Media-making Pedagogies for Empowerment & Social Change: An Interview with Diana J. Nucera (a.k.a. Mother Cyborg)

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MOVEMENTS & MOBILIZATION

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As part of our "What Is Just Tech?" series, we invited several social researchers–scholars, practitioners, artists, and activists—to respond to a simple yet fundamental question: "What is just technology?" This interview was conducted by Just Tech Program Officer Catalina Vallejo, who spoke with Diana J. Nucera, a.k.a. Mother Cyborg, a multimedia artist, educator, and organizer based in Detroit, Michigan. Nucera (she/her) uses music, performance, DIY publishing, community-organizing tactics, and popular education methods to elevate collective technological consciousness and agency. Her art draws from and includes eleven years of community organizing work in Detroit.

In their conversation, Vallejo and Nucera spoke about the history of independent media and the internet, the potential of media-making pedagogies for empowerment and social change, and being optimistic about opportunity in the midst of great challenges.

Catalina Vallejo (CV): What was your journey to where you are now?

Diana J. Nucera (DN): I am a product of the Indymedia movement. I grew up in a small town in Indiana. Population 15,000. I'm a large queer woman of color so it was a rough road. I found the DIY punk movement, which was all about publishing your own media. These Independent Media (Indymedia) Centers popped up. Indymedia Centers were places where people came together to do journalism and to share what the potential of the internet was before it was widely adopted. Indymedia centers had an online space which was almost like a CraigsList before CraigsList—people would punch in links and

upload their reporting. This was a very unique use of the internet at the time.

> *A lot of people think about social media as a moment that changed journalism, but it was Indymedia that did it about 10 years prior. It set the stage for social media to become a decentralized journalism tool.*

I got into small, self-published "zines" which would always be distributed at rock or punk shows. I went to one show and it happened to be the first Allied Media Conference—called the Midwest Zine Conference—in Bowling Green, Ohio. A lot of people think about social media as a moment that changed journalism, but it was Indymedia that did it about 10 years prior. It set the stage for social media to become a decentralized journalism tool.

That was in 1999. I ended up moving to Chicago for grad school to study media, art, and technology. I got a job teaching to youth at Street Level Youth Media, working with young, brown, queer folks to uplift their voices. I mostly taught documentary video, but also creative storytelling, music video, and video installation. I worked there for years thinking about how media-making is such an incredible learning and community organizing tool. I remember working with families and making music videos, watching them bond, watching them learn, watching people transform.

Eventually I went back to the Allied Media Conference and ran into Jenny Lee, a media-based organizer who is now the co-executive director of Allied Media Projects. I was sitting at a taco stand with her, and I was like, "you know I really hate going to conferences. I want to connect with people but what would feel good is if I were able to *make* with them." To me this taco stand is the moment where Indymedia and youth media meet up to make the hands-on components of what the Allied Media Conference is today. That moment I was like, "what if instead of talking the talk, we walk the walk together?" We used the tech for stop-motion animation and interviewing. We built radio transmitters and super computers. It was always amazing to see what people made in such a short amount of time.

The Media Lab inspired me to think about ways we can learn together with technology. Tech was so scary to folks, but I saw that when we were together in a potluck setting, people were down to experiment. I discovered the power of agency, and how one cultivates agency.

> *At DiscoTechs we could teach people how to teach and also collect information that our community needed—what internet access there was, where people were accessing the internet (if they were), and what people wanted to learn about tech.*

In 2011, we formed the Digital Justice Coalition. We started doing these DiscoTechs that were very reminiscent of the Media Lab and took that pedagogy to the next level, multimedia workshops to teach

young people what data is, as well as ways to visualize, collect, and analyze it. We did all of these community events—these DiscoTechs—to gather information. There was this "twofer": we could teach people how to teach, then teach other people how to teach, and also There was this kind of community education pedagogy that popped up out of that. We were able to create this program called Detroit Future, which people used to call "the grad school for the people." The program trained Detroit community leaders to train other Detroiters in digital media production, create their own jobs, and support media-based organizing. The idea was, in the process of creating media, you build and cultivate relationships while also getting to the root of issues.

I learned that there is a group of people who have no desire for or access to college, but have a deep desire to continue learning. This model—which trained participants to make video, create graphics, design web sites, and build wireless networks—exploded the potential of media and technology in Detroit. Because it was free and it was based in the community, we ended up having huge success. It was powerful because at the time, nobody had a website. People didn't know much about what was online outside of commerce.

