

Arte Público Press

Teacher's Guide

Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja **By Antonia Pantoja**

Book Synopsis

Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja is an autobiographical account of the life of Antonia Pantoja, one of the nation's most influential Puerto Rican leaders. Pantoja's story chronologically weaves together the people, places, events, and decisions that most significantly influenced her journey of self-discovery from her early childhood in Puerto Rico to her international acclaim as a community leader and scholar.

A visionary in the creation of many institutions designed to address educational, economic, and political barriers confronting Puerto Ricans, Pantoja played a pivotal role in helping Puerto Ricans to obtain their rights and establish their place within U.S. society. Her story provides an inspiring example of how one person's conviction, commitment, and activism can dramatically impact community empowerment. It also sheds light on a largely overlooked aspect of American history – how Latinos have contributed to the advancement of civil rights and social justice in U.S. society.

Teaching Overview

Intended Audience and Disciplinary Connections

This guide is intended to facilitate the exploration of Latino/Hispanic contributions to U.S. culture among high school and junior college students (as well as lower division university students) in history, social studies, and civics classes. It is also intended to educate general adult readers interested in issues of civil rights, racial equality, leadership development, and community empowerment.

Important Curricular Themes

Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja is valuable as a tool to strengthen student comprehension and understanding of several important themes, including:

- the importance of community leadership and institutions that bridge cultural, linguistic, and material divides to advance immigrant participation in and contributions to mainstream U.S. society;
- the impact of activism as a means to expand social and educational opportunities for marginalized U.S. groups; and
- the need to expand prevailing notions of the American experience and of community as our nation becomes increasingly diverse and multicultural.

Reading Comprehension Strategies

Before Reading: *Initiate in-class discussions with students on topics that underscore the social and historical relevance of the work. Sample topics include:*

- Discovery of Puerto Rico by Columbus (1493)
- The Spanish-American War and its impact on Puerto Rico
- The U.S. invasion and annexation of Puerto Rico (1898)
- The Ponce Massacre (1937)
- Operation Bootstrap (U.S. government policy to displace Puerto Ricans from the island)
- World War II: Puerto Rico's participation and the impact on life in Puerto Rico
- The Puerto Rican Diaspora: history of the large-scale migration of Puerto Ricans to the U.S., especially to New York City, following World War II
- Key Puerto Rican independence efforts in the 1900's
- Overview of key literature/philosophical references in Pantoja's work, such as Julia de Burgos, Pedro Salinas, Kierkegaard, Ortega y Gasset, Hostos, Freire, Fannon, Menninger, Fromm, and de Unamuno

As Reading Progresses: *Pose questions to students designed to improve reading comprehension. Sample questions include:*

Introduction and Part 1: Toward a Clear Identity (1922-1944)

- What key realizations, beliefs, and values comprise Pantoja's philosophy of life, as referenced in her introduction? How was her life influenced by her birthplace? By literature? Who were the intellectual luminaries that influenced her philosophy of life?
- Who were the influential family members in Pantoja's life? How did they help to cultivate her identity? How did they inspire her activism?
- What were some of Pantoja's early activist experiences in Puerto Rico?
- How did growing up poor in Barrio Obrero shape Pantoja's identity? What were some of the experiences she recounts as formative to her life while she lived in the barrio? How did the barrio compare to Loiza?
- Why did Pantoja become a teacher? Why did she decide to leave Puerto Rico for the U.S. mainland?

Part 2: I Take a Leap Over the Sea and I Land on My Feet (1944-1949)

- What were Pantoja's impressions of New York City prior to her arrival? How did this compare to what she experienced upon arrival?
- How was Pantoja's experience with racism different in Puerto Rico than in the U.S.?
- How did Pantoja "become a New Yorker?" What changed about her life?
- Who were the people and what were the experiences that influenced Pantoja's intellectual awakening during her bohemian living years? What new information did she learn during that time about why the U.S. invaded Puerto Rico at the end of the Spanish-American War?

Part 3: A Builder of Institutions (1950-1960)

- How did Pantoja discover her leadership ability? What beliefs underscored her community development philosophy? How did she begin to exercise her leadership through the Hispanic Young Adult Association (HYAA)?
- Why did HYAA change its name to the Puerto Rican Association of Community Affairs (PRACA)? How did PRACA's approach to the Puerto Rican community differ from the Office of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico's approach?
- What challenges did Pantoja experience as a graduate student at the New York School of Social Work? How did her experience with the Association of Puerto Ricans in Bridgeport reconfirm her commitment to study social and public policy?
- How did Pantoja's work at the Commission on Intergroup Relations teach her the importance of building institutions as a means for community empowerment? How is social work different from institution building, according to Pantoja?

Part 4: The Puerto Rican Forum (1957-1964)

- Why was the founding of the Puerto Rican Forum so significant to the Puerto Rican community in New York? What was its purpose?
- What was the significance and purpose of ASPIRA? How was Pantoja involved in its founding? What are some of the challenges that ASPIRA has faced from both inside and outside the Puerto Rican community? Why did ASPIRA become the most important work in Pantoja's life?
- Why and how did the Puerto Rican Community Development Project (PRCDP) evolve? What were some of its successes? What were some of its failures?
- How did learning about the history of Puerto Rico have an impact on Pantoja's political perspective?

