

From:

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Women of Color and the
Reproductive Rights Movement

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“Abortions under community control”

*Feminism, Nationalism, and the Politics
of Reproduction among New York City’s
Young Lords*

Eighteen days after a new abortion law went into effect in New York State—on July 1, 1970—the heart of a 31-year-old Puerto Rican woman, Carmen Rodriguez, stopped during a saline-induced second-trimester abortion at Lincoln Hospital in the South Bronx. She was the first woman to die from a legal abortion after the reformed New York State abortion law—legalizing termination up to 24 weeks—became effective.¹ This tragic event immediately became a lightning rod for criticism of both national and local reproductive policies and the conditions of public hospitals serving the poor in New York City. It also helped to crystallize an original reproductive rights discourse combining both feminism and nationalism stridently put forth by women in the Young Lords Party (YLP), a New York City-based Puerto Rican nationalist organization.

The YLP, echoing similar claims made by Black Nationalists and Black Muslims, pointed to Rodriguez’s death as evidence that Puerto Ricans and other people of color were targets for mass genocide through population control. For example, after Rodriguez’s death, Gloria Cruz, health captain of the YLP, warned that the new state abortion law, in the context of the dangerous medical environment of New York City public hospitals, was an essential part of an attempt to reduce the population of low-income Puerto Ricans. Cruz announced: “A new plan for the limitation of our population was passed—the abortion law. Under this new method we are now supposed to be able to go to any of the city butcher

shops (the municipal hospitals) and receive an abortion. These are the same hospitals that have been killing our people for years.”²

As we have seen, the belief that people of color were being subjected to a genocidal plot was a popular political position in nationalist circles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This view was extreme, and no evidence confirms that population control reduced the numbers of people of color in America. But the realities of inadequate health care at Lincoln and other public hospitals—long waits for emergency room care, exhausted and hurried interns as medical staff, the lack of provisions for drug treatment or pre- and postnatal care, run-down accommodations, and Carmen Rodriguez’s death—provided a context for the dire warnings espoused by Cruz and other people of color.

At the same time, the YLP distinguished themselves from other nationalist organizations active during this period by demanding a broad reproductive rights agenda, which included the right to legal abortion. As we have seen, most nationalist organizations of the early 1970s, like the Black Panther Party or the Nation of Islam, were staunchly opposed to abortion or any other form of reproductive control, even if chosen voluntarily. They insisted that by increasing their numbers, people of color would gain political power. By contrast, the Young Lords’ pro-fertility control position developed as a result of the actions of a few very outspoken and powerful women within the organization who were sympathetic to feminism. These women ensured that feminist demands for safe, legal contraception, abortion, and other reproductive rights were an integral part of the Young Lords’ politics. Although, at first, women were not taken seriously by most of the male members, by 1970—the first anniversary of the group’s existence—they had radically altered the political ideology of the group. For the first time, a nationalist organization composed of people of color made an explicitly feminist position central to their political ideology.

The reproductive rights agenda developed by the female Young Lords between 1969 and 1974 was inclusive: it encompassed access to voluntary birth control, safe and legal abortion, a quality public health care system, free day care, and an end to poverty among Puerto Ricans and other people of color. It also combined two distinct strands of political thought: the first was a nationalist politics—emphasizing the right of poor people of color to control over local institutions, an end to poverty among people of color, and an anti-genocide rhetoric—most stridently articulated by the Black Panther Party and the Nation of Islam in the late

1960s and early 1970s. The second was a feminist politics that demanded a woman’s right to control her own reproduction, articulated by women’s liberationists during the same period.³ As female Young Lords pushed feminism to the center of the Young Lords’ nationalist political ideology, reproductive rights demands gained increasing importance. After their first year, the YLP openly demanded that Puerto Rican women had a right to bear the number of children they wanted and the right to raise them in a prosperous environment.⁴

At least one group of Puerto Ricans thus developed a unique radical politics during the early 1970s that encompassed both feminism and nationalism. The coexistence of these two political positions within one organization may come as a surprise. There has been a presumption that nationalism and feminism cannot coexist, that a group’s nationalism inevitably renders any feminist expression insincere. This perspective is not a product of careful historical examination, however. Not only did women in the YLP push the group to embrace both nationalism and feminism, but they also did so without contradiction, although not without conflict. They drew from both nationalist and feminist political ideologies to forge a liberatory reproductive politics. Their standpoint as Puerto Rican feminists active in a nationalist organization that emphasized the needs of poor people of color allowed YLP women to develop this unique version of reproductive politics. In short, their particular position within the YLP fostered an original and inclusive reproductive politics.

