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Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric

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*Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands
Rhetoric* by Adela C. Licona (review)

Jenna Vinson

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Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric

Adela C. Licona

Albany: SUNY P, 2012. 207 pp.

Reviewed by Jenna Vinson

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In her 2011 review of rhetorician Adela C. Licona's documentary work, Marianna Grohowski hoped readers of the *Community Literacy Journal* would be inspired by Licona's efforts to make visible non-academic community literacies while also performing multimodal, community-relevant composition. Readers of the *CLJ* will be happy to learn that Licona's latest publication continues to emphasize the value and impact of community literacies. Her book, *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*, provides activists, researchers, and educators with 1) a new theoretical framework through which to analyze community literacies and coalitional practices and 2) a vibrant genre to consider for community literacy projects and rhetorical analysis: zines.

Zines are self-published and often locally-circulated booklets that are made up of words and images. The term "zine" derives from magazines and fanzines. However, as Licona explains, zines are a distinct genre characterized by content that challenges societal norms and dominant ways of thinking. In addition, the authors of zines—or zinesters—refuse "to wait for permission or acceptance" to write, publish, or circulate these texts (20). In conducting research for this book, Licona analyzed zines from the 1980s and 1990s that were donated to the Sallie Bingham Center Special Collections Library at Duke University. In her book, Licona argues for the value of third-space zines as sites for rhetorical study, coalitional community building, and the "hopeful potential" of social change. "Third space" is a tricky concept that Licona describes as "the abyss beyond dualisms" (8). Licona explains that third space can reference a physical location (e.g., a place in-between two other places such as a borderland), a methodology (i.e., a way of reading a text to look for ambiguities or challenges to established dichotomies), and a practice (i.e., being conscious of both/and possibilities as opposed to either/or distinctions). Licona asserts that the tactics, or borderlands rhetorics, of third-space zinesters move us past marginalizing and reductive binaries to



Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric



both/and consciousness and productive ambiguities. Zines potentially resist dominant dichotomies, build coalition, share lived knowledge, and promote grassroots literacies.

The book includes five chapters. In the first chapter, “Borderlands Rhetorics and Third-Space Sites,” Licona introduces readers to zines and carefully delimits the scope of her study. She explains that she searched the Duke University collection for zines that were collaboratively authored by what she calls third-space subjects—authors who are feminist, queer, and/or of-color and who use the genre to articulate shared goals for egalitarian social change. By focusing on third-space print zines, Licona writes that she can analyze the spatialized literacy practices of people collectively working toward social justice in the specific areas where the zines circulate. Then, Licona sets up the theoretical framework of her study, drawing from the critical terms and insights of Chicana scholars Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, Emma Pérez as well as feminist cultural geographer Doreen Massey. Scholars who similarly seek to assess the contributions and strategies of marginalized rhetorics will appreciate Licona’s distinctions between criticism and coalitional consciousness, dichotomies and third space, and homogeneity and community.

In the second chapter, “The Role of Imagination in Challenging Everyday Dominations,” Licona builds on Chandra Mohanty and Gloria Anzaldúa’s emphasis on the importance of imagination as a coalition-building tool. She examines how zinesters imagine new ways they (and others in their communities) can connect via lived experience, shared knowledges, and collective resistance to social injustice. Licona illustrates different strategies zinesters use to invite and inspire coalitional activism including visual/discursive interventions in issues that readers across lines of difference would find upsetting (e.g., Nike’s exploitation of Vietnamese laborers). Licona describes how zinesters’ explicit calls for multi-racial collaboration on an issue or action and code switching practices allow multiply literate readers to engage. Readers of *CLJ* will especially enjoy the section “Community Scribes: Lived and Relational Knowledges and Community Literacies” as Licona powerfully and persuasively demonstrates how zines challenge the tyranny of “expert” or “authorized” knowledges by, instead, sharing and valuing lived knowledges—or the personal stories and perspectives shared by people who experience the things they are writing about.

In chapter three “Embodied Intersections” Licona continues to illustrate how zinesters value and circulate “embodied knowledge,” or ways of knowing based on lived experience, in order to build community literacy of socio-political issues that need to be addressed. In this chapter, she draws on feminist theories of emotion, subjectivity, and body politics to explore the role of emotion (which she represents as “e-motion”) in zines. Licona demonstrates how zinesters “integrate emotion into their knowledge claims,” particularly love and anger (65). This is my favorite part of the book as Licona shows us example after example of feminist zinesters using personal narratives, hyperbolic claims, and visual representations to call out cultural icons and practices that piss. them. off. Licona persuades readers that explicit anger is a valuable third-space rhetorical tactic in that e-motion invites coalition (among others who know/feel/live likewise), informs meaning making, and motivates action. Also important

to this chapter is Licona's theorization of a tactic of social critique called "reverso." Reverso includes the discursive and visual strategies zinesters use to reverse the often oppressive and divisive gaze on minoritized people to, instead, highlight and render abnormal those ways of looking and their accordant practices. This often involves questioning "expert" discourses—such as medical officials' concerns about "fat" and the psychological treatments for addiction—as well as the explicit refusal to be silent about sexual abuse.

