The Look of Sovereignty: Style and Politics in the Young Lords

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ABSTRACT
This essay examines the relationship between sovereignty claims and style through the political practice of the Young Lords of New York, a radical youth group that went public on July 26, 1969. The essay argues that the Young Lords are a rich archive for this inquiry as the group’s leadership was aware of the importance of style to becoming visible as political actors and being recognized as citizens. The Young Lords’ practice also dramatizes both the potential and limits of this framework. While the Lords’ military “cool” style was exceptionally fruitful in challenging the dominant premise of Puerto Rican political docility and attracting media attention to critical issues, once sovereign claims shifted from city resources to obtaining nation-state status for Puerto Rico, the Lords’ organization suffered internal and external ruptures. The state stepped up its surveillance and segments of the Lords protested the reallocation of energy from New York to Puerto Rico. The result is a complex legacy that enables a reflection on the impact of style and sovereign claims in the political praxis of modern colonial groups. [Key words: Young Lords, radicalism, New York, style, performance, praxis]
The day was October 18, 1970, and a young man by the name of Pablo “Yoruba” Guzmán was doing all the talking. Armed with an Afro, U.S. military fatigues, and Cuban shades, Guzmán—the Minister of Information for a radical group called the Young Lords—demanded that any police officer who came into the East Harlem Methodist Church step aside. The Young Lords had occupied the church after a funeral march to protest the suspected murder of one of their members, Julio Roldán. To make sure that arms would not be planted on the premises, Yoruba styled his actions with great care: dressed as a commander himself, he body-searched the captain in charge of the operation, forcing him “to assume the position spread” (Guzmán 1998: 165). The order produced the desired results. Not only did the police fail in finding any weapons, the very next morning, one New York newspaper headline read: “Policemen Frisked by the Young Lords” (Meléndez 2005: 186).

The Lords’ road to citywide recognition had been both long and short. Launched on July 26, 1969, the New York Lords were initially a branch of the Young Lords Organization of Chicago, a street gang turned political group led by José “Cha Cha” Jiménez. In existence since 1959, the group’s primary goals were to defend Puerto Rican neighborhoods and demand respect from rival Italian, Appalachian, and Latino gangs. The radicalization of the Chicago Lords unfolded after Jiménez received a 60-day sentence on a drug possession charge over the summer of 1968. While in prison, Jiménez read works by Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; he also became familiar with the thought of Puerto Rican nationalist leader Pedro Albizu Campos and the Black Panthers’ concept of self-defense (Fernández 2009a: 66).

Perhaps as a sort of poetic justice, the founding Lords, who had initially carved a name for themselves as a turf gang, invested much of their political capital in fighting gentrification in Chicago’s Puerto Rican communities. From the outset, however, the New York Lords were different from Chicago’s. For one, they had little association with street gangs. In fact, a number of the Lords’ core leadership had some college education and had belonged to traditional left groups before joining the organization. Furthermore, if the Chicago Lords had tense relations with the media, and in the eyes of the public never quite shed their gang origins, the New York Lords were another story. In the words of former Lord-in-Charge-of-Arms Miguel “Mickey” Meléndez,
“We had different working methods [from Chicago] and the New York media at our disposal” (2005: 136). The groups’ divergence eventually became official when, in May 1970, the New York group broke off from the Young Lords Organization of Chicago and became the Young Lords Party.

To this day, scholars debate to what extent the New York Lords changed public institutions in the city or achieved revolutionary goals. Yet often overlooked is how the Lords significantly disrupted a symbolic economy founded on the stigmatization of Puerto Ricans as both criminally inclined and politically docile. In the process, the Young Lords transformed not only how the world saw Puerto Ricans but also how they saw themselves. Equally critical, they equipped an already upwardly mobile sector of the community to fully participate in New York’s political and cultural life. In more ways than one, the Lords’ afterlife has shown, and this is an important choice of words, that some Puerto Ricans could “make it” at the same level of New York’s other historic ethnic minorities, particularly European Jews and Italians. Or, in Yoruba Guzmán’s terms: “The concept of winning, right, that is the number one contribution of the Young Lords Party—that is what we are, man, the concept of winning” (1971: 82–3).

For a major part of the Young Lords’ achievements relied on what could be called the “look of sovereignty.”

But how did the Young Lords’ leadership turn what one Chicago Lord called a “ragtag army” into a winning (political) party? After all, they identified as and were identified with one of the most politically disempowered communities in New York. In addition, their core leadership was composed of five to ten people who could typically mobilize only a few hundred members to demonstrations, even if they claimed a membership of a thousand (Fernández 2003: 261). Just as significant, the organization’s median age was close to 18 years old, with some prominent members, like Deputy Minister of Finance Juan “Fi” Ortiz, starting as young as 15.

Historian Mervin Mendez attributes the Lords’ youth as one of the reasons for their success. “The eyes of children are not hypocritical,” Mendez remarked in an interview; “they’re very honest, deadly honest” (Rodriguez 2002). While many, including the Lords, saw their youth as more of a political
liability, I concur with Mendez on one thing: looking and being looked at is at the center of the New York Lords’ story. For a major part of the Young Lords’ achievements relied on what could be called the “look of sovereignty”: a way to style, display, and move the body to denote that a political actor is willing and able to exercise self-governance and full citizen rights at any time he or she determines. This look was likewise a part of an evolving visual vocabulary that could be recognized by the state, mainstream media and radical groups in and outside the city.

At another level, the Lords’ deployment of style underscores the fact that although the concept of sovereignty is commonly understood in relation to the prerogative of states to control national territory, sovereignty is not solely a matter of law: it is also a performative and aesthetic act. In the words of philosopher Michel Foucault, one of the few theorists to take note of the relationship between style and sovereignty: “If I want people to accept me as king, I must have the kind of glory which will survive me, and this glory cannot be disassociated from aesthetic value” (Foucault 1984: 334). The Lords’ stylized performance further implies that given how the identity of racialized and colonized groups is routinely shamed by dominant cultural discourses, their political mobilization often requires the act of refashioning or restyling the public self. For style, as scholar Jesús D. Rodríguez-Velasco (2010) has argued, is intimately linked to how citizens “express their will to form an active part of… sovereign power.”