The Young Lords Party: Background

Cha Cha Jimenez, a young Puerto Rican activist, and a group of Puerto Ricans allied in the Young Patriots Organization, a politicized street gang, founded the Young Lords Organization (YLO) in Chicago in 1968. The YLO drafted a 13-point platform at the founding that echoed the Black Panther Party’s 10-point platform. The first point demanded Puerto Rican independence. Independence for the island was important to Young Lords (both Chicago and New York) politics for the entirety of their existence but became more so after the first three years. Early on, the group focused on improving and empowering poor Puerto Ricans in the barrios of Chicago and New York City. They encouraged individuals with diverse backgrounds to join the group, including people of European, Native-American, and African descent. They wanted their organization to

reflect the variegated cultural and racial demography of Puerto Rico and the barrios without the prejudice or class inequity that plagued both the island and mainland United States.⁵

Meanwhile, in New York City, a group of young New Left and civil rights activists, including Denise Oliver, Robert Ortiz, and Mickey Melendez, joined an organization called the Real Great Society (RGS)—an anti-poverty program funded by Vista—that quickly became known as *the* Puerto Rican radical group in New York City.⁶ In May 1969, Oliver, Ortiz, and Melendez, along with a group of students of color at the State University of New York, Old Westbury, heard about Jimenez’s successes organizing Puerto Ricans into a nationalist party in Chicago and decided to establish a Young Lords Organization branch in New York City.

The New York YLO created a central committee of five individuals—all men—including Felipe Luciano, deputy chairman; Juan Gonzalez, deputy minister of education; Pablo “Yoruba” Guzman, deputy minister of information; David Perez, deputy minister of defense; and Juan “Fi” Ortiz, deputy minister of finance. With about 30 active members at the beginning, the New York group quickly superseded the Chicago YLO as the most prominent branch and began to call themselves the Young Lords Party. Their journal, *Palante*, enjoyed a wide readership among Puerto Ricans and other New Yorkers interested in radical and New Left politics.⁷

The New York Lords’ first public political action, in July 1969, was a protest against the New York City Sanitation Department. According to the Lords, the New York City Sanitation Department neglected to provide service to poor black and Latino neighborhoods. To address this problem, they decided to begin a community sanitation project. YLP work groups piled the refuse in heaps in the streets, blocking traffic, to force the city to collect it.⁸

The next protest was a takeover of the 111th and Lexington Avenue Methodist Church on December 28, 1969. The New York Lords had formally requested the use of the church basement to provide free community services, such as a free breakfast program, health clinic, and day-care center, modeled on the Black Panther social programs.⁹ When the church authorities refused the request, the New York Lords took over the church. For 11 days after the initial takeover, they used the church for clothing drives, breakfast programs, a liberation school, political education classes, a day care, free health care, and evening entertainment. Hun-

dreds of people from the community joined the protest and became involved in the direct service programs.

Feminist Philosophy: “We want equality for women”

The women present in the YLP at its founding and in the first year were a powerful force in the group. They shaped the agenda to include both feminism and reproductive rights demands. The first women to become involved were Iris Morales, the education captain and now a documentary filmmaker, Denise Oliver, the minister of finance for the YLP, a Black Panther, and now a medical anthropologist, and Gloria Fontanez, a stalwart supporter of the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party, a member of the Health Revolutionary Unity Movement (HRUM)—an organization of health-care workers—and a field marshal for the YLP. Although women composed nearly half of the YLP from the beginning, these three women were particularly influential in forcing feminism to the center of YLP ideology.

At first, gender was not a matter of great importance for the YLP. Women joined the party for many of the same reasons that men did; they identified as Puerto Ricans and believed that poverty, racism, and disempowerment among Puerto Rican New Yorkers was unacceptable and had to be fought. Just as young black men and women across the country had been mobilized by the explosive cries for “Black Power!”, Puerto Rican New Yorkers joined together to transform their status. Within months of their founding, however, gender became central to their politics as women decided they wanted a greater role in determining the direction of the movement. Women became discouraged with male displays of machismo and sexism and decided to force the issue within the political forum created by the Lords.¹⁰

Oliver recalls that a series of particularly heated clashes with YLP men helped mobilize women in the group to bring feminist demands to the group. Several months after the founding, a schism developed among the (male) leadership. Felipe Luciano expressed dissatisfaction with the Lord’s ideological alliance to the Black Panther Party and their “national socialist politics,” which was diametrically opposed to a cultural nationalism that celebrated “African” identity. He was particularly inspired by the poet Amiri Baraka who lived in Newark, New Jersey and advocated

an Afrocentric politics. Luciano and several central committee members arranged a meeting with Baraka in Newark to explore the possibility of a stronger alliance with the Lords. Although she was not a central committee member yet, Luciano asked Oliver to join the meeting as one of the founding members of the YLP. She was the only female Lord to attend.

