

Pa'lante: The Direct Action Campaigns of the Young Lords Party

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Chapter I: Introduction.....	5
Chapter 2: The Puerto Rican Migration Experience	10
Chapter 3: Protest Movements of the '60s and the New Radicalism.....	16
Chapter 4: Racial Politics-The Black Panther Movement.....	20
Chapter 5: History of the Young Lords--From Chicago to New York City.....	27
Chapter 6: Spatial Theory and Protest Movements.....	37
Chapter 7: YLP Direct Action Campaigns: Taking it to the Streets.....	42
Chapter 8: Decline of the Young Lords Party.....	59
Chapter 9: Successes and Failures of the YLP.....	63
Chapter 10: Conclusion- Legacy of The Young Lords...The Struggle Continues.....	69
Bibliography	73

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“The strength of the Young Lords was that we created a program and a platform, modeled on the Black Panther Party’s, with international amendments, that outlined a clear vision of the interrelationships of oppression and of the need for systemic societal change.”¹

Abstract

This thesis explores the campaigns of the radical social justice organization The Young Lords Party (YLP) and the politicization and education of the Puerto Rican community about the social, economic, and political inequalities that affected their urban environment in the late 1960s and early 1970s. After a discussion of the historical context within which the Young Lords formed and connecting the Lords’ work with that of other radical organizations in the 1960s, this thesis investigates how the Young Lords appropriated space in New York City, specifically East Harlem (*El Barrio*) and the South Bronx, through the occupation of local social institutions such as hospitals, churches, and public streets in their effort to gain community control of their neighborhoods and raise a people’s political consciousness.

¹ Iris Morales and Denise Oliver-Velez quoted in Darrel Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), xiii.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Inspired by the tactics of the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords Party was an organization politically active in the areas of political and human rights, as well as education, health care, gentrification, housing, police brutality, gender equality, and independence for Puerto Rico. Their direct action campaigns such as the “Church Offensive,” “Garbage Strike,” and “Lincoln Offensive” brought national attention to the inequalities Puerto Ricans were experiencing in their urban environment. They were a unique radical nationalist organization that argued not only for self-determination and independence for Puerto Rico, but offered a broad based health care program and reproductive rights campaign for women. They connected socio-economic concerns of the community to structural racism and the colonial status between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. They demanded an end to the Vietnam War and linked militant guerrilla street campaigns to Third World exploitation and oppression of people of color. Dilapidated housing in inner city neighborhoods, inadequate healthcare, rising unemployment, and racial discrimination were some of the main issues that motivated the Lords. The Young Lords showed how collective agency and direct action against injustice could alter the urban environment that the Puerto Rican community inhabited and change a people’s political consciousness.

This thesis demonstrates the successes and failures of the YLP in their effort to transform the use and meaning of community spaces to mobilize the community for social justice. The YLP showed how the power of the people, united and in solidarity, can bring about real social and economic change. Although the YLP was short-lived, they were an excellent example of how a grassroots political organization can make a difference.

I became interested in the Young Lords through my previous research on other civil rights organizations including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Black

Panther Party (BPP), groups in the Women's Liberation Movement, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I was surprised how little attention and scholarly work had been published on this organization compared to these other groups. However, recently there has been more scholarship on the Lords.² In my Honors College course, "Puerto Rico: In But Not Of the United States," I discovered the Young Lords Party and became interested in this organization, which was active in the late 1960s. In researching this group, I became aware of their political action campaigns and their appropriation of space in order to support the rights of the Puerto Ricans in New York City and in the ways their campaigns were similar to and different from those of other minority activist groups.

As a History major at the University of Vermont, I studied civil rights leaders of the 1960s including Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, protest movements for civil rights, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. In my courses in the Honors College, including "License and Registration, Please," I studied the role of the FBI and its surveillance methods. Discovering an article on FBI surveillance and the use of space in relation to the rights of leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. got me interested in connecting the issues of appropriation of space to the direct action campaigns of the YLP³ after I took another Honors College course "Puerto Rico: In But Not Of the United States" where I discovered the Young Lords.

² Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Gender Politics, Democratic Demand and Anti-Essentialism in the New York Young Lords," in *Latina/o Discourse in Vernacular Spaces; Somos de Una Voz?*, ed., Bernadette Marie Calafell and Michelle A Holling, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 59-80; Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Decolonizing Imaginaries: Rethinking 'the People' in the Young Lords' Church Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98:1 (2012): 1-23; Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Tropicalizing East Harlem: Rhetorical Agency, Cultural Citizenship, and Nuyorican Cultural Production," *Communication Theory* 21: 4 (2011): 344-367.

³ Jules Boykoff, "Surveillance, Spatial Compression, and Scale: The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Antipode* 39: 4 (September 2007): 729-756.

The Young Lords are relevant today in connection with the Occupy Wall Street movements that swept this nation, as well as the world, in 2011 and have resulted in a revolution of sorts that seeks to create income equality and an end to the greed and corruption of the one-percent of the wealthiest Americans. Massive and often militant street action as a form of political expression was seen in the Occupy Wall Street Movement. More than forty years earlier, the Lords were a nationalist revolutionary party fighting for liberation of all oppressed peoples, and they too tackled issues of income inequality in inner city neighborhoods in the United States. They are also relevant today as an early example of an environmental justice group concerned with spatial justice.

These Puerto Rican young adults came of age in a time of universal student protests against the Vietnam War, when ideas were changing regarding race and gender and a new voice for the direction of America was occurring. They challenged a system of inequity and confronted institutions of power. Their legacy lives on today through all community organizations that seek to create systemic societal change.

After a look at the history of radical organizations in general in the 1960s, this thesis will focus specifically on the Young Lords, the Puerto Rican example of these organizations, and how this group appropriated space through the seizure of local social institutions, such as hospitals, churches, and urban streets in their effort to control their community in East Harlem and the Bronx and advance the Puerto Rican rights movement. Drawing on existing studies of African American civil rights organizations and their appropriation of community spaces to gain power for their movement, I will investigate the Young Lords' successes and failures in their occupation of social institutions and their efforts to improve living conditions, as well as combat

the injustices facing Puerto Ricans.⁴ By occupying strategic urban spaces in their communities that were symbolic of the existing social order and by changing their functions, the Young Lords attempted to empower Puerto Ricans to demand greater social, political, economic, and cultural autonomy. Matthew Gandy, in his chapter, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio” in his book *Concrete And Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, describes the Lords’ community action programs and the impact they had on their urban environment.

From the summer of 1969 until the spring of 1971 the Young Lords played a significant role in fostering a vibrant cultural and political sphere within the Puerto Rican community through high profile direct actions, their newsletters and regular radio broadcasts, poetry readings, and other activities. They extended existing conceptions of the urban environment in multiple ways to encompass the control of community spaces, the creation of a healthy city, and the transformation of social relations. Their words and actions had revealed, for a brief moment, a different kind of urbanism sprung from the injustice of the ghetto.⁵

By controlling their own communities they made sure social institutions served the needs of the people.⁶ The Lords brought power and control back into the people’s hands through community service and outreach.

This paper highlights a number of primary source documents from the voices of the Young Lords themselves. *The Young Lords: A Reader*, edited by Darrel Enck-Wanzer, with a “Forward” by former Young Lords members Iris Morales and Denise Oliver-Velez, was a very valuable source throughout my research because it offers primary texts on the activities and actual words of the Lords through essays, speeches, photographs, poetry, and pamphlets. These are rare written and visual documents that were of great benefit in my research. I also analyzed

⁴ Sara M. Evans, and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986): 61; Boykoff. “Surveillance, Spatial Compression, and Scale,” 729-756.

⁵ Matthew Gandy, “Between Borinquen and The Barrio,” in *Concrete And Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 174.

⁶ Carmen Teresa Whalen, “Bridging Homeland and Barrio Politics: The Young Lords n Philadelphia,” in Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 114.

scholarly journal articles, and books, a dissertation, as well as newspaper articles from the *New York Times*.

In the middle of my research, in July 2012, I went to New York City to find the spaces in *El Barrio* that symbolized both the interconnectedness of the spaces of production (i.e. public spaces and streets, urban layout, housing, transportation, etc.) and social practices (divisions of labor, living arrangements, meanings of race and identity, etc.) that were influenced by and resulted from the Young Lords' community based activism. My experience walking the streets, talking to the people in the neighborhoods and observing the multi-cultural community life helped me to understand better the legacy of this important organization. My hope is that future historians of social movements will appreciate the unique role the Young Lords played in the Civil Rights Movement in twentieth century America.

Chapter 2: The Puerto Rican Migration Experience

*“Our Cry is a very simple and logical one. Puerto Ricans came to this country hoping to get a decent job and to provide for their families; but it didn’t take long to find out that the American dream that was publicized so nicely on our island turned out to be the amerikkkan nightmare”*⁷

Migration Begins: The first generation of Puerto Ricans on the mainland

Puerto Ricans living in New York City are culturally and historically tied to the island of Puerto Rico. After World War II, *jibaros* (workers) left the island in search of economic prosperity in the United States because there was very limited employment on the island. Because of improved transportation and communication networks between the island and the mainland, Puerto Rican migration increased dramatically during the 1950s.⁸ The first generation of Puerto Rican immigrants established large communities in places such as New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia and Newark. Many settled in the South Bronx, New York City and East Harlem (Spanish Harlem or *El Barrio*). *El Barrio* is a section of Harlem located in the Upper Eastside of Manhattan. The neighborhood is surrounded by East 142nd Street along the Harlem River to the north, the East River to the east, East 96th Street to the south, and Fifth Avenue to the west. The majority of the Puerto Rican men found whatever jobs were available in the manufacturing sector, and women worked in the garment industry.

First generation migrants were attracted by labor recruiting campaigns in Puerto Rico during the 1940s and 1950s that presented idealized images of post war prosperity for all in America. However, the social and economic realities were much more bleak. The urban

⁷ David Perez (a founding member of the YLO) quoted in Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 9.

⁸ Jennifer A. Nelson, “‘Abortions under Community Control’: Feminism, Nationalism, and the Politics of Reproduction among New York City’s Young Lords,” *Journal of Women’s History* 13:1 (2001): 165.

environment was shaped by dilapidated overcrowded tenement housing, lack of adequate health care services and widespread poverty. The influential poet Pedro Piertri describes the conditions of El Barrio in “Puerto Rican Obituary,” which was first read in 1969 at a rally to support the Young Lords Party. Pietri captures life for Puerto Ricans in NYC:

*Juan
Miguel
Milagros
Olga
Manuel
From the nervous breakdown
Streets
Where the mice live like
Millionaires
And the people do not live
At all
Are dead and were never alive⁹*

This poem had a major impact on young Puerto Rican activists in articulating a new political consciousness.

The Puerto Rican community was forced to occupy the slums that had housed Irish, Italian and Jewish immigrants in previous decades. There is a popular image that the Puerto Rican community created these slums. However, instead, they inherited them. “Those dilapidated buildings were the ghosts of the country’s first great waves of immigration.”¹⁰ Urban geographer Matthew Gandy explains the reality of life in El Barrio for the new immigrants. “The new arrivals found that they were restricted to menial, poorly paid work—if they worked at all—in combination with overcrowded, dilapidated housing and inadequate access to basic services such as education and health care. Widespread subjection to racial, cultural and language

⁹ Pedro Pietri, “Puerto Rican Obituary,” in Michael Abramson, *Palante: Young Lords Party*, 17.

¹⁰ Matthew Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio: Environmental Justice and New York City's Puerto Rican Community, 1969–1972,” *Antipode* 34:3 (2002): 737.

discrimination completed the bleak outlook.”¹¹ Parents of the generation that would form the Young Lords grew up in a country where they were forced to feel racially inferior, were treated like second class citizens, had limited socio-economic opportunities, and were forced to learn a new language, as well as to abandon their Puerto Rican culture and assimilate into American society.