That the Lords fully understood the importance of style to politics makes their trajectory a rich archive to inquire into the effects and limits of both practices. An engagement with Lord style also partly explains why they remain the most widely recognized of New York Latino radical organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whereas other contemporary groups like Real Great Society (RGS) were similarly pivotal and generative—it was the RGS, after all, that incubated the Young Lords in their East Harlem offices—the Lords and their iconography have come to signify radical politics itself for subsequent generations of activists. Additionally, the Lords’ sartorial history accentuated that style is not an afterthought to political action but rather a practice that materializes at the exact moment when dissent is articulated and a new political body brought forth. Or as Guadeloupan writer Maryse Condé (1985) once put it, “The revolution starts with new clothes.”
The struggle to refashion Puerto Ricans in New York did not, of course, begin with the Young Lords. New York Puerto Ricans have historically been aware of their low status in the city’s symbolic and political economies and have pursued ways to re-dress their circumstances. During the post-World War II period, for instance, many young men tried to valorize themselves by belonging to gangs and styling themselves accordingly. In the words of former Young Lord Chairman Felipe Luciano, “My first models of resistance were Puerto Rican men. I saw Puerto Rican men stand up to the Italian gangs, oblivious to the fact that these guys might put a hit on them. I saw them stand up… in T-shirts, with pegged pants and curly hair coming down their foreheads” (Morales 2002: 83). Those who played by the politics of respectability also sought redress by means of style, wearing the standard suit and tie in the hope of gaining access to the U.S. party machineries, the island’s Commonwealth’s Office in New York or the War on Poverty programs of the post-World War II period (Barreto 2002).

But coming onto the scene at a time of global political radicalization and expansion of visual media technology, the Young Lords opted for a different strategy to transform the perception of Puerto Ricans and their conditions.
They seized the very site of shame and subordination—the body—and re-styled it to maximize its potential as a mobile political sign that staged their liberation from colonial, racist and patriarchal structures of power. In this way, “costume,” as Daphne A. Brooks (2006: 5) has suggested in another context, was a path for self-transformation and freedom. That the Young Lords specifically focused on the body was not a coincidence. Similar to other groups in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, the Lords understood that the violence visited upon Puerto Rican bodies through inferior health services, mass sterilization, poor nutrition, substandard housing and inadequate education was political. Moreover, the emphasis on the body spoke to the colonial stereotype of Puerto Ricans as incapable of sovereign action due to their individual and collective body politic’s presumable weakness. Since the start of U.S. rule on the island in 1898, officials routinely dismissed Puerto Rican self-governance claims and demands for political participation by alluding to the community’s sickness, ignorance, poverty and lack of hygiene.

To counter a politico-symbolic economy that barred Puerto Ricans from resources and visualized them as socially disposable, the Young Lords worked hard to produce a different body for boricuas: well-fed, well-dressed and well-educated; drug and lead-free. This was a body guided by a new consciousness that could “stand up” to the system and take control of the Puerto Rican nation’s destiny by discipline, organization and coordinated action (Ja 1970: 10). By re-stylizing and beefing up the body, the Lords aimed to shed what Young Lord Mickey Meléndez called the “colonial pathology of docility” and replace it with “an image of Puerto Ricans as tough and inventive defenders of their rights as citizens” (Sánchez 2007: 196). In this and other ways, the Young Lords fashioned a public body that moved U.S. Puerto Ricans into political modernity, which, as Wendy Parkins has written, “depends on the concept of an individual who is not subject to the authority of any other except by consent and who is also free to withdraw this consent” (2002: 1).

In a broader sense, the Lords’ desire to improve their political performance is linked to how shame constitutes Puerto Rican ethno-national identity in a colonial context. As I have argued elsewhere, U.S. colonial discourses have historically imagined Puerto Ricans as black, poor and lacking as national subjects. Not surprisingly, many of their forms of survival, including escape, avoidance or unarmed resistance, are similarly considered as “queer” in the sense of being both odd (non-normative) and effeminate (weak, cowardly) (Negrón-Muntaner 2004). Given this context, Puerto Ricans’ performances as
national subjects are often aimed at the American gaze: a “dirty look” that not only deems Puerto Ricans low, criminal and “other” in relation to first-class, upstanding, normative American subjects but demeans them in the eyes of other groups as well. Insisting on being seen otherwise, the Lords asserted that Puerto Ricans had nothing to be ashamed of; on the contrary, what is shameful is the racist colonial and patriarchal gaze.

Equally significant, in contrast to the island Puerto Rican elites who emphasized their racial, class, and gender normative identities, the Lords engaged with, rather than denied, the racialized and queer cast of Puerto Rican identity. On the one hand, they embraced feminist politics and at times overtly identified with the stigmatized political location of LGTB people, particularly gay men. On the other hand, in a manner different from how mainstream political leaders frequently deployed a national discourse of ambiguity toward U.S. sovereignty, the Lords’ sovereign acts offered an oppositional (if problematically) masculinist alternative: one that challenged American imperial “muscular” style with the muscle of national liberation aesthetics deployed by African American, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutionaries.

In sum, to contest multiple sites of symbolic and political dispossession, the Young Lords developed a range of “self-actualizing performance[s]” that were striking in their economy (Brooks 2006: 3). A group without significant financial or institutional support, the Lords promoted low-cost imaginative practices such as symbolic disruption, sartorial re-invention and dramatic storytelling to propose a radical alternative to the status quo. In this way, the Lords built on Felix Padilla’s observation that “the only significant resource Puerto Ricans possessed was the capacity to make trouble…and force authorities to respond” (Fernandez 2012: 173). With style and stunts, the Lords set out to conquer New York.

Lords of Style

As the Lords themselves have noted, the Black Panthers largely inspired their style. From their founding in 1966, Black Panther Party imagery and gestures like the raised fist became a widely cited shorthand to signify empowerment and revolution for radicalized minorities. The Panthers’ strategic use of style, and the media’s tendency to primarily cover the organization’s most spectacular actions often made Panther fashion better known than their political programs. Media consumers, for instance, may not have been aware that the Panthers wanted a United Nations-sponsored referendum on black self-determination
or a general amnesty for all imprisoned black men. But the majority of TV viewers knew what the Panthers looked like: “They were splendidly outfitted… black leather jacket, slacks, shoes, and beret… turtleneck shirts; dark glasses optional,” in the words of historian William Van Deburg (1992: 156).