Oliver described her shock and outrage at the scene that unfolded when the Lords arrived at Baraka's headquarters: "Women crawled into the room on their hands and knees wearing elaborate headdresses decorated with fruit. They accompanied Baraka's coterie of male guards and supporters who wore dashikis and gave power handshakes to the male Lords." She immediately began to fire questions at Baraka about women's role in his organization, but he wouldn't answer her. Pablo Guzman, one of the Lords invited to attend the meeting, then asked the same questions of Baraka, but Oliver became so furious she marched out of the room without waiting for his answers.¹¹

Oliver returned to New York City and immediately held a women's caucus meeting with other women in the Lords. She explained what had happened with Baraka. She recalls, "I told them [YLP women] that if we didn't do something we would end up on our hands and knees with fruit on our heads." The women's caucus decided that it was time to force men in the Lords to take feminism seriously. Shortly before the incident with Baraka, several female YLP members, including Oliver and Iris Morales, had become active in the women's liberation movement and participated in a feminist takeover of the left movement journal *Rat*. But the YLP women were unwilling to form their own feminist group apart from the YLP men. They decided, instead, to use a strategy that they hoped would convince the YLP men to yield to their demands. Influenced by Aristophanes' play, *Lysistrata*, they declared they would have no sexual relations with YLP men until the central committee met their demands, which included adding women to the central committee, elevating women to other positions of power, eradicating the call for revolutionary machismo from the platform, and integrating the defense committee by gender.¹²

Many of the YLP, including Oliver, joined the party as part of a couple. Others formed romantic and sexual partnerships within the group over time. For security reasons, the central committee not only encouraged these sexual liaisons among members, but they also forbade extra-group sexual relations. Violation of this rule constituted an offense wor-

thy of disciplinary measures and possible expulsion from the organization. With rumors of FBI infiltration within radical groups running rampant, the Lords feared any intrusion by outsiders not committed to the ideals held by the group.

After the "no sex" strike had been in effect for several weeks, a few central committee members, including Luciano, disappeared. Oliver remembers worrying that the central committee members had been arrested when nobody heard from them for over 24 hours. When they finally turned up after several days, their security guards confessed that the central committee members had been meeting with women outside of the YLP. It turned out that all of the central committee members were privy to the offense, although not all of them had engaged in extraorganization sexual relations.¹³

As the highest-ranking noncentral committee member, it fell to Oliver to decide the central committee's punishment. She demoted the entire central committee to cadre status. Eventually, they could be reinstated, but not until they took time to think over their transgression. Oliver enjoyed full support from the female YLP and some support from the men who had adhered to the rules. With the central committee members humbled, the women's caucus took the opportunity to push their demands: Oliver and Gloria Fontanez joined the central committee and women in the Lords began holding evening seminars to teach men in the group how to treat women as equals.¹⁴

Most of the YLP women were sympathetic to the goals of second wave feminists, including demands for safe, legal abortion and contraception. A few had been involved in women's liberation organizations. Women in the Lords distinguished themselves from many second wave feminists, however, by stressing what they viewed as the absolute right of all women to have as many children as they wanted—to rid themselves of the poverty that could discourage childbearing and to end involuntary sterilization or any other form of coerced fertility control. While women's liberationists were declaring an absolute right to safe, legal, and free abortion, women in the YLP argued that Puerto Rican and black populations needed to have the freedom to grow and to thrive free from the poverty that affected a woman's choice to bear children or caused illness in children after they were born.¹⁵

After the demotion of the central committee members, the YLP revised the call for "revolutionary machismo" on the platform so that it disavowed both sexism and traditional machismo. It stated:

WE WANT EQUALITY FOR WOMEN, MACHISMO MUST BE REVOLUTIONARY . . . NOT OPPRESSIVE

Under capitalism, our people have been oppressed by both society and our own men. The doctrine of machismo has been used by our men to take out their frustrations against their wives, sisters, mothers, and children. Our men must support their women in their fight for economic and social equality, and must recognize that our women are equals in every way within the revolutionary ranks.

FORWARD, SISTERS, IN THE STRUGGLE!¹⁶

Although “revolutionary machismo” seemed like a contradiction, YLP men and women appropriated the traditional Latino concept of machismo for the purposes of revolution. They literally stood the term on its head so that machismo took on a connotation directly opposed to its traditional usage. After feminism became part of the YLP ideology, machismo for a YLP man now meant treating women as comrades and equals.¹⁷

By 1971, the YLP explicitly and vocally supported the women’s liberation movement. They stated: “We say right on to any women who are revolutionaries. They’re getting their shit together, they have to deal with the white man, who is probably at the top of the heap in terms of being a capitalist oppressor, and they’ve got a heavy battle—they’ve got to fight their husbands and their fathers.”¹⁸ Angie Sanabria, who became a self-described “foot soldier” for the YLP in 1972 after leaving high school, agreed that the organization had a positive outlook on women’s liberation. She recalled that members of the YLP had an “awareness that you were a woman and wanted to be treated as an equal.” And, they made a “conscious effort to have women and children in the forefront. People were not allowed to be chauvinistic. Women were not on the back burner.”¹⁹

Over time, the YLP recognized a political symbiosis between feminism and anti-racism: a sense that the two movements were necessarily interconnected. The YLP 1970 Position Paper on Women stated that “Third World women have an integral role to play in the liberation of all oppressed people as well as in the struggle for liberation of women.” And, more plainly, “We [YLP women] support them, and they should support us [YLP men] in our struggle.”²⁰ The YLP believed that men and women of color needed to unite to fight problems of poverty and racism. Sexism, too, needed to be addressed within a framework that made anti-

racism, anti-poverty, and gender inequality equal priorities. The Lords added:

The basic criticism we have of our sisters in Women’s Liberation is that they shouldn’t isolate themselves, because in isolating yourselves from your brothers, and in not educating your brothers, you’re making the struggle separate—that’s again another division, the same way that capitalism has divided Blacks from Puerto Ricans, and Puerto Ricans from whites, and Blacks from whites.²¹

From the Young Lords’ perspective, white women had created a separatist feminism that excluded women and men of color because it made white middle-class women’s progress the priority. Preferably, women would lead men to reject sexism, not by excluding them, but by teaching them about power imbalances that involved sexual difference. The Lords argued that the division of feminism from the anti-racism movement prevented the real revolution from taking place; if white women just garnered power for themselves, nothing would really change. They asserted that “racism has to be eliminated, and that whole division of male from female has to be eliminated, and the only way you can do that is through political education. I don’t believe that a group of women should get together just to educate themselves, and then not go out and educate the brothers.”²²

Reproductive Rights:

“End all genocide. Abortions under community control!”

The Young Lords’ feminism was essential to their support of a broad reproductive rights agenda. Unlike other nationalist groups, the Lords linked an anti-sterilization position, which originated with their criticism of high sterilization rates in Puerto Rico, with a pro-abortion stance. Feminist Lords argued that Puerto Rican women on the island and in New York required access to safe and legal methods of fertility control, including safe abortion and a variety of birth control methods from which to choose. These methods needed to be distributed in publicly funded health facilities under community control. The Lords believed that if fertility control measures fell into the wrong hands, they could become dangerously coercive, even genocidal. Thus, they announced, all Puerto

Rican women needed to be able to choose freely how many children they wanted, whether this meant never bearing children or bearing 10.

Although most of the YLP were born on the mainland, Puerto Rican New Yorkers were still very much affected by their cultural and historical ties to the island. A massive out-migration of Puerto Ricans to the mainland United States—primarily to New York City—began during World War II, when factory laborers were needed for war production. With improved transportation and communications between the island and the mainland after the war, migration increased through the decade of the 1950s. Despite efforts to attract industry to Puerto Rico in “Operation Bootstrap,” Puerto Ricans poured off the island because of high unemployment and greater economic opportunity in the States. By the 1960s, migration began to level off, and some Puerto Rican New Yorkers returned to the island. But the constant contact between the two locales ensured strong bonds between people living in Puerto Rico and in the United States.²³

The YLP traced the history of sterilization abuse among Puerto Rican women in New York to what they viewed as a tradition of coerced and forced sterilization on the island.²⁴ The Puerto Rican legislature legalized sterilization as a method of birth control in 1937. Interest in birth control, however, as a measure to stem a growing poor population in Puerto Rico dated to the early 1920s. In 1922, Luis Muñoz Marín, who eventually became the first elected governor of the island, began writing a series of articles supporting birth control in *La Democracia*, the newspaper of the Union Party. He argued that the birth control ideas promoted by Margaret Sanger would save the island from becoming overrun with too many mouths to feed, too many children to clothe, and too few resources.²⁵

Faith in the potential of birth control to help control unemployment and poverty in Puerto Rico continued to grow throughout the decade of the 1920s, particularly among Puerto Rican physicians and other members of the professions. Dr. José Lanauze Rolón founded the Puerto Rican branch of Sanger’s organization, the American Birth Control League (ABCL), in Ponce in 1925. The Puerto Rican ABCL faced fierce opposition, however, from the Catholic Church. As a result, the ABCL of Puerto Rico dissolved in 1928. Still, many local physicians continued to lobby the legislature for the legalization of birth control.²⁶

Puerto Rican professional women—nurses and social workers—also became active in the movement for birth control on the island. In 1932,

Violet Callendar—who had trained as a nurse at Margaret Sanger’s Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau in Harlem—opened a birth control clinic in San Juan. Unfortunately, Sanger never favored Callendar and refused to support her effort to distribute the diaphragm to Puerto Rican women. Callendar’s clinic failed within a month. Rosa González, a Puerto Rican feminist leader, opened another clinic in Lares, which also quickly closed. Without support from the mainland, feminist attempts to establish birth control clinics modeled on the Sanger clinics ended in failure.²⁷

In 1937, birth controllers met with greater success through the efforts of members of the privately funded Maternal and Child Health Association, founded by the Procter and Gamble heir Dr. Clarence J. Gamble. The association opened with 3 private clinics and at its peak directed 12 birth control clinics on sugar plantations throughout the island. In addition to contraceptive distribution, the association successfully lobbied for pro-birth control legislation, including the repeal of article 268—Puerto Rico’s version of the “Comstock” laws²⁸—that legalized birth control. At the same time, the legislature passed Law 116, which created a eugenics board to evaluate legal sterilization cases.²⁹

