

THE YOUNG LORDS

INTRODUCTION

In the final days of 1969, the Young Lords were on top of the world. As the decade entered its midnight hour, this group of poor and working-class Puerto Rican radicals brought an alternative vision of society to life in their own neighborhood. Their aim was to reclaim the dignity of the racially oppressed and elevate basic human needs—food, clothing, housing, health, work, and community—over the pursuit of profit. In the course of a fight with East Harlem’s First Spanish United Methodist Church (FSUMC), they found an unlikely but irresistible setting for the public presentation of their revolutionary project.

The Young Lords had simply been looking for a space to feed breakfast to poor children before school. The church seemed an ideal place. It was conveniently situated in the center of East Harlem and housed in a beautiful, spacious building that was closed all week except for a couple of hours on Sunday. But its priest, an exile of Castro’s revolutionary Cuba, denied the use of its building. In response, the Young Lords charged that the church’s benign indifference to the social and economic suffering of the people of East Harlem—one of the poorest districts in the city—mirrored government indifference and enabled social violence. They argued further that the church’s professed goals of service to mankind and promises of happiness and freedom from earthly worries in the hereafter cloaked a broader project of social control.

Two months after their initial request was denied, the militant activists nailed the doors of the FSUMC shut after Sunday service and barricaded themselves inside. In that moment, their neighborhood deployment of the building takeover—a strategy popularized by sixties radicals in universities—gave concrete expression to growing calls for community control of local institutions in poor urban neighborhoods.

In their determination to stoke revolution among Puerto Ricans and other poor communities of color, these radicals transformed the occupied building into a staging ground for their vision of a just society. Rechristened the People’s Church by the Young Lords, the liberated space was offered up as a sanctuary for East Harlem’s poor. Before long, community residents poured into the church in search of solutions to all manner of grievances, from housing evictions to the

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absence of English translation at parent-teacher meetings. The Lords served hot meals to school-aged children, helping to institutionalize what is now a federal program that serves school breakfast to children, and ran a free medical clinic for members of the community. They sponsored a vigorous political education program for anyone who was interested, where they taught classes in Puerto Rican and black American history, the history of the national independence movement of Puerto Rico, and current events—an alternative to public school curricula that failed to make sense of the troubles of the poor and the brown in New York City. In the evenings, the Lords hosted “festivals of the oppressed” where they curated spurned elements of Puerto Rican culture and music, performed by underground poets, musicians, artists, and writers—an antidote to the erasure of Puerto Rican culture and history that accompanied the U.S. colonial project that began in Puerto Rico in 1898. New genres of cultural expression were cultivated at the liberated church, among them the spoken word poetry jam, which would in the coming years become a springboard for the development of hip-hop. In the process, the Young Lords created a counternarrative to postwar media representations of Puerto Ricans as junkies, knife-wielding thugs, and welfare dependents that replaced traditional stereotypes with powerful images of eloquent, strategic, and candid Puerto Rican resistance.

At a moment of growing state violence against activists, the decision of these radicals to turn the Lord’s house into a site of protest was a brilliant tactical move that created a strategic sanctuary from the possibility of violent reprisals. Approximately one year earlier, in April 1968, after hundreds of Columbia University students occupied major campus buildings in protest of the Vietnam War and the university’s gentrification of Harlem, students were dragged out of the occupied buildings by police with billy clubs.¹ At the church in East Harlem, such violence was politically untenable.

Immediately, local grandmothers began delivering pots of food to the Puerto Rican radicals through church windows, while a phalanx of National Lawyers Guild attorneys, on-site and in the church’s periphery, filed court injunctions and reminded judges and police of the barricaded radicals’ constitutionally protected right to protest. Teetering between sacrilege and righteousness, the Young Lords’ unfolding drama was captured by TV cameras parked in and outside the house of worship.

As the Young Lords fortified their programs at the church, hundreds of supporters and engrossed spectators gathered to hear about new developments during their daily press conferences. Speaking through a bullhorn out of a church window to attentive journalists outside, Young Lord Iris Benitez explained, “The people of El Barrio have gotten to the point that they don’t ask the why of things anymore, they just see things as they exist and try to survive. The Young Lords know the why and we’re trying to relay that information to the people.”² From

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their pulpit at the People's Church, the Young Lords observed that the poverty indices of Puerto Rico, a U.S. colony, and this Puerto Rican neighborhood were strikingly similar. Another Young Lord referenced the global scope of resistance a year earlier, when millions of people rose up in Rome, Madrid, Paris, Belgrade, Prague, Mexico City, Pakistan, Chicago, across U.S. cities, and beyond. Pablo Guzmán observed, "It ain't just y'all in this church, it ain't just East Harlem. . . . We relate to an international struggle. It may sound ridiculous but this all links up . . . from Vietnam to Puerto Rico to Watts."³ Born in the wake of one of the deepest political radicalizations of the century, the Young Lords' creative militancy, critique of social problems spoken in the language of their peers, and socialist vision for America embodied the best of sixties radicalism.



Against the backdrop of America's escalating sixties urban rebellions, the Young Lords unleashed a chain of urban guerilla protests that amplified the primacy of class analysis and revolution in the fight against racism. From garbage-dumping demonstrations to a series of church and hospital occupations—termed "offensives" in deference to the Tet campaign of the Vietnamese—this small group exploded into the country's consciousness in July 1969, staging their social grievances with infectious irreverence and distinctive imagination. Although a new wave of repression befell the movement, the Young Lords actually benefited from protests in defense of the Panther 21, jailed that same year. The arrests had been part of a police frame-up.⁴ With New York's police department exposed and discredited, the new radicals were able to launch their campaigns without the same level of disruption that the FBI and local law enforcement brought against the Black Panthers in the late 1960s.

Over the course of their brief yet productive life-span, the Young Lords won significant reforms and used local battles to expose the United States' quiet imperial project in Puerto Rico, which became a colony of the United States in 1898. In just a few short years, the group grew from a little-known organization to the stuff of legend. In the process, their media-conscious urban guerrilla offensives, combined with the group's multiethnic membership, redefined the character of protest, the color of politics, and the cadence of popular culture in the city.

And as the children of the vast post-World War II transfer of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. mainland, the Young Lords also helped their generation interpret the causes of that migration and the place of Puerto Ricans in U.S. society as "special citizens" and a diaspora of colonial people living in the metropole. Between 1947 and 1970, one-third of the people of Puerto Rico left the island. Most settled in New York, where Puerto Ricans migrated in larger numbers than black Americans during the same period. By 1970, the Puerto Rican population on the U.S. mainland had grown 500 times to approximately 1.5 million.⁵

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Puerto Rican postwar migration formed part of a much larger migratory process that transformed the class structure and political standing of groups that have been historically racialized and concentrated in the most backward and exploitative sectors of the economy, namely black Americans, Mexicans, and Native Americans. The vast internal migration of people of color from countryside to city during and after World War II proletarianized these previously rural and small-town people, which increased their economic power. Urbanization gave them a sense of their strength in numbers, amplified their potential political power, and established the conditions for the rise of the civil rights movement.⁶ The timing of Puerto Rican migration set the stage for the emergence of a group like the Young Lords in the 1960s, whose members were largely first- and second-generation, working-class Puerto Rican migrants between the ages of fourteen and thirty-four; most were in their late teens.⁷

The postwar migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. mainland was exponentially larger than in previous generations. The young were overrepresented in its ranks, and their consciousness would be shaped by an unlikely combination of politicizing experiences, from the rise of the civil rights, black power, women's, and gay liberation movements and the U.S. declaration of war in Vietnam to their own experience in an urban setting beset for the first time by industrial decline, permanent unemployment, and the growing spatial and economic isolation of its racialized residents. Like their black American counterparts in the sixties movements, the Young Lords became iconic among Puerto Ricans and within movement circles for several reasons. Their uncompromising militancy matched and channeled the anger unleashed by the era's urban rebellions. At a moment when the call for revolution began to replace the call for reform in the minds of many, the Young Lords linked the precarious conditions of postwar Puerto Rican migrants to their status as colonial subjects, identified common cause with black Americans, and called for socialism. And in their quest to take a stand in the city, the Young Lords discovered and asserted in the public square what it meant to be Puerto Rican in America.

Children of the Revolution

As the mainstream and underground sixties press captured the controlled chaos at the People's Church, an evocative portrait of the racial and ethnic composition of the protagonists struck a chord with people around the world. Unintentionally, the Young Lords had staged a visual coup. New York's major Spanish-language newspaper, *El Diario La Prensa*, took special notice: "These young men and women, Puerto Ricans—some white and others of the black race—and among them some Americans, love the ideal of independence for Puerto Rico. . . . They say that they form part of a coalition with the Black Panther Party and the Young Patriots."⁸

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Although the Young Lords were self-professed Puerto Rican revolutionary nationalists, approximately 25 percent of its members were black Americans. The group's membership gave political expression to the common social, economic, and cultural urban experience of Puerto Rican and black American youth who grew up alongside each other in the 1950s and 1960s. Considered New York's Puerto Rican barrio, East Harlem was, in fact, home to Puerto Ricans, black Americans, and white Americans of Italian descent—one of the city's few multiracial and multiethnic neighborhoods. In 1960, 40.4 percent of its residents were Puerto Rican, 38.2 percent black American, and 21.4 percent white American.⁹ With another 5 percent of its members composed of non-Puerto Rican Latinxs, the group's membership also reflected the changing demographic character and diverse ethnic composition of a city increasingly populated by people of color. The ethnic and racial diversity on display at the church seemed to express the possibilities for a society free from bigotry, of the kind that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. imagined in his notion of the beloved community, the same kind that seemed ever more in doubt as riots crept across America's cities toward the end of the 1960s.¹⁰

But the Young Lords envisioned even more. Only a decade removed from the anticommunist witch hunts of the 1950s, the Young Lords, together with a significant minority of young organizers of their generation, began to embrace revolutionary politics. This vision of the political and economic organization of society was radically opposed to standard American political values. The Young Lords' calls for Puerto Rican independence, an end to hunger and want, and a socialist society embodied the politics of the era's revolutions for independence from European colonial rule that swept through Africa, Asia, and Latin America after World War II. In the United States, self-proclaimed revolutionaries of color linked racism to colonialism and class exploitation under capitalism and identified all as barriers to building a liberated society.

Organizationally, the Young Lords modeled themselves after the Black Panthers, who called for the building of vanguard revolutionary parties by black Americans and other people of color as vehicles through which those who believed that the system must be dismantled would come together to concentrate and coordinate their efforts.¹¹ The Lords outlined their bold vision for a just society in a thirteen-point program and platform in which they called for "self-determination for Puerto Ricans" and proclaimed, "We want a socialist society."¹² Through community-based campaigns and political propaganda, the Young Lords popularized the demand for Puerto Rican independence both in their own constituency and within broader movement circles. They also spread and demystified socialist ideas among poor and working-class people of color, arguing that society should be organized around human priorities and needs rather than capitalism's drive for profit.

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Like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords believed that the fight against racism and colonial domination was central, rather than secondary, to the fight for a new socialist society. For this reason, they called themselves revolutionary nationalists, arguing that the fight for national independence was integral to the struggle for socialism. The Young Lords also believed that independence could not be attained through electoral means but only through revolution. They declared themselves the children of Puerto Rico's Nationalist Party of the 1930s and were the first mainland-raised Puerto Ricans to, as a group, call and organize for the island's independence.

The Young Lords' embrace of independence formed part of the 1960s revival of nationalism among Puerto Ricans with varying levels of political experiences and influences. Encouraged by the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the gathering pace of the black freedom movement in the United States, elements of the Puerto Rican Left on the island, which had been forced underground by government repression, reconstituted themselves as the *Movimiento Pro Independencia*. In 1964, *Movimiento Pro Independencia* opened branches in New York and Chicago, attracting small numbers of older, first-generation Puerto Rican migrants. In the late 1960s, the politics and activism of the Young Lords, which had developed independently of the island and mainland independence movements, widened the terrain of independence politics among a new generation of mainland-born Puerto Ricans. They educated other 1960s activists about the language discrimination and racism endured not just by black Americans but also by Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland, and popularized the call for Puerto Rican independence among them.

The New York Young Lords formed part of a cohort of young working-class people—and people of color among them, in particular—whose unprecedented access to higher education sharpened their latent critique of society and afforded them an infrastructure for dissent. The postwar era's exponential increase in college enrollment delayed the responsibilities of work and family among the young for the first time in U.S. history and simultaneously opened up a space where they could question society.¹³ The movements they built challenged racism; the U.S. war in Vietnam; and the oppression of women, gays, and lesbians and the transgender community. They also challenged what many believed were old, soul-slaying social norms and standards of behavior that constrained personal freedoms in the United States. Known collectively as the New Left, these diverse movements were built by a generation whose activism radically changed the cultural and political landscape of the United States. Its participants referred to the overlapping movements of the New Left as “the movement.” These movements are historically significant because together they established contemporary standards of interactions among Americans and between American people and their government—they challenged white supremacy, made

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racism unpopular, changed “the relationship between white people and people of color,” and influenced U.S. foreign policy and the ways the nation understood issues of gender and sexuality.¹⁴

Although the New Left is popularly understood as predominantly white and campus based, its origins are rooted in the intrepid and morally righteous sit-ins and radical campaigns of the youth wing of the civil rights movement that cohered in April 1960 with the emergence of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In the north, the Black Panthers and the Young Lords recast SNCC community organizing strategy. The temperament of their protests and worldview gave shape and meaning to the radical style and politics of the New Left. Built by young people of color in cities like Oakland, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, these movements were university-incubated and deployed to poor communities. And like the white student-led sector of the New Left, the seeds of these movements were also sown in the postwar years. They developed in response to the poverty produced by the flight of industries to the suburbs, which in turn created a class of permanently unemployed and discouraged young workers of color—an unprecedented development in modern urban history.

The politics of the Young Lords were driven by a search for root causes. They also were colored by a disdain for liberalism, an exploration of the broadest possible meaning of liberation, and the call for the transformation of both society and the individual. Like others of their ilk, the Young Lords broke new ground. They uncovered the psychological impact of racism on the oppressed; challenged sexism and homophobia in their ranks; exposed the character of racial oppression in the North, including and beyond that of black Americans; interpreted the standing of the racially oppressed with a colonial frame; fostered solidarity among all racially oppressed groups in the United States; popularized socialist ideas in communities in which they were active; and raised the standard of accountability in local government.

The Young Lords represent one of the most creative and productive expressions of the New Left; and while the group’s rise was influenced by all the movements, the Young Lords are first and foremost heir to the black power movement. The term “black power” had been used in the past, but in 1966, when articulated by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee leader Stokely Carmichael, it signaled the growing dominance of a more militant political current long embraced by movement people, north and south. It was emboldened by continued white violence against black Americans and their continued exclusion from the political, social, and economic fabric of their society, despite the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965.¹⁵ Black power was, above all, a declaration of the right to self-determination—the right of black people to control and influence their lives and their world.¹⁶ Before long, a broad cultural and political movement cohered around the concept, which variously came to mean the

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right to armed self-defense against white racist violence, black pride, and the development of independent black political leadership free from pressures to accommodate the interests of northern white liberals. The broad appeal of black power allowed for its use among a wide range of actors with differing political agendas who embraced a broad spectrum of solutions to racial oppression.¹⁷

Black power connected with the rebellious mood of an ethnically diverse set of racially oppressed people in the 1960s because it called on them to embrace the best of their history, lay down socially imposed notions of racial inferiority, exert control over the institutions that governed and oppressed their lives, and see themselves as the architects of a new world. As the black power movement reclaimed culture, language, and history for one of the most racially subjugated groups in American history, it inspired a cultural renaissance among Puerto Ricans as well as among Asians, Mexicans, and Native Americans. Black power enabled Americans of all shades to redefine their political relationship to the nation and to negotiate that often-fraught relationship from a position of strength. In the process, however, the color of the black power movement, and the civil rights movement more broadly, was changed as well.

Overview of the Book

These pages tell the story of the rise and fall of the New York chapter of the Young Lords Organization, later renamed the Young Lords Party, and of how the Young Lords, and so many others of their generation, came to believe in the concept of revolution. Chapters 1 and 2 explore the social and economic forces that shaped the lives of young people of color in the postwar city and laid the seeds of their radicalization in the era of civil rights and black power. Chapter 1 traces the origins of the Young Lords as a Chicago gang. Through the early life experiences of the group's famed leader, José "Cha Cha" Jiménez, the chapter examines how the mass dislocation of Puerto Ricans occasioned by federal housing policy forced them to settle in densely populated blocks on the edges of hostile, white ethnic neighborhoods, where young men of color, who were outnumbered by their white counterparts, joined gangs to survive and became embroiled in a life of petty crime. As the social movements of the 1960s opened up the possibility for self-transformation, Cha Cha Jiménez was politicized in prison and set out to transform his gang into the Puerto Rican counterpart of the Black Panthers. The bold move inspired and propelled a group of radical students looking for an activist agenda to do the same in New York. Chapter 2 examines the global forces that brought one-third of Puerto Ricans to the U.S. mainland and the social and economic crisis that befell the Puerto Rican community in postwar New York. The chapter explores the backgrounds of the talented cohort of first-generation college-educated students who, in July 1969,

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launched the New York chapter of the Young Lords Organization. Unlike their white baby boomer counterparts—whose activism was fueled by the alienation of postwar suburbanization, the repressive Victorian-era morality imposed on youth in the 1950s, and the expansion of the university—for youth of color, the seeds of rebellion sprouted in the crucible of migration, urban decline, and white backlash against their increase in the postwar city.¹⁸ Caught in the middle of a political battle among adults over access to jobs and education, children of color experienced greater overt racism in the classroom and police repression in the streets. The early childhood experiences of the Young Lords in the schools and in the streets and as language and cultural translators for their parents radicalized them emotionally and compelled the evangelical commitment with which they launched their activism as young adults.

Historical accounts of the 1960s and of the civil rights and black power movements are today more textured than ever, with new historical research revealing the local actors, problems, and organizing that gave birth to ideas, strategies, and movements that are often imagined as national projects.¹⁹ From the movement's inception, its local leaders—challenged with the task of increasing their ranks and cognizant that race oppression was not attributable to race alone—broadened their protest demands.²⁰ The objectives and character of protest challenged economic inequality and class divisions in society and among the oppressed. In New York, the Young Lords organized against the most visible manifestations of urban poverty and its distinctly new forms: chronic unemployment, escalating police surveillance and repression, the large-scale displacement of poor city dwellers from housing, intractable public health crises that came in the form of poor sanitation services, growing addiction to drugs, and an epidemic of childhood lead poisoning, among others. Chapters 3 through 6 examine the Young Lords' class-conscious, community-based campaigns and their impact on the city. Although civil rights and black power movement histories are popularly understood within the framework of black American citizenship rights, the work of organizations like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords paint a portrait of struggle that is more composite. Their organizing efforts show that the black movement set in motion an awakening of social consciousness wherein virtually no social issue escaped public scrutiny.

Chapter 3 examines the New York Young Lords' first community-based protests against poor sanitation services in East Harlem, the Garbage Offensive, which pressured the candidates of that year's mayoral election to address the citywide grievance. By pressuring local government to solve neighborhood problems such as poor sanitation, for example, these activists sought to establish standards of decency in city services that expanded the definition of the common good and stretched our nation's definition of democracy. Immediately following the Garbage Offensive, the Young Lords established a headquarters

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in East Harlem and developed an organizational infrastructure and political platform. Chapter 4 examines the nuts and bolts of that process. Chapter 5 reconstructs the medical activism of the Young Lords' 1969 door-to-door campaign to test children for lead poisoning in the tenements of East Harlem and the relationships the group fostered with medical personnel. The campaign ended with a sit-in at the Department of Health in protest of a childhood lead-poisoning epidemic in the city and eventually led to the creation of New York's Bureau of Lead Poisoning. Chapter 6 covers the Young Lords' occupation of the First Spanish United Methodist Church, their relationship with a younger cohort of church parishioners who supported their actions, and the response of the church to their protests. The children's breakfast program the Young Lords set up at this church and those of the Black Panthers established the precedent for what is now the federal School Breakfast Program.

Chapter 7 explores how the Young Lords applied to the U.S. context the political world view known as Third World socialism.²¹ Formed at the height of the greatest radicalization since the labor struggles of the 1930s, the politics of the Young Lords and others of their time reflected the ideas and strategies for social change that became dominant with the advent of wars of decolonization in places such as Vietnam, Algeria, and Cuba. Radicals argued that subjugated groups in the United States—including black Americans, Native Americans, Chicanos, Asian Americans, and Puerto Ricans—were internal domestic colonies, politically and economically underdeveloped and dispossessed of their rights to self-determination. While Third World revolutions iconized peasant guerrillas, organizations like the Black Panthers and the Young Lords identified the lumpenproletariat as the most revolutionary class in society. At a moment when economic restructuring and the flight of industries to the suburbs were producing permanent unemployment and greater economic and racial segregation in the city, the activism and politics of grassroots radicals like the Young Lords reflected the distinctive social features of the urban environment in which they emerged. The strong nationalist character of urban radical politics was also tied to the vast relocation of white Americans from city to suburb. In this environment, the ideal of people of color fighting together with white Americans for change grew more and more difficult to enact as the daily lives of these populations grew further and further apart. Instead, dramatic action was created by polyglot groups born of the increasingly multiethnic character of the American slum and its new racialized migrants.

Chapter 8 explores how the organization tackled racism and sexism within the organization. The Young Lords embraced the "revolution within the revolution," by which they meant the deliberate struggle to deconstruct and challenge the manifestations of power dynamics, racism, and sexism in everyday life among movement participants. The effort was also a trademark of the radical wing of the women's movement, articulated in the slogan "The personal is political."²²

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Chapter 9 analyzes the Young Lords' occupation of Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx alongside a radical flank of white doctors to dramatize medical discrimination and the deplorable conditions of a hospital that, according to one of its doctors, "looked more like an abandoned factory than a center for the healing arts." Although historians sometimes interpret the revolutionary nationalism of the 1960s as a rejection of coalition building with white Americans, groups like the Young Lords collaborated with radicalized white allies. In their coalitions, however, the Young Lords, like the Black Panthers, set out to rework the power dynamics of cross-racial and cross-class alliances, rejecting what they perceived as the uninterrogated racial prejudices and liberal tendencies of middle-class white radicals and the potential for their disproportionate influence on interracial coalitions. At Lincoln Hospital, the Young Lords–led coalition drafted the first patient bill of rights and established the first and principal acupuncture drug treatment center in the United States.

Chapter 10 covers the circumstances surrounding the Young Lords' second occupation of FSUMC, this time against the backdrop of a prisoner uprising in the infamous New York City jail known as the Tombs.

Chapter 11 analyzes the New York organization's move to Puerto Rico and its decline. By the end of 1970, the Young Lords had grown to approximately 1,000 members and had expanded to Newark, Philadelphia, Hartford, Bridgeport, and Boston. Over the course of its life, the group drew approximately 3,000 members and influenced thousands more. Amid polarized deliberations about the organization's future and with a majority of its leadership advocating a stronger Puerto Rican nationalist orientation, the group decided to launch two branches in Puerto Rico: in El Caño and Aguadilla. The move to Puerto Rico, for which the group was ill prepared, combined with the decline in the coming years of the mass character of the civil rights and black power movements, weakened the ability of the Young Lords to remain connected to the grassroots. By 1973, Young Lord membership had declined considerably. Fueled by government repression, the youthfulness and political inexperience of its leadership, and a growing dogmatism, the Young Lords became entangled in violent internecine disputes that led to the organization's demise in 1976.

