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The Young Lords in Lincoln Park

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In the fall of 1968 in Chicago, Patricia Devine and Dick Vision, members of a church organization called the Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park approached me to see if I could help them bring people to an upcoming housing meeting of the Lincoln Park Community Conservation Council. At the time, I was still president of a loose knit street gang, the Young Lords. I had recently come out of jail and wanted to get back with my girlfriend and daughter and settle down. During the day I was studying for my G.E.D. while also working as a janitor at the Argonne National Laboratory in an ex-offender program. It was not an easy task to get a group of relatively undisciplined young people to attend a formal, political meeting. Convincing them bruised not only my ego, but my face. But when the evening of the meeting arrived, about 40 young people from the neighborhood showed up.

The young people were quiet, to avoid police detection, walking in small groups one behind another, traveling down Armitage Avenue for about six blocks to 2020 North Larrabee Street. Once inside they stopped and gazed briefly at a glass and wooden display that showed their neighborhood with vacant spaces in placed where their homes currently stood. In the meeting hall were about nine, white males, well-dressed sitting at a folding table at the front of the room. Barely ten other people sat on folding chairs in the audience. From our perspective, this did not look much like a public, professional meeting at all. They were meeting in private, secluded in a tiny back hall room.
These were the representatives appointed by Mayor Richard J. Daley. Most were also members of the Old Town Triangle Association or the Lincoln Park Conservation Association, which later joined and consolidated. The official Community Conservation Council, whose meeting we attended that night, had little, collective decision-making power; they primarily followed the directives of George Stone, a surrogate of Lewis Hill, the top urban renewal man for the city of Chicago. Members of the Council prided themselves on being “urban renewal professionals,” but they were only there to legitimize and rubber stamp the mayor’s fifty-year Master Plan to destroy the “blighted, deteriorating areas of Lincoln Park, and areas near downtown and the lakefront.” This would increase the city’s tax base and their property values. In Lincoln Park the so-called blighted areas were primarily Puerto Rican homes, churches, businesses, and gathering spaces. These same groups had already successfully displaced the large barrio of Puerto Ricans from where Carl Sandburg Village Complex now stands, Old Town, and later, the primarily African American Cabrini-Green Homes. Only one Puerto Rican was named to the Lincoln Park Community Conservation Council, Felix Silva, a Caballero de San Juan (Knight of St. John) member. But Mr. Silva handed in his resignation publically, making it clear that he stood with his Puerto Rican brethren. His resignation letter was published in the first edition of the Young Lords’ newspaper.¹

Before the Young Lords successfully blocked the meeting and left the building, they told the Council that they could not meet there again until there were “Blacks, Latinos, and poor Whites on the Council.” To make their point, they trashed the place. Chairs were thrown against the walls, windows were broken, toilets and sinks were

pulled from their pipes, and the wooden and glass display was broken into pieces. The emotional action was spontaneous; I was the only one who was arrested days later. But the action of these youth marked the beginning of a movement within Lincoln Park to save the Puerto Rican and poor areas of the city – a movement that grew to encompass all sectors of that neighborhood and eventually lead to the creation of a national Young Lords Latino movement for civil and human rights. Documenting the birth of this movement, its growth within Chicago’s Lincoln Park Neighborhood and its ultimate expansion through chapters across the United States, fighting for self-determination and neighborhood empowerment is the focus of this larger research project that now includes more than 110 oral histories and other primary data.

Documenting and writing this history is critical. Like scholarship by historian Robin Kelley, political anthropologist James C. Scott, and by now, nearly a generation of others who have been influenced by their work and applied these ideas to political studies around the globe, this project takes seriously the theory of “infrapolitics.” As Scott writes, “[T]he circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible…is in large part by design – a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.”\(^2\) This theory helps to locate the early work of the Young Lords and countless other Latino youth within inner-city Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s within a larger framework of individual and collective resistance.

It is equally important to recognize the aspects of this movement that were unique to the Puerto Rican experience of imperialism and diaspora – contexts that are lost when

studies of the Movement are reduced to narrow, local case studies alone. United by the slogan, “Tengo Puerto Rico en mi Corazon,” the Young Lords Movement both grew out of the struggles and organizing efforts of their immigrant parents while it also forged new forms of activism, new priorities, and a new political gaze. In other words, this movement embodies what Andres Torres has called “a new chapter in Puerto Rico’s political history.”

