

“WE CRY FOR CHANGE:”

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PUERTO RICAN NEW YORK’S POSTWAR

HOUSING CRISIS, 1945-1974

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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As early as 1945, Puerto Rican migrants in New York City were being failed by the city’s government and landlords. Housing in the largely Puerto Rican enclaves of El Barrio (East Harlem) and the Upper West Side was significantly inadequate. The streets were dirty, and the housing infrastructure crumbling. From this housing crisis arose organized community advocacy and activism in the city’s Puerto Rican community.

This thesis traces the history of the housing crisis Puerto Ricans in New York faced from the end of World War II through 1974. Special focus is given to the lived experiences of tenants. Through the usage of a variety of primary and secondary sources, this thesis argues that the sociopolitical marginalization and substandard housing of the immediate postwar years combined with public and private urban renewal efforts in the 1960s contributed to a critical pushback from Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the form of community advocacy organizations and, eventually, the formation of radical action-based groups such as the New York Young Lords and Operation Move-In.

While the movements for better housing were ultimately unsuccessful in enacting large-scale systemic change, Puerto Ricans were able to gain some level of political

power in New York City through their community organizing and advocacy for better housing. Their collective power, however, was not sufficient to ensure that the post-World War II housing crisis would end as this would have required more than the ethnic Puerto Rican population could have done on its own. As argued by various scholars since the 1980s, the newest recognized ethnic groups in New York had the least amount of political power and were quickly cast aside in city politics. Despite their legal citizenship, New York's Puerto Ricans were not exempt from this. The history of Puerto Rican New York's postwar housing crisis is not a history of change and success—it is a history of a community recognizing its potential to organize and gain some level of power despite being subjected to political, social, and economic marginalization.

For my grandmother, Carmen H. Crespo, and my late grandfather, Angel A. Crespo.

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Introduction

In 1961, a young Esmerelda Santiago moved to New York City from Puerto Rico with her immediate family. “I didn’t expect the streets of New York to be paved with gold,” she recalled in her critically acclaimed 1993 memoir *When I was Puerto Rican*, “but I did expect them to be bright and cheerful, clean, lively. Instead, they were dark and forbidding... The door to the [tenement] building was painted black, and there was a hole where the knob should have been.”¹ A few years earlier in 1955, audio documentarian Tony Schwartz produced *Nueva York: A Tape Documentary of Puerto Rican New Yorkers*. One of the interviewees, an unnamed Puerto Rican woman, discussed her experience with the housing situation she faced in the city: “You know the hall is dark... so dirty the walls, so dirty.”² She also mentioned how she only resided in this specific tenement for three months before she needed to find more livable housing.

These two accounts of housing in Puerto Rican New York were not outliers, and they reveal some of the key issues facing Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the postwar era. As early as 1945, the municipal government of New York and city landlords were failing Puerto Rican New Yorkers. Housing in the largely Puerto Rican neighborhoods of El Barrio (also known as East Harlem and Spanish Harlem), the Upper West Side, and later, the South Bronx, was significantly inadequate, and from this housing crisis arose organized community advocacy and activism in the Puerto Rican New Yorker community.

¹ Esmeralda Santiago, *When I was Puerto Rican* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2006), 217-18.

² Tony Schwartz, *Nueva York: A Tape Documentary of Puerto Rican New Yorkers* (New York: Folkways, 1955).

This thesis will trace the history of the housing crisis Puerto Rican New Yorkers faced from the end of the Second World War through 1974, with a special focus on the lived experiences of residents. Through the usage of a variety of primary and secondary sources, this thesis argues that the sociopolitical marginalization and substandard housing of the immediate postwar years combined with public and private urban renewal efforts in the 1960s contributed to a critical pushback from Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the form of community advocacy organizations and, eventually, the formation of radical action-based groups such as the New York Young Lords and Operation Move-In.

It was not until the 1980s that Puerto Ricans began to be recognized as part of postwar urban housing history. Previous scholarship had heavily relied on a Black-white paradigm when analyzing urban housing in the postwar era. Anthropologist Josh DeWind argued in his 1981 study *Caribbean Immigrants and Housing in New York City* that “housing problems in New York arise in the context of the city’s dual housing market. One sector serves upper income households, while the other serves lower income households... Lower income families have to confront the deterioration and abandonment of their buildings.” DeWind’s findings support his argument that immigrant residents of New York City “are actively involved in a variety of attempts to maintain or improve their housing.”³ It is worth acknowledging, however, that DeWind examined the ethnically diverse Manhattan Valley neighborhood in New York City rather than the largely Puerto Rican enclaves of El Barrio, the Upper West Side, and the South Bronx. Despite these demographic differences, DeWind’s study is still valuable to understanding

³ Josh DeWind, *Caribbean Immigrants and Housing in New York City*, Occasional papers / New York University, Faculty of Arts and Science, Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies ; no. 30, (New York, N.Y: New York University, Faculty of Arts and Science, Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, 1981), 1-3.

the housing crisis Puerto Rican New Yorkers faced; Manhattan Valley had similar issues that Puerto Rican neighborhoods had, such as gentrification and urban renewal, high rates of poverty, and the expedited deterioration of residential buildings.

Puerto Ricans had long been considered by mainstream academics to be a people without a history. This began to change in the 1990s with the rise of the Latina/o studies discipline. In his 1990 politics doctoral dissertation entitled “Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1945 to 1984: A Study in Class Powerlessness,” Jose Ramon Sanchez examined the housing situation of Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the postwar era. In his dissertation, Sanchez argued that “Puerto Ricans [lived] in poor housing not simply because they are income-poor but rather because they lack sufficient social power, especially that power created by class position.”⁴ Sanchez continues by asserting that as of the early 1990s, “social scientists [had] generally treated the Puerto Rican experience in New York City...as if they had no history.”⁵ This remark is what makes “Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City” groundbreaking: it challenged the long-standing perception that Puerto Ricans were an ahistorical people.

The first two decades of the 2000s saw continued and increasing scholarly interest in Puerto Ricans, particularly in terms of the diaspora within the United States. Released in 2004, anthropologist Arlene Dávila’s book *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* argued that “in the neoliberal city, yet another type of urban dynamic emerged where the appeal of previously undesired ethnic spaces led to the displacement of solid communities of color and forced these communities into a

⁴ Jose Ramon Sanchez, "Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1945 to 1984: A study in class powerlessness" (PhD Dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1990), 1.

⁵ Sanchez, "Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City," 25.

reexamination of self and their spaces.”⁶ In *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (2012), historian Lilia Fernández examines the Latino/a communities of postwar Chicago. She focuses on Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, communities that have been invisible in mainstream postwar urban scholarship. In her introduction, Fernández recognizes that Latino/a Chicagoans “bore witness to and were part of a dramatic labor migration wave, unprecedented demographic changes, declining industrial employment, massive urban renewal, racial succession, and social turmoil.”⁷ Many of the social dynamics listed by Fernández were also clearly visible in postwar Puerto Rican New York, such as urban renewal and social turmoil. By acknowledging the influential role Latinos played in Chicago’s urban history, Fernández challenges the invisibility of Mexican and Puerto Rican Chicagoans in prominent scholarship.

Scholarship has changed considerably since Puerto Ricans and the Puerto Rican diaspora were first critically analyzed in the late twentieth century. This thesis continues in the tradition of examining the Puerto Rican diaspora and civil rights, and the goal is to examine Puerto Rican New Yorkers and their responses to the housing crisis of the postwar era, rather than the policy-related causes of the housing crisis. Put in other terms, this thesis will be following the history of one specific ethnic group within New York, Puerto Ricans, and their historical path to recognizing their social and political standing to try and enact change. To do so, the history of housing in Puerto Rican New York will be examined, including postwar migrations from Puerto Rico to New York City, the

⁶ Arlene Dávila, *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2004); Zaire Z. Dinzey-Flores, "Review Essay: Latinos as Protagonists in American Urban History and Planning Practice," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 4 (2008): 739.

⁷ Lilia Fernández, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 7.

making of the housing crisis, and the community response to the housing crisis in the form of organized collective action and activism. The perception of the past is critical to understanding how groups, in this case Puerto Rican New Yorkers, reckoned with their collective histories of sociopolitical marginalization and historical colonization, and used their history to ground the activism seen in the 1960s and 1970s. Emotion and memory are also key aspects of the analyses in this thesis, and as such the sources examined will be diverse, spanning from poetry and short works of fiction inspired by life in postwar Puerto Rican New York to newspaper articles and oral histories.

This thesis is organized into three distinct sections, roughly divided by time. The first section, entitled “Postwar Migration and the Making of a Nuyoric Housing Crisis,” follows the history of Puerto Rican migration from Puerto Rico to New York City in the years immediately following the end of World War II in 1945 through the late 1950s. This section examines the origins of the Puerto Rican housing crisis are examined through the historical understanding of im/migration. Ultimately, it argues that the colonization of Puerto Ricans did not end with the move from the island to the city; but rather, the colonial status of Puerto Ricans was a key factor in determining their sociopolitical position in immediate postwar New York City. In other words, colonization was a leading force in determining the low sociopolitical position Puerto Rican migrants fell into in New York’s mid-century society.

The second section, entitled “Urban Renewal, Public Housing, and the 1960s,” argues that after the marginalization and substandard housing of the 1940s and 1950s, the urban renewal efforts of the 1960s helped to serve as a catalyst for Puerto Rican New Yorkers to organize politically. This section also serves to complicate the historical

understanding of New York's postwar Puerto Rican population, as community divisions relating to urban renewal are examined. It makes clear that there was not a single trajectory for Puerto Ricans in the city. Some Puerto Ricans reluctantly accepted urban renewal as an inevitability, other Puerto Ricans wholeheartedly embraced urban renewal and sought to use their newly found political power to ensure the success of urban renewal programs. Additionally, some Puerto Ricans, fed up with urban renewal, forced relocation, and the decline of community, fled Manhattan during this decade for neighboring suburbs in New York State, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

The third section, entitled "Radical Action in the Late 1960s and 1970s," follows the Puerto Rican activists who remained in Manhattan, specifically the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhoods of El Barrio and the Upper West Side. This section connects Puerto Rican movements for better housing in New York City to the nationwide civil rights movements of the era. Two main activist groups are examined: the New York Young Lords and Operation Move-In. This section argues that some Puerto Ricans, fed up with their marginalized socioeconomic position and lack of political power, took inspiration from the civil rights movements across the nation in the 1960s to fight for, among other necessities, better housing in the form of organized radical action.