Telling the Story of the Young Lords

The word "radical" is used often in this text. In all cases, I employ the word's most common definition: concerned with root causes of social problems and system-wide change. This history of the Young Lords is reconstructed from the literature they left behind, including their newspaper, *Palante*, and internal documents; audio and visual recordings; municipal government documents that reference their work; extensive records on the Young Lords and studies

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conducted by the FSUMC following the group's occupation of its East Harlem subsidiary; the papers of a growing number of archival repositories across the country; the personal papers of a handful of Young Lords and their supporters; and the FBI's COINTELPRO documents on the Young Lords as well as surveillance documents kept by the New York Police Department (NYPD). Known as the Handschu files, these police documents were found as a result of my 2014 suit against the NYPD for its failure to honor my Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) request for the police records of the Young Lords. The suit and its astonishing resolution were widely covered in the media. They led to the 2016 recovery of the "lost" Handschu files, the largest repository of police surveillance documents in the country—namely, over 1 million surveillance files of New Yorkers compiled by the NYPD between 1954 and 1972, including those of Malcolm X.

Over the course of many years, I've conducted close to 100 critical oral histories with the Young Lords, doctors who worked alongside them, and people who were influenced by their activism. The people I interviewed were tremendously generous with their time. Over the years, their articulate and impassioned remembrances of that period kept this project alive.

CHAPTER TEN

A SECOND OCCUPATION

The Young Lords Party's long summer of protest in 1970—during which it intrepidly foreshadowed the possibilities and aspirations of “Socialism at Lincoln Hospital”—amplified its political reputation in New York and across the nation. Since its emergence a year earlier, the organization had undergone a meteoric rise in notoriety and popularity. It was slammed in the press by James L. Buckley of the Conservative Party and Sanford D. Garelik, the New York City Council president and former chief inspector of the New York Police Department (NYPD), among others.¹ At the grassroots, however, thousands of people had approvingly reached out to the Young Lords in the streets and in their offices. The group expanded its day-to-day work from East Harlem and the Bronx to the Lower East Side, opening a new office on September 16, 1970. The Young Lords were now fully known in wider circles of antiwar, women's, gay, lesbian, and transgender liberation, and in the black, brown, yellow, and red power movements. Their protests had also helped revitalize larger sectors of organizers and artists in the Puerto Rican community.

Emboldened by continued success, the Lords initiated a series of new projects between September and December 1970: They launched a student initiative, which was the springboard for one of the most sizable mainland, pro-Puerto Rican independence march in the history of New York. They reoccupied a floor of Lincoln Hospital's nurses' residence to initiate a drug treatment center that was lauded as the first of its kind in the Western world.² But as summer gave way to autumn, the organization also wrestled with inevitable challenges including assimilating new membership growth and discipline, internal conflicts, changes in leadership, and heightened repression. The demotion and loss of beloved chairman Felipe Luciano, unforeseen tragedy, and a second action at the First Spanish United Methodist Church (FSUMC) would set the Young Lords Party (YLP) on a new course toward decline, precisely at the moment it had reached the height of success.

The chairman's swift demotion, in early September 1970, was dramatic and commanded media attention. The group's highest leadership body took the action after Luciano and another member of the Central Committee, Pablo

CHAPTER NINE

THE LINCOLN

OFFENSIVE

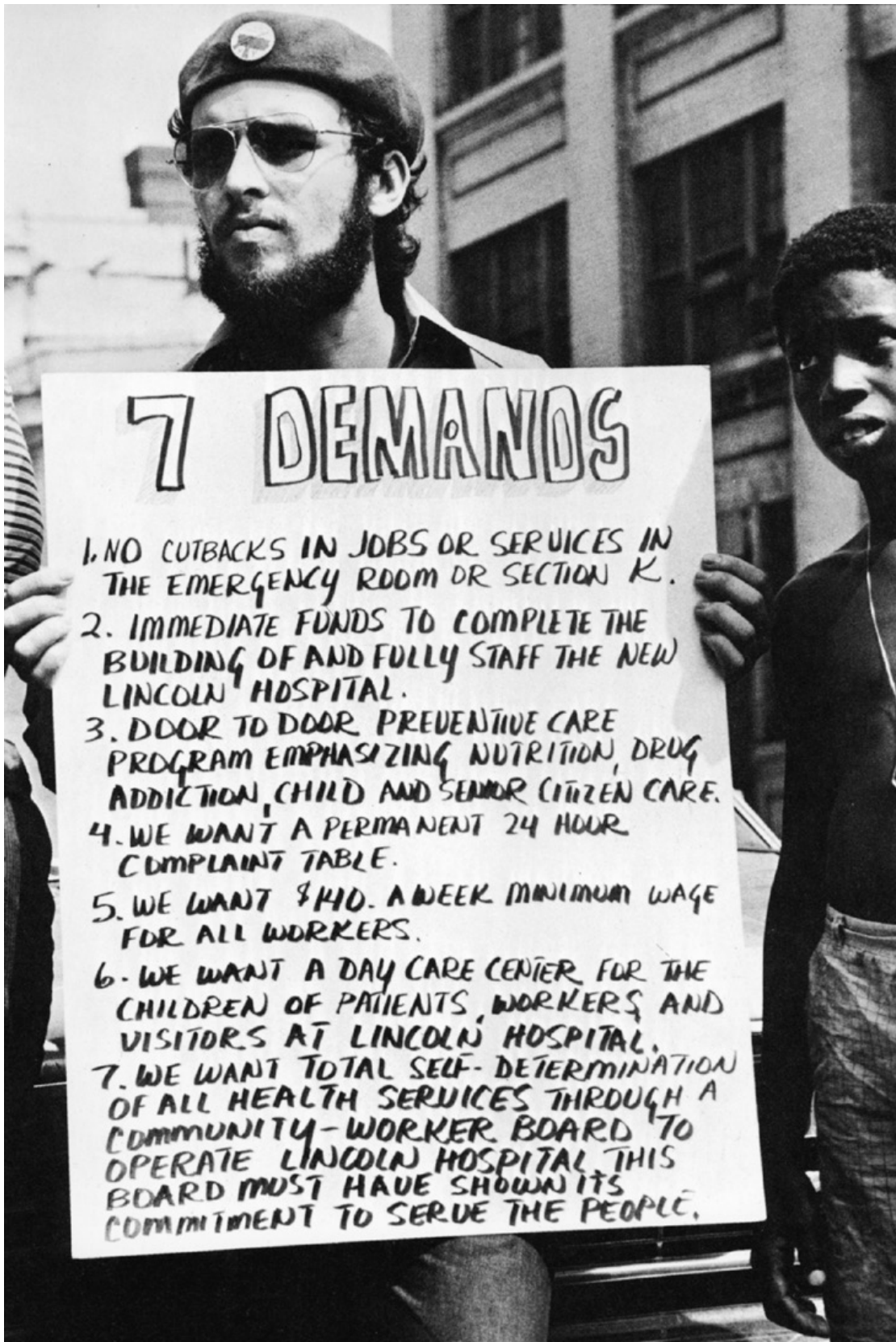
Toward a Patient Bill of Rights

A human life is worth more than
all the wealth of the richest man.

—ERNESTO “CHE” GUEVARA

A year after their Garbage and Lead Offensives, the Young Lords launched a similar wave of tuberculosis activism in the context of grassroots service work in the community. The potentially serious lung disease—highly contagious and airborne—had long been linked to poverty and overcrowding. Small New York tenement apartments, with little circulating air or sunlight, were perfect breeding grounds. Puerto Rican migrants were further disadvantaged by coming from an island where the mortality rate from tuberculosis was the highest in the world. In May 1970, the group reported that it was conducting door-to-door medical home visits and that its members had administered 800 tuberculosis tests in East Harlem and the Bronx. According to the group, the administration of Prospect Hospital even permitted them use of a chest X-ray machine, a concession to their petition after word got out among locals that the Young Lords were conducting tests alongside doctors and technicians.¹

The logic and objective of the Young Lords’ public health efforts were explained in a June 1970 issue of *Palante*: “Services are extended out to the people, visiting them in their home and setting up Free Health Clinics in every block. This type of service which keeps people from getting sick in the first place is called preventative medicine.” As they went door to door, they offered medical services alongside political education, explaining that “even though t.b. has been eliminated among the rich, the middle class, and white people in general, it is alive and spreading in the Puerto Rican and Black colonies of amerikkka, the richest country in the world.”²



Richie Perez at rally outside Lincoln Hospital.
(Photograph by Michael Abramson; courtesy of Haymarket Books)

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As they began to conduct tests at Prospect Hospital, they also tried to partner with the New York Tuberculosis Association, a public agency that operated a mobile chest X-ray unit. The Young Lords argued that the X-ray truck, operating from 12:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. on alternate days, did not accommodate the work schedules of laboring people; they proposed to staff the truck around the clock with the many local technicians and doctors who had already offered to volunteer. Citing the existence of city-managed programs with trained personnel and effective technology, the Tuberculosis Association denied the Lords' request.³

Determined to carry their intended project to fruition and prepared—perhaps even eager—to employ publicity to their benefit, the young radicals alerted both the press and the police of the time and place of an impending action.⁴ On June 17, 1970, the Young Lords hijacked the association's mobile clinic and, with a Puerto Rican flag unfurled above the bus, drove off—another classic Young Lords moment, complete with cameramen capturing footage for the evening news.⁵ Via the unit's loudspeaker, the Young Lords carried their message throughout Spanish Harlem, explaining the motives for their actions and inviting residents to get tested for tuberculosis at a new location. The next day they parked the truck across from their office on Madison and 111th Street and rechristened it the Ramón Emeterio Betances Health Truck—after the nineteenth-century Puerto Rican revolutionary physician. The mobile unit tested hundreds of people its first day in its new location. Within hours of the hijack, the Young Lords had negotiated an agreement with the director of health for the East Harlem district, Thomas Jones, authorizing the group to operate the unit, at the city's expense, for twelve hours a day, seven days a week.

Having established a record of community service through their previous door-to-door work and having demonstrated their ability to mobilize hundreds of inner-city youth at a moment's notice, the group could count on a measure of bargaining power in local politics, especially as the specter of urban rioting weighed on the minds of city officials. Referring to the Young Lords, Jones said, "Their methodology is in dispute, but we must relate to where the community feels they need the service. Occasionally confrontation does occur, but I think we can work it out."⁶ Jones's rationalization was a kind of admission to the Young Lords' charge of government indifference to the needs of city residents. Moreover, that Jones's formulation—"relate to where the community feels they need the service"—echoed the Young Lords' manner of speech is an example of their impact on public discourse, values, and standards for municipal services.

Jones seems to have agreed to the arrangement primarily out of fear. The Young Lords' paramilitary style, confidence, and rhetoric were threatening to many, and yet they spent most of their time engaged in public service. Within the organization these two currents existed side by side, without any seeming tension or incongruity. The Young Lords would test the boundaries of their

muckraking in the spring and summer of 1970. Surpassing prior challenges, they set their sights on a daunting task: addressing head on the injustices and substandard conditions plaguing neighboring Lincoln Hospital.

The Blight and Transformation of an Aging Institution

As the tuberculosis testing continued, the Young Lords were expanding their reach north to the borough with the largest conglomeration of Puerto Ricans in New York. Though East Harlem remained the cultural home of Puerto Ricans, by 1960 100,000 Boricuas had settled in the Bronx; most were concentrated in its southernmost section.⁷ The Young Lords' turn to "the Puerto Rican borough" was a rational progression in the organization's growth and identification with Puerto Rican nationalism. In April 1970, the group opened its South Bronx office on Longwood Avenue (on the corner of Kelly Street). The expansion brought greater responsibilities. It challenged an emerging class of leaders and new members to take on broader obligations. That same month, the group began to host weekly outdoor, late-night film screenings as a form of political education. They featured *Los siete de la raza*, the story of seven Chicano youth accused of killing a police officer in San Francisco, and *Black Panther*, on the origins of the Black Panther Party (BPP), among others. Leading the efforts, Carlos Aponte reported in *Palante* that people from the block, on Intervale Avenue between Kelly and Beck Streets, stopped the police on a number of occasions from breaking up the screenings.⁸ The Lords also extended to the neighborhood a practice they'd begun in East Harlem six months earlier, door-to-door medical home visits on Saturdays. Of their reception in the South Bronx they reported, "Our recruitment is growing rapidly and many brothers and sisters are offering us their services, making us a part of their everyday lives."⁹

By the late 1960s, the South Bronx was one of the most impoverished districts in the nation—a decaying strip of industrial land, where 80 percent of the housing existed in a state of moderate to severe deterioration. Against the onslaught of culture-of-poverty discourse, which interpreted urban poverty as a racial phenomenon, the Young Lords used a well-timed article, "The South Bronx Time Bomb," to highlight for *Palante* readers the larger social and structural forces at work in neighborhoods like this one. In it Richie Perez explained: "There are no jobs available. We are imprisoned in a vicious cycle. No education, no jobs, and no way to move out of the run-down, unhealthy and dangerous tenements of the South Bronx." As early witnesses to the borough's deepening crisis of deindustrialization and its social consequences, the Lords analyzed the root causes of what sociologists would later call "the urban crisis."¹⁰

The *Palante* article highlighted the public health crisis at the center of this dilapidated environment where "rats, roaches, uncollected garbage, no steam

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or hot water, and broken and unrepaired windows contribute to poor health.” It also reported that the area’s dirtiest and most overcrowded streets, “Simpson and Fox Streets, between 163rd and Westchester Ave. . . . have the highest death rates of any blocks in the entire city.”¹¹ The Young Lords learned the morbid statistics and mastered the art of humanizing their fallout. The South Bronx had the highest rate of heroin addiction in the world; a mortality rate 50 percent higher than the rest of the country; and an incidence of syphilis and gonorrhea six and four times the national average, respectively. The leading causes of death among adolescents and young adults were heroin overdose and trauma.¹²

Apprised of the neighborhood’s demography, its chronic social problems, and a preexisting grassroots effort for improved patient services at nearby Lincoln Hospital, the Young Lords settled on this aging hospital as a major organizing site. In a district with disproportionately higher medical needs than other parts of the city, access to medical care was as afflicted as the population it served. Lincoln’s 350-bed facility was charged with caring for a catchment area of approximately half a million people. Not surprisingly, the facility was so overcrowded and the bed shortage so severe that patients were often treated in corridors. These conditions were not new, and Lincoln Hospital was not alone. Two decades earlier, a *Daily News* editorial noted that the city’s public hospitals—“Harlem, Queens, Lincoln, Fordham, Kings County—are sick . . . with nurses and doctors scarce and overworked, patients crowded into every nook and cranny and service generally going to the devil.”¹³

Lincoln’s crisis, however, was extreme. The hospital had an outdated, turn-of-the-century open ward and a clinical interior that, according to one doctor, “looked more like an armory or abandoned factory than a center for the healing arts.”¹⁴ A study of municipal hospitals in New York offered a lengthy list of deplorable conditions. The periodic power outages in its main building were the consequence of generators installed in 1927 that were too weak to power the hospital’s new technology in 1969. Air conditioners in the surgical recovery room did not work. The building’s walls had paint with a lead base of 28 percent, a figure far exceeding the legal levels for retail paint. In a hospital that treated countless cases of child lead poisoning, and where the pediatric ward was meant to be a temporary refuge for lead-poisoned kids, at least two children treated for lead poisoning in the late 1960s reingested lead in the ward.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the lack of a centralized administrative structure thwarted the hospital’s ability to systematically address such problems. Under these and other conditions, disgruntled functionaries and medical staff customarily rendered services grudgingly. By all accounts, the Lincoln experience was abominable.

Starting with eastern European immigrants in the 1920s, successive generations of neighborhood residents referred to Lincoln as the “butcher shop of the South Bronx.”¹⁶

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The situation was no better for employees. Still in the process of transformation from charity foundations to professional institutions, hospitals were prone to underpaying the nonprofessional employees they hired.

Because of their long hours and labor-intensive, unsanitary, and repetitive duties, hospitals “had long been the urban employer of last resort” for superexploited newcomers, now demeaned by their occupation and their race.¹⁷ Hospital salaries in New York were so low that a large percentage of their unskilled, predominantly black American and Puerto Rican labor force was eligible for public assistance.¹⁸ Moreover, hospital administrators generally extended to their nonmedical staff the same paternalism accorded patients, a predicament reflecting the institution’s origins in charity.¹⁹

This was the kind of largely ignored “social violence” the Young Lords were gearing up to expose. But in the decade before the Young Lords set their sights on the ailing hospital, Lincoln had become the site of at least three major reform efforts that helped prepare the groundwork for the Young Lords’ intervention. The first took the form of semiprivatization. In 1959, Mayor Robert Wagner authorized the affiliation program, which turned over the management and staffing of New York’s public hospitals to the city’s major private medical schools. Under the new program, Lincoln became an affiliate of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. As discussed in chapter 4, under the agreement, medical schools received operating budgets to staff and run the hospitals. In return, the schools reaped the benefits of unmonitored access to a poor population of patients prone to illness. They provided opportunities for medical research and a fertile training ground for interns and residents in the range of clinical departments housed in public hospitals. The new affiliation policy followed the trend in healthcare toward the expansion of large medical institutions. It also responded to the growing public debate on the crisis of healthcare and fragmented character of its delivery. In a market of spiraling costs produced by the fee-for-service dictum of the country’s healthcare system, city hospitals continued to languish, albeit under slightly less deplorable conditions.²⁰

The second attempt at reform lacked the global scope of the affiliation system, but its link to federal programs brought national attention to the hospital, and its experimental partnership with employees drawn from the community became the wellspring of struggles to come. In 1963, the Albert Einstein Medical College inaugurated the Lincoln Hospital Mental Health Services (LHMHS). It was a network of services with diverse points of contact between mental health providers and patients, designed to deliver related services and care at the neighborhood level—in schools, churches, and community centers. Its treatment protocol included traditional talk therapy, drug rehabilitation, mental health education, and community action. The program owed its unorthodox mission to the experimental stipulations of its two funding sources: the 1961 National Community

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Mental Health Center Act and the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the federal agency that implemented the so-called War on Poverty. The first legislation funded local mental health clinics, such as LHMHS, as part of its larger goal of consolidating a shift in psychiatry, already under way, from treatment of the mentally ill in asylums to treatment in private practices and privately run community centers.²¹ The second source of funding sought to improve access to mental healthcare in urban and rural areas and mandated the “maximum feasible participation” of community residents in programs it funded.²²

In 1967, LHMHS achieved national recognition when a documentary film, *Store Front*, chronicled the “struggles and success” of its teams’ unorthodox community practice.²³ The clinics’ progressive in-house psychiatrists, among them Dr. Mike Smith, believed that psychiatric treatment should emphasize talk therapy, rather than psychoactive drugs, to alleviate depression, addiction, and other psychological dysfunctions. The program’s nonmedical, community staff contributed their own vision for improved mental health. They underscored the significance of patient involvement in the life of their community to foster meaning in and control over their lives. Influenced by the era’s discourse on social inequality, these new approaches focused on the relationship between the individual and society. They emphasized the manifold social problems of urban life, which, according to a growing number of specialists and health professionals, contributed significantly to the psychological breakdown of the individual in society.²⁴

Given the magnitude of problems at Lincoln, LHMHS’s achievements, though groundbreaking, were at best piecemeal and symbolic. However, the program hired and trained an emerging segment of workers uniquely situated to launch and win more consequential reforms. Like other mental health centers in New York, LHMHS employed community members with funding from the New Careers program, a unique project of the OEO and offshoot of a 1962 federal policy designed to train, on the job, displaced blue-collar workers and the permanently unemployed as legal aides, social health technicians, vocational rehabilitation specialists, police community services aides, and community mental health workers.²⁵ To that end, LHMHS hired dozens of black American and Puerto Rican mental health workers. LHMHS applicants underwent a rigorous, three-month interview process that tested for communication skills, maturity, and a high threshold for withstanding high-stress scenarios with patients. Those hired, among them Richard Weeks, Ruth Dawkins, Aubrey “Doc” Dawkins, Danny Argote, and Cleo Silvers, were promised ongoing training to ensure the possibility of promotion and advancement in the health industry, now the fastest-growing sector of the American economy. Their social location, both as semiskilled workers in the city’s poorest public hospitals and as residents in the hospitals’ catchment districts, was strong motivation. They approached

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their work seriously, with the expectation that they would help build a clinic responsive to their community's complex health needs. "As Puerto Ricans and Black workers in the emergency rooms and clinics," one organizer reported, "we see what oppression in the hospital is like, the inferior medical attention our neighbors are subjected to or obligated to accept."²⁶

As for others in their cohort, dramatic examples of resistance in New York shaped the consciousness of these young people. Seminal events were the Harlem riots; the battle to desegregate the city's schools; sit-ins in active construction sites; protest against racial discrimination in employment and labor unions; the fierce images of Malcolm X; and numerous rent strikes, among other struggles. Their counterparts in the south had raised the bar on what a young person might dedicate his or her life to. Here, too, this cohort was morally repulsed by poverty and war and eager to be part of something larger.

Unlike those who founded the New York chapter of the Young Lords, this cohort of young people of color, though very bright, did not go to college. Rather, they joined the labor force during or immediately after high school. Back at LHMHS, they proposed and organized social actions intended to improve patients' day-to-day lives, from challenging evictions to helping raise awareness about public health.

The BPP proved instrumental in the transmission of these methods and ideas at Lincoln. The group had already initiated a wide range of radical public health programs in black communities across the nation, including a sickle cell anemia project in New York, ambulance services in Pittsburgh and Oakland, and campaigns to test and raise awareness about tuberculosis, anemia, and lead poisoning.²⁷ In the Bronx, the organization had helped draft leaflets, conducted workshops on race and public health for the mental health workers, and even sat in at staff meetings in which core members discussed strategy.

The mental health workers brought a similar approach to a preexisting workplace struggle. Beginning in the late 1950s, the Service Employees International Union Local 1199 launched a campaign to unionize the nurse's aides, orderlies, porters, cooks, elevator operators, and laundresses in the city's privately owned, nonprofit "voluntary" hospitals. Disproportionately black American and Puerto Rican, these workers were vital to the basic operation of New York's hospitals but were among the city's least paid. The union's groundbreaking campaign combined the fight for civil rights with the demand for economic justice. It culminated in two major strikes in 1959 and 1962 that won unionization, increased wages, limited to eight the number of daily hours worked and mandated pay for overtime.²⁸ Public sector workers, however, remained on the margins of Local 1199's campaign. But with 80 percent of New York's nonprofessional hospital staff organized by the late 1960s, the unionization of their counterparts in the public hospitals was on the horizon. When Local 1199 sent its labor organizer, Bernie

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Minter, to Lincoln Hospital in 1967, he found a cohort of workers who had already begun to organize themselves and whose broad vision of reform he could not easily accommodate. According to one of them, Cleo Silvers, “We wanted to join 1199 and we did eventually, but we wanted the union to take a position against the Vietnam War, against the increased prescription of psychotropic drugs in the neighborhood by Lincoln Mental Health Services, and to support our position: that social and economic conditions were determinants of a person’s psychological health. We also wanted the union to back us up on what we had been promised but never got, which was training and upgrading. The union did not look positively on any of this. So from the start we were seen as renegades.”²⁹

For more than a year thereafter, the mental health workers attempted, but failed, to persuade the union leadership to press their employer to deliver on the promise of training and upgrading.