In chapter four, "Queer-y-ing Consumption and Production," Licona turns her attention to how zines resist dominant norms for consumption and production in our postmodern, globalized society through the "creative and critical inquiry and class-consciousness" that she terms "queer-y-ing" (100). Queer-y-ing, as performed in zines, may include destabilizing dominant understandings of gender and sexuality, promoting ambiguity, re-appropriating familiar images (like Barbie) to question social norms, making visible inequitable and exploitative production practices (such as the production of beef), and re-telling history to reclaim bi (or seemingly bi) female historical figures. Licona also demonstrates that the genre of the zine itself challenges "first-order" consumption practices wherein the consumer purchases a product or intellectual property from the producer/retailer. For example, zinesters often reproduce content from other writers/media without permission in the aim of broad readership and accessible education. In this way, zines challenge mass production and consumption materially and discursively.

Chapter 5 is Licona's epilogue, entitled "Third-Space Theory and Borderlands Rhetorics." In this chapter, Licona reiterates the importance of third space and borderlands rhetoric and explains why she studied zines as her primary example of these rhetorical practices. She offers us insight into who she imagines will take up these ideas about third space—rhetoricians, cultural theorists, feminist scholars, and anyone who needs to "identify and explain creative resistances and responses to marginalizing structures and practices" (136). While Licona does not offer us any additional examples from zines in this chapter, she does offer rich examples of third space subjectivity and borderlands rhetoric by situating herself as a third-space subject. She shares childhood memories from living in the U.S./Mexico border region, personal/academic reactions to Gloria Anzaldúa's work, and her admiration and love for the third-space experiences of her father who taught her so much. In short, Licona models embodied rhetoric that refuses a dichotomy between the personal and the academic.

One of the primary reasons this book is so valuable is because it demonstrates how community literacy is promoted, engaged, and circulated in the multimodal genre of zines. I can imagine literacy researchers collecting and studying zines from their communities as a way of knowing more about the literacy practices therein. In addition, Licona's careful attention to the visual and discursive representations in zines will appeal to those interested in visual rhetoric. In fact, the excerpts I used from Licona's book in my undergraduate Visual Rhetoric course this past semester sparked exciting discussions of how visual representations can perform social criticism¹. In a brief footnote to her epilogue, Licona explains that she has used zines

in the classroom as a way to encourage students to bring their everyday knowledges and lived histories into their academic inquiry and writing. Assignments that call for students to collaboratively construct zines with their classmates or people in the non-academic community could encourage community-relevant undergraduate research and writing projects. Although the theoretical framing of the book might be difficult for undergraduates, individual chapters—such as chapters 2 and 3—may pair nicely with a unit on zines and other non-academic, community-based genres. This could prompt students to think about the civic importance of writing for social justice.

There is also much to admire and learn from the way in which Licona organizes and writes her book. From the opening dedication to the “acknowledgement of gifts of knowledge” to the body chapters that follow, *Zines in Third Space* models academic scholarship that recognizes and values community as a site for the sharing and learning of new knowledge and literacy practices. Furthermore, Licona uses language to interrupt readers’ understanding of certain terms. Licona writes, “In my work, I play with language. I always have. It is serious play though which I am able to reimagine language’s potential” (6). Using strategic punctuation and diction, Licona encourages us to re(en)vision the meaning and impact of specific words. As one example, she writes, “Like many third-space subjects, I have needed to read and interpret con/texts, and reread and reinterpret con/texts, in multiple directions” (7). Here, Licona interrupts any simple understanding of context—the circumstance of/around something—to prompt readers to consider the drawbacks of the texts she was assigned in elementary school. She describes creatively reading between the lines of Dick and Jane books for places of recognition as a bilingual, Chicana first grader. Licona’s practice of word play is a performance of the very borderlands rhetorics she identifies and analyzes in zines.

It feels important to end this review by situating myself in third space. I am—at one and the same time—Licona’s reviewer, Licona’s mentee, Licona’s former colleague, and Licona’s friend. I have worked with her in the non-academic community to build relationships between youth organizations and academic researchers and I have worked with her in the ivory tower on my dissertation, her scholarship, and campus events. Writing this review has been just one more opportunity to blur the imagined boundaries between each of those roles while learning and being challenged by Licona’s ways of thinking.

Endnotes

1. Those who are interested in reading an excellent example of a zine should consult issue 8.1 of the *Community Literacy Journal*, which includes a zine collaboratively produced by youth activists from Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and Tucson.