The conclusion to this thesis contains a brief epilogue which explains that despite the efforts of various advocacy and activist groups in the 1960s and 1970s, the housing crisis continued well into the 1980s and beyond. This poses a significant question that drives this thesis and its analyses: why is it worthwhile to examine the history of housing Puerto Ricans in postwar New York when the advocates and activists ultimately failed to enact enduring change? To some readers, this thesis may seem to end where it began:

with a community facing a housing crisis. To a certain extent, this is a valid reaction, however, this thesis is also about examining historical agency and the rise of Puerto Ricans' political power in New York. Puerto Rican migrants in the 1940s had very little, if any, political power in the city. By the 1970s, through advocacy and activism, Puerto Ricans had become a major sociopolitical force in the city, most clear through the impacts the Young Lords and Operation Move-In had on the city's housing movements.

Postwar Migration and the Making of a Nuyorican Housing Crisis

Puerto Rican migrants faced housing issues almost immediately after arriving in New York. Recall the unidentified woman interviewed in Tony Schwartz's *Nueva York* and how she was subjected to "dirty" housing, ultimately being forced out of the apartment after three months due to unsanitary conditions. That was in 1955. Esmerelda Santiago's similar experience with unsanitary conditions in relation to housing in New York was in 1961. Housing issues, especially to this extent, do not happen overnight. Like groups of immigrants before them, Puerto Rican migrants to New York City generally did not have an easy time adjusting to the city. New migrants to the city following the end of World War II faced a severe shortage of available quality housing, a crumbling existing housing infrastructure, discriminatory attitudes from other residents and the city government, and as such, were particularly vulnerable to impoverishment. The colonization of Puerto Ricans did not end with the move from the island to the city; rather, the colonial status of Puerto Ricans was a key factor in determining their sociopolitical position in immediate postwar New York City.

New York City historian Tyler Anbinder has argued that "Puerto Ricans came to New York for the same reasons that others immigrated to the city... most Puerto Ricans

were terribly poor, and because they were subjects of a foreign colonial power, the island's residents believed that prospects for improving their economic status were dismal."⁸ This argument that many Puerto Ricans migrated to New York for economic reasons is supported by author Irma Olmedo. In *Tales from the Barrio and Beyond*, Olmedo's 2020 collection of short stories based on her lived experiences as a Puerto Rican New Yorker, economic migration to New York is mentioned in a story about Blanca, a character originally from Puerto Rico: "now that Blanca no longer needed to go to school, she could get a job, and [New York] in the 1960s was the place."⁹

In a 1987 interview for the *Latino Oral History Collection*, Maria Vizcarrondo recalled her mother's experiences in 1950s New York: "my mother... never left the neighborhood. She lived within it, had her family there and... the poverty was hard." On her own experiences with housing in New York, Vizcarrondo described her childhood home in El Barrio as "a one-room tenement."¹⁰ In one of Irma Olmedo's short stories, a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York is described as poor, with many considering "it a slum because of the rundown appearance of the buildings."¹¹ These accounts of housing conditions were seemingly verified by the city itself in an official report on the city's Puerto Rican population from the late 1940s:

"The buildings look dirty and deteriorated. In one of them there are no mail boxes and the tenants complain that they have to go over to the Post Office to receive their mail. In another building the toilets and baths are in the hall. There are a few

⁸ Tyler Anbinder, *City of Dreams: The 400-Year Epic History of Immigrant New York* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2016), 482.

⁹ Irma Olmedo, *Tales from the Barrio and Beyond*, ed. Roberto Cabello-Argandoña and Leyla Namazie (Moorpark, California: Berkeley Press, Floricanto Press, 2020), 42.

¹⁰ Maria Vizcarrondo, "Maria Vizcarrondo interviewed by Griselda Cueto," interview by Griselda Cueto, *Latino Oral History Collection*, 1987, <https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/latinooralhistories%3A3156dd7e-1cf7-4eab-9283-efaa825bc444#page/1/mode/2up>.

¹¹ Olmedo, *Tales from the Barrio*, 34.

vacant buildings, partly full of refuse, and the people complain that it is a menace to their safety and health.”¹²

The report repeatedly reinforces the dilapidated appearance of city housing, stating that “most of the apartments look dingy and are in bad condition. One of the major complaints of the tenants is that landlords do not pay any attention to their requests especially when they ask for repairs or painting.”¹³ Descriptions like these tell stories of race, poverty, and class—and how all three were inextricably linked with and through the housing crisis.

Latina/o studies scholar Vanessa Rosa has argued that “public housing became a key site for the spatial articulation of Puerto Ricans’ racial position within US society... The colonial subjectivity of Puerto Ricans justified truncated housing options [and] contributed to ideas around the racial inferiority of Puerto Ricans.”¹⁴ Rosa is correct in her analysis: the housing crisis facing Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the postwar decades was a result of the colonial subjectivity of Puerto Ricans. This argument is complimented in this thesis section—whereas Rosa was solely examining public housing in her study, this section will focus on the broader housing conditions Puerto Rican New Yorkers faced, regardless of whether their housing was public or private. The housing crisis Puerto Rican New Yorkers faced in the decades following the end of the Second World War was the result of the racialized sociopolitical marginalization of New York’s Puerto Ricans, which in turn lead to systematic neglect from landlords (both public and private) and the city government.

¹² Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City: the report of the Committee on Puerto Ricans in New York City of the Welfare Council of New York City*, The Puerto Rican experience, (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 22-23.

¹³ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 19.

¹⁴ Vanessa Rosa, "Colonial Projects: Public Housing and the Management of Puerto Ricans in New York City, 1945-1970," in *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A Reader*, ed. Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas and Mérida M. Rúa (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 186-87.

Puerto Ricans Make the Move to New York

There was a dramatic increase in migration from Puerto Rico to New York City following the end of World War II. In a 2021 edited book chapter, Vanessa Rosa observed that “the development of public housing in New York City from the 1940s to the 1960s coincided with the displacement and migration of Puerto Ricans to the continental United States.” Rosa continued, noting that “in 1949, 3.5 percent of public housing residents were Puerto Rican. By 1955, [Puerto Ricans accounted for] almost 10 percent of [public housing] residents. By 1960, 18 percent of public housing tenants were Puerto Rican.”¹⁵ These numbers are not surprising when considering the patterns of migration from Puerto Rico to New York City following the end of the Second World War. In 1910, only 1,513 Puerto Ricans resided in the mainland United States, according to anthropologist Kal Wagenheim in his 1975 study *A Survey of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. Mainland in the 1970s*. By 1940, nearly 70,000 Puerto Ricans resided in the continental United States.¹⁶ This number would increase to 301,375 by 1950, 887,662 by 1960, and to over 1.4 million by 1970. Through at least 1970, a majority of Puerto Ricans residing in the continental United States were concentrated in New York City.

These population increases are consistent with Edna Acosta-Belén’s and Carlos E. Santiago’s findings in their book *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait*. The two scholars observed an increase in net emigration from Puerto Rico during the 1920s, which presumably corresponds to the economic prosperity of the mainland during this period. They then observed a sharp decline in net emigration in the

¹⁵ Rosa, "Colonial Projects," 186, 89.

¹⁶ Kal Wagenheim, *A Survey of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. Mainland in the 1970s* (New York, 1975), 71.

1930s, which aligned with to the Great Depression. Finally, they observed a sharp increase in net emigration in the 1940s and 1950s, which correspond to the stabilization of the United States economy following the end of World War II and the Great Depression. Emigration from Puerto Rico then appears to have leveled off by the 1960s, with the net number of out-migrants being less than half that of the previous decade.¹⁷

Table 1: Puerto Ricans Residing in the United States, 1910-1970¹⁸

Year	Total of Puerto Ricans in the United States	Percentage in New York City
1910	1,513	36.6
1920	11,811	62.3
1930	52,774	Not indicated
1940	69,967	87.8
1950	301,375	81.6
1960	887,662	69.0
1970	1,429,396	56.8

Table 2: Net Emigration from Puerto Rico, 1920-1970¹⁹

Decade	Net Number of Out-Migrants
1920-30	42,000
1930-40	18,000
1940-50	151,000
1950-60	470,000
1960-70	214,000

¹⁷ Edna Acosta-Belén and Carlos E. Santiago, *Puerto Ricans in the United States: A Contemporary Portrait*, Second ed. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2018), 97.

¹⁸ Wagenheim, *A Survey of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. Mainland in the 1970s*, 71.

¹⁹ Acosta-Belén and Santiago, *Puerto Ricans in the United States*, 97.

Responses to the “Puerto Rican Problem”

By the middle of the 1940s, the City of New York began to recognize that Puerto Ricans were quickly becoming a significant part of the population. In January of 1947, after two years of explosive population growth, the Welfare Council of New York City commissioned a report on the city’s Puerto Ricans. In its early stages, the committee formed by the Welfare Council was known as the Committee on American Citizens of Puerto Rican Extraction Living in New York City; this name was subsequently shortened to the Committee on Puerto Ricans. According to the Committee’s 1948 report, entitled *Puerto Ricans in New York City: The Report of the Committee on Puerto Ricans in New York City of the Welfare Council of New York City*, its goal was:

“[to] examine the spiritual, economic, social, educational, health, and vocational needs of the Puerto Rican Americans living in New York City, as well as the facilities and resources available to meet those needs; demarking any gaps or inadequacies that may be found to exist. The Committee should then proceed to delineate those problems which appropriate groups within the Welfare Council might begin to attack.”²⁰

In this report, the Committee pondered as to why Puerto Ricans were leaving the island in such large numbers and why New York City was the destination of choice for so many migrants. Among the factors identified as causes for migration was affordable “air-borne migration” and “the growth of conspicuous Spanish-language groups, particularly the one in East Harlem,” which, with time, would become known as Spanish Harlem and El Barrio. The report then identifies specific issues facing the neighborhood, including its “poverty and overcrowding.”²¹

²⁰ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 9.

²¹ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 13.

