



“Latin Power to Latin People”: the Black Panther Party’s Influence on the Revolutionary Politics of the Young Lords Organization

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Abstract

The Young Lords gang transformed in late 1968 into the Young Lords Organization (YLO)—a revolutionary political body modeled after and allied with the Black Panther Party (BPP). This article explores the role of the BPP in the transformation and political development of the Young Lords. In particular it examines the BPP’s influence on the organizational structure, political ideas, and major organizing activities of the YLO.

Keywords Black Power · Black Panthers · Chicago · Young Lords · Revolutionaries · Puerto Rico

The Young Lords began as a street “gang” formed in Chicago’s Lincoln Park community area in the fall of 1960. Most of the early Young Lords members had either been born in Puerto Rico or had parents who were born there. José “Cha Cha” Jiménez for example was born in 1948 in El Millón, a “slum” in the city of Caguas, Puerto Rico. Yet it was in the slums of Chicago where he spent his formative childhood and adolescent years, as his family had moved there in 1951 (Jeffries 2003: 290; Cha Cha Jimenez Defence Committee 1973: 3). Facing poverty at home and with greater employment opportunities in the US mainland, his family joined hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans who left the island in the decades following World War II, tens of thousands of whom settled in Chicago. Driven from their homes by the economic forces of US colonial capitalism, Puerto Ricans continued to endure colonial subjugation upon their arrival in the Windy City. Packed into overcrowded, dilapidated, and segregated neighborhoods, Puerto Ricans in Chicago were also often exploited on the job, and effectively shut out of local political and civic institutions. In response to these conditions, Puerto Rican community leaders organized a variety of religious, civic, and social clubs of their own. Meanwhile, Puerto Rican youth like those in the Young Lords began to engage in their own brand of independent organizing.

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Soon after the Young Lords formed, the group gained a reputation for fighting. Some members—such as Orlando Dávila, one of the group’s most aggressive and dominant early leaders—saw the Young Lords as a mechanism through which to challenge white gangs for access to area parks, restaurants, street corners, and beaches. As Jiménez later said of Dávila, “his way of advancing Puerto Ricans was to pick fights” (José Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Jiménez was elected president of the Young Lords in 1964. The following year an all-girl chapter was formed called the Lordettes (Vasquez-Ignatin 1969). Some of the Lordettes members would later be active in the politicized Young Lords Organization (YLO), such as Angie Rizzo who later served as the YLO communications secretary. Remembering the sock-hops, dances, and weekly “socials” the Lordettes attended at the YMCA, Rizzo later explained: “It was all just very social, probably more so for the girls than the guys” (Angie Navedo-Rizzo, interviewed by Johanna Fernandez, 2005, recording given to the author by José Jiménez; Vasquez-Ignatin 1969). Yet even for the guys, by the mid-1960s the gang fighting had largely died down and members of different street groups often socialized together, whether at dances or on street corners.

Around 1966 the Young Lords started to become much less active, and eventually the group altogether stopped holding meetings and hosting events. Some leaders had gotten married and had children and were therefore no longer interested in the gang lifestyle. Others had joined the military and left the city. Some members, such as Jiménez, increasingly found themselves in trouble with the law. After stabbing another young man in a fight in 1966, for example, Jiménez served a six-month sentence in Vandalia State penal farm. Several months after his release, Jiménez was beaten by police officers and arrested following an altercation with a neighbor outside of his home. He subsequently fled the city with his girlfriend. She was pregnant and still a minor when they returned a year later, and her mother soon obtained a court order preventing Jiménez from seeing his newborn daughter (Cha Cha Jimenez Defence Committee 1973; Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Trouble continued to follow Jiménez. In the spring of 1968, he was arrested for possession of heroin and sentenced to sixty days in jail. It was while serving this sentence in the Cook County House of Correction (a decaying facility built in the nineteenth century) that Jiménez began a personal transformation that led him to embrace revolutionary politics. Spending much of his time in isolation, Jiménez’ introspection was sparked in part by his reading of *Seven Storey Mountain*, a 1948 autobiography written by Trappist monk Thomas Merton. Merton’s tale of rebellion and redemption spoke to Jiménez, who had once dreamed of entering the priesthood. Kneeling before the iron bars of his cell, Jiménez confessed his sins to the prison chaplain and asked for absolution. Afterwards, a Black Muslim jail trustee began to supply Jiménez with political literature, including works by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Jiménez interviewed by author, 2014; Cha Cha Jimenez Defence Committee 1973).

After his release from jail that summer, Jiménez enrolled in an ex-offenders program at Argonne National Laboratories where he secured a job as a janitor and participated in General Educational Development (GED) classes. Argonne’s ex-offenders program was principally run by Mike Lawson, an experienced teacher and civil rights activist who had already mentored young people from a number of different Chicago gangs. In late August 1968, Lawson brought Jiménez and others in the program on a “field trip” to observe demonstrations against the Democratic National Convention. His curiosity

piqued; Jiménez returned to observe more demonstrations over the following days (Lawson 2012; Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

It was at a demonstration in Lincoln Park (a 1200 acre public park located on the eastern edge of the Lincoln Park community area) where Jiménez first encountered Black Panther Party (BPP) Chairman Bobby Seale. Jiménez listened intently as Seale urged the crowd to defend themselves against the “pigs.” Seale was reported to have exhorted: “If a pig comes up to us and starts swinging a billy club and you check around and you got your piece, you gotta down that pig in defense of yourself” (Farber 1988: 190). Meanwhile, police were gathered on the outskirts of the park. Wanting to avoid returning to jail, Jiménez made a hasty exit (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014). Later that evening, after the police began to enforce the park’s 11:00 p.m. curfew, police officers attacked and beat protesters, chasing many of them into adjacent neighborhoods (Farber 1988).