All that work came from one question that I still work with today: "what is the role of media and technology in building new economies based in mutual aid?"

This report in 2013 came out that Detroit was one of the top three least connected cities in the United States. It was pretty embarrassing because we were a metropolitan city, and the other two cities were small. This is when this concept of digital redlining became so clear. Now it was like, "okay let's work on the internet, because what the heck are you going to do with this stuff if you don't have an Internet connection?" There were so many folks that were part of the Allied Media Conference community that taught me everything I know about wireless technology, and then it was my job to turn it into a curriculum using the pedagogy that I had developed and learned through all those years of organizing, That's how we got the Equitable Internet Initiative, which responds to a lack of internet access in Detroit by supporting residents in building and maintaining their own neighborhood-governed internet infrastructure.

Everyone thought we were crazy—how do you think people from the streets of Detroit are going to build the internet? People really overlook what comes out of the streets, but we have continually been predicting the future. So the one thing that I would love for people to pull out of my story is that these movements start in the streets. They get to Congress last, and they get to academia second-to-last. But they are in the homes and in the streets and in the community centers first, because these are people who are experiencing those issues and with just some opportunity of understanding and unpacking the issue on their own terms—not within an academic setting or a specific town hall but just having a group of people to unpack what is happening—that's what makes change.

CV: Tell me more about the other things that you do connected with social justice and tech.

DN: My current work has been going back to art. The thing that art can do is offer perspective. It can break open what's there and allow us a safe, beautiful space to look at something hard. Doing the

internet stuff, we're literally working with things that are invisible. Wireless signals and data are invisible, so when we start to talk about data extraction, it's hard to put your finger on it. With art, I work on analog touchstones that don't necessarily tell people what to think, but offer moments of critical thinking to build agency.

So I have been doing a series of quilts based on technology. I sometimes hold sewing bees that are reminiscent of the old media labs and DiscoTechs. Lately, I have people co-design quilts that carry messages for the future. They learn about issues and possibilities in technology while translating their ideas for the future in the form of a quilt block. At first everybody always goes to point out the problem. It is always the hardest thing to come up with the solution to that problem. I learned in these quilting bees that these solutions come up much quicker when there's creativity involved, when people are designing things together. Just talking and making you can talk about really hard things in a way that is not based in fear. There is so much potential in that space that I am really excited by.

CV: For you, at this moment, are there any reasons to be optimistic about the possibilities for tech justice?

> *The Internet allows me to be queer. It allowed me to find my community. It allowed me to feel not alone.*

DN: I might be one of the few optimistic people left! I think my optimism in technology comes from my queerness. I say that because the Internet allows me to be queer. It allowed me to find my community. It allowed me to feel not alone in a small town of Indiana, and it gave me the courage to move to San Francisco and find out who I was and go to art school.

Being connected is a gift and it is one that is just unique to this particular time that we're in. We have this tool that has us connected. The work, though, is figuring out new business models that don't exploit people and figuring out how we communicate to each other, now that we're connected, figuring out what the role of technology can be in creating safety, or what safety even is! All those questions are opportunities as well as challenges. Detroit has faced so many hardships and within each one of those we've built something beautiful that the world admires, from Motown to the Equitable Internet Initiative to techno to the car. We've built it because in the face of a challenge—this intersection of low resources and oppression—you find the most holistic solutions.

The work is remembering that, honoring that, and learning how to facilitate that. Love plays a huge role. We were able to do all this work because we loved each other so much. We had such deep love, not just for each other, but for our community. There's a rootedness in Detroit that gave us the ambition and energy to make change. That's what I hold on to when I'm in the face of a challenge: there's a learning moment here, let's go. And when I don't have it, someone I love often does. That's why we have to have community, that's why we can't do these things in isolation. Part of my optimism comes from this framework that there's always an opportunity within a challenge and the work is finding it.

CV: I would like to ask you to recommend for our readers different artists that you're following now touch on similar questions about social justice, tech, and community.

DN: Mimi Ọnụọha inspired me to go back to art. She says that I brought her back into organizing and she brought me back into the art world so again, you know, being in community really does make the change. Stephanie Dinkins is killing the game right now. She's been creating these virtual reality and augmented reality environments in thinking about mourning and community on online spaces that are incredibly eerie and powerful. Also Complex Movements out of Detroit, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Morehshin Allahyari, Sasha Costanza-Chock, Una Lee, and Wesley Taylor.