From the Committee's report, conclusions can be drawn as to how the City of New York viewed its rapidly growing Puerto Rican population. Take, for example, the following description of El Barrio as presented in the report:

“There is too much noise at night in the streets and in the buildings. There are too many fights; drunkards and unemployed young men smoking marijuana and playing dice and cards in the streets, and especially in halls and on steps of buildings. There are a few bars nearby where they get drunk. Women and men do not dare go outside in the evening because there are numerous robberies.”²²

The language used in this excerpt from the Committee's report (and language such as this is commonplace in the report) served to portray a predominantly Puerto Rican New York neighborhood as riddled with delinquency and immoral behavior. This is one of the ways in which the New York City government contributed to the racialization of Puerto Ricans in the city. By characterizing Puerto Rican New Yorkers as delinquents and thus undeserving of even basic urban infrastructure, the city could justify the substandard living conditions in Puerto Rican communities such as El Barrio.

The same section of the Committee's report discusses community relations with law enforcement:

“There is a building in this block where robberies are frequent, and tenants believe that the thieves actually live right in the building. One of the tenants complains that when speaking to a policeman, he was told that East Harlem is a "hot place." Another tenant says that when he went to Police Headquarters he was told that if he thought himself and his family to be respectable citizens, they should move from the neighborhood. A large number of tenants say that policemen deliberately avoid being on that block and do not pay attention to the complaints of the Puerto Ricans. There are not enough officers in that area.”²³

Race and racism are key to understanding the perceptions the city government and its law enforcement officials had towards the new Puerto Rican migrants. The Committee's

²² Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 22.

²³ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 22.

report bluntly states that “the only way our community can really protect the Puerto Ricans from [discriminatory attitudes and actions] is to make headway against race prejudice in general.”²⁴ Puerto Ricans in late 1940s New York were subjected to a circular logic that created and then continually reinforced prejudice, and this had severe consequences for the growing Puerto Rican community in the city.

In this circular logic, Puerto Ricans were viewed by the city government, law enforcement, and non-Puerto Rican members of the community as inherently susceptible to criminality and moral failures such as alcoholism, drug use, and chronic unemployment. This apparent “fact” about the new Puerto Rican migrants was then used to justify mistreatment and the limitation of necessary resources such as law enforcement. With police officers either avoiding Puerto Ricans or not acknowledging their valid concerns, crime and delinquency were not just tolerated, but rather encouraged by the lack of city investment in the community. This then “proved” the initial stereotype, that Puerto Ricans were inherent susceptible to criminality.

The impact of this circular logic extended beyond law enforcement and legal issues; Puerto Ricans were also deemed unworthy of having their apartments and tenements properly maintained by landlords. This phenomenon has been observed throughout the history of immigrant New York City, as demonstrated in Tyler Anbinder’s comprehensive study on the topic.²⁵ Repeatedly, Anbinder argued and demonstrated that the newest groups of immigrants were dealt the worst in terms of housing and social treatment, essentially subjected to similar versions of the circular logic that legitimized anti-Puerto Rican racism and prejudice in the 1940s.

²⁴ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 11.

²⁵ Anbinder, *City of Dreams*.

The circular logic which was used by non-Puerto Ricans to justify anti-Puerto Rican racism was but one force working against the growing community. News journal correspondent Nathan Glazer, in a 1958 article for *Commentary*, noted that

“in 1945, with the war ended, with prosperity continuing, and with cheap airline service operating to New York, a path from [Puerto Rico] to the city finally opened... There was only one serious obstacle facing the Puerto Rican migrant. In 1945, and indeed until the present day [1958], living quarters in New York were scarce and expensive. [With] almost 10 per cent of the population of New York [being] Puerto Rican... how was it possible for Puerto Ricans to find any place to live at all?”²⁶

Glazer was justified in having concerns for the housing needs of New York’s Puerto Rican population. Quantity of available housing, however, was not the only part of the problem—there were also severe quality issues of the housing that was being used. The Committee on Puerto Ricans identified this complex Puerto Rican housing crisis in their report:

“This then is the situation in the region where the greatest number of Puerto Rican newcomers are trying to find homes. Landlords do not make repairs; the repairs needed in these old buildings are extremely costly and unsatisfactory to make. Tenants are afraid to report violations, even minor ones, because upon official inspection the whole house may be condemned. If a building is condemned, the Housing Authority must re-house the tenants, and this the Authority cannot do because there are no vacancies. There is nowhere for the dispossessed to go. The result is continuous deterioration of houses and lowering of living conditions.”²⁷

It is worth acknowledging, however, that the Committee appeared to be downplaying the role anti-Puerto Rican racism played in the origins of the postwar housing crisis. As explained previously, Puerto Ricans were perceived by non-Puerto Ricans as being prone to chronic unemployment. This was partially true; Puerto Ricans in New York City were

²⁶ Nathan Glazer, "New York's Puerto Ricans," *Commentary* 26, no. 6 (1 Dec 1958): 469-70, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/1290152417?pq-origsite=primo&imgSeq=1#>.

²⁷ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 18.

systematically excluded from well-paying jobs and primarily had to work jobs that provided little to no opportunity for upward mobility. Through the explained circular logic, Puerto Rican unemployment and underemployment then became a self-fulfilling prophecy—a consequence of this being the reduction of housing options and Puerto Ricans being forced to settle in substandard housing.

Although the Committee on Puerto Ricans acknowledged to a certain degree the role of race and prejudice, it did not do anything to mitigate the systemic origins of this circular logic or its impacts on the city's Puerto Ricans. The Committee also viewed the issues facing Puerto Rican New Yorkers as beyond the scope of their responsibilities. The concluding paragraph to the introduction of their report even goes as far as to state that their report “will propose a definite plan for the Federal Government's aid to Puerto Rico in regard to migration and resettlement.”²⁸ In other words, the Committee on Puerto Ricans and, by extension, the Welfare Council of New York City and the City of New York, did not want to take responsibility for the social and environmental conditions Puerto Ricans were facing in the city.

The Puerto Rican housing crisis was allowed to grow unchecked by the city throughout the remainder of the 1940s and 1950s. Put simply, the city government had little motivation or desire to help improve the living conditions of its Puerto Rican population. The Committee wanted to place responsibility for the “Puerto Rican problem” with the federal government, even stating so in its official report:

“It is not merely difficult to find apartments for newcomers; it is impossible. It is of prime importance therefore to the residents of New York, including the Puerto Ricans, that the flow of migrants to New York be directed elsewhere in the United States, and that congestion be reduced in existing Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, particularly in Harlem, by relocating substantial numbers of the

²⁸ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 11.

families who now live there. Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States and have a right to live wherever they wish in the United States provided they can find a home and work. In this they will need help. The primary responsibility for the solution of *the Puerto Rican problem* lies with the Federal Government.”²⁹

What is seen here is the denial of responsibility on the part of the city government, combined with placing blame for the housing crisis on Puerto Rican migrants and a lack of available housing. It is also interesting to note how the housing crisis is framed as “the Puerto Rican problem”—this framing makes it seem as though the crisis in housing was exclusively caused by and impacted “problem” Puerto Rican migrants. Not seriously considered by the Committee were the social attitudes towards Puerto Ricans that also deterred any real action from taking place that would improve the living conditions of the community. Puerto Ricans in New York had no social, political, or economic power to successfully advocate for themselves at this time.

Latina/o studies scholar Vanessa Rosa drew similar conclusions in her 2021 article on postwar public housing and Puerto Ricans, noting how Puerto Ricans were “initially framed as “excellent” public housing tenants by city officials... Puerto Ricans, along with African Americans, were [then] quickly blamed for their enduring poverty and the perceived “decline” and failure of public housing projects.” Rosa also noted, in the context of internal colonization through public housing, how “Puerto Rican incorporation in public housing both relied on and furthered racist tropes about domesticity, inherent poverty, and heteronormative nuclear family structure that were mobilized on the island and justified US occupation.”³⁰

²⁹ Welfare Council of New York City, *Puerto Ricans in New York City*, 31. (emphasis added)

³⁰ Rosa, "Colonial Projects," 186, 90.

Conclusion: The Making of the Housing Crisis

By the 1960s, social scientists were acutely aware of the disadvantaged socioeconomic position Puerto Rican New Yorkers occupied. “The Puerto Rican family as we find it in New York should not be expected to be a duplicate of its counterpart on the island. To begin with, mainland Puerto Ricans are keenly aware of the social prejudice they encounter on the mainland,” wrote Joseph Bram in a 1963 report.³¹ More contemporary studies have affirmed the social prejudice, among other forms of oppression, that resulted in the lower socioeconomic class of Puerto Ricans in New York. Political scientist Luis Aponte-Parés argued in 1998 that “Puerto Rican settlement [in New York City] has been a struggle between opposing economic, social, cultural and political forces. The will to settle and shape a community has been tempered by forces against these attempts.”³² This argument compliments Sanchez’s dissertation, which argued against the idea that “it is simply ability to pay or the presence of market barriers, such as racism, that accounts for the poor condition of housing” for Puerto Ricans in postwar New York. Instead, Sanchez argued, it was a broad “matrix of social power” which rendered Puerto Ricans “economically redundant and politically marginal.”³³

In the conclusion to his 1990 politics dissertation, Jose Ramon Sanchez asserted that “it is the loss of social power that explains the poverty and poor housing the Puerto

³¹ Joseph Bram, "The Lower Status of Puerto Rican Families," in *Amilkar Velez-Lopez Papers* (Newark Public Library Digital Repository: New Jersey Hispanic Research and Information Center, 1963), Notes, 10. <https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/velez-lopez%3Aab992970-295d-4560-a73e-102b8880cf66#page/1/mode/2up>.

³² Luis Aponte-Parés, "Lessons from El Barrio-the East Harlem Real Great Society/Urban Planning Studio: A Puerto Rican Chapter in the Fight for Urban Self-Determination," *New Political Science* 20, no. 4 (1998): 401-02.

³³ Sanchez, "Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City," 3-4.

Rican community has experienced in New York.”³⁴ Despite having been present in the United States since before the annexation Puerto Rico in 1898 following the war with Spain, Puerto Ricans were not widely recognized as a new group of migrants until the end of World War II. As established in Anbinder’s comprehensive study on immigrant New York, the newest groups of immigrants tended to receive the worst in terms of housing and social treatment. Postwar Puerto Rican migrants to New York were no exception. As one of the “newest” recognized groups of migrants, Puerto Ricans lacked the social and political standing to be able to effectively advocate for better housing, among other community needs.