Despite being forced to assimilate, these first generation immigrants from Puerto Rico often had a desire to integrate into white society and to benefit from socio-economic white privileges. Ninety-six percent of Puerto Ricans on the mainland were classified as white on the U.S. census in 1960.¹² Gandy explains the complex nature of identity among Puerto Ricans. “The racially and ethnically diverse Puerto Rican community had historically occupied an ambiguous space within the dominant black-versus-white racial antinomy of the city. Differences in class and race among Puerto Ricans had combined to produce a complex hierarchy of identifications within U.S. society, driven by an assimilationist desire to be fully integrated into white society.”¹³

David R. Roediger in his book *Working Towards Whiteness* discusses the immigrant experience in the twentieth century, as well as the process of acculturation in America. Those that were deemed not “white” were seen as the foreign “other” and as social outsiders who did not deserve U.S. citizenship. Using justifications of their so-called innate racial inferiority, European and Latin American immigrants, as well as African Americans were denied political, economic and cultural rights. Roediger notes that working towards “whiteness” was seen as a form of “social currency” for those groups that did not have access to these resources. European

¹¹ Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 732.

¹² Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon: The Young Lords, Black Power and Puerto Rican nationalism in the U.S., 1966-1972,” *Centro Journal* 17:1 (Fall 2006): 153.

¹³ Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 735.

immigrants such as Jews, Irish and Italians competed for access to “white rights” and assimilation to white identity against other stigmatized groups in U.S. society, including African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans in their effort to become “white ethnics.” Roediger explains, “the answer to conservative uses of white ethnic immigration narratives lies not in flattening the story of race and immigration but in examining the material and state-sponsored underpinnings of categories of the past and carefully analyzing how the new immigrant experience was different by probing where and how racially stigmatized European immigrants could claim white rights, as well as measuring the extent to which gaining fuller humanity could require participation in inhumanity.... Becoming American required the European new immigrant to ‘buy into the notion of American blacks as the real aliens.’”¹⁴ Roediger stresses the point that acculturation became a gradual process of acceptance for some groups to adopt a white identity to benefit economically and politically at the expense of and the exclusion of other groups such as African Americans and Latinos. It does not matter how long a particular group lives in this country or how well they assimilate; if they are not white, they do not gain access to certain privileges and the system of power attained through whiteness.

Second Generation Puerto Ricans

The Young Lords, who were the children of the first generation of Puerto Rican immigrants, and who were, on the whole, educated in the U.S., embarked on a campaign to challenge existing conceptions of race and identity among Puerto Ricans. Their generation was taught to be ashamed of their parents and their native language. The Young Lords, however, stood up for their parent’s generation. The identity of this second generation of Puerto Ricans (*Nuyoricans*) was shaped by the urban barrios in the U.S., unlike their parents who had lived in

¹⁴ David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Become White* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 33-34.

poverty on the sugar plantations in Puerto Rico. *Nuyoricans* envisioned a different America than their parents because of their assimilation to U.S. society and lack of cultural roots in Puerto Rico. By the late 1960s, over ten percent of New York City's population was of Puerto Rican origin. However, they were unrepresented in decision-making processes within the city bureaucratic structure.¹⁵ The Young Lords goal was to gain political visibility through a campaign of community control of social, political and economic institutions, as well as the rediscovery of their Puerto Rican identity and history that their parents had been forced to abandon.

The Political and Economic Climate of the late 1960s and its influence on the Puerto Rican Community

Researching the Young Lords allows historians to understand an important time period in American history. The late 1960s and early 1970s were turbulent times in the United States. Radical leftist protest movements were advocating direct confrontation of a government that they felt was lying to them and not meeting the needs of individuals living in poverty and facing discrimination. President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" social programs were not addressing the needs of individuals living in impoverished communities. As Darrel Enck-Wanzer writes in *The Young Lords: A Reader*, the "'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."¹⁶ Because of an increased U.S. militarism, the money towards Great Society programs were lost in the jungles of Vietnam. On the domestic front, Puerto Ricans faced constant discrimination and xenophobia in New York City, as well as a lack of job opportunities. During this era,

¹⁵ Gandy, "Between Borinquen and the Barrio," 733/

¹⁶ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*. 1.

manufacturing jobs in many U.S. cities were decreasing, and discrimination was prevalent in the work force. Deindustrialization destabilized the Puerto Rican community. Therefore, there were limited job opportunities for young, unskilled Puerto Ricans and other minorities. White flight and urban renewal displacement resulted in the destabilization of Puerto Rican neighborhoods.¹⁷ As a result, property values went down, and less money was invested in these communities. Urban Studies scholars M. Gottdiener and L. Budd describe the process of gentrification and how it can lead to the emergence of social movements. “The process of displacement that often accompanies gentrification may result in political struggles as older residents resist the incursions of new capital. Thus, the process of dis-investment and re-investment results in cycles of decline and gentrification that afflict the housing stock of the city. Community concern and resistance accompanies these changes including the emergence of political protest and, occasionally, social movements.”¹⁸ Cyclical patterns of gentrification have altered the communities of New York City, including East Harlem.

The social programs promised by President Johnson’s Great Society were not making their way to the inner city neighborhoods such as *El Barrio*. The Puerto Rican neighborhoods became unstable and filled with crime and youth gangs. Young Puerto Ricans wanted to change the economic inequality that plagued their communities, but the lack of any organizational leadership and political power prevented this. Anger and frustration was rampant among young protesters across various social justice groups and at times these young people advocated for militant political campaigns to bring about a revolution in America.

In the midst of this turmoil, the Young Lords began their campaigns.

¹⁷ Gandy, “Between Borinquen And The Barrio,” in *Concrete And Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City*, 161.

¹⁸ M. Gottdiener and L. Budd, “Gentrification,” in *Key Concepts in Urban Studies*(New York: Sage, 2005), 32-34.

Chapter 3: Protest Movements of the '60s and the Birth of a New Radicalism

The development of the Puerto Rican Young Lords Party cannot be understood without comprehending the larger political and social context of the 1960s and the development of other radical organizations. In the 1960s, racial and economic inequality was a structural component of American society and nothing short of a full scale revolution would change injustices in communities like East Harlem. The riots of 1967 in northern cities had the biggest impact on the birth of radicalism of the late 1960s. Militant protest tactics were adopted by civil rights groups to challenge local, state and federal institutions that were not meeting the needs of urban communities of color. These protest movements would lead to demands for community control and new ways to challenge racial and economic oppression. The Young Lords Party emerged, along with many other organizations, out of this 1960s radicalism.

Urban Riots

The social ills in communities of color such as East Harlem led to violent protests by Puerto Ricans and African Americans throughout urban areas of the United States. In June 1966, around 70,000 Puerto Ricans took part in a four-day protest in Chicago over a police shooting incident. In August of that same year, clashes between young Puerto Ricans and the police occurred in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. After the riots in Detroit on July 24, 1967, urban unrest exploded on the streets of *El Barrio*. Thousands of young Puerto Ricans took to the streets in anti-police demonstrations. These protests were the worst cases of civil disorder in New York City since the Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant race riots of 1964. "At its peak, before 1000 police reinforcements managed to contain the violence, the rioting extended all along Third

Avenue from 119th to 103rd Streets and between Park and Second Avenues.”¹⁹ Before this time there was widespread belief among the white community that Puerto Ricans were docile and politically inactive. The riots of 1967 countered this belief and the birth of a new radicalism emerged.

Radicalization of the New Left

The protests at the 1968 Democratic Convention symbolized the radical political times of the 1960s. Thousands of activists arrived in Chicago in 1968 to protest at the Democratic National Convention against the Vietnam War. Things were peaceful inside the convention hall, but outside it was chaos. On national television, there were images of police beating young people who were practicing their first amendment rights as they protested the Vietnam War, and the whole world watched as cops billy-clubbed the protesters. The young demonstrators chanted, “The whole world is watching.” Network news programs showed the police using Gestapo-like tactics, and these images had lasting political impacts.

Radical groups of the time argued that protestors had a right to resist if they were experiencing police brutality. They referred to the police as “fascist pigs.” Organizations like Students for a Democratic Society and later the Weather Underground “put their bodies on the line” to stop the Vietnam War and fight for change.²⁰ The Yippies (Youth Revolutionary Movement,) founded by Abbie Hoffman, used guerrilla theater tactics to protest the Vietnam War and argue for the redistribution of wealth. A notable protest was in the summer of 1967 when the Yippies threw money onto the New York Stock Exchange floor to the traders below demanding an end to capitalism. A new generation of middle class white Americans were ready

¹⁹ Gandy, 732

²⁰ For more on the radicalization of the New Left see Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987; revised, 1992); Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988); James Miller, *“Democracy Is in the Streets”: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973).

to start a revolution. Hippies in the Counter Culture Movement became radicalized. The Yippies hosted a satirical event to levitate the Pentagon to demand an end to the war in Vietnam during the 1967 march to the Pentagon, and at a notable event at the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention (DNC) they announced “Pegasus the Pig for President.” The massive protests at the DNC resulted in the famous Chicago 8 trial, with notable activist defendants Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin and Bobby Seale being tried for conspiracy to incite a riot. Hoffman and Rubin turned the courtroom into a space of guerilla theatre. With wild outfits and loud outbursts they disrupted the court and turned it into an anti-neutral space. They used satire to fight tyranny and in doing so highlighted the U.S. government’s atrocities in Vietnam. They would have characterized themselves as cultural revolutionaries.

The general American public started to pay attention when white kids were beaten up by the police who were often fellow young white men. They did not always seem to take equal notice when African Americans and Latinos were getting killed in the street by police and National Guardsmen. The YLP and other Black Nationalist parties would refer to organizations like these composed of mainly young white youth as “dressing up and playing revolutionary.” Unlike their white left-wing counterparts, Puerto Ricans and other minorities had grown up in spaces of economic and social exclusion during the greatest economic boom time in American history. Most white activists came from privilege and were not able to comprehend or willing to acknowledge the socio-economic inequalities people of color experienced in inner city neighborhoods.

There was an overall disillusionment among young people during this time. The war in Vietnam was still going on; race riots swept the nation after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, and the violent protests and police brutality at the 1968

Democratic National Convention in Chicago and later the murders at Kent State University showed that police departments and the federal government were willing to use excessive, violent force to control activists. In this climate, many black civil rights organizations were taking a stand for African Americans. This type of radical action would influence the Young Lords as they began to take power for the Puerto Rican people.

Chapter 4: Radical Politics-The Black Power Movement

“The only way we gonna stop them white men from whippin’ us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothing.’ What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!”²¹

-Stokely Carmichael, in Greenwood, Mississippi, 16 June 1966

Along with the climate of unrest in the cities throughout the U.S., the emergence of the Young Lords Party can be traced to a variety of factors. The most important influence was the growing Black Power Movement.²² A split in the Civil Rights Movement occurred at the Mississippi Freedom March of June 1966. Chants of “Black Power” could be heard from young demonstrators of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Influenced by the teachings of Malcolm X, they began questioning the tactics of nonviolent protest advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. King argued that advocating the use of violence would deter white support for the civil rights movement. Individuals such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, as well as Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), believed that passive resistance to white violence and building coalitions with white civil rights workers would not change systemic political, social and economic inequality for African Americans. Many members of SNCC who had risked their lives in Southern states such as Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama working on voter registration drives had become convinced that self-defense was the proper tactic to overcome white violence, discrimination and to demand greater political power for blacks. Also, earlier the failure of SNCC in integrating the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to change the all white

²¹ Quoted in Richard Layman, *American Decades 1960-1969*, (Detroit: Gale Research, 1995), 242.

²² For more on Black Power Movement and black nationalism see William Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention convinced young activists that they could not reform the Democratic Party. They realized whites would never give up power to blacks willingly and thus they had to form their own political party.

SNCC helped black voter registration drives in Lowndes County, Alabama and helped form the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) with a black panther as its symbol.²³ By May 1966 SNCC had elected Stokely Carmichael as the National Chairman. As SNCC and CORE became more militant, a new radical black nationalist organization emerged. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was formed in October 1967 in Oakland, California by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale.

Militant tactics of the Black Panther Party inspired the Young Lords. Erich-Wanzer describes the ideology of the Panthers as, “a radical, sometimes militant, Afrocentric response to racists’ classism and classists’ 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.’”²⁴ Individuals were tired of being passive and confronted their perceived oppressor.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965)* that laid out his philosophy on black pride, black nationalism and Pan-Africanism. Malcolm X said blacks should not want to “integrate into this corrupt society, but to separate from it, to a land of our own, where we can reform ourselves, lift up our moral standards, and try to be godly.”²⁵ The Panthers believed blacks needed to create their own political, educational and economic institutions to truly change society. To empower

²³ Layman. *American Decades, 1960-1969*, 234.

