

The Young Lords, Puerto Rican Liberation, and the Black Freedom Struggle

Interview with José “Cha Cha” Jiménez

José “Cha Cha” Jiménez was born into a peasant family in Caguas, Puerto Rico in 1948. After father Antonio Jiménez Rodríguez had worked for two years as a tomatero, or migrant tomato picker, in Concord, Massachusetts, José and his mother, Eugenia Rodríguez Flores, joined Antonio in Boston, and they moved to Chicago in 1950. At that time, most Puerto Ricans in the Windy City lived in run-down neighborhoods just north and west of downtown. As José came of age on the mean streets of Chicago, working-class turf gangs—black, white, Mexican, and Puerto Rican—defended their neighborhood territories against perceived outsiders. At the same time, a growing movement for “urban renewal” pushed working-class Puerto Rican families northward to Lincoln Park, and in the 1960s, further northwest to the Humboldt Park and Wicker Park neighborhoods. Colonized by the U.S. in 1898, Puerto Rico became a “commonwealth” of the U.S. in 1952, but as an “unincorporated territory” its residents had limited rights. The 1950s saw a burst of activism among Puerto Ricans on the island and mainland in support of full independence. Yet Jiménez and a handful of friends were more concerned with developments in their new neighborhood of Lincoln Park. In the late 1950s, they formed their own turf gang to defend against racist harassment by area whites. By 1962, they were calling themselves the Young Lords.

Over the next six years, the Young Lords underwent a remarkable transformation. As José Jiménez recalls, his personal political conversion took place in prison in 1968, where he was exposed to a wide variety of ideas promoted by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Black Panther Party. For Puerto Ricans in Chicago more widely, a pivotal event was the June 1966 Division Street riots, sparked by the shooting of an unarmed Puerto Rican youth by Chicago police, which led to a spate of organizing in the Chicago Puerto Rican



Figure 1. This illustration from the Young Lords Organization newspaper portrays the group’s participation in a takeover of the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago’s Lincoln Park in May 1969 to demand funds for low-income housing. YLO leader José Jiménez stands second from left. YLO Minister of Defense Manuel Ramos had been fatally shot by an off-duty Chicago policeman the previous month. In his interview, Jiménez highlights the connections between the African American struggle and the movement for Puerto Rican liberation. (Courtesy of DePaul University Archives)

community. From a turf gang mainly interested in “getting a reputation,” as Jiménez recalls, the Young Lords became the Young Lords Organization (YLO), a voice for militant Puerto Rican nationalism, opposition to urban renewal, solidarity with the black freedom struggle, and support for revolutionary movements around the world. They signed peace treaties with rival gangs, published a newspaper, spread to a number of U.S. cities, most notably New York, and formed an alliance—the Rainbow Coalition—with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Young Patriots, a white working-class group.

The YLO viewed Puerto Rican immigration to the U.S., as a result of the island’s colonial status, as similar to the forced migration of Africans in the transatlantic slave trade. In Chicago, shared experiences with racial discrimination and criminalization served as the basis of black–Puerto Rican solidarity. Both groups suffered as well from gentrification policies that culminated with the physical displacement of African American and Puerto Rican families from their neighborhoods to make way for more privileged white Chicago residents.

While their presence and popularity on the streets of Chicago lasted only a few years—the group collapsed as the result of political infighting, abetted by the FBI’s COINTELPRO and the Chicago Police Department’s “Red Squad”—the Young Lords captured the barrio’s imagination by asserting a sense of

community and providing living leadership to Puerto Rican youth in the Windy City. It also served to politicize a large sector of second-generation Puerto Ricans in the urban landscape of the United States.

The following is an edited transcript of an interview with José “Cha Cha” Jiménez, which was conducted by OAH Magazine of History assistant editor Ángel G. Flores-Rodríguez.

When we got to Chicago [in 1950, when I was two years old], most of the Puerto Ricans were living near downtown [on the near north side]. The neighborhood at that time was renamed by Latinos and Puerto Ricans as *La Clark*, because the main street was Clark Street. There you had a lot of old saloons, and it actually was more of a skid row. There was also another neighborhood called *La Madison*, which was not too far to the west of there. Those were the two first barrios in Chicago. People there were looking for cheap rent. They were not looking to establish themselves. . . . Some wanted to bring their families, but the goal was to make money and go back to Puerto Rico. That was also my parents' lifelong dream.

