López, Madeleine E.
Reseña de "Antonia Pantoja ¡Presente!" de Lillian Jiménez
The City University of New York
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Antonia Pantoja ¡Presente!

Directed by Lillian Jiménez
A Women Make Movies Release, 2009
53 minutes (color); $295.00 [DVD]

REVIEWER: Madeleine E. López, Hamilton College

Pantoja’s words “I am me and my community” anchor Antonia Pantoja ¡Presente! Director Lillian Jiménez has interwoven archival footage with interviews from Pantoja herself, colleagues, friends, and institutional partners or, as Pantoja would say, “her community.” Listening to representatives of the organizational beneficiaries of her work (ASPIRA, PRODUCIR, Graduate School of Community Development), one immediately understands the extraordinary impact of Pantoja’s vision. This film not only pays homage to the person, but, by showcasing first-hand accounts and archival materials, it illuminates important facets of the Puerto Rican experience.

When Pantoja was born in 1922 in Puerto Rico, her grandmother described her as one “with a special destiny.” Pantoja lived up to her grandmother’s prophecy. Events early in her life, which were direct effects of U.S. colonial policies (Dietz 1987), left an imprint on her way of thinking, living, and political maturation. Chief among these are her grandfather’s labor organizing at the American Tobacco Company and the Ponce Massacre in 1937. Throughout her life, her actions would be informed by her awareness of the tangible limitations on everyday existence for those living under a colonial power.

As a child, she suffered ill health as a result of poverty and malnutrition. The extreme poverty of the island is vividly portrayed through archival footage depicting dilapidated houses, worn clothes, and dirt roads. Despite this, Pantoja persevered and completed a two-year college degree, which qualified her to become a rural school teacher.

During her time as a teacher in Puerto Rico’s countryside, Pantoja was warmly welcomed by the students’ families. She quickly appreciated the important leadership role a teacher held in the community. At the same time, she struggled with the Americanization policies enacted by the Department of Education. She specifically objected to the emphasis on teaching English-language skills—a mandate for all public schools prior to 1948—which seemed out of place in rural Puerto Rico (Osuna 1975).

Jiménez interweaves Pantoja’s struggle with gendered expectations throughout the film. For example, Pantoja discusses the traditional prescribed gender roles in Puerto Rican families, as an archival black-white image of a Puerto Rican woman fills the screen. Head bowed, she appears demure as she passes a coffee cup to a man. He takes it, expressionless. This image of a puertorriqueña is shown as Pantoja voices her restlessness with “the traditional things a woman is supposed to do in that culture.” Pantoja would break customary gender barriers throughout her life. In the process, she would create new paths for women and foster greater understandings of what individuals, straight or gay, married or unmarried, could accomplish.

Searching for something she could not quite define and taken in by the glamour of the United States as depicted by Hollywood, Pantoja set off for New York City in 1944. Traveling during the era of the “Marine Tigers” (this term originated from the mode of transportation, a cargo ship), her arrival and transition was just as jarring as that of other migrants/immigrants to New York. Not one to be limited
by an unfamiliar environment, she quickly found work and mental liberation. She surrounded herself with other young people interested in art, literature, and politics. Pantoja describes this transformative experience as becoming “a New Yorker the right way, through art and its artists.”

As the number of Puerto Ricans increased during the Great Migration (1946–1964), Pantoja underwent a political transformation due to her heightened awareness of the problems her compatriots encountered due to race, language, and poverty. Drawing on the memories of her grandfather’s labor organizing and motivated by racist headlines—wonderfully illustrated in the documentary with archival clippings—Pantoja sought solutions. At this point in her life, she began her work as an institution builder.

In 1961, she established ASPIRA (aspire) to fight poverty and discrimination among Puerto Ricans, to highlight their heritage, and to promote their success as a community. Described by Pantoja as “the most important work of my life,” ASPIRA sought to address inequalities by focusing on the educational achievement of its youth. Understanding the organization’s name as a command, “to aspire,” educational counselors facilitated the academic success and access to higher education for aspirantes. In the film, former participants speak to various aspects of the multi-dimensional impact of the program, including self-responsibility, cultural pride, and increased opportunity. The viewer learns how parents were reassured that education was accessible and the responsibility of the child. Self-responsibility is an underlying theme in all of Pantoja’s efforts.

