

## Revisiting Herstories: The Young Lords Party

By Iris Morales

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### ***Sí, pero...* Truth and Reckonings: *Revisiting Herstories: The Young Lords Party***

In *Revisiting Herstories: The Young Lords Party*, Iris Morales, an original member of the Young Lords Organization's (YLO) New York chapter and the Young Lords Party (YLP), embodies an essential ethos of improvisation. She positions herself as an insider-outsider, echoing Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot's emphasis on the dual role of historical actors as both narrators and protagonists. *Revisiting Herstories* broadens the Young Lords' narrative functioning as a metahistory, memoir, and political education curriculum with a central focus on the participation of women and LGBTQ+ individuals within the Young Lords and related organizations. Drawing on seminal works by interdisciplinary scholars and activists, Morales offers new insights into the most renowned episodes in Young Lords lore. She candidly addresses contentious moments, engaging new narratives and interpretations, while reckoning with their *herstory*.

Although some scholars argue that the Young Lords have received disproportionate attention in the history of Puerto Rican liberation struggles, books analyzing the origins, ideologies, and impact of the movement are scarce, especially when compared to the extensive bibliography of the Black Panther Party (BPP), with which they share close historical ties. The Young Lords undeniably left a profound mark on the cultural and political identity of the Puerto Rican diaspora. However, there is still much more to explore. *Revisiting Herstories* addresses this gap by unveiling the often-overlooked contributions of women in the organization. Morales dispels any uncertainty by highlighting the various movements within and beyond the Puerto Rican diaspora that intersected with, opposed, and grew from the Young Lords. Published by Red Sugarcane Press, a venture founded by Morales in 2012, the book also prompts readers to reflect on prevailing narratives and the formidable task of challenging established power structures to assert alternative perspectives.

*Revisiting Herstories* embodies Sandra Cisneros's concept of "*Sí, pero no.*" It is a journey of self-reflection, growth, observation, and outrage, demanding resilience from activists and scholars alike. Amidst the complexities of cancel culture, a restorative justice lens offers guidance. The era of the 1960s and early 1970s, intertwined with civil rights and Puerto Rican nationalist movements, necessitates this adaptability. Dominant narratives often overshadow the contributions of women, LGBTQ+, and non-binary individuals, neglecting feminist perspectives. Morales's loyalty to the Young Lords persisted, despite challenges to prioritizing women's equality within the party. *Revisiting Herstories* emphasizes the Young Lords' influence on shaping the cultural and political identity of the diaspora. At the same

time, it serves as both a transformative justice exercise and a historical standoff where she demands accountability for stifling the accomplishments of the Women's Caucus and addresses the harms caused by movement leaders.

The preface of *Revisiting Herstories* reflects on the 2019 protests in Puerto Rico, which called for the resignation of then-Governor Ricardo Rosselló. Morales describes the grassroots resistance on the Island as "a leaderful movement" and recalls the echoes of protests in New York. She asserts: "I was among them." The victory inspired the YLO's 50th-anniversary celebrations that year and drove her to write the book. The mobilization's transnational and intersectional nature underscored the urgency to firmly acknowledge women's contributions to YLO history and the function of the diaspora in Puerto Rican politics. This preface lays the foundation for Morales' ongoing argument: that the Young Lords Party's decision to sideline the Women's Caucus' efforts to integrate feminist socialist principles and focus solely on the Puerto Rican independence struggle on the Island had detrimental long-term effects on the organization.

The book, divided into five parts, multiple chapters, and an appendix featuring key documents like the *13 Point Program and Platform* and the *Women's Union 12 Point Program*, utilizes an intertextual feminist framework to reposition women's role in the Young Lords' political platform. Each section and chapter incorporates epigraphs, blending a personal memoir with interdisciplinary scholarly analysis. Part I, "Another Cycle of Grassroots Militancy," starts with a quote from Zuleica Romay Guerra, Director of Afro-American Studies at Casa de las Américas, urging people to envision a changed society while taking direct action. Subsequent chapters feature quotes from Gwendolyn Patton, Subcomandante Marcos, and Ana Lydia Vega stressing collective, community-driven action. In line with this, Part I explores the formation of the YLO chapter in East Harlem in 1969, amidst the Puerto Rican migration post-World War II and Black liberation movements. Morales examines the adoption of revolutionary nationalism, socialist philosophies, democratic centralism, and the language of gender equality in the *13 Point Program* of the YLP while pointing out contradictions, like the absence of a democratic process, exclusion of women from the Central Committee, and leaders' dismissive attitudes toward the women's liberation movement. The Women's Caucus (WC), co-founded by Morales and Denise Oliver-Velez in the early 1970s, advocated for "equality and new ways of being."