If race is nearly always downplayed in Puerto Rican national politics, many Young Lords wore their blackness literally on their sleeve by dressing in African and African-American-inspired fashions.

A cross between urban street style, outlaw fashion and third-world revolutionary aesthetics, the male Panther’s look accentuated the wearer’s power. This is evident in, for instance, the use of the black leather jacket; a garment that since its origins in early twentieth century Germany has signified military power, rebellious masculinity, outsider status and social disaffection (Farren 2007). Long firearms, military formation choreography, and the display of “scowling facial expressions” similarly defined the Panther look (Rhodes 2007: 107). Whereas Panther women could also be seen carrying guns and wearing black leather jackets, their style was less regulated and often perceived by critics as a statement of high fashion instead of political practice. In the notorious terms of “Radical Chic” chronicler Tom Wolfe, Panther women were more inclined to wearing “tight pants and Yoruba-style headdresses, almost like turbans, as if they’d stepped out of the pages of Vogue, although no doubt Vogue got it from them” (2009: 5).

For the Lords, drawing from the Panthers was a highly efficient way to make Puerto Ricans visible. Different from African Americans, Puerto Ricans at the time were concentrated in only a few neighborhoods in the Northeast, Illinois and Ohio, and seemed racially ambiguous according to American standards. Fashioning themselves as “a kind of Puerto Rican equivalent to the Black Panthers” (Militants Vow to Continue 1970: 61) allowed the Lords to be readily identified as a desirable ally to other radical groups and as a revolutionary organization that would take the rights of Puerto Ricans by any means necessary. In citing the Panthers through the use of berets, leather jackets and/or Afros, the Lords were engaging in what style theorist Nathan Joseph has called “sartorial metaphor,” that is, “borrowing…the social characteristics of another—status, relationships, and attribute—by adopting his dress” (1986: 13).
Identifying with the Panthers was also about challenging racism among Puerto Ricans. If race is nearly always downplayed in Puerto Rican national politics, many Young Lords wore their blackness literally on their sleeve by dressing in African and African-American-inspired fashions. This trend was particularly apparent in the style of several Lords, including Yoruba Guzmán, who wore a Malcolm X look, Afro, as well as an occasional dashiki. In addition, while the Young Lords remained a Puerto Rican majority organization, black style signaled its openness to incorporate other groups and communicated their desire to work on behalf of the “people” rather than narrowly defined communities. This is evident in that a significant number of Young Lords—from 25 percent to 30 percent—were not Puerto Ricans, and many were African Americans (Fernández 2009b: 271).

Importantly, this practice of inclusion went beyond the rank and file. Some of the top Lords like Yoruba were “halfies” (in his case, of Cuban and Puerto Rican parents), while Denise Oliver, who went on to serve as Minister of Economic Development, was African American.

Simultaneously, the Lords knew that in order to be taken seriously as Latino revolutionaries, they could not be perceived as just an imitation of black groups. At the level of style, the Lords addressed this by infusing their Panther-inspired attire with accessories that accentuated Puerto Rican identity. For instance, whereas the Panther beret was black, the Lords’ own was purple, a detail that is easy to miss if looking at black and white footage or photographs. The color purple explicitly references the Young Lords’ Chicago gang origins, since this was their distinct hue when it was a street gang. Moreover, the Lords adopted Chicago’s “YLO button,” which showed a “fist holding a rifle and containing a Spanish phrase ‘Tengo Puerto Rico en mi corazón’—‘I have Puerto Rico in my heart’ against a silhouette of the island” (Fried 1969: 86). The beret was arguably the item that most identified the New York Lords. “People knew us by the beret and the buttons that we wore on them,” recalls former Lords leader Iris Morales. “If we did not want to be seen or engage as a Young Lord, we would take off our beret” (Morales 2015).

An equally significant addition was the Puerto Rican flag. This was a key accessory. During the first half of the twentieth century, the Puerto Rican flag had emerged as a symbol of defiance to U.S. colonial authority in part due to its suppression by the local government. Pro-independence groups, like the Nationalist Party led by Pedro Albizu Campos, often displayed the flag in public events despite being (or precisely because it was) outlawed. Although the Estado Libre Asociado officially adopted the banner in 1952, the fact that
it could still not legally be flown “alone”—without the American flag—carried its oppositional meanings well into the 1970s (Morris 1995: 50–2). After Puerto Ricans migrated to the U.S. and expanded their participation in American institutions, the flag came to signify ethno-national identity in multiple sites, from New York’s Puerto Rican Parade to war zones in Korea. Whether they intended to call attention to the “national question” and/or underscore their ethnic difference (Guzmán 1971: 75), many Lords wore the Puerto Rican flag on their heads, chest and hands—anywhere that they could hang it.

A good number of Lords similarly wore “U.S. Army-issued field jackets, combat fatigues” and black boots (Meléndez 2005: 94). While wearing U.S. military garments may appear incongruous given the Lords’ opposition to American colonial policies and foreign interventions, it effectively communicated a wide range of ideas regarding their aspirations, experience and form of organization. Army attire, for example, connoted the Lords’ paramilitary structure, which included a central committee consisting of five people: a chairman and the ministers of information, education, defense and
finance. Fatigues also referenced the contradictory experience of Puerto Rican service in the U.S. military and/or opposition to the Vietnam War. “We had a lot of Vietnam vets and they wore their uniform,” adds Morales. “They were proud that they had fought in Vietnam but ambivalent about the fact that they had killed Vietnamese” (Morales 2015). In wearing the uniform, the Lords aimed to remove the stigma of passivity and weakness, and be seen as warriors: a type associated with heroism, strength and honor in the American popular imagination.

The common use of olive green clothing further emphasized the Young Lords’ identification with Third World revolutionary movements and projected their actions as those of revolutionary soldiers against the state and its representatives. This affinity was present from the very beginning, starting with the date chosen by the Lords to stage their first public event: July 26, 1969. The day overtly referenced the Cuban July 26 Movement, which became the military arm of the anti-Batista forces that eventually propelled Fidel Castro to power in 1959. Honoring their key political genealogies—nationalist, black and Third World—the Young Lords introduced themselves to New York “clad in fatigues resembling the BPP and holding aloft a banner of a rifle over the Puerto Rican flag as their insignia” (Fernández 2003: 264).