Clark Street began to form into a community among the prostitutes, the drugs, the drug dealing, the saloons, bar fights, and everything else. At that time, people began to organize around the church. You had the Knights of St. John [Caballeros de San Juan] and the Damas de María. But you also had the gangs. You had the Hachas Viejas [Old Axes] who were from La Clark, and in Madison you had Los Rebeldes [The Rebels], another Puerto Rican group. At that time, they were fighting Mexicans, because those were the same ones that hung out at the bars nearby. Eventually they began fighting the Italians and the other groups.

La Clark for example was very cosmopolitan, integrated. What I'm saying by that is that it was mostly lower-income people, but ethnically mixed. As we began to arrive [a bit later] at Lincoln Park, I noted that there were certain two or three blocks that were Gypsy, two or three blocks that were Italian, Polish, two or three blocks that were German, two or three blocks African American. Lincoln Park as a whole seemed mixed but it was internally divided along racial lines. You also had people from Appalachia and indigenous people there. Primarily there was a lot of Puerto Rican, hillbilly and indigenous people living nearby. But the saloon owners were still Irish and Italian.

Life in the Young Lords Gang

There was a lot of prejudice in the city, especially against Latinos and African Americans. But in terms of growing up, it was like any other community. People were close and friendly. Actually, there were a lot of . . . Latino social clubs . . . that became gangs later as there was more poverty and less supervision. Now the Young Lords, we were a gang from the beginning. We wanted to fight, we wanted territory, and we wanted a name. So, we were different. We were also a younger group. Around 1962 they opened an upper elementary school center and that's where we met and we officially got the name, the Young Lords.

But we were meeting before and we had gotten into fights with other groups previously. They were getting chased, all of us were getting chased by other white gangs. Coming from school you would get chased. That was the normal thing. Without thinking, all of a sudden I would see a group behind me and I'm running. The same thing was happening to Orlando [Dávila, primary founder of the Young Lords] and the others. You know, we were just coming into a Lincoln Park heavily populated by whites. Not that we wanted to be there, it was more that we were pushed into it. They used to say that Puerto Ricans moved a lot, but they were wrong. We got pushed out. We did not move a lot by our own choice. If we did move by our own choice it had to do with the rent, the rent being too high or something like that.

Once the Puerto Ricans that arrived into Lincoln Park got to know each other, the younger ones started forming their own little groups. Those groups were more for protection. As other Latinos moved into the neighborhood we now wanted to chase those who originally harassed us. It was more like calling them out "come on, and let's fight

here . . . let's see how bad you are." . . . Orlando had a reputation because he liked to fight. So we would just go with him to back him up. In the beginning that's how it started. Later on you had knives, bats, and all that other stuff. The idea was to insult them in their own neighborhood.

The first few years we were going into other people's neighborhoods to get a reputation. Then we would go to parties at the YMCA. At the YMCA there were other Latino groups, like the Paradigms and the Black Eagles. Everybody had their own sweaters. Ours was black with a purple stripe on our shoulder. So, it became something more social. We even did a soul month in collaboration with the Blackstone Rangers from the South Side, and every Saturday for a month we had a dance. We had radio advertisements for those dances.

I was in and out of jail for different things. Eventually, I had too many cases that they basically sent me back to Puerto Rico. I was the head of the group at the time, and they wanted to get rid of the head. They gave my mother a choice, since I was still a juvenile, between staying in jail and going to Puerto Rico. I was put in handcuffs and sent to Puerto Rico. That was good for me because I learned a little about my culture. I started to speak Spanish more, and when I came back I changed my name from "Cha-Cha" to "El Cagüño" [that is, a native of Caguas]. I even put that on my sweater. I returned to Chicago within a year, maybe '64. When I came back, I rejoined the group. At that time I was getting a reputation because I was in and out of jail most of the time. When I went to jail there were always the same Young Lords there. So you could say I was part of a selected group.

Birth of Young Lords Organization

Then there was a drug epidemic in the neighborhood. You could feel a quick change in the area. Some people just came in and started selling drugs to support their own habits. I started using heroin at that time and I got caught with a bag and given sixty days [in the summer of 1968]. I went to the House of Correction, which is today called the Cook County Jail. While I was there, a black Muslim worked as a librarian. He did not serve books to me at first, because of my light features, I think. But I had a cousin, also doing time there, who was dark skinned and a friend of the librarian. He explained to the librarian that we were relatives, family, regardless of our skin difference. Though I never became really close to the librarian, we became friends and he started recommending and giving me books.