Tensions in the mental health program intensified in 1969 when OEO funding, which mandated community action, began to dry up. In response, the National Institute for Mental Health—a more traditionally oriented and research-driven psychiatric agency—took over funding the programs.³⁰ This development jeopardized the security of the nonprofessional staff and threatened the pioneering approach to mental health that the OEO had encouraged. With the change in funding source came a shift to a mental health approach that emphasized medicating patients. Activists and progressive doctors, among them Dr. Mike Smith, argued that the dispensation of psychotropic substances in poor black American and Puerto Rican urban neighborhoods was an attempt at social control.³¹ When the mental health workers asked to meet with the clinic’s top administrators to discuss these changes, they were reportedly dismissed with arrogance and contempt. Four were fired at various stages of the mounting struggle, which workers interpreted as retribution for speaking up.

The turning point in the struggle came on March 3, 1969. Over 100 nonprofessional mental health counselors, orderlies, and administrative and janitorial staff, mostly people of color, seized the Lincoln facility and evicted its director, Dr. Harris B. Peck, and high-ranking staff members. The stated purpose of the takeover was to democratize the program’s governing structure and force it to meet its stated philosophy of making the community a partner in its own care. As justification for their actions, the workers deployed the words of Peck, who in an interview with *Reader’s Digest* in early March 1969 had said, “When there’s a foot planted in the seat of my trousers to knock me out of here, I’ll know we’ve succeeded. It will mean that the people want to take over the running of their own community. And that’s the way it should be.”³²

The mental health workers were now spearheading efforts for “community-worker control” that grew organically out of their relationship both to the workplace and the community they served. Like “black power,” the meaning and ap-

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plication of “community control” varied depending on the political orientation of those defining it. Conservatives, liberals, and cultural nationalists measured it in terms of racial representation: that the ethnic composition of those who administer local institutions—schools, hospitals, police precincts, etc.—should reflect that of their constituency. To the Lincoln workers, however, community control involved a reconceptualization of the structure, leadership, and priorities of local institutions.

The team of community mental health workers who took over the clinic operated it for three days with the active support of some of the clinic’s mostly white psychiatrists, psychologists, and professional staff. As liaisons between patients and psychiatrists, mental health workers had developed relationships with both. They commanded a measure of respect and power. They were, therefore, unimpeded in their efforts by other doctors and specialists who continued to treat clients during the takeover despite quiet reservations.³³ Workers’ grievances included “discrimination in hiring and firing” policies, the closure of the neighborhood service centers, the inadequacy of the training and upgrading program for nonprofessional employees, and the firing of four mental health workers.³⁴ BPP support work was instrumental during the takeover. The Panthers organized security and brought food and throngs of community supporters.³⁵ The action was finally shut down at the end of the workday on March 6 when the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, with support of the city’s public hospital administration, threatened to suspend specialists’ licenses for “malfeasance and malpractice” and for continuing to render care under an illegitimate administration.³⁶

In the weeks after the March 6 shutdown of the occupation, the mental health workers led a series of rallies and direct actions at the clinic. Twenty-three people were arrested. Forty-one nonprofessional workers and nineteen professionals, including three psychiatrists, were fired (although they were eventually reinstated).³⁷ The protests, however, were successful in leading to the reinstatement of the four black American mental health workers who had been fired in the year before the takeover, the clinic director’s transfer out of Lincoln, and widespread questioning of the dispensation of psychotropic drugs in the South Bronx. On April 2, a month after workers took over the mental health clinic, twenty-one members of the New York chapter of the BPP were arrested and charged with terrorism. Almost all had been active at Lincoln Hospital during the takeover and subsequent rallies. They included Dr. Curtis Powell, Zade Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, Rashid, Afeni Shakur, Charlene Ife, Bob Collier, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, and Ali Bey Hassan, among others.³⁸

But nonprofessional mental health refused to succumb to repression. In the fall of 1969, a network of workers of color formed the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (HRUM). They were from New York’s Metropolitan,

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Gouverneur, and Lincoln Hospitals and the NENA Health Center. Influenced by the struggle at Lincoln and the black power movement, radicalized by the Vietnam War, and frustrated by the speedups and budget cuts brought on by economic stagnation in the late 1960s, they were among the patches of the American workforce that began to organize independently of union leaderships in this period. Hoping to carry the current political mood into the workplace, young black and Latino workers organized into insurgent groups. They challenged conservatism among elected union officials, organized opposition to the Vietnam War among their coworkers, and pressured the unions to address structural racism within the union, on the job, and in society at large.³⁹ HRUM argued that these had to be priorities of the unions in the health industry: “The unions 1199 and District Council 37, even though progressive in the question of salaries, do not fight against the conditions imposed on the workers nor the quality of the medical services our people are receiving.”⁴⁰ Although Local 1199 was conceived as a “soul power” union (wedded to the political and economic concerns of working people of color) that was supportive of the controversial community control battle in the schools, Union officials opposed the bottom-up efforts of workers in the hospitals.⁴¹

HRUM borrowed its acronym from the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), launched in 1968 by black autoworkers in Detroit.⁴² Like DRUM, HRUM called for worker control of workplaces. Unlike DRUM, however, HRUM members joined the Young Lords and Black Panther Parties. HRUM’s newspaper, *For the People’s Health*, reported that members of the organization “live in the same communities where we work [the municipal hospitals] where we see our poor Black, Puerto Rican and Chinese Brothers and Sisters waiting too long and being told, ‘sorry, no bed in this hospital, try another.’” HRUM believed strongly in patient advocacy. Its members observed that hospital workers had a “dual role” as patients and workers, “often in the same hospital,” and argued that it was the “obligation of every health worker, Black, Puerto Rican, or Chinese . . . to make sure that our people are given decent health care—if you are a registrar refuse to collect high fees, if you are a nurse’s aide demand that you have adequate help so that you may perform your duties well.”⁴³

HRUM protested healthcare’s turn to profit and opposed the reduction of services in public hospitals. It also organized around traditional union issues, among them improved wages and working conditions. In its view, class exploitation of workers of color in the hospitals was inseparable from racial oppression shaping conditions in their neighborhoods. With continuity between workplace and community, they reasoned that the hospitals offered a unique venue to address both.

Efforts to transform the paradigm of healthcare delivery in the mental health

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clinic at Lincoln, combined with the rise of HRUM and the political vacuum created by the arrest of the Panther 21, set the stage for the Young Lords Party's activism at Lincoln a year later, in the spring and summer of 1970.

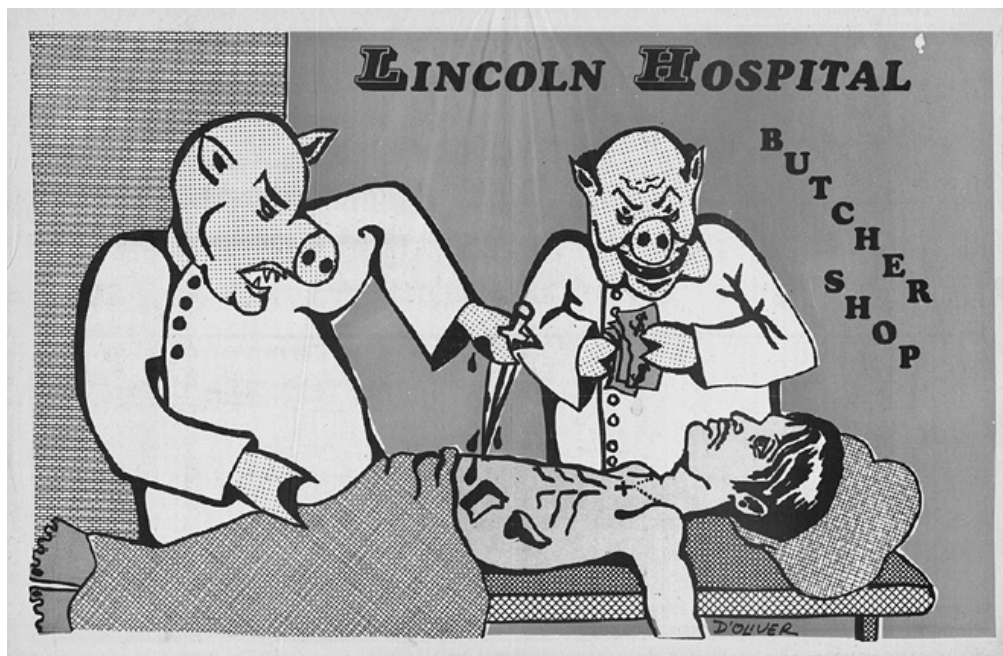
Think Lincoln, Think Community

In the weeks before the Young Lords went to work at Lincoln in the fall of 1970, a more traditional cast of political actors was already at work there. In early April, local Puerto Rican political clubs tied to the Democratic Party and community groups held a sit-in in the lobby of Lincoln Hospital after the commissioner of hospitals refused to support the candidacy for hospital administrator of a well-qualified Puerto Rican gynecologist and public health administrator, Dr. Antero Lacot, who was trained in Puerto Rico. Their efforts were inspired by Ramon Velez, a political boss and controversial player in local politics, who sought influence over Lincoln, one of the major employers in the South Bronx, especially since the future construction of a new hospital building would yield lucrative contracts. This earned Velez a spot as *Palante's* "Pig of the Week":

Number one Puerto Rican poverty pimp, head of the Hunts Point multi-service center, runs the South Bronx like a little political machine, giving jobs here and there to supporters and destroying anyone who gets in his way. He gets our people to fight Black people for a share of the rotten poverty program pie that shrinks every year. He . . . is head of a \$12 million program. Meanwhile, Lincoln Hospital, the schools, the garbage, the buildings, and the police in Hunts Point are no better.⁴⁴

The groups affiliated with Velez sought to reform care at Lincoln by demanding that the racial and ethnic composition of the hospital's administrative body reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the community. Yet, given the medical establishment's conservative hiring patterns for top administrative posts, even the granting of moderate reforms at the height of a revolution in rights consciousness required substantial social pressure and militant action. In an attempt to quell the furor at Lincoln, the mayor intervened by overruling the commissioner's decision and approving Antero Lacot's appointment. Months later, the *New York Times* proclaimed, "If it were not for militants among the people of the South Bronx, Dr. Antero Lacot might not be administrator of Lincoln Hospital," referring to the militancy of activists the previous year.⁴⁵ Much more radical organizing was still to come.

Critical of Velez's group and its ties to the antipoverty industry and social-service-oriented community groups competing for funding, the Young Lords sought to influence Lincoln on their own terms. They explored a grassroots organizing approach at the hospital that focused on conditions rather than the



Lincoln Hospital cartoon illustrated by Denise Oliver. (*Palante* 2, no. 7 [July 17, 1970]; courtesy of the Tamiment Library)

appointment of people of color to administrative positions. Their objective was to address patient needs and grievances, expose malfeasance, impugn the profit-driven system of healthcare, and build their base in the process. In an article in *Palante* about how to solve the crisis of healthcare among people of color in New York, the Young Lords wrote: “The only way we can stop all this is not by electing someone into office, because we have tried that and it does not work. It is not done by going to college and getting doctor degrees, because that leads to an intellectual trip that takes us away from our people . . . and that we also tried. The only way to make this racist government serve us right is by knocking it down and building a new one of our own.”⁴⁶

In May 1970, in concert with neighborhood residents and hospital workers—among them the talented mental health worker and organizer Cleo Silvers, who became the head of HRUM at Lincoln and then its citywide cochair alongside Gloria Fontanez—the Young Lords and HRUM launched the Think Lincoln Committee (TLC). One of its goals was to challenge the newly formed citywide governing body for New York’s public hospitals, the Health and Hospital Corporation (HHC), and its proposed budget cuts, scheduled for July of that year, which would further deteriorate an already miserable situation.

Run by a sixteen-member board appointed largely by the mayor, the HHC’s stated purpose was to free the public hospital system of bureaucratic red tape in order to facilitate the provision of medical services in New York’s underprivileged communities. But like its predecessor, the Department of Hospitals, the

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HHC was hamstrung by rising healthcare costs and lack of funding.⁴⁷ According to HRUM, the HHC “is a group of business men, to which the city of New York has handed over the mismanagement of its public hospitals. It is a representative of the interests of the second most profitable industry in AMERIKKKA, the sickness industry that is, the drug companies, construction firms, medical schools and the reactionary American Medical Association. Nowhere in this conglomeration are the interests of the colonized people represented.”⁴⁸ Galvanized by the hospital’s abominable conditions and the immediate threat of budget reductions, the TLC proceeded to gather and spread information about the impact of the impending budget cuts on patients and hospital staff.

Of all the municipal hospitals facing austerity measures, the already impoverished Lincoln was slated for the steepest cuts. The TLC reported to patients and hospital workers that the cuts had precipitated a six-month job freeze in the Department of Medicine, which in turn blocked the replacement of five doctors whose services were vital to the functioning of the hospital. The budget redistribution was also expected to limit the operating hours of Section K, a screening clinic for patient diagnosis and referral, and increase the number of intakes in the ER—already ranked fourth busiest in the nation—where patients would be rerouted on evenings and weekends when Section K was expected to shut down.⁴⁹

In the process of distributing leaflets, posting flyers, and talking to Lincoln workers and community residents about the cutbacks, the radicals were flooded with numerous concerns. For the Young Lords, many of whom had endured alienating visits to the hospital as children, these complaints were not foreign. These young people had witnessed the stigma and indignity of racial discrimination during hospital visits, long waiting hours in the ER, and the haphazard care of their parents and people like them. As we have seen, their generation functioned as indispensable language and cultural interpreters for their community, especially in New York’s public hospitals, which, second only to the public schools, were the most frequented of the city’s bureaucracies and institutions. It is no surprise that as politically conscious young adults, the Young Lords were drawn to the hospital that had become ground zero in the city’s health crisis. The race and class critique of what became known on the left as the fight against healthcare inequity made sense organically and fueled righteous indignation among these young radicals.

Conversations with people in the hospital led the Young Lords to set up a patient/worker complaint table in the ER to document patients’ many grievances. A rotating crew of Young Lords and community members sat at the table from 9:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. on weekdays and around the clock on weekends. Over the course of their first month they collected 2,000 complaints, the most common being unsanitary health conditions, the language barrier for non-English-

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speaking patients, the failure of doctors to explain medical information to their patients, the backlog created by the scarcity of doctors (one doctor per eighty patients, on average), and a five-to-six-hour waiting period in the ER.⁵⁰ TLC members championed the rights of patients and workers and often sought to resolve grievances immediately by accompanying patients to the office, floor, or clinic where they had been improperly served. TLC representatives would show up to any of the hospital's floors or departments to press patient grievances. The work of documentation and verification, day after day after day, was unexciting, but the Young Lords were filled with an impassioned commitment to serve. Although brash, their advocacy was not provocative, involved no confrontations with police, and had none of the glorious, self-righteous fury that accompanied radical 1960s activism. The hours logged at the complaint table embody the Young Lords' rapid evolution into a group committed to its community and to helping ease the banal injustices of everyday life.

In just a couple of months the hospital's ethics were transformed. By systematizing, for the first time, a way of documenting and bringing patient grievances into the open, the activists helped establish a code of behavior in the hospital. No other effort had zeroed in on the abominable conditions at Lincoln so methodically. The lay intervention of the activists in the relationship between patient and physician also challenged the rigid hierarchy of an institution founded on paternalism. Patients who were previously treated with condescension, disregard, or contempt by those occupying a higher social status in the hospital hierarchy began to be accorded better and more respectful treatment.

Redress of grievances was often procured successfully by discussing the issue with the appropriate staff person and in the presence of the patient.⁵¹ A report on the crisis at Lincoln prepared in August 1970 for the HHC by its chief administrator, Antero Lacot, confirmed these findings. Describing those who set up the complaint table at Lincoln as "consumers of health care," Lacot wrote: "The watchdog activities of persons strongly committed to good, humanized and personalized health care, created immediate, visible, positive changes. Doctors kept a better working schedule. . . . The waiting period for patients diminished; the traditional long lines in our emergency rooms, outpatient clinics and the pharmacy became shorter."⁵² In response to one of the many complaints it received, the TLC obtained screens for the ER's bathroom cubicles, which had been exposed.

When civil discussion failed to obtain desired results, the TLC adopted more confrontational strategies.⁵³ On another occasion, the TLC's request that garbage be removed from the corner of 142nd Street and Cortlandt Avenue, just outside the hospital, was finally granted—but only after the group, inspired by the Young Lords' sanitation protests, transferred a heap of garbage from the street into Lacot's office. According to the TLC, the garbage protest was an

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action of last resort: “We complained, we petitioned, we called the mayor’s office. Nothing was done.”⁵⁴ Although the TLC was primarily involved with issues concerning patient treatment, it also rallied around improved working conditions. Following the involvement of the TLC, cafeteria workers, who had long complained of the ninety-degree heat in the hospital’s unventilated kitchen, were finally provided the fan they had requested a long time before.

In spring and early summer 1970, the coalition established a set of demands that reflected the concerns of a community-controlled movement and, to a lesser extent, the traditional demands that a union might present at a contract negotiation. The TLC declared:

- 1 Doctors must give humane treatment to patients.
- 2 Free food must be given to patients who spend hours in the hospital waiting to be seen.
- 3 Construction on the new Lincoln Hospital must start immediately.
- 4 There must be no cutbacks in services or in jobs in any part of Lincoln Hospital.
- 5 The immediate formation of a community-worker board which has control over the policies and practices of the hospital.⁵⁵

These demands were in the spirit of those made by the mental health workers a year earlier but were more explicit about poor hospital conditions and in their demand that doctors live up to the highest ethics of their profession.

Initial successes soon stalled. The TLC’s declaration was accepted graciously by the administration in June, but not much happened. These first three months of intense organizing yielded limited results beyond improved patient relations—a victory, for sure, but one that only made the activists aware of how much more they could accomplish. Starting in July, acting independently of the TLC, the Young Lords turned to more militant action, which they believed would jolt the hospital administration and city government into conceding greater reforms. The Young Lords acted on their own because their action would require clandestine planning and a chain of command that they believed could only be carried out by a disciplined cadre organization. Their plans for more dramatic protests coincided with the arrival, on July 1, 1970, of thirty-one medical interns and residents, who had applied collectively to complete their residencies at Lincoln.⁵⁶ This progressive group of young men and women chose Lincoln because they were looking to build a community-centered residency program and for a less traditional learning environment. According to one of the residents, Dr. Harold Osborne: “After medical school, a group of us got together and were talking about going together as a group to someplace to do our training. Because the training that you participated in, in medicine . . . internship and residency is very

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dehumanizing and sort of top-down, very traditional, very hierarchical . . . and we wanted to do it in a different way.”⁵⁷

The project was anchored by four progressive doctors in training at Jacobi Hospital in the Bronx who were entering their third year of residency: Charlotte Fein, David Stead, Fitzhugh Mullan, and Marty Stein. They chose Lincoln Hospital in part because of its history of activism but also because there was a power vacuum there. With a lack of resources and staff, it was a kind of medical Siberia. According to Mullan, Lincoln “didn’t have a lot of senior staff. . . . If you were going to try to take over and build a community hospital with a different philosophy, with a different set of relationships, this was a good place to go, as compared to Jacobi or lots of other places that had a million invested and well-established interests.” When the second-year interns at Jacobi introduced the idea of recruiting a community-minded cohort of residents to Lincoln’s chief of pediatrics, Dr. Arnold Einhorn, he agreed with the proposal. Since Einhorn’s department had long been staffed with foreign doctors, the introduction of an entirely U.S.-trained staff of interns and residents from reputable schools was expected to increase the prestige of his program.⁵⁸ According to Osborne, “The thing about Einhorn was that he was kind of an unusual character. He was clinically a very skillful pediatrician; someone who was pretty well known in academic circles, well published. But he ran the department like a little kingdom. He was the king. And he had these residents who were mostly foreign—particularly Filipino or Asian—who never questioned him and kind of hung on his every word and really thought that he was God.”⁵⁹

Troubles were on the horizon. The doctors of the Lincoln Collective, as they called themselves, were poorly dressed, long-haired, downwardly mobile doctors in training who were looking to “escape the medical training hierarchy [they] detested.”⁶⁰ The doctors came to the South Bronx with a righteous sense of purpose and a belief that healthcare was a human right that was too often denied to the poor. According to Osborne, they understood that “medicine and politics were inseparable.” Mullan explained that the goal was to “craft a community-oriented [medical] training program [for interns and residents] at a community-oriented hospital,” where the presence of good doctors could save lives.⁶¹ According to Osborne, they envisioned “a training program that was non-hierarchical, pro-patient and pro-public health.” The doctors “saw prevention as important if not more important than medical treatment . . . [and] wanted to involve the workers in the hospital and the community in determining what services were made available and what kinds of doctors should work at the hospital.” The collective came with no less of a goal than to “transform the healthcare of the South Bronx.”⁶² But from the outset, their dreams were tempered by the high stakes of medical care at Lincoln. According to Mullan,

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“Whatever our plans were for ramping up our political activities, we were mostly consumed with ramping up our medical activities, getting comfortable being the staff of this very big, very active medical 24-7 institution.” And then within two weeks of their arrival the doctors were thrust into a tumultuous battle for community control of the hospital.

The Occupation of Lincoln Hospital

On the afternoon of July 13, after a typically long day of carrying out the various daily functions of the organization—speaking engagements, leafleting, the selling of *Palante*, and assisting members of the community with translation or advocacy in schools or the welfare office—general body members of the Young Lords checked in as usual at their East Harlem headquarters. Upon arrival, members were given a sheet of paper with instructions that contained the coordinates of a gathering scheduled for that evening. Also included were the names of two or three Young Lords to bring along but to whom information should not be divulged. The leadership was concerned with police infiltration, but among the rank and file, rumor had it that a surprise party was in the works.

Over the next few hours, approximately 150 Young Lords gathered at an apartment on Manhattan Avenue. Chairman Felipe Luciano announced that those present would be occupying Lincoln Hospital the next morning. The leaders of the organization, including Luciano, Juan González, and David Perez, each gave an assessment of the crisis at Lincoln and why the takeover was necessary. Assignments were meted out and a division of labor was established among different subsets of Young Lords that coincided with the different ministries: health, information, field, and education. The rest of the meeting focused on the details of security and the need to comply with strict discipline during the takeover. All of them were expected to sleep in the apartment. Those not wracked with anxious anticipation managed to sleep a few hours before it was time for action.

At 3:30 A.M. on July 14, a large U-Haul truck and a number of cars were waiting outside the apartment. The Young Lords were instructed to maximize room by making use of the space between their legs for others to crouch in and to hang on tight during the bumpy ride to the South Bronx. At 5:00 A.M. the Puerto Rican militants proceeded to reenact a sensational routine, the same one that had first brought them national notoriety seven months earlier during their Church Offensive. With members of HRUM and TLC on call, approximately 200 people were gearing up for the action. Members of the Young Lords defense ministry were on-site, charged with “neutralizing” the hospital’s security as soon as the Young Lords’ caravan arrived at the prearranged location. The defense ministry was also ready to direct the action.