During this time Jiménez was also in contact with Richard Vission and Patricia Devine, who were organizers with a white progressive church-based group called Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park. Devine and Vission wanted to recruit Jiménez to join them in their efforts to halt urban renewal projects that were displacing Puerto Ricans (and other low-income residents) from Lincoln Park (Devine-Reed 2012). Jiménez was moved by their arguments, as well as by the political literature they provided him. Jiménez later wrote: “They...gave me books to read including the Black Panther Newspaper—that did it! I had to create an organization of that kind for the Puerto Rican community” (Jiménez 1970). For Jiménez, the political philosophy of the BPP spoke to the colonial position of Puerto Ricans in Chicago. It also provided a model of resistance that depended upon the participation of urban street youth like him. Drawn to these ideas, Jiménez envisioned reorganizing the Young Lords into a militant protest organization modeled after the BPP.

In the fall of 1968, Jiménez worked to revive and reconstitute the Young Lords, which by that point had essentially become defunct. He reached out to former Young Lords members, asking them to help lead a new group dedicated to fighting for self-determination for Puerto Ricans. He also spoke with members of other local street groups in hopes of gaining new recruits and allies. At first his efforts had mixed results. While many people were receptive to the idea of transforming the group into a vehicle for direct action protest, others were violently opposed. Jiménez later wrote: “Convincing them bruised not only my ego, but my face” (Jiménez 2012: 1). Yet despite some early resistance, Jiménez organized a core group of leaders, many of whom had formerly been leaders in the Young Lords street group. He also brought in new recruits, including high school and college students. Jiménez later chose September 23, 1968—the centennial of the *Grito de Lares* (a famed Puerto Rican nationalist revolt)—to represent the official founding of the Young Lords Organization (YLO) (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

The Black Panther Party Shapes the Young Lords Organization

The BPP served as a model for the YLO as it developed into a revolutionary political organization. In addition to embracing the sartorial style of the BPP (wearing purple berets however instead of black ones), for example, the YLO also adopted the BPP organizational structure. The YLO had a central committee that mostly mirrored that of the BPP.

As chairman, Jiménez served as the YLO's primary leader and spokesperson. A small number of top leaders took on other ministerial positions (e.g., minister of education, minister of information), while lower ranking leaders became captains, field marshals, etc. Those not assigned to positions of leadership were often younger, less experienced, or less active members (some of them high school students or recent dropouts) and were considered to be the organization's "cadre." Sympathizers who only occasionally participated in YLO activities were sometimes affectionately referred to as "rally Lords" (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014; Omar López, interviewed by author, 2013).

Rafael "Spaghetti" Rivera, a longtime Young Lords gang member, was chosen to serve as the group's initial minister of education and was thus responsible for organizing political education classes, an idea appropriated from the BPP. Jiménez later remembered that those classes never really got off the ground under Rivera's leadership, and Rivera left the YLO in the summer of 1969. Luis "Tony" Baez joined the YLO in early 1970 after moving to Chicago from Puerto Rico, and soon took charge of the political education classes. Jiménez remembered that Baez (who had previously been a student at the University of Puerto Rico and member of the Puerto Rican Independence Party) led political education classes that were well organized and intellectually stimulating (Luis "Tony" Baez, interviewed by author, 2013; Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Omar López took on the role of minister of information, and as such was responsible for publishing the YLO newspaper. López was a 23-year-old student at Chicago's Loop Junior College (later renamed Harold Washington College) when he was recruited by Jiménez to join the YLO in early 1969. López later remembered that this occurred at the same time that he also first met Illinois BPP Chairman (and national BPP Deputy Chairman) Fred Hampton, who had been invited to speak to students on the Loop City College campus by a coalition of student groups known as the Third World Coalition (López, interviewed by author, 2013; López 2012). Jiménez later said, "I was there to hear Fred speak, but make no mistake about it, I was also there to recruit for the YLO" (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Jiménez first began communicating with national BPP leaders in the fall of 1968, namely Bobby Seale. Afterwards Jiménez visited the BPP headquarters in Oakland where he learned about fundraising for programs, laying out a newspaper, organizing demonstrations, and a host of other things. Yet despite early contact with national BPP leaders, Jiménez did not meet with leaders in the Illinois chapter of the BPP until early 1969, when Hampton reached out and made contact with him (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Jiménez later explained that Hampton had sought out YLO leaders after he learned about a demonstration that the group had staged at Chicago's eighteenth district police station on February 11, 1969. Donning purple berets and carrying home-made signs (with messages such as "Hands Off Cha Cha" and "Young Lords Serve and Protect"), dozens of YLO members arrived for a scheduled police-community workshop (YLO 1969a). They had come to protest the harassment of YLO leaders by local police. They also hoped to counteract rumors (which they believed the police had been spreading) that the YLO was nothing more than a violent street gang. Jiménez later remembered grabbing the microphone at one point and explaining that the YLO was not a threat and was there to help the community (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Hampton was impressed by what he heard about this demonstration, and so he and a few other Panthers went to Lincoln Park one evening looking for YLO leaders. He was initially directed to try the street corner in front of the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church (later to