²⁴ Enck-Wanzer, 1.

²⁵ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press), 348.

African Americans, they organized community health care programs, food give-aways, and education centers.

The Panthers were also inspired by Algerian Nationalist Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*, which offered a critique of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the need for Third World liberation. Fanon had a major impact on the black liberation movement in America, including the YLP. His work provided a framework for strategies in launching a militant anti-colonial struggle. He offered new interpretations of race, identity and history. "Fanon gave the Panthers in particular—and the black liberation movement in general—the vocabulary to express their belief that black Americans' history and culture, and with it their sense of self-worth, had—like those of the Third World—been dominated, distorted, and nearly destroyed by whites, the 'colonizers' who imposed their own culture and system of values on a conquered people."²⁶ To advocate for these new ideas, they began to reeducate the black community about their true African cultural identity and demanded greater political empowerment through separating from the "oppressor" and forming their own social and economic institutions. They also advocated a Marxist-Leninist ideology that argued that oppression of people of color was linked to oppression of the lower classes. The YLP would adopt a similar socialist position that incorporated the working class into the liberation struggle.

²⁶ Richard Layman. *American Decades 1960-1969*, 235.

Radical Ethnic Nationalism and the Young Lords Party:

“The Black Panther Party served as a paradigm of radical ethnic nationalism and a vanguard party for the revolutionary nationalist movement. The Panthers provided an appeal that was unprecedented in the annals of radical struggle.”²⁷

Black nationalism had swept the nation in the mid to late 1960s. Historian Jeffery O.G. Ogbar describes how Puerto Rican radical activism on the mainland and the island was inspired by black nationalist ideology. He argues that the black power movement offered a new interpretation of race and identity for Puerto Ricans, which developed into a radical ethnic nationalism agenda. Revolutionary nationalism to the Young Lords had two key qualities that deconstructed ideas on race and identity. Their first nationalist demand was for Puerto Rican independence on the island and mainland. Secondly, their nationalism argued for an end to the oppression of Third World people. For decades scholars have debated and analyzed the variety of definitions of nationalism.²⁸ However, there are three universal nationalist agendas: self-determination, unity and territorial separatism.²⁹ Anthony D. Smith and John Hutchinson describe how nationalism developed among Westerners in the 18th century. They argue it was, “first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated—that is, free from any external constraint; they must determine their own destiny and be masters of their own house; they must control their own resources.”³⁰ The pursuit of sovereignty is centered

²⁷ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 164.

²⁸ For more on nationalism see Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates About Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000); Shafer Boy, *Face of Nationalism: New Realities and Old Myths* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972); Anthony D. Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1971); Jyoti Puri, *Encountering Nationalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

²⁹ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 150.

³⁰ John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, eds., *Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4-5.

on the expression of national consciousness. People are connected through a shared history and culture. Also the struggle for political, economic and social autonomy depends on peoples' awareness that an outside group seeks to deny them freedom and self-determination. Puerto Rican nationalist politics incorporated all of these qualities. The YLP confronted the "three evils" of revolutionary nationalists: capitalism, racism, and imperialism.

Puerto Rican nationalism has been a part of the Puerto Rican political identity since the nineteenth century. It is rooted in the Spanish-Cuban-American War, when Puerto Ricans fought with Cubans against Spanish imperialism. After the U.S. defeat of Spain in 1898, Puerto Rico did not receive its independence from the United States. On the island of Puerto Rico, the Nationalist Party became a major political force that argued for self-determination and independence. In 1930, Don Pedro Alibizu Campos was elected President of the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico. For the next six years, he enacted a campaign to end the colonial occupation of the island through violent opposition to colonial leaders and U.S. business interests. The Nationalist Party was labeled a terrorist organization by the United States and Alibizu Campos was incarcerated from 1936 to 1948. After the uprising of 1950, he was sentenced to 72 years in prison. The 1950 uprising and the shooting of five members of the U.S. Congress by four Puerto Rican Nationalists resulted in greater political repression on the island. Alibizu Campos would later be seen by Young Lords members as an inspiration for the struggle for independence and national pride.

In the 1950s, leftist radicalism was seen on the mainland through Puerto Ricans joining the Socialist Workers Party or Communist Party USA. Others joined SNCC, CORE and SDS in northern cities, including New York. However, as the black power movement began to gain widespread appeal, it attracted people of color unlike previous leftist radical political

organizations. The Nation of Islam attracted Puerto Ricans because it saw all people of color as black. Puerto Ricans went to hear African American leaders like Malcolm X at Temple #7 in Harlem. They connected with his discussion of the anti-imperialist black freedom struggle. After his assassination, Malcolm X became a symbol in the black nationalist movement and Puerto Ricans would read his work as well as debate his ideologies. The Black Panthers spread nationally after 1968 with the Free Huey Movement. Black militants began to challenge police brutality and white supremacy, but also imperialism and capitalism. Puerto Ricans were inspired by the BPP rhetoric of revolutionary nationalism.

Jeffery O.G. Ogbar describes how the Black Power movement brought together various nationalist organizations, their platform, and world-views under the terms of black power, self-determination and third world liberation. Ogbar writes that in “the context of the Black Panther Party, self-determination, armed self-defense, racial pride, and socialist ambitions were central to [inter] national liberation. This group typifies what I call radical ethnic nationalism. Unlike typical ethnic nationalism, this form does not limit its nationalist agenda exclusively to its own group. Indeed, its national consciousness is central to its politics; however, it can work intimately with members from other ethnic groups in various contexts in symbiotic struggle.”³¹ African Americans and other minorities such as Puerto Ricans had a shared history of injustice, discrimination, and a colonial mentality that resulted in racial inferiority. Race is a social construct and Puerto Ricans were classified as “other” in American racial politics. The YLP celebrated the range of diversity among Puerto Ricans. It was within this context and new interpretations of racial and ethnic identities that the YLP began to take action.

³¹ Ogbar. “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 152.

Chapter 5: History of the Young Lords: From Chicago to New York City

“The Young Lords rises in Chicago and later in New York as a gang trying to defend ourselves against amerikkkan oppression. Little by little we change our understanding and a revolutionary thinking begins to develop. We realized that only with the liberation of Puerto Rico and self determination inside the united states is it possible to end all the daily pain and suffering with the rats, the poverty, the sickness, the unemployment, the slavery inside the factories, the inadequate housing. And we fight in New York, we fight in Bridgeport, in Philadelphia, against garbage in the streets, the conditions in the hospitals, against the hypocrisy of the churches.”³²

-Juan Gonzalez, YLP Minister of Defense on July 25, 1971 in front of a crowd of 2,000 people on the anniversary of the 1898 U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico through the Bay of Guanica.

From Street Gangs to Community Organizers

The Young Lords Organization (YLO) had its roots in gang culture. In the midst of the 1960s protest movement and as the black power movement was spreading, Chicago became a site of radical ethnic nationalism. Chicago at that time also suffered from a prevalent gang problem. The growing black nationalist movement and an increase in urban riots resulted in gang members reconsidering their activities. The Black Panther Party was successful in getting former gang members to get involved in politics and social justice through projects such as free breakfast programs and day care centers. Thousands of Puerto Ricans migrated to Chicago in a post World War II America in hopes of finding manufacturing jobs or work as migrant farm laborers in the Midwest. At this time, whites did not see Puerto Ricans as a distinct “other” group as they had seen African Americans.

As mentioned earlier, on the island and mainland there were stigmatized views of blackness among Puerto Ricans in favor of whiteness. The path to assimilation was adopting whiteness. However, as the Puerto Rican population grew in Chicago and competed for resources, they became perceived as non-white. They settled in the communities of Old town, Lincoln Park and Lakeview, which were highly segregated neighborhoods. Conflict between

³² Enck-Wanzer. *The Young Lords*, 159.

white gangs and Puerto Rican youth resulted in a Puerto Rican gang culture. The Young Lords were formed in 1959 by seven Chicago Puerto Rican youth to protect themselves from rival Italian, “obilligans” (Appalachian whites) and other Latino gangs.³³ Jose (Cha-Cha) Jimenez was elected chairman of the organization. Organizations such as the Nation of Islam, Deacons for Defense, SNCC and the BPP became successful in establishing peace treaties between rival African American gangs and helping them identify with the black power movement.

After serving a year in prison, Jimenez realized the Young Lords should engage in constructive activities similar to those of the BPP and encouraged gangs to engage in politicization of the community. By 1967 the Young Lords established community service programs such as free toy drives for children, community picnics and drug education programs. They went from street gang members to revolutionary Nationalists. They challenged the blatant police brutality against people of color. This new militancy rejected the fear of white power and adopted black liberation.

In 1968 Fred Hampton met with Jimenez to encourage the politicization of street gangs. The Black Panther Party (the vanguard party or main political party leading the revolution) would provide leadership for the people. It taught them proper methods of revolutionary resistance through literature and direct action community service programs. BPP theories on class saw the politicizations of street gangs as a necessary process in political transformation of the *lumpenproletariat* (the working class that has not achieved class consciousness yet). According to Jeffery O.G. Ogbar, The Panthers argued the “*lumpenproletariat* had guns and were not afraid to use them. Unfortunately, the Panthers explained, they were not yet politically

³³ Ogbar. “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 154.

sophisticated enough to aim them in the direction of the ‘pig power structure’ more frequently.”³⁴ Therefore, the vanguard party must provide leadership to the people.

The political transformation of the Young Lords from a gang culture to revolutionary nationalists, Ogbar argues “was indicative of the political transformation that would make inadvertent agents of oppression into agents of liberation. The Lords, Rangers, and other street gangs could be made into harbingers of freedom, justice, and power for the people by embracing revolutionary nationalism.”³⁵ With inspiration from the Panthers, the Lords called for a cease-fire with all rival gangs. In May 1969 the Lords joined a pact established by Fred Hampton. It included the Panthers, the Brown Berets, and the Young Patriots (a gang of white Appalachian youths). They called it the “Rainbow Coalition.” The Lords based their organizational structure on the Panthers’ structure and developed a 13 Point Program and Platform. They developed political education courses, free breakfast programs for children, and observed police activities to curtail police brutality.

The YLP on Race and Identity

“We can only unchain our minds from this colonized mentality if we learn our true history, understand our culture, and work towards unity.”³⁶

For the Young Lords, ethnic revolutionary nationalism involved new interpretations on race and identity. The YLP resisted the “cultural and psychological entrapments of whiteness,”³⁷ while simultaneously adopting a new identity that celebrated their indigenous culture and historical roots. Ogbar explains this new racial identity:

³⁴ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 155.

³⁵ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 156.

³⁶ *Ideology of the Young Lords Party*, February 1972, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 22.

³⁷ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 159.

Black power proponents depeDESTALIZED whiteness in ways not seen in the civil rights movement. The generations of self-hate and internalization of white supremacy were being addressed in what many would consider a collective and profound moment of group catharsis. Young Puerto Ricans took notice. They, too, had to affirm themselves in ways not seen heretofore, while addressing the complicated racial politics of the time. Puerto Rican radical ethnic nationalism initiated systematic efforts to make the psychic break from whiteness (as it was popularly understood in the U.S.)³⁸

The YLO became the first radical ethnic nationalist group that condemned racism, attempted to get the community to break free from the colonized mentality that perpetuated their so called racial inferiority, and at the same time called for a greater understanding of their African and Taino culture and history. There was also the myth at the time that Puerto Ricans were passive. However, a history of colonial resistance on the island showed otherwise. And when Cha Cha Jimenez started advocating for a revolution and socialism, as well as for the liberation of Puerto Rico, a consciousness shift occurred among many Puerto Ricans. After the Young Lords Organization was founded, people no longer were afraid of the police and other institutions of power. Jimenez said, “The People are fighting toe to toe [with the oppressor] and know [that the people] can take his best. The people now have hope.” Puerto Ricans became psychologically empowered through revolutionary nationalism. They did not identify with being white, but instead grew Afros, celebrated their Taino cultural history and referred to themselves as “brown” people. These nationalist organizations transcended race through multi-cultural and racial coalitions. There was a common cause of combating racial oppression and Third World exploitation.

