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## Community Literacy for the 21st Century: A Review of Adela C. Licona's Works

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*In Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*, Eli Goldblatt shares his experiences with community-based learning and encourages readers to “pay attention to the problems of the people among who we live” (6). The unique, self-proclaimed “progressive” multimedia work of Adela C. Licona, assistant professor of English at the University of Arizona, observes and shares the “lived community literacies” of the voices that often go unnoticed in the communities of the southwest (Licona). Licona explains that her documentary film work is inspired by her interests “in documenting and different ways of engaging in conversation-making.” Her work acknowledges and weaves together public performance, grassroots literacies, and multimodal literacy practices (in particular, documentary film). Her film works, inspired by the theoretical intersections of Chicana theory, feminism, activism, and social justice, showcase the potential for transformation in the familiar spaces of our lives.

I regard the experience of observing Licona's work as inspirational and it is my hope that others will be inspired to see in action what Goldblatt urged and Licona practices: the opportunity for seeking out and committing oneself to the issues present in one's own local environment. Licona's work encourages viewers, in our unique and privileged roles of academic, scholar, teacher, community member, and human being, to engage in work “that links the [privileged] spaces” of the academy with the “lived literacies” of our communities.

In 2008 The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) provided a “Definition of 21st Century Literacies,” which acknowledges the ways technology affects literacy practices. This statement, adopted by the NTCE executive committee, acknowledges a multiliteracies approach to literacy acquisition and recognizes that legitimate, contemporary literacy practices consist of multiple modalities (visual, audio, gestural, spatial, or linguistic means of creating meaning). While Adela C. Licona has composed and published traditional, alphabetic compositions (compositions which rely on words as the primary modality for making meaning), it is her multimodal compositions (compositions that use multiple modalities to compose and

convey meaning), which provide an excellent use of the NCTE's "Definition of 21st Century Literacies." Her film work is important for scholars of the 21st century to consider as valuable, scholarly work, even though it is not composed in the traditionally prized alphabetic/print-based medium. My intent for sharing Licona's work in documentary film and community literacy is to inspire community literacy scholars and community members of the 21st century to consider composing projects in different modalities, which aim to inform and promote understanding of the local, lived community literacies that go unnoticed in our communities.

On her personal website, Licona lists and provides links to the various multimodal scholarship she has composed. While she lists several documentary film/community partnership projects, I will share just two of her works: *Circles of White* made in collaboration with the public performance group The Invisible City Project (ICP) and a project intended to create cultural sustainability tools entitled *Augamiel: Secrets of the Agave*, made in cooperation with women's cooperatives along the US/Mexico border. These works showcase the ways that multimodalities provide legitimate media for community literacy scholarship and can often be best practice. Such is the case for Licona's works, which consider the most effective affordances to convey community-based literacies. Her videos reveal that which the print-based composition neglects: an intense degree of present awareness—what Licona describes as "commitment to the practice of reflection in a present way" (Licona). That is, her videos, which combine spoken and written word, English and Spanish, still and moving images, are highly observant. Her close examination provides an intimate viewing experience for her audience. Her work reveals emotion, mood, movement, passage of time, and most notably, respect for her subjects, whom her work legitimates and empowers, and whose participation in her work is essential.

### **Film: Circles of White in collaboration with the Invisible City Project (ICP) of Tucson, AZ.**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YW--xtlhsM>

Public performance is an overlooked form of multimodal literacy. Literacy, as defined in the NCTE's "Definition of 21st Century Literacies," is not limited to alphabetic representation; literacy is visual, audio, gestural, spatial, or linguistic means of creating meaning but rarely is public performance work engaged in or shared in community literacy scholarship. In 2008 Adela C. Licona collaborated with the public performance group The Invisible City Project (ICP) and produced two films: *On the Plaza Between—For Joseph* and *Circles of White*. Licona's work with ICP sends a unique and strong message about the community literacy project's ties with social justice and change, empowerment, sustainability, solidarity, and consciousness-raising.

Licona's film work represents 21st century literacy practices and provides the potential for public performance art to be regarded as authentic community literacy work.

The Invisible City Project, as their website explains, is a “communal... art-making practice to re-imagine social spaces in an urban setting” (“About”). The group was created by Lisa Bowden and Kimi Eisele in order for “women artists to imagine what a more humanist city might look like and how it might function by focusing on the...‘ignored’” aspects of urban environments (“About”). ICP's website showcases central questions for artists to consider, which demands each artist to closely examine his or her communities through the medium that each artist best communicates.

In the video *Circles of White*, Licona answers the questions ICP poses and appears to reveal the mission of ICP. As the video pans, the dancers (public performance artists) dressed in white weave in slow motion to create circles of white; Licona shares, “It was a celebration of space. The present space and the right to inhabit it. Teach from it, learn from it” (*Circles*). As this video shows and tells of Licona's experience with the ICP, viewers get the sense that both Licona and the dancers embodied and critically reflected on the concept of belonging in the isolating, impersonal city sprawl.