In a 1963 article in *New York Times*, then-Commissioner of Relocation Herman Badillo is reported to have stated during a symposium on "The Emerging Puerto Rican Community" that he was “convinced that within a generation the Puerto Rican community will be one of the most important middle-income groups” in New York City.³⁵ Badillo would be proven correct in a matter of years.

Urban Renewal, Public Housing, and the 1960s

By the 1960s, urban renewal had become one of the dominant aspects of the housing crisis Puerto Rican New Yorkers faced. Urban renewal programs often involved the forced or coerced removal of Puerto Rican residents, who were then made to resettle in even less-desirable neighborhoods such as the South Bronx. These programs were supported, endorsed, and managed by the City of New York. The effect of urban renewal was that Puerto Ricans and other members of marginalized communities were forced

³⁴ Sanchez, "Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City," 513.

³⁵ "PUERTO RICANS GET HOUSING ASSURANCE," *New York Times (1923-Current file)* (New York, N.Y.), 23 Oct 1963, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/116437598?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=13626#>.

from their homes and made to relocate to other parts of the city with worse housing infrastructure than El Barrio. In other words, despite sounding like a positive for underdeveloped and neglected neighborhoods, urban renewal only served to make the housing crisis worse for impacted communities like New York's Puerto Ricans.

Take, for example, the following excerpt from sociologist Patricia Cayo Sexton's 1965 study *Spanish Harlem: An Anatomy of Poverty*:

“Some people call East Harlem a raped community. The accused rapist is not the slum landlord but the public bulldozer. The most heated debate in East Harlem now is over urban renewal, what should be renewed and how. Everyone favors renewal, more or less. The dispute is over who is going to make the decisions about renewal. The city says it has the ultimate power of decision-making. Some "community leaders" say that the community should either make the decisions or approve all decisions that are made. The average citizen is not much involved: He doesn't like his slum housing at all, but he doesn't want simply to be chased out to perhaps worse housing while the city tears down his slum.”³⁶

While Sexton was incorrect in her analysis that the “slum landlord” had not ravaged housing in El Barrio (it did), she was right to acknowledge the role the public bulldozer played in the housing crisis of the neighborhood. Nearly four decades later, anthropologist Arlene Dávila reinforced Sexton's argument about the role of slum clearance, urban renewal, and displacement, noting that “East Harlem was a prime target for federal slum clearance under the Federal Housing Act of 1937, which led to the construction of densely populated public housing projects and to the displacement of its residents,” including the city's Puerto Ricans.³⁷ Put simply, the Federal Housing Act of 1937 was the federal policy that allowed for urban renewal to become so dominant in New York by the 1960s. As Sexton noted, the “average citizen” did not have any say in

³⁶ Patricia Cayo Sexton, *Spanish Harlem: An Anatomy of Poverty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 37.

³⁷ Dávila, *Barrio Dreams*, 30.

urban renewal—the sole entity that managed and oversaw urban renewal was the City of New York. From the city’s perspective, there was nothing questionable or unethical about urban renewal. It even went as far as having a “Commissioner of *Relocation*” to manage both urban renewal programs and the logistics of relocating entire neighborhood populations as early as 1962.³⁸

In *Break and Enter*, a 1971 documentary on the housing crisis in Puerto Rican New York produced by the activist group Operation Move-In, a politically active New Yorker stated the following on urban renewal projects, forced relocation, and gentrification:

“Wherever the city sets up urban renewal programs, it removes working people and poor people from their homes, and replaces them with rich people, and big businesses. This is what's happening all over the city. It's paid for by the government. You see the master plan is for all the poor people to be moved out of the city -- Manhattan, per se. And to be moved into the boroughs, which is Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx. Why should these people move? Why should I move? I was born here. I was raised here. Why should I have to move into a neighborhood, or into a borough that I know nothing about?”³⁹

The same sentiment is shared by a member of the New York Young Lords in the organization’s 1971 documentary *El Pueblo Se Levanta*: “the joke of urban renewal only means that you have to move from his housing to a worst [sic.] one in the South Bronx or South Brooklyn to a new apartment that is worse than the one you're living in now.”⁴⁰

This section will examine the role urban renewal played as a catalyst for the rise of collective Puerto Rican advocacy and activism in the 1960s. Throughout this section, it is critical to recall Gina M. Pérez’s theorization of the term “barrio” as explained in

³⁸ "Puerto Ricans Get Housing Assurance."

³⁹ *Break and Enter (Newsreel #62), Newsreel (Third World Newsreel, 1971), Documentary.*

⁴⁰ Young Lords Party, *El Pueblo Se Levanta (Newsreel #63), Newsreel (Third World Newsreel, 1971), Documentary.*

Keywords for Latina/o Studies: “although barrios often tend to be conceptualized in homogenous terms, they have always been far more heterogeneous, serving as home to a range of people from different national origins, class positions, and distinct racial, gender, and sexual identities.”⁴¹ The same general idea can be applied to New York’s Puerto Rican communities. Through this section, it becomes clear that class position played a monumental role in determining the relationship between Puerto Rican New Yorkers and the housing crisis. Some Puerto Ricans, such as Commissioner of Relocation (and eventual Bronx Borough President and United States Representative) Herman Badillo, were strongly in favor of urban renewal programs and took actions that advanced these programs. Other Puerto Ricans, such as future Young Lords and Operation Move-In members, had more complex relationships with urban renewal. Some Puerto Ricans simply wanted more community input, while others were opposed to urban renewal at all costs. This section ultimately argues that after the marginalization and substandard housing of the immediate postwar years, urban renewal efforts of the subsequent decade served as a catalyst for Puerto Rican New Yorkers to organize.

The Beginnings of Urban Renewal

From 1945 to 1960, Puerto Ricans in New York City began to consolidate a community consciousness and began representing themselves in the built environment of the city. Like the other ethnic groups before them, Puerto Ricans had begun to claim their neighborhoods in the city, and in turn made their neighborhoods such as El Barrio and the Upper West Side better represent them.⁴² This is an understandable process—as Puerto

⁴¹ Gina M. Pérez, "Barrio," in *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, ed. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (NYU Press, 2017), 20.

⁴² Aponte-Parés, "Lessons from El Barrio," 400.

Ricans became a consequential part of the city's population, they wanted their communities to reflect their customs, traditions, and culture. Politics scholar Aponte-Parés continued, explaining how the formation of community consciousness roughly corresponded to the change in settlement patterns within New York City: "settlement patterns changed from *colonias* into *barrios* or neighborhood enclaves, where Puerto Ricans continued to build community by shaping further the many small enclaves of earlier periods."⁴³

Despite the formation of community consciousness and the reappropriation of the built environments of New York City, Puerto Ricans continued to face threats to their communities. The growth and stabilization of Puerto Rican communities "was marred by the onslaught of...the restructuring forces of...slum clearance and urban renewal [which were] unweaving the work of a generation."⁴⁴ Indeed, many Puerto Rican New Yorkers felt that urban renewal was a direct attack on their communities. Having spent nearly two decades spatially consolidating from *colonias* to *barrios*, urban renewal was a clear and direct threat to the lives Puerto Ricans had built in the city.

Many Puerto Ricans favored urban renewal in theory, noted Patricia Cayo Sexton in *Spanish Harlem: An Anatomy of Poverty*. Sexton asserted that the main dispute over renewal was "what should be renewed and how," as well as how the community was consulted in the decision-making process. "The average citizen is not much involved," wrote Sexton, "He doesn't like his slum housing at all, but he doesn't want simply to be chased out to perhaps worse housing while the city tears down his slum."⁴⁵ From

⁴³ Aponte-Parés, "Lessons from El Barrio," 401.

⁴⁴ Aponte-Parés, "Lessons from El Barrio," 401.

⁴⁵ Sexton, *Spanish Harlem*, 37.

Sexton's observations, it was clear that Puerto Ricans simply wanted a degree of autonomy and the right to make decisions based on the needs of their communities rather than the city making decisions based on its own political and business interests.

There were more reasons Puerto Ricans were ambivalent towards urban renewal. In the early 1960s, there was still a severe shortage of housing, and relocated Puerto Rican tenants would need to be placed in temporary housing while their neighborhoods were being renewed. "Between 1960 and 1962, the state of New York released funds for the construction of only 427 low-rent housing units," wrote politics scholar José E. Cruz. He continued, stating that "in 1963, [the state of New York] held more than \$50 million that could be allocated for housing. In that year, New York City had over 200,000 low-income families in need of subsidized housing."⁴⁶ Keep in mind that in 1960, there were approximately 887,000 Puerto Ricans in New York City, and this number would rise throughout the decade.⁴⁷ Naturally, there was significant overlap between the city's 200,000 low-income families in need of housing and the 887,000 Puerto Ricans living in the city, most of whom would have qualified as "low-income." Urban renewal presented to some Puerto Ricans an opportunity to have more housing options, but other Puerto Ricans foresaw the forced removal of residents and the disintegration of their built environment as inevitable.

Municipal Committees and Lack of Progress

By 1961 (and presumably earlier), Puerto Rican New Yorkers were beginning to engage in some degree of community organization and advocacy to improve their

⁴⁶ José E. Cruz, *Liberalism and Identity Politics: Puerto Rican Community Organizations and Collective Action in New York City* (New York, NY: Centro Press, 2019), 56.