The various movements influenced each other through alliances, networks and conferences. It was a broad-based movement for liberation. The YLP helped deconstruct racial and ethnic identities. Ogbar describes these alliances. “There are no major examples of ethnic

³⁸ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 159.

nationalist struggles that have established alliances, as had young radicals of the Black Power era. African American, white, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Asian, and Native American radicals merged ethnic nationalist rhetoric with a struggle that emphasized class conflict and interracial coalitions.”³⁹ The Young Lords combined paramilitary revolutionary theories on nationalism with social service work and “serve the people programs,” which created a unique blend of radical ethnic nationalism.

The Young Lords in New York City

The inter-relationship between various nationalist groups resulted in the birth of radical ethnic nationalism on the island of Puerto Rico and the mainland, and, by early 1969, on college campuses throughout the U.S., especially in New York City. The first Black Student Union was formed in 1966 at San Francisco State College. The BSU quickly spread across the country and Puerto Ricans joined this organization. Iris Morales, who later became an influential leader in the YLP, joined an African American group ONYX at City College in NYC. She became inspired by the black freedom movement, and this group had a major impact on her political ideology. However, there was no Puerto Rican student group at the time. Morales, along with others, founded the first Puerto Rican organization at City College (Puerto Ricans in Student Activities). They established alliances with ONYX and other black groups on college campuses and launched a citywide strike to get a Black Studies Department and more black faculty, as well as more students of color. They occupied buildings and named them after famous black and Latino leaders.

At the annual convention for SDS, the Young Lords founders granted original members such as Denise Oliver, Robert Ortiz and Mickey Melendez, who all were part of the New Left and were civil rights activists, permission to establish a chapter in New York City. They had

³⁹ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 164.

been members of the Real Great Society (RGS), an anti-poverty program funded by the U.S. Government's Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). In May of 1969, Oliver, Ortiz and Melendez, along with other students of color at State University of New York, Old Westbury, heard about Cha Cha Jimenez' success in organizing Puerto Ricans into a nationalist party in Chicago and his work to establish a YLO branch in NYC.⁴⁰

During the militant student protests across college campuses, students at City College of New York formed the Sociedad de Albizu Campos (SAC) in early 1969 in honor of the Puerto Rican nationalist leader Don Pedro Albizu Campos. Individuals in these two organizations formed alliances with "street people" in *El Barrio* and the variety of groups formed the New York branch of the Young Lords organization. Enck-Wanzer describes the motivations to form the YLO in NYC. "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."⁴¹ In the beginning they did not have a fundamental plan for societal change, but they knew they had to "take to the streets" to protest for Puerto Rican rights.

The YLO was comprised of mostly twenty-year olds and teenagers living in impoverished inner city communities. They encouraged people of diverse backgrounds to join the YLO, such as Europeans, Native Americans and those of African descent. They wanted their organization to reflect the cultural and racial diversity of the island of Puerto Rico. Alliances with other nationalist groups and people of color were central to the YLO's mission. Chicanos were heavily involved in the group, and a Chicano member Omar Lopez was responsible for coining the Lords' slogan, "*Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazon.*" ("I have Puerto Rico in my heart.") They wanted to include all oppressed people within their organization. They had

⁴⁰ Nelson, "'Abortions under Community Control,'" 160.

⁴¹ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 1.

members who were Cuban, Dominican, Panamanian and Colombian. 25 percent of the organization was African American.⁴² Many were attracted to their platform of third world liberation and shared a history of colonial resistance. As Cha Cha Jimenez said, “We feel that we are revolutionaries, and revolutionaries have no race.” The Young Lords created a unique multi-cultural organization during a time of intense racial conflict and supported power for all oppressed people.

The YLO began community work by improving the socio-economic quality of life for people in the barrios of NYC. Their first office opened on Madison Avenue in East Harlem. In the early months of the organization, the Lords were concerned with addressing change at the community level through “serve the people” programs. Wanzer explains “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 service, etc.). Finally, they sought transformations in the community that cannot be measured sufficiently through lenses of ‘influence’ or policy ‘success.’”⁴³ The YLO was the first symbol of community protection in *El Barrio* and the community trusted them more than the police or government agencies to bring about change.

Through political education courses, the Lords became well-versed in community organizing and the rhetoric of the time. Inspired by the tactics of the Black Panther Party, the Young Lords were politically active in the areas of political and human rights, as well as education, health care, gentrification, housing, police brutality, gender equality, and independence for Puerto Rico. Their direct action campaigns such as the “Church Offensive,” “Garbage Strike,” and “Lincoln Offensive” brought national attention to the inequalities Puerto

⁴² “We’re fighting for Freedom Together. There is no Other Way,” *The Black Panther*, August 2, 1969.

⁴³ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 3.

Ricans were experiencing in their urban environments. Johanna L. del C. Fernandez's study of the Young Lords Party in New York City between 1969 and 1974 describes connections with groups such as the Panthers and the Lords. "Linking local economic grievances with issues pertaining to structural racism and economic inequality, these radical groups helped orchestrate militant protests of the poor that addressed community issues and simultaneously advanced a broader political movement. By fomenting local change, they aimed to rebuild society anew."⁴⁴

The Young Lords Party "13 Point Program and Platform"

The YLP proposed a specific political platform and concrete social programs for political and economic change. The "13 Point Program and Platform" was created in October of 1969 and stated their goals, as well as the society they envisioned. Some of the important platforms and policy positions as outlined in the group's historical and theoretical introductory book *Palante: Young Lords Party* are:

"1. WE WANT SELF-DETERMINATION FOR PUERTO RICANS, LIBERATION ON THE ISLAND AND INSIDE THE UNITED STATES.

For 500 years, first Spain and then the united states have colonized our country. Billions of dollars in profits leave our country for the united states every year. In every way we are slaves of the gringo. We want liberation and the Power in the hands of the People, not Puerto Rican exploiters. QUE VIVA PUERTO RICO LIBRE!

6. WE WANT COMMUNITY CONTROL OF OUR INSTITUIONS AND LAND.

We want control of our communities by our people and programs to guarantee that all institutions serve the needs of our people. People's control of police, health services, churches, schools, housing, transportation and welfare are needed. We want an end to attacks on our land by urban renewal, highway destruction, and university corporations. LAND BELONGS TO ALL THE PEOPLE!

12. WE BELIEVE ARMED SELF-DEFENSE AND ARMED STRUGGLE ARE THE ONLY MEANS TO LIBERATION.

We are opposed to violence-the violence of hungry children, illiterate adults, diseased old people, and the violence of poverty and profit. We have asked, petitioned, gone to courts, demonstrated peacefully, and voted for politicians full of empty promises. But we still ain't free. The time has come to defend the lives of our people against repression and for revolutionary war against the businessmen, politicians, and the

⁴⁴ Johanna L. Del C. Fernandez, *Radicals in the Late 1960s: A History of the Young Lords Party in New York City, 1969-1974* (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2004), 4

police. When a government oppresses the people, we have the right to abolish it and create a new one.
ARM OURSELVES TO DEFEND OURSELVES!

13. WE WANT A SOCIALIST SOCIETY.

We want liberation, clothing, free food, education, health care, transportation, full employment and peace. We want a society where the needs of the people come first, and where we give solidarity and aid to the people of the world, not oppression and racism. HASTA LA VICTORIA SIEMPRE!”⁴⁵

The YLO advocated for a socialist society and redistribution of wealth, as well as liberation of all oppressed people.

The New York YLO’s five member central committee was comprised of: Felipe Luciano, Deputy Chairman; Juan Gonzalez, Deputy Minister of Education; Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman, Deputy Minister of Information; David Perez, Deputy Minister of Defense; and Juan “Fi” Ortiz, Deputy Minister of Finance.⁴⁶ They carried out their plans through direct action programs. By April of 1970 the New York Lords organization split from the national organization in Chicago because they felt the Chicago branch had a difficult time abandoning their gang lifestyle and becoming a social justice organization. The organization became the Young Lords Party (YLP). By the end of 1970 the membership in New York had grown to over 1,000 members with offices in *El Barrio*, the Lower East Side, and the South Bronx, and branches in Newark-Hoboken, Bridgeport, Philadelphia and Puerto Rico, as well as active supporters in Detroit, Boston, Hawaii, and in the military, as well as prisons.⁴⁷ Enck-Wanzer describes the various organizations within the YLP:

“First, the Puerto Rican Workers Federation took the struggle into places of employment in an attempt to challenge and, eventually, overthrow capitalist economies. Second, the Lumpen Organization enlisted the class below the workers, including those in jail, drug

⁴⁵ Abramson. *Palante: Young Lords Party*, 151.

⁴⁶ Nelson. ““Abortions under Community Control,”” 160.

⁴⁷ Pablo Guzman, “La Vida Pura: A Lord of the Barrio,” in Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 155-58, 164-67.

users, and the unemployed, in the struggle. This wing of the YLP was largely responsible for the (in)famous Attica prison uprising. 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."⁴⁸

There were a diverse group of organizations within the YLP that sought to change political, economic and social inequalities through community control. Each of the organizations was connected to one another in the common pursuit of liberation for all oppressed people. The YLP wanted to involve community members in whatever position in the revolutionary struggle they most associated with and create people's self-government.

⁴⁸ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 4.

Chapter 6: Spatial Theory and Protest Movements

To understand how the YLP appropriated space by seizing local social institutions, I applied a theoretical approach used by scholars who have analyzed how African Americans used space to gain momentum for their movement and bring about equality for blacks. Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, in their book *Free Space: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*, argue that free spaces are areas such as churches where individuals could organize, meet and plan for social change. “Black churches were typically the foundation of the movement in communities across the South. Even where ministers proved hesitant, the churches became drawn into the struggle through the activities of church members, and the language of black religion furnished the central themes of the movement.”⁴⁹ Southern Baptist churches were extremely important in the evolution of the Civil Rights movement because people could freely express their ideas about race and identity in America, while providing the necessary skills and objectives that future civil rights leaders and activists developed. I applied Evans and Boyte’s approach to interpret how the Young Lords altered the function of community spaces such as the First Spanish Methodist Church in East Harlem to gain momentum for their movement and empower Puerto Ricans.

The social-spatial dialectic sees the urban form (the ‘spatial’) and the lived experience of the city (the ‘social’) as converging and constituting each other. Society and space interact with each other on a daily basis. The “ordering” of the city reflects social, political, and economic power structures and cultural values. This is reflected in the built environment. Ordering on a large scale is seen through capital investment, and policies in city government that affect the built environment. Their actions are was represented in the dilapidated housing, inadequate

⁴⁹ Evans and Boyte, *Free Spaces*, 61.

healthcare, and unsanitary public streets of *El Barrio*. City government officials and the elite power structure were ignoring the health and well-being of those living in poverty in East Harlem. The ‘spaces of representation,’ or ‘lived spaces’ looks at how everyday practices are lived through the spaces constructed by elites and their symbols.⁵⁰ Some important questions to analyze are what actors make the urban landscape and what group interacts with it on a daily basis? How do people resist these ‘spaces of representation’? How do marginalized groups demand power across a spatial boundary? The Lords attempted to challenge and subvert dominant spatial practices in East Harlem to create alternative or ‘counter spaces.’ The Young Lords reappropriated spaces in *El barrio* that were controlled by the power elite. They wanted control of spaces by the community, not by those in power.