become the People's Church, discussed below). This was a known hangout of the Young Lords since its days as a gang. No YLO leaders were there that evening. However, Hampton did encounter several rank and file members of the YLO as well as members of the Latin Kings (arguably the city's largest "Latin" gang at the time) who took him and the other Panthers to the apartment of John Boelter, a school teacher and union organizer who rented a room to Rafael Rivera. Both Rivera and Jiménez along with other YLO leaders happened to be there that evening. Jiménez later remembered that after a brief discussion about Puerto Rico, everyone settled down for a nice evening of conversation, laughter, and relaxation. Jiménez recalled: "It was an evening of camaraderie building and fellowship" (Boelter 2012; Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

The YLO and the Illinois BPP began to work together after that initial meeting. In addition to holding political education classes together, Jiménez later remembered that the YLO sometimes acted as security for BPP events, and that BPP members did the same for YLO events (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014). During this time YLO leaders also took direction from local and national BPP leaders. As Jiménez explained in an interview published in the June 7, 1969, issue of *The Black Panther* newspaper, "we see and we recognize the Black Panther Party as a vanguard party, a vanguard revolutionary party. And we feel that as revolutionaries we should follow the vanguard party." For Jiménez and other YLO members, the BPP ideology affirmed their revolutionary potential as "*lumpen*" street youth and as colonized people. For the BPP leaders, the YLO represented evidence of the validity of their analysis and the explosive potential of their methods. Drawing its members and leaders from what they identified as a colonized urban *lumpenproletariat* class, the YLO represented a manifestation among Puerto Ricans of the BPP's vision for Black street youth.

In March 1969 the YLO began publishing *Y.L.O.*, a "monthly" bilingual newspaper. As YLO minister of information, López served as one of the publication's editors. He later credited the BPP with the decision to publish the newspaper, saying:

"We always said that we were a propaganda unit. At one point if we are a propaganda unit, we need to have some propaganda. One of the ideas that came up was to have a newspaper, and of course it wasn't very difficult for us to come to that conclusion because we fashioned ourselves after the Black Panther Party. The Black Panthers had a newspaper, so we followed that kind of model" (López, interviewed by author, 2013).

According to the BPP model, the regular production of a newspaper served organizational functions beyond simply the distribution of propaganda. Producing and distributing the newspaper created tangible work, which BPP leaders identified as an important necessity for growing and sustaining new chapters. As the BPP Chief of Staff David Hilliard later wrote: "the paper...help[ed] us organize new chapters. '[W]hat do we do?' new members in San Diego or Sacramento want to know. '[S]ell the newspaper,' we answered." Distributing newspaper also provided the BPP with a way to recruit new members into the group, as well to build connections with community members. Hilliard recounted going to the streets to sell the paper:

"'Hey, brother,' I say, flashing a copy in a strangers face, 'read *The Black Panther*. Find out what's really going on in this country'...If the brother takes the copy, I've

made a potential convert; if he refuses, we get into a conversation that lures other people and ends in a general verbal free-for-all that's probably the most exciting event on the block in the last ten years" (Davenport 1998: 196-197).

Similarly, López later remembered sending Young Lords activists out to distribute the YLO newspapers. They sold newspapers on street corners in Lincoln Park, Old Town, downtown, and throughout the city. They also went to universities, community organizations, and political demonstrations to sell the newspapers. Lopez recalled:

"You know we asked them to try to get donations for the newspaper, but what we wanted them to do was to engage people when they gave the newspaper out...tell them what was in the newspaper...and talk about all the other things that the Young Lords were doing in the community" (López, interviewed by author, 2013).

YLO newspapers were also used as a way to inform readers about the BPP. The first two issues of *Y.L.O.* featured full-pages printed with the BPP Ten Point Party Platform and Program. A note from the *Y.L.O.* "staff" briefly introduced the BPP in the first of these issues. In part it read: "The Illinois B.P.P. was started 4 months ago and has thus far put the pigs up tight. We think it is important that the Latin community find out what our black brothers are all about and what they are doing." That same issue contained artwork from BPP Minister of Culture Emory Douglas originally published in *The Black Panther*. Later YLO newspapers also reprinted content from *The Black Panther*, and featured articles about the BPP and other Black Power movement activity in Chicago.