Driven by radical labor organizer William Santiago, father of Young Lord



Young Lords find Sterling rock-salt bags in Nurses Residence, the building they occupied earlier that morning, and build a make-shift barricade at side entrance, July 14, 1970. (Photograph by Jack Manning/New York Times; courtesy of the *New York Times*)

Gloria Rodriguez, the U-Haul truck backed into the hospital's loading dock, and when the back doors of the truck were opened, the Young Lords stormed the hospital "like marines storm a beachhead in war."⁶³ Equipped mainly with chuka sticks (a pair of eight-inch wooden batons held together with an elastic band and used in martial arts), the Young Lords deployed with confidence and even a measure of grace. Several entered the building wearing long white medical coats, a trademark display of the Young Lords' mischievous humor and deadly earnestness. Immediately after they secured the entrances and exits, they explained their purpose to those inside and allowed workers and patients access to the building.

Within the first hour, the Young Lords had secured all of the first-floor windows, doors, and entrances, blocking them with hospital furniture, boxes, and hundreds of industrial-size bags of "sterling rock salt" that were in the building.⁶⁴ The building's high-pressure water hose was unfurled, ready in the event that the police might charge the front entrance of the building.

The radicals announced a press conference for 10:00 A.M. and deployed messengers to the upper floors to inform doctors, nurses, and other hospital employees of the occupation and request their assistance in "running the hospi-

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tal for the people.”⁶⁵ As they did at the First Spanish United Methodist Church, they kept one door open to ensure that those coming to work were allowed in. Each employee was told that the Young Lords did not wish to interfere with the operation of the hospital. At 10:00 A.M., they explained their actions to the press, welcomed volunteers to help staff their programs, and invited the community to participate.

The timing of the occupation coincided, roughly, with the onset of the new budgetary cycle, when reductions in hospital services were scheduled to begin. Only days earlier, *Palante* had run a major article on Lincoln Hospital whose opening lines both reported on the imminent budgetary cuts and foreshadowed the Young Lords’ July action. The portentous article began, “In July 1970, Lincoln Hospital will be the victim of the greedy businessmen who make money from the illnesses of the people of the South Bronx.”⁶⁶

Though the doctors of the Lincoln Collective were not part of the planning of the action, its logic resonated with their own understanding of the crisis. They all had read Barbara Ehrenreich’s 1970 book, *The American Health Empire*, on the chaotic nature of the medical system, its organization around profit rather than patients, and its traditional hierarchical culture and systemic racist and sexist practices. The author paid special attention to the displacement of solo practitioners by “medical empires.” Defined as a network of institutions spearheaded by an elite private medical school and anchored by a teaching hospital and, in New York, its public hospital affiliates, the medical empire accelerated the transformation of healthcare into an industry in the 1960s. Even though they were significantly subsidized by public taxes, the empires focused exclusively on research, the pursuit of prestige, the training of physicians, and the expansion of their real estate holdings through incursion in their surrounding urban ghettos. Because they were powerful enough to set industry standards, they presented a formidable obstacle to patient-centered care and a drain on the public coffers.

With the help of HRUM and the TLC, the militants began instituting their community programs. In the auditorium, they began a provisional screening clinic for anemia, lead poisoning, iron deficiency, and tuberculosis, and in the basement they created a daycare center and classroom for political and health education. Over the course of the day hundreds of community residents who had heard of the takeover and of the free services made their way through the occupied building or stood watch outside amid a sea of armed police officers. Above them, hanging from the windows of the hospital’s upper floors, fluttered the Puerto Rican flag and banners that read, “Seize the Hospital to Serve the People,” “Welcome to the People’s Hospital,” and correspondingly in Spanish, “Bienvenidos al Hospital del Pueblo.” According to a firsthand account by one of the doctors in the Lincoln Collective:

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The Lords never requested formal backing in advance since to do so would have jeopardized the secrecy surrounding the planned action. In all likelihood, though, they counted on a fair amount of support from the hospital staff. And they got it. . . . The Collective members visited the occupied areas frequently, helped staff the day care and health care programs, and let it be known to the press and the police that physicians backed the Lords. I for one couldn't stay away. The Nurses' Residence suddenly had the fantastic, intoxicating air of a liberated zone. The press was listening; the city was listening; and the Lords had risen up and were telling the stories of the women and children waiting endlessly in the clinic, the old folks dying for lack of a Cardiac Care Unit, the humiliation of the Emergency Room, the flies, the pain, the degradation. It felt good, it felt right, it felt righteous. It was why we had come to Lincoln.⁶⁷

For the duration of the day, radio and television news broadcasts reported on the group's dramatic disruption, capturing in the process the inhumane physical conditions under which service was customarily rendered at the hospital. At a press conference, the group's representatives described the hospital's deplorable conditions in detail. Even Lacot, the hospital's chief administrator, admitted that day that although he preferred that they leave, the Young Lords' actions were "helpful" to "dramatize a situation, which is critical."⁶⁸ For a city government that was planning to implement a long-term package of austerity measures in public services, the events at Lincoln Hospital would have consequences. In no uncertain terms, the Young Lords' action inserted the budget cutting and its consequences into the city's public discourse.

With confidence in their sails, the Young Lords outlined a new and more comprehensive set of demands at their press conference:

- 1 No cutbacks in services or jobs, specifically in the Section K screening clinic, the Emergency Room, of translators, doctors, or any other personnel.
- 2 We want immediate funds from the NYC Health Services Administration to complete the building of and fully staff the new Lincoln Hospital.
- 3 Door-to-door health services for preventative care emphasizing environment and sanitation control, nutrition, drug addiction, maternal and childcare, and senior citizen services.
- 4 We want a permanent 24 hour-a-day grievance table staffed by patients and workers with the power to redress grievances.
- 5 We want a \$140.00 a week minimum wage for all workers.
- 6 We want a day care center for patients and workers at Lincoln Hospital.

- 7 We want self-determination of all health services through a community-worker board to operate Lincoln Hospital. This group of people must have shown their commitment to sincerely serve the people of this community.⁶⁹

As the political and economic character of these demands suggests, the preoccupations of the TLC had evolved from an initial focus on humane treatment of patients to demands that also reflected a stronger set of traditional shop-floor concerns.⁷⁰

The Young Lords' disruptive protests had proved effective once again. As before, fear that a prolonged and hostile conflict would spark similar actions by other discontented groups afforded the Lords a measure of bargaining power in city politics. Following their press conference, the militants entered into negotiations with Lacot; the mayor's chief assistant, Sid Davidoff; and representatives from the HHC, which had taken over the administration and allocation of expenditures for municipal hospitals a year earlier. After four hours of talks, the fragile balance at the bargaining table was suddenly upset just as an agreement was about to be reached. According to the Young Lords Party, the police were going to withdraw their forces from the hospital's surrounding area and would have allowed the group to run a series of programs in the hospital in return for the immediate evacuation of the premises. But when TLC delegates received word that an undercover police officer had tried to break through the central checkpoint door where a Young Lord was positioned, they called off the negotiations, concluding that "it was apparent that the administration had no control of what was going on and that Mayor Lindsay, through his mouthpieces, was trying to double-deal."⁷¹

At approximately 5:00 P.M., in an auditorium brimming with media and supporters, Young Lord Pablo Guzmán reported on what had transpired at the negotiation table. As he spoke, police reinforcements positioned themselves at every entrance of the building. Guzmán exhorted the audience to defend the hospital. But Guzmán's exhortations were merely a ploy to disorient the police. Believing that they had "won a political victory" and that they risked a bloody confrontation with the awaiting officers, the Lords decided against mass arrests. As the young radical excited the audience with his speech, the Young Lords in their white smocks began to slip out of the building, a few at a time, escorted by resident doctors. After just twelve hours, the occupation of Lincoln Hospital ended, just as stealthily as it began. Supporters stayed in the auditorium for several hours so that the Young Lords could exit without being detected. Only two were arrested.

The Aftermath

From July until December 1970, the crisis at Lincoln became central to the city's political debates. James Buckley, the Conservative Party candidate for U.S. senator, called the occupation a "vigilante action" and denounced Mayor Lindsay's decision to send his own chief assistant, Sid Davidoff, "to negotiate with the extremists."⁷² And while Lacot, the hospital's chief administrator, and Einhorn, the head of pediatrics, acknowledged the validity of the activists' grievances, they took issue with the YLP's and TLC's "extremism" and questioned the authenticity of their ties to the community. In response, Cleo Silvers explained:

Those people that recognize problems . . . [and] are willing to move on them in the interest of all the people and not a small segment of the community are those people who represent the community. . . . Our position is that we do not say that we represent the South Bronx. . . . We are an element of the community, which has . . . been able to articulate the problems. . . . [Our] job is to get out to the people in the community with this information, to organize the people in the community, and to involve them in making changes along with us, because . . . we won't be able to make any changes without . . . large numbers of people in the community. We feel that the only way that a person can be a bona fide representative of the community is by his practice, by what he has done to prove that he is representing the people of the community and not himself.⁷³

In her statement, Silvers defined the role of the vanguard party as defender and advocate of the broadest and most progressive interests of poor and working people. To Silvers and the Young Lords, vanguard leadership had to combine analyzing the world's problems with charting political direction alongside the broadest possible number of oppressed people. Striking this balance would require an accurate assessment of both the political state of affairs and the level of consciousness of their community base at any given moment.

Just days after the July 14 occupation, a new crisis erupted. On July 17, Carmen Rodriguez went into Lincoln's gynecology service for an abortion. The Puerto Rican woman was a long-standing patient at Lincoln. She had been addicted to heroin and was an active member of Logos, a community-initiated heroin treatment center in the South Bronx at which progressive Lincoln doctors volunteered. According to one of the doctors who supervised Logos, resident psychiatrist and TLC member Mike Smith, Rodriguez was well known and had endeared herself to Logos's drug rehabilitation workers because of her caring spirit. She was fortified by Khalil Gibran's writings, carried his books with her daily, and regularly implored the people around her to treat each other with kindness.⁷⁴

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Though New York State had legalized abortion just two weeks earlier, Rodriguez had been approved for the procedure under the old abortion law because she had rheumatic heart disease and delivering a baby would endanger her life.⁷⁵ Smith explains that her procedure occurred just two weeks after a new cohort of residents and interns relieved the old class of doctors in training; because “the attendings were different, the doctors were different . . . they knew nothing of her medical background at all . . . and in those days at public hospitals you didn’t always get records, so they assumed that she was there simply to get an abortion.” Abortions were relatively simple procedures, but they had not been performed with any regularity before, and at Lincoln there was no established protocol and no formal training of doctors.⁷⁶

The resident on call that day performed a saline-based abortion procedure, whose severely harmful effects on patients with heart disease were well known.⁷⁷ Rodriguez became short of breath, but without a chart the resident proceeded to treat her for what he assumed to be asthma and then repeated the same course again. According to Smith, the resident assumed that Rodriguez “was ‘a Puerto Rican woman with asthma’—a common category but not a universal category. And so he gives her medicine for asthma, and that’s medicine that makes the heart patient much worse. She was quite correctable. And again she was a person who knew the difference between asthma and heart disease.” Although Rodriguez was likely conscious, and “could enunciate beautifully,” she was being treated in a medical environment in which the patient was often infantilized; she was never consulted about what was happening to her body and how the medical care she was receiving might have been harming her.⁷⁸ She died on July 19, three days after the abortion.

On the day of her death, the TLC activists demanded a meeting with Lacot. According to the activists, they were told that Rodriguez’s was “a complicated case,” beyond their comprehension. The activists retorted, “We knew what they were talking about and also what they wanted to hide.” They drafted a set of demands, calling for damages to be paid to her family; for the head of the abortion clinic, Dr. J. J. Smith, to be removed unless a community-worker committee was set up to oversee the program; and for the abortion clinic to be named after Carmen Rodriguez.⁷⁹ Within days, Rodriguez’s record was leaked to the TLC by Mike Smith, who was well aware that her death was due to negligence.⁸⁰

The tragedy of Rodriguez’s death called into question the methods of care institutionalized in the public hospitals as a result of medical school affiliation contracts. In the affiliation system, patients were never assigned their own primary care physicians; a patient would likely see a different doctor—whoever was on call—from visit to visit. The resulting reliance on inexperienced students’ treatment decisions increased the probability of disastrous outcomes. Moreover, the fact that no one doctor followed the progress of any patient over time meant

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that cases such as Rodriguez's could fall through the cracks. Although the affiliation contract was conceived with mutual benefits in mind for both the city's poor and the medical schools, in actuality the medical training of interns and residents and the schools' research needs became major forces in shaping hospital practices. One of the key reforms that came out of the activism at Lincoln was the emergence of "continuity clinics" in public hospitals, where patients are seen by the same primary care doctor. This program was conceived by the doctors in the Lincoln Collective.⁸¹

Another remarkable result, negotiated by the Young Lords, was that the hospital administration consented to a clinical pathological conference. In late July, the hospital hosted a public hearing, where administrators presented Rodriguez's diagnosis, treatment, and the medical complications that led to her death. The audience then asked questions, and doctors from other institutions presented counterarguments about the care she should have received. This type of public clinical conference, allowing a lay audience to cross-examine a team of medical doctors, has been cited as the first of its kind in the history of medicine. Though the meeting proved grossly contentious, with a lot of hissing and heckling, according to one of the doctors in the collective, "the fact of the meeting was an important event. It was a troubled, even tortured example of community control of medical services. At the least, it was a real and significant instance of physicians being called to account by community people. The agenda did not flow easily but the very meeting of the two sides to discuss a medical event stood as a victory for community participation in the hospital."⁸²

After the clinical conference, the crisis surrounding Rodriguez's case escalated. The TLC charged the department with "genocide." In its estimation, the clinical conference was a victory, but Rodriguez's "murder," which was due to systemic negligence, required accountability, continued campaigning for fundamental change, and reprisals at the administrative level. On August 25, 1970, TLC activists met with the head of the division of obstetrics and gynecology, J. J. Smith, repeating their demands once again and adding that Smith should reinstate the only black doctor in gynecology, who the activists alleged was fired because "he stood up to" Smith.⁸³ The more-than-two-hour meeting was filled with acrimony, after which the activists took measures into their own hands and "fired" him. They escorted the doctor to his car, pushed him around, and told him never to come back.⁸⁴ According to Cleo Silvers, the conflict reached a fever pitch because of the arrogant and racist disposition of the doctors, even the progressive ones among them. She remembers, "If Dr. J. J. Smith had conceded to even some of our demands, and if [the administration] hadn't tried to cover up what we knew was all too common at Lincoln—the daily disregard for the lives of people of color—we wouldn't have had to take the actions we took."⁸⁵ Surprisingly, the activists were able to get away with such acts because they had

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relatively free rein in the hospital. Its chief administrator, Antero Lacot, had not asked them to disband the complaint table they had set up in the ER in late spring 1970 or the daycare center they established during the July 14 occupation.⁸⁶

J. J. Smith resigned shortly after the altercation with the activists in his office. In response, twenty-seven residents and interns of his department, most of whom were foreign doctors, went on a ten-day strike in his support, from August 25 through September 3.⁸⁷ The interns continued to work at another affiliate of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Jacobi Hospital, but their actions shut down Lincoln's obstetrics and gynecology department. The interns and residents vowed to return only if the activists were barred from interfering in any aspect of work in their department. To this end, on August 27, 1970, the hospital sought a restraining order against the Young Lords, the TLC, HRUM, and all other activists.⁸⁸ Antero Lacot reported to the *New York Times* that the injunction was served to the Young Lords because they had "exceeded the ground rules." But Lacot was equivocal in his condemnation of the radicals. He had previously acknowledged that although their actions were extreme, they had helped move the Lincoln bureaucracy toward change. Perhaps because he sensed the value of their controversial presence and perhaps because he was unaware of the draconian character of the injunction, he reported to the *New York Times* that the activists would be allowed to continue to run their daycare and complaint table. But top city officials, the courts, and the mainstream media were collaborating with institutions in all spheres of public life, from the schools to the hospitals, to institutionalize heavy security measures against activists like the Young Lords and their supporters.

The injunction was served on the same day that the *New York Times* editorial board penned a scathing editorial against the Young Lords titled "Crisis at Lincoln." Because this editorial and another news article both referenced the terms and effective date of the restraining order, it is likely that efforts were coordinated between the newspaper, the city's attorneys, and the hospital administration. The editorial portrayed the striking Lincoln physicians as heroes and the Young Lords as villains, explaining that because of "doctor shortage, when many alternative jobs are available, it requires physicians with special dedication to the disadvantaged to be . . . willing to put up with Lincoln's many difficulties." But the profile of physicians at Lincoln, the majority of whom were foreign doctors seeking to gain licenses in the United States, was far more complicated. And there was no mention of the Pediatric Collective, which together with the Young Lords launched a door-to-door preventive medicine program in the South Bronx. The editorial derided the Young Lords as "a Puerto Rican imitation of the Black Panthers," who created "a climate of fear and conflict" in the hospital and took to "harassing doctors and nurses." Using the symbolic remnants and language of McCarthyism, it charged the group with "invading"

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the hospital and implicitly impugned its administrators for allowing the Lords “to become a fixture in it.”⁸⁹

In a letter responding to the *New York Times* editorial, Eli C. Messinger, national chairman of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, pointed out the contradiction between its “righteous condemnation of conditions at Lincoln” and its “even stronger condemnation” of the methods of those trying to effect change. Messinger itemized the “constructive” activities of the radicals and emphasized the failure of “the medical profession and the city” to redress “the abominable conditions of the hospital” until the Young Lords and others “began to directly institute changes.” He also explored the merits of the Young Lords’ most controversial demand, the community-worker board to set policy for the hospital, arguing that hospital workers and community residents were best positioned to “identify major health problems” and “shape corrective programs relevant to their communities.” He went on to say that community control was less about “lay interference in the technical aspects of medical care” and more about compelling “physicians and administrators to abdicate their elitist roles of prescribing the structure of health services.”⁹⁰

The conservative politician James Buckley, eager for any publicity that might help his mayoral campaign, also weighed in. Like others, including the *New York Times* editorial board, he misapprehended the facts, failed to address the grievances that led to protest, and used the language of crime to describe the actions of the radicals at Lincoln. Buckley observed, “Not only was the superintendent of the hospital held hostage by extremists, but women in labor were actually turned away from the hospital doors because the rest of the medical staff could not function in this sort of chaotic environment.”⁹¹ What Buckley characterized as a hostage situation involving the superintendent of the hospital was, in fact, the activists’ firing of the head of gynecology, J. J. Smith. Buckley also blamed the Young Lords’ July 14 occupation for the disruption of services in the gynecology department. Speaking to the *New York Post*, Young Lord Pablo Guzmán retorted, “The only disruption of services came about when those doctors [who supported Smith] left . . . of their own volition, not because of any threat.”⁹²

Even though the hospital’s chief administrator told the *New York Times* that the court injunction would allow the activists to continue to run the daycare and the complaint table, the injunction failed to bring the doctors back to work. Their work stoppage and temporary transfer to Jacobi Hospital may have offered some comparative perspective. Now, in addition to their harassment complaint against the Young Lords, they were demanding that their workloads be reduced at Lincoln. But when the city threatened to terminate its \$28 million affiliation contract with the Einstein Medical College, Einstein forced the doctors to return to their posts.⁹³

Other departments, including pediatrics and psychiatry, were also swept up in the conflict. Arnold Einhorn, the chief of the pediatrics department and its

pioneer, was replaced by the acclaimed Dr. Helen Rodriguez Trias after protests by pediatric doctors within the Lincoln Collective. In their view, Einhorn was too rigid to allow the kind of training program the dissident doctors sought to establish, in which department policy was determined through collective discussion in weekly meetings that included the nurses. The doctors in training wanted to challenge the individualism, elitism, and sexism of the medical profession in consciousness-raising circles not unlike those that emerged in the women's movement. They also initiated a Pediatric Parents' Association to involve parents in the life of the department. Other innovations—like drawing straws to decide who was in charge of the daily rounds—were deeply flawed and didn't last. Ironically, Einhorn's ouster by a group of mostly young, Jewish doctors in training was decried by the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Defense League as an instance of anti-Semitism. A civil rights investigation by the city ultimately led to Einhorn's reinstatement.⁹⁴

Patient Bill of Rights

Before Carmen Rodriguez's death, the TLC had experimented with a variety of tactics in its fight for improved conditions and greater influence over the governance of the hospital. The activists held rallies, drafted a series of petitions and demands, convened meetings with hospital administration, and occupied buildings. All the while their presence in the hospital was anchored by their twenty-four-hour patient/worker complaint table in the emergency room. As we have seen, the activists' demands reflected grievances surrounding local conditions and an attempt to introduce the notion of preventive care through medical home visits at the neighborhood level. Another set of demands drafted in late summer 1970 by HRUM and the Young Lords proved uniquely influential in the field of medicine. Drafted in the cauldron of protest following Rodriguez's death, the demands aimed to establish a protocol of communication between patients and doctors, minimizing the incidence of such tragedies in the future and investing patients with knowledge and control over their care by recasting patients in the eyes of the medical profession as citizens with constitutional rights.

The Patient Bill of Rights demanded these rights:

- 1 To be treated with dignity and respect.
- 2 To have all treatment explained and to refuse any treatment you feel is not in your best interest.
- 3 To know what medicine is being prescribed and what it is for and what side effects it will cause.
- 4 To have access to your medical chart.
- 5 To have door to door preventative medicine programs.

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- 6 To choose the doctor you want to have and to have the same doctor treat you all the time.
- 7 To call your doctor to your home.
- 8 To receive free meals while waiting for outpatient service.
- 9 To have free day care centers in all hospital facilities.
- 10 To receive free healthcare.

With its far-reaching implications for the relationship between patients and doctors, rearticulations of HRUM's Patient Bill of Rights have been adopted by hospitals across the nation under the same name. Part of what was remarkable about this list was its prescience. It significantly advanced the standards and ethics of patient care and patient rights in public discourse and helped enshrine concepts such as patient dignity, full disclosure and explanation of medical treatment and prescriptions and their side effects, and the right of the patient to refuse treatment. At the same time, it anticipated, in its call for free healthcare, what remains one of the most contentious debates about public health.

Coalition Politics: Middle-Class Guilt and Revolutionary Bravado

The coalition of individuals and groups that came together to fight for better healthcare in the South Bronx was riddled with internal tensions. The relationships they built were full of promise but also strained by conflicts of race, class, and gender. The weakest link in the coalition revolved around the relationship between the TLC, itself an amalgam of radical organizations and individuals of color, and the predominantly white Lincoln Collective. For its part, the Lincoln Collective of doctors was independently organized and often deluged with the responsibilities of medical residency. The Lincoln Collective worked best within the coalition when it could offer concrete, skill-based support to the work, as in its contributions to the door-to-door preventive medicine program.

The Young Lords did not tell any of the staff at Lincoln about their takeover in advance. Osborne, among other Lincoln Collective doctors, was unsettled by the surprise occupation. He described the Young Lords as “top-down. . . . They might come and say, ‘We’re doing this today,’ or, ‘We’re gonna do this tomorrow.’” He was resentful that they didn’t involve the Lincoln Collective in discussions about strategy. Osborne also perceived the male leadership of the Young Lords to be “intimidating,” “arrogant,” and “secretive.”