With the legalization of birth control, sterilization became increasingly popular among Puerto Rican women. For some women, the highly medicalized aspect of the sterilization procedure helped overcome the sense that birth control was immoral.³⁰ Many women also chose sterilization because they believed that other contraceptives were dangerous, dirty, only for use by prostitutes, or the cause of infidelity. Puerto Rican men, on the other hand, rarely consented to a vasectomy for fear it would hinder their potency. Puerto Rican women who chose sterilization had an average of 6 children and a mean age of 32. Most sterilizations occurred after labor; by 1949, 17.8 percent of all deliveries were followed by sterilization.³¹

Sterilization was by far the most heavily promoted method of contraception in Puerto Rico. Surgeons in hospitals around the island promoted sterilization surgery as the most effective method of contraception for women with several children. They argued that other methods required too much responsibility by the user and ultimately led to contraceptive failure. One study of 850 Puerto Rican unmarried women revealed that 22 percent knew about sterilization, or “la operación,” while only 1 percent knew about the diaphragm and 12 percent knew about the condom. At first, sterilization was most common among higher income women who could pay for the cost of surgery in a hospital facility. Eventually,

however, sterilization became the chosen method of middle-income Puerto Rican women as the procedure became more available and less taboo. The most privileged and well-educated women chose temporary methods of birth control, while the majority of extremely poor women remained outside of the medical establishment altogether.³²

The theory that Puerto Rican women lacked the ability to choose how they regulated their fertility was reinforced in the mid-1950s, when several American contraceptive researchers, including Dr. Gregory Pincus, Hale H. Cook, Dr. Clarence J. Gamble, and Adaline P. Satterthwaite, under the aegis of Margaret Sanger's Planned Parenthood Federation of America, tested the birth control pill in Puerto Rico. The researchers chose Puerto Rico as the locale for the pill tests for 3 reasons: first, they believed that overpopulation and poverty threatened public health on the island. Second, as a U.S. commonwealth they could more easily gain the support of the local government. And, third, poverty and a high population density provided ample justification among neo-Malthusian birth controllers for using the island as a laboratory for the pill. One pro-birth control commentator described the island as "crowded, impoverished and ripe for an intensive birth control program—a prototype underdeveloped country on America's own doorstep."³³ As of November 1958, 850 Puerto Rican women had participated in the birth control trials in San Juan, Humacao, Puerto Rico and also Port-au-Prince, Haiti.³⁴

The YLP believed that the pill tests, in conjunction with high rates of sterilization, revealed the genocidal intentions of U.S. birth controllers.³⁵ While there is no evidence of an actual genocidal campaign against Puerto Ricans or people of color in general, for the YLP and other nationalist organizations, there was a perception that people of color did not have the option of choosing when or how to control their fertility.³⁶ Fertility rates were high among Puerto Rican women, but rather than encourage choice among a variety of nonpermanent forms of contraception, birth controllers, the Puerto Rican state, and the Catholic Church limited contraceptive choice. Also, birth controllers often offered contraception as a tool for ameliorating poverty. To people of color, reducing the numbers of poor people was not the same as ending poverty.

Anti-eugenics politics have a long tradition in Puerto Rico among Puerto Rican Nationalists. Decades before the pill tests, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party feared that eugenicists intended to drastically reduce the Puerto Rican population. In 1932, Nationalist Party members learned that Dr. Cornelius Rhoads, who worked in the San Juan Presbyterian

Hospital under a Rockefeller Foundation grant, advocated the elimination of Puerto Ricans in a private letter. *El Mundo*, a leading daily newspaper on the island, published the letter after its discovery by one of Rhoads's lab assistants. There was no evidence that Rhoads succeeded in carrying out his genocidal mission. But the U.S.-appointed governor of the island, James R. Beverly, exacerbated the situation when he announced in his 1932 inaugural address that the population problem on the island would have to be addressed sooner or later. Nationalist Party members were particularly incensed when Beverly stated that the problem was not only the quantity but also the quality of the Puerto Rican population. Nationalists suspected that Rhoads's and Beverly's sentiments were not uncommon among influential Americans living and working on the island.³⁷

Echoing Nationalist Party criticisms, the Lords spoke and wrote of what they called an international conspiracy of genocide waged by U.S. imperialists against all Third World peoples. The Lords drew parallels between reproductive abuses occurring in Puerto Rico, Africa, and elsewhere in the Third World. In 1971, Gloria Colon wrote that "the birth control pill was first used in Puerto Rico; the 'morning after' pill is being experimented on women in Africa. Poor Third World women are continuously being used as guinea pigs, not for our own good, but for the destruction of our people. The proper word for it is 'genocide' (mass murder)." In all of these nations, Colon postulated, the United States had a vested interest in limiting the population both to sustain the abundant natural resources that kept the American economy afloat and to reduce the possibility of organized rebellion in Third World nations.³⁸

Writing in 1970, Iris Morales raised the specter of genocide when she discussed the history of high rates of sterilization among Puerto Rican women. She asserted that "genocide is being committed against the Puerto Rican Nation through the mass sterilization of Puerto Rican women! In no other nation has sterilization been so prevalent as a means of genocide against an oppressed people." According to Morales, Puerto Rico had become a "military stronghold" and base from which the United States could assert control over the rest of Latin America. She added: "One way to control a nation of vital importance is to limit its population size. The u.s.[sic] is doing exactly this through sterilization."³⁹