Unlike the *The Black Panther*, which was published weekly, YLO activists in Chicago had difficulty putting their newspaper out on a regular basis. The YLO published only seven issues of their "monthly" newspaper in the span of a year and a half. López later pointed to the steep learning curve YLO activists faced. "It was a project," he said in a 2013 interview. López recalled: "It wasn't like today, you can just sit at a computer and write it. It was a whole process." In order to publish their newspaper, YLO members had to learn how to design layout, prepare images, and even how to type. These were skills none of the YLO members initially had. As well, lacking supplies and office space, YLO activists relied upon the material resources of others, which complicated and slowed their efforts. López later admitted, "In the final product, you can see that it was a struggle." Yet he proudly spoke of the "grassroots" nature of the project. Describing the completion of each issue as "like giving birth," López remembered:

"The cadre was all street, young men and women who weren't very good at academics, but nevertheless had something to say. When we decided to do a newspaper, we never envisioned this journalistic vehicle. But it was something that we needed to put out" (López, interviewed by author, 2013).

Lack of funds also sometimes prevented the YLO from publishing its newspaper.

YLO Minister of Finance Alfredo Matias later described the financial drain of publishing the newspapers: "I was supposed to be keeping books," Matias laughed, "but we were always broke because the little money we had went to the newspaper" (Matias 1995). Luis "Tony" Baez, minister of education, helped produce the newspaper after he joined the group in early 1970. Baez later affirmed that a lack of money proved

to be a major obstacle. “Where do you put your money?” he asked rhetorically. “Do you put your money into a newspaper, or do you put it more into the health programs... the breakfast programs, and stuff like that? And not a lot of money was coming in” (Baez, interviewed by author, 2013).

In the spring of 1969, the YLO approached the Armitage Avenue Methodist Church in Lincoln Park with a plan to rent the church’s vacant basement. The group hoped to use this space to operate free community programs to be modeled after the “survival programs” (such as free breakfast for children) that the BPP had begun operating in late 1968. While some church members opposed the YLO’s proposal, the group gained the support of the church’s young pastor Reverend Bruce Johnson. Despite this, negotiations between the YLO and church members ultimately broke down. In early June 1969, it became apparent that some within the church were never going to agree to allow the YLO to rent the vacant basement space. After a failed final meeting between church members and the YLO on Wednesday, June 11, 1969, several YLO members decided to take action. Asserting that they had a moral right to claim the church’s basement space in order to serve the needs of poor people in the community, a group of YLO members carried out an armed takeover of the church. YLO Chairman José Jiménez later clarified that he played no role in planning nor executing the takeover (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2016).

Wanting to avoid a violent confrontation, Jiménez urged Johnson to intervene. When police officers arrived at the building (after they had been called by church members), Johnson met them outside and introduced himself as the church’s pastor. He told the police that there had been a misunderstanding, and that the YLO had his permission to use the space. When members of the press arrived, both Johnson and Jiménez maintained that the armed takeover was not a takeover at all. Jiménez assured reporters that the church would remain open and that religious activities would be allowed to continue unimpaired. In defiance of some among his congregation, Johnson allowed the YLO to remain inside the church (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2016).

Renaming it the People’s Church, the YLO converted the space into its official headquarters. Soon a new symbol was displayed inside the church—a cross bursting the chains of bondage—and a new creed appeared at the church door. Principally written by Johnson, it read:

“We have a dream. This Church, led by the community, confronting the powers which limit our destiny, keeping rulers responsible, assisting man to claim his destiny and celebrating in worship the birth of that power is our dream of a People’s Church. The Good News of Jesus Christ is that each man is of worth as a special creation of God. And Christ’s resurrection means that there is no power or establishment which can control a man who claims his own dignity. This is your faith & your Church. Claim them both and join us in this dream” (YLO 1969b).

Over the next year and a half, the YLO maintained a constant occupation of the site. Johnson continued leading religious services in the chapel. Meanwhile in the church’s basement, YLO activists eventually began operating a free daycare center, a free food-panty, a free clothing program, a free breakfast for children program, and a free community health clinic. As is discussed below, city authorities used a variety of means to force the closure of these programs.

The Revolutionary Nationalism and the Revolutionary Internationalism of the YLO

By the summer of 1969, a YLO chapter had been established in New York City. While the Chicago YLO had evolved from a gang into a revolutionary organization, the New York chapter grew out of student activism. Similar to the experiences of the YLO in Chicago, New York YLO members were also shaped by the growth of the BPP.

The development of the New York YLO was actually the result of a merger between two different groups of New York students. One of these was led by José Martínez, a member of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who met with YLO leaders at an SDS convention in Chicago in May 1969. Upon gaining Jiménez' approval, Martínez began organizing a New York chapter shortly thereafter (Jeffries 2003: 291). The other group began as the Sociedad Albizu Campos (SAC). SAC was based in El Barrio (Spanish Harlem) and had been meeting for about six months when its members first learned about the work of the Chicago YLO in the pages of *The Black Panther*. As SAC member Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán later wrote:

“What happened was, in 1969, in the June 7 issue of *The Black Panther* newspaper there was an article about the Young Lords Organization in Chicago with Cha Cha Jiménez as their Chairman. Cha Cha was talking about revolution and socialism, and the liberation of Puerto Rico and the right to self-determination and...I mean, I hadn't never heard no Puerto Rican talk like this—just Black people were talking this way, you know. And I said, ‘Damn! Check this out.’ That's what really got us started” (Young Lords Party and Abramson 1971: 69).

SAC leaders soon traveled to Chicago to meet with Jiménez and other YLO leaders, and shortly thereafter SAC and Martínez' group joined together to form a unified New York YLO chapter.

