

The Afro-Latin@ Reader

HISTORY AND CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

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Livin' it, ALIVE BLACK!
Always lovin' it—Yeah!

PABLO "YORUBA" GUZMÁN
Before People Called Me a Spic,
They Called Me a Nigger

People always look for the beginnings of the Party. We started the Young Lords because we knew something had to be done. If we didn't find or create an organization that was gonna do something then everybody was gonna get shot, see, because it would have gotten to the point that people got so frustrated, they would just jump on the first cop they saw, or just snap, do something crazy.

At first the only model we had to go on in this country was the Black Panther Party. Besides that, we were all a bunch of readers, when we first came in we read Che, Fidel, Fanon, Marx, Lenin, Jefferson, the Bill of Rights, Declaration, Constitution—we read everything. Now there ain't too much time for reading.

We also felt that the potential for revolution had always been there for Puerto Rican people. If we had gone into the thing from a negative point of view, we wouldn't have made it, right. 'Cause a lot of times when things were really rough, it's been that blind faith in the people that keeps us going. The problem has been to tap that potential and to organize it into a disciplined force that's gonna really move on this government. Puerto Ricans had been psyched into believing this myth about being docile. A lot of Puerto Ricans were afraid to move, a lot of Puerto Ricans really thought that the man in blue was the baddest thing going.

Things were different in the gang days. Gang days, we owned the block, and nobody could tell us what to do with the street. Then dope came in and messed everything up, messed our minds up and just broke our backs—dope and anti-poverty. Anti-poverty wiped out a whole generation of what could have been Puerto Rican leaders in New York City.

For example, in '65, the time of the East Harlem riots, we held East Harlem for two days. We had the roof-tops, the streets, and the commu-

nity—no pigs could go through. It was like back in the old days. A lot of people really tripped off that, a lot of the junkies who had been in gangs remembered that shit. To end it they shipped in anti-poverty. They brought it in full force, and they bought out a lot of the young cars who were leading the rebellions. A lot of dudes who were throwing bricks one day found themselves directors of anti-poverty programs the next, or workers on Mayor Lindsay's Urban Action Core.

So we had no leadership, and we had no people—our people were dying from dope. But we knew that it was there, man, 'cause we knew that the fire was there. Those of us who got together to start the thing, we knew we weren't freaks—we didn't feel that we were all that much different from the people. There's a tendency to say "the people" and put the people at arm's length. When we say "people," man, we're talking about ourselves. We're from these blocks, and we're from these schools, products of this whole thing. Some of us came back from college—it was like rediscovering where your parents had come from, rediscovering your childhood.

Our original viewpoint in founding the Party was a New York point of view—that's where the world started and ended. As we later found out, New York is different from most other cities that Puerto Ricans live in. But even in New York, we found that on a grass-roots level a high degree of racism existed between Puerto Ricans and Blacks, and between light-skinned and dark-skinned Puerto Ricans. We had to deal with this racism because it blocked any kind of growth for our people, any understanding of the things Black people had gone through. So rather than watching Rap Brown on TV, rather than learning from that and saying, "Well, that should affect me too," Puerto Ricans said, "Well, yeah, those Blacks got a hard time, you know, but we ain't going through the same thing." This was especially true for the light-skinned Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans like myself, who are darker skinned, who look like Afro-Americans, couldn't do that, 'cause to do that would be to escape into a kind of fantasy. Because before people called me a spic, they called me a nigger. So that was, like, one reason as to why we felt the Young Lords Party should exist.

At first many of us felt why have a Young Lords Party when there existed a Black Panther Party, and wouldn't it be to our advantage to try to consolidate our efforts into getting Third World people into something that already existed? It became apparent to us that that would be impractical, because we wouldn't be recognizing the national question. We felt we each had to organize where we were at—so that Chicanos were gonna have to organize Chicanos, Blacks were gonna have to organize Blacks, Puerto Ricans Puerto Ricans, etc., until we came to that level where we could

deal with one umbrella organization that could speak for everybody. But until we eliminate the racism that separates everybody, that will not be possible.