The Young Lords' anti-genocide rhetoric stemmed from their criticism of international population control policy. They rejected neo-Malthusian theories espoused by birth controllers that Third World poverty could be

eradicated through population limitation. The YLP and other nationalists argued that population controllers really wanted to reduce or eradicate groups of “undesirable” or “unfit” people rather than put an end to poverty.⁴⁰ The Lords also emphasized that Puerto Rican men and women lacked personal control over their reproduction. Social biases discouraged many women from choosing nonpermanent methods of fertility control, such as a diaphragm or condoms, the pill caused unpleasant side effects (including death), and female sterilization was more available than any of the nonpermanent methods. Under these circumstances, Puerto Rican women had no real choice about birth control.⁴¹

High rates of sterilization in New York City were also of great concern to the YLP, particularly in the first few years of the 1970s when they focused almost all of their political energies on organizing working-class and low-income Puerto Ricans living in the South Bronx, Harlem, and on the Lower East Side. The Lords argued that when poor Puerto Rican women appeared to choose sterilization they did so under very restrictive circumstances. In New York City, Puerto Rican women had seven times the sterilization rate of white women and twice the rate of black women. Many of these women had been sterilized in Puerto Rico; but a significant number were sterilized after arriving in New York City. In her 1970 article on sterilization abuse, Morales explained: “Genocide through sterilization is not only confined to the island of Puerto Rico. It is also carried out within the barrio; sterilization is still practiced as a form of contraception among women, especially young Sisters.” Morales posited that one in four Puerto Rican women in New York City were sterilized, and many of these had the operation when still in their twenties. She added that “the system justifies the shit saying the Sisters go to Puerto Rico to get it done. Yet the evidence says that over half the Sisters get the operation done right here in New York City and are strongly encouraged by their doctors to do so.” Morales concluded that many Puerto Rican women felt severe disappointment when they could not have all the children they wanted because they had been sterilized before making an informed decision to end their childbearing.⁴²

Other evidence confirmed Morales’s claims that poor Puerto Rican women in New York were sterilized in high numbers and at a young age. Puerto Rican women tended to have their children early, so they opted to restrict their childbearing while still in their twenties. Puerto Rican women “chose” sterilization when they wanted to restrict their childbearing because they often felt uncomfortable with, or did not know

about, other methods such as the diaphragm—condoms were often rejected by male partners—and legal abortion was not an option in New York until 1970. The vast majority—80 percent—of Puerto Rican women sterilized in New York did so for socioeconomic reasons. If they had been given the economic means to have more children, many of them might have made that decision.⁴³

Women in the YLP believed that sterilization had negative psychological effects and they worked to combat the stereotypes about femininity that fed this psychology. For example, many Puerto Rican women who opted for sterilization without fully realizing its permanence, or without total confidence in their decision, expressed the sense that they only counted for “half a woman” after the surgery. Writing in 1974, Lopez explained that “unfortunately, men also feel this way. They think that if a woman can’t have children or menstruate monthly that she is not a complete woman.” Female YLP members argued that these stereotypes constituted a myth about womanhood that required reevaluation. Lopez continued, “Due to his ignorance and ‘machismo’ a man may leave his wife after she has been sterilized. It is wrong for both men and women to believe that the sole purpose of a woman is to bring children into this world.” Women in the Young Lords articulated a feminist rhetoric that deconstructed stereotypes about womanhood and reproduction traditionally popular among Puerto Ricans. They believed that women needed to be able to make autonomous reproductive choices, without coercion from either birth controllers or their male partners.⁴⁴

The YLP reproductive rights position included demands for safe, legal abortion, although the right to legal abortion often seemed secondary to ending sterilization abuse and ensuring that poor Puerto Rican women received proper health care in public hospitals. Denise Oliver recalled that abortion was not central to the Young Lords’ political program. She pointed out that “sterilization was the main thing because of the great number of women sterilized in Puerto Rico.” Olgie Robles, who joined the YLP in 1969 after dropping out of high school at the age of 16, remembered being strongly pro-legal abortion at the time. She believed that poor women needed the means to limit their reproduction when they could not afford to raise another child. She added, however, that most women in the barrio would not have chosen abortion if they had had the resources to care for an additional child.⁴⁵

After Carmen Rodríguez’s death, the Lords feared that unsafe abortion in public hospitals might become the rule despite the new law legalizing

abortion. The YLP alleged that doctors had carelessly given Rodriguez the wrong medication to control her asthma, which resulted in a heart attack. Supposedly, none of the staff noticed that she had a heart condition that could be aggravated by asthma medication. The Lords claimed that an inexperienced student intern without proper supervision had treated her. According to the Lords, the Rodriguez case proved that legal abortion was not the answer for poor and Third World women who did not have access to quality health care. The YLP did not trust the new abortion law to radically change these statistics. In 1971 they argued, "Abortions in hospitals that are butcher shops are little better than the illegal abortions our women used to get."⁴⁶

