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## Two of Our Funnest Shows Ever!



(in alphabetical order) Christine Bunuan (not pictured), Dipika Cherala (not pictured), Katherine L. Condit, Joseph Anthony Foronda, Erik Kaiko, Govind Kumar, and David Rhee, in Silk Road Rising's 2009 production of *Broadway Sings the Silk Road*, conceived and curated by Jamil Khoury, and directed by Elizabeth Margolius.

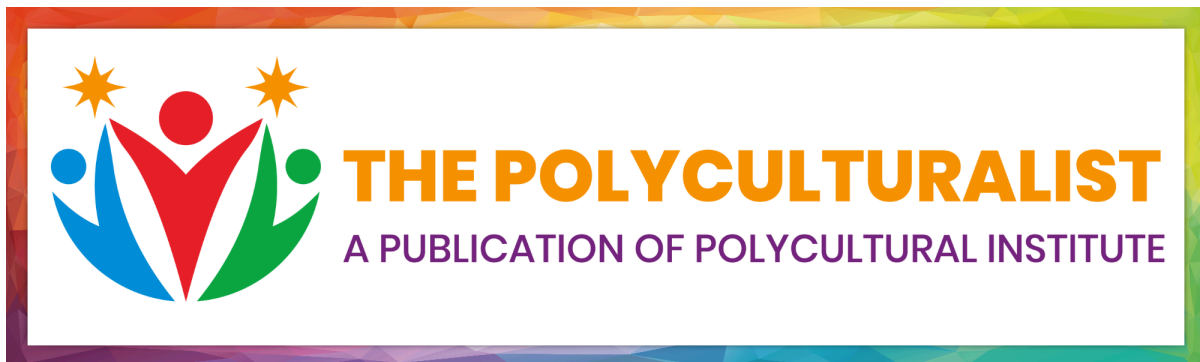
Our 2009 cabaret production of *Broadway Sings the Silk Road* featured songs from popular Broadway musicals set along the historic Silk Road—from *Pacific Overtures* to *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to *Jesus Christ Superstar* to *The King and I* to *Zorba* to *Miss Saigon*, and many more in between. This bold and harmonious East-West interplay blended music with personal stories and showcased performers of diverse backgrounds as they claimed, reclaimed, subverted, and poked fun at a host of old favorites from the Broadway repertoire.





(in alphabetical order) Jaii Beckley, Danny Bernardo, Joel Kim Booster, Christine Bunuan, Dipika Cherala, Joyee Lin, Evan Tyrone Martin, and Amira Sabbagh, in Silk Road Rising's 2012 production of *Re-Spiced: A Silk Road Cabaret*, conceived and curated by Jamil Khoury, and directed by Steve Scott.

In 2012 we produced *Re-Spiced: A Silk Road Cabaret*, a playful, sexy, occasionally subversive, entertaining musical pastiche of Asian and Middle Eastern images in American and British song and verse. From Broadway show tunes to pop, from country to rap, folk to rock, poetry to prose, *Re-Spiced* turned the tables on “us” and “them” with panache and glee and left us wondering just who’s who?



Our latest offering of Polycultural Institute's soon-to-be-launched online publication, *The Polyculturalist*, features Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Professor of English, University Distinguished Scholar, and former Director of Women and Gender Studies at Montclair State University.

## **Crossing Borders with Fawzia Afzal-Khan**

*This interview was conducted on October 10, 2022, by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.*

**Tasneem Mandviwala: As someone who teaches at the university level, what have you learned about the production of cultural knowledge within educational settings?**



**Fawzia:** As a brown female Muslim immigrant body in academia, my experience of that production of knowledge has been both as a subject and object of knowledge myself. I was participating in this creation of cultural knowledge that was already premised on White, male, Judeo-Christian, hetero-normative understandings of what knowledge really consisted of, both inside and outside the academy. I became a kind of placeholder for Otherness. I think the norm doesn't get displaced so much as people like me, and the knowledges that we bring of other cultures, simply become add-ons to that norm. A lot of my dive into queer knowledge production has made me even more aware of how knowledge production, as an industry, continuously appropriates in a way that ends up flattening out differences in the service of hegemonic ideals. Those of us who are not interested in simply becoming part of the add-and-stir model of multiculturalism have to be continuously on guard.