In October, the New York YLO drafted a Thirteen Point Program and Platform that was, again, modeled after the BPP's Ten Point Program and Platform drafted in October 1966. The YLO program and platform however was arguably both more expressly nationalist and internationalist than that of the BPP. The first point stated: “We want self-determination for Puerto Ricans—liberation on the island and inside the United States.” Expanding on that demand, the second and third points called for “self-determination for all Latinos” and the “liberation of all Third World people.” Point number four explicitly defined the group's politics as “revolutionary nationalist.” Connecting the anti-colonial struggles of Puerto Ricans and other “Latin” people in the USA with the “Black, Indian, and Asian...colonies fighting for liberation,” it stated: “We each organize our people, but our fights are the same against oppression and we will defeat it together.” As well, point number eleven stated: “We fight anti-communism with internationalism,” and pledged that the YLO would “defend our brothers and sisters around the world who fight for justice against the rich rulers of this country” (YLO 1970a).

Drawing directly from the ideology of the BPP, notions of revolutionary nationalism grounded in principles of revolutionary internationalism also came to define the politics of the YLO in Chicago. Evidence of this can be seen in the March 1969 issue of the YLO

newspaper in a gallery of photographs centered around the printed phrase “Latin Power to Latin People” (YLO 1969a). The use of the term “Latin” here can be read as a symbol of solidarity between different Spanish-speaking communities in Chicago (which at the time were predominantly Puerto Rican and Mexican). The full phrase “Latin Power to Latin People” was also a slight alteration of the BPP slogan (sometimes repeated by Hampton) “Black power to Black people. Brown power to Brown people. Yellow power to Yellow people. Red power to Red people.” Given this context, the YLO’s use of this phrase can be read both as an expression of a form of revolutionary ethnic nationalism inclusive of all “Latin people,” as well as an acknowledgment of the connection between the struggles of Latinxs and other oppressed national minorities.

In conformance with the ideology of the BPP, YLO leaders came to see Puerto Rican nationalism and other forms of ethnic nationalism as part of a larger internationalist struggle against imperialist white supremacist capitalism. As their politics developed alongside the BPP, Jiménez and other leaders articulated this in the language of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist theory as the “national question.” Balancing the seeming contradictions between nationalist and internationalist sentiments, the YLO sought to harness the popularity and power of nationalist movements to further a broader internationalist class struggle. Jiménez later explained:

“You have to understand the difference between the mass line, which is the people’s line, and the disciplined line. For the cadre, we wanted them to be class-conscious. But for the community, we wanted them to understand and be proud that they’re Puerto Rican, or proud that they’re Mexican, or proud that they’re African American. But we were internationalist, of course, as an organization. Nationalism was a step towards uplifting people to class consciousness, yet we were clear that it was a class struggle between the rich and poor from the very beginning” (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Accordingly, YLO members who were not Puerto Rican (such as the Mexican-born Omar López) could see the movement for Puerto Rican independence as a struggle that would not only benefit Puerto Ricans but as also inextricably linked to the struggles of all oppressed people. López later explained:

“Those of us who were not Puerto Rican saw [the movement for Puerto Rican independence] as an internationalist struggle, and we readily embraced that. So we had no problem at all with the Young Lords being identified totally as a Puerto Rican group that talked about the independence of Puerto Rico, when in the leadership of the Young Lords we had several people that were Mexican and Mexican American” (López, interviewed by author, 2013).

The YLO celebrated Puerto Rican and Mexican identity, culture, and history through buttons, posters, murals, and various content in the group’s monthly newspaper. YLO newspapers sometimes provided Puerto Rican history lessons. As well, through cover images and other artwork the newspaper affirmed and celebrated Puerto Rican identity. The slogan “Tengo Puerto Rico En Mi Corazón” (I Have Puerto Rico In My Heart) created by Jiménez and Rivera, which overlaid an image of the island and a raised fist clenching a rifle, was featured prominently in the newspaper banner, as well as on YLO

buttons and in a mural painted above the entrance to the People's Church. Murals of Mexican revolutionary figures—such as Adelita and Emiliano Zapata—also adorned the exterior of the People's Church. As well, the YLO soon began distributing buttons containing the phrase “Tengo Aztlán En Mi Corazón” (I Have Aztlán In My Heart). The use of this phrase, a reference to the mythical Aztec homeland of Aztlán, was meant as a show of solidarity for the Chicano movement (Del Rivero 2012).

Yet while the YLO celebrated Puerto Rican and Mexican identity and culture, the group was also at times critical of more culturally focused forms of ethnic nationalism. This can be seen as akin to the BPP's denunciation of “cultural nationalism”—what BPP leader Huey P. Newton sometimes derisively referred to as “pork chop nationalism”—as an ultimately “reactionary” form of nationalism (Newton 2002: 50). We can see a similar critique in a report published in the YLO newspaper about a March 1969 Chicano conference. Organized by Chicano poet, playwright, and activist, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, and hosted in Denver, the National Youth and Liberation Conference brought together approximately 1500 Chicano activists. The conference was also attended by several YLO members. The YLO newspaper report focused mostly on what the group saw as positive elements of the conference, as can be seen in this passage:

“The Conference was an education for all of us. We learned what Chicanos are doing to rid themselves of the brainwashing that the power structure calls education. We learned how they are organizing themselves and how they are trying to fight the system everywhere...Most important, we realized how much we have in common, and how our enemy is always the same: the pig power structure, capitalism” (YLO 1970b).