From him, I started reading *Seven Story Mountain* which is about a monk [Thomas Merton]. I also started reading about Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and hearing about the Black Panthers through the loudspeakers. The radio was on almost twenty-four hours a day, so I heard the news that way. I remember hearing about the Panthers doing watches against the police and occupying a courthouse. Those things got me interested and thinking that I could do the same thing, something similar to what blacks were doing but within the Puerto Rican community.

[When I got out of prison], the neighborhood seemed completely transformed. The streets that were two-way became one-way, for example. I saw people that I knew being kicked out by the sheriff when they could not pay rent—their clothes splattered all over the sidewalk. I wasn't the only one thinking of this as a problem, the neighbors were also talking about the Latino community being oppressed. Groups such as the Progressive Puerto Rican Youth began to address some of those neighborhood concerns.

Then [in early September 1968] I met this lady, Pat Devine, a white woman who was fighting against urban renewal [with a group called Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park] . . . not in defense of Puerto Ricans but for the whole neighborhood in a class basis. She asked me if I could get some people to go to a [local council] meeting [of the Department of

Urban Renewal] and I said, “of course, I can get a bunch of people.” I was on the corner drinking and bragging about all the people I could get for her and then I started talking to members of the Young Lords gang, but they opposed to go. They did not want to get involved with Devine’s work. I then went to other people, the Paradigms, Black Eagles, and Flaming Arrows, which gave me similar responses. I even got in a couple of fights because people started calling me “communist” and things like that.

Finally, the day of the meeting we were able to get around sixty people to come. It was rough to get just those sixty. Inside the urban renewal office we saw a big display of the remodeling plans. I started telling the group “look, that is your house and they are going to knock it down”—real simple urban renewal analysis. I, of course, did not know any theory about urban renewal projects. The people that were meeting that night were mainly white [and connected with the pro-urban renewal Lincoln Park Conservation Association]. Offended by the sight, the guys and I called for the meeting to be over. I told them that if they did not get black or Latino representatives from the community they could not meet there anymore. To make the point clearer, somebody started throwing chairs. Chairs flew and even the neighborhood display was destroyed.

The following day I got picked up and sent to the station. The cops were asking me questions about me working with communists to which I laughed. They could not understand that we were not communists we were simply pissed off. About an hour or two later, a lawyer came. He told me there were people outside the station. I did not believe him but when he got me out I saw Pat Devine and a bunch of Young Lords there. That day gave me the motivation to keep working for the community.

When we originally started, Ralph “Spaghetti” Rivera and I were talking about independence for Puerto Rico. In fact, we designed a button that said “Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón” [I have Puerto Rico in my heart]. Our main focus was the neighborhood but also self-determination for Puerto Rico. We brought the colonial issue to Chicago on a massive scale. We did not know words like “diaspora” or anything like that but we always knew that we were connected to Puerto Rico. We saw ourselves as part of a shuttle culture, going back and forth all the time.

That was a big part of our beginnings, our roots as a group centered on demanding self-determination for Puerto Rico. We used the term “self-determination” because we tried to find a concept that anybody could understand. People raised in the United States understood and were more comfortable with the term “self-determination” than independence because that’s basically what the United States fought for against England. Even if we were not afraid to use the term “independence,” we also preferred self-determination because we recognized that there is no country in the world that is really wholly independent. Everybody has to work with somebody. We fought for the right to control our own lives.

For us, it was simple. It was not anything theoretical. It was just like what we saw at Lincoln Park. Other people came to take over the neighborhood and the U.S. did the same thing in Puerto Rico. The whole issue of housing displacement, then, served as a way to explain the issue of U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico and vice versa.

Making Alliances

We went to Denver, Colorado and through Corky González [the founder and central leader of the militant Chicano group Crusade for Justice] we met people from the Brown Berets, a lot of Chicano gangs from Los

Angeles, and members from the Council of Aztlán. I also traveled to California for one of Corky’s speaking tours. There, I learned more about the Black Panthers.

In Chicago, after the Young Lords made news following a takeover of a police community workshop meeting, we met Fred Hampton and the Chicago Panthers. The Panthers were organizing at the same time that we were, but they mainly worked underground. They were smart; we did it the dumb way. They prepared themselves first before they came out. We went straight from being a gang right into being a politicized group without much preparation.