Urban geographers, sociologists, and architects have studied the issue of space, both the interaction of the social production of space through the social spatial dialectic (the social construction of space) and the built environment, as well as the power that can come with a crowd of people occupying a public space. Architectural historian Max Page, writes,

A protest can succeed only if it defies the regime by occupying space usually denied it, or occupies it in a way that transforms the place’s meaning...One of the central experiences of a mass protest is precisely to be part of the ‘mass’ to find oneself in a space that is expressly out of scale with the individual, and to find that thousands, together have filled it...(the space) had been conquered at least for a day and in the minds of the participants forever.”⁵¹

Page cites a number of places that have been transformed by occupy movements including, during the Civil Rights era, the Lincoln Memorial and Reflecting Pool in Washington, DC during Martin Luther King’s 1963 March on Washington. Page notes that “The Lincoln Memorial and

⁵⁰ See Henri, Lefebvre. *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, 1991; Katrina Vavickas “Spatial theory, cultural geography and social movements,” September 30, 2011, at <<http://historytoday-navickas.blogspot.com/2011/09/spatial-theory-cultural-geography-and.html>>

⁵¹ Max Page, “Urban Design & Civil Protest: A Socio-spatial Laboratory,” March 27, 2008, at <<http://www.urbandesign-civilprotest.com/about.htm>>

its Reflecting Pool were not designed for the Civil Rights Demonstration of 1963 but surely we cannot now imagine them without envisioning the scene there when MLK gave his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.”⁵² In a similar way, although on a much smaller scale, the First Spanish Methodist Church in East Harlem on the corner of 111th Street and Lexington Avenue is now seen over forty years later by the community as the church that the Young Lords took over. It symbolizes the power of the YLP in their ability to appropriate community spaces for the people.

Political Science professor Jules Boykoff writes about “scale shift” in terms of space and power control. He argues that “The Poor People’s Movement was designed to scale shift from various localized anti-poverty struggles to a descent on Washington, D.C. where thousands of protesters were to demand from Congress a federally legislated economic bill of rights.”⁵³ With national interest in civil rights issues on the rise and fundraising efforts increasingly successful, the time was perfect for, as Boykoff calls it, “vertical scale jumping.” Building from his earlier actions in Birmingham, Alabama, King pressed for a “vertical scale shift” to the national stage, restoring his call for President Kennedy to put forth an executive order banning segregation at the federal level.⁵⁴ Although on a smaller scale, by occupying the church, the Young Lords moved from taking over a few streets with brooms and garbage pails during the “Garbage Offensive” to occupying a key community church and then later a hospital in a very visible take-over that brought national attention to the organization.

Boykoff also explores the issue of space in relation to surveillance, specifically the FBI surveillance of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960s. In his article, Boykoff discusses how King went from smaller to larger rallies and with each rally, he got more power and more followers.

⁵² Page, “Urban Design & Civil Protest.”

⁵³ Boykoff, “Surveillance, Spatial Compression, and Scale,” 743.

⁵⁴ Boykoff, “Surveillance, Spatial Compression, and Scale,” 737.

As a result, surveillance activities used by the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover controlled the space that King occupied by trying to discredit him through wiretaps and attack letters. In somewhat the same way, during the last years of the YLP, the FBI's COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program) also made life difficult for Puerto Rican activists through constant surveillance and through informants who infiltrated the organization. By controlling the space of the YLP, as they had controlled the space of MLK and other black civil rights leaders, the FBI could intimidate and control the Puerto Rican community.

The Young Lords occupied space, first the public streets in the garbage initiative, and later the First Methodist Church in El Barrio and then Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx. Along the way, they took over the TB testing vehicles that belonged to the New York Department of Health. Through all these direct action campaigns, the YLP wanted to radically transform community spaces to better serve the people and empower Puerto Ricans to demand social, economic and political equality.

One author who discusses the Lords' appropriation of community spaces is Matthew Gandy, a scholar of Urban and Geography Studies at the University of London. His book *Concrete And Clay: Reworking Nature In New York City* traces the environmental history of New York City. In his chapter on the Young Lords, Gandy explains the evolution of this radical environmental justice organization and how they confronted the lack of community health programs by controlling community spaces. "A fundamental dimension to the Lords' political strategy was a desire to alter relations between space and society through demands for greater local autonomy and self-determination."⁵⁵ Gandy's research is limited to the history of this environmental justice movement and the Lords' direct action campaigns to change the function

⁵⁵ Gandy, "Between Borinquen and The Barrio," in *Concrete And Clay*, 186.

of community spaces. He does not fully investigate other aspects of the YLP's transformation of community spaces to gain momentum for their movement and does not go into as much detail on the social, political and cultural empowerment of Puerto Ricans through consciousness raising.

Chapter 7: Direct Action Campaigns--Taking it to the Streets

“As long as we don’t control institutions like the hospitals we will continue to die of disease like t.b. and receive poor or no health services in general. We must begin to fight together as a people to take over all the institutions that control our lives, by taking the central power that protects the capitalist hospitals, the state. Pig administrators who run hospitals and profit from other people’s suffering must be put up against the wall. As long as pigs like these are in our communities, they will continue to use (exploit) us....The YLP will fight until hospitals, police, schools, etc. are run by the people, especially those who work in and are affected by these institutions.”⁵⁶

Within the context of the growing black power movement and radical ethnic nationalism, the Young Lords began to operate within *El Barrio*. Through direct action campaigns, the YLP altered the function of community spaces that were not meeting the needs of the people living in poverty. In this section I will highlight a few of the campaigns as case studies of the community service work of the Lords, as well as showing how and why the YLP appropriated community spaces. Through various direct action campaigns and “serve the people” programs, the YLP wanted to change political, economic and social inequality at the local level and gain greater community control. These actions were coordinated by the YLP’s Committee for the Defense of the Community. Its goal was to fight for and stand up for the injustices Puerto Ricans were facing in their communities, such as dilapidated housing, educational inequalities, limited access to adequate health services and sanitation, as well as racial, cultural and language discrimination. The YLP demanded representation through their rhetoric of direct action towards social institutions and the power of government agencies.

The Garbage Offensive

When the YLO established their offices in East Harlem, they asked the people in the neighborhood about the biggest problem facing the community. The problem identified was the garbage left rotting in the streets because of ineffective city sanitation services. After petitioning

⁵⁶ *Palante*, June 5, 1970, volume 2, number 4, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 193.

the City Council for brooms and trash bags and getting no response, members of the YLO began to clean up the uncollected garbage themselves. To the Lords, garbage was a symbol of poverty and neglect. A newsletter in *Palante* (The YLP's biweekly newspaper) describes the urban environment of El Barrio. "East Harlem is known as *El Barrio*—New York's worst Puerto Rican slum...There is glass sprinkled everywhere, vacant lots filled with rubble, burnt-out buildings on nearly every block, and people packed together in the polluted summer heat...There is also the smell of garbage, coming in an incredible variety of flavors and strengths."⁵⁷ The first major direct action campaign was launched on 27 July 1969.

"The Garbage Offensive" is an example of the community taking control. In their newspaper, *The Young Lords Organization*, the Lords explained their actions, "For weeks the YLO had been asking the Sanitation Dept. for brooms and trash cans so they could clean up the streets and sidewalks of *El Barrio*. The City ignored the request. Finally, on Sunday, August 17, the community rebelled. All the rubbish that had accumulated along East 110th St. was dumped in the middle of the street. At 111th and Lexington Ave., the people turned over several abandoned cars and set them afire."⁵⁸

When the New York City Sanitation Department refused to acknowledge requests for street clean-ups, members of the YLO increased the level of street activism and they barricaded the main avenues in *El Barrio* to force the city authorities to take action. They cleaned up the community and engaged directly in dissent. This offensive resulted in student activists from New York City College working alongside street people. Darrel Enck-Wanzer discusses the offensive and how marginalized groups like the YLP demanded power through the rhetoric of dissent.

Wanzer writes, "The YLO asserted a form of independence; they demanded, through their words

⁵⁷ Gandy, "Between Borinquen And The Barrio," 736.

⁵⁸ "El Barrio and YLO Say No More Garbage in our Community," *Young Lords Organization*, 1969, Vol. 1, no. 4, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 186.

and actions, freedom from an oppressive ‘system’ that had subjugated Puerto Ricans for half of a millennium. With regard to form, the YLO declined the opportunity to mimic the form of the oppressor’s rhetoric and reforms.”⁵⁹ Wanzer argues that by developing a collective agency that would serve the community, their aim was to stand up to the status quo and challenge their oppressor’s rhetoric and reforms. In this sense, they appropriated the public streets to gain greater political and social autonomy. Matthew Gandy explains their actions. “By publicly sweeping the streets, they had extended the idea of home into the wider space of the city. With the construction of trash-can barricades, the demand for clean streets had become a revolutionary act.”⁶⁰ Through “The Garbage Offensive,” the Lords challenged the existing function of the urban environmental space of *El Barrio*. By demanding greater community control of their neighborhoods and altering the function of the public streets, they highlighted the condition of the streets as an example of Puerto Rico marginalization and injustice.

The People’s Church Offensive

One of the major events YLP is remembered for and that historians discuss is their December 1969 seizure of the First Spanish Methodist Church in East Harlem on the corner of 111th Street and Lexington Avenue. After launching the Thirteen Point Program that laid out their political objectives, the YLP shifted their campaigns to “serve the people” programs in the community. Similar to the Panthers in Oakland, they provided free day care for single mothers, cooked free meals for children, and monitored lead poisoning in homes and rates of tuberculosis in the community. However, they did not have a space large enough to carry out their community service programs. The First Spanish Methodist Church stood empty for most of the week and

⁵⁹ Darrel Enck-Wanzer, “Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization’s Garbage Offensive,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92: 2 (May 2006), 176.

⁶⁰ Gandy, “Between Borinquen And The Barrio,” 737.

seemed an ideal space to launch “serve the people” programs. Over 100 Lords activists occupied the church after the pastor (an anti-Communist Cuban exile) would not allow the YLP to setup a free children’s breakfast program in this community space. Over a period of eleven days, 3,000 people visited and participated in free breakfast programs, clothing drives, a community school, a day care center, free health care, and Puerto Rican cultural activities, as well as “liberation classes.” Educational events included readings from Pedro Albizu Campos, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X and Che Guevara. They renamed the building “La Iglesia de la Gente-The People’s Church.”

Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman, the YLO Minister of Information told why specifically the First Spanish Methodist Church was occupied as a strategic space to launch their “serve the people” programs. “The First Spanish was chosen because it was right smack dead in the center of El Barrio. It’s a beautiful location right in the middle of the community that has consistently closed itself up to the community. It’s only open for a few hours each week and for the rest of the week it turns into one big brick that sits on 111th St. and Lexington. It’s not just the Young Lords or our political beliefs that they responded to—they don’t even deal with the anti-poverty organizations in the community.”⁶¹

Initially, the Lords were practicing civil disobedience and simply trying to help out the community that had been ignored for far too long. Later, some members were armed, but that was only to protect themselves against police brutality that had become commonplace in *El Barrio*. They were prepared to break laws to challenge the local government’s refusal to provide adequate resources to East Harlem. The Young Lords Party lived by the principle that “armed

⁶¹ “Interview with Yoruba, Minister of Information, Young Lords Organization, Regarding Confrontation at the First Spanish Methodist Church in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem),” from the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America Communication Center File on the Young Lords, 1970, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 203.

self-defense and armed struggle” were the only means to liberation. The police arrived at the Church to subdue the organization and 105 Lords were arrested and many were beaten and sent to the hospital with severe injuries. Instead of retreating, they came back and occupied the church again. This was known as the “Second Peoples’ Church Offensive.” Young Lords’ member Felipe Luciano said the church gave them no valid reason why they could not use the space for “serve-the-people programs.” He asserted,

The reasons that they have given us for not having us in the church [are] that we are satanic, we are a devilish influence in the community, we are communism in disguise, all of that superficial jive. There has been no substantive reason as to why we can’t have the space. That has to be understood by everyone. There has been no substantive reason why the Young Lords cannot operate a community program in cooperation with the church. Legally, the church is tax exempt. Any tax-exempt institution is run by the people. The people should be allowed to use the space. They have no right to close the doors to any group of people, whether they be anti-poverty, revolutionary, or whatever the case may be, they have no right to close the doors.⁶²

Following on the ideas of liberation theology from Latin America, the Young Lords felt that the church had an obligation to help the people and not to lock its doors everyday except Sunday and separate itself from the community needs.