Yet YLO leaders were also critical of some Chicano activists at the conference. “We felt they were too nationalistic and saw everything from a racial or cultural point of view,” the report concluded. “We tried to explain that culture isn't the whole answer and that the reason we are treated the way we are is usually because we are poor, not because of our race” (YLO 1970b).

Rainbow Radicalism

At the same time that Fred Hampton and other Illinois BPP members were growing closer with YLO leaders in early 1969, a BPP field marshal named Robert “Bob” E. Lee began surreptitiously working with a group of white Appalachian migrant youth in Chicago's Uptown community area. These youth were members of the Young Patriots Organization (YPO), a group that grew out of the earlier community organizing efforts of activists participating in a SDS-sponsored project called Jobs or Income Now (JOIN). In the mid-1960s, JOIN activists engaged in anti-racist agitation among Uptown's poor white communities. They also organized a welfare union to fight for welfare rights and provided direct services for Uptown's poor and working-class residents. The YPO was founded by a small group of poor whites that included former JOIN members. Despite sewing Confederate battle flag patches on their jean jackets and berets (an act that YPO leaders later regretted), YPO members proclaimed

themselves to stand against racism. After several meetings with the YPO, Lee, as instructed, reported his activities to Fred Hampton.

Hampton supported an alliance with the YPO, but there was some resistance from a number of other BPP members. Understandably, several BPP members questioned the YPO's use of the Confederate battle flag and they wondered what joining forces with these self-proclaimed "hillbillies" really meant for their movement. YLO members also debated the idea of allying with the YPO at length before they decided to move forward with a partnership. Despite some trepidation among the rank-and-file members, in early June 1969, the BPP, the YLO, and the YPO announced the formal creation of an alliance between their groups known as the Rainbow Coalition (a term coined by Hampton). The formation of the Rainbow Coalition did lead to some internal dissent within each group, with several BPP members quitting their organization in protest. Lee later dismissed these critics: "Some didn't like the Patriots; some just didn't like white people in general. To tell the truth, it was a necessary purging" (Sonne and Tracy 2011: 80).

Despite early misgivings, the Rainbow Coalition can generally be considered a success. As a result of this alliance, poor and working-class white, Black, and Latinx youth came together for marches, direct action protests, community survival programs, and political education classes. Members of each group also provided security for each other's events. The Rainbow Coalition also had a profound impact beyond the material support it provided for poor and working-class people in Chicago, as it demonstrated the revolutionary potential of cross-racial working-class alliances. In the words of Bob Lee, "the Rainbow Coalition was just a code word for class struggle" (Sonne and Tracy 2011: 80).

Sometimes facilitated by the organizing of the BPP, the YLO also connected with a variety of movement groups outside of the Rainbow Coalition. In July 1969, for example, delegates from both the YPO and the YLO traveled together to Oakland to attend the BPP-sponsored United Front Against Fascism Conference. There they joined two thousand others (among them Asian Americans, American Indians, Chicano farmworkers, and white SDS members) at a three-day conference aimed at addressing continued terroristic attacks by police and federal forces against working-class communities and leftwing movements. Many of these same groups joined together a year later as the BPP assembled a Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention. The purpose of this convention was in part to draft a document that would serve as a common platform to bring together oppressed working-class communities of all races and ethnicities and serve as a guideline for their various revolutionary activities. The YLO publicized the convention in advance of its first meeting in a summer 1970 issue of its newspaper. A center-spread poster advertising the upcoming meeting featured a collage of images and slogans celebrating Cuban, Puerto Rican, Black, Asian American, American Indian, and white revolutionaries. Text boxes featured information in Spanish and English about the upcoming convention's purpose (YLO 1970c).

Among the slogans embedded in the collage was the phrase "Rising Up Angry!" An explanation of the phrase's meaning can be found in a small advertisement on the final page of the newspaper. It read in part: "Have you heard of Rising Up Angry? These brothers and sisters are ANGRY and working to make the dream of revolution a reality." Urging readers to subscribe to that group's newspaper, the advertisement explained that Rising Up Angry was an organization of "Greasers" (a term used to

describe a subculture of white working-class street youth) who were “‘dedicated to building a new man, a new woman and a new world’ and are trying to reach those brothers and sisters who cannot relate to the black or brown movement, but nevertheless, are also our brothers in oppression” (YLO 1970d).

The YLO also worked during this time with other Latin street groups in Chicago. In September 1969, for example, YLO members joined with community organizations and church groups, as well as with the Latin Kings and twelve smaller street groups, to form the United Puerto Rican Coalition (UPRC). The UPRC was organized in response to the shooting of a Puerto Rican high school student by a Chicago police officer. A week after the shooting, the UPRC held a protest march to “Pig Daley’s office.” As the YLO newspaper reported:

“The march was significant in that the barriers between the youth clubs were broken and they were all aware that YLO was with them, struggling against the conservative adults, discussing ideas, urging them to take leadership. The Latin Kings Militant Unit had led the march for the first time appearing in public in full uniform, marching in formation behind the flag of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement...Whether the United Puerto Rican Coalition is the answer is not important. But laying down the basis of another united youth force against the ruling class is. Right On!” (YLO 1969c).