In response to the Young Lords' allegations, the Lincoln Hospital administration denied responsibility for Rodriguez's death. They released an autopsy report disclosing that she died from a rare reaction to the saline solution that was injected into "[her] uterus to induce the abortion."⁴⁷ They admitted that she had a heart condition that was aggravated by the abortion. But the hospital administration insisted that the death was unavoidable because they had no previous knowledge of Rodriguez's vulnerable condition.⁴⁸

The YLP and a coalition of other groups, including members of the Black Panther Party and hospital workers from the Health Revolutionary Union Movement (HRUM), called a community meeting to discuss their reaction to the Lincoln Hospital findings. At the meeting, Mike Smith, a Lincoln Hospital intern and member of the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR)—a group of medical students allied in an informal national network to address health problems in low-income and underserved areas—presented a chart, or "clinical pathological conference" (cpc), that summarized Rodriguez's case history. Records of an autopsy appeared in the cpc, demonstrating that the patient died of medical neglect. The Lords called the meeting "the People's cpc" in order to claim the community's right to control medical decisions that affected them; they wanted to appropriate the hospital medical staff's exclusive access to and manipulation of medical information.⁴⁹

As with other medical services, the YLP asserted that the community needed to control their own abortion provision to ensure safety for women of color. In their 1970 "Position Paper on Women," they insisted that women needed to have the option of controlling their fertility using abortion in healthy conditions. They stated: "We believe that abortions should be legal if they are community controlled, if they are safe, if our

people are educated about the risks, and if doctors do not sterilize our sisters while performing abortions." In some circumstances, they argued, abortion was a necessity, particularly when poor women did not have adequate resources for more children: "We realize that under capitalism our sisters and brothers cannot support large families and the more children we have the harder it is to get support for them."⁵⁰

Rather than oppose abortion, the YLP asserted that poor Puerto Rican and African-American women needed greater access to safe abortion and total health care or else they would end up in Rodriguez's predicament; she was so far along in the pregnancy she required a dangerous saline procedure, which turned out to be life-threatening in her condition. One writer for *Palante* described the difficulty of acquiring an abortion in a municipal hospital in the first months following legal abortion in New York City:

Lincoln Hospital has an abortion waiting list of over 300, but provision has been made for only 3 abortions a day. This means that many of our sisters will be in advanced stages of pregnancy when the abortion is performed; this makes the abortion more dangerous. In addition, these operations are not even performed in a well-equipped, sterile operating room, but rather in a small room that had previously been used as a storeroom.⁵¹

Abortion provision quickly improved as freestanding clinics became the norm in the 1970s. After legal abortion became more available, low-income women experienced a tremendous improvement in survival rates for termination of pregnancy. One study from 1982 indicated that abortion fatality dropped by 73 percent in the decade following *Roe v. Wade*. But after Rodriguez's death in 1970, legal abortion appeared as if it would be as dangerous to minority women as illegal abortion had been for all women before *Roe*.⁵²

According to the YLP, safe and accessible abortion needed to accompany a total health care program that allowed Third World women to have all the children they wanted: "We say, change the system so that women can be freely allowed to have as many children as they want without suffering any consequences."⁵³ This scenario constituted true reproductive freedom for the YLP. Colon illustrated this point in a discussion of the circumstances of another Puerto Rican woman who attempted to get an abortion for economic reasons but became frustrated in the end

because of the poor abortion services in New York City clinics and hospitals. When the woman Colon described first went to a clinic, she discovered that her pregnancy had progressed too far for a first trimester abortion. A hospital would perform a late-term saline abortion but only after she had reached her fourth month. According to Colon, her situation worsened when she discovered that without money to pay for an abortion, she would have to go to a city hospital for the late procedure. (Clinics were not prepared to perform the more difficult second trimester surgical procedure.) At the city hospital a doctor told her that she had reached 6 1/2 months: too late to terminate her pregnancy at all. "The sister returned home to her other children and her unemployed husband to do more hustling to allow her future child to survive when she gives birth." According to Colon, the woman felt great relief when she was finally forced to forego the abortion. She explained that "being a Puerto Rican woman, she knew that for her entering an abortion clinic in a New York City hospital was either risking her life or the possibilities of ever being pregnant again. And she was scared!" Colon proposed that Puerto Rican women were not alone in risking their lives for abortion—other women of color confronted the same circumstances. She postulated that "the case of this sister is no different from that of other Third World (Puerto Rican, Black, Chicana, Asian, Native American) women who face the situation of choosing between the risk of an abortion from a racist hospital administration, or of inventing new ways of hustling to clothe, feed, and shelter an addition to her family." Pregnancy without adequate health care measures or economic security left a minority woman "holding on to her pregnant body, watching her already born children nibble on lead paint in place of food, watching the rats that gather to nibble on the toes of her children, worrying about having her insides ripped-up during an abortion."⁵⁴