The Young Lords’ constant citation of the basic third-world guerrilla uniform also explicitly signified their aspiration to combat U.S. colonialism in Puerto Rico. According to Meléndez: “We began to believe in the possibility that we could become an independent and self-governing nation, controlling our own economy and our own destiny. We redefined ourselves in this tradition of struggle and resistance against powerful foreign intervention” (2005: 81). Yet the Young Lords’ rare display or use of the ultimate nation-state sovereignty accessory—guns—suggested that even if they identified with liberation movements in the U.S. and abroad, defended their own right to armed struggle and in print constantly included drawings and photos of guns, theirs was a conflict fought primarily in the symbolic rather than military arena.

This reality is evident in the sole New York action in which guns were extensively wielded in public: the already mentioned funeral of Young Lord Julio Roldán. Arrested on October 15, 1970, for allegedly trying to set an East Harlem apartment on fire, Roldán was taken to the Manhattan House of Detention for men, otherwise known as the Tombs (Young Lords Take Over Church 1970: 52). A few days after his arrest, Roldán was found dead, hanging in his jail cell by a belt. Although the police labeled the death a suicide,
the Young Lords believed that Roldán was murdered. In response, the Lords occupied what they had renamed the “People’s Church” for a second time. On this occasion, they entered the building bearing arms, in a show of force designed to communicate that their organization would not tolerate the killing of its members (Perez 1970: 4). But since the Lords were not interested in confronting the police or getting arrested, they devised a magnificent exit strategy: before leaving, they broke down the guns and hid them in the clothes and purses of seemingly harmless neighborhood _doñas_ leaving the church.

The Lords’ downplaying of guns is in contrast to the Black Panthers and speaks to different histories and contexts despite their significant affinities. The Panthers initially became visible as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense to confront police brutality and “a law-and-order culture” in California (Ongiri 2009: 42). Arms also stood for the Panther rejection of non-violence as a resistance strategy and frustration with the limitations of the Civil Rights Movement. Fittingly, the Panthers’ first statewide action in May 2, 1967, was an armed entrance into the California state capitol at the same time that the legislature was considering the Mulford Act, a gun control bill that would have barred residents from carrying concealed weapons. At the end, even after dropping “self-defense” from their name to avoid being considered “a paramilitary organization” (Nelson 2011: 62) and emphasizing service programs, guns remained a loaded symbol of empowerment for the Panthers (Rhodes 2007: 106).

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In this sense, while both groups displayed guns for symbolic reasons, and the Young Lords similarly recognized police brutality and prison conditions as a threat to Puerto Rican well-being, much of the Lords’ core politics emerged from being marginalized and unrecognized rather than targeted and attacked. In addition, through their close study of past Puerto Rican nationalist armed revolts, the Lords’ were arguably aware of the risks of these actions, the potential for state violence against community members and the high price paid by pro-independence militants who often enjoyed little support. Not surprisingly, even on the occasions when he advocated armed struggle, the
Lords’ Minister of Defense Juan González underscored the importance of going to battle with other allies, particularly blacks and radicalized workers, and the tactical need to “divide up the work necessary to destroy amerikkan power” (González 1971: 8).

When going it alone, the Lords then tended to carry weapons under circumstances perceived as extreme, and only to stress that Puerto Rican political will and/or citizenship rights had to be respected. In this sense, the Lords were generally unwilling to engage in the definitive sovereign action: to determine who lives and who dies. Even Mickey Meléndez, the Lords’ highest ranking military member, who at one time was also given the task of building up an “underground armed branch” (Herz 2009), described the scene at the Methodist Church in exclusively performative terms: “For the first time, we would brandish weapons. They were meant to be symbolic; we wanted to force the city to negotiate with us for prison reforms. We were angry and wanted to show how serious we were, publicly and on TV” (Meléndez 2005: 182).

This is consistent with Nathan Joseph’s observation that, in certain contexts, “The importance of weapons may derive less from their actual efficacy than their associated cultural values. The right to weapons has long symbolized the wellborn or even the ordinary adult male in a warlike society” (1986 :22).

Inherent in Joseph’s gendered comment is the notion that looking like the Lords had different implications for men and women. As a visual sign, the male Young Lords’ armed image signaled that Puerto Rican men were capable of violence. In the words of José Yglesias, the Lords’ look was about “being a macho, a real male, means standing up to the Man” (1970: 32). Or in the more explicit terms of Young Lord Richie Perez: “When we integrated campuses… we got to [kick ass] too… throw racists down the stairs. We did non-violent actions—but it was a TACTICAL question, not a matter of PRINCIPLE. It was important that our antagonists knew this” (Perez 2000). The idea was to clearly connote that Lords’ men could—and would—defend themselves and their rights by force if they so decided.

By wearing clothing associated with men and war such as combat boots in private and public spaces, women signified a rejection of the traditionally defined gender roles of housewives and mistresses, so closely associated with the “macho” culture some men were attempting to uphold.
Though the male Lords’ look projected a sovereign masculinity, dressing as a “Lady Lord” had as much, if not more, to do with power differentials between men and women. By wearing clothing associated with men and war such as combat boots in private and public spaces, women signified a rejection of the traditionally defined gender roles of housewives and mistresses, so closely associated with the “macho” culture some men were attempting to uphold. In the words of Iris Morales, who was also the wife of Chairman Felipe Luciano at the time, “War begins at home” (Klemesrud 1970: 78). Women’s adoption of the Lord uniform was ultimately a sign of discontent in relation to gender expectations and a demand that women be treated as equals in and out of the organization.

But although women may have valued military dress, their style, like that of female members of the Black Panthers, was generally less regimented than the men’s. In addition to the fact that many women embraced other fashion choices that affirmed their sexual autonomy like the mini-skirt, there was a second important reason: it did not take long for the Lords’ women to figure out that dressing the part was not enough to be recognized as sovereign or equal. As the Lords increasingly thought of themselves as a paramilitary organization, sexist ideologies arguably became more dominant in day-to-day operations and women’s discomfort with their low status grew (Oliver in Morales 1996). Consequently, eight months into the life of the Young Lords, the women members staged the first transformative insurrection experienced by the organization. And, not coincidentally, in one of the most colorful accounts of the Lords’ feminist revolt, Denise Oliver narrates the inciting incident via dress metaphors.