Repression

The Young Lords was not the only Chicago street group to become political in the mid-to late 1960s. Inspired by Civil Rights activism and an ascendant Black Power movement, a number of the city’s Black gangs (such as the Blackstone Rangers and the Vice Lords) also transformed, at least in part, in important ways during this time. Perhaps the most important change to occur was that several of these groups brokered peace agreements that temporarily stopped internecine gang fighting. Subsidized by charitable foundations and government sources, some Chicago street groups also began operating employment services, recreation centers, and a variety of self-help projects. Spurred by contact with more militant groups like the Illinois BPP, some of these street groups also joined together in coalition to engage in direct action protest (Dawley 1992; Hagedorn 2008; Diamond 2009; Gellman 2010).

Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley perceived the independent organizing of the Illinois BPP, the YLO, and all of the various politicized Chicago street groups as a threat. In response, in 1969 Daley launched a so-called war on gangs. Cook County State’s Attorney Edward Hanrahan claimed that the war on gangs was a response to continued “intimidation” and “extortion” practiced by gangs throughout the city. Yet as rates of gang violence had dropped to their lowest point in years and meaningful peace had been established between the city’s largest street groups, it appears that Daley’s real objective was to disrupt and undermine independent political and community organizing. Daley likely recalled his own days as a member of the Hamburg Athletic Club, a group of young Irish Americans on Chicago’s South Side that newspaper columnist Mike Royko wryly described as “handy with a brick.” Like other groups that moved

from street brawls to politics, Daley's gang eventually became an integral part of the Democratic Party machine and launched his own political career in the 1920s. Royko summed up Daley's likely fear in his unauthorized biography of the mayor:

“There lay the danger of the black gangs. Blacks had been killing each other for years without inspiring any great concern in City Hall. But these young toughs could be dictating who their aldermen would be if he didn't stop them. And the Black Panthers, a more sophisticated though smaller group, was even more dangerous. They had set up a free-food program in the ghetto and had opened a health clinic that was superior to those of his own health department” (Royko 1971: 210-211).

The mayor's office applied substantial pressure to the charitable foundations that supported groups such as the Vice Lords and the Blackstone Rangers (which by that time had been renamed the Black P. Stone Nation), convincing many of them to cancel the funding of community projects already in operation. Through its Gang Intelligence Unit (GIU), the Chicago police also stepped up its harassment of these groups. For example, in the fall of 1969, Vice Lords leader Bobby Gore and P. Stone spokesperson Leonard Sengali were both arrested and indicted on separate murder charges. While Sengali was eventually cleared of any wrongdoing, Gore ended up serving eleven years in prison based on spurious evidence for a crime he most likely did not commit (Dawley 1992: 172-174; Hagedorn 2008: 80). The mounting legal costs and time spent in jail drained resources from and undermined leadership within these groups, eventually forcing most of them to abandon community organizing altogether. As one Vice Lords member later said, “Once Bobby [Gore] went down, guys didn't have jobs...and there was money to be made selling drugs” (Hagedorn 2008: 80).

The Illinois BPP also came under heavy fire in the war on gangs. In addition to being targeted by Hanrahan's GIU, the BPP faced ongoing harassment from both the FBI and the city's Red Squad (an anti-subversive police unit that had its roots in the 1886 Haymarket affair). The harassment culminated in a deadly early morning raid on December 4, 1969, when Chicago police murdered BPP leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark as they slept in their apartment. The Chicago police were accompanied by GIU officers, and their efforts were materially aided by an undercover FBI agent who had infiltrated the BPP. Though the raid dealt a devastating blow to the Illinois BPP; the organization did continue to operate. Fallout from the raid eventually damaged Hanrahan's political career and cost the city millions in legal settlements. Yet no officers or public officials were ever charged for the murders.

The YLO was also the target of state repression during this time. Jiménez later described getting arrested as “a way of life.” In addition to daily harassment from the police, YLO leaders were under constant surveillance. Jiménez recalled that police officers sat in cars parked twenty-four hours a day in front of the People's Church. “I mean they would change shifts there in front of our church,” he later laughed in an interview (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

The city also applied substantial pressure to shut down the YLO's community survival programs. For example, shortly before the free daycare center was set to open in August 1969, city building inspectors came to inspect the People's Church. The YLO printed an account of this visit in its newspaper:

“[The building inspector] told the YLO and the church’s minister, Bruce Johnson, that if they tried to open the center there would be trouble...The city said that the center was in violation of the city building code. Three broken floor tiles were a violation. The ceiling was a violation because it was too high. The rooms were violations because they were partially below street level...In short, everything was a violation. The city forced Bruce Johnson into court because of these violations. As one YLO member said, ‘We were violations to the system the day we were born. The idea of poor people running and benefiting by their own day care center is a violation of city purpose and policy’”(YLO 1969d).