The Church was occupied for a second time in early October 1970 after the death of Lords activist Julio Roldan. He had been arrested earlier and sent to the “Tombs” (Manhattan House of Detention), a notoriously corrupt prison. The morning after his arrest he was found hung in his cell. This occurred after a series of controversial “suicides” of activists and people of color in jails throughout New York City that later were proven by autopsies to have not been unassisted deaths. The Lords had been following these “suicides” and discussed them in the newspaper *Palante*. The next day a massive crowd of 5,000 demonstrators carried Roldan’s casket to the First Spanish Methodist Church to demand prison reform. Pablo Guzman, in his

⁶² “Speech by Felipe Luciano, New York State Chrmn., Young Lords Organization, at the First Spanish Methodist Church in El barrio (111th St. & Lexington) on Sunday December 21, 1969,” from the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America Communication Center File on the Young Lords, 1970, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 208.

memoir *La Vida Pura: A Lord of the Barrio*, explains how they occupied the church and blocked the entrances with armed men. Police began to surround the church. New York City Mayor John Lindsay did not want a confrontation with the demonstrators so he negotiated with the Lords. The Board of Corrections was the body that instituted reforms in the prison, and in exchange for leaving the Church, Puerto Rican activist Jose Torres got a seat on the Board. Now the Lords had to get out of the Church without getting caught with guns. Under the negotiations clause, the Police were allowed to enter the church to check if weapons were there. The Lords got off without arrest because of the clever and comical way they concealed the weapons and got them out of the church without the police noticing. YLP member David Perez explained to Guzman how they pulled it off:

“Never underestimate the power of the people,” he said laughing. The cops stopped everybody they thought looked like a Young Lord a block from the church. ‘Where are the damn guns?!’ one cop yelled at me. But we’ve spent the last year and change organizing this whole community, not just a part of it. They’ve been stopping everyone under thirty-five. We broke the weapons down and hid them under the coats of *las viejitas*, the little old ladies who look like your grandmother. Hey, those little old ladies were down.”⁶³

Adhering to their platform that committed themselves to “community control of institutions and land,” the YLP took over the space within the church to provide community service programs to the neighborhood’s inhabitants. The YLP believed the first responsibility of the church was to the people. Historian Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar describes the media attention the YLP received. “In an era of incredible contest over the “law and order” conservatism of President Nixon’s “silent majority” and the rising tide of baby boomer leftist activism, events

⁶³ Pablo Guzman, “La Vida Pura: A Lord of the Barrio,” in Andres Torres and Jose E. Velazquez, eds., *The Puerto Rican Movement: Voices from the Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 157-168.

like the occupation were sensational news.”⁶⁴ The “Garbage Offensive” only gained local attention, but “The People’s Church Offensive” gained city wide, national and international media attention. In a similar way that Max Page described the reorganization of space around the Lincoln Memorial after King’s 1963 March, the First Spanish Methodist Church now was a symbol of the power that the Young Lords were gaining in the community for the Puerto Rican people.

My Visit to “The Peoples Church

During my time walking the streets of East Harlem on a rainy mid July afternoon in 2012, I stopped by the First Spanish Methodist Church in East Harlem on the corner of 111th Street and Lexington Avenue. I rang the doorbell and was invited in. The sign on the front said, “*Todos Son Bienvenidos*” (Everyone is welcome). I got to talk to one of the current congregation members who lived in the community during the time of the Lords occupation of the church. In 1969, she was a recent bride and her husband would not allow her to attend the church because of the trouble the Young Lords were causing. She said some in the community did not like the way the Lords tried to bring about change because they used force by carrying guns. However, she said, many supported the message they brought to the community in *El Barrio* about improving their lives and working with the people in East Harlem, as well as bringing attention to what was occurring in this neighborhood that many in the city and country did not know about. She said that she was against violence and therefore did not support everything the Young Lords did, but she was glad they had made a statement. She now wants the younger generation to learn about the positive messages the Lords brought to the community.

The occupation of the church to gain more community control of the spaces in East Harlem was seen by some in the community as a violation of their personal space. The radical

⁶⁴ Ogbar, “Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” 157.

nature of the Lords' actions sparked fear in some in the community because they saw the presence of guns as detrimental to bringing about change. The Puerto Rican woman that I met said that of course they were afraid at that time since there were Lords with semi-automatic rifles and shotguns on the roof of the building across from the Church, as well as armed FBI agents around the Church.

Today the Church offers programs such as free food to the community and neighborhood block parties, but it has been difficult because of the economic recession. The current population is a mix of Hispanics, including Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Mexicans, a prime example of the diversity of East Harlem today. 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the Young Lord's takeover of "The Peoples Church." The Puerto Rican church worker told me the congregation voted to allow them to hold the commemoration at the church. She said so many people showed up that many were standing outside in the streets because the church was so packed. Some of the original members returned for the celebration. Among the over 500 who came for this commemoration were former Young Lords, Black Panthers and Jewish Defense League members. Now the Church wants to build unity among the groups, as well as work toward a reconciliation process between church members and former Lords.

Health Care Initiatives

After the Church offensive, the Lords focused on inadequate health care in the community. Poverty, dilapidated housing, and lack of basic medical services in the Puerto Rican community had led to high rates of tuberculosis, lead poisoning and other diseases. Adequate health care for the poor was one of the chief demands of the Young Lords. In this section, I will focus on the Young Lords as an environmental justice organization in their occupation of health care facilities to bring community control to the people. "Faced with a health-care crisis on various fronts, the Young Lords (together with the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement)

started lead poisoning and tuberculosis testing programs, took over Lincoln Hospital in the Bronx, and demanded equal treatment of all ‘Third World’ peoples.”⁶⁵ In the early stages of the YLP’s political action campaigns, they conducted door-to-door TB testing in the community. Since the 1930s, the Puerto Rican community has had high rates of tuberculosis. “The highly contagious, airborne disease had long been linked to poverty and overcrowding. Small tenement apartments, with little circulating air or sunlight, were perfect breeding grounds. Puerto Rican migrants were further disadvantaged by coming from an island where the mortality rate of tuberculosis was the highest in the world.”⁶⁶

After multiple attempts failed to get the public agency the New York Tuberculosis Association to help test for TB in the community, the YLP took matters into their own hands and launched a direct action campaign. They seized a New York City chest x-ray truck in June of 1970 to test for tuberculosis in the community because of the lack of preventative care provided by the hospitals to the people. The truck had operated only from 12:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., a time that was inconvenient for working people. The YLP aligned themselves with doctors and technicians who supported their cause to bring quality healthcare to *El Barrio*. To gain publicity for the event, they alerted the media to their demands and used a loudspeaker to carry their message throughout East Harlem. The Lords said, “In the three days that we had the truck, we have already tested 770 people. According to the technicians, the usual amount of people taken care of in the same amount of time is about 300. So, as far as the Young Lords Party is concerned, this truck rightfully belongs to the people!”⁶⁷ They ‘liberated’ the truck and returned it to the people.

⁶⁵ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 188.

⁶⁶ Del C. Fernandez. *Radicals in the Late 1960s*, 197.

⁶⁷ “TB Truck Liberated,” *Palante*, July 3, 1970, volume 2, number 6, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 197.

The Lords were successful in getting the Director of Health for the East Harlem District to meet some of their demands. The organization allowed the Lords to continue operating the X-ray unit for 12 hours a day, seven days a week at the city's expense. According to Johanna L. del C. Fernandez "having established a record of community service through their previous door-to-door work and having demonstrated their ability to mobilize hundreds of angry inner-city youth on a moment's notice (at a time when the threat of urban rioting weighed heavily on the minds of local government officials), the radical youth had achieved a measure of bargaining power in local politics."⁶⁸ Because the city neglected to provide services to the community, the Lords demanded community control of institutions that were not meeting the needs of the people.

The Young Lords laid out their Ten Point Health Program. Some of their demands were:

- "We want total self-determination of all health services at East Harlem (El Barrio) through an incorporated community-staff governing board for Metropolitan Hospital."
- "We want free publicly supported health care for treatment and prevention."
- "We want "door-to-door" preventative health services emphasizing environment and sanitation control, nutrition, drug addiction, maternal and child care and senior citizen services."
- "We want education programs for all people to expose health problems—sanitation, rats, poor housing, malnutrition, police brutality, pollution, and other forms of oppression."⁶⁹

YLP Leadership in Women's Rights:

YLP radical politics of the early 1970s also incorporated both feminism and nationalism into their party platform. Although they had physically taken over buildings and spaces in NYC, they also appropriated "psychological" space in relation to the general feeling among many males in the U.S. that women did not have the same rights as men. The founding of the YLP came at the same time as the Women's Liberation Movement of the New Left. The YLP developed a unique reproductive rights discourse and integrated it into a nationalist perspective

⁶⁸ Del C. Fernandez. *Radicals in the Late 1960s*, 199.

⁶⁹ "Ten Point Health Program," *Young Lords Organization*, January 1970, volume 1, number 5, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 188.

different from other organizations at the time. It took the Black Panther Party longer to incorporate feminism into their political ideology.

Women emerged in leadership roles within the YLP in the early stages of the YLP's formation. They advocated for feminist demands such as access to voluntary birth control, safe and legal abortions, a quality health care system, free day care and an end to poverty among Puerto Ricans and other minorities. An important feature of their feminist position was a woman's right to control her own reproduction. The YLP was different from other nationalist organizations at the time, such as the Nation of Islam, which were opposed to abortion. For the first time in a nationalist and multiracial organization, radical feminist thought became a central platform of the organization's political ideology. Jennifer A. Nelson argues that the coexistence of two political positions: feminism and nationalism created an original and inclusive reproductive political ideology⁷⁰ "End all genocide: Abortions under community control" reflected the YLP's nationalist fertility control and reproductive rights agenda. Feminists in the YLP began to challenge traditional stereotypes about women and reproduction. They believed women should have control over their bodies.

Abortion was a dangerous procedure for poor minority women before *Roe v. Wade*, the U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion in the first six months of pregnancy. Reproductive freedom advocated by the YLP called for a woman's right to choose to have as many children as she wanted. Since socio-economic inequality and inadequate access to quality healthcare prevented women of color from taking care of so many children, women needed to be free to choose what to do with their own bodies.

⁷⁰ Nelson. "Abortions under Community Control," 157-180.

Poor Puerto Rican and African American women needed access to safe and accessible abortions. Because of the inadequate abortion services in inner city New York hospitals and clinics, the YLP advocated for the community control of abortion clinics and hospitals by taking over these institutions of power to serve the people. YLP member Colon describes their nationalist demands: “Point Number 6 of the Young Lords Party 13 Point Platform and program states, ‘We want community control of our institutions and land.’ This means that we want institutions like hospitals where sisters go to have abortions to be under the control of our people to be sure that they really serve our needs. Until we struggle together to change our present situation, women will not be allowed to have the children they can support without suffering any consequences.”⁷¹

Control of healthcare institutions was important for the YLP because they wanted to ensure the safety of women from medical abuses. Two influential YLP leaders Iris Morales and Denise Oliver argued that in order to achieve liberation of people of color they had to make efforts to end sexist oppression. The Young Lords were one of the first social justice organizations to include rights to abortions and contraceptives, an end to sterilization abuse, and a comprehensive reproductive rights agenda.

Nationalism and Gender Equality

The Young Lords’ political ideology constructed not only a race and class based political agenda, but one that highlighted gender oppression. Initially there was a “revolutionary macho” thesis on nationalism within the rank and file of the YLP. The idea that “Machismo must be revolutionary” was widespread in nationalist movements at the time and members struggled with patriarchal policies. Although nationalist organizations like the Black Panthers were the first to align themselves with the Women’s Liberation movement and the Gay Liberation movement,

⁷¹ Nelson, “‘Abortions under Community Control,’” 173.

women were mostly only in secondary roles in the BPP leadership until the early 1970s. However, as early as 1969, women in the YLP formed a women's caucus that argued for a feminist agenda and they shared examples of sexism from their fellow comrades. Puerto Rican culture is machismo in nature and is determined by highly patriarchal norms. Dennis Oliver explains that, "The woman is taught to cater to the...demands of her father or husband. She is taught that she is inferior in her own ways."⁷²

Women in the party issued demands to the Central Committee to end sexual harassment and to include women in leadership roles. The organization responded by promoting Denise Oliver and Gloria Fontanez to the Central Committee and adopted a new slogan, "*Abajo con el machismo!*" (Down with Machismo) About 40% of the active membership was made up of women.⁷³ They also changed the 13 Point program of the Party to include gender equality, and the call for "revolutionary machismo" was dropped from the platform. The YLP's Women's Caucus was also key in advancing the party's gay and lesbian caucus. Point five says Puerto Rican women, "will be neither behind nor in front of their brothers but always alongside them in mutual respect and love."