The Young Lords and their leadership were unapologetic in deploying both eloquent rhetoric and brawn in their day-to-day work. They inspired thousands of young people across the city with their dramatic antics and their perceptive insights, but they also threatened to beat up corner drug dealers for debasing

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their neighborhoods and the head of the Lincoln gynecology department for his attempts to cover up medical negligence. To a young, white, middle-class doctor unfamiliar with the parlance of the street, who was working in a disfigured urban landscape brimming with petty criminals and drug users, the masculine posturing and street savvy of male members of the Young Lords was likely discomfiting. The strident confidence and centralized power of the group's Central Committee surely unsettled white middle-class notions of legitimate leadership, and the brashness of some members of the Young Lords must have unnerved those who held on to any iota of middle-class propriety and respectability. The Young Lords challenged mainstream perceptions of race, which in turn destabilized the paradigm of power, world view, and identity of the middle class, of all roles, even the radicalized among them.

In his recollection of activism at Lincoln, Osborne returned to the male bravado and unilateral decision-making of the Young Lords' leadership as a source of tension. In fact, the Young Lords had enjoyed quite a number of victories since they had started organizing a year earlier. And the generally positive media attention they enjoyed must have enlarged their egos and made the group, and especially its leadership, feel invincible. But the organization's formal leadership had a mix of personalities. Its most visible leaders were Felipe Luciano, Juan González, Pablo Guzmán, and Denise Oliver. Juan "Fi" Ortiz and David Perez were self-effacing, background strategists. González was an articulate, but low-key, strategist and leader of the student strike and occupations at Columbia in 1968. Guzmán was a media maven who could pack a punch in a slogan. Luciano, the most charismatic among them, vacillated between poetic ruminations and a street-tough persona. And Oliver, a middle-class black American woman, was known for the haughtiness with which she brought down her opponents in an argument.

Despite Osborne's critique of the organization's leadership, he sang the praises of the organization's rank and file that was active at Lincoln—a disproportionately female representation of the organization who were also members of HRUM—whom he believed to be "much more earnest and hardworking and humble and sincere." While Osborne characterizes the activists at Lincoln as people who often adopted hard lines unnecessarily, overall he said they "were really trying their best to do the right thing. They were very consistent, I think, self-effacing, very altruistic."⁹⁵

Osborne's perception of the Young Lords differed from that of Dr. Stephen Levin, "a Jewish kid from a working-class neighborhood in Philadelphia," who conducted home visits with the Lords and was the organization's resident doctor. The Young Lords "played a major role in my reassessing where I had come from, what was important, what I should do with my life. . . . Using one's life for a better purpose than getting rich, you know, made really resonating sense for me." He felt alienated by the middle-class professional aspirations of his medi-

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cal school cohort. With the Young Lords, by contrast, he found home: “I don’t know exactly . . . what there was about me and my personality that made me click so easily with a guy like Mickey Melendez or Yoruba Guzmán? I think I come from a neighborhood that was so much like the barrio—wild-ass kids runnin’ in the street, playin’ ball, doin’ crazy things. . . . So there was something about the way they were that was so resonant with my own [experience growing up]. . . . I was white, unmistakably white, and a doctor, too . . . [but] my distinctiveness disappeared.”⁹⁶

Osborne described the behavior of the radicalized doctors in ways similar to his description of the leadership of the Young Lords, but he seemed less intimidated by his colleagues: “Despite our erratic behavior and arrogance, the workers came to like us because they felt, at least, we cared about the patient and were trying to do the right thing.” He also observed that the manner with which the Lincoln Collective doctors dealt with Einhorn was “extreme” and unreasonable, and he attributed their inflexibility to youthful inexperience. However, in discussing the authoritarian disposition of the Young Lords, Osborne also recalls that “everybody was pretty sectarian in those days. That was the characteristic of most political groups that I knew of, which meant that . . . they were run in a very hierarchical fashion. Most of the leadership was male.”

Middle-class guilt figured prominently in the relationship among the groups in the Lincoln coalition. According to Osborne, “They would give us political education and sort of make us feel guilty about being white and middle class.”⁹⁷ Mullan explains the internal conflict he experienced over the notion that he should take a political lead from the Young Lords. “I struggle with it. On the one hand I thought it was good to think creatively, and I definitely had the sense that there were ways in which we needed to function differently as people in order to be responsive to people’s movements, so I was at least open to the notion of considering . . . my own elitism.” Although they never made their position overt, the doctors, according to Mullan, took issue with the analysis that “Third World people, and in particular Third World workers, were the leadership, which was a little bit unrealistic in the sense that while you might like that to be the case, that doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s true. Just declaring it doesn’t mean it’s right. But most of us felt we had to accede to whatever the leadership of these minority groups asked of us because we felt guilty.”⁹⁸

Mullan concludes that the notion that “you have to surrender your identity, or your leadership, or your pride, and take leadership from anyone who comes through the door because they’re part of the party . . . is [not] a viable way to run anything.”⁹⁹ For his part, Osborne often “felt a bit guilty and a bit intimidated and a bit used,” but he believed that the good outweighed the bad: “On the whole we were doing the right thing. . . . We had to move forward by having parties and leadership and cadre and rank and file and organizing and all that.

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And I don't think I knew enough quite yet, politically, about how groups worked to really have a consistent analysis or consistent critique."¹⁰⁰ Of the coalition's experience with the doctors, Young Lord Cleo Silvers emphasizes that "many of them, especially the men (and they were mostly men) were never able to accept the notion that we could be equal partners because we weren't doctors ourselves. They didn't truly get that you have to listen to the community in order to deliver quality healthcare. They couldn't overcome their middle-class entitlement and we struggled with them over this."¹⁰¹

The coalition work led by the Young Lords at Lincoln Hospital reflected the challenges presented by the demographic shifts of the postwar period. Lincoln employed and served members of a predominantly Puerto Rican and black American population, and tensions among hospital activists were exacerbated by the chasm between the life experiences of the cohort of working-class people of color with vanguard party politics who made up the core of the TLC and those of the group of politicized middle-class white doctors who made up the Lincoln Collective. In a nation where middle-class white professionals and poor people of color lived diametrically different lives, the workplace convergence of these two groups was bound to produce conflicts. On the one hand, white middle-class professionals were beholden to a world managed by experts and a world view that measured success through individual hard work, prudence, education, ambition, and self-improvement. By contrast, for many people of color, success was increasingly defined not by individual strivings alone but by their collective challenges to entrenched systems of oppression and grassroots campaigns for reform in education, health, and employment. In the context of growing claims to self-determination among people of color, there emerged critiques of less visible but no less damaging manifestations of racism and white paternalism among even progressive whites.

Through 1970 and 1971, the Young Lords continued their coalition work at Lincoln and in November 1970 became involved in another major action. In the lead-up to the action, the HRUM became an official subsidiary organization of the Young Lords, which meant that its members identified both as Young Lords and as HRUM members. This granted the Young Lords greater reach and political influence at Lincoln even amid administrative attempts to limit their access to the hospital after the Lincoln occupation. In August, the Young Lords and HRUM brought together a disparate group of seven neighborhood organizations in a collaboration they called the South Bronx Drug Coalition.¹⁰² Its objective was to obtain institutional backing from Lincoln Hospital for a drug detoxification center. Following the dominant community control model of protest of that period, on November 6, 1970, the activists again occupied the sixth floor of the nurses' residence attached to Lincoln. There they proceeded to implement a program. With the aid of doctors, the group conducted physicals,

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assigned beds, and began to administer detoxification treatment, while representatives of the coalition negotiated with Lacot. At the end of the day, the police were called in, and fifteen people were arrested.¹⁰³ But others returned the next day and proceeded to lay the groundwork for a detox clinic.

The program became popular among the people of the South Bronx because it humanized the user and challenged the notion of addiction as a personal character flaw. The Young Lords and others involved sought to understand the relationship between individual behavior and the social context and structure of society. The identification of drug abuse as a social rather than a purely individual phenomenon was considered an integral component of the rehabilitation process. In a district that claimed the largest incidence of drug addiction in the nation, before long what came to be known as Lincoln Detox was treating 600 people a week.¹⁰⁴ Through political education, the program's treatment empowered users with an understanding of the complexity of addiction, including the sociopolitical context that led people to want to escape reality—poverty, permanent unemployment, racism, and a dilapidated living environment. The mandatory education classes also introduced their participants to a web of political ideas that highlighted the intersection between drug addiction and the expansion of drug trafficking as a consequence of U.S. foreign policy in places such as Vietnam.¹⁰⁵

The detox program involved doctors, activists, and patients as partners in a multifaceted medical treatment and social rehabilitation project. Directed by Stephen Levin and Cleo Silvers, the program first adopted, of necessity, the mainstream methadone detox method, which was unpopular with activists because methadone could be just as addictive as heroin.¹⁰⁶ The activists sought an alternative that didn't replace one addictive substance with another. Before long they came to envision a program that would introduce Eastern medicine as the primary treatment method for addiction. Lincoln Detox was eventually funded by Lincoln Hospital in 1972 and became one of the principal acupuncture drug treatment centers in the Western world.¹⁰⁷



The fast-paced course of activism initiated by the Young Lords at Lincoln used a range of tactics to involve workers and patients in the fight for better wages and improved care. The multiplicity of tasks—from rallies and petitions, the complaint table, and negotiations with hospital administrators to building occupations and door-to-door home visits—demanded a full-time activism that was as exhausting as it was exhilarating. Together, the TLC, HRUM, the Young Lords, and the Lincoln Collective sought to elevate the ethics of medical practice by establishing a compassionate, patient-centered, preventive model of care. They also sought to dramatize the problems of Lincoln and embarrass the city

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to compel it to build a facility that had been promised to the people of the South Bronx fifteen years earlier.

The crisis over governance at Lincoln Hospital was a continuation, albeit in a different sphere, of the movement for “community control” that had exploded during the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school decentralization crisis of 1967–68.¹⁰⁸ The growing call for community control was a radical interpretation of the War on Poverty’s dictum of “maximum feasible participation.” The concept demanded a reordering of decision-making, employment patterns, and delivery of local services in the major institutions governing community life such as schools, hospitals, and police precincts. The call for minority control over community institutions was not a radical demand, but it was an expression of the radicalization, and growing confidence, of movements built by people of color in urban centers across the United States. It was also one of the major practical applications of the concept of black power. It reflected a growing preoccupation among activists with extending the meaning of democracy and enhancing the fight for racial equality by rooting it in economic and political power at the local level. As the Lincoln example suggests, that demand was led by the growing sector of low-ranking workers in social service industries and municipal government, who were also often residents of that same community. The non-professional staff at Lincoln’s mental health clinic called for a community- and worker-led board of the clinic, with authority to make and implement governing decisions and committed to fairly representing all staff. These activists raised issues of economic equality and wealth redistribution in their struggles, but in seeking greater influence and power over major local institutions they often became managers of a system that had not granted the major structural reforms needed to address racialized economic inequality.

At Lincoln, the Young Lords broadened the definition of community control. Their campaign took the call a step further, beyond a critique of the form of governance to a critique of its content and purpose. The struggle at Lincoln evolved politically from one that emphasized the ways in which racism colored healthcare services in the Bronx to one that articulated the social limitations of institutions governed by economic interests and how racism against people of color created deadly consequences. The dramatic work of the Young Lords and their supporters at Lincoln Hospital was driven by, and corresponded to, the deepening social and economic decay of the urban environment. Operating between two different epochs—the decline of the era of civil rights, black power, and the Great Society, and the emerging new era of social conservatism that began in the 1970s—the Young Lords were among the first activists to challenge draconian reductions in social spending and the associated privatization of public services. They were preparing for what they believed would be politically decisive battles.

96. Martinez, in "Women of the Colonies."
97. For a discussion of this perspective, see White, *Too Heavy a Load*, chap. 2. For a study of how issues of gender permeated the day-to-day life of the Black Panther Party, see Spencer, *Revolution Has Come*.
98. Morales, in "Women of the Colonies."
99. Springer, *Living for the Revolution*.
100. Martinez, in "Women of the Colonies."
101. Iris Benitez in "Women of the Colonies." This was also the position of the women of the Black Panther Party; see "Panther Sisters on Women's Liberation," in Heath, *Off the Pigs!*, 344, 346.
102. Oliver, interview by author, August 18, 2007.
103. Ibid.
104. Iris Morales, interview by author, July 25, 2000.
105. Abramson, *Palante*, 25; Morales interview by author, July 25, 2000.
106. Iris Morales, "Puerto Rican Genocide," *Palante*, May 6, 1970, 8; Connie Morales, "Women's Oppression: Cortejas," *Palante*, May 22, 1970, 16; Carlos Aponte, "Lolita Lebron: Puerto Rican Liberation Fighter," *Palante*, May 22, 1970, 5; Oliver, "Sojourner Truth"; Iris Benitez, "Cambodia '70," *Palante*, May 6, 1970, 14.
107. Robin Morgan, "Goobye to All That," *Rat*, February 6–23, 1970, 6–7.
108. Oliver, interview by author, August 18, 2007.
109. See Young Lords Party, "13 Point Program"; see also discussion in Clemserud, "Young Women Find a Place."
110. See Rudolph, "Masculinities"; Jenkins and Hine, *Question of Manhood*; and Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.
111. Rovira interview, July 27, 2013; Oliver, interview by author, August 18, 2007.
112. Morales interview.
113. Oliver, interview by author, August 18, 2007.
114. Morales interview.
115. Denise Oliver, interview by Iris Morales, in Morales, *Palante, Siempre Palante!* (film).
116. Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, 11.
117. Ibid., 51.
118. Oliver, interview by author, August 18, 2007.
119. "Colonized Mentality and Non-Conscious Ideology," in Young Lords Party, *Ideology*, 32.
120. D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; D'Emilio, *Intimate Matters*.
121. Carlito Rovira, interview by author, October 2, 2017.
122. This narrative is assembled from a series of conversations I had with Denise Oliver, Carlito Rovira, Marta Duarte, and others during the exhibit project *Presente! The Young Lords in New York*, which I cocurated with Yasmin Ramirez in summer 2015 at the Bronx Museum and facilitated at two other museum sites in New York, El Museo Del Barrio and Loisaida Inc. The project was cited by the *New York Times* as one of the year's "Top 10, Best in Art." See Mark Armao, "The Art and Activism of the Young Lord: Three New York City Venues Look Back at the Puerto Rican Nationalist Group," *Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2015.
123. Morales interview.
124. Luciano interview.
125. Ibid.
126. Connie Morales, "Women's Oppression: Cortejas," *Palante*, May 22, 1970, 16.
127. "Young Lords Party Position Paper on Women," *Rat Subterranean News*, October 6, 1970.
128. For an in-depth discussion of the Young Lords' position on reproductive rights, see Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color*, 113–32.
129. Discussed in Iris Lopez, "Agency and Constraint," 320. For a comprehensive history of birth control in Puerto Rico, see Ramirez de Arellano and Scheipp, *Colonialism*.
130. "Puerto Rican Genocide," *Palante*, May 8, 1970, 8.
131. "Young Lords Party Position Paper on Women."
132. Young Lords Party and Abramson, *Palante*, 50.
133. *La Luchadora*, in boxed newspapers, Tament Library.
134. Kathleen Neal Cleaver, "Women, Power, and Revolution," 123–27; see also Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom*, chap. 7.
135. Other women of color were also involved in this work. See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free*.

Chapter 9

1. See Carlos Rovira, "Prospect Hospital," *Palante*, June 19, 1970, 8.
2. Carl Pastor, "Socialist Medicine," *Palante*, June 5, 1970, 8.
3. Alfonzo A. Narvaez, "The Young Lords Seize X-Ray Unit," *New York Times*, June 18, 1970, 17.
4. Luciano and Maristany, "Young Lords Party," 13.
5. Carl Pastor, "TB Truck Liberated," *Palante*, July 3, 1970, 11; Narvaez, "Young Lords Seize X-Ray Unit," 7; "Young Lords Free Health Truck," *Old Mole*, August 7, 1970, 5; "Control Seized," *Berkeley Tribe*, September 18, 1970, 13; "Young Lords Hijack TB Unit in New York," *Peace News Ltd.*, June 26, 1970; "Young Lords Truckin," *Good Times*, June 26, 1970, 3.
6. Narvaez, "Young Lords Seize X-Ray Unit," 17.
7. U.S. Department of Labor, *Labor Force Experience*, 7. One source estimates the neighborhood's racial and ethnic makeup in the early 1970s as 70

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percent Puerto Rican, 20 percent African American, and 10 percent other. See Kaplan, *Organization*, 6.

8. Carlos Aponte, "Street Films in the Bronx," *Palante*, June 19, 1970, 9.

9. David Perez, "Y.L.O. Bronx Branch," *Palante*, May 22, 1970, 9.

10. See Wilson, *When Work Disappears*.

11. Richie Perez, "The South Bronx Time Bomb," *Palante*, July 17, 1970, 4.

12. Glazer, "South Bronx Story," 269–76; Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 114.

13. Quoted in New York State Department of Health, "A Preliminary Survey of the Municipal Hospitals of New York City," October 1966, 1, in New York City: Hospitals, Municipal, and General Vertical File.

14. Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 113.

15. Commission on the Delivery of Personal Health Services, *Community Health Service*, 266; "Lead Paint on Pediatric Wards," *Lincoln News*, mimeographed pamphlet, n.d., in Osborne Personal Files. According to the latter source, of the children treated for lead poisoning in ward 2-B in that period, two reingested lead in the ward.

16. Lincoln Home and Hospital was acquired by the city and transformed into a public facility in 1925.

17. "What Course for Health Workers," editorial, *Health/PAC Bulletin*, July–August 1970, 1, <http://www.healthpacbulletin.org/healthpac-bulletin-julyaugust-1970>.

18. Leon Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval*, 6; Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 213–14.

19. Rosner and Markowitz, "Hospital, Insurance," 74–95.

20. The affiliation contract failed to resolve the problems of poor municipal care in part because abolishing the double standard of care was not the priority. In a laissez-faire market, the priority of large research institutions centered around maintaining their viability in an expanding healthcare industry, not in abolishing the dual standard of care for the poor. Thus, affiliation did not bring a revolution in care for the poor; instead it meant that voluntary hospitals gained badly needed training territory, as well as funds, which helped them stay afloat in the midst of spiraling costs, a kind of Keynesian economics for the health industry. For discussions of the profit-driven structure of the health system and its consequences, see Rosner and Markowitz, "Hospital, Insurance," 74–95.

21. Levine, Murray, *History and Politics*, 51–52. For an assessment of the shift, see Grob, *From Asylum to Community*.

22. According to the policy of the antipoverty bill of 1964, sec. 2, "it is the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the

midst of plenty in this Nation by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity" (quoted in Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 57–58).

23. The film featured one of the LHMHS's neighborhood service center storefronts in the southeast Bronx. See "The Storefronts," press release, October 24, 1967; and "Movie Premiered in Ghetto Area," press release, October 30 (no year), Director of Public Information, Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers.

24. R. R., "Heal Thyself," n.d., 1, Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers.

25. Janoski, *Political Economy of Unemployment*, 127–30. According to the policy of the antipoverty bill of 1964, sec. 2, "it is the policy of the United States to eliminate the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty in this Nation by opening to everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity," quoted in Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding*, 57–58.

26. Gloria Cruz, "HRUM: Health Worker Organization," *Palante*, May 6, 1970, 3.

27. On the health activism of the Black Panthers, see Nelson, *Body and Soul*. On the convergence of black power activism and emergency medical care, see *Freedom House: Street Saviors*, directed by Gene Starzenski.

28. *Ibid.*, 6.

29. Cleo Silvers, interview by author, October 13, 2018.

30. "Bronx Conflict Focused on Community Control," *Hospital Tribune*, May 5, 1969, 20, in Lincoln Hospital Papers.

31. Mike Smith, interview by author, August 19, 2005; Cleo Silvers, interview by author, October 19, 2005.

32. Gerald Fraser, "Community Control Here Found Spreading in the Field of Health," *New York Times*, March 9, 1969, quoted in Lincoln Hospital Mental Health and Non Professional Association and Supporting Professionals, "Einstein vs. the Community?," press release, March 10, 1969, Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers. See also Thomas S. Harper, "The Lincoln Hospital Protest: Community Mental Health Leadership as the Agent of Ghetto Imperialism," n.d., Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers.

33. An unidentified group of nonadministrative staff, the majority of whom would have been professional staff, wrote a statement opposing the methods but supporting the critique and grievances of the Puerto Rican and African American nonprofessional workers. See "Position Statement by Lincoln Hospital Mental Health Services Staff

- in Opposition to the Current Work Stoppage and Takeover of Services,” March 13, 1969, Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers.
34. Lincoln Hospital Mental Health and Non Professional Association and Supporting Professionals, “Einstein vs. the Community?”
35. The clinic remained closed for approximately two weeks, during which time its administration attempted negotiations with the staff. Cleo Silvers, “Learning through Struggle,” *For the People’s Health*, June 1970, 2; Cleo Silvers, interview by author, June 24, 2015.
36. Office of Public Information, “The Facts on Lincoln Hospital,” Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers.
37. “Bronx Conflict Focused on Community Control,” *Hospital Tribune*, May 5, 1969, 1, 20, in Lincoln Hospital Papers; see also Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 139.
38. Cleo Silvers, interview by author, April 24, 2018. On the Panther 21, see Kempton, *Briar Patch*.
39. For examples, see Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s*, chap. 8. For a case study, see Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*.
40. Cruz, “HRUM,” 3.
41. Leon Fink and Greenberg, *Upheaval*, 199.
42. For a history of DRUM, see Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*. DRUM organized localized workplace actions and wildcat strikes in the auto industry against what the group termed “niggermentation,” the combined impact of shop-floor speedups and racial discrimination on the part of company management and the union, respectively. HRUM’s replacement of “union” with “unity” in its name reflects the organization’s preoccupation with building bridges with people of color and advancing the ever-evasive concept of unity among people of color presumably in “the community” rather than in the workplace.
43. “Workers-Patients United,” editorial, *For the People’s Health*, April 1970, 1, Microfilm Collection.
44. “Pig of the Week,” *Palante*, June 19, 1970, 4.
45. “Besieged Hospital Head,” *New York Times*, August 28, 1970.
46. Carlito Rovira, “Crime against Our Youth,” *Palante*, May 8, 1970, 9.
47. Edmund Rothschild, interview by Bruce Solloway, in “Lincoln Hospital: The Decline of Health Care.”
48. HRUM, “Total Self Determination,” mimeograph, n.d., 1–2, in Smith Papers.
49. Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 45; Danny Argote and Cleo Silvers, “Think Lincoln,” *Palante*, July 3, 1970, 2, 16.
50. Cleo Silvers, interview by Bruce Solloway, in “Lincoln Hospital: The Decline of Health Care”; Silvers, interview by author, June 24, 2015; Smith interview; Carl Pastor, “Patient Worker Table,” *Palante*, July 17, 1970, 20.
51. Ellen Frankfort, “The Community’s Role in Healing a Hospital,” *Village Voice*, November 26, 1970.
52. Antero Lacot, “Lincoln Hospital 1970—A Prelude of Things to Come,” n.d., 1, Smith Papers.
53. Argote and Silvers, “Think Lincoln,” 16.
54. “Lords Liberate Hospital,” *Old Mole*, August 7, 1970.
55. Argote and Silvers, “Think Lincoln,” 16.
56. *Pediatric Collective Bulletin*, n.d., Arch 106.L63, Lincoln Hospital Papers.
57. Harold Osborne, interview by author, July 30, 2000.
58. Fitzhugh Mullan, interview by author, December 13, 2005.
59. Osborne interview.
60. Harold Osborne, untitled manuscript, Osborne Papers. They belonged to a larger cohort of doctors who were politicized by the social movements of the 1960s and specifically by their participation during medical school in the public health projects in poor urban neighborhoods sponsored by the Student Health Organization. They were also connected through their networks to the older cohort of doctors who formed the Medical Committee for Human Rights, which participated in the southern civil rights movement and challenged segregation in southern hospitals.
61. Mullan interview.
62. Osborne, untitled manuscript.
63. Carlito Rovira, interview by author, July 27, 2013.
64. These bags are referred to as sandbags or bags of coal in a number of my interviews with the Young Lords. A photo of them was captured by the *New York Times* for an article on the takeover. See photo in Alfonzo A. Narvaez, “Young Lords Seize Lincoln Hospital Building,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1970.
65. Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 142.
66. Argote and Silvers, “Think Lincoln,” 2.
67. Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 144.
68. Narvaez, “Young Lords Seize Lincoln.”
69. Carl Pastor, “Socialism at Lincoln—July 14, 1970,” *Palante*, July 31, 1970, 5.
70. The involvement of the Young Lords with HRUM and with other hospital workers in HRUM accelerated the debate about the working class, which was initiated in May.
71. Pastor, “Socialism at Lincoln,” 5.
72. “Buckley Denounces the Young Lords,” *Masena Observer*, September 3, 1970.
73. Silvers, interview by Solloway.
74. Smith interview.
75. “Abortion Death at Lincoln Hospital,” *Think . . . Lincoln*, July 27, 1970.