This lens provides an important counter to existing work on the Young Lords, much of which has only focused on the media rich and heavily Puerto Rican populated New York City, while actively excluding the Chicago birthplace and downplaying the work of chapters elsewhere across the United States as well as the Puerto Rican movement in Puerto Rico. By viewing the Young Lords Movement as a purely local struggle, this gaze provides no way to adequately explore the mission of the Young Lords which is, and was, to free Puerto Rico and empower the barrios. Such isolated case studies privilege only the local, ignoring the larger diasporic context that not only birthed but has sustained the Movement. These studies have also privileged the college educated, middle- and upper-class Latinos at the expense of the working-classes and the poor who were the ones heavily repressed and scorned by the media, and yet remained consistently active within the Movement well beyond 1969.

Some scholars have also dismissed the early work of the Young Lords on the basis that the group was “just a gang” and not “political.”

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4 See especially Darrell Enck-Wanzer, ed., The Young Lords: A Reader (NYU Press, 2010); Johanna Fernandez, When the World Was Their Stage (Princeton University Press, 2011); Miguel “Mickey” Melendez, We Took the Streets: Fighting for Latino Rights with the Young Lords (St. Martin’s Press, 2003), among others. Even Lilia Fernandez’s recent book, Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago (University of Chicago, 2012), emphasizes the differences separating YL chapters in
saying that the actions taken by Rosa Parks when she refused to give up her seat on the bus were not political, nor the voter registration campaigns, nor the freedom riders, nor the murders of black children and activists. Instead, this work takes seriously new scholarship by individuals like John D. Márquez and others who have argued that groups like the Young Lords can only be fully understood within a larger de-colonial context, as “self-defense organizations,” that grew out of struggles within Black and Latino neighborhoods to “curb ghetto violence without the state’s intervention.”

**Puerto Rican Migration to Chicago**

At least 91,000 people, or about 2,600 people a year, emigrated from Puerto Rico to the mainland United States between 1910 and 1945. In 1947, the U.S. federal government launched a program it called “Operation Bootstrap.” In addition to investing heavily in industrial development within Puerto Rico, largely by offering tax incentives and low rents to industrialists from the mainland to relocate to Puerto Rico, the program recruited young Puerto Ricans to work in agricultural and service jobs across the United States with the understanding that they would return to the island after their term of employment was over. According to a *New York Times* article, farmers were so pleased with the 1400 Puerto Rican migrant workers who arrived in 1948 that they wanted double

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New York and Chicago, characterizing Chicago Young Lords as lacking “organization, discipline, and professionalism” rather than underscoring the common aims and origins of the movement.


that number in 1949.\textsuperscript{8} Federal census estimates record over 4,200 individuals arriving from Puerto Rico to the United States each year between 1946 and 1956.\textsuperscript{9}

A large contingent of the first Puerto Ricans during the “Great Migration” of the 1950s and 1960s were contract laborers to steel mills, farm labor camps, downtown hotels, meat packing and other factories, and domestics. Most of them came from the country, mountain towns or some seasonal, sugarcane coastal cities. To ensure assimilation of these new migrants on the mainland, a range of government and private efforts also focused on actively discouraging Puerto Rican migrants from settling in any one specific area. While the earliest waves of migrants settled in the northeast after 1948 increasing efforts were made to encourage Puerto Ricans to come to the Midwest.\textsuperscript{10} In 1949, a migration office was opened in Chicago to serve migrants across the mid-west, including in Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Ohio. The office was located at Superior and La Salle Streets.\textsuperscript{11}

These newcomers joined a small community of Puerto Ricans who had first arrived in the city in the 1920s. According to a pamphlet written by Manuel Torres, a member of the Caballeros de San Juan, “in the 1920s, middle and upper class Puerto Ricans regularly sent their children to study abroad, including to the city of Chicago.” He documents that a large Puerto Rican family lived in a Puerto Rican enclave near 47th

Street and Michigan in the 1930s and 1940s. As the Puerto Rican community grew, more and more families began to move to what became known as the *La Clark* neighborhood. *La Clark* started at Grand Avenue on the south and stretched up to Armitage and Clark on the north. To the east was Dearborn Street. The western boundary stretched to Halsted Street, but along Chicago Avenue it extended to Ashland Avenue. A second significant barrio known as *La Madison* spread west from downtown until Ashland. Both neighborhoods followed the bus routes or trains that led to downtown, where Puerto Ricans worked in the many hotels and nearby factories, and many women worked as domestics, cleaning apartment buildings and private homes.