YLP began to challenge traditional gender roles in the Puerto Rican community. One of their campaign slogans was "*La mujer puertorriquena es doblemente oprimida*" (The Puerto Rican woman is doubly oppressed). It was rare at the time for a nationalist agenda to highlight the role of gender. Radical ethnic nationalists realized that women were essential in the struggle for national liberation and that both sexes had to work together to enact real systemic societal change. The YLP changed the position of women and increased the space that they were

⁷² Abramson. *Palante: Young Lords Party*, 50-52.

⁷³ Gandy, "Between Borinquen and the Barrio," 741.

allowed to occupy within the organization and thus influenced the changing role of women within Puerto Rican society.

The Lincoln Hospital Offensive: Background

The Young Lords also focused their attention on the issue of forced sterilizations administered without consent to Puerto Rican women and on the deaths resulting from poorly performed abortions. The third direct action campaign was the July 1970 occupation of the dilapidated Lincoln Hospital after the death of Lords' activist Carmen Rodriguez. On July 1, 1970, 31-year-old Rodriguez died during a saline-induced second trimester abortion at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. She was the first woman to die from a legal abortion after the passage of the New York State abortion law, which legalized pregnancy termination up to twenty-four weeks.⁷⁴

The death of Lords' member Rodriguez convinced Puerto Ricans and people of color that they were targets for mass genocide through population control. This became a popular radical political position among nationalist organizations including the YLP, the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. Gloria Cruz, the YLP Health Captain, said that New York City's dangerous and ill-equipped hospitals attempted to reduce the population of low-income Puerto Ricans. She asserted "a new plan for the limitation of our population was passed—the abortion law. Under this new method we are now supposed to be able to go to any of the city butcher shops (the municipal hospitals) and receive an abortion. These are the same hospitals that have been killing our people for years."⁷⁵

Puerto Rico has a historical tradition of coerced and forced sterilization of women. Legislation legalized sterilization as a method of birth control in 1937 in an effort to decrease the

⁷⁴ Jennifer A. Nelson. "Abortions under Community Control," 157.

⁷⁵ Gloria Cruz, "Murder at Lincoln," *Palante*, July 1970, 3, quoted in Nelson. "Abortions under Community Control," 157-158.

growing poor population on the island. Sterilization was the most promoted method of contraception. “Most sterilizations occurred after labor; by 1949, 17.8 percent of all deliveries were followed by sterilization.”⁷⁶ The pill would later be first tested in Puerto Rico by corporations under the sponsorship of Margaret Sanger’s Planned Parenthood. They believed Third World poverty could be eradicated through population limitation. These programs limited the reproductive rights of women on the island. The Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico had long been convinced that the government enacted a eugenics program to drastically reduce the population. Women’s and Gender Studies professor Jennifer Nelson explains the motivations for these programs. “The United States had a vested interest in limiting the population—both to sustain the abundant natural resources that kept the American economy afloat and to reduce the possibility of organized rebellion in Third World nations.”⁷⁷

To the YLP these historical roots revealed that people of color did not have control over their fertility and a genocidal campaign had been enacted to limit the population, especially so called “undesirable” and “unfit” people living in poverty. This anti-genocidal rhetoric was common among black nationalist groups such as the BPP and the Nation of Islam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although there is no firm evidence to confirm that population control was enacted by the U.S. government to reduce the number of people of color in America, Jennifer Nelson says Puerto Ricans in the community faced, “the realities of inadequate health care at Lincoln and other public hospitals....Long waits for emergency room care, exhausted and hurried interns as medical staff, lack of provisions for drug treatment or prenatal and postnatal care, run-down accommodations, and Rodriguez’s death—provided a context for the dire warnings Cruz and other people of color espoused.” High sterilization rates among Puerto Rican

⁷⁶ Nelson, ““Abortions under Community Control,”” 167.

⁷⁷ Nelson, ““Abortions under Community Control,”” 168.

women and lack of control over their fertility led to claims by the YLP of genocide by U.S. imperialists against third world women.

Lincoln Hospital Takeover

In the early morning of July 15, 1970, 150 Lords occupied the administrative buildings of Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx for 12 hours and demanded their 10 Point health program. To protest the poor health care in this hospital, they took over the building to begin to foster a collective consciousness and to educate the community about the “butcher shop” at Lincoln Hospital. The Lords described the abortions at Lincoln and what happened to Rodriguez,

Lincoln Hospital has an abortion waiting list of over 300, but provision has been made for only 3 abortions a day. This means that many of our sisters will be in advanced stages of pregnancy when the abortion is performed; this makes the abortion more dangerous. In addition, these operations are not even performed in a well-equipped, sterile operation room, but rather in a small room that had been previously used as a storeroom. The man responsible for this inefficient program is J.J. Smith, head of obstetrics and gynecology. He is the man whom we hold directly responsible for the needless death of Carmen Rodriguez, a sister who was killed because she was injected with salt solution that stopped her heart during an abortion. The doctor that was performing the abortion didn't even check her chart before administering the injection; if he had, he would have seen that she had a heart condition and couldn't be given that type of injection.⁷⁸

The YLP members occupied the spaces of Lincoln Hospital protesting inadequate healthcare for the poor and the lack of reform in the Metropolitan Hospital Community. They declared:

The Young Lords have developed a Ten-Point Program of Health that explains what we want, the minimum necessary for our people—for Puerto Rican, black, and poor white oppressed peoples. We have joined with revolutionary workers in other parts of the city, with the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement at Gouverneur Hospital on the Lower East Side, with the Lincoln Hospital workers in the South Bronx, with the Black Panther Party Free Health Clinics in Staten Island and Brooklyn. We are building a city-wide revolutionary health movement that will shake the city to its rotten pig core...By becoming involved in Breakfast Programs, Clothing Programs, Health Programs, the Young Lords are demonstrating to all Latin and other oppressed peoples that we truly do

⁷⁸ “Lincoln Hospital Must Serve the People,” *Palante*, September 11, 1970, volume 2, number 11, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 199.

serve and protect. Wherever the people suffer and resist oppression, we are there to aid, shape and lead their struggle.”⁷⁹

The mobilization and coalition of various social justice organizations from various races, helped propel a revolutionary health movement in the early 1970s in the urban environment of New York City. The YLP joined The Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (HRUM) and the South Bronx organization *Think Lincoln Committee*, which was made up of hospital workers and patients. This was a coalition outside of union control comprised of hospital employees, neighborhood residents and activists that sought to demand an end to budget cuts at Lincoln Hospital and demanded health care reform.⁸⁰

The Lincoln Offensive was the YLP’s longest and most effective direct action campaign. The Lords were part of a health movement that wanted self-determination in all health facilities, as well as free health care for all people. They appropriated the space in community hospitals to state their goals and change the inequality of health services in the city. The needs of the people came first in all their direct action campaigns. They wanted to take control of institutions like Lincoln Hospital that they felt controlled and exploited oppressed people of color.

⁷⁹ “Revolutionary Health Care Program for the People,” *Young Lords Organization*, January 1970, volume 1, number 5, in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 190.

⁸⁰ Del C. Fernandez. *Radicals in the Late 1960s*, 201.

Chapter 8: Decline of the Young Lords Party

In March 1971, the YLP expanded operations to Puerto Rico with the *Offensive Rompecadenas* (“Chains Off Offensive”) campaign. Independence for Puerto Rico became the primary concern for the YLP. Matthew Gandy writes, “The cultural nationalism of the *barrio* became more geopolitical in its focus and looked to the mythical island of Borinquen (Puerto Rico in its imagined pre-colonial state), rather than the tangible transformation of the ghetto.”⁸¹ In Puerto Rico, the YLP adopted a more militant, armed, violent revolutionary struggle. The Central Committee put all their resources and efforts into national liberation for Puerto Rico, as well as fighting against imperialism, capitalism and the exploitation of third world countries. A revolutionary, nationalist, ideological struggle for Puerto Rican independence became their primary concern. However, they underestimated the support for Puerto Rican independence and failed to form alliances with other independence movements on the island. In addition, the members’ lack of proficiency in Spanish lost them support of Puerto Ricans on the island. Because of the focus on Puerto Rico independence, addressing local community issues was abandoned and days of “serve the people programs” faded quickly.

Also during this time, the YLP came to the attention of FBI’s COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program). COINTELPRO was the covert and (illegal) action by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that targeted radical protest organizations because of their perceived Communist sympathies and support of Third World revolutionary independence movements. COINTELPRO was set up by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover at Richard Nixon’s request. Their goal was to disrupt and destabilize political groups within the United States. COINTELPRO sought to

⁸¹ Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 743.

discredit the New Left and black nationalist organizations. They used harassment, misinformation and set-ups to infiltrate civil rights organizations and targeted private citizens whom they labeled “left wing agitators.” They placed informants inside these groups to create internal strife within the organization and political conflicts, as well as to collect surveillance on the activities of the groups. Gandy writes, “The U.S. Government characterized the Lords as achieving Puerto Rican independence. Increasing FBI infiltration exacerbated internal tension within the organization and the Lords became increasingly embroiled in internal strife, violence and suspicion.”⁸² Just as the FBI had taken away Martin Luther King’s safe spaces when they harassed him and wiretapped his phone, the FBI also targeted the YLP and through informants made the space they occupied less safe and limited their political mobility.

The change in strategy toward Puerto Rican independence took the focus away from the previous community action and progressive social programs. The YLP also lost the alliances of progressive groups in New York, as well as activists who were not Puerto Rican. The increased violence that the community began to see in the Lords’ activities began to erode public support as well. This was highlighted in a riot between hundreds of Lords supporters and police at the 1971 Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York, as well as the violence during the second occupation of the Methodist Church after the death of YLP activist Julio Roldan.⁸³ Also the resurgence of gang violence for turf control in the early 1970s destroyed any sense of multi-racial political coalitions and community mobilizations for social and economic equality. To make matters worse, many of the community-based programs that emerged in the 1960s relied heavily on government funding. However, during the economic recession of the 1970s, these programs were ended. Also, during this time deindustrialization was occurring in cities across

⁸² Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 747.

⁸³ Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 745.

the U.S. at a massive rate, especially in New York City. Deindustrialization resulted in an increase in the Puerto Rican poverty rate, which had dropped to under 30% in 1970 and now rose to over 45% by the mid-1980s.⁸⁴ The early 1970s saw an era of conservatism with the rise of the New Right and later the “moral majority.” These groups did everything in their power to increase the inequality in wealth in the United States and destroy the progressive reforms brought about by the Civil Rights Movement.

After the failure of the YLP Puerto Rican branch, the organization left the island in July 1972 and became the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Worker’s Organization (PRRWO) in New York City. They focused on infiltrating labor unions. They formed alliances with radical labor groups such as Revolutionary Union, I Wor Kuen and the Black Workers Congress. Their goal was to establish a multiethnic Communist party within the United States. This lasted until 1976. According to Wanzer, the “PRWO 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 the 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 worker’s consciousness through unionization.”⁸⁵ Membership and support severely weakened. Progressive community based programs were gone, as well as the support for raising the people’s political consciousness.

In the mid seventies, the Lords disintegrated because of political infighting and F.B.I infiltration through COINTELPRO. The YLP became a “proto-authoritarian regime” and loyal members were accused of being informants for the FBI. The PRWO disbanded in 1976. “The Young Lords seemed destined to become a minor footnote in the turmoil of 20th century U.S.

⁸⁴ Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 748.

⁸⁵ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 5.

politics, their political legacy lost forever amid the new political and economic realities of the Reagan era.”⁸⁶

Pablo Guzman describes the decline of the YLP, “By our sixth year, it was over. Partly because of destabilization by arrest and government infiltration but mainly because we were young and prone to mistakes—mistakes of leadership, of vulnerability to betrayal, and of the same movement infighting that we had once so despised. But before we dissolved, the Young Lords Party had left its mark.”⁸⁷ Even though their widespread power and membership numbers faded within three to four years of its creation, the Lords’ direct action campaigns, along with the transformation of community spaces, gave hope to Puerto Ricans living in poverty and brought national attention to the deterioration of urban areas throughout the nation.