⁴⁷ Wagenheim, *A Survey of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. Mainland in the 1970s*, 71.

housing conditions. These efforts, however, saw limited results. According to a *New York Times* article from May of 1962, “many Puerto Ricans felt that the city’s housing programs seemed to envision a city ‘without Puerto Ricans.’”⁴⁸ Puerto Ricans were justified in feeling abandoned by the city—there was a sharp decline in the percentage of New York’s Puerto Ricans living in Manhattan since the 1930s:

“In fact, in the 1930s more than 75% of Puerto Ricans lived in Manhattan, their numbers dropping slowly throughout the 1950s to 60% and finally less than 50% by 1960. This was the period when the federal government engaged in full in the project or restructuring cities, and the beginning of displacement and dispersal period for the Puerto Rican community in New York City... *More than half of the loss* [of Manhattan’s Puerto Ricans between 1960 and 1990] *occurred between 1960 and 1970, when 40,316 Puerto Ricans left the borough, the largest loss in the last three decades.*”⁴⁹

It was the sentiment of resentment towards the city’s urban renewal programs that led to the creation of the Puerto Rican Citizens Housing Committee (PRCHC) in July of 1961. This committee, which represented “more than 100 Puerto Rican organizations in the city,” demanded “2,500 new low-rent, public-housing units be constructed” as part of the city’s proposed urban renewal program. “We are not against urban renewal...we just want more housing that our people can afford,” stated Petra Rosa of the PRCHC.⁵⁰ It is important to note, however, that the PRCHC was not a grassroots organization and was instead “comprised of five Puerto Ricans who had worked in city agencies” and were studying the impact of urban renewal plans in the West Side Urban Renewal Area

⁴⁸ Martin Arnold, "HOUSING ASSAILED BY PUERTO RICANS: They Ask More Low-Rent Units in Renewal Project," *New York Times (1923-Current file)* (New York, N.Y.), 16 May 1962, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/docview/116066833?pq-origsite=primo&accountid=13626#>.

⁴⁹ Aponte-Parés, "Lessons from El Barrio," 402.

⁵⁰ Arnold, "Housing Assailed by Puerto Ricans."

(WSURA), an area with a significant Puerto Rican population.⁵¹ Politics scholar Rose Muzio noted in a 2009 *Centro Journal* article that the positions of the PRCHC were “widely publicized by local newspapers and tenant advocates.” Ultimately, Muzio summarized, the PRCHC was able to get renewal planners in the WSURA to agree to “designate 30 percent of new units for low-income families, that new construction should cause minimal neighborhood disruption, and that the city should make a greater commitment to rehabilitating existing housing for working class residents.”⁵² The city failed to hold up its end of the agreement and despite the efforts of the WSURA renewal planners, gentrification and the resulting increase in cost of living continued to force Puerto Ricans from their homes.

As a community organization, the PRCHC failed to unite Puerto Ricans in support of the urban renewal planners. Tensions soon arose between three groups: politically powerful Puerto Rican community leaders (who were strongly in favor of urban renewal), the politically moderate housing advocates (who were also in favor of urban renewal but were also concerned with the negative impacts it had on their communities), and more radical Puerto Rican activists (who ranged from strong opposition against urban renewal to lukewarm support of some reformed version of it).

Public Housing, Discrimination, and Puerto Rican Flight

As the decade progressed, the scale of urban renewal grew larger, and its impacts were more evident to the city’s Puerto Ricans, particularly those in the West Side and El Barrio. Puerto Rican political and community leaders played a significant role “in the

⁵¹ Rose Muzio, "The Struggle against "Urban Renewal" in Manhattan's Upper West Side and the Emergence of El Comité," *Centro Journal* 21, no. 2 (2009): 119.

⁵² Muzio, "The Struggle against "Urban Renewal" in Manhattan’s Upper West Side," 119.

process of displacing their compatriots from New York’s West Side,” wrote José E. Cruz, also noting that “through relocation, [these leaders] also helped many families to move out of welfare hotels to permanent housing.”⁵³ Sexton reported then-Commissioner of Relocation Herman Badillo as having said that “relocation is the most emotionally charged part of renewal,” and it is understandable as to why. Sexton continued, noting how critics of urban renewal demanded “that tenants be relocated in better housing, that new projects be built on vacant sites, that good housing and commerce be preserved,” but this was not happening at a large enough scale to have unified Puerto Rican support of urban renewal. Sexton concluded that Puerto Ricans wanted “to keep street life [and for] the community to be closer in on the decision-making.”⁵⁴ West Side Puerto Ricans did not want urban renewal to do to their community what was being done in El Barrio, which Sexton acknowledged as “too much upheaval too fast, failure to relocate the bulldozed into decent housing, poor housing design, too many rules, [and] failure to consult the community.”⁵⁵

Public housing projects built because of urban renewal were initially intended for the “submerged middle classes,” city residents deemed “worthy” of help, noted Dávila. Deemed unworthy were minoritized city residents, the unemployed, and those with large “untraditional” families. Dávila continued, noting that because of discriminatory admissions policies, many Puerto Ricans

“...had to struggle for due and equitable access to public housing, which became a marker for class distinctions among East Harlemites through housing policies that included interviews for tenant suitability, apartment inspections for hygiene, wait lists for apartments, and other forms of tenant surveillance.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Cruz, *Liberalism and Identity Politics*, 56.

⁵⁴ Sexton, *Spanish Harlem*, 43.

⁵⁵ Sexton, *Spanish Harlem*, 37.

⁵⁶ Dávila, *Barrio Dreams*, 31.

Cruz identified yet another factor complicating the issue of urban renewal in 1960s Puerto Rican New York. Block busting, a tactic used by real estate speculators to “promote white flight from neighborhoods [by] using racial tactics” was having a severe impact on Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers. By using this tactic, minoritized New Yorkers “were less likely to obtain first mortgage financing, and this left them vulnerable to the lure of second and third mortgages at exorbitant costs.”⁵⁷ Essentially, block busting was being used to put Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers into financial disrepair while at the same time drastically reducing property values (a result of white flight), leading to landlords and the city divesting from these properties. This created a perfect storm of sorts for urban renewal planners and developers to come in with the false promise of higher-quality housing.

Some everyday Puerto Ricans, disillusioned by their treatment and what was being done to their neighborhoods, began to fight back against the city. Housing advocates were slowly being replaced with more radicalized activists. In March 1965, a “sit-in took place at the offices of the city’s Housing Administrator, Milton Mollen. Mollen failed to appease the demonstrators who remained locked in for several hours until the water was shut down and the toilets and telephone booths were closed off,” noted Cruz.⁵⁸ Correspondence for one year was all this group of activists received due to their actions. Puerto Rican housing activists and by extension, the concerns of Puerto Rican New Yorkers, were not being taken seriously by the city government and the various agencies managing housing and urban renewal.

⁵⁷ Cruz, *Liberalism and Identity Politics*, 56.

⁵⁸ Cruz, *Liberalism and Identity Politics*, 57-58.

The mistreatment they faced further pushed certain Puerto Ricans towards radical activism. Those radical Puerto Rican activists will be examined in the next section. Other Puerto Ricans, however, were fed up with the mistreatment by the city government and urban renewal planners and, with the allure of better employment prospects elsewhere, fled Manhattan's El Barrio. Dávila has written extensively on the Puerto Rican flight from Manhattan's Puerto Rican neighborhoods, El Barrio in particular. "Upward mobility was synonymous with leaving El Barrio for Puerto Rico, Connecticut, New Jersey, the Bronx, or just about any suburb. Many had no intention of returning." This also corresponded with the decline in public perception of the public housing projects, which were quickly becoming associated with "urban blight, crime, grime, and poverty." Dávila concluded that "El Barrio was one place you left lest your children became polluted or corrupted."⁵⁹

Conclusion: Flight and Endurance

By 1960, Puerto Ricans in Manhattan had consolidated their neighborhoods and reshaped their built environment to better represent the inhabitants of El Barrio and the Upper West Side. However, to borrow the language used by Jose Ramon Sanchez, there was a "broad matrix" of forces impacting Manhattan's Puerto Rican neighborhoods in the 1960s. Urban renewal, the dominant and most plainly visible of these forces, pushed Puerto Rican New Yorkers from El Barrio and the Upper West Side to less desirable neighborhoods in other boroughs while at the same time allowing rapid gentrification to create an influx of wealthy non-Puerto Ricans to move in. While the city's Puerto Ricans were divided as to how to handle urban renewal, they generally agreed on one thing: they

⁵⁹ Dávila, *Barrio Dreams*, 31, 38-39.

wanted more community input in the decision-making process. Despite the efforts of housing advocates and activists alike, the city continued to roll out urban renewal programs at a rapid pace without the input of the Puerto Rican New Yorkers who would be most impacted.

The rise of urban renewal in El Barrio and the Upper West Side corresponded with the rise of Puerto Rican community consciousness and, ultimately, the rise of organized collective advocacy. Despite their general failure, municipal committees such as the Puerto Rican Citizens' Housing Committee were important to the early history of organized Puerto Rican collective advocacy. These municipal organizations helped to further organize the city's Puerto Rican population, which with time would allow grassroots radical activists to organize around the issue of housing in the latter part of the decade. Other Puerto Ricans, though, had grown weary of the poor housing conditions and forced removals of urban renewal and fled Manhattan.

As the next section examines, despite the rapid pace of urban renewal in the 1960s, housing conditions in El Barrio and the Upper West Side were still unacceptable. However, the nationwide civil rights movements of the decade began to have their mark on the city's up-and-coming Puerto Rican activists. Municipal committees and moderate housing advocates would soon be replaced in the public light by more radical activists.

Radical Action in the Late 1960s to 1970s

Children's book author Veronica Nash painted a bleak picture of El Barrio in her 1969 book *Carlito's World: A Block in Spanish Harlem*. Through the character Carlito, a young Puerto Rican boy growing up in El Barrio, Nash described the neighborhood:

"I live up this block in the city of New York. Almost everyone who lives here is Puerto Rican. There are many apartment houses here. Many families live in each

one of them. Our apartment is long and narrow. It has three rooms. All the rooms are small except the kitchen... We have five people in our family so our apartment is crowded... Our street is very dirty. The garbage cans get too full. They spill out onto the sidewalks and streets. There is broken glass on the streets, too.”⁶⁰

This description of a Puerto Rican neighborhood in 1960s and 1970s New York was a common one. In a 1987 interview for the *Latino Oral History Collection*, Amilkar Velez-Lopez recalled his experience with returning to New York from Puerto Rico in the 1960s: “As I entered 125th Street in Manhattan. I really felt that dreariness. the darkness. the filth. It really was the first time that it kind of shocked me up to that point you had kind of just blended in and then when I... came back it kind of hit me.”⁶¹ In 1973, the poet Sandra María Esteves expressed her frustration with the housing crisis:

*we cry for change
and you ask why?
why! :so that our children
can sing a song
for flowers they have touched
(because we never knew flowers
in the backyards of our concrete ghettos)
we cry for change
so that our families can survive*⁶²

This poem, entitled “If You Need a Reason,” is a clear cry for help and relief from the housing crisis. The lines “we cry for change/ and you ask why?” reveal the disconnect between the reality of the housing crisis for everyday Puerto Ricans in New York such as

⁶⁰ Veronica Nash and David K. Stone, *Carlito's World: A Block in Spanish Harlem, Our Living Neighborhoods*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969).