Several of the oral histories recall life in *La Clark* and *La Madison* through the 1940s and 1950s. Eugenia Rodríguez Flores describes living in the Water Hotel at Superior and LaSalle Streets when she and her family first arrived in the city in 1951. Every time she moved, her friends and family followed. Still, she had to travel to St. Francis on Roosevelt, a primarily Mexican parish, because that was the only place that there was Spanish mass at that time.  

Ricci Trinidad talks about his mother, “Nine’s,” small restaurant on the corner of Wells and Superior. The business had only a couple of tables and chairs. Customers came to eat and to play dominoes. The restaurant began by her cooking in her apartment for separated migrant men in the building who were working or *grabando discos* (cutting records), as hotel dishwashers or at the nearby factories working in *El Mani* (the peanut factory) or at *Las Gomas* (the rubber factory), striving to bring their wives and children.

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from Puerto Rico. She located this small restaurant space and her business quickly grew.¹³

Most of the structures in La Clark were the same: old hotels or rooming houses converted into one or two room kitchenettes where families crowded. Rents were inexpensive, averaging about $25 a week which included linens and furniture. This also meant that most of the new immigrants were accustomed to living near roaches, rats, and chinches (bed bugs). As Eugenia Rodriguez recalled, “We had to hurry and get another apartment or get eaten up.” Despite the struggles of such poor quality housing conditions, the low cost was what kept many Puerto Ricans there. Most intended their stay to be temporary, returning back to Puerto Rico as soon as possible to make their dream house on the island. This could only be accomplished by saving on rent and living expenses in Chicago.

Times were changing quickly and by the early 1950s La Clark was being eyed for urban renewal.¹⁴ After milking the tenants for as much rent as they could, landlords began giving notices for Puerto Ricans to move quickly. Families moved north up La Salle Street first, then west down North Avenue, Division Street, and Chicago Avenue. These displacements and resettlements helped form the first large Puerto Rican barrios of Lincoln Park and Wicker Park in the late 1950s and early 1960s – it was actually one gigantic Puerto Rican neighborhood that was split in half by the Kennedy Expressway.

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¹³ Ricci Trinidad, interviewed by José Jiménez, May 17, 2012, Special Collections and Archives, Grand Valley State University, http://gvsu.cdmhost.com/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16015coll6/id/78/rec/1
Birthing a Movement

Very few are aware of how the Puerto Ricans of Lincoln Park, like many other new immigrants to cities across the United States, were assaulted, marginalized, barred from access to jobs and homes, and robbed of prime real estate. Few also understand how their unsupervised sons and daughters did not initially have the support of any city or church programs and had to fend for themselves. The oral histories in this collection describe how the first youth formed social sports and cultural clubs and played at the boys’ club and Y.M.C.A. As more Puerto Ricans were displaced and forced to move into previously white-only areas of Chicago, clashes became more frequent and these social clubs transformed into street clubs, which were often labeled as “gangs.”

Antonio (Maloco) Jiménez, Vice President of the Hacha Viejas, the first Puerto Rican street club in Chicago, recalls:

We just came here [in the 1950s] because there was no work in Puerto Rico. On weekends we just wanted to relax and drink beer in a club owned by one of our family. One day a few of us came to the tavern on Clark and Armitage where we usually played pool and just hung out. The Italian, Irish, and Germans were waiting for us. They were like a mob. This was before Lincoln Park was Puerto Rican. They had us trapped. We could not get away and tried to hide under cars but they cut me and the others real bad. We were put in the hospital for a few weeks and our family wanted revenge.


This experience of targeted, race- or ethnicity-based violence was not unique to Puerto Ricans. African Americans, Italians, and earlier in the 19th century, the Irish, experienced similar patterns of brutalization and intimidation in Chicago’s inner-city neighborhoods. But for African Americans and Latinos, this violence had especially dire consequences.

