

The Inhumanity of War
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Breaking the Cycle of Silence



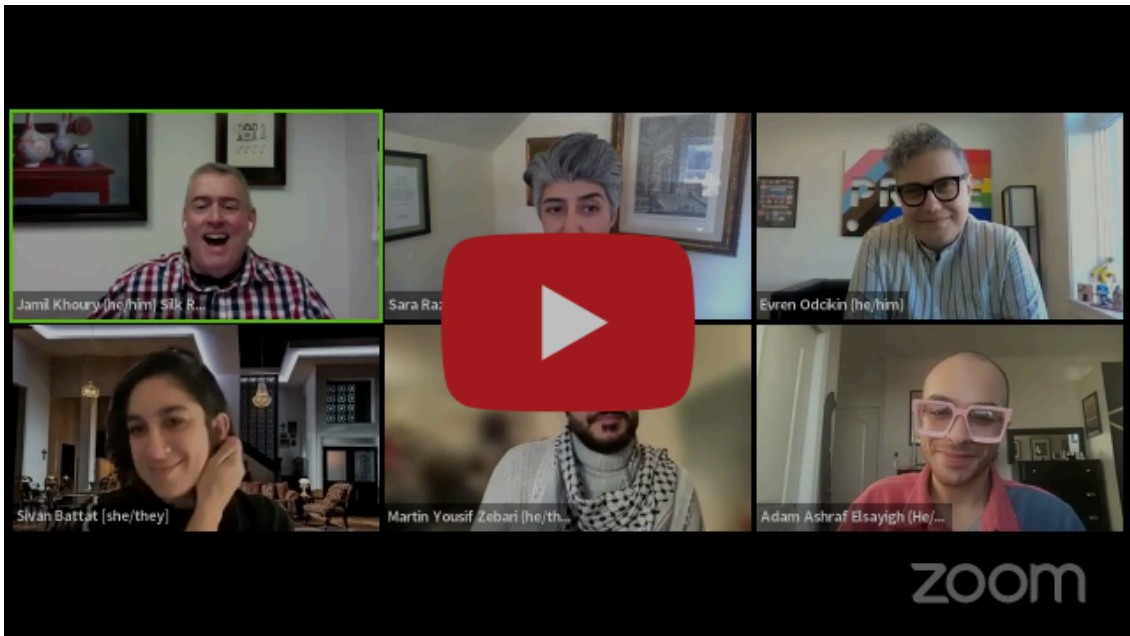
Lacy Campbell (front left), Rinska M. Carrasco (front right), Diana Simonzadeh (back left), and Fawzia Mirza (back right) in Silk Road Rising's 2010 Chicago Premiere of Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*, translated from French to English by Linda Gaboriau, and directed by Dale Heinen.

In Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*, the origins of one Lebanese-French-Canadian family were revealed in startling and utterly unforgettable ways. A brother and sister returned to their mother's war-torn homeland to carry out her last wishes—finding the father and brother they never knew existed. Inspired by classical Greek tragedy and the devastating effects of the Lebanese civil war, *Scorched* captivated audiences with its rich poetic language and evocative imagery that forced us to confront our own demons as intractable parts of our shared humanity.



A dramaturgical video describing the world surrounding Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*.

Doing It For Ourselves: SWANA and Queer in the Global Story



On March 26, 2023, Goodman Theatre, HowlRound, and Silk Road Rising co-presented "Doing It For Ourselves: SWANA and Queer in the Global Story." This lively virtual conversation was in support of the Goodman Theatre's recent production of Martin Yousif Zebari's

Layalina, directed by Sivan Battat.

Moderated by Silk Road Rising's Founding Co-Executive Artistic Director, Jamil Khoury, the discussion focused on the intersections of SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) and Queer identities.

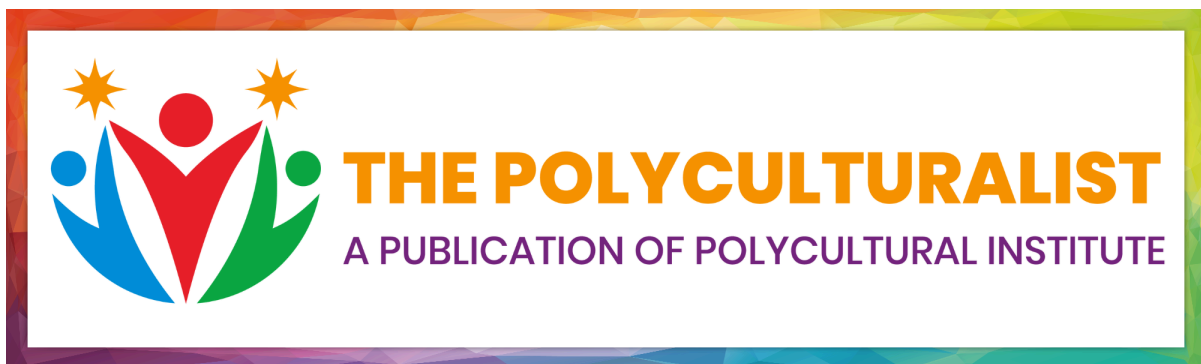
Panelists included playwright Martin Yousif Zebari and director Sivan Battat as well as playwright Adam Ashraf Elsayigh, director and producer Evren Odcikin, and actor and director Sara Razavi.