What happened was in 1969 in the June 7 issue of the Black Panther newspaper there was an article about the Young Lords Organization in Chicago with Cha Cha Jiménez as their chairman. Cha Cha was talking about revolution and socialism and the liberation of Puerto Rico and the right to self-determination and all this stuff that I ain't never heard a spic say. I mean, I hadn't never heard no Puerto Rican talk like this—just Black people were talking this way, you know. And I said, "Damn! Check this out." That's what really got us started. That's all it was, man. [...]

When we talk about our role in terms of creating the American Revolution, we are not saying we are going to take Puerto Rican people and ship them back to Puerto Rico. We are saying that we have been here in this country for two generations—in some cases, maybe three generations—we've been here for so long, right, that it would be too convenient for us to move back now, and just create a revolution there. We're saying that we want payback for the years that we have suffered, the years that we have put up with cockroaches and rats. We had to put up with snow, we had to put up with English, we had to put up with racism, with the general abuse of America. And we are gonna hook up with everybody else in this country who's fighting for their liberation—and that's a whole lot of people. We know that the number-one group that's leading that struggle are Black people, 'cause Black people—if we remember the rule that says the most oppressed will take the vanguard role in the struggle—Black people, man, have gone through the most shit. Black people, along with Chicanos and native Americans, are the greatest ally we can have. So we must build the Puerto Rican-Black alliance. That is the basis of the American Revolution for us. Actually, the first group in America that we had a formal coalition with was the Black Panther Party. Also we must further the Latino ties, especially as we move west, and here in New York City we must work with Dominicans—to further eliminate the racism that has deeply divided Black people and Spanish people. [...]

Now the time has come for the Young Lords Party to begin organizing on the island. I mean, that's inevitable—we're not fighting just for Puerto Ricans in the States, we are fighting for all Puerto Ricans, you know, and in turn we're fighting for all oppressed people. In the fourth point of our Thirteen Point Program and Platform, we say we are revolutionary nationalists, not racists. That also means that we recognize the struggle of white people.

One thing we always say in the Young Lords, "Don't ever let any particular hatred you have prevent you from working. Always take it into you and let it move you forward. And if it's strong, change it, because it stops your work." We tell all Puerto Rican youth to listen to this. High-school-age Puerto Ricans are into a big thing about whiteness, and we tell them, "Man, it's not white folk. What we are trying to destroy is not white people, but a system created by white people, a capitalistic system that has run away from them to the point that it is now killing white people, too." [...]

You know, when we meet somebody from the Third World, we immediately call them brother or sister, right. And then they have to prove to us through their practice that they are not our brothers or sisters—like Gene Roberts, who infiltrated the Panther Party. We view white people, when we first see them, with mistrust and suspicion, and then they have to show us by their practice that they are really our brothers and sisters—and that is the difference in the two.

It would be totally naive for us to openly embrace white people, even if they are in the Movement, simply because they're supposed to be revolutionary. We've gone through too many frustrations with white people in the Movement to have that happen. 'Cause you really want to hope that once you get into the Movement there ain't no more racism. But that's a joke. In many cases racism becomes sicker than what you see in the so-called "straight" world, because it's kind of like a psychopathic hero-worship. You know, everything the Panthers do is right simply because they're Black; the Young Lords are fantastic because they're Puerto Rican. That's ridiculous. The Young Lords make mistakes, and if we make mistakes we want our white *compañeros* and *compañeras* to criticize us. If they really love us, that's what they'll do. That's one of the weaknesses of the Movement, you know, that people do not want to criticize the Panthers because the Panthers are Black. But in doing that they do more harm to the Panthers than they do good. [...]

The Young Lords Party today is the fastest-moving group of people inside the Puerto Rican nation. We're moving faster than anybody else, and this means that all the contradictions that exist among our people are much more highlighted among us, that things come out much more quickly. That's why you have the Young Lords arguing about male chauvinism, female passivity, racism, Viet Nam. People on the street ain't talkin' about all those things yet, you know. We try to take that word "vanguard" and give it a new definition, because the definition that it has now is that the vanguard is some elitist group, that they're better than everybody else,

and they tell all the other groups, "Go fuck yourself." Like, to us, the vanguard means that we have a great responsibility. It means that we are in front of the people and show the people the way, but at the same time we are among the people, because we are the people. We are also in back of the people, you know, because sometimes you got to lay back to check the people out. And that's where we get our strength from.