Even as Chicago’s press continued to write positive-sounding articles, praising the stability, work-ethnic, and grooming of its growing Puerto Rican community, they also perpetuated race-based stereotypes. Take, for example, one Chicago Daily News article, published in June 1965 entitled “Chicago’s Proud Puerto Ricans”:

Everyone who has seen “West Side Story” or reads the papers or has seen Spanish Harlem in New York knows there is a ‘Puerto Rican problem.’ He can talk knowledgeably about gang fights and knives and five Puerto Ricans hanging themselves in New York jails and all the other problems of the Spanish ghetto. It has been printed and reprinted that more Puerto Ricans, sick of subway knifings and dirty air and dirty tenements, are going back to Puerto Rican than are coming to New York. The surprising thing is that none of this is true in Chicago.

It was true that by the 1960s, Puerto Ricans were choosing to come to Chicago in greater numbers even as fewer migrants chose New York City. Articles like this that were geared to drum up support for the city’s targeted slum clearance efforts while perpetuating negative stereotypes about Puerto Ricans were also used to justify police brutality, as anthropologist Gina Pérez has argued.

Puerto Rican parents worked hard to establish institutions, community- and church-based organizations to provide needed cultural, economic, and social support for their families. Another interviewee, Carmen Trinidad, explains how her father, Cesario Rivera, Jesus Rodríguez, and others organized door-to-door, establishing the Caballeros

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17 See especially Gerald D. Suttles, The Social Order of the Slum: Ethnicity and Territory in the Inner City (1968); Frederick Thrasher, The Gang (University of Chicago, 1927), 36-46.
The Caballeros de San Juan and Damas de María also organized dances, softball leagues, picnics, retreats, fairs and other activities to raise funds and to assist the youth and their families. But it was not enough to encompass the entire neighborhood. Still, it is significant that many of the local gangs which developed over this same period, including the Young Lords, grew up within these church activities and values of the Caballeros de San Juan and the Damas. They also provided a critical reference point as groups like the Young Lords reorganized themselves into a formidable, political movement.

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**Coming of Age in Lincoln Park**

There were other factors which contributed to the Young Lords’ political awakening. First, they had to experience enough of their own community and all its networks to identify in their own minds which neighborhood structures were viable and which were not. Even with urban renewal hovering above them, the barrio was stable enough in the 1950s and early 1960s for children to benefit from social groups and community organizations, feel a strong connection to their neighbors, friends, and local businesses, and to witness the power that comes from a community working together.

Young Latinos studied the lessons learned from the community organizing work of their parents who sometimes misunderstood and rejected the cries of their own children. But the children added to this community organizing by organizing without support from anyone, their own neighborhood social clubs that sponsored their own dances, splash parties, basketball and softball teams, birthdays and funerals, weddings and picnics.

Many of the children who came of age in Lincoln Park over this era also had to learn to fend for themselves at an early age. Some would refer to them as “latch key” children, usually left alone with an older sibling, in between getting out of school and the time both of their parents would arrive home from work. Minimum wage was not enough to pay all the bills, so it was common for everyone able in the household to contribute to the family’s financial needs. In Puerto Rico, where children were accustomed and entrusted to work the land, this was common practice and these migrants carried similar patterns with them into Chicago.

Language difference, coupled with beliefs about the cultural and intellectual inferiority of Latinos, shaped parents’ workplace experiences. Many Puerto Ricans were
arbitrarily pushed back at the doors of factories and at the hotels. Some who had been brought in by other Puerto Ricans before them on the “buddy system” fared much better. They made war planes and parts at Midway Airport or worked for Western Electric and at the steel mills of East Chicago. Some were lucky enough to work for the city, even if it was on the garbage truck. They were thrilled to proudly outrank the status of the first “immigraos” like the Mejicanos and the Puerto Rican tomateros.

Where on the one hand, Latino children in Chicago found themselves with less adult supervision than they would have had in Puerto Rico, cultural beliefs about proper gender roles for men and women shaped where children played, with whom, and for how long. Girls were expected to indoors while the boys were permitted to play outside, in the front or in the back alley, sometimes under the noisy, elevated train. Unsupervised, boys would stretch their luck, extending their forays farther and farther from their homes, exploring in small groups every section of La Clark, including most of the downtown loop and a good chunk of Lake Michigan, from Oak Street Beach north. This became their magnificent landscape, clustered within a city of winds. Now these Puerto Rican children could compete with the palms and seas and the sands of their parents. Chicago now howled for them and the next generations of Puerto Ricans who were now beginning to speak English but still, with a good sprinkling of Spanish.