Panelists

Martin Yousif Zebari
Sivan Battat
Jamil Houry
Adam Ashraf Elsayigh
Evren Odcikin
Sara Razavi



Our latest offering of *The Polyculturalist* features Nawar Nemeh, Social Media & Marketing Manager for LabX at The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine.

Thinking Outside the Proverbial Box With Nawar Nemeh

This interview was conducted on February 16, 2023, by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.

Tasneem: Politics is often seen as a realm of human experience that privileges power, or the pursuit of power, over empathy and cultural sensitivity. That said, you have extensive experience in political analysis, organizing, and campaigning across the US. In your understanding, what role does empathy play in politics?



Nawar: Empathy is the oxygen for politics. There's no function of politics that can work effectively without true, authentic empathy. And what I mean by that is that it's very important for us to work within ideologies that are well-founded, that we believe in, and that we advocate for, but it's also very important to not become ideologues who only see things one way—and empathy is the key for that. It's the key for keeping us in check with ourselves, with what other people believe, and how we feel about evolving as a society.



Tasneem: You have come to know yourself and the world through straddling a number of cultural contexts and belief systems: Arab and American, Christian and Muslim, and likely a few others. How has polyculturalism contributed to your understanding of your lived experience?

Nawar: This ties well into the empathy question. I think part of having very different cultural facets growing up, whether, from religious, ethnic, or linguistic perspectives, quickly helped me understand that there is no one singular way of looking at the world that's valid. I realized that there are a lot of people who are quite satisfied and have a lot of meaning in very different ways of living. I wouldn't have called it polyculturalism at the time, but I had an in-depth understanding that I was part of a very flexible, malleable identity. That was empowering—

that my identity is not something that is frozen in place or defined by the current political environment and differentiations that are usually imposed by Western powers or media, at least in my experience. That's where it helped me understand that there are so many different paths for creating a valid and meaningful life within a community.



Nawar's grandparents on their wedding day - after which they visited the now Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on their honeymoon.

Tasneem: You have worked extensively in many parts of the world, including Syria and China. Could you say a little bit about how polyculturalism can be a useful tool in dismantling oppressions in different human contexts?

Nawar: One of the things I've come to terms with is that there is a huge impact of the long and violent history of Western imperialism on most of the world we're living in today. This has resulted in either the creation of Western imperialist systems of oppression or the reinforcing of pre-existing systems in those places. My understanding of polyculturalism stems from thinking as a community member who wants to improve the status of my community—and this applies both to Syria and to China. It's important to break out of the way of thinking of what I'm generally calling, "the Western style" of approaching these countries, the clash of civilizations myth. I kind of go between two identities: one is being Syrian, and one is American. The American in me is very uncomfortable with a criticism-based perspective on a lot of what's happening in Syria, but as someone who is Syrian, I do have real concerns about how things are going, and I do have real criticisms that I want to be able to engage with my community. I think a nuanced understanding of polyculturalism is critical in dismantling these kinds of systems because otherwise we risk falling into the same patterns of repression and abuse.



The entrance to the chapel in Nawar's maternal home village of Barshin, Syria.

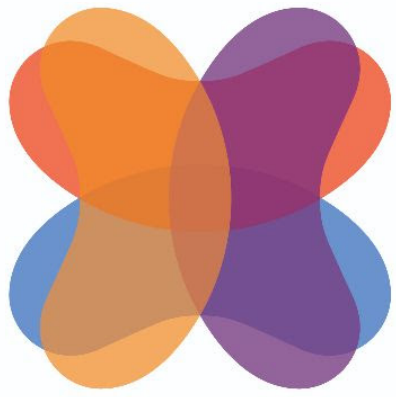
Tasneem: Please tell us a story of a time when someone surprised you because they supported you or demonstrated compassion towards you even though you expected otherwise.

Nawar: I had a teacher in high school who would say things a bit off-color all the time. Like, when there would be price changes in the oil

market, he would ask me how I felt about it, explicitly pointing me out in class. I remember not being too bothered by it, but I was uncomfortable. I didn't always feel respected in that context. But I was an engaged student in that class because it was about a topic I was really into. I ended up asking that teacher for a letter of recommendation for a few of the universities I was applying to, and he wrote the most glistening letter out of anyone that I asked. He was very excited for me, and he helped shepard me through that process. I don't think that erases any of his past issues, but I do think it goes back to the empathy question: It would be easy for me to mark this person off as unreformable or whatever political terms we might use—a lot of them might even be valid in some contexts! But it would make me miss the larger person of who he is.



Nawar meeting with U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib (D-MI) in 2021.



Polycultural Institute

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**Support a Vision of the World that is
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