76. Smith interview.
77. Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 147.
78. Smith interview.
79. "Abortion Death at Lincoln Hospital."
80. "Bronx," *Health/PAC Bulletin*, October 1970.
81. Charlotte Phillips, interview by author, August 6, 2015; Mullan interview.
82. Mullan, *White Coat, Clenched Fist*, 148.
83. "A History of the Struggle at Lincoln Hospital," flyer, September 1970, Smith Papers; Silvers, interview by author, October 19, 2005.
84. "Crisis at Lincoln," editorial, *New York Times*, August 27, 1970.
86. Frances X. Clines, "City Gets Injunction in Lincoln Hospital Dispute," *New York Times*, August 27, 1970.
87. John Sibley, "Doctors Return to Lincoln Jobs: Normal Service is Restored in Obstetrics Department," *New York Times*, September 4, 1970.
88. Clines, "City Gets Injunction"; "History of the Struggle at Lincoln Hospital"; Silvers, interview by author, October 19, 2005.
89. "Crisis at Lincoln."
90. Eli C. Messinger, "Letter to the editor," *New York Times*, August 30, 1970, copy of original letter on letterhead in Smith Papers.
91. "Buckley Denounces the Young Lords."
92. Barbara Yuncker and Jay Levin, "11 Resign at Harlem Hospital," *New York Post*, August 28, 1970.
93. "Bronx."
94. Luis E. Yavner, chairman of the Committee on Urban Affairs, American Jewish Congress, to Samuel Belkin, president of Yeshiva University, February 4, 1971, and related correspondence, Vertical File, 1960–1975, Lincoln Hospital Papers.
95. Osborne interview.
96. Stephen Levin, interview by author, August 16, 2005.
97. Osborne interview.
98. Mullan interview.
99. Ibid.
100. Osborne interview.
101. Silvers, interview by author, October 19, 2005.
102. History of HRUM, undated document of the period, Mike Smith Papers.
103. Carl Pastor, "Seize the Hospitals," *Palante*, December 11, 1970, 6; "El Programa de las Drogas," *Lincoln News*, undated, 1971, Mike Smith Papers.
104. Levin interview.
105. In Vietnam, military officers and government officials with easy access to opium poppy fields established poppy-refining labs for the production of heroin that made its way into the nation's urban centers in CIA planes. Larry Collins, "The CIA Drug Connection Is as Old as the Agency," *New York Times*, December 3, 1993; Michael Cetawayo Tabor, "Capitalism Plus Dope Equals Genocide," Black Panther Party, n.d., Pamphlet Series, Tamiment Library.
106. Smith interview.
107. Miguel Melendez, *We Took the Streets*, 177–78.
108. Podair, *Strike*, chap. 4.

Chapter 10

1. Garelik earlier managed the Red Squad, which was formally known as the Bureau of Special Services and Investigation and came into existence in 1946. At the height of the Cold War, it spied on a wide range of citizens with different political views, including communists, and during the 1960s it disproportionately targeted black power activists, the New Left, and others. Clarence Taylor, *Reds at the Blackboard*, 206.
2. The reported size of the independence march varies, with the Young Lords describing it as a 3,000-person march in "3,000 Join Protest Led by Young Lords," *New York Times*, October 31, 1970.
3. Denise Oliver, interview by author, August 18, 2007; Iris Morales, interview by author, July 25, 2000.
4. The concert organizers were white, and their program had displaced a long-standing yearly Puerto Rican festival held at Randall's Island on that same weekend. In protest, the Young Lords coerced its organizers into sharing the profits of the concert with the organization. Oliver interview; Carlito Rovira, interview by author, July 30, 2015. A photo of the event shows Denise Oliver speaking at the event.
5. Felipe Luciano, interview by author, August 28, 2005.
6. Ibid.
7. Morales interview; Oliver interview.
8. Oliver interview.
9. Juan González, email exchange with author, April 2019.
10. The most well-known example of this was a letter sent to Martin Luther King by the FBI suggesting that King kill himself rather than face the shame of his extramarital affairs, which the writers said they were about to disclose to the public.
11. Carlos Aponte, interview by author, July 30, 2019.
12. Rudy Johnson, "Ex-Head of Lords Backs His Ouster," *New York Times*, September 9, 1970.
13. Mickey Melendez, conversation with author, July 4, 2019.
14. Rovira interview.
15. Luciano interview.
16. Mickey Melendez, conversation with author, July 4, 2019.



Denise Oliver speaks at press conference during Julio Roldán's wake in the occupied First Spanish United Methodist Church, October 19, 1970. (Photograph by Tyrone Dukes/ New York Times; courtesy of the *New York Times*)

Guzmán, violated the organization's security protocol prohibiting unauthorized leave. One day in late August, the two men simply disappeared. Central Committee member Denise Oliver recalls that in the context of heightened repression and threats against the party, the situation sent many into a panic: "The organization was on red alert because there was a supposed mob contract out on Felipe. Security was heightened. Two members of the Central Committee went missing. And nobody knew where they were."³ Approximately twenty-seven hours later, they reappeared with what some perceived as an elaborate excuse.

The men suggested that they had been lured into a trap, likely set by government agents. According to Guzmán, two white women approached them with a fund-raising proposal—a follow-up to a Randall's Island concert where the Young Lords had raised significant funds.⁴ They all ended up at an Upper West Side apartment where, according to Luciano, one of the women offered him a joint that made him "hallucinogenic, sick, and suicidal." When he asked her to

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close the window because he wanted to jump out of it, “she opened it wider.” Guzmán came to his aid and twice suggested that they leave: “I said no. Whatever took hold of me was so powerful that all I could do was stay in one spot for about twelve hours. I sat erect on a chair, my feet firmly planted on the floor, my fist balled up, and I told her, ‘You brought me up here, you better take me down.’ When I threw up, the strangest things happened. I felt totally infinite . . . and I made love to the same woman who tried to kill me.”⁵ The incident raised more questions than it answered. The chairman lamented, “Should I have known? Yes. In the back of my mind was I thinking that maybe we could get over? Yes. But we had no idea of the vulnerability of our position.”⁶ Whether this was a government disruption, bad story, or bad trip didn’t seem to matter. These details surfaced amid distrust produced by the storm of internal dissent led by the women of the organization. That storm raged against sexism, philandering on the part of male members, and inequality between the sexes.

In concert with leading cadre, Oliver proposed that Luciano and Guzmán account for their breach of party discipline at a closed disciplinary hearing of the Central Committee and deputy ministers that included some of the organization’s most vocal women. The women, unwilling to tolerate a disciplinary double standard fueled by sexism, questioned the men. In the past, the Central Committee had summarily terminated members who didn’t report to assignments or violated party protocol.

Oliver recalls that the hearing revealed alarming details: “The other men on the Central Committee knew where Luciano and Guzmán were. So did their security detail.”⁷ Juan González asserts that he did not know their whereabouts. The hearing concluded with Felipe Luciano’s demotion from chairman to cadre. Oliver remembers that the other men on the Central Committee would likewise be temporarily “suspended, charged, disciplined, and sent to study hall for two weeks.” This left Oliver, the only woman on the Central Committee, to run the organization. The men do not remember having been demoted. Of the Central Committee members’ response to their demotion, Oliver remembers, “Fi was a kid, you know. And Fi was, like, ‘We fucked up.’ And Pablo was, like, hanging his head in shame—remember, we were raised on criticism and self-criticism. You were given criticism and you had to stand up there and criticize yourself. We were very Maoist in that way.”⁸ The ritual of moralistic self-flagellation was a growing feature of life. Central Committee member Juan González was familiar with the practice. Months earlier, he had entered into an intimate relationship with a woman different from his known partner. González remembers, “When the women’s caucus discovered that I was seeing someone else, I was brought up on charges and suspended from Central Committee for six weeks.”⁹ As we will see, the painful mingling of love and politics influenced the culture of the organization, added to the emotional intensity of movement life, had the potential to

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blur political decision-making, and was likely manipulated by COINTELPRO.¹⁰ For Luciano, who was married to Iris Morales, a leading member of the women's caucus, the violation came at great cost, both personally and politically.

Luciano had failed the test of discipline and personal transformation to which he subjected others, and because he had become the face of the organization, the demotion would soon become public. The *New York Times* carried the story almost immediately, quoting Young Lord Carlos Aponte on reasons for the demotion: "male chauvinism, unclear politics, political individualism, and lack of development." It seemed that Aponte was speaking as an individual, not as official Young Lords spokesperson, a violation of the organization's Rules of Discipline: "No member may speak in public unless authorized by the Central Committee of Central Staff." Aponte was a veteran and experienced organizer previously active with California's left-wing Peace and Freedom Party, which ran radical candidates, including Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, for president. As part of the secondary leadership of the YLP, he was a critical founding member of the Bronx branch. The development raised questions about him within the Central Committee that would not be addressed until later. Aponte asserts that he did not speak to the press.¹¹ A COINTELPRO agent likely did. The article also cited a supposed Young Lord statement on how informants might interpret the demotion. A few days later, the group corrected the record with a press conference of their own, in which Luciano stated that the demotion happened "in an atmosphere of love and education."¹²

The turn of events elicited different internal responses. Mickey Melendez accepted it as "a good soldier." He explains: "the women's question had just emerged. The men were still trying to figure out what that meant. But there was a sense that we had to set an example at the top."¹³ There were some, like Young Lord leader Aida Cuascut, who opposed the public character that the demotion took on for the shame it generated for Luciano. The *New York Times* coverage must have felt permanent to him, even though many assumed it to be temporary.¹⁴ The struggle's public dimension must have inadvertently silenced internal criticism by members of the organization because it signaled that stepping out of line carried a high cost. This moment of leadership transition was also open for COINTELPRO to exploit. But the decision had been made, and key members, including Gloria Fontanez, were vocal supporters of the demotion.

Luciano's recollections, years later, offer perspective on the emotional state he was in. "For about two to three days, I was under scrutiny. . . . After the criticism, self-criticism sessions, I was a nervous wreck. I ended up going to Soho." Influenced by the politics of black nationalism, which downplayed gender inequality, Luciano tended to see the issues raised by the women's caucus as a personal rather than political matter. In Luciano's words, "I felt that [the conflict] . . . was a personal affair between me and Iris and that it should be dealt with in that man-

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ner, and they felt that this was a party issue and that my behavior indicated what was indicative of the sort of male chauvinism that existed in the party.” Luciano acknowledged a problem of sexism in the organization: “Yes, the women were coming up with very legitimate issues . . . and [these] strong warriors were aided by the fact that . . . we were basically a male-oriented organization. We had to change.” Both women and men in the organization believed that Luciano was undermining the political shift toward political equality among men and women. However, Luciano took the position—articulated most adamantly by cultural black nationalists—that the standing of men of color, whose manhood had been trampled by racial oppression, had to be elevated and prioritized in the struggle for liberation. He continues: “The change, I felt, had to come organically. It should not come abruptly. . . . That’s why in our Thirteen-Point Program we had something about machismo, positive machismo. I came from the perspective that there was nothing wrong with machismo. Now, when I say ‘machismo’ I’m not talking about the . . . brutalization of women. I’m talking about the ability to stand as a man in your space and say, ‘This institution, this community, is mine, it’s part of my matrix, and I will not allow anyone to violate the sanctity of my home and family,’ and so the way we organized a lot of Puerto Rican men in our communities was by telling them that your beating up your woman is not being a macho.”¹⁵

However, even in retrospect, Luciano failed to grasp that his demotion happened a few months after the Young Lords women had led a successful internal struggle that altogether rejected machismo as a backward contradiction and had revised the notion of “revolutionary machismo” in the group’s original Thirteen-Point Program and Platform.

A month later, Luciano was still unable to accept his demotion. After his public shaming, the charismatic leader had difficulty assuming the role of cadre. That role included selling newspapers, distributing flyers, carrying out assignments given by the officer of the day, and performing other quiet duties like waking early to cook for the children’s breakfast program. His personal struggles with ego and humility factored into this. Making matters more difficult was the fact that, without a clear definition of his new role, others with long-brewing resentments and hostilities against him ran unchecked. The alienated chairman had to navigate these waters alone. In failing to give Luciano a new assignment, the Central Committee abdicated its role. The failure also undermined the organization’s self-proclaimed commitment to love and compassion. It contributed to Luciano’s withdrawal from party life.

The former chairman soon stopped showing up at the office and to meetings and demonstrations. A month later, he left the organization and Gloria Fontanez replaced him in the Central Committee.

Luciano had his shortcomings. This was not the first time he disappeared

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without notice. Yet, in spite of his individualistic streak, “he was forward thinking, clear on what the organization needed to do, and people in the street simply liked him.”¹⁶ Because he was revered and respected his departure was demoralizing to many in the group’s rank and file and the community. With Luciano gone, the Young Lords lost a brave fighter and inspirational leader. Among his other virtues, he grasped the political value of solidarity between Puerto Ricans and black Americans. The organization didn’t realize it at the time, but in losing Luciano it also lost the person best positioned to challenge the narrow notion of Puerto Rican nationalism that was under way in the organization, promoted as it was by an increasingly influential, and particularly authoritarian, emerging cadre.

Puerto Rican Student Conference at Columbia

Not long before Luciano’s demotion in early September, two members of the Central Committee, Juan González and Juan “Fi” Ortiz, traveled to Puerto Rico. The reasons were manifold. They intended to learn about the different political formations on the island and to plant the seeds for a collaborative relationship between the YLP and the island’s left-leaning, pro-independence parties. Influenced by his new wife and fellow comrade in the organization, Gloria Fontanez, González explored the terrain for branch building in Puerto Rico, an idea that was supported by one or two members of the Central Committee but would not be revealed to the party cadre until much later.¹⁷ The more immediate task before González and Ortiz was to meet with island students who were leading mass antiwar protests against the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) at the University of Puerto Rico. González and Ortiz wanted to invite leaders of the pro-independence student group, Frente Universitario Pro-Independencia, to join them at the Puerto Rican Student Conference in New York, scheduled for a month later at Columbia University, on September 22 and 23.

Back on the mainland, the YLP was turning its attention not to another dramatic takeover but to a far less flashy goal: student organizing. In August, just before the start of the school year, the Lords had partnered with the Puerto Rican Student Union (PRSU) to begin a series of student initiatives at local high schools and colleges.¹⁸ The PRSU emerged a year earlier in September 1969 to bring together Puerto Rican students who had been involved, over the past two years, in various protests across New York City: in the effort to ban the ROTC from recruiting on City University of New York (CUNY) campuses; to establish a Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter, Lehman, and Brooklyn Colleges; and to create an open admissions standard throughout the city’s public colleges.¹⁹ The Young Lords and the PRSU consolidated their relationship at the Puerto Rican Student Conference at Columbia University. The approximately 800 students in attendance heard speeches by members

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of the PRSU, the YLP, and Frente Universitario Pro-Independecia. The titles of the weekend's workshops typified both the big-picture thinking of student organizing in the 1960s and the broad variety of topics that the Young Lords deemed essential for radical social change: "Third World Unity," "The Draft and the Military," "The Role of Women in Revolutionary Struggle," "Political Prisoners," "Socialism," and "Media & Education."²⁰ Another workshop, "Latin American and Latin Unity," suggests that the Young Lords were forging a new identity based on common experiences of people migrating to cities such as New York from Latin America after having been displaced by Cold War-era, U.S. military and economic interventions in places such as Guatemala in 1954 and the Dominican Republic in 1965, among others.²¹ In fact, through regular use of the term "Latin," the Young Lords were among the first to conceptualize the term "Latino/a." Their rendition of the term, however, underscored a shared political experience of regional underdevelopment produced by U.S. political and economic domination rather than contemporary appeals to *latinidad* on the basis of language and culture alone. The conference's closing remarks included speeches by radicals of Chicano, Cuban, and Dominican descent. A summary of the last panel observed that the Dominican presenter "eloquently linked the struggles for unity and freedom of the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, [which] can only be accomplished, said he, through militant opposition to outside oppression and eventual socialism (in the DR and PR)."²²

The group embraced a pan-Latinx orientation despite the hard nationalist turn it was about to take. The conference took place on the 102nd anniversary of El Grito de Lares, the first recorded rebellion against foreign rule in Puerto Rico, and a number of conference sessions focused on the history of Puerto Rico's independence movement and the island's contemporary politics. At its closing session, Young Lord conveners encouraged participants to sign a pledge saying that they would organize Liberate Puerto Rico Now committees in high schools and on college campuses. This marked the first tangible initiative to make Puerto Rican independence an organizational focus and priority of the party. The myriad campus activities that followed took on an organizational life of their own, but the PRSU was influenced by the Young Lords' politics. Although the PRSU remained independent from the Young Lords, its members began to wear red berets. Over the next year, the Liberate Puerto Rico Now committees became the basis upon which the PRSU and Young Lords developed Marxist-Leninist chapters in New York's universities. These linked Puerto Rican independence to antiwar protests and the struggle of the Vietnamese and challenged the emerging political backlash: the surge in school regulations and the suppression of free speech and political association in high schools.²³ The chapters also supported the overhaul of Eurocentric academic curricula and the introduction of ethnic studies. The Columbia conference and the activities initiated in its immediate

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aftermath laid the groundwork for an impressive turnout at the Young Lords' Free Puerto Rico Now march to the United Nations on October 30, 1970. That march began a gradual shift in the Young Lords' political perspective.

Heightened Repression

Since their formation in the summer of 1969, the Young Lords had been the object of police surveillance, harassment, and arrest. Justifications for their surveillance came from New York City Council president Sanford D. Garelik. A highly visible politician, he attributed criminal and violent intent to the Young Lords' politics and militancy. Motivated by a regressive agenda, Garelik lumped the Black Panthers and the Young Lords together with the Weather Underground, a white splinter group of Students for a Democratic Society. He denounced them as "armed terrorist group[s]" and accused each of terrorism.²⁴

Historically, authorities have invoked the term "terrorist" to criminalize organizers and dissidents.²⁵ By the classic, nineteenth-century definition, however, most U.S. radicals of the 1960s were not terrorists; they were not individual actors using violence to intimidate or instill fear among civilians as a strategy for advancing their cause.²⁶ Nevertheless, in the late 1960s, politicians began to use the term against radicals of all stripes, including the small sector of radicals who employed violence as a political strategy but who weren't terrorists either. Epitomized by the Weather Underground, these actors turned to armed propaganda against property and the symbols of government power. National independence movements deployed similar strategies against sites of colonial military and political power in places like Palestine, Algeria, and South Africa.²⁷ The term "guerrillas" more accurately describes these international actors.²⁸

Garelik was building upon an existing blueprint. A decade earlier, conservatives across the country began to link civil rights demands to the communist boogeyman. But with the political ascendancy of Third World guerrilla communists in places like Vietnam and Cuba, terrorism came to replace communism as "the growing peril." Garelik also deployed the term "guerilla" against them. He told the *New York Times*, "These are urban guerrillas, the outgrowth of an era of disrespect for law and acceptance of Maoist Philosophy of guerrilla warfare." Again, given the growing legitimacy of decolonization movements, Garelik employed the language of race ideology—disrespect of law—to suppress and stigmatize activists of color. In addition to criminalizing radicals of color, the logic mandated respect for authority as precondition to claims on the right of redress. These regressive narratives did not emerge by happenstance. As we have seen, their logic was crafted earlier in the decade by a Madison Avenue public relations firm hired by the city's powerful police union to defeat the civilian complaint review board at the polls in 1966.

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Though the Young Lords had not employed weapons during their campaigns, the organization's political platform supported "armed struggle." In an earlier conversation with the *New York Times* in March 1970, Pablo Guzmán said that "the only way to achieve liberation is by picking up guns—and we're moving our people in that direction." The statement spoke of events to come.²⁹ At around the same time, the Weather Underground began its underground bombing campaigns of state buildings and university sites where faculty were contributing research and technology to the military-industrial complex. Believing, like many others, that a world revolutionary crisis was on the horizon, Weathermen activities were launched in solidarity with Third World anti-imperialist revolutions abroad. At home, they were galvanized by the black power movement and welcomed the idea that their violent propaganda would redirect state repression away from the Black Panther Party (BPP).³⁰

Historically, those committed to revolution have accepted what they perceive as inevitable in a revolutionary situation: that armed struggle is a necessity in the process of wresting power from the armed opposition forces of the state. For these actors, the use of violence and armed force is not the main issue of concern. More important is the question of timing. And even more central in debates within the revolutionary Left is the relationship between those "picking up the gun" and the mass mobilization of people at the bottom of society.³¹ In this instance, the Young Lords, like others in the New Left, were either engaging in or considering the use of violence for several reasons. Some believed widespread rebellion was on the horizon. In reality, the movements were on the path of decline. Others saw mounting state repression as a reason to embrace the right to self-defense within their relatively small groups, which they confused with a defense of the masses in their communities. Amid the disorientation and siege mentality produced by state repression radicals became somewhat isolated from their communities. They began to see themselves increasingly as enlightened actors. Before long they began to substitute the painstaking task of grassroots mobilization with heroic acts of sacrifice taken on behalf of "the people."