The only way to adequately provide health and fertility care for Puerto Ricans and other people of color, the YLP declared, was to gain control over the hospitals and other health care facilities in their neighborhoods. Colon detailed her understanding of this nationalist requirement:

Point Number 6 of the Young Lords Party 13-Point Platform and program states: "We want community control of our institutions and land." This means that we want institutions, like hospitals where sisters go to have abortions, to be under the control of our people to be sure that they really serve our needs. Until we struggle together to change our pre-

sent situation, women will not be allowed to have the children they can support without suffering any consequences.⁵⁵

The slogan "End all genocide. Abortions under community control" encapsulated the notion of truly voluntary fertility control for Puerto Rican nationalist activists in the YLP. Real fertility control could only be achieved when both of these demands were met: that is, when women of color and poor women could choose to limit their fertility when and how they wanted, could have as many children as they wanted, and had economic access to quality overall health care. The YLP believed that Puerto Rican women needed to wrest control of their bodies and reproductive capacities from institutions and individuals preventing them from making their own reproductive decisions. In this sense, the YLP embraced a feminist politics sympathetic to many of the demands made by radical feminists and women's liberationists active at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s. They argued that women needed to decide—without any outside pressure—what to do with their own bodies. At the same time, institutions that provided health care to Puerto Rican women needed to be collectively controlled by Puerto Rican communities to ensure that they were safe from medical abuses. For the YLP, reproductive and health care decisions were never strictly limited to the individual; they recognized that a woman's right to abortion needed to be guaranteed by a politicized community that could protect both individual rights and the interests of the larger group.⁵⁶

Several factors allowed the Young Lords to adopt this quite remarkable position that distinguished them from other nationalist organizations such as the Black Panther Party. First, a few powerful female Lords—notably Denise Oliver and Iris Morales—led the way by forcefully arguing that true liberation of people of color needed to include an end to sexist oppression. These women became empowered to speak out against machismo by involving themselves in the women's liberation movement. The second factor is a matter of timing and political context: The first members of the Young Lords founded the organization in 1969, just as women's liberation emerged as a popular political discourse among those affiliated with the New Left. The parallel development of second wave feminism with the YLP's particular brand of nationalist politics allowed the Lords to become sympathetically acquainted with feminism while they forged their political ideology. By contrast, the Black Panther Party members founded their organization several years before

women's liberation emerged. As a result, it took much longer for the Black Panthers to incorporate feminism into their political ideology.⁵⁷

Finally, in 1970, Young Lords men were in a better position to lend a sympathetic ear to women's liberation than Black Panther men. Throughout the twentieth century, black men experienced a cultural emasculation—the Black Sambo stereotype—while black women were stereotyped as emasculating and unwomanly. The response among Black Panther men was to embrace a hypermasculinized identity.⁵⁸ Puerto Rican men did not carry the same stigma and Puerto Rican women were not burdened with having committed the crime of emasculation. As a result, the deconstruction of machismo within the YLP occurred much more swiftly than it did among the Black Panthers.⁵⁹

Therefore, women in the Young Lords carved out a politics of multiple identity positions—as nationalists and as feminists of color.⁶⁰ This stance allowed them to develop their unique reproductive rights position, which embraced both a gender-based politics and a race- and class-based politics. While much of early 1970s New Left politics centered on a singular identification with racial oppression, gender oppression, or oppression by sexual identity, the YLP women were able to construct a politics that took into account race, class, and gender oppression. An inclusive reproductive rights agenda that addressed the needs of women of different identity positions was the result. By the middle of the 1970s, socialist feminists—most notably feminists organized into the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA)—adopted much of the YLP politics of reproductive freedom. But in the early part of the decade, the Lords were among the first to demand both an end to sterilization abuse and a right to abortion and contraception on demand within an organization whose politics grew from both nationalist and feminist roots.⁶¹

5

Race, Class, and Sexuality

Reproductive Rights and the Campaign for an Inclusive Feminism

Reproductive freedom means the freedom to have as well as not to have children. Policies that restrict women's right to have and raise children—through forced sterilization or the denial of adequate welfare benefits—are directly related to policies that compel women to have children, on the view that this is their primary human function. Both kinds of policies constitute reproduction control by the state and affect the rights of all women insofar as women are the reproducers of children. But state-sponsored reproduction control also affects different groups of women differently. In a period of economic crisis, many white middle-class and working-class women are pressured to resume the “woman's role” of full-time motherhood and housework. At the same time, low-income women—particularly those on welfare and those who are black, Hispanic, and Native American—are targets of systematic, heavily funded programs of “population control” as well as programs that aim to remove their children from them and into “foster care” or state institutions.

—The Committee for Abortion Rights and
Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA)

This statement—written in 1979 by the Committee for Abortion Rights and Against Sterilization Abuse (CARASA) and published in the pamphlet “Women Under Attack”—represented a political high point in nearly two decades of feminist struggle to establish reproductive rights for women. The movement began in the late 1960s with the pre-*Roe v. Wade* feminist campaign for legal abortion that emphasized a woman's sovereignty over her reproducing body. It culminated in the 1980s with