⁶¹ Amilkar Velez-Lopez, "Amilkar Velez-Lopez interviewed by Linda Arroyo," interview by Linda Arroyo, *Latino Oral History Collection*, 1987, 3, <https://digital.npl.org/islandora/object/latinooralhistories%3A92ad9343-2d4e-4f7a-b33f-9f70cb54633c#page/1/mode/2up>.

⁶² Sandra María Esteves, "If You Need a Reason," in *Sandra María Esteves Collection, 1973-1977* (Hunter College, CUNY: Center for Puerto Rican Studies Library & Archives, 1973), Poem. <https://centroca.hunter.cuny.edu/Detail/objects/5036>.

Esteves and those with more power, such as landlords, renewal project developers, and the city government. The lines “(because we never knew flowers/ in the backyards of our concrete ghettos)” also speak volumes to the lived experiences of Puerto Ricans like Esteves. By referring to the homes of Puerto Rican New Yorkers as “concrete ghettos,” Esteves sends a strong message regarding the quality of housing—it was not ideal nor adequate. The closing lines of “we cry for change/ so that our families can survive” reveal the true stakes for those like Esteves; the housing crisis was more than just about having a secure place to live—it was about survival. This theme of survival and the housing crisis was recognized and written about by others. The poet Gloria Vando also discussed the themes of home and poverty in Puerto Rican New York, which are inextricably linked to the condition of housing:

*But I am home, home, I tell myself.
Home from the wheat and corn
of Middle America, where whole-
someness grows so tall you cannot
see the poverty around you, grows
so dense the hunger cannot touch you.*⁶³

This is an excerpt from the poem “New York City Mira Mira Blues.” From the title alone, this poem is about looking (from the Spanish *mira*, which translates to “look”) beyond what is immediately visible. This excerpt also uses two vastly different forms of imagery—the description of “wheat and corn/ of Middle America, where whole-/someness grows so tall” is followed by the sharply contrasting “you cannot/ see the poverty around you, grows/ so dense the hunger cannot touch you.” In the context of the housing crisis, the metaphoric wholesomeness can be taken to mean urban renewal,

⁶³ Gloria Vando, “New York City Mira Mira Blues,” in *Looking Out, Looking In: Anthology of Latino Poetry*, ed. William Luis (Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 2012).

which makes it impossible for the reader to “see” the poverty hidden in plain sight. The usage of “home” is also critical in this reading of the poem, as Vando would consider the pre-renewal neighborhood to be her home.

The children’s book by Veronica Nash, the interview with Amilkar Velez-Lopez, and the poems by Sandra Maria Esteves and Gloria Vando all speak volumes to the reality Puerto Rican New Yorkers faced every day in their housing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Despite the efforts of public advocates in the early 1960s, housing conditions were not improving for the vast majority of Puerto Ricans in New York City.

Why was housing allowed to remain so poor in the Puerto Rican neighborhoods of New York? Many Puerto Rican New Yorkers blamed landlords. In 1979 and 1980, The Bronx Museum of the Arts ran an exhibition on housing in the South Bronx. Entitled “Devastation/Resurrection,” this exhibition highlighted the historical housing challenges New Yorkers, particularly those of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent, faced. In a promotional leaflet for the exhibition, a South Bronx resident is reported as having said that “most of the blame should go to the landlords. They’ve never made an effort to keep the buildings up. The landlords only worry about keeping their own pockets full. They don’t care about what happens.”⁶⁴ Future scholars would also identify landlords as a leading reason for the continuation of the housing crisis. Arlene Dávila noted in a 2003 article that “Puerto Ricans countered countless ‘slumlords,’ whose tactics of

⁶⁴ The Bronx Museum of the Arts, “Devastation/ Resurrection: The South Bronx,” in *Carlos Ortiz Papers, 1940s-2006* (Hunter College, CUNY: Center for Puerto Rican Studies Library & Archives, 1979-80), Leaflet. <https://centroca.hunter.cuny.edu/Detail/objects/8987#>.

abandonment, disinvestment, and retrieval of services had, by the 1970s, turned East Harlem into a prime example of urban blight.”⁶⁵

The marginalization and substandard housing of the immediate postwar years, combined with urban renewal efforts in the subsequent decade contributed to a critical pushback from Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the forms of organized collective action and, later, radical activism. Fed up with their marginalized socioeconomic position and lack of political power, many Puerto Ricans took inspiration from the civil rights movements across the nation in the 1960s and used this moment in history to fight for, among other necessities, better housing. The director of a social service organization, in a 2003 article by Dávila, recalled “the 1960s as a time when there were a variety of groups, from gangs to community groups to social clubs, caught in the movement for social empowerment and community autonomy.”⁶⁶ As the decade progressed, Puerto Rican community advocates became bolder and more radical in the face of persistent housing neglect and ongoing urban renewal. Advocacy groups like the Puerto Rican Citizens Housing Committee were soon publicly replaced by far more radical activist groups, including the Young Lords Party and Operation Move-In.

In her 2008 politics dissertation, Rose Muzio defined key terms in the context of Puerto Rican radicalism in 1970s New York. The term “radical,” Muzio wrote, “describes activists and organizations...who embraced the Marxist critique that fundamental differences between the working class majority and the ruling class minority were “irreconcilable” in capitalist society. The radical Left,” Muzio continued, then

⁶⁵ Arlene Dávila, "Dreams of Place: Housing, Gentrification, and the Marketing of Space in El Barrio," *Centro: Journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies* 15, no. 1 (April 2003): 117-19.

⁶⁶ Dávila, "Dreams of Place," 117-18.

“refers to those who believed that deep transformations in power relations must occur in order to achieve a more egalitarian control over and distribution of wealth.”⁶⁷ These definitions will guide this section’s analyses of the radical actions taken by specific radical Puerto Rican Left activist groups in the first half of the 1970s.

This section is divided into three parts. The first part will focus on the housing activism of the New York Young Lords in El Barrio. The second part will focus on the Upper West Side’s Operation Move-In, a militant squatter’s campaign that would evolve into El Comité, one of the most significant organizations of the Puerto Rican Left in the 1970s. The third part will compare the two groups and examine the relationship between activist groups in early 1970s New York.

El Barrio: The New York Young Lords

The Young Lords Organization was a politically active revolutionary group that originated in 1960s Chicago with the goal of an independent Puerto Rico. They also fought to improve the living conditions of members of the Puerto Rican diaspora within the United States through means inspired by other radical political groups, such as the militant group of Puerto Rican nationalists that attacked the United States Congress in 1954. Soon after the founding of the Chicago Young Lords, a branch of the Lords was founded in New York. According to El Museo del Barrio’s 2015 exhibition on the New York Young Lords, “a group of young Puerto Ricans traveled to Chicago in 1969 to ask for permission to found a New York chapter of the group.”⁶⁸ Permission was granted, and

⁶⁷ Rose Muzio, "Puerto Rican Radicalism in the 1970s: El Comité-MINP" (PhD Dissertation, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008), 20-21.

⁶⁸ El Museo del Barrio, "¡Presente!: The Young Lords in New York, 2015," in *From the Archives* (New York, NY: El Museo del Barrio, 2015), Brochure. https://www.elmuseo.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2015_emdb_exh-brochure-presente-young-lords-in-NY.pdf.

the newly-founded New York Young Lords then sought community input for how they could best help Puerto Rican interests in New York. The New York Young Lords were inspired by the Young Lords Organization in Chicago and modeled after the Black Panther Party.⁶⁹ The two separate organizations would share the same name, the Young Lords Organization, until May of 1970, when the New York Lords opted to rename their organization the Young Lords Party of New York.

In an essay published in the New York Young Lords' biweekly newspaper *Palante*, Minister of Education for the East Coast Region Juan Gonzalez outlined the platform of the revolutionary Puerto Rican organization: "Only through organized change will we end addiction, eliminate landlords, build new cooperative housing, provide jobs for all, assure decent health [care] for everyone, end all wars, and achieve independence for Puerto Rico."⁷⁰ While some of these goals are more radical than others, they are indicative of a group that had been historically colonized and systematically subjected to marginalization, most clearly visible from the lack of adequate housing. Access to quality housing was central to the New York Young Lords' radical activism.

A highly nationalistic and revolution-oriented group, the New York Young Lords also took inspiration from "the first revolutionary action of the Puerto Rican nation [which] took place on September 23, 1868—EL GRITO DE LARES." Then-Education Captain of the New York Young Lords Iris Morales continued, "when a group of short, quiet, shuffling, machete-carrying spics tired of taking shit picked up arms against Spain.

⁶⁹ Lisa Sánchez González, *Boricua Literature: A Literary History of the Puerto Rican Diaspora* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 119.

⁷⁰ Originally published as Juan Gonzalez, "The Vote or the Gun," *Palante*, 22 May 1970. Republished in Darrel Enck-Wanzer, ed., *The Young Lords: A Reader* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2010), 81-82.

These Puerto Ricans became revolutionaries after a long struggle to improve conditions which resulted in nothing, a struggle similar to the civil rights movement in the u.s.”⁷¹ Despite taking control of the Puerto Rican town of Lares, the struggle was quickly brought down by Spanish troops and no social or political change ensued.

Parallels can be drawn between Morales’s account of El Grito de Lares and the housing struggle in New York City. Earlier movements for better housing did not see any results, and by the end of the 1960s, many Puerto Rican New Yorkers were, to quote Morales, “tired of taking shit.” It is also clear from this account that Morales, speaking on behalf of the New York Young Lords, saw no use in working within the system to enact change. Previous Puerto Rican groups in New York had looked to work within dominant social systems to enact change for their community, but the New York Young Lords saw another route: direct, militant action.