Some of these children also felt superior to their parents who they came to see as backward jíbaros, a belief that was heightened by pressure at school to assimilate into the dominant Anglo culture of their surroundings. A great deal of recent scholarship has

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documented the types of systemic discrimination experienced by Mexican and Puerto Rican students in public schools over the 1940s and 1950s. Latino children were often classified as “intellectually inferior” based on intelligence test scores and English-language only mandated instruction. Even well-intentioned teachers often had low expectations for Latino children and ridiculed them for their culturally distinctive traits. As early as elementary school, many Latino children were assigned primarily to non-academic or slow-learning classes by school administrators.\textsuperscript{22}

Chicago’s school systems, both private and public, also shaped how young Puerto Ricans came to understand their own history, identity, and community. As in New York, teachers were told to emphasize teaching English to their Puerto Rican pupils and to think of school as the most important place to assimilate these children by teaching them about the superiority of Anglo American culture, politics, and history.\textsuperscript{23} Through the 1940s and 1950s, teachers were also heavily influenced by journalism that most often described Puerto Ricans as an urban “problem” and academic literature like that by anthropologists Chenault and Oscar Lewis that dramatized slum life and presented Puerto Rican as lazy, prone to crime, backward, and unmotivated.\textsuperscript{24}

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Few Latino children learned much about the deep history and culture of their native lands. As Young Lord Richie Perez described in a mid-1990s interview, only later in life did they realize that they were “descendents of three great cultures: the Taino Indian, the white European Spaniard, and the African slave.”

Since there was no teaching about Latino leaders or their history, young Puerto Ricans who were raised on the mainland grew to dislike their indigenous, Spanish and African cultural mix. To Puerto Rican children a *jibaro* and the intonations of his language could never represent a Puerto Rican family but instead the most backward person on earth. The kids did not want to stand out but to appease their parents and their neighbors. They preferred to blend in and maintain the status quo, striving to become one with the dominant culture but often falling short.

If language, family ties, and culture were a few barriers that prevented even those Puerto Rican youngsters who wanted to assimilate from fully being able to do so, physical appearance was often a barrier as well. Neither “black” nor “white,” Puerto Ricans came to occupy an “other” space, not fitting easily into the racial dichotomy that was so much a part of life in the United States. Many Puerto Ricans resisted this binary. As early as the 1930s, recent scholarship has documented the ways Puerto Ricans actively worked to create a more flexible racial identity, rooted in Puerto Rican

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nationalism and local neighborhood organizations.\textsuperscript{27} Still, in Midwest cities like Chicago – even cities with significant Puerto Rican populations – through the 1940s and 1950s, race often was used to further marginalize Puerto Ricans, with racial prejudice felt keenly by Puerto Rican youngsters.

Despite encountering frequent barriers at work and in school, few young Latinos recognized that their experience was not individual, but the result of larger, systemic patterns of discrimination. The promise that they could find “gold in garbage cans” if only they worked hard enough was a myth conveyed by the Spanish-language press as well. As José Camprubí, editor of \textit{La Prensa}, wrote in a 1951 editorial, he believed that the numerous letters the paper received from Puerto Ricans in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia calling attention to discrimination around housing and work, and violence directed toward Puerto Ricans were “absolutely false.” “[O]ur people who believe themselves to be persecuted, hated, and despite here, will never succeed in developing themselves as they should and could,” he wrote.\textsuperscript{28}

The children worked hard to speak English, to translate for and appease their parents while they gave their best effort to uphold Puerto Rico. The more they actively attempted to learn American culture, the more their parents were proud of them. It was a complicated “Catch 22,” to be praised for attempting to be American and yet scorned for attempting to be Puerto Rican – a contradiction embodied by the Broadway musical and film, “West Side Story,” which was first performed in 1957 and was the first mainstream theatrical performance to feature Puerto Ricans in the United States. Focused on the fight

\textsuperscript{27} Lorin Thomas, \textit{Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth Century New York} (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

for urban space and Puerto Rican migration to New York City, a key moment in the performance comes with the song, “America,” sung by Puerto Ricans and purported to be about Puerto Rican self-definition:

Puerto Rico…You ugly island..
Island of tropic diseases.
Always the hurricanes blowing.
Always the population growing…
And the money owing. And the babies crying.
And the bullets flying.