Although the Young Lords did not experience the same homicidal state repression that befell the Black Panthers, the NYPD increased its repression and arrest of their members after the December 1969 occupation of the FSUMC in East Harlem. Six months later in June 1970, when the Young Lords led a spontaneous march in East Harlem protesting the beating by police of a teenager, riot-gear-clad police descended on their office. According to the Young Lords, when a bottle hit one of the police vans—likely hurled by the combative crowd of community residents gathered outside—the police "jumped out of their trucks like John Wayne on the range and went crazy, beating on every Puerto Rican they could catch, old and young alike." By the end of the clash, one Young Lord was unconscious on the pavement, and two others, David "Pelú" Jacobs and

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Benjamin Cruz, were arrested and beaten in the police van and at the precinct, suffering serious head injuries and fractures.³²

That same month, the group's youngest Central Committee member, sixteen-year-old Juan "Fi" Ortiz, was arrested and charged with the kidnapping, robbery, and assault of Jack McCall, who (according to the Lords and neighborhood reports compiled by the mayor's Urban Action Task Force) had taken to soliciting monetary contributions on behalf of the YLP without the group's authorization.³³ When police arrested Ortiz based on McCall's testimony, the Young Lords called a rally in East Harlem to protest what they believed to be a police setup. Ortiz was released soon after, but the demonstration against his arrest the next day attracted hundreds of black and Puerto Rican youth. At the start of the rally, David Perez, another member of the group's Central Committee, was arrested—plucked "out of a crowd of hundreds by plain clothes pigs," suggestive of a premeditated campaign by the police to arrest or frame the formal leaders of the group.³⁴

Later that night after the demonstration wound down, throngs of teenagers—many of whom had likely joined the Young Lords' protest—began to riot. A dozen firemen and seven policemen were injured when called to the scene.³⁵ In the aftermath, the police made public statements linking the Young Lords with the disturbances. The group's public reputation was cleared when the *New York Times* and other media sources published testimonies of shopkeepers and eyewitnesses who maintained that the group was absent when the rioting began.³⁶ On several separate occasions, members were taken into custody for offenses so petty that they were dismissed immediately by judges who found the arrests ungrounded or the charges excessive.³⁷

The Young Lords' public pronouncements about the right of people of color to armed self-defense increased in relation to the growing number of targeted campaigns of state violence and political disruption against them and other movement persons. Just a month before the police beat and arrested the Young Lords in front of their office, the country witnessed the tragedy at Kent State University. On May 4, the Ohio National Guard opened fire on unarmed students protesting the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, killing four protesters and wounding nine others. The Young Lords' perspective developed in the context of the highly publicized framing, a year earlier in April 1969, by NYPD and COINTELPRO of twenty-one BPP members. The Panther 21 were falsely accused, tried, and eventually acquitted of planning coordinated bombings and armed attacks on the Board of Education office in Queens and two police precincts—the Forty-Fourth and Twenty-Fourth in the Bronx and Manhattan, respectively.³⁸ The psychological impact on radicals of mounting arrests, beatings, and surveillance was profound. It distorted their sense of reality and ability to properly assess the political character of the period. Like others during the period, the YLP inac-

curately assessed the moment. They interpreted mounting state repression as a sign that the United States was galloping into fascism. Significantly, they believed a revolutionary situation was under way among a broad sector of the population, which legitimized the party's call to "pick up the gun."

A Devastating Inquiry

On the evening of October 13, 1970, undercover narcotics police arrested two Young Lords, Julio Roldán and Robert "Bobby" Lemus, charging them with attempted arson. The circumstances appeared to fit the pattern of unsubstantiated charges against organization members. These arrests would galvanize New York activists, and in particular the people of East Harlem and the Bronx, in support of the Young Lords. They would also position the group toward another confrontation with the FSUMC and Mayor Lindsay's administration.

According to a major municipal investigation of the arrests, the two activists were apprehended for allegedly attempting to set fire to the vestibule of an East Harlem building in the aftermath of a garbage demonstration that, although initiated by the Young Lords, had taken on a life of its own.³⁹ Roldán and Lemus decried the charges as absurd because they and other members of the organization were building tenants. The men maintained that amid the protests, they entered the building to put out burning debris that had been swept into the vestibule. A few minutes later, three undercover narcotics officers jumped out of their vehicles, guns drawn, and apprehended them.⁴⁰ According to Lemus, the men were "insulted and picked on" during the car ride to the Twenty-Third Precinct and again during their 1:00 A.M. transfer to the Twenty-Fifth Precinct, the proper jurisdiction for the address of their arrest. Police zeroed in on Roldán's mild manner, hurled epithets at him, and mockingly called him "cookie" because he was the chief cook and organizer of the Young Lords' "mess hall," a sign that the NYPD kept close watch on the group's membership and its activities.⁴¹

Back at the precinct, police informed Roldán and Lemus that they could make a personal call through the arresting officer, Hubert Erwin, who dialed the office of the Young Lords. Two hours later, the Young Lords sent attorney Barbara Handschu and law clerk Carol Goodman to the precinct. Both were denied a private conversation with their clients.⁴²

Because the Twenty-Fifth Precinct did not have a holding pen, the detainees were eventually returned at 4:30 A.M. to the Twenty-Third Precinct, where they spent the rest of the night in a cold, empty cell with no benches. Their requests to police to close the cell window fell on deaf ears. A few hours later they were transferred once again, this time to 100 Centre Street, for arraignment. On the ride, officers Erwin and James Murphy levied a barrage of questions and insults at Roldán. In the courtroom, two attorneys were trying to meet them before the

proceedings began: Lemus was represented by Handschu, and Roldán by attorney Dan Pochoda, both National Lawyers Guild members. Neither lawyer was allowed access to their client. When Roldán's case was called in the afternoon, Pochoda asked Judge Hyman Solniker if he could speak to his client; the judge snapped back "I can't create the Utopia here" and denied the request because of the backlog. On that day, Judge Solniker had to hear 283 arraignments over the course of eight hours, with little time for lunch, which afforded only 1.7 minutes, or 102 seconds, for each case.⁴³ This exponential rise in arrests and the backlog created in arraignment proceedings in urban counties was unprecedented. It was one of the many consequences of the country's "law and order" campaigns, which manipulated crime statistics, identified drug use and trafficking a major crime, increased the number of police officers in urban centers, and criminalized residents involved in urban rebellions and organizers alike. Roldán interrupted the proceeding and yelled: "There is no justice in this court. There is no one here to represent us. Our lawyers have not had a chance to speak with us. This is only happening because I'm Puerto Rican."⁴⁴ Irritated and with no time to spare, Judge Solniker postponed the hearing until the end of the day.

While the detainees were being transferred to another section of the courtroom, the lawyers were finally able to talk to them. When they were recalled, Roldán's counsel tried to explain that the charges against the defendants were excessive because they were civic-minded members of their community whose friends and relatives lived in that building. Because Roldán had no prior record, Pochoda could have convincingly argued that his client be released on his own recognizance, pending trial; but no such argument was made because Pochoda intended to present this as follow-up argument, which the judge did not allow.⁴⁵ When Roldán again interrupted, saying that "he had set no fire," Judge Solniker asked that the prisoners be removed from the court. According to Lemus, Officer Erwin proceeded to bend Roldán's arm behind his back and "push and shove and knee him out of the courtroom." When someone in the courtroom yelled, "They're beating him," the judge demanded that the person making the complaint be taken out too. Officer Erwin later admitted to putting Roldán in a "hammerlock with one arm behind his back and put his [Erwin's] other arm on his collar, thereby forcing his head down . . . to move Roldán out of the courtroom."⁴⁶

By his own admission, the district attorney requested a high bail of \$2,500 because the deposition of the police officers suggested that this was "a heavy case" involving the Young Lords as defendants. This was a clear indication that the men's political associations were prejudicing the proceedings, in keeping with the trend of local police departments collaborating with the FBI to neutralize 1960s radicals. Ordered by FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, who identified the BPP as the nation's major "internal security threat," these directives sought to coun-

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teract militant domestic organizing, which in the context of the U.S. military crisis in Vietnam, threatened to further erode the nation's power and political legitimacy around the world.⁴⁷ Back in the courtroom, the prosecutor proposed a high bail because Roldán and Lemus allegedly gave "false" addresses, even though the defendants had given the address of the Young Lords' headquarters, well known to police. In the context of his arduous arraignment schedule, the judge was predisposed to side with prosecutors and police, with whom he worked closely day after day. In the end he set bail at \$1,500, the standard for a serious felony case not likely to end in a lesser charge of misdemeanor.⁴⁸

Julio Roldán's arrest and arraignment offers a window into the botched legal process that, beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, exponentially increased the arrest and jailing of people of color living in urban centers. This trend imposed on defendants disproportionately severe charges for victimless crimes and minor felonies, a new development in U.S. history.⁴⁹ In an attempt to convey the consequences of decisions made at arraignment hearings, a later investigation into the arrest and imprisonment of Julio Roldán ordered by New York's mayor, John V. Lindsay, recommended that "every judge assigned to arraigning prisoners who may be confined in the Tombs be invited to spend a 12 hour period in the MHD [Manhattan House of Detention for Men] before beginning his assignment."⁵⁰

On their way to an upper-level holding pen in the court later that day, Roldán and Lemus were subjected to more rough treatment, then separated. Early in the evening of October 14, Roldán and twelve other men were finally transferred to the Manhattan House of Detention for Men next to the courthouse for prisoners awaiting trial. Known as the Tombs it was named for the resemblance of its original 1838 structure to an Egyptian tomb.⁵¹ Described as a "melancholy picture of a fortress in bedlam" by the federal judge who ruled in favor of closing the detention center in 1974, the Tombs was an oppressive edifice of steel and concrete, "built like a series of safety deposit boxes."⁵² As detainees were escorted to their cells they passed at least eight guarded steel doors. In the words of a Corrections Department spokesperson, "The Tombs was built in the Ma Parks, Bonnie and Clyde, Dillinger, and Al Capone era and its [architectural style] reflected America's attitude at the time that every criminal was a 'mad dog,' the feeling was lock them up and forget about them."⁵³ Those who wrote the Roldán report prefaced their remarks by saying, "If we kept our animals in the Central Park Zoo in the way we cage fellow human being in the Tombs, a Citizens Committee would be organized, and prominent community leaders would be protesting the inhumanity of our society."⁵⁴

Upon arrival, Roldán underwent the routine admission procedure: he surrendered his wallet and personal belongings and was stripped and searched. Following the regulatory shower, the prisoners were allowed to wear their own clothes and proceeded to a meeting with the medical examiner to briefly docu-

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ment their medical history. Roldán registered athlete's foot as a problem and was given an ointment. The prisoners were transferred to the eighth floor, and Roldán was assigned a cell on the floor's lower level, Lower E-4, where he joined another prisoner who had been there since July.

The detention of Roldán and Lemus came just two months after a rebellion at the Tombs, during which prisoners held thirty corrections officers hostage in protest of deplorable conditions. At the time of the Young Lords' imprisonment, the Tombs was observing twenty-four-hour lockdowns, with no yard time, exercise, or "eating period outside of the cell."⁵⁵ This routine rendered detention an insufferable purgatory. Inmates spent most of their time in squalid cells the size of small walk-in closets, "enclosed in solid steel on three sides with bar gates forming the fourth side."⁵⁶ Although the cells were designed for one prisoner, they often housed two or even three men, one of whom often slept on the bare floor for lack of mattresses. A count done a few months before the rebellion revealed that the 932-inmate facility was housing close to 3,000 prisoners.⁵⁷ In addition to being overpopulated, these holding pens were infested with rats, roaches, and vermin. Perhaps the greatest crime of the Tombs was in how it was used: as a maximum-security prison that primarily held persons accused of minor felonies and misdemeanors who could not immediately post bail. This reality led prisoners to charge that "poverty and race are the crimes that are really being punished."⁵⁸

From the time of arrest until release or transfer, Tombs detention was an assault on the senses. The jail had no access to fresh air or daylight. Sunlight rarely filtered through the facility's small frosted-glass windows; inmates often experienced disorientation since they couldn't determine whether it was morning or night. The noise level alone was enough to disturb the mental balance of a sane person. According to one account, "At 5:50 A.M., service crews drag metal garbage cans along concrete floors. Noise at the Tombs builds up as the day progresses: a blend of piped music, the high-pitched clicking of metal trays being stacked, the guards shouting, 'Stand by your cells,' for the morning count, and the clanging of steel doors against concrete, the blare of the television set and the inmates' voices reverberating off tile walls." This cacophony rose to a level of eighty decibels, a level comparable to that produced in the New York subways during rush hour.⁵⁹ These conditions regularly led to the psychological breakdown of detainees and the use of brutal corporal punishment by guards to restrain them. Detention at the Tombs was more trying than actual imprisonment.

On the day of his transfer to the Tombs, Roldán had been enraged by the trampling of his rights in the courtroom. By the time he was shuttled through the noisy, labyrinthine corridors and catwalks of the prison en route to his cell, the Young Lord had fallen silent. His cellmate later reported that when Roldán arrived he was upset and "alternatively frustrated, angry, crying, [and] laugh-

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ing” and that periodically Roldán would give his cellmate “hostile looks.” Other prisoners and cellmates also reported that Roldán began to rage, in Spanish and English, about “the oppression of minority groups, starving babies, killing of blacks, revolution, the establishment trying to kill minority groups and him, corruption and poison in the air.” Later in the evening, he began to jump off his top bunk. He would land on the concrete floor, scramble back up the makeshift ladder, and jump off the bed again, over and over again.⁶⁰

The next morning, on October 15, a prisoner sweeping the floors tried to speak to Roldán, who responded with gestures as if he were a mute. Later Roldán began asking the prisoner “stupid” questions including where he could get gas to make a bomb. The prisoner alerted the guards that Roldán should be transferred to the observation section of the prison. Later Roldán told his cellmate, “I will prove to you that I’m a man,” and punched him. Nearby prisoners alerted guards from their cells and again suggested that Roldán be transferred to the observation block; instead, the guards transferred Roldán’s cellmate to a separate cell.⁶¹ Broken down both by the maddening noise at the Tombs and by the unnerving uncertainty of imprisonment, Roldán was experiencing the frustration, sense of impotence, and delirium that often led to violent explosions there.

Civilian access to the facility was severely limited. Detainees were often unable to communicate with their court-appointed lawyers or loved ones and didn’t learn of the date and time of their trial until the day they were scheduled to appear in court. The Young Lords would not have been allowed a visit, but they sent a telegram to Roldán and Lemus, which the men had not yet received. That same evening, Roldán asked the sweeper-prisoner how he could get out of the jail. The prisoner responded that someone would have to post bail. Prisoners reported that Roldán “talked at length about revolution, the poor, the Young Lords. . . . One inmate described Roldán’s behavior as that of one who had ‘realized the truth about his people.’ And his ‘list of grievances’ were received affirmatively by prisoners who yelled ‘right on.’”⁶²

The next morning, Friday, October 16, at 6:50 A.M., Roldán’s name was called two or three times over the loudspeaker on the sixth floor of the prison. The Young Lords telegram had finally been processed; it read, “Sit tight, we are trying to get bail money.” Although the guard noticed a discrepancy, he read the message over the sixth-floor loudspeaker, per standard operating procedure with telegrams. Roldán was on the *eighth* floor.

At 8:30 A.M., the guard conducting the morning prisoner count found Julio Roldán hanging by a belt from the rear bars of his cell.

That guard went in search of two other guards, a requirement before opening any cell. Then he had to get two keys, neither of which guards carried, to access a panel box that opened and closed the areas’ mechanical gates and the cell doors. As word spread, prisoners began to shout, “Cut him down!” All the

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Tombs guards, according to the later report, carried penknives “at all times for the express purpose of cutting down inmates who are attempting suicide.”⁶³ One officer held Roldán’s waist and the other cut the belt and lay him face-up on the lower bunk, at which point “two Captains arrived with resuscitators, one tried to find a pulse, while the other looked for a heartbeat and administered a cardiac massage.” A doctor arrived shortly thereafter, performed a series of tests, and determined that Roldán’s body “was beyond assistance.” The doctor speculated that he could have been dead for at least one hour from the time he arrived at the scene.⁶⁴ Prisoners who were interviewed said that they had contact with him at approximately 7:00 A.M. when Roldán, who was in the E-4 cell, replied, “Yeah, brother,” when he was asked to help pass pipe tobacco or a rolled cigarette between the E-5 cell and the E-3 cell. And at about 7:50 A.M., a prisoner-worker remembered greeting the Young Lord with “Hi, brother,” as he served him breakfast and Roldán took the tray to the table. It is likely that Roldán died between 7:50 and 8:30 A.M.

A preliminary prison assessment conducted by the Tombs’ house captain, who interviewed the prisoners of the Lower E block, determined that Roldán committed suicide. The assistant deputy warden then “made calls to official agencies.” According to *El Diario La Prensa*, at least five police precincts (the Twenty-Third, Twenty-Fifth, and Ninth in Harlem and East Harlem and the Forty-First and Forty-Second in the Bronx) and two divisions of the NYPD were immediately placed on emergency alert, with the expectation that the news would lead to violent protests.⁶⁵ By midmorning, the Catholic chaplain was allowed into Roldán’s cell to administer last rites, before a police sergeant, two police officers, the medical examiner, and an ambulance technician conducted another series of tests and then arranged to transport Roldán’s body to the City of New York’s office of the chief examiner. The prison captain reportedly called what he thought was the number of Roldán’s nephew to deliver the news. According to the report, the person who answered the phone identified “the chapter or division title of the organization and his name followed by some phrase to the effect of ‘officer of the day’ . . . the same type of response he would expect when one calls a military institution of the MHD.”⁶⁶ Roldán had given the number of the Young Lords’ East Harlem office. Within hours, the Young Lords leadership sent out an emergency alert to its membership and supporters throughout the city.

At 4:00 P.M. a member of the chief coroner’s office, Dr. John. F. Devlin, began to conduct an autopsy alongside the chief and deputy chief medical examiners, Dr. Milton Halpern and Dr. Michael Baden. The autopsy, completed shortly thereafter, was witnessed by two other doctors. They were Dr. David Spain of Brookdale Hospital in Brooklyn and Dr. Oliver Fein, a young progressive doctor

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who had recently begun to volunteer at the Tombs as an advocate for prisoners' medical rights and a member of Health Policy Advisory Center.⁶⁷ The Young Lords and Julio Roldán's family, respectively, requested the presence of these doctors. Neither of these doctors were pathologists, however. The chief medical examiner officially declared the death a suicide by hanging.

It was time for the Young Lords to tell the world.

A year after their emergence, the Young Lords had mastered the art of the press conference. Their eloquent, strategic, and smart communiqués injected an unlikely, young New Left perspective into New York's public discourse. On Saturday, October 17, 1970, the day after what appeared as Roldán's suspicious "hanging," Pablo Guzmán explained the Young Lords' version of the events at a press conference: "Yesterday we found out that our brother Julio Roldán . . . was found murdered in his cell in the Tombs." Julio was thirty-three years old. News of the "murder" of yet another prisoner at the Tombs, this time of a Young Lord, spread like wildfire through East Harlem and through the larger movement.

Although Dr. Fein was present at the autopsy when the medical examiner declared the death a suicide, the Young Lords still doubted the process. They believed that Julio Roldán had been murdered by guards. Guzmán went on to discuss the "bogus" circumstances of Roldán's and Bobby Lemus's arrests and that the Young Lords had already heard from those inside the Tombs that "at 5:00 A.M. on the day the body was discovered inmates heard him screaming and there was a guard present." He added, "Now they're trying to say that he hung himself with his belt." According to Guzmán, because Roldán was taken to the eighth floor, the psychiatric section of the Tombs, prison officials should have automatically removed his laces and belt. But a later study reported that although prisoners at the Tombs had on two different occasions implored guards to transfer Roldán to the special observation section of the eighth floor, he never was. Roldán's murder, Guzmán suggested, was linked to that of Jose Perez, another prisoner who, on the same day, "was found dead of another supposed suicide." He continued, "Since 1967 or 1966 there have been countless stories of blacks and Puerto Ricans who were brought to their cells alive, and their families were then told that they had committed suicide. . . . This has been happening to our people for so long. . . . It's beginning to add up, and now it's got to be called genocide."⁶⁸

In the wake of Roldán's death, two other prisoners unaffiliated with the YLP, Anibal Davila and Raymond Lavon, were also found hanging from the cross-bars of their cells. By year's end, there would be eight reported suicides in the Tombs.⁶⁹ To a civilian population that was becoming more acquainted with the atrocities committed in the Tombs—especially after the prison riots that occurred only months earlier, in late August 1970—these cases seemed suspicious. In the case of Raymond Lavon, there was evidence that he had been violently

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subdued by prison guards in the days before his death, and the three-inch fracture in his skull revealed in his autopsy increased suspicions about the allegedly suicidal deaths at the Tombs.⁷⁰

The Young Lords' tone at the press conference that day was as fiery as always, unafraid to indict vast swaths of society and adamant about making the connections between the lives of individuals and the circumstances of a people. But that press conference also presaged a permanent shift in the organization. Roldán's death emboldened the Young Lords with a darker spirit of rebellion. In a decade that witnessed numerous political murders—of civil rights leaders and organizers, of Black Panthers by the FBI, of Che Guevara at the hands of the CIA—Roldán's fate ushered in the ultimate repression to the organization's doorstep. The tragedy imbued members' preexisting political commitment with a sense of loyalty to the organization. And that loyalty, born of grief, grew more resolute.

Rebels with a Cause

The viewing of Roldán's body on Sunday morning October 18 at the González Funeral Home on 109th Street and Madison Avenue, a block away from the Young Lord' office, attracted throngs of people. They came from East Harlem and the Bronx. And the entire membership of the Young Lords, which now numbered approximately 1,000, came to pay their last respects. At about noon, when the flow of attendees was at its peak, the Young Lords closed the doors. They removed Roldán's casket from the González Funeral Home and led a stirring funeral march through the neighborhood, alongside members of Roldán's family, including his cousin Jesus Villanueva, also a Young Lord. Roldán's casket was carried by a roll call of members of New Left organizations of color: the Lords, the BPP, I Wor Kuen, Movimiento Pro Independencia, and Los Siete de la Raza. In keeping with the group's militaristic temperament, a larger group of Young Lords served as "revolutionary honor guards," the ceremonial guards that accompany funeral processions of fallen officers in the military. Solidarity with the Young Lords was palpable at the procession, which drew thousands of marchers, and thousands more witnessed it from their tenement windows.

Crowds of onlookers lined the sidewalks, picking up on and repeating the marchers' chants: "Julio Roldán, los Boricuas se vengarán" (Julio Roldán, Puerto Ricans will avenge your death), "Fuego, fuego, fuego, los yanquis quieren fuego" (Fire, fire, fire, the Yankees want some fire), and "Pick up the gun, go left, go right now, pick up the gun." Others hung out of their apartment windows, fists raised.

The Young Lords' final stop was the FSUMC. As its doors were forced open, hundreds poured inside the worship hall where the Young Lords intended to hold another viewing of the body, alongside a socially conscious ceremony.



Pallbearers carry Julio Roldán's coffin. (Photograph by David Fenton)

Once Roldán's casket was situated and opened on the altar, out came a small arsenal, including automatic weapons, carbines, and pistols, which had been tucked into the casket next to Roldán's body back at the funeral home before the procession. The next day, the *New York Times* captured photographs of two Young Lords flanking Roldán's casket and bearing arms. According to a report filed by an undercover agent on the day of the occupation, the Young Lords had in their possession "three carbines, five 12 gauge shotguns, two .30–30 rifles, one .22 caliber rifle, two .38 caliber pistols, one .22 caliber pistol and five or six alleged small home-made explosive devices. All are believed loaded and with a limited stock of additional ammunition available. Attempts are being made to obtain more ammunition. A member of the American Service Union was heard to offer that he would get two M-16 rifles. His offer was accepted."⁷¹

Until now, the Young Lords had tactically avoided brandishing weapons publicly. They wanted to avoid unnecessary arrests and confrontations with police. But they also promoted the right to armed self-defense. If ever there was a moment for them to take up arms, this was it.