**Tasneem:** You have a rich relationship with music, including being a trained vocalist yourself and a researcher of South Asian female singers. What role do you think singing plays in cross-cultural communication and connection?

**Fawzia:** Music in general is a border-crossing tool. It's very visceral. Singing and music can connect people in ways that marry affect with

intellect. It's a different register for us through which to connect. For me, when I started to turn towards music to understand what it was that music did for me both as a performer and as someone who wants to understand it in an academic way, music actually becomes a perfect way to bring emotion and intellect together. It opens up a new way of doing academic research. Oftentimes when I perform here, people don't understand the words. But you don't have to understand the words. You can feel it. Music can be a way to bridge the intellectual divide. Emotion and intellect are two sides that should be more and more deeply connected: you shouldn't just use the mind; you have to bring the heart into it.



Fawzia with her Neither East nor West Ensemble at Hudson Valley Books for Humanity, Ossining, NY.

**Tasneem: You served as the Director of the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies program at Montclair State University for several years. What do you see as the relationship between feminism and polyculturalism, and how might one bolster the other?**

**Fawzia:** For me, the connection is through transnational feminisms, the word “trans” being one that indicates movements that are horizontal across borders, not vertical. In the West, we know feminism started off being very White-centric, middle-class-centric, and hetero-centric. My own understanding of feminism has expanded from being this very individual, empowered type of feminism that just is not in line with polyculturalism, to postcolonial, transnational feminisms. These feminisms re-shift the focus to where you look at the voices of those who have been under-represented in dominant frameworks of feminism. That’s the feminism that interests me and aligns me with the kinds of issues that are of central importance to a polycultural way of being and understanding the world.



Fawzia with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr., the grandson of namesake late Pakistani Prime Minister, at his exhibition of queer art on February 26, 2023. It was an uplifting gathering welcoming of diverse identities, unleashing a polyculturist sensibility, in Lahore, Pakistan.

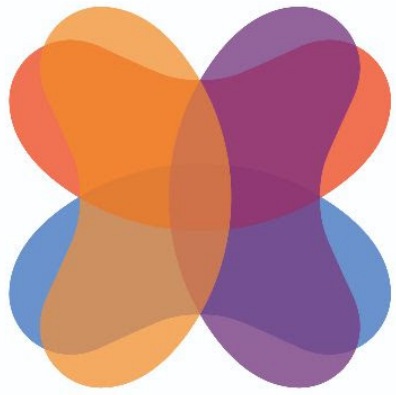
**Tasneem: Please tell us a story of a time when someone surprised you because they supported you or demonstrated compassion towards you even though you expected otherwise.**

**Fawzia:** As a new graduate student from Pakistan, I had a really unhappy, nasty experience in my MA/Ph.D. program. The department chair at that time—a well-known White man—made some really derogatory remarks about why he thought I was there. Later on, when I was supposed to be getting my TAsip, something all students moving into the Ph.D. were guaranteed, he said, “I can’t give it to you because English isn’t your first language.” He was dismissive of me and another Asian American student. I decided to fight back. I penned a letter to the entire faculty of English, and I reported this incident in it along with a record of my grades, which had nothing lower than an A-.

They went into a closed-door meeting. When they came out, I was told that not only I but the other woman also had been given our TAsips. They apologized on behalf of the chair for what was said. I don’t know what I was expecting, but I’m sure I wasn’t expecting that. To me, it was an example of compassion but also a sense of compassion as justice. To me, this was an incident that showed me that not all of the White faculty were like that man. If you think of compassion as co-compassion, where the person can see your point of view, and seeing it, can feel your feelings with you—“co”—they are able to correct whatever wrong they have done.



Fawzia with Angeline Malik, a Pakistani media producer and director of drama serials dealing with taboo topics such as same-sex love, contraception, abortion, and the right to say “No!”



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