Part II, "Feminists of Color and Gender Justice Movements," examines the state-sponsored mass sterilization of women of color in the US and Puerto Rico as a major issue informing the WC's platform. Collaborating with Black, Chicana, Native, and Asian women activists and drawing from Black feminist scholarship, they found inspiration in the Black Women's Alliance, a Black feminist socialist organization that originated from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and notably, the BPP women's discussions on gender. Initially hesitant to adopt the feminist label, they later embraced the term "women of color feminists." The WC presented ten demands to the Central Committee, including leadership roles for women, childcare, heightened attention to women's issues within the organization and the broader community, and the removal of male chauvinist policies and language from the party platform. Despite accusations of fostering division, they achieved some demands, like overturning the "no women" policy in the Defense Ministry and the publication of

the *YLP Position Paper on Women*. Morales delves into the Young Lords' alliances with the LGBTQ+ movement and partnerships with groups like the Gay Liberation Front and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), co-founded by Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, closely affiliated with the Young Lords.

Part III, "We Do Not Live Single-Issue Lives," emphasizes the intersectional perspective cultivated by the Women's Caucus, central to the YLP's 1970s campaigns. Women played significant roles in protests for worker and patient rights at Lincoln Hospital, including abortion and reproductive rights, defying prevailing nationalist views. They contributed to efforts challenging the New York Criminal Justice system, advocating for incarcerated individuals' rights, including those at the Women's House of Detention. Morales reveals her involvement in the 1960s education rights movement, catalyzing reforms in New York City colleges and student protests that led to open admission policies and the establishment of Black and Puerto Rican studies programs. Collaboration with the Puerto Rican Student Union (PRSU) expanded the Young Lords' agenda for Puerto Rican independence and alliance with the Puerto Rican nationalist movement. Morales concludes Part III with poignant reflections on the solidarity and struggles of feminist, nationalist freedom fighters Blanca Canales and Claudia Jones.

Part IV, "Nationalisms and Feminisms," opens with an excerpt from the poem "Río Grande de Loíza," by Julia de Burgos, who advocated for feminist and nationalist ideals from the Puerto Rican diaspora. In 1970, the YLP Central Committee initially responded to the WC's demands but later deemed all auxiliary caucuses addressing gender inequality unnecessary. Led by Juan González and Gloria González, the YLP expanded operations to Puerto Rico, sparking debates over Puerto Rican authenticity and gender roles and causing further division. Despite the opposition of other, particularly, US-born and African American members, and skepticism from *independentista* organizations on the Island, the Young Lords Party persisted, declaring the national liberation of Puerto Rico as their primary mission. The Women's Union (WU) provided a platform for gender-related activism to continue in the absence of the WC. Under increasing control from the executive leadership, which demanded a redirection of the discourse on sexism to *machismo* and passivity, the WU was dissolved by 1972 and the Young Lords Party began its decline. In the aftermath, leaders expressed regret for their decisions, though Morales notes these admissions came too late. The section concludes with reflections on the diverse paths taken by former members in pursuing social justice and decolonization.

In the final section, titled "Reckoning with the Past," a quote from Eduardo Galeano from *Open Veins of Latin America* encapsulates a core objective of the book—revisiting historical narratives to understand the present and drive meaningful change. In this final series of chapters, Morales highlights the intensity of state surveillance and police violence faced by activists, emphasizing that COINTELPRO and internal disagreements contributed to the dismantling of the Young Lords. Despite this, she envisions an enduring legacy of feminist organizing, connecting past histories to the ongoing struggles for gender and racial justice. She draws parallels with contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, recognizing the global resurgence of feminist organizing against gender violence. Additionally, Morales reflects on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which she sees as exacerbating existing inequalities, particularly in Puerto Rico, where US colonialism endures.

The book concludes with Morales revealing the end of her journey with the Young Lords, including her decision to finally resign in January 1975. This decision marked the end of one chapter but continues with an acknowledgment of the ongoing struggles for women's liberation, leading us through decades of groundbreaking work from intersectional feminist thinkers like the Combahee River Collective, and influential literary movements epitomized by the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Morales's journey from the past ends with a call to action: "The voices and strategies of historically excluded peoples and communities, especially low-income Black and marginalized women of color in every part of the world, must be central to action plans." Morales's meticulous exploration illuminates the complexities of historical narratives and reminds us of the imperative value of approaching our mistakes with openness rather than resistance. Emphasizing coalition and solidarity as essential respites in an era of absolutes, *Revisiting Herstories* rallies for the role of truths in transformation.