Johnson and the YLO were determined to open the free community daycare center, though they did so surreptitiously in order to avoid invoking fines of 200 dollars a day. The YLO newspaper later proclaimed that Bruce Johnson and his wife Eugenia Johnson were, “friends and partners in the struggle to open up the day care center at the People’s Church...[who] stood up for what was right...in the face of pressure and threats...and continued to defend us from attacks from the police, the alderman and other politicians” (YLO 1969e).

While their children slept, Bruce and Eugenia Johnson were both brutally stabbed to death in their home on the night of September 29 or early morning September 30, 1969. Their bodies were discovered the next morning by their three young sons. The police never solved the crimes, which some saw as evidence of either negligence or a coverup. There was certainly no shortage of potential suspects, as their relationship with the YLO had earned Bruce and Eugenia Johnson several enemies. The YLO’s position was that the murders were politically motivated—retribution for support the couple had given to the Young Lords movement—writing in the YLO newspaper shortly afterwards: “These murders show to what vicious lengths the ruling class will go to prevent the growth of our just struggle” (YLO 1969e).

The deaths of Bruce and Eugenia Johnson devastated YLO leaders and negatively impacted the work of the group. Nonetheless, YLO activists and their allies continued to organize over the next year. Some new projects emerged and temporarily flourished in the period following the murders. One of these was the Ramón Emeterio Betances Health Clinic. Named after a famed nineteenth century Puerto Rican nationalist and abolitionist hero, this free clinic operated out of the People’s Church and was principally run by YLO Minister of Health Alberto Chavira, who was a medical student at Northwestern University. By the fall of 1970, the city Board of Health was working to shut down the free clinic. Chavira charged in the YLO newspaper: “This attempt to close down our health program is another example of how the fascist Daley machine responds to any program which truly serves and educates the people” (Chavira 1970).

Retrenchment and Reorganization in the YLO and the BPP

With Jiménez facing an extended jail sentence, and Puerto Ricans increasingly being displaced from Lincoln Park as a result of urban renewal, a major portion of the YLO leadership decided to take the organization “underground” in late 1970. Jiménez had already gone underground by that time. He was avoiding a one-year jail sentence after

having been convicted of stealing lumber from an urban renewal construction site. Later admitting that the theft had been a critical mistake, Jiménez had originally hoped to use the stolen supplies to complete renovations to the People's Church. After leaving Chicago, Jiménez and a rotating group of between ten to twenty YLO members spent much of the next two years on a farm near the small city of Tomah, Wisconsin. They envisioned the farm as a sort of revolutionary training camp, and much of the group's time was spent studying (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014). YLO members also engaged in small arms training during this time. Bertha Zamudio, who was appointed to serve as YLO minister of education during her time on the farm, later recalled: "we always had our rifles on us, we were ready at all times" (Bertha Zamudio, interviewed by author, 2016). In late 1972 YLO leaders decided to come out of hiding and resume above ground organizing. While Jiménez served nine months in jail, other YLO members opened a storefront office in Chicago's Lakeview community area (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

The BPP was undergoing its own process of retrenchment and reorganization during this time, though the group stayed in contact with and provided direction for YLO leaders. Following a split in the organization that led to the expulsion of Eldridge Cleaver and many of his supporters in early 1971, Huey P. Newton began to order the closure of BPP chapters and branches across the country. Meanwhile, Newton asked dedicated BPP members from these chapters to leave their cities and move to Oakland. Based in part on a Maoist guerrilla concept of base-building, the BPP hoped to consolidate their strength in Oakland in order to build a revolutionary base there. The goal in part then was for the BPP to gain political power in Oakland. Towards that end party members won a number of minor offices in Oakland City elections. As well, in 1973 BPP leaders Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown ran unsuccessful campaigns for Oakland mayor and city council member, respectively.

Following that same model, with Jiménez in jail, the YLO (now principally directed by Communications Secretary Angie Rizzo) began efforts to build a new base of support among Puerto Ricans in Chicago's Lakeview and Uptown community areas. Following his release from jail, Jiménez ran a spirited though ultimately unsuccessful campaign for alderman in 1975. While he was inspired by the electoral strategy of the BPP in Oakland, Jiménez later explained how he saw this campaign: "We never believed in elections, that elections were going to bring about change by themselves, but we had to educate the people...and the elections became an organizing vehicle to do that" (Jiménez, interviewed by author, 2014).

Conclusion

The YLO remained active in Chicago throughout the 1970s, though the organization was never able to attract as much attention as it did during the late 1960s. The group did not achieve its major political objectives (e.g., stopping gentrification in Lincoln Park, independence for Puerto Rico, socialist revolution). Yet in the face of severe repression, the YLO made several important historical statements, nearly all of them inspired and/or shaped in some way by the work of the BPP. Among these, YLO members and their allies articulated a model of revolutionary nationalism bound up with notions of revolutionary internationalism. In partnership with the BPP, from which YLO members

drew inspiration and sought guidance, the YLO pushed a model of struggle that saw solidarity between colonized and oppressed communities as the only way to effectively combat empire and racial capitalism. Through its survival programs in the People's Church and its protest activity in Lincoln Park and elsewhere in Chicago, the YLO also demonstrated the revolutionary potential of the "brothers off the block," standing as evidence in favor of the BPP's model of revolution waged through the colonized *lumpenproletariat*.

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