The triggering event took place at the home of poet and activist Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). Chairman Felipe Luciano, who was intrigued by Baraka’s strand of nationalism, went to meet him accompanied by several Lords’ men and Denise Oliver. According to Oliver, when she arrived at Baraka’s home, she noticed that women “crawled into the room on their hands and knees wearing elaborate headdresses decorated with fruit” while “Baraka’s coterie of male guards and supporters…wore dashikis and gave power handshakes to the male Lords” (Nelson 2000: 162). Uncomfortable with the scene, Oliver reportedly asked Baraka about the role of women in his organization but was ignored throughout the gathering. After Oliver left, she called a meeting with other Lords women and urged them to pressure the male leadership for greater inclusion in the top command. Oliver succinctly summed up the reason why
this course of action was urgent: “[because] if we didn’t do something we would end up on our hands and knees with fruit on our heads” (Nelson 2000: 162).

To bring the point home, the Lords’ women proceeded to create their own caucus, formally pressured for change, and threatened to stop working for the organization (Morales 2015). Some women also reportedly refused to have sex with the men until the Central Committee met their demands. (Lord internal regulations prohibited sex outside of the group for fear of government infiltration.) By June 1970, the Young Lords’ women won a series of victories that substantially altered their status (Nelson 2000: 159). Among these were the elevation of two women to the central committee and other positions of power, and the complete overhaul of point number 5 in the party program, the only item that the Lords amended while an active organization. Whereas before the Young Lords argued in their platform that “machismo must be revolutionary and not oppressive,” the new point number 5 now read: “We want equality for women. Down with machismo and male chauvinism” (Young Lords Party 1973a: 272). For the Lords’ women, rationale for the amendment was simple. In the words of Oliver, “machismo was never gonna be revolutionary. Saying ‘revolutionary machismo’ is like saying… ‘revolutionary racism’” (Young Lords Party 1971: 52).

Ready for their close-up
Arriving at the right look and mending the gendered splits, however, was only the first step. Once refashioned, the Lords had to mobilize their bodies to tell compelling stories in which Puerto Ricans were the protagonists of a political drama about the city’s failure to recognize, serve and protect its people. Importantly, these performances were not only directed at the state or other radical groups but also at Puerto Ricans and other community members. According to New York Times journalist Joseph Fried, one of the first reporters to cover the Young Lords, their main goal was “to show the people of El Barrio, East Harlem’s Puerto Rican slum, that such activity was necessary to get city action to meet community needs” (1969: 86). Aiming to inspire respect, even awe, the group captured the imaginations of thousands of people who never met a Young Lord in person or directly benefited from their actions.
In other words, politics required publicity and publicity required that you make news. And to make news you had to not only “look good” but tell a moving story too.

Since a wide base of support was necessary to challenge institutions, offer services and “awaken” Puerto Ricans to their own political potential, the Young Lords heavily promoted their corporeal movements to the mass media, effectively recruiting them to act as their co-producers. “Look, you know,” wrote Yoruba. “The media is gonna have to be used. Until we can put out the Daily News regularly, until we have a TV station and a radio station, chalk it up. Everybody on welfare got a TV set, everybody got a radio, everybody buys the Daily News and El Diario, so as long as the people got access to these things, we might as well use them to the best of our advantage” (Young Lords Party 1973a: 261). Moreover, as new journalist Tom Wolfe once observed, “Without publicity it has never been easy to rank as a fashionable person in New York City” (Wolfe 2009: 30). In other words, politics required publicity and publicity required that you make news. And to make news you had to not only “look good” but tell a moving story too.

The Lords’ discovery of the importance of effective (and entertaining) media representation to contemporary politics was not met with universal approval. The traditional left deeply disliked the Lords’ style and tactics. The Movement for Puerto Rican Independence’s (MPI) leadership, for instance, was particularly clear when they called the Lords “a group of immature young people looking for publicity” and a “bunch of crazy exhibitionists” (¿Young Lords o ‘landlords’? 1989: 46).

Despite the left’s bad reviews, the Young Lords’ emphasis on the media was not arbitrary. The group came into being at a time when media outlets significantly expanded, resulting in an unprecedented hunger for television news. News programs were similarly changing into more stylish and dramatic presentations that sought to build audiences rather than promote traditional journalistic values such as “content and social responsibility” (Rhodes 2007: 63). In addition, city residents increasingly constituted their social and political identities via their interaction with mass media products. Knowing how to attract and grasp media attention was then paramount to any disruption of hegemonic discourses around race, colonialism and citizenship.
Furthermore, although the Young Lords were not the first Puerto Rican group to recognize the importance of performance to politics—anarchists like Luisa Capetillo and the Nationalists under Albizu Campos understood it too—they were the first U.S.-based organization to do so in a context where the mass media had become a major political power, as great, and at times greater, than the state in allocating the cultural capital of groups seeking support for their claims. In this sense, improving Puerto Rican looks through style, performance and choreography was both a mode of “self-defense” as the Panthers would have it and a means to quicken the pace of political empowerment and accumulation of cultural capital.

In attempting to capture media attention, however, the Lords faced structural challenges. Unlike affluent whites, who had access to news and media infrastructure, Puerto Ricans had few resources to call attention to their concerns. In contrast to African Americans, who despite discrimination had a more sustained presence in U.S. media and greater prominence in American national discourse, Puerto Ricans were rarely recognized as a U.S. ethnic minority or specific national group, so their claims were frequently dismissed as irrelevant and/or anti-American. Moreover, they were often confused with immigrants and blacks, requiring additional effort to gain separate notice. It is then not a coincidence that Puerto Rican activists and organizations are known for extreme stunts, such as the Nationalist Party’s 1954 shooting in Congress to bring attention to Puerto Rico’s colonial situation or twice climbing the Statue of Liberty and unfurling Puerto Rican flags in support of various causes, including evicting the U.S. Navy from Vieques.