⁸⁶ Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords*, 5.

⁸⁷ Guzman, *The Young Lords*, 288.

Chapter 9: Achievements and Failures of the YLP

“It is the imaginative power of the Lords’ campaigns that revealed how urban space bears the imprint of networks of power operating in far wider arenas than any one city or region. The island of Puerto Rico and the city of New York are rooted in a shared political and historical dynamic that has transformed the landscape and culture of both places.”⁸⁸

-Urban Geographer Matthew Gandy

In their effort to improve the living conditions in *El Barrio*, create new community spaces controlled by the people, and assert their cultural identity, the Young Lords changed the nature of the urban streets by confronting institutions of power and demanding greater community control. Researching the Young Lords is significant because historians can get a picture of social protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s and how a key group went about choosing areas for action and achieving social change. The Young Lords transformed urban spaces during a time of intense social and political change in America. By controlling their own communities they made sure social institutions served the needs of the people. Civil Rights groups of the 1960s needed space to effectively bring about social change and gain momentum for their movements. Because the Young Lords seized local social institutions and changed their function, they controlled the geographic urban spaces in their communities. By gaining space for the movement, the YLP gained power through their rhetoric and direct action in the streets of NYC. Many Puerto Ricans were tired of U.S. imperialism and Third World exploitation. They wanted to empower Puerto Ricans to be proud of their culture and heritage. They did this by politicizing and educating the community. By empowering Puerto Ricans to take back their community institutions that were not serving the needs of the people, they brought about social change and tried to enact systemic societal change.

⁸⁸ Gandy, “Between Borinquen and the Barrio,” 752.

By examining the successes and failures of their direct action campaigns, historians investigating the Young Lords can understand the changes they brought to the community and the shortcomings of the movement. They successfully highlighted the inequalities of urban America and the neglect U.S. society's governing institutions showed towards meeting the needs of the people living in poverty. Through the blending of radical ethnic nationalism and social service work they wanted to radically transform society. Johanna L. del C. Fernandez explains this when she writes, "Their success, and part of their difficulty, was due to the novelty of their blend of paramilitary revolutionary theory and concrete, social service action. Nevertheless, in 'doing the city's work' the group straddled a strange middle ground between a traditional social service organization and a political organization, bent on fundamentally transforming society."⁸⁹ They did provide a sweeping critique of capitalism and offered a socialist system, but they were not able to launch a broad based campaign for the redistribution of wealth. Also their direct action campaigns only brought temporary change to Puerto Rican communities. They did not ensure the stabilization of lasting progressive programs. Because they shifted their focus away from community action and the transformation of community spaces into a revolutionary struggle for Puerto Rican Independence and a Workers' Revolution, they lost the trust and admiration of Puerto Ricans in American cities. The FBI's COINTELPRO program of covert action, surveillance, infiltration and intimidation also hindered the movement. When they set up branches in Puerto Rico to fight for Independence, and established the PRRWO, the progressive programs that had brought about immense change in the community lost support. As the lived spaces the Puerto Ricans inhabited no longer benefitted from the Young Lords campaigns, the

⁸⁹ Del C. Fernandez, *Radicals in the Late 1960s*, 288.

community suffered, and crime, health care inequality, housing inadequacy and educational inequality greatly increased.

Overall, examining space as it relates to the YLP illuminates the successes and failures of this social protest organization in comparison to the efforts of black civil rights organizations' appropriation of space to gain momentum for their movement. The Young Lords revealed a new kind of urbanism that sought to change the injustices of the ghetto and alter a people's political consciousness. They altered the social production of space. As Matthew Gandy writes, "A fundamental dimension of the Lords' political strategy was a desire to alter relations between space and society through demands for greater local autonomy and self-determination. In this respect, the many concerns were fused into an alternative kind of urbanism—or as Castells (1983: 320) put it, 'a struggle for a free city, a citizen movement.'"⁹⁰ They altered the function of community spaces through seizure of local institutions-hospitals, t.b. testing trucks, churches and public streets, to engage people in direct democracy.

Achievements of the Young Lords Party

- A new Lincoln hospital built in South Bronx after health care reform program and "Lincoln offensive"
- Successful at building coalitions with health workers in East Harlem and the South Bronx
- Brought attention to the issue of sterilization without the consent of African American and Puerto Rican women.
- Challenged gender roles in the Puerto Rican community

⁹⁰ Gandy, "Between Borinquen and the Barrio," 751.

- Forced the city to use lead-poisoning and tuberculosis detection tests after the YLP exposed the epidemic occurring in Puerto Rican neighborhoods and housing projects
- Promoted a broad based reproductive rights campaign
- Pushed the NYC Board of Corrections into reforming prison conditions
- Encouraged schools to teach Puerto Rican history and culture, which now many do.
- Promoted bilingual education
- Feminist consciousness raising
- The Young Lords were successful in getting an entire generation to begin to abandon the colonized mentality and reject stereotypes of their racial inferiority. Former member Juan Gonzales said “The colonized mentality is that you believe you’re inferior, you believe you have no impact on your life. What we did in the Young Lords because we are a colonial people, Puerto Ricans are a colonial people, is that we were able to inculcate in our members the sense that one we can control our own destiny, that events don’t happen, you can control events. Once your mind is free, once you believe you’re the equal of anyone else and you depend on your fellow members for support, you can do anything. That was the great victory of the Young Lords: eradicating in a whole generation of people in a colonized mentality.”⁹¹ The YLP empowered Puerto Ricans through revolutionary nationalism to be proud of their culture and history through the eradication of the colonized mentality.

⁹¹ “National1” at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwtgAE8foco>>

- “Ask any Latino professional in Nueva York who advanced in government or the corporate world between, say, 1969 and 1984, and you’ll be told they owe part of their opportunity to the sea change in perception that the Young Lords inspired”⁹²

It is difficult to gauge the success of the Lords because judging success or failure takes value away from the political consciousness they developed among the Puerto Rican community in *El Barrio*. Historians cannot measure their success only with numbers or quantitative data. Wanzer explains, “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. 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 with a loyal nonmember community base.”⁹³ The Young Lords Party was a revolution of the mind and a consciousness struggle.

Young Lords members such as Felipe Luciano and Michael Abramson wanted to remove the negative stereotypes that Puerto Ricans had about themselves and make them see the beauty and worth of themselves and their culture. Luciano says, “There is a cultural amnesia among Puerto Ricans and they would like to forget about their heritage and history.”⁹⁴ Puerto Ricans not only were oppressed by the social institutions of white America, but by their own victimization, which resulted in this negative mentality and the self-conceptualization of Puerto Rican

⁹² Guzman. *The Young Lords*, 288-289.

⁹³ Enck-Wanzer. *The Young Lords*.

⁹⁴ Felipe Luciano quoted in *Salsa: Latin Pop Music in Cities*. DVD. Directed by Jeremy Marre. El Entertainment Distribution, 1988.

stereotypes, as well as a legacy of colonialism. Once they freed themselves from the colonized mentality, they were able to strive to bring about change in their communities. Luciano said, “It was the first time the older first generation of migrants saw their sons and daughters fighting for their rights. They embraced their children as liberators.”⁹⁵ Through direct action and taking over community spaces, they were able to instill pride in Puerto Ricans by advocating their brothers and sisters to demand greater political, social and cultural autonomy in American society.

⁹⁵ Marre, *Salsa: Latin Pop Music in Cities*.

Chapter 10: Conclusion- Legacy of The Young Lords...The Struggle Continues

In July 2012, I took the advice from the title of a work by spatial theoretician Michel de Certeau, “Walking In the City”, and spent two days wandering from one side of East Harlem (El Barrio) to the other. The purpose was to find the places where the Young Lords had appropriated space (the church, the streets, the hospitals). I found some of these historical places, but what I also found was a modern day appropriation of space. There were bilingual signs on street posts instilling pride in the community: *El Barrio means History; El Barrio means culture; El Barrio means hope*. There were sidewalk shops, Latino restaurants, loud Latin music coming from stores, shop names in Spanish. I ate Puerto Rican *plantains dulces*, pork, chicken, rice and beans and Puerto Rican icy (coconut was the best) from a street vendor. There were community gardens with signs: *No drugs, No guns. Come in, sit and enjoy. Plots available*. I looked through a gate at a peaceful, well-maintained garden with flowers and vegetables and comfortable looking benches—a part of a city project of community gardens. There were signs for health services on the doors of churches and community centers, and there were notices for free food, summer sports activities and education programs. There was a mobile health care van testing for HIV in the community. Puerto Rican and American flags hung side by side next to murals and mosaics of Puerto Rican heroes. Kids of many ethnic backgrounds (Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Asian Americans, African Americans) played in the open fire hydrants on a hot summer evening. People sat on stoops chatting with each other and greeting passersby (including me).

All of my observations are not to discount the continuing socio-economic inequality of this area. *El Barrio* has endured a massive system of urban renewal and gentrification. It has the

highest rates of poverty, and crime in the city, as well as the most housing projects. However, although the Young Lords were only active for a few years, these elements of a vibrant community that I saw in East Harlem must owe their success, at least in part, to YLP's appropriation of space and "serve the people" programs in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Although the Young Lords had a short-lived existence, their community-based activism and ideological struggle had lasting impact on the consciousness of Puerto Ricans and the community as a whole. Their social justice work expanded the political profile of Puerto Ricans in New York City, the second largest racial minority group in the city.⁹⁶ They connected socio-economic concerns of the community to structural racism and the colonial status between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. The Young Lords were just one example of the many radical social justice organizations that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s that wanted to completely change society from the bottom up. These young radical activists realized change never comes without a fight. Through direct action campaigns, the YLP altered the function of community spaces that were not meeting the needs of the people living in poverty. As Johanna del C. Fernandez articulates, "Increasingly, the Young Lords as well as activists of other political persuasions sought greater influence and power over major local institutions. For a brief moment in the late sixties and early seventies, they pursued the goals of "community control," motivated by the idea that by taking possession of major local institutions—schools, hospitals, churches, and police precincts—local communities could begin to exercise genuine direct democracy."⁹⁷ Through various direct action campaigns and "serve the people" programs, the YLP wanted to change political, economic and social inequality at the local level and gain greater community control through the occupation of social institutions. They were able to understand the key

⁹⁶ Del C. Fernandez. *Radicals in the Late 1960s*, 291.

⁹⁷ Del C. Fernandez, *Radicals in the Late 1960s*, 287.

community grievances of the time: poverty, healthcare inequality, dilapidated housing, lead poisoning, and these campaigns gained them respect from the older generation of Puerto Ricans. They envisioned the neighborhoods where Puerto Ricans lived as space where cooperation among various races and ethnicities, as well as community control of social and political institutions would foster a new sense of space and place through the achievement of local reforms.

In the words of the Young Lords, *¡Pa'lante, Siempre Pa'lante!* (“Go Forward, always go forward”) was their guiding principle and they always had the Puerto Rican people in their hearts and minds. The struggle for political, economic and social equality did not end with the Young Lords. It lives on through the work of all those committed to a more just society that seeks to change the systemic societal problems that affect all people no matter one’s race, creed or socio-economic class. The Young Lords educated the community about the class struggle that was occurring in this country, and that continues to occur. The Lords envisioned a society where equal opportunity was the norm for everybody. They showed what works and what does not work in mobilizing communities for social change. By occupying strategic urban spaces in their communities that were symbolic of the existing social order and by changing the functions, they attempted to empower Puerto Ricans to demand greater social, political, economic, as well as cultural autonomy. The Young Lords showed how collective agency and direct action against injustice could alter the urban environment the Puerto Rican community inhabited and change a people’s political consciousness. As Iris Morales and Denise Oliver-Velez said, “If you don’t know your history, you cannot assess where you are today, and where you are going in the future. The Young Lords’ ideas about a just society opened up the imagination, offered hope, and inspired action. Its commitments connected the organization and the community to a national and

international agenda. The Young Lords, situated in the relatively recent past, between the civil rights movement and the era of conservatism of the 1970s, offer insight into what was and was not effective in mobilizing communities.”⁹⁸ ¡Pa'lante, Siempre Pa'lante!

⁹⁸ Enck-Wanzer. *The Young Lords*, xi.

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