We're here because we are trying as best we can to take the power of the State and put that back in the hands of the people who for so long have been denied everything. It's a very deep, emotional thing, you know, for people who've been told for so long that they're fucked up, that they're niggers, spics, that they ain't worth shit, to be doing this.

We are showing people an alternative to living under a capitalistic society—an alternative to the tenement, to the street, to the workplace, to the *funguito*. Each generation that comes up is taught that this is the only way things can be done; this is life, right? It's a fact of life that you're poor, that there are some people on top, and that most people are on the bottom. It's a fact of life that this is a dog-eat-dog world, and if you want to make it you got to make it by yourself. But we're gonna take them facts of life and turn them around. We're saying that it is gonna be a new fact of life, that what counts first is not so much the individual but the group, and in order for the individual to survive, the group, the nation, has to survive.

Before people called me a spic, they called me a nigger (2007)

From the beginning, we were always keenly aware inside the Young Lords that while we were trying to bring about changes in the society at large that would get the boot off the most downtrodden, we would also, at the same time, have to change ourselves. And we would have to try to change the very people we were trying to convince to join us in taking the bold step of confronting the status quo.

The biggest obstacle to overcome, I think, is fear. It is damn frightening to take on a power structure, to take that first step. It is almost comfortable to stay, even in the misery of where you might be. It is more secure, at first blush, to continue believing even wrong things. About yourself. Or the world around you. And how it got that way. Add on children, living paycheck to paycheck . . . yeah. Change is tough.

After fear, I think, for us in the barrio in 1969, when the Young Lords started out of New York, the next big obstacle was the relationship be-



The General Committee (The Original Five) of the Young Lords Party, left to right: Juan "F" Ortiz, Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán, Juan González, David Pérez, and Felipe Luciano, New York City, summer 1968. (Photograph by Hiram Maristany/Maristany Photos)



Nellie Tanco (far right) and her brother Sammy (in hat) jamming with friends, including Felipe Luciano, New York, circa 1975. (Photograph by Máximo Colón/Max Colón Photo Collection)

tween women and men. And then, this whole thing of "race." This essay deals with the latter topic, though man and woman—well, you can fill libraries on that one.

The Lords was predominantly a Puerto Rican group, though not exclusively. We were also based in the Northeast—New York at first, then Philadelphia, Bridgeport, Newark, Hoboken, and various support groups and branches ranging from Boston to campuses in places as far-flung as Ann Arbor and Hawaii: we were in prisons, the military, and had two chapters in Puerto Rico. So our experience on "race," or "the national question," is very different from, say, our Chicano *compañeros*.

Puerto Ricans—similar to Dominicans, Cubans, and most Latino groups throughout Latin America and the Caribbean—are, mostly, a blend of genes from Spain, Africa, and the peoples indigenous to the region at the time Columbus showed up. The Native Americans. The so-called Indians: Tainos, Arawaks, Caribs. There's also touches of Dutch in there, French, *lo que sea*—but those are the three main groups.

Certain inbreeding among the aristocratic, colonial, upper classes, coupled with a fierce caste system over the generations, created the sense that the "higher" up one searched the society, the lighter skinned it got. And of course, just as in the racist United States of America, there existed the corollary that somehow "lighter" ("whiter") meant "better." And hell, a lot of things were better: Opportunity. Food. Homes. Education. Families remaining intact. Recreation. And if you don't think we still have a mountain to climb, check out the news on Univision and Telemundo, and see how they have screened out more Afro-Latin@s than even their "American" counterparts have screened out Blacks, Latin@s, and Asians. Or check out how "Spanish" radio rarely blends salsa regularly into the mix, considering it a "lower-class" music.

In New York, Puerto Ricans were growing up alongside African Americans in the same barrios, and only the fools among us (and at first there were many because who doesn't want to cling to a shred of something that says, "Hey, you're not really in the worst shape, they are") could not see that we had a heck of a lot in common. And it began, of course, with rhythm and dance.

As stereotypical as that may sound, come on: when people from two different cultures heard a *conga* played just right and found themselves staring across a room at each other moving in the same syncopation to that beat, it had an electricity that surpassed Steven Spielberg's aliens and Francois Truffaut tripping out together to those notes in *Close Encounters*

(and if a man's eyes met a woman's across that space—well, there goes that whole male-female thing again!).

