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Reflections on the Allied Media Conference

By **Nadia Abou-Karr**

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It was Thursday night, a few short hours before almost 600 visionary media makers, educators, and social justice activists would convene for the 2007 Allied Media Conference, and I was in a nearby living room assembling registration materials. A group of sleep-deprived conference organizers and volunteers formed an assembly line, and I punched out name tags to stuff them into envelopes, noting the familiar names in anticipation of seeing their faces and conversing with them in the days to come. Friday morning Wayne State's campus—usually lifeless during summer weekends—vibrated with excitement as people began filling the conference center. A line formed before we even set up the registration table and large groups of people continued swarming in until well after Grace Lee Boggs' opening keynote talk: *A Paradigm Shift in our Concept of Education*.

As a local, it was interesting to see my neighborhood crawling with out-of-towners. I put myself in their shoes and imagined I was walking these streets for the first time, hearing stories as if they were new and meeting people as if they were strangers. The conference made its big move to Detroit this year after eight years of being housed in the remote college town of Bowling Green, Ohio. Local participation included a dedicated local organizing committee and staff of volunteers and accounted for roughly half of the total attendees. As RJ Maccani noted on his blog *Zapagringo*, "Whereas some conferences can feel like they are taking place on some other planet—totally disconnected from the place where they are being held—this one was firmly rooted in 'the D.'"

The conference was absolutely site-specific, while remaining relevant and useful for non-Detroiters as well. This was nowhere more evident than the Opening Ceremony, in which veteran Detroit activists Grace Lee Boggs, Elena Herrada, and Charles Simmons wove local movement histories into visions of a new future, with new ways of living, communicating, and relating to each other. During Friday's Popular Education symposium, Detroit's Live Arts Media Project exemplified participatory media in action, and many of the youth involved delivered high-energy, inspirational performances at the Saturday night show.

I was most looking forward to the INCITE! Women and Trans People of Color track of sessions, which Jenny Lee, Susana Adame, and I organized together. It was incredibly rewarding to witness and participate in the culmination of months of hard work, long meetings, and endless emails. It's worth noting that several weeks before the conference, a group of women of color media makers organized a net-based grassroots fundraiser to cover the cost of travel, and each one met their funding goal, allowing us the pleasure of their company.

First thing on Saturday morning, after a last minute meeting, a flurry of zine assembly, and about four hours of sleep, Noemi Martinez, Johanna Eeva, and I led a session on "Women of Color & Zines." We addressed logistical concerns of zine construction, described some obstacles we had encountered, and emphasized why this medium is useful for us as women of color. In the process, our own interest and belief in the power of the written and cheaply photocopied word was refreshed and reinvigorated. Our session, along with subsequent conversations with women of color zinesters, made me reconsider all the assumptions I had about zine-making and the frustrations I had with the "zine community." I realized that I was sitting in a room full of people who could be my community.

Shifting demographics

In 2006, The Women of Color Bloggers Caucus inspired myself and several others to begin blogging. This year, being in the physical presence of women

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others to begin blogging. This year, being in the physical presence of women whose words are a daily source of knowledge and comfort for me, and realizing that there is such strong and powerful support for what we are doing, has inspired me to keep blogging. These feelings of community support cannot be underestimated—as women of color making media that directly mingles our personal lives with the political issues we speak on, we face daily racialized, sexualized intimidation, but facing it in isolation from each other is more dangerous. Knowing that we are not alone is vital to our survival as media makers.

In many ways this was the biggest lesson I left the conference with: I'm not alone. I was not the only person of color, the only woman of color, the only Arab, the only Muslim, the only Palestinian, the only one who looked like me—and we were not the only ones who deeply cared about our communities. Originating as a zine conference largely populated by a specific demographic of white zinesters, there were two sessions on zines at this year's AMC, both centering women of color as zine-makers. The end of tokenism is a wonderful thing.

We did not just talk about media-making and popular education; at each turn there were people creating and using multimedia for information sharing. Diana Nucera created a stunning video in the three intense days preceding the conference that, when shown at the Opening Ceremony and later posted on YouTube, concisely represented the energy and popular mood of the attendees. A variety of media about, inspired by, and taking place at the AMC was spread via the internet; animation, audio, video, photos, poetry, and downloadable print media.

The participants in "Wrong is Not My Name: Poetic Healing as a Response to Sexual Violence," presented by Serena Sebring and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, created a zine together in just one short hour. While there was not one open copy shop for miles, the zine soon found a home on Alexis' *BrokenBeautiful Press* website as a downloadable PDF. Bloggers populated the internet with their thoughts, providing personal reflections, detailed summaries of workshops and presentations, and spaces for further discussion.

Presenters used the AlliedMediaConference.org blog to share information with those in attendance at their sessions. All of this documentation has been (and continues to be) archived at AlliedMediaConference.org/documentation. Interactive and independent media allowed for the inspiration resulting from the conference to be spread throughout multiple spheres, embracing media makers and activists all over the world and exemplifying media's usefulness as a tool for education and organizing.

About the Author

Nadia Abou-Karr is an artist, writer, and Allied Media Conference organizer. Check nadiaaboukarr.com for more information.



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