One of the first direct actions taken by the newly formed New York Young Lords was a blockade of El Barrio, protesting the city’s negligence to properly maintain the sanitation of the neighborhood. “On Sunday, July 27 [1969], the Lords of New York blocked the avenues of *El Barrio*,” according to the organization’s 1971 book *Palante: Voices and Photographs of the Young Lords*. The offensive, as the high-profile actions and campaigns of the New York Young Lords were referred to, was the organization’s first foray into public and highly visible action in the city. It is noteworthy that the material that activists used to block access to El Barrio was garbage that the city government had neglected to clean. The garbage offensive soon “turned into a confrontation with police, and the [New York Young Lords] became experienced in

⁷¹ Originally published as Iris Morales, "El Grito de Lares," *Palante*, 25 September 1970. Republished in Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords: A Reader*, 93-95. (emphasis in original)

street fighting.”⁷² The blockage of El Barrio with garbage would become a weekly occurrence, stated rhetorician and Young Lords scholar Darrel Enck-Wanzer in a 2006 article, with the garbage offensive peaking “on August 17 when hundreds of Barrio Boricuas expanded their rebellion to include overturning cars, lighting fire to the trash, and assaulting police property.”⁷³

The garbage offensive quickly gained attention from New York-based media, including the *New York Times*. In an article published on August 19, 1969, a mere two days after the peak of the garbage offensive, members of the Young Lords told the newspaper that “they had acted to show the people of El Barrio...that such activity was necessary to get city attention to meet community needs.”⁷⁴

The weekly demonstrations of the garbage offensive would continue until Sunday, September 2, 1969. “We would hit and run, block to block, talking and spreading politics as we went, dodging the slow-moving pigs sent to crush any beginning Boricua movement for freedom. The garbage offensive united us through struggle,” recalled New York Young Lords Minister of Information Pablo “Yorúba” Guzmán in the organization’s one-year anniversary edition of *Palante*.⁷⁵ The garbage offensive allowed for the organization to rally supporters and greatly expand their numbers. In a matter of

⁷² Young Lords Party, *Palante: Voices and Photographs of the Young Lords, 1969-1971*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 11.

⁷³ 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, no. 2 (2006): 175.

⁷⁴ Joseph P. Fried, "East Harlem Youths Explain Garbage-Dumping Demonstration," *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.) 1969, 86.

⁷⁵ Pablo “Yorúba” Guzmán, "One Year of Struggle," *Palante*, 17 July 1970, 12-13, http://dlib.nyu.edu/palante/books/tamwag_palante000006/#1.

weeks, the New York Young Lords had grown from a small group of young activists to a powerful radical activist organization.

The New York Young Lords' housing and neighborhood activism did not end with the garbage offensive. In July 1970, the group was rallying members of the community against a proposed urban renewal project in the heart of El Barrio. "Urban renewal is suppose to [sic.] be a plan to benefit the people by improving New York city slums and by developing the orderly growth of new urban areas," wrote member Luis De Graffe in a *Palante* article provocatively entitled "Urban Renewal= Spic Removal." "In reality," De Graffe continued, "it is a scheme to disperse Black and Puerto Rican communities and, at the same time, fill the pockets of the capitalists of wall street." Throughout the article, De Graffe repeatedly assured that the New York Young Lords were not opposed to urban renewal on ideological grounds, but rather, the group was "against spic removal because it is an obvious attempt to separate and disperse our people by tearing down their homes to build new buildings which they cannot afford to live in."⁷⁶ This article, as was customary for articles in *Palante*, made a list of demands aimed at safeguarding the interests of Puerto Ricans:

1. All housing built in the designated area must be low income housing.
2. A guaranteed occupancy plan must be made so that all the people taken out of this area will be returned.
3. People must control every aspect of the buildings in terms of rent, facilities, and commercial space for the commerciantes from our community.
4. A community advisory committee must be made up of the people from our community.
5. Workers on the construction site must come from our community.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Luis De Graffe, "Urban Renewal= Spic Removal," *Palante*, 31 July 1970, 8, http://dlib.nyu.edu/palante/books/tamwag_palante000007/#8.

⁷⁷ De Graffe, "Urban Renewal= Spic Removal," 8.

These demands were consistent with the organization's 13 Point Program, which included having "community control of our institutions and land."⁷⁸

The housing crisis unquestionably influenced the New York Young Lords. On December 28, 1970, the group carried out a protest like the garbage offensive at Madison Avenue and 110th Street in El Barrio. In this incident, according to the *New York Times*, "angry residents of Spanish Harlem heaped garbage in the street...and set it afire as part of a protest against the lack of heat and hot water in some buildings."⁷⁹ This was, up until that point, the most direct form of protest organized by the New York Young Lords confronting the housing crisis in El Barrio.

The Upper West Side: Operation Move-In and El Comité

The New York Young Lords took advantage of a critical moment in American history, that moment being the civil rights movements of the 1960s, to garner community support for their causes. Shortly after the demonstrations of the garbage offensive, other Puerto Rican radical activist groups would emerge in New York City, including Operation Move-In, "the [Upper] West Side's contentious housing movement of 1970, [which] sustained a militant squatters' campaign that opposed the removal of thousands of low-income, mostly minority tenants from their homes."⁸⁰ Like the New York Young Lords, members of Operation Move-In wanted change to happen immediately and utilized radical means to accomplish their goals.

"The squatters' movement in Manhattan's Upper West Side...erupted in the spring of 1970 when groups of residents seized and claimed possession of vacant

⁷⁸ Young Lords Party, *Palante: Voices and Photographs of the Young Lords, 1969-1971*, 144-45.

⁷⁹ "Trash Burned on 110th St. In Spanish Harlem Protest," *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.), 29 December 1970, 15.

⁸⁰ Muzio, "The Struggle against "Urban Renewal" in Manhattan's Upper West Side," 110.

buildings,” wrote Muzio. She continued, asserting that “the initial move-ins were more spontaneous than part of a deliberately planned strategy of an organized movement, anger and frustration over the city’s housing plan had been swelling for some months.”⁸¹ The squatters’ movement quickly gained attention from New York-based media. “The take-over of city owned buildings, known as “Operation Move-In,” began about two weeks ago...only as a last resort after neighborhood groups met constant frustration in their long efforts to press the city into action on decaying, overcrowded housing in the area,” reported journalist David K. Shipler of the *New York Times* on April 24, 1970.

Manhattan-based Operation Move-In attracted attention from Black and Puerto Rican New Yorkers from as far away as the Bronx, who came to local storefront offices to “put their names on rapidly growing waiting lists” for housing.⁸²

The participants of Operation Move-In were notably different from the activists involved in the New York Young Lords’ garbage offensive demonstrations. Whereas the Young Lords were typically younger and actively involved in radical politics, members of Operation Move-In were typically families, older evictees, and war veterans. A translated Spanish-language protest song by the group, featured in their 1971 documentary *Break and Enter*, is as follows:

*I’m a Puerto Rican, proud as I can be.
I’m not asking favors, I’m taking what belongs to me,
I will wait no longer; I will wait no more.
I will wait no longer, and I won’t fight another man’s war.
A little piece of paper promised me liberty
Now what the hell does that paper really mean to me?
Not a god damn thing.*⁸³

⁸¹ Muzio, "The Struggle against "Urban Renewal" in Manhattan’s Upper West Side," 121.

⁸² David K. Shipler, "Poor Families Taking Over Condemned Buildings," *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.), 24 April 1970, 36.

⁸³ *Break and Enter*.

The lyrics “I’m taking what belongs to me” refer to members of this group reclaiming their homes and willing to go as far as unauthorized occupation to do so. From these lyrics, it is also clear that members of this group took influence from the anti-war movement against United States involvement in Vietnam. The closing lyrics reveal the relationship members of Operation Move-In have with the United States government (and government in general) by deeming the “little piece of paper” (a service draft) illegitimate and worthless. These attitudes as revealed by the protest song were representative of a specific segment of Puerto Rican activists, a segment that included many housing activists.

Operation Move-In continued into the summer of 1970. “In the summer of 1970, a group of 200 families took over various buildings slated for demolition in the [Upper] West Side,” recalled the first secretary of El Comité (EC), the activist organization formed by participants of Operation Move-In, at the organization’s tenth anniversary celebration in 1980. The secretary continued, praising “the courageous action of these squatters [of Operation Move-In] to secure decent, affordable housing.”⁸⁴ In an article from July 22, 1970, *The New York Times* noticed the increasing community power of Operation Move-In. “The families in the Upper West Side buildings, and in other buildings, have been as in moving into the vacant apartments by a variety of tenant organizations, community groups and churches,” reported journalist Edith Evans

⁸⁴ "Presentation of the First Secretary of MINP-El Comité [at the 10th Anniversary Celebration]," *Obreros En Marcha* 5, no. 6 (August 1980), Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line, <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1a/comite-10th-3.htm>.

Asbury.⁸⁵ By this point in the summer, Operation Move-In had grown to include approximately 150 families occupying abandoned buildings set for demolition.

Although the number of squatters increased dramatically during the summer, by the fall of 1970 the movement began to peak, leveling off at about 200 families by October, according to another *New York Times* article by Shipler. This article, dated October 11, 1970, made clear the demands of Operation Move-In, which included that maintenance service be provided through the winter and “an increase in the proportion of low-income housing in the area,” which the city agreed to.⁸⁶ Among Operation Move-In’s greatest successes by October was its ability to get the city to stop evicting tenants in buildings set for demolition as part of the Upper West Side’s urban renewal plans. This decision, noted Shipler, was “an effort [on the part of the city] to avoid clashes between the police and squatters [which] has given neighborhood groups new muscle with which to control the course of urban renewal.”⁸⁷

Operation Move-In “motivated a group of young people from the community to take over a storefront on 88th Street and Columbus Avenue. Their goal was to... establish a place to discuss how to become active in the community’s struggles. Their idea was to build an organization that would serve the community. They named this group El Comité.”⁸⁸ Politics scholar and former EC member Rose Muzio has written extensively on the organization. “From 1970 until its disintegration in 1984, [El Comité] engaged in two levels of political action,” wrote Muzio in her 2008 dissertation. She

⁸⁵ Edith Evans Asbury, "Squatter Movement Grows As Housing Protest Tactic," *New York Times* (New York), 22 July 1970, 42.

⁸⁶ David K. Shipler, "Squatters Cast Doubt Over Housing," *New York Times* (1923-) (New York, N.Y.), 11 October 1970, 324.

⁸⁷ Shipler, "Squatters Cast Doubt Over Housing," 324.