Part 5: Leadership in the Overall Society (1965-1969)

- What were some of Pantoja's most significant leadership contributions in the "overall society"? For example, as a university professor? As a delegate to the New York State Constitutional Convention? As a member of Mayor Lindsay's Bundy Blue Ribbon Panel?
- What did Pantoja learn as a result of her experience in these leadership positions? In particular, what did she learn about politics and the power of those who make policy decisions?
- What insights does Pantoja share about her personality that reflect her leadership style and motivation?
- Why does Pantoja think her book is an important story to tell?

Part 6: Return to Puerto Rico and Return to New York (1969-1983)

- What were some of the community projects that Pantoja became involved with when she returned to Puerto Rico?
- Why did Pantoja decide to leave Puerto Rico? How was her decision affected by her experience teaching at the Puerto Rico School of Social Work? By her Pantoja Associates experience?

- What was the Puerto Rican Research and Resources Center? What were some of its projects? How did Pantoja’s work at the Research Center evolve over time and lead her to pursue other paths?
- What changes did Pantoja help make while teaching at the San Diego State University School of Social Work? Why was the Graduate School for Urban Resources and Social Policy established? What model of learning did it promote? How was this different from more traditional educational models?
- What inspired Pantoja to return to Puerto Rico once again?

Part 7: I Return to Puerto Rico to Retire (1969-1983)

- How did Pantoja become involved with young people upon her return to Puerto Rico?
- What was the significance of PRODUCIR? To Pantoja? To the community? To the political, governmental, and social leadership of Puerto Rico? How did PRODUCIR evolve from Pantoja’s work with youth?
- How did Pantoja’s work with PRODUCIR contribute to the field of community development?
- What realizations led to Pantoja’s final return to New York?

Epilogue: Reflections and Ruminations

- What did Pantoja learn about herself in writing her memoirs?
- How do Pantoja’s poems shed light on who she is?
- What are some of the terms that Pantoja uses to define herself?

Writing/Composition Ideas

- Do you think that Antonia Pantoja was a visionary leader? Why?
- What do you think were Pantoja’s most important contributions? Why?
- Who are you? Are you a visionary? An artist? A member of a particular group? An institution or community builder? Something else? Write an essay defining yourself.
- Who are the key people, places, and events that have influenced who you are as a person (e.g., family members, where you grew up, where you went to school, jobs you have held, etc.)?
- What beliefs and personal values guide the way in which you live your life?
- Is there a particular intellectual luminary – a writer, musician, philosopher, psychiatrist, etc. – that has influenced your philosophy of life? How?
- Write a poem or song lyrics inspired by a person, place, or experience in your life.
- What do you think it means to be a visionary? Give an example of a person who you think exemplifies a “visionary.”
- Describe a personal experience with racism/discrimination and how this influenced your identity.

Word and Terms Study

- *Aspira*: Spanish term meaning, “to aspire.”
- *Barrio*: Spanish term for neighborhood or community. In English, barrio often connotes a poor community or slum.

- *Bohemian*: A person or behavior that is nonconformist or unconventional. Often refers to an artistic or literary person who disregards conventional standards of appearance and behavior.
- *Chicano*: A Mexican American. The literary and political Mexican American movements of the 1960s and 1970s established *Chicano* as a term of ethnic pride.
- *Diaspora*: A dispersion of people from their original homeland.
- *Hispanic*: Of or relating to Spain or Spanish-speaking Latin America. Often used to refer to a U.S. citizen or resident of Latin-American or Spanish descent.
- *Latino*: A person of Latin-American descent, often one living in the United States. While *Latino* and *Hispanic* are often used interchangeably, *Hispanic* refers more broadly to culture and persons descended from both Spain and Latin America. *Latino* and *Hispanic* also have strong geographic and political connotations, whereby some prefer the use of one of the terms to the other.
- *Nuyorican*: A person of Puerto Rican descent or birth who lives in New York City.

Word Study Note: Given that many of the words highlighted above possess deep and complex meanings, encourage students to conduct more in-depth analysis of these terms through paperback and on-line dictionary and encyclopaedia sources. Pantoja's text also contains other Spanish language words that can be further explored using a Spanish-English dictionary. These strategies may also serve to enhance student reading comprehension.

About the Author

Antonia Pantoja is both the subject and the author of this book. A leading figure of the modern Hispanic civil rights and feminist movements of the 1950s through the 1980s, she was awarded the prestigious Medal of Freedom by President Bill Clinton in 1996 for her many contributions to American civic culture. Pantoja lived in New York City until she passed away in 2002.

Related Media/Literary Tools

Audio-Visual/Background Research:

All documentation and videos related to this book can be found at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College at the City University of New York.

Books:

- *Colon, Joaquin. *Pioneros Puertorriquenos en Nueva York, 1917-1947*. University of Houston: Arte Público Press, 2002.
- _____, Pablo Figueroa, and Antonia Pantoja, eds. *Events in the History of Puerto Rico*. New York: Research for Urban Education, Inc., 1967.
- Perry, Wilhelmina. "Memories of a Life of Work: An Interview with Antonia Pantoja." *Harvard Educational Review. Symposium: Colonialism and Working-Class Resistance: Puerto Rican Education in the United States* 68 (1988): 244-258.
- Puerto Rican Forum. *Poverty Conditions of the Puerto Rican Community of New York City*. New York: Puerto Rican Forum, Inc., 1965.

*Other Arte Público Press book.

Acknowledgements

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