The Block/El Bloque: Writer's Reflection

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

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The Block/El Bloque: A Young Lords Story is the product of over a year of meticulous research first with the assistance of a Humanities Center Fellowship and then with the assistanship of a Center for Latin Research Fellowship. The result is a historical fiction account of the development of the Young Lords Organization, a Puerto Rican street gang turned civil rights activists in 1960s Chicago. The organization, inspired and working alongside the Black Panther Party evolved into what most experts consider to be the entry of Puerto Ricans into the United States Civil Rights Movement and now recognized as one of the most radical political nationalist movement amongst ethnic groups in the United States. This intriguing story of passionate, grass roots organizing is tied into the intimate process of a writer reflecting on the very act of writing about sensitive and politically charged history.

The Block/El Bloque: A Young Lords Story takes place in Chicago, where the Young Lords Organization, a Puerto Rican street gang turned civil rights activists in 1960s Chicago, mobilize to address their biggest concerns; police brutality and what they saw as the lack of action by the community’s most significant institutions: The Church, The University and the Police. While by most accounts, this was a peaceful, albeit armed, takeover, the show of support by what had been labeled by the FBI as a militant gang caught the attention of the media and activists organizations like the Black Panthers. This activity would lead to the historical alliance formed by the Black Panthers, The Young Lords and the Young Patriots known as The Rainbow Coalition as proclaimed by Huey Newton and the formation of the national Young Lords Party.

But there is much more to this story. In fact, reviewing government documents, letters, newspapers and video lead the fictional character, Writer 1, to realize that the very act of writing about history is plagued with challenges. Where does one find truth? Challenged by constraints of time and political forces, whose interests are privileged? Writer 2, representing both an alter ego and what is left out of traditional history is also a symbol of the one truth that inspires both the Young Lords and this story: the tribulations of urban living and the survival of communities before gentrification. Chicago, as pioneer of United States urban planning is revealed in this story as a complex set of forces working during a turbulent time with and against communities. We see the various ethnic communities, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Polish, Irish, African Americans and others who are migrating, settling and defining themselves as both ethnic groups and other socio-political identifications together,
separately, in coalition and in conflict. At the end, the focus is on families who are displaced and for whom the Young Lords led a nearly 40 year battle against the injustices of urban renewal.

PHOTO DETAILS
p.49: The Department of Special Collections and Archives, The Young Lords Collection, DePaul University’s John T. Richardson Library.

JACQUELINE LAZÚ has nearly 20 years of experience in theater ranging from acting to playwrighting. She is currently a professor in the Department of Modern Languages at DePaul University and a published literary and cultural critic, poet and playwright. She is the founder and artistic director of the Primer Acto theater company and founding and board member of a non-profit community-based organization The Afro-Latin@ Institute of Chicago. To contact: jlazu@depaul.edu