To counter their limitations, the Young Lords developed two key performances with a “sense of drama, and a flair” (Guzmán 1971: 75). The first was the well-coordinated stunt, exemplified by their first mass action in July 1969, the “Garbage Offensive.” According to Mickey Meléndez, the Lords picked garbage, no pun intended, because that is what barrio residents identified as their number one neighborhood problem. This was an astute choice since, as historian Johanna Fernández has observed, not only were barrio residents concerned with the issue, it had also become a sensitive matter for the city at large. The fact that New York’s sanitation infrastructure was outdated, its city workers underpaid and the growing volume of waste was increasingly difficult to manage was on the minds of many New Yorkers (Fernández 2003: 269). But a third account particularly fitting for my argument is that the Lords decided to concentrate on the overwhelming problem of trash in East Harlem
because, as Yoruba Guzmán put it, “garbage is visible and everybody sees it” (Young Lords Party 1973a: 258).

In addition, “garbage” was what many New Yorkers considered Puerto Ricans to be. A 1948 travel book, *New York Confidential*, by Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, minced no words in describing the new migrants: “They are mostly crude farmers, subject to congenital tropical diseases, physically unfitted for the northern climate, unskilled, uneducated, non-English-speaking, and almost impossible to assimilate and condition for healthful and useful existence in an active city of stone and steel” (1948: 126). Even after decades of living in New York, Puerto Ricans continued to be largely seen as unassimilable to middle-class values and norms. Former Congressman Herman Badillo, for instance, once commented that when he began registering Puerto Ricans to vote in the late 1950s, he heard a man say that, “We have to do something about that guy Badillo. He’s been bringing all this garbage to register and to vote” (Bosch 2013). Ten years later, Yoruba would similarly conclude that “[the] D.O.G [Department of Sanitation] looks upon Puerto Ricans and Blacks as though they are something lower than garbage” (Guzmán 2010: 185). So, to make the garbage visible—and to purposefully re-present it as a sign of how “dirty” the system was rather than a measure of Puerto Rican worth—was a highly effective way of prompting New Yorkers to look at Puerto Ricans in an entirely different light.

Influenced by prior Real Great Society actions and named after the Vietnamese Tet offensive, the Young Lords and other community members decided to meet every Sunday to clean up the garbage. To this end, the Lords requested supplies from the city and were summarily ignored. After experiencing similar treatment more than once and seeing that the trash was not collected or, if so, was left “strewn in the street,” the Lords changed their tactic (Fernández 2003: 265). For over a month, the Lords and other residents began to push the garbage further and further into 110th Street and Third Avenue, and to make piles that partly obstructed traffic. By August 17th, something unexpected happened: the protesters decided to set the garbage on fire.

To achieve this, the Lords began making use of a second tactic—the “kidnapping” building action—an open-ended story that invited spectators to join and bring closure by changing prevalent conditions.
Setting garbage on fire was, according to political scientist José Ramón Sánchez (2007), a turning point in the relations between Puerto Ricans, the state and New York at large. Whereas residents had piled up garbage and swept the streets before the Lords came onto the scene, the style deployed by the Young Lords suggested that this was not business as usual. The idea was no longer to ask the authorities for help but to make their failure to serve visible, thus deflecting shame onto a system that did not live up to its self-proclaimed standards of cleanliness, efficiency and order. And, from the Lords’ point of view, what garbage made evident was at least two-fold: that “the system does not serve them” and that Puerto Ricans, while they were surrounded by garbage, were not responsible for the conditions in which they lived (Fried 1969: 86).

Yet, in order to establish themselves as prime-time players and be widely recognized as sovereign political actors, that is, subjects who did not require state or church approval to act on their desires, the Lords needed to dramatize their movements and capture New York’s attention at a greater scale. To achieve this, the Lords began making use of a second tactic—the “kidnapping” building action—an open-ended story that invited spectators to join and bring closure by changing prevalent conditions. The initial choice embodying the new tactic was the takeover of the First Spanish Methodist Church on the corner of 111th Street and Lexington. The impasse began when the pastor, Reverend Humberto Carranza—a Cuban exile to whom the Lords must have seemed like mini-Ché’s—repeatedly refused the Lords’ request for space to house several programs including a day care center and a popular free breakfast program over a four-month period. Frustrated with the lack of progress, the Lords decided to take over the church. On December 29, 1969, they began an 11-day occupation, during which hundreds of people participated in their programs.

The Lords’ biggest victories may have been at other levels. Both the Offensive and the takeover of First Spanish Methodist Church established the Lords as representatives of Puerto Ricans in what they perceived was a global revolution, and decisively transformed Puerto Rican expectations. In Yoruba’s words: “...before the Young Lords Party began—people used to walk with their heads down like this, and the pigs would walk through the colonies, man, like they owned the block. They’d come in here with no kind of respect in their eyes. But after the Garbage Offensive and the People’s Church it was a whole new game” (Guzmán 1971: 82). In the end, the longer-term impact of
these actions had less to do with whether the city picked up the garbage in East Harlem more frequently or offered church space. Instead, the consequences turned on how the Puerto Ricans transformed themselves from spectators into political actors, unhinging enduring stereotypes of Puerto Rican passivity and ineffectiveness (Perez 2000).

Despite the Lords’ revolutionary rhetoric, they selected relatively easy targets that could lead to tangible improvements.

Emboldened by their accomplishments, the Young Lords went on to organize other similar high-profile actions such as the “liberation” of an x-ray truck to conduct community tuberculosis tests June 17, 1970, and the occupation of Lincoln Hospital, nearly a month later, on July 14th (Fernández 2009a). Prompted by the outrage of proposed budget cuts and inhumane treatment of patients, the Lincoln Hospital takeover was a classic Young Lords action: it included the occupation of an unpopular hospital that most agreed was a “butcher shop.” In addition, the siege lasted only 12 hours, attracted coverage by news cameras and made no use of physical force. Notably, the hospital’s chief administrator himself, Dr. Antero Lacot, described the action as “helpful” in “trying to dramatize a situation which is critical.”