It was a very natural relationship. I met Hampton at some common friend’s house. We talked about how we could work together. I went on a few speaking gigs with Fred, where I would spend the whole day with him. He would be speaking the whole day, while I learned how to go about those things through him. That’s basically how we started; we developed a trend of observation and participation just by taking part in movement activities. We had people with good skills too, but seeing how they did it helped to get things like our newspaper started. After we were better known, we started to have Latino students working for us. Before that, we were mainly street people. Following the takeovers, students started working for us and brought their skills with them.

One was in McCormick Theological Seminary, where Pat Devine and her group, The Concerned Citizens of Lincoln Park, with several other organizations, us included, fought to get the Seminary to invest in low-income housing as a way to slow down urban displacement. After the Seminary’s refusal to invest in low-income housing, we decided to occupy their offices [on May 15, 1969] to show that they don’t tell us what to do. From inside the building we started calling the media and other people to join. We were there for almost a week until the people of the Seminary agreed to meet our demands—\$50,000 to be invested for low-income housing, \$25,000 for two health clinics, to invest in a community legal aid office. We also demanded resources to open a Puerto Rican cultural center, which we never received. In the end, the city council rejected our plan for low-income

housing. We hired an architect and everything but the council rejected the plan.

After we met Fred [Hampton], we decided that we had no choice but to come together. The police in Chicago was well connected so we needed to come together and protect ourselves. Besides, we were fighting for the same thing. A group of hillbillies called the Young Patriots also joined. At that time in Chicago, the Appalachian community was suffering from the same displacement issues that we Puerto Ricans faced. Having different people together allowed us to re-educate ourselves. We learned that we were not alone in the world, that there is many people fighting for change and we were part of a larger struggle for change.

Repression

[In the fall of 1969], three weeks before [Fred] Hampton and [Mark] Clark were killed, our reverend Bruce Johnson [pastor of the People’s Church, formerly the Armitage Avenue United Methodist Church] and his wife were stabbed to death in their home. It was definitely something planned ahead of time. There was a lot of repression going on against other groups, not just blacks. Still, at that time we did not know what repression meant. We walked down the street and if a cop stopped us and beat us with a nightstick it did not represent anything outside our way of life. For us to get beat up and charged with assault and battery against the police, when we were the ones bleeding from our

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head injuries, was part of our everyday experiences. So, we did not call it or accuse it of repression. When we had a police car parked the whole day right in front of our church we did not think of it as a form of repression. When the city got other gangs to harass us, again, we did not see it as repression.

By constantly arresting people they took away from our funds as well. I remember getting a \$30,000 dollars bond for disorderly conduct. I was arrested close to eighteen times in six weeks. They were not targeting me, but the group. They targeted leaders, like they did with Hampton and Clark. They knew that together we were a strong group and they were afraid of the Rainbow Coalition that we had.

I was a pall-bearer at Hampton's funeral. I remember Jesse Jackson speaking and trying to hold back my tears. I tried to be a man but I could not do it. Not just me but a lot of people got afraid and it had a big effect on the movement in Chicago.

Many abandoned us. Infiltrators started to become more of a problem as well. That was when people started turning on each other. Police also created animosity between groups like the case of the Blackstone Rangers and the Panthers in Chicago. I went from having a lot of support to being seen as an enemy. As new people got involved with the group and the old guys that I grew up with went to jail there were fewer people to trust. There were splits everywhere, splits between the student groups, the Black Panther Party, and a split between the Young Lords Party and the Young Lords in Chicago.

Theoretically speaking we were for the same goals, but while in Chicago we were more street-talking, in New York the discourse came from their schooling, from their university education. They were very well educated in terms of Marxist theory and literature. For us it was not as important how much Marxist literature we knew, it was how much the people knew about what was going on in their surroundings. The emphasis was on the level of consciousness the people were at, not the level of consciousness I was at. And I think, both groups, the Young Lords in Chicago and the Lords in New York got away from that. We both divorced ourselves from the people.

Additional Resources

The Young Lords and Puerto Rican Gangs in Chicago: <http://www.gangresearch.net/ChicagoGangs/latinkings/lkhistory.html>

Historical overview of the Young Lords in Chicago: <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/ISHS/ishs-2003autumn/ishs-2003autumn288.pdf>

Young Lords Newspapers: <http://libguides.depaul.edu/content.php?pid=266901&sid=2206995>

New York Young Lords primary documents: <http://younglords.info> □



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