Automobile in America. Chromium steel in America.
Wire-spoke wheel in America. Very big deal in America!
I like the shores in America! Comfort is yours in America.
Knobs on the doors in America.
Wall-to-wall floors in America!”

In what he calls a “Puerto Rican reading of ‘America,’” film critic Alberto Sandoval Sanchez notes that the song embodies how “the myth of immigration to the U.S. is reactualized…[and]the prejudices, discrimination and racism that Latinos face in the U.S.A. are eliminated and silenced.”

A few of the children rejected this version of American modernity altogether and instead sought to become “hillbillies,” creating an image for themselves that built on the image and traditions of Puerto Rico’s jibaro folk-culture but modeled the dress styles of the white and black southern migrants from Appalachia and the Deep South who were also flooding into Chicago over this period. These migrants also lived in La Clark and in Lincoln Park. Where Anglo America had Elvis Presley, Lincoln Park had Puerto Rican Ito of the Paragons. He had long black hair like Elvis, looked like Elvis, dressed like Elvis, and sang like Elvis. At most of the neighborhood dances Ito would jump on the

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stage and put on a free show. Some young Puerto Ricans also wanted to become like
the Irish and Italians, whose histories were at least mentioned in the books they were
taught form in school. They were at least mentioned in the history books in school while
Puerto Ricans and other Latinos were invisible. But the majority of Puerto Rican youth
adopted the more prevalent urban African American culture. African Americans were
most often their closest neighbors. They shared the closest pains.

News about family, friends, and politics flowed to Puerto Rico and back through
bochinche, or gossip, carried by traveling people as well as by phone and through letters.
Everything in Chicago seemed new and news was exciting in the grapevine of Lincoln
Park. But young Puerto Ricans also quickly began to shy away from the traditions,
cultures, and mores of their parents and grandparents. They dressed differently, not only
to keep up with the “American” kids at school but to also as a way to move ahead of
them. For the young Puerto Ricans who came of age on the mainland in the 1950s and
1960s, this was their way of creating a new diasporic identity – one linked as much to
Puerto Rican culture, language, and history as to life in the American city. In New York
they called it “Newyoric.” In Chicago, the idea was the same but it was never
formalized with a new, specific name.

For Puerto Ricans, the need to establish a clear, nationalist identity was also born
of the discrimination they experienced so regularly on the U.S. mainland. In their oral
histories, Carmen Rance and Eugenia Rodríguez both describe searching for housing in
Chicago only to be told by Italians, Irish, Polish and German Americans that “we don’t

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30 Ito was later shot by police. His murder was followed by a mini-riot of several days in Lincoln Park.
31 Jorge Duany, “Nation on the move: the construction of cultural identities in Puerto Rico and the
diaspora,” American Ethnologist, Vol. 27, no. 1 (February 2000), 5-30; Rachel Rinaldo, “Space of
Resistance: The Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Humboldt Park,” Cultural Critique, Vol. 50 (Winter
want dogs here.” As José Rodríguez, the son of one of the primary leaders of the Caballeros de San Juan, described the ways that segregation shaped not just housing but worship. “We had to celebrate Spanish mass in the hall because they did not want Puerto Ricans in the main chapel,” he recalls. Labeled with racial slurs and marginalized from other native-born and immigrant communities through segregation, both formal and informal, while these experiences were painful they also helped to unite Puerto Ricans and forge a greater sense of community through these shared hardships.