Ultimately, the Young Lords offered a familiar and popular storyline to the media featuring disempowered youth with a just cause that was likely to end well for all involved. In Yoruba’s terms, “The people dig an underdog, that was the great appeal of the Mets at one time, and you have to understand that that’s exactly what we are, underdogs” (Guzmán 1971: 78). Despite the Lords’ revolutionary rhetoric, they selected relatively easy targets that could lead to tangible improvements. As Sánchez adds, “they appeared dangerous yet used church space for a free breakfast program and free medical care” (Sánchez 2007: 203). This is one of the main reasons why the Young Lords generally obtained sympathy from journalists, wide sectors of the public and even from some individuals and organizations they targeted. In the end, their New York actions did not seek military control or revolutionary overthrow of the state but, instead, access to resources, self-transformation and expansion of the political imagination.
Heart of Lords
For over a year, the Young Lords won nearly every publicity battle if not
every political fight. Some may have disagreed with their look or tactics; few
disagreed with their reasoning. Still, the Young Lords began losing momentum
after 1972, when they engaged in a series of public actions and internal
debates that began to alter their image and strategy. Their first political turn
arguably took place earlier, on June 8, 1970, when the Lords marched in the
annual Puerto Rican Parade alongside members of the Movement for Puerto
Rican Independence and the Puerto Rican Students Union. During the
parade, the group embarrassed some participants and organizers when they
pelted officials and Puerto Rico’s pro-statehood governor Luis A. Ferré with
tomatoes, oranges and eggs (Yglesias 1970).

In other words, as the Lords moved from dramatic actions focused on community needs towards a pro-independence agenda, the political ground began to shift.

Moreover, while bringing arms to Roldán’s funeral in 1970 was a symbolic
gesture that did not end in armed confrontation, it anticipated a turn toward
more nationalist and militarized politics, one that boomeranged. As journalist
Ansel Herz has argued, “Unlike previous building occupations, the second
takeover of the ‘People’s Church’ did not achieve any tangible victory for
the community of El Barrio. No one was ever held responsible for Roldán’s
death. The open display of weapons did, however, agitate the FBI and lead
to increased surveillance and repression” (2009). In other words, as the Lords
moved from dramatic actions focused on community needs towards a pro-
independence agenda, the political ground began to shift. Not only did this new
orientation deeply polarize the Lords and community members, it also made
the media lose interest. All that the Lords had achieved seem to fade away.

Yet, from the start, the Young Lords had a constitutive duality that came
to undo them as a political force: the Lords’ head may have been bent on
being recognized as an integral, if distinct, part of New York and in solidarity
with other anti-imperialist movements at home and beyond. But, as the
Young Lords’ button proclaimed, they had “Puerto Rico en el corazón,” a
sentiment that started weighing heavily. The Lords came to believe that acts
of political imagination and community service in East Harlem did not go to
the heart of Puerto Rican subordination and therefore could not free Puerto Ricans, decolonize the island or confer the dignity of nation-state status. After all, the number one point in the Young Lords’ platform was: “We want self-determination for Puerto Ricans, liberation on the island and inside the United States,” and number six affirmed: “We want community control of our institutions and land” (Young Lords Party 1973b: 272).

In contemplating growth for the organization within a context of declining mass activity, the Young Lords made a fateful decision: starting in March 1971, they launched Ofensiva Rompecadenas and started to develop a presence in Puerto Rico. This decision was not unanimous. It was, however, largely founded in a shared analysis that rested on two assumptions: one, that Puerto Ricans made up a single nation and therefore the occupied Island was every boricua’s national land base; and two, that the origin of Puerto Rican disempowerment and stigmatization in the U.S. was the colonial status of Puerto Rico. In the succinct words of Felipe Luciano: “Puerto Rico is oppressed as a nation, it is a colony of the united states [sic] and the colonial status of Puerto Ricans follows them from the countryside to New York City” (1970: 10).

Building on this assessment, the Young Lords decided that they should reallocate energies and resources to winning independence for the island and liberate the “two-thirds of our people [who] are in chains in Puerto Rico” (Beat is Gettin’ Stronger 1971: 2). If Puerto Ricans were an “internal” colony of the U.S., the only path to liberation was to externalize it through formal decolonization. “And this is why we must rise up together,” wrote Lord leader Gloria Gonzalez, “Boricuas in the u.s. and Boricuas on the island, to put an end to yankee abuse…we must re-unite our Nation” (González 1971: 8). Only then, will the new body and the old heart produce a truly free and sovereign Puerto Rican.

The Young Lords proceeded to open branches in Ponce, Aguadilla and San Juan. Dressed in their full Young Lords uniform, they made their first major appearance on March 21, 1971, as part of a commemorative march for the Ponce Massacre of 1937. But their presence was generally not welcome. Although the Lords’ commitment to national sovereignty did not go unnoticed by sectors of the independence movement and later prompted outreach campaigns in the mainland (Torres 1998: 7), most island nationalists felt that they had little need for the Nuyorican warriors on their own turf. Counting on century-old nationalist and left traditions, and apparently feeling the Lords had come to “show the other independentistas how to make revolution,” many
dismissed the new arrivals (Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization 2010b: 240). While there is limited research on this part of Young Lords history, anecdotes from political activists of this period suggest that the New York Lords were seen in terms similar to other U.S.-born Puerto Ricans: low class, non-Spanish-speaking, “atrevido” Americans (Whalen 1998).

But, one could say, Puerto Rico broke the Lords’ heart, in some ways severing the heart from the body.

In listening to their hearts, the Young Lords came face to face with a nearly unbearable truth: if a great part of the Lord’s transformation into revolutionaries had to do with realizing that they were Puerto Ricans and not Americans, the “real” Puerto Ricans did not think that they were Puerto Ricans at all, much less that the island needed foreign leadership to win any political battle. In Juan González’s words, “one of the biggest mistakes…the Young Lords ever made was…that we could figure out how to organize an independence movement on the island. Because the reality is that we’re US-raised Puerto Ricans and the experience that we knew was the urban ghettos of the United States” (González in Morales 1996). This realization had great implications.