After the conga, the rest followed pretty quickly: "Chidins?" "Cuchifritos." "Salsa." At least half the Puerto Rican family had to pick up on having the same nappy hair as their African American cousins. It took a long, long while—but that "good hair versus bad hair" thing just couldn't cut it anymore. *Y tu abuela, ¿dónde está?* I used to tell David Dinkins, the former mayor of New York, that our roots went to the same slave ship. It just made different stops. Dinkins looks eerily like my father. And he claims he has a cousin who looks exactly like me.

Reality kept kicking racial bullshit in the ass. My maternal grandfather, an Afro-Latino (or Afro-Boricua, as we started saying in the Lords as a way of identifying dark-skinned Puerto Ricans), left Santiago de Cuba in 1920 to go to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Hello! My father, born in Nueva York, was raised by a light-skinned Puerto Rican woman who told him he was not "Black" but "White." And that as a Puerto Rican he was descended from the Spanish *conquistadores*. She barely mentioned the "Indios," and never included the Yorubas, Ibos, or Fulanis. Then my old man—an Afro-Boricua, if you will—signed up for the still-Jim Crow Navy in 1946.

Assigned to the aircraft carrier *Midway*, my father's best friend was a man from the South named Johnson. Movies were shown on the flight deck. The wooden folding chairs up front were for the white sailors. The rows in the back for the Blacks. "Come on, Johnson," my father said one night. "I see a couple of seats up front." "Whoa, Guh-z-man," Johnson said in a long southern drawl, pulling back on my father's elbow. "That's fo' the White boys." "What are you talking about, we're all in this together?" My old man pulled away. "That's where the White boys sit, Guh-z-man!" "I'm Puerto Rican! I'm sitting up front!"

A few minutes later, Johnson helped pull my father up from a pile of wooden chairs where he had been thrown after the "White boys" kicked his ass for being so stupid as to try and sit up front. "Ah TOI' you, Guh-z-man!" But I'm Puerto Rican, my father said in a low, slow voice, rubbing his bruises. "They don't care what kinda nigger you is, Guh-z-man!"

My father told me that story every couple of years from the time I was about five. He would finish with: "So remember: you're a Black Puerto Rican!" This would drive my brown-skinned mother crazy, as she held on to the illusion a lot longer that we were somehow not "sullied" by "Black blood."

My father took me to see Malcolm X speak on the corner of 125th and Seventh when I was about twelve. He made sure we watched the news

together when the sheriffs down South were hosing civil rights marchers and using electric cattle prods on them: on people just trying to vote; on people just saying "I am an American too." "I want you to see this," he would tell me. "Because in this country, those people are us."

He and my grandfather would tell me that to survive and get ahead in this country I would have to learn several languages as currency: "You have to speak perfect English. You're dark skinned, and you're poor. That's two strikes. So you have to let White folks know how educated you are by speaking perfectly. Now, at the same time, you live in the ghetto. You don't want people thinking you're putting on airs, or you'll get your ass kicked. So you have to speak like the brothers. *Y tu también eres del barrio*. So, you better get your Spanish together." That one took the longest time.

Think about how things have changed among us since the Young Lords, and other groups, in that regard: the good hair and bad hair nonsense. Mary someone White *para mejorar la raza*. Remember that? As a kid I remember an older, light-skinned Puerto Rican girl pointing to her bare arm when someone asked her to pick something up: "What do I look like?" she said. Meaning, a slave? A nigger slave?

Just before helping to start the Young Lords, I had intended to join the Black Panther Party. In fact, a Black friend and I summoned up the nerve to go to the Harlem office, with the intent of signing up. They scared the hell out of us.

But when we started the Lords, the Panthers were the model. That and the inspiration of Malcolm and Rap Brown. Now, though, thanks to founding members like Mickey Meléndez, David Pérez, and Iris Morales, we started teaching ourselves about Albizu Campos and the Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico. About Lolita Lebrón. About Ramón Emeterio Betances.

We did this while we danced at parties after a day of fighting the police, just to get basic rights, with the Panthers. Blasting James Brown and Tito Puente. ¡PA!LANTE!