In addition to forging a new identity for themselves, through the 1950s young Puerto Ricans also began to break away from the social clubs their parents had created – clubs named after Puerto Rican towns – and the religious churches and organizations painstakingly created by their parents to form community. Many parents felt they could only watch helpless, suffering as they saw their children lose their culture and history and fall one by one out of grace, and out of their traditional world. Some parents attempted every form of persuasion including physical threats to try to change the new found ways of their children and to get them to conform. It did not work. How could it work since their children were never able to fully comprehend their own parents, their own culture, their own history -- a history that was never taught? This was the price of crossing the ocean. To many of these children, their parents would always be rejected jíbaros. And though the children tried so hard to show their Puerto Rican pride in whatever manner they could, they were discouraged by the teachers who said, “Speak English. You are in

33 José Rodríguez, interviewed by José Jiménez, August 2012, Special Collections and Archives, Grand Valley State University.
America.” And they were mocked by their own parents because they could not speak Spanish or understand their culture accurately. Instead, young Puerto Ricans in cities like Chicago founded new groups, some modeled on the social clubs of their parents and other created in response to specific neighborhood threats or conditions, including the mounting threat of violence from private citizens and police alike.

**The Young Lords**

One of these groups was the Young Lords. Founded between 1958 and 1960, the Young Lords was a street club that was created in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood. Male members of these clubs often identified themselves by wearing black leather jackets or club sweaters that resembled school sweaters – an intentional choice that highlighted how outdated many inner-city youth of that era found formal schooling. The Young Lords wore a black sweater with a purple stripe at both shoulders. On one side, above the left side pocket was an emblem: a shield with a cross inside it that featured several symbols in the boxes including a Spartan or knights’ headpiece. The Young Lords name was lettered in Old English script. Like many of these clubs, they also had a women’s auxiliary, the Young Lordettes.

Many of the first members of the Young Lords were students at Waller High School. Yet few felt connected to the school. Many of them had watched with embarrassment as their parents were excluded from the P.T.A. Few Latinos were selected to play on sports teams. Stereotypes continued to limit the attention Puerto Rican students received in the classroom, except in terms of discipline where, like their African American classmates, young men were frequently expelled or disciplined for behavioral
problems. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that dropout rates among Puerto Ricans climbed in Chicago through the 1960s and 1970s. By 1973, one scholar estimated that 71% of all Puerto Ricans dropped out before finishing high school in the city of Chicago.\(^{34}\)

Although many Young Lords dropped out early in their freshman and sophomore years, they continued to hang around Waller High School. Restaurants also became important meeting places and hangouts, especially as the Puerto Rican community of Lincoln Park expanded. These places also marked important sites of conflict as populations were displaced by urban renewal. George’s Hot Dog stand, which in the mid-1960s was located on the southeast corner of Halsted and Dickens, provides one example.

By the 1960s, urban renewal programs in Chicago had been underway for nearly two decades. Starting in the era immediately after World War II, a series of federal and state-based acts gave city governments’ unprecedented power to seize property for new “public purposes,” including slum clearance or prevention. These policies also allowed cities to convey seized property to private developers at greatly reduced rates. While the intent of these acts was to head off what many policy-makers feared was an “urban crisis,” created by crowding and job loss in inner cities, these programs too often became a vehicle for political graft and targeted race- or ethnicity-based housing discrimination. Mid-century Chicago, as historian Arnold Hirsch has famously argued, became a national “pioneer in developing concepts and devices” for housing segregation and social engineering.\(^{35}\) For Puerto Ricans in Chicago, this meant that by the late 1950s many families who had first made their homes in La Clark and La Madison had been forced

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from their homes and were not becoming heavily concentrated in what had been the predominantly Italian, Irish, and Polish neighborhood of Lincoln Park. During the day, Puerto Rican students who attended Waller High or Arnold Elementary School, as well as adults who worked in the nearby factories, began stopping at George’s Hot Dog stand to get a quick and inexpensive lunch. But by the evening and on weekends, when work and school was over, George’s reverted to being a restaurant with primarily white ethnic patronage. White thugs often enforced this boundary violently, threatening or beating up any Puerto Ricans who dared come to the stand after hours. This remained the practice for several years until the Latino community reached enough of a critical mass that Latino street clubs claimed George’s as their own, reinforcing their own presence at George’s in much the same way white ethnic groups had previously done.

While many of the social clubs of an earlier generation were formed to assist with networking for jobs or to provide support within religious contexts, these newer street clubs provided social support and self-defense. In this way, their history is inseparable from urban renewal – a connection that was key not only to the founding of the Young Lords, but the transformation of this street club into a formidable political organization.