During more than a year of strenuous work, the Young Lords had fashioned themselves into a disciplined body ready for political power. Style was a form of discipline, and discipline a way to produce a sovereign self: “We stressed self-discipline…we attempted to remake ourselves—change our thinking and behavior—while we fought to change the world” (Perez 2000). But, one could say, Puerto Rico broke the Lords’ heart, in some ways severing the heart from the body. And this severance revealed the tensions between two different conceptions of sovereignty. The first was a lower-case form that emphasized symbolic disruption, recognition as citizens, and the politicization of class, ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality and colonial subordination. A second understood sovereignty in nation-state terms and ultimately could only be fought in—and over—Puerto Rico. The gap exposed a fissure between the potentially sovereign body of the Nuyorican, and her non-sovereign heart, Puerto Rico, one that would eventually make the Young Lords Party implode.

At the exact moment that the Young Lords aimed to overtly challenge
U.S. sovereignty in Puerto Rico by migrating part of their operation to the Island, the state moved to disassemble its potential success by stepping up surveillance, increasing the number of infiltrators and intensifying police harassment of individuals and property (González in Morales 1996). Equally important, the move south literally dislocated rather than stretched the Lords’ body politic. As Iris Morales summed up: “[W]e started to lose the relationship with the community which was what had kept us and made us strong…people then didn’t have a place where they would come and talk to us about the police brutality issues, they didn’t have a place where there could be a free breakfast program or a free clothing drive” (Morales 1996). In addition, the embrace of more conventional goals such as national sovereignty displaced other core objectives that had so defined the politics of the Young Lords, including dismantling racism and sexism (Morales 2015).

Called the “intellectuals” by the Chicago group, the New York Lords’ leadership composition also implied a distrust of or, at least, a distance from the masses.

Lastly, this dislocation became a deep fracture when Marxist-Maoist members led by Gloria Fontanez transformed the party into the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO) in July 1972. The PRRWO’s leadership, which included former core Lords, derided the Lords’ prior nationalist analysis in favor of revolutionary proletarianism, arguing that only a working-class revolution in the U.S. would eliminate the threat of American imperialism. Some of the Lords were now even accused of being “rightist” and “reactionary.” As the PRRWO’s new leaders saw it, “Puerto Rico is not a divided nation. Puerto Rico is a nation in Puerto Rico, and the Puerto Ricans inside the U.S. are an oppressed national minority part of the North American working class” (Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization 2010a: 234). Significantly, a measure of the proof that they offered for the Lords’ political errors was sartorial: “Left extremism was being developed and this was seen in the way we dressed, as if we were an army, our way of talking, of living, so different from the rest of the working people” (Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization 2010a: 234). Over time, the PRRWO’s dogmatism led to violent internal struggle, authoritarianism and ineffectiveness.
Still, whereas the PRRWO is almost universally regarded as the Lords’ “darkest hour,” and their stance that the working class was the only possible revolutionary class is seen at best as misguided, its leaders were not altogether wrong in assessing that the Lords’ project was that of an already upwardly mobile group (“lower petty bourgeoisie” in their terms). This is evident in the reasons why they cut off their ties to Chicago to become the Young Lords Party—the original Lords were considered too “street” and not sophisticated enough—and in their urgent quest for a “base” once social movements began to change in the early 1970s (Fernandez 2012: 202–3). Called the “intellectuals” by the Chicago group, the New York Lords’ leadership composition also implied a distrust of or, at least, a distance from the masses. Although the Young Lords’ leadership stressed service to “the people,” all decisions were made by a central committee, mostly composed of college-educated young men, who shared Che Guevara’s assumption that a small group of militants could bring about significant change and foster revolutionary conditions.

Not surprisingly, one of the most tangible long-term effects of the Lords’ political practice was the ways that it enabled Puerto Rican upward mobility and greater participation in New York’s mainstream institutions and mass media structures. As Yoruba concluded, “Ask any Latino professional in Nueva York who advanced in government or the corporate world between, say, 1969 and 1984, and you’ll be told they owe part of their opportunity to the sea change of perception that Young Lords inspired” (Guzmán 1998: 165). Similarly, not a few Young Lords went on to careers inside the legal system and mass media as producers, radio personalities, judges, organizers, non-profit directors and/or lawyers. For instance, Felipe Luciano was a radio personality on Fox 5 and WLIB radio. At present, Yoruba Guzmán is a newscaster for WCBS/Channel 2, Juan González is a Daily News columnist and cohost of the show Democracy Now! and Iris Morales is a lawyer and filmmaker.

In the end, the Lords did not bring liberation to Puerto Rico or Puerto Ricans in the U.S. in the conventionally sovereign terms they envisioned. Their “look of sovereignty” paradoxically exposed the limits of style, nationalist Puerto Rican politics and sovereign discourse itself in a context of global economic restructuring and enduringly colonial power relations. Yet, regardless of the Young Lords’ internal struggles, by becoming Lords of style, they upended the premise of Puerto Rican identity as inherently low, passive and disposable; and displaced the stigmatizing shame of racialization and colonialism from their bodies to state and media structures. Furthermore, the Young Lords’
trajectory, including its failures, freed U.S. Puerto Ricans to inhabit different and multiple political locations as New Yorkers, blacks, Latinas, queer Latinos, and/or global citizens, among other identities. In the process, the Lords left behind not just a rich record of imaginative acts in challenging times. They also showed, and this is an important notion, the possibility of thinking about politics as a daily practice of self-fashioning and transformative action rather than a utopian state somewhere beyond our reach.
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NOTES
1 For additional context about the Young Lords of Chicago, please see Fernandez (2012), Williams (2013) and Ogbar (2006: 154).
2 Although beyond the scope of this essay, the differences between the trajectory of the Chicago, New York and other branches of the Young Lords were at times substantial. These involved not only differences in the membership composition and goals of each organization but also their relationship to city structures, level of support from the media, impact of counter intelligence programs such as COINTELPRO, the presence of other radical organizations and public discourse around key issues.
3 For further discussion on Real Great Society, including their relationship with the Young Lords, see Aponte Parés (1998).
4 In the documentary *Palante, Siempre Palante!* (Morales 1996), Felipe Luciano’s describes the taking of the first building as “we literally kidnapped the church.”
5 For more details, see Narvaez (1970: 34) and Fernández (2009a: 76).
6 For further discussion on the relationship between sovereignty and political modernity, see Bonilla (2015).

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