⁸⁸ "Presentation of the First Secretary of MINP-El Comité."

continued, clarifying that “on one level, it initiated or joined local campaigns to expand or protect democratic rights – understood as access to jobs, housing, education, and health care – and worked with other progressive and revolutionary groups in national coalitions and international solidarity movements.” This can be seen through their early housing activism, particular in the squatting campaigns that followed Operation Move-In in the summer and fall of 1970. “On the second level, as a Marxist-Leninist organization, it became more involved in political education projects, in a national network of organizations interested in forming a new communist party in the United States, and in other forms of dialogue within the U.S. Left.”⁸⁹ Like El Comité, the New York Young Lords would also become more involved in political education projects by the middle of the decade.

Relationship Between Activist Groups

Muzio has noted that although Puerto Rican Left organizations collaborated on many issues and had similar interests, they “held distinct perspectives on political action.” It is for this reason that El Comité chose to remain separate from the New York Young Lords and other politically similar organizations. While the Lords were primarily concerned with issues Puerto Ricans in El Barrio were facing, El Comité initially focused on Manhattan’s more ethnically diverse Upper West Side. “During its early period, El Comité’s activity was among the squatters and the surrounding community in the Upper West Side,” explained the first secretary of El Comité, “our objectives were to bring about social changes within this immediate area.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Muzio, "Puerto Rican Radicalism in the 1970s," 5.

⁹⁰ "Presentation of the First Secretary of MINP-El Comité."

“The proximity of the Upper West Side to Harlem,” wrote Muzio, “facilitated communication between activists in both areas.”⁹¹ Muzio has also argued that although the Young Lords were not the main housing activists in the Upper West Side, there was “no doubt” they “expanded networks of communication [between activist groups] and contributed greatly to the growing acceptance by Puerto Ricans and Dominicans of contentious protest as effective political action.”⁹² “Our experiences also taught us the importance of making alliances with forces with whom we had differences but with whom we could agree on given actions and objectives,” recalled El Comité’s first secretary. “This was a particularly important lesson for us, one that over the years has guided us through difficult political situations where our inclination might otherwise be to throw up our hands in disgust and say we cannot work with these people.”⁹³

Conclusion: Moving Past Radicalism

The Young Lords and El Comité are but two examples of controversial and contentious radical activism by Puerto Rican organizations in New York. Both organizations regarded the city government and landlords as illegitimate and performed the actions they saw as necessary to fight against these corrupt powers. These organizations were about returning power to marginalized communities. However, their impact was limited, and Puerto Rican New Yorkers often saw little to no enduring results from the actions of activists.

By the late 1970s, many members of the New York Young Lords, El Comité, and similar organizations had begun to abandon their radical activism. “In the end,” wrote

⁹¹ Muzio, "Puerto Rican Radicalism in the 1970s," 16, 18.

⁹² Muzio, "The Struggle against "Urban Renewal" in Manhattan’s Upper West Side," 118.

⁹³ "Presentation of the First Secretary of MINP-El Comité."

Cruz, “the Young Lords themselves ended up trading the practice of politics for the study of politics, the challenge of the legal system for entry into its corridors, the streets for the library, the mass demonstration for institutional media, El Barrio for the gentrified city block or suburbia.”⁹⁴ For example, the Young Lords’ Education Captain Iris Morales would become an educator and earn a Master of Fine Arts degree in Integrated Media Arts from Hunter College. She would, however, remain heavily active in civil rights movements for Puerto Ricans.⁹⁵ In short, many members of the Young Lords and similar groups like El Comité left radicalism, but not activism and advocacy altogether, in hopes of changing social systems from within and through less radical means.

Conclusion

Despite the high profile of the Young Lords and other community organizations, the housing crisis for Puerto Rican New Yorkers continued well into the 1980s and beyond. In the 1979-80 exhibition “Devastation/Resurrection: The South Bronx,” an anonymous member of the community is recorded as having said “I felt very happy that they were going to renovate the South Bronx- that you would be able to live nicely here, and that the buildings would be renovated and that you would be able to live in a safe place. I was very happy and expected to see everything renovated by now, but I don’t have hopes of that anymore.”⁹⁶ Attitudes like this were common among Puerto Rican New Yorkers after decades of substandard housing and forced relocation due to urban renewal.

⁹⁴ Cruz, *Liberalism and Identity Politics*, 28-29.

⁹⁵ Iris Morales, *Through the Eyes of Rebel Women: The Young Lords, 1969-1976* (Red Sugarcane Press, Inc, 2016).

⁹⁶ The Bronx Museum of the Arts, "Devastation/ Resurrection: The South Bronx."

Daniel Irizarry, a correspondent for the community journal *Vocero*, reported in 1982 that “the physical havoc that indifferent housing schemes have brought to our neighborhoods is plainly evident, but the toll in terms of human suffering is not as apparent, nor easily measured.” Irizarry then alluded to the next major housing crisis for Puerto Rican New Yorkers, stating that “the affordability of rents and availability of apartments play a significant role in the housing dilemma [sic.] facing our barrios.”⁹⁷ In a 1985 conference on Puerto Rican New Yorkers, the Regional Plan Association reinforced Irizarry’s suspicion of another development in the housing crisis. “With the average household size dropping,” the association stated, “there could be as many as 2.7 million more households in the Region by 2000. In New York City, that means the demand will be three times the current pace of housing construction.”⁹⁸ This suspicion by both Irizarry and the Regional Plan Association was seemingly confirmed by the 2000 Census results for New York City, which saw the city at its peak population.⁹⁹

As this thesis has argued, the sociopolitical marginalization and substandard housing of the immediate postwar years combined with public and private urban renewal efforts in the 1960s contributed to a critical pushback from Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the form of community advocacy organizations and, eventually, the formation of radical

⁹⁷ Daniel Irizarry, "Fair Housing for Puerto Ricans in New York City: The Goal vs. The Reality," *Vocero*, November 1982; Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs, "Vocero," in *Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro), 1973-present* (Hunter College, CUNY: Center for Puerto Rican Studies Library & Archives, 1982), Publications. <https://centroca.hunter.cuny.edu/Detail/objects/22327>.

⁹⁸ Regional Plan Association, "APRED's Second Conference: The Puerto Rican New Yorkers," in *Center for Puerto Rican Studies (Centro), 1973-present* (Hunter College, CUNY: Center for Puerto Rican Studies Library & Archives, 1985), Reports. <https://centroca.hunter.cuny.edu/Detail/objects/20787>.

⁹⁹ "New York City's Population Peak," *New York Times (1923-Current file)* (New York, N.Y.), 17 March 2001.

action-based groups such as the New York Young Lords and Operation Move-In. This thesis has also contributed to contemporary dialogues in postwar urban American history and American Latina/o/x history, both of which have, in recent years, shifted towards more interdisciplinary work.

The first section argued that the colonial status of Puerto Ricans was a key factor in determining their sociopolitical position in immediate postwar New York City, which in turn marginalized the city's Puerto Ricans. Also discussed was how the ethnic Puerto Rican population of New York increased drastically after the end of the Second World War, and the city did not have the proper infrastructure to handle such a population increase. This section drew primarily from data presented in Kal Wagenheim's 1975 study *A Survey of Puerto Ricans on the U.S. Mainland in the 1970s*, oral interviews conducted by the *Latino Oral History Collection*, the short works of fiction by author Irma Olmedo, and the Committee on Puerto Ricans' 1948 report *Puerto Ricans in New York City: The Report of the Committee on Puerto Ricans in New York City of the Welfare Council of New York City*. Each of these sources allowed for different dimensions of analysis to be conducted on immediate postwar Puerto Rican New York, particularly in how housing was perceived by and impacted Puerto Ricans in the city. The analyses of these sources also made clear that the lack of proper and safe housing infrastructure and the disadvantaged economic position of Puerto Ricans set the stage for a decades-long housing crisis. Puerto Ricans were rendered, in the words of Jose Ramon Sanchez, "economically redundant and politically marginal."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Sanchez, "Housing Puerto Ricans in New York City," 3-4.

In the second section, Puerto Ricans in New York were shown to not have been quiet in the face of marginalization and the housing crisis. Beginning in the early 1960s, Puerto Rican community leaders organized to improve the conditions of their community. Ultimately, this section argued that after the marginalization and substandard housing of the immediate postwar years, urban renewal efforts of the 1960s served as a catalyst for Puerto Rican New Yorkers to organize politically. In addition to the main argument presented, this section also served to complicate perceptions of Puerto Ricans in 1960s New York—there was no community consensus on what should be done about urban renewal or how it should be carried out and as such, some Puerto Ricans saw it preferential to leave Manhattan rather than fight the forces of urban renewal, forced relocation, and the stigma of living in El Barrio or the Upper West Side.

The third section of this thesis examined how the civil rights movements of the 1960s heavily influenced more radical groups such as the New York Young Lords and Operation Move-In. The New York Young Lords were also keenly aware of the historical roots of the marginalization of Puerto Ricans. Indeed, they used their knowledge of history to ground their activism. For example, El Grito de Lares was but one example of a highly influential moment in Puerto Rican collective action history that inspired the revolutionary nationalist group. This moment in history set a precedent for Puerto Ricans organizing and revolting against the powerful forces of social and political oppression. The New York Young Lords, often discredited as merely a gang by its opponents, sought real, immediate social change, and had a clear and well-defined ideology that included anti-racism, anti-sexism, and civil rights for all. Like the New York Young Lords, members of Operation Move-In took direct radical actions. In their campaigns, members

occupied vacant city-owned buildings to protest urban renewal and the forced relocation of Puerto Ricans to less desirable housing in other parts of New York. The two groups had similar goals when it came to housing but due to political differences, they opted to keep their movements separate. Despite this, the two groups occasionally worked together when such a move would be mutually beneficial.

The movements for better housing, grassroots or not, were ultimately not successful in enacting large-scale change. While Puerto Ricans did gain political power in New York City organizing for better housing, they did not gain a sufficient level of power to ensure that the post-World War II housing crisis would end. Ending such a large-scale city-wide housing crisis required more than the ethnic Puerto Rican population could do on its own. As argued by various scholars since the 1980s, the newest recognized groups of im/migrants in New York had the least amount of power and were quickly cast aside in city politics. Puerto Ricans were no exception to this despite their citizenship status at the time of migration. The history of Puerto Rican New York's postwar housing crisis is not a history of change and success—it is a history of a community realizing its potential to organize and gain some level of power despite being subjected to political, social, and economic marginalization.

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