From Watts to East Harlem, urban rebellions had coursed through the coun-

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try like a hurricane, drawing thousands of black Americans into pitched confrontations with law enforcement. Puerto Ricans and Mexican Americans took part in these uprisings as well. In 1968, the Vietnamese brought the war to the cities during Tet and led an armed occupation of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. That same year, a poll determined that 20 percent of the American student population supported the idea of a revolutionary party.⁷² It had been approximately one hundred years since Europe colonized Africa and Asia, and so-called Third World people were taking up arms in the name of independence and self-determination—and most of the world rooted for them. And in the country's most regimented sector, the American armed forces, generals registered a significant increase in mutinous activity.

Taking up arms was a political statement rife with symbolism. It sent a message that the Young Lords were not going to accept the state's repressive violence, that they were not going to lay down to die, and that things had to change. The armed occupation of the People's Church was to the Young Lords what the armed march into California's state capitol in Sacramento was to the Black Panthers. It was the first and only time in modern American history that racially oppressed people in the United States asserted their right to bear arms in the public sphere. They deliberately adopted a tradition that has, for the most part, been understood to apply exclusively to Europeans and their U.S. descendants.

The act of displaying arms drew greater attention to the Young Lords within larger movement circles. It brought into their orbit hundreds more young people angry about police harassment, detention, arrests, and the conditions of poverty and discrimination in daily urban life. Some older East Harlem residents must have looked on these developments with mixed feelings of momentary pride and frightened disapproval. As exhilarating and cathartic as it was to prisoners and youth in New York, these armed occupations also horrified many in the Puerto Rican community.⁷³ A flyer that the Young Lords distributed at the church offered an explanation for their decision to bear arms: "We are armed because we must defend ourselves, and we advise all Puerto Ricans in New York to begin preparing for their defense. The U.S. government is killing us, and now we must defend ourselves or die as a nation."⁷⁴ Speaking at the church, Juan González asked rhetorically, "Why the arms? Why do we feel it necessary to come into this church with arms to make these demands to the city?" González then proceeded to review the history of the Young Lords' campaigns before the crowd of old and young seated in the church pews. The lesson learned, he explained, is that "every time we move to remedy the ills of our community, we are struck down." After he condemned the state for failing to meet human need, he went on to expose its repressive character: "Now they have killed one of our members and we've seen what's happened to our political parties in the past . . . to the Nationalist Party in Puerto Rico that was wiped out by the United States. We've

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seen what happened to the Black Panther Party. Year in and year out the police departments across this country have little by little killed them, such that there are now thirty Black Panthers left.”⁷⁵

The armed church occupation increased government surveillance. It also increased repression of the organization.

In describing the social crisis they saw around them, the Young Lords used language that foreshadowed the mass warehousing of poor, urban black American and Latinx communities in the 1980s and 1990s in U.S. prisons and the violent consequences of the militarization of police departments in urban communities across the nation. González ended his quietly rousing remarks with a defiant assertion: “Now is the time for us to say exactly how we’re going to respond to the killing of our people. We are not going to sit by and allow more Julios and more Carmen Rodriguez abortion deaths. We have to stand up for the people, for the Puerto Rican people and say, ‘That’s enough!’” A few minutes later, the Young Lords informed those in attendance that they were taking possession of the church.

Taken two days after Roldán’s death, the Young Lords’ response was bolder and exponentially more spontaneous and therefore more dangerous than any of their previous actions. In this sense, bitterness more than strategy informed their declaration of war. The armed occupation could precipitate a violent confrontation with police, and the Young Lords were preparing for that scenario. David Perez was at the helm of defense. In the case of a siege, the Central Committee would evacuate the church, and Perez and his team of ten would remain behind to defend the Young Lords’ position in an armed confrontation.⁷⁶ Because they were so ill prepared for the armed operation, the Young Lords’ actions evinced political disorientation. It appeared that in avenging the tragedy of Roldán’s death, the Young Lords were more committed to violence than they were to laying out a strategy for building a larger movement and winning a significant political victory.

The day before the occupation, a desperate and frightened David Perez went in search of Felipe Luciano to seek operational advice and assistance in acquiring more weapons through the former chairman’s wide-ranging street connections. Luciano vehemently opposed an armed occupation of the church. He charged that the organization was headed toward a suicide mission that would risk the lives of its members, the majority of whom had absolutely no weapons training—including those on Perez’s defense unit. He pleaded with Perez, pointing out that the Young Lords were barely adults and that some were still children. But the Central Committee had already made its decision, and so Luciano cooperated with apprehension and showed up at the church, but he chided Perez some more when he witnessed members of the security team stumble while handling and loading the guns.⁷⁷

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With members of the press in the audience, the group called on the Methodist Church to contribute a \$150,000 grant to the Young Lords for a legal defense center, which the group planned to launch in the church basement. The mission of the center was to document abuses against prisoners by corrections officers and against civilians at the hands of the police. In addition, the center would provide psychological counseling to young men who had been drafted, one expression of the group's antiwar stance. The second demand called on the city to allow clergymen full visitation rights in prisons as well as the authority to investigate prison conditions, "especially the murders of Julio Roldán, Jose Perez, and three of the negotiators at the Queens House of Detention uprising on October 1."⁷⁸ The demand galvanized a group of clergymen from different denominations, who organized a meeting that week where they presented the proposal to the city commissioner of corrections, George McGrath. When the commissioner rejected the proposal, which the clerics perceived as just and reasonable, eighteen of them joined with the Young Lords in the church occupation.⁷⁹

The Young Lords occupation took advantage of heightened public awareness concerning prison conditions following multiple rebellions by prisoners from August to October 1970 in the city's network of jails. For two days beginning on August 10, 1970, more than 800 prisoners took four floors of the Tombs, held eight guards hostage, and presented a list of ten grievances to the media and city officials. The ebb and flow of the uprising followed a familiar pattern. After hostages were taken and floors were secured, prisoners unleashed a torrent of anger against the jail that mainly targeted property; prisoner leaders, who restored calm and discipline, then became spokesmen and negotiators with city officials. The prisoners' grievances were known to the city. But Mayor Lindsay and Commissioner McGrath had failed to implement the recommendations made by two major reports released in 1969 and 1970 on overcrowding and poor, inhabitable conditions, respectively.⁸⁰ Chief among the prisoners' grievances was being held without having been convicted of any crime: half the prisoners in the city's jails were imprisoned for at least six months before trial, and many waited longer than a year. Other grievances included high bail set for defendants of color; inadequate legal aid services; overcrowding; inedible food; a wretched environment filled with rats, mice, lice, and roaches; poor medical care; guard brutality; and harassment and abuse of prisoners' visitors by guards. Prison officials regained control of the facility only when, after nine days of meetings with the prisoners, Mayor Lindsay, Commissioner McGrath, and others acknowledged that the prisoners' grievances accurately reflected claims of "cruel and unusual punishment."⁸¹

In the absence of meaningful change, another series of prison rebellions ensued less than two months later, on October 1, 1970, at the Queens House of Detention on Long Island, to which nine members of the Panther 21 had been

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transferred after the Tombs rebellion that summer. With the presence of Black Panthers and prisoners who had participated in the Tombs rebellion in August, the rebellion was better orchestrated and the demands more sophisticated. In exchange for the release of some hostages, the prisoners demanded and were granted the right to hold a press conference in the yard with TV, radio, and print media. They also asked for immediate bail review by a judge of forty-seven cases at the prison. At the press conference the prisoners outlined their grievances and presented a list of people they wished to serve as negotiators. The list included Mayor Lindsay, Georgia state senator and civil rights leader Julian Bond, attorney William Kunstler, Muhammad Ali, and others, but the final list included Representative Shirley Chisholm, Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, and former Bronx borough president Herman Badillo. The next day, the rebellion spread like wildfire to two other prisons: the Tombs and a new prison in Kew Gardens, Queens. And on October 3, 1,400 prisoners took three hostages at the Brooklyn House of Detention, while approximately 3,000 mostly Puerto Rican residents rallied outside the prison and threw bottles at police, who were called to back up the team of guards that was going to subdue the insurrection.⁸²

To the surprise of government officials such as mayor's aide Barry Gottehrer—who was involved in all of the negotiations—unlike the prison guards, prisoners generally exercised restraint. At the Brooklyn House of Detention, where prison guards retook the prison, the guards seriously injured more than 200 prisoners and “ripped up their own building more vehemently than any gang of rampaging prisoners.”⁸³ According to one of the hostages at the second uprising at the Tombs, Daniel Zemann, “You can't believe what it was like in there. There was complete bedlam—punching and screaming. It was a power struggle between Panthers and Muslims and the Young Lords and whatever else was in there.” Many of the hostage corrections officers described the behavior of some who were deranged among the barricaded prisoners. Zemann recounts that when a prisoner attacked him with a pocketknife, another “inmate jumped in front and stopped him.” Another hostage, Walter Starke, remembered that prisoners held three officers “with knives against their necks,” and one threatened to “castrate . . . [a hostage] against the bars.” But, amid the volatility, compassion and organization prevailed. Zemann told the *New York Times* that the prisoners “did for us better than we do for them. What they did, we should have done. They fed us first from what was available and let us call our wives. They set up a security system to protect us from the psychos.” Later many of the hostages concluded that poor conditions and abuse led to the riots, and even the guards who had been held hostage lamented that although they were out of harm's way, nothing had been done for the prisoners.⁸⁴

Prison conditions had been bad for quite some time. What was different was that the movements of the 1960s had, slowly, raised the expectations of a

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broad swath of U.S. society about how people should be treated, regardless of their social or economic status and regardless of their status as prisoners. The growing sense of entitlement to rights, what historians have called the “rights revolution,” had penetrated even the prisons; and in New York the prisoners leading these rebellions self-identified as Black Panthers and Young Lords. This sense was articulated by Julio Senidez, a prisoner who was released shortly after the riots at the Queens House of Detention: “The other times I was in, prisoners were sort of conditioned to accept brutality. There was a feeling that if you said something or complained, you were a punk. It’s different now, people are not giving in.” According to the *New York Times* interview with Senidez, the shift in consciousness among the prisoners “came from an identification with the Black Panther Party and the Young Lords.”⁸⁵ Some prisoners involved in the protests of the summer and fall of 1970 believed that they could only get justice if the United Nations intervened.⁸⁶

The concerns of the rebelling prisoners assumed broader significance as they increasingly linked the roots of crime to social and economic inequality and emphasized the disproportionate imprisonment of people of color on account of racism in the courts. Radicals advanced these views as they carried on political work within the prisons. In some cases, imprisoned members of organizations such as the Young Lords and Black Panthers initiated organizing efforts; in other instances, unaffiliated groups of men were inspired by radical organizations to form their own chapters on the inside. As prisoners’ rebellion opened the door to conversation about reform in the city’s government, the Young Lords advanced a political program at the occupied church that called not just for improved conditions but also for prisoners’ rights. The group’s deliberate focus on prisoners’ rights earned them respect and a “huge following in America’s jails.”⁸⁷ The Young Lords published several letters from circles of prisoners expressing solidarity with the organization and its political views and goals. In one instance a group signed their letter “Prisoner’s Liberation Front a subsidiary of the Young Lords Party.”⁸⁸ Prisoners identifying as members of the Young Lords, the Black Panthers, and the Black Muslims provided leadership during the uprisings, but there were contentious disagreements among these groups about how to move forward with negotiations.

At the Queens detention center, Victor Martinez, who identified with the Young Lords, played a crucial role in negotiations with prison authorities. He was one of six prisoners on the negotiation team, three of whom were subsequently murdered by guards. In early October, before the Roldán tragedy, the Young Lords responded to a letter Martinez had written them and paid for his bail. Upon his release, he became involved in an ongoing YLP project for prisoners’ rights called the Inmates Liberation Front. He and Denise Oliver worked closely in the legal center at the church developing support services for those

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imprisoned and returning home. They also worked closely with lawyers from the Legal Aid Society, who argued before the Supreme Court that the Tombs was unfit for human habitation and should be shut down.⁸⁹ The YLP's Inmates Liberation Front devoted itself to the following five points:

- 1 To assure that no person be detained in jail because he or she is unable to make bail
- 2 To investigate and act on the brutal, unjust, and inhuman treatment being executed [*sic*] on the inmates
- 3 To assure that an inmates' committee be set up in the concentration camps, and that they be permitted to communicate with the outside world
- 4 To insure that inmates are given speedy trials, and have access to counsel of his or her choice, and that none of the people's constitutional rights and basic human rights be violated
- 5 To provide the inmates, upon release, with jobs, education, housing and readjustment to the community⁹⁰

The lawyers preparing the case against the operation of the Tombs often met at the occupied FSUMC to gather depositions from former prisoners.⁹¹

The circumstances surrounding Roldán's death presaged how people of color would be treated by law enforcement and the penal system in the late twentieth-century epidemic of mass hyperincarceration. The new penal regime would be built through an exponential increase in policing and indiscriminate arrests in urban communities of color; intimate relationships among police, prosecutors, and judges at arraignment; overly punitive and fixed charges and sentencing, often with little correlation to the circumstances of arrest or crime; assembly-line adjudication in an overly burdened criminal justice system; high bail that targeted populations could not afford; warehousing arrestees pending trial under inhumane conditions; and the advent of desperate defendants coerced into signing their rights away in plea-bargain agreements.

The Young Lords' strategy of defying the law by seizing a symbolic institution added to the preexisting crisis of prisoners' rebellions, which the mayor and his aides identified as the most difficult and volatile crises of their tenure. In an attempt to restore a sense of authority in the city, the mayor belatedly denounced the armed occupation of the church by the Young Lords as "deplorable and a sacrilege" and rejected the Lords' demand for an independent inquiry into Roldán's death. He determined that an independent investigation was "unnecessary" because his office was in the middle of establishing a board of corrections (made up of civilians) to oversee grievances in the city's networks of prisons, and it would investigate Roldán's death "as its first order of business."⁹² Though they had succeeded in forcing the mayor's hand, the radicals viewed the hasty

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activation of the board—which occurred on the same day the Young Lords took over the church—as a political maneuver to quell public sentiment rather than a genuine effort at an unbiased investigation. Moreover, they criticized the appointment of former Democratic gubernatorial candidate William J. vanden Heuvel as the chairman of the board on the basis that “a politician cannot be trusted to conduct an impartial inquiry.”⁹³

Above all, the Lindsay administration wanted to avoid clashes at the church that might spread to other prisons or that would reignite rebellions at the Tombs.⁹⁴ Despite their fierce rhetoric, the Young Lords did not want unnecessary violence either. Having made their point, the Puerto Rican radicals “entered into back-channel communications with the city.”⁹⁵ They agreed to remove the guns. At around the same time that these negotiations were happening, the Young Lords’ armed guards fought back police who sought to coax them into a confrontation by cocking their weapons as they attempted to push their way through the door. They finally removed the weapons with the support of elderly neighborhood women who managed to slip out of the church unsuspected with the disassembled parts of the weapons in their shopping bags.⁹⁶ The image in East Harlem was a microcosm and reverse example of the events leading up to the victory of the Vietnamese guerrillas against the French colonial army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. There, a civilian network of a quarter of a million peasants carried artillery broken down into many pieces in their sacks along paths through the jungle, up the mountains, and through a complex system of tunnels, which they delivered to the Viet Minh up in the mountains.⁹⁷

In another incident, Pablo Guzmán allowed police in the building but only after frisking them for unexposed weapons, which resulted in the next day’s humiliating headline, “Police ‘Frisked’ by the Young Lords.”⁹⁸ Eldridge Waithe, “the commanding officer of police in the north half of Manhattan,” and his partner were not able to find any contraband inside the church, which would have been grounds for pressing formal charges against the group. Within a week of the occupation, the group had gotten rid of the guns. That seemed to be the Young Lords’ nod to the mayor. As if on cue, the next day, on October 27, 1970, the mayor formalized his request to the board of corrections for an investigation into the death of Julio Roldán. The investigation was conducted by eleven attorneys who were voluntarily employed by the board to gather and analyze information from interviews with correction officers and prisoners.⁹⁹

The Young Lords and their cleric supporters declined an offer to participate in the investigation. However, their attorney, Geraldo Rivera, participated in the inquiry, and the Lords’ leadership remained in touch with him throughout. Attorney Oscar Garcia Rivera Jr., the son of the first elected Puerto Rican politician of the same name, also participated in the inquiry.¹⁰⁰ That rejection of a remarkable offer by the city was in line with the Young Lords’ principle against

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collaboration with government institutions and its potential for co-optation. In refusing to participate, the Young Lords might have missed an opportunity to offer a powerful eyewitness account. Had the organization participated, it would have had entrée to the inner sanctum of an institution that operated outside civic society. The Tombs continued to dispense medieval punishment in the shadows precisely because residents and critics like the Young Lords had no access to its inner workings. This kind of on-the-ground reporting from behind the walls might have further broadened the Young Lords' political status in the city and offered an unprecedented platform for grassroots organizing on what had by the early 1970s become the new frontier in the fight against structural racism in the United States. While the Young Lords' left orientation and opposition to mainstream politicians influenced the party's decision against compromise, they were also likely influenced by the failure of long-standing petitions to the city for nothing less than an *independent* civilian complaint review board to monitor grievances against the police. The clergy's refusal to accept the city's deal also gives a sense of how discredited government institutions had become in the 1960s.

The inquiry yielded a gripping twenty-seven-page account on Roldán's life and his descent into insanity in a barbaric environment. The study, *A Report to the Mayor of New York on the Death of a Citizen, Julio Roldán*, was released three weeks later, on November 17, 1970. A sizable excerpt was printed in the *New York Times* the next day. The report concluded that Roldán "ended his life by his own hand and that no individual deliberately contributed to his death." Yet, while the report exonerated the officials who came in contact with the Young Lord during his court appearances and stay at the Tombs, it incriminated the institution of criminal justice for its degenerative effect on the individual. The report established that "the intricate system of criminal justice designed to protect the community and the individual succeeded only in deranging him and ultimately, instead of protecting him, it permitted his destruction."¹⁰¹

The organization had demanded an investigation into the detention center. But the Young lords were not interested in parsing out the fine details of Roldán's demise. They had articulated their position in countless statements. Released a month into the occupation, the report seemed to confirm their thinking. Gloria Fontanez articulated that position when, during their first press conference, she situated Roldán's fate in a larger context of systemic violence against poor people of color: "In the party, we make no distinction between the jails and our streets. Our people are killed in the streets all the time. A brother by the name of Johnny was killed in the Bronx by the police. A sister by the name of Carmen Rodriguez was killed in Lincoln Hospital by an abortion; we say that it's all the same thing, that it's genocide against Third World people, black and Puerto Rican people, and that's why we're charging the city with murder."¹⁰²

The Young Lords were not alone in their insistence that Roldán was mur-

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dered. In summarizing lessons learned from the investigation, one mainstream editorial concluded that “suicide can be induced by a judicial and detention system of sufficient inhumanity, that such a suicide is very little different from murder, that justice is not so much blind any more as stoned out of her heard, and that we have in this country today immeasurable more order than law.”¹⁰³

The high-profile investigation of Roldán’s death was a powerfully symbolic victory for New York City’s organizers and for the prisoners’ rights movement gathering steam across the country. The fate of Julio Roldán and protests that followed put pressure on the board of corrections and City Hall. It also led to the first official investigation of the death of a single prisoner, which corroborated the stories of horror that prisoners had recounted to journalists. Previous investigations focused on conditions but were imbued with the language of law and order. The board’s investigation, however, humanized Roldán, and by extension all prisoners. It increased awareness among a broader segment of the population in New York City about basic rights violations and asserted the notion that prisoners have rights too. To the prisoners at the Attica Correctional Facility, in upstate New York, who would rebel a year later, the investigation must have offered some hope that their grievances would be heard and adjudicated by government officials.

The Young Lords’ armed occupation was daring, frightening to its members, and risky. But the group also had a finger on the political pulse of the city, and its leaders likely knew, instinctively, how far they could go. The group’s established record of grassroots muckraking also shielded them from the worst possible outcome. Loved by some and tolerated by others, the Young Lords were known to many Puerto Ricans and black Americans and to a cross-section of other New Yorkers from welfare rights activists, progressive doctors, and wider New Left circles to hospital administrators, citywide clergy, and the media corps—not to mention the Lindsay administration. This would be their last offensive. It lasted until early December 1970.

From the facility, they indicted the prison system at regularly held meetings and ecumenical services, developed a legal defense center, and ran their usual community service programs. Their advocacy continued to draw diverse supporters, including a radical Jesuit priest from Puerto Rico, Monseñor Antulio Parrilla, who led a series of services. Back in Puerto Rico, he reported having been “profoundly moved” by the work at the church.¹⁰⁴ The Young Lords continued their coalition work at Lincoln Hospital and found themselves involved in another major action. While some Young Lords were occupying the church, others occupied the sixth floor of the Lincoln nurses’ residence in the first week of November.



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The death of Julio Roldán, however tragic, presented the Young Lords with the opportunity to activate hundreds of Harlem residents who supported them through a broad campaign around an issue of growing concern. The moment also presented an opportunity to challenge the growing consolidation of an emergent racist ideology that criminalized, dehumanized, and scapegoated people of color as thousands of New Yorkers were questioning the war in Vietnam, the integrity of government officials, declining wages, and the economic and political structure of U.S. society. As discussed in chapter 2, in one of the most important political moves of the decade, New York mayor Robert Wagner recrafted for white northern audiences fearful of the riots the racially charged dictum of law and order, which southern segregationists used to suppress the civil rights movement. A year later in 1966, the NYPD ideologically defeated the civilian complaint review board referendum. The public relations firm it hired crafted a meme for white residents blending two historically powerful ideological strains in American history: fear of political dissent and the alleged criminal proclivities of people of color. But the fierce rebellions in New York's prisons had offered a counternarrative to the racist propaganda that New Yorkers had been fed. Among the groups of the New Left, the Young Lords had honed the most effective media presence in New York. They were positioned like no other group to launch what they might have termed a guerrilla offensive against law and order. It had the potential to push back the rebirth and consolidation of what has arguably been the most destructive and racially divisive ideology of the second half of twentieth-century U.S. history.

Yet, despite the organization's increased visibility and its growing ranks (approximately 1,000 members by the end of 1970), it was exhibiting signs of overstretch. The achievements at Lincoln and the continued growth in membership couldn't contain the gnawing sense among some members that things were changing. The death of Roldán, who was known in the YLP as a gentle and compassionate comrade, was demoralizing.

For the YLP, assertions by prison officials that Julio Roldán committed suicide were read as a government-inspired conspiracy intended to provoke fear among YLP members and break the political will of its membership. They understood that Roldán's murder was a manifestation of homicidal government repression. Since the mid-1960s, left activists had indeed been aware of how COINTELPRO worked to frustrate the movement's goals and to encourage internecine struggles within its organizations. Government infiltration of the BPP was the most visible example of this development. As repression intensified, radicals became increasingly pessimistic about their ability to effect change in the United States. Repression increased a sense of bitterness, cynicism, and disenchantment with the state of American democracy. Many turned their attention to the upheavals

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in the wider world, where revolutionary armed struggle had been in ascendance for decades.

For the Young Lords, what would come next was nearly as dramatic as the group's previous nine months of local actions: a shift from an ideology of community control to a nationalist battle against U.S. imperialism on the island of Puerto Rico.