Aspirantes recognized that through ASPIRA school clubs, they were being trained as leaders. Learning about the civil rights movement, as well as Puerto Rican history and culture, mobilized them to address a multitude of issues. Jiménez pieces together a montage of success stories: educators, community activists, members of the Young Lords Party, politicians like Fernando Ferrer, and the leaders of the 1969 CUNY takeover, which created greater access for minorities to the colleges of the City University of New York (Torres and Velázquez 1998).

Lillian Jiménez’s archival choices bring an emotional element to the film’s narrative, adding a power that words themselves could not achieve. For example, to illustrate the confusion and isolation Puerto Rican children felt in the classroom due to English-language limitations, we see a young girl facing a group of children who are talking. She is not participating nor are the children attempting to include her. She is merely looking at them with sadness and bewilderment. The confusion that enveloped these children in English-only classrooms has been extensively documented (Nieto 2000). However, it is one thing to read about it and another to see it. A second powerful image is that of a stern, authoritative figure leading an ASPIRA meeting. Fearless is the best word to describe this woman. How else could one be to envision and effect the change ASPIRA sought to accomplish? During this time, Puerto Ricans were largely seen as a “problem,” not as a group with the potential to achieve or deserving of a college education. ASPIRA’s leadership remained keenly aware of the formidable obstacles their students encountered in schools.

Pantoja knew that Puerto Rican children were not a priority of the Board of Education. By the 1960s, innumerable reports had been conducted and issued by the Department of Education, yet basic services to improve their educational experience were lacking. Proven strategies, such as training Puerto Rican teachers and providing bilingual classrooms, were not implemented. Following in the footsteps of the African American community, ASPIRA took the New York City Board of
Education to court in 1972. The resulting consent decree required the Board of Education to offer transitional bilingual education programs, and to monitor and evaluate the programs. To quote Pantoja: “I battled the monster and won.” Cesar A. Perales of the Puerto Rican Legal and Education Defense Fund rightly underscores the significance of this case in terms of language rights and equal educational opportunity. The impact of this case remains to this day. Just as the historic Brown v. Board of Education decision set a legal precedent for the dismantling of Jim Crow laws in all segments of society, ASPIRA v. N.Y.C. Board of Education allowed for legal recognition of language rights and social services.

After this legal victory, Pantoja left New York City to teach at San Diego State University. The documentary depicts a vastly different environment—from big city lights to beaches and “free love”—and Pantoja found herself in unfamiliar territory. Yet, once again, she immersed herself in the mission of empowering communities. Conceptualizing “art as community,” Pantoja and Wilheminia Perry established the Graduate School for Community Development in 1978. This school sought to infuse community values and philosophies with art. In the film, we hear from graduates who changed the local art scene and integrated politics into their work. More importantly, the school gave its graduates skills to solve problems and empower their communities.

At the age of 62, Pantoja returned to the island in 1984 to retire. But her “retirement” was short-lived; as Dr. Perry notes, “An entire community needed her. How could she say no?” Putting her expertise to practice, she assisted the town of Cúbú to achieve incorporation status and thus have access to resources. In addition, she helped establish PRODUCIR, a community economic development project to promote sustainability.

The most important contribution this film makes is recording Pantoja’s life story—much of it in her own voice and perspective. Pantoja rightly belongs in the pantheon of civil rights heroes. (In 1996, President Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.) While Pantoja remained uncomfortable with the admiration and accolades bestowed upon her, her experience is one that every young person, every Puerto Rican, every Latina/o needs to know. Jiménez relied on first-hand sources to tell this story and, in so doing, validates a colonized and marginalized community without reducing it to a simplistic caricature.

It is a complicated task to put together Pantoja’s multifaceted life. The film’s transitions at times seem abrupt, but this is understandable due to the filmmaker’s need to edit for time. Jiménez made use of images from newspapers and archival photos. This should inspire others to further research the Puerto Rican experience. The interviews give voice to the life-changing work Pantoja conducted. Pantoja not only created institutions (ASPIRA, PRODUCIR), she forged pathways toward stability and success for marginalized, colonized, and disempowered people that only a visionary could have imagined. Educators, activists, Latinos, and young people will find this film to be an enjoyable learning experience.

REFERENCES