*Circles of White* is written and narrated by Licona, who also provided still photographs to compliment the moving photography shot and edited by Jamie A. Lee. Licona's voice draws in and captivates her audience for the entire nine-minute video. Her words provide a critical reflection of



*Still image from Circles of White*



*Still image from Circles of White*

her experience. In a telephone interview, Licona admitted that the video was intended “as a self-critique to remind us of our privilege. I wanted to be self aware and critical” (Licona). Licona’s self-awareness acknowledges the unrepresented voices of the street, literally and figuratively giving voice to the voiceless. She focuses on the “first people: Chicinidad, Latinidad, Indigenos,” whom she sees inhabiting the street and notices the traces (art, smells, sounds) they leave behind. She compares these ignored, local peoples to the dancers in white by stating, that the dancers, as “*Circles of White* [were] embodied, performed, present.” The dancers, hard to miss by passersby, receive apologies by the local people who use the street for home and work and go largely unnoticed. But it is those people who, as Licona shares in her composition, truly belong in this city—whose city this really is (*Circles*).

The first two minutes of the film appear to be an explanation of the film’s dedication “to Raquel and Ofelia,” whose “powerful reminders” Licona shares explicitly and revisits implicitly by connecting their “reminders” to what she witnesses on the street. Licona focuses on Raquel and Ofelia’s requests to express “gratitude to the Tohon O’odham for the greater space in which we are all situated” and to “remember that I am in someone else’s home. A guest?” (*Circles*, emphasis original). Licona’s feeling of being a guest is magnified by her awareness of “the privilege to call ourselves artists in the

space. I didn't want to lose sight of the street as a place for work and home, and of the race, class, and sex divides of the street" (Licona).

The focus of *Circles of White*, that we are all guests, is complicated when Licona states, "We are all looking for belonging" (*Circles*). As we view images of blurred bodies and elements of the city in both still and motion photography, the viewer not only senses Licona's feelings of humility at being a guest while trying to understand her place of belonging, but the viewer is also called to question our own connectedness and acknowledge our individual and collective place(s) in our communities.

*Circles of White* is a dedicated observation to the literacies of the local people who largely go unnoticed. By the stating and reinforcing of the idea of belonging, Licona refers to her acknowledgement, understanding, and respect to those who have come before her, those who once owned this land, and to the local people with whom she shares this space. Licona's account of her experience sends a tone of humility and respect. Her composition accomplishes a number of goals: it advocates for the importance and belonging of marginalized people and their literacies in her community; it shows how public performance art (among other artistic expressions) has a place in community; and it explains her experience of being influenced through the discovery process of observation in a familiar space. Licona's work is an authentic, engaged, meaningful piece of community literacy work for the twenty-first century.

**Film: Women's Intercultural Center (WIC), a promotional film for the Women's Intercultural Center of NM.**

<<http://vimeo.com/2241523>>

Adela Licona has also collaborated as a producer, director, and writer on the project *Aguamiel: Secrets of the Agave*. The project, which observes women's cooperatives along the US/Mexico border and their responses to the unequal effects of globalization, was first imagined as a feature-length documentary film but has since emerged into five bilingual segments to be accompanied by bilingual study guides for academic and community purposes. Through a telephone interview, Licona shared her hopes that in its new form, the project will "reach a broader audience," and that used as tools, her work will "call for critical reflection regarding border issues and borderlands contexts: water; community housing; funds of knowledge; and building community/transnational connections." Those interested should visit the project's website, <http://www.aguamiel-documentary.com/>, and check back to view the video segments and study guides. The only segment of the project shared thus far is footage Licona and Lee produced in collaboration with the Women's Intercultural Center (WIC) in New Mexico. The footage of WIC is segment one of the project, which reflects what the larger project

shares. That is “how the imagined and the real come together in this space between two powerful nations. It’s about reclaiming the funds of knowledge that reside and inform this space. It’s about sustaining community, hope, imagination, and the lived knowledges within each of us” (“Home”). In Licona and Lee’s seven-minute video of the Women’s Intercultural Center (WIC), viewers see how the combined efforts of the Center’s Founder, Kathleen Erickson, the Director of Programs Delia Gomez (whose voice narrates the film), and the immigrant women to whom the center belongs have transformed WIC into a model for a successful, sustainable, community service organization.

The video authentically displays WIC’s genuine partnership on the part of all members. Licona’s and Lee’s video catalogs the process of creating (literally from the ground up) a sustainable community organization that works in solidarity with the people whom it aims to serve. Kathleen Erickson explains WIC began when she learned, by talking with the residents of Anthony, NM, of the need to “reach out to immigrant women who were isolated in their homes.” With awareness of a genuine need, Erickson and others began by offering group classes on self-esteem building to the local women before the group had a place of their own to meet. As Director of Programs, Delia Gomez explains, “It’s about women coming into their own power, and owning our power.” Gomez explains the authentic partnership of this organization’s beginning and which the organization is founded upon, that the women WIC sought to serve were “the architects” of the space, providing input about how the building should look and feel (Women’s).

The documentary film work of Licona displays her sincere commitment to giving voice to the voiceless by acknowledging that knowledge is made in both academic and informal spaces. My intention for sharing Licona’s works was to inspire community literacy scholars to engage in nontraditional scholarship, that is, multimodal, community literacy projects that seek to raise awareness about the literacies that occur in our own communities. My hope is that community literacy scholars will consider Licona’s works—works that are multimodal and that listen to the voices that make up the communities in which one resides—as legitimate, authentic, and inspirational forms of community literacy to aspire toward producing or, at least, respecting.

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