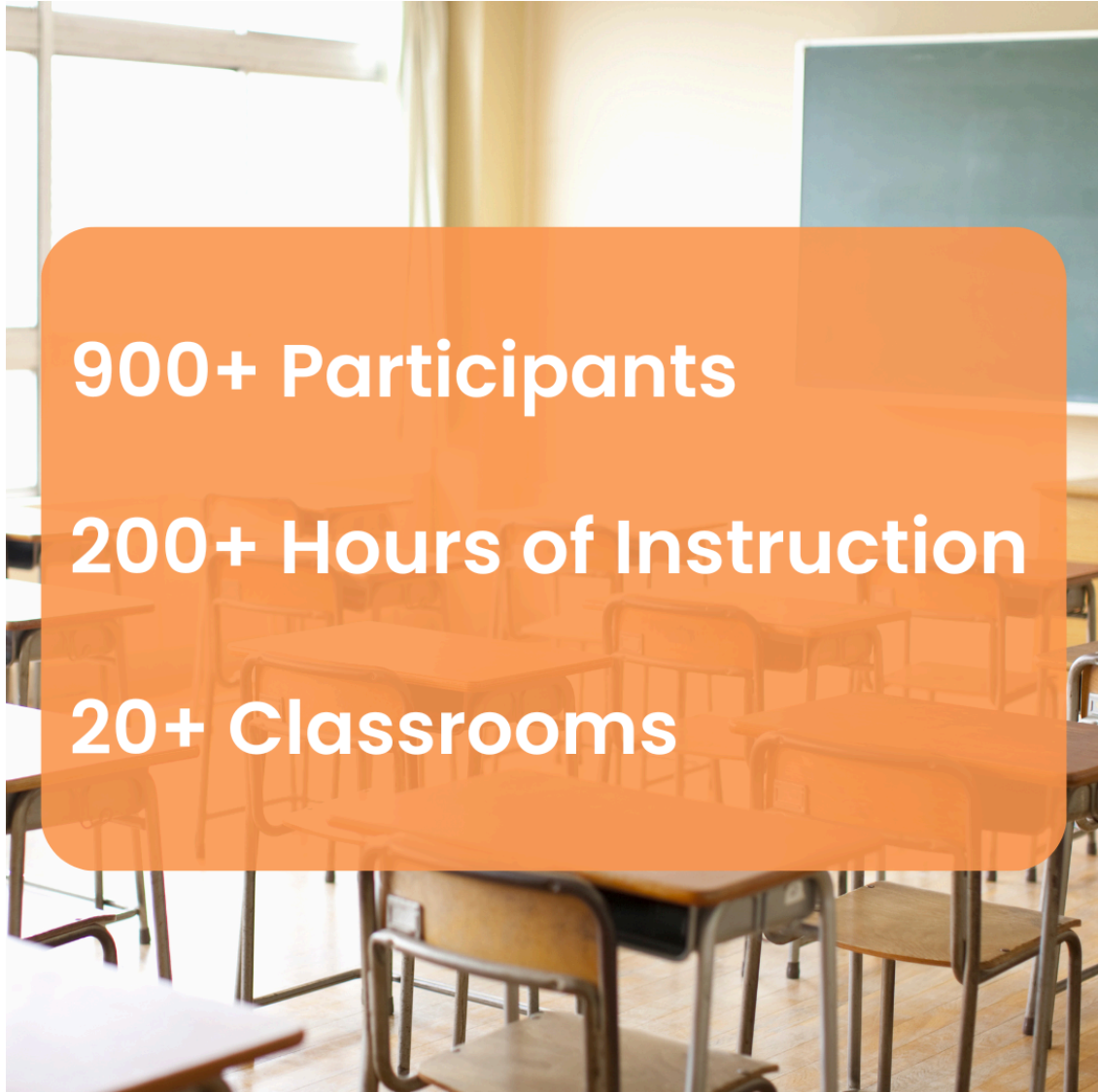


Lifting Up Students of All Ages  
View this email in your browser

## Our 2022 - 2023 Report Card



**900+ Participants**

**200+ Hours of Instruction**

**20+ Classrooms**

We are delighted to share that this school year alone, we served over 900 Chicagoland community members through our three educational programs:

- EPIC (Empathic Playwriting Intensive Course) - For ages 12+
- Myths to Drama- For ages 7-11
- *Black Teen Lives Matter* Discussion Circles- For ages 12+

As we settled into our new "Post-COVID" normal, we were able to expand our programming and build new partnerships. We helped cultivate voices within our city's diverse neighborhoods and amplified stories that were resonant and from the heart.

Here's what select participants had to say.

*It was an amazing experience. I was able to learn many things through the EPIC program. It helped me develop social skills and taught me about empathy. It also encouraged my creativity by having us make a monologue which was also read by actors on the last day of the EPIC program. — 8th Grade Student*

*So many of my students feel confident and empowered to engage in playwriting, and they developed not only skills but also knowledge of the genre. — Classroom Teacher*

*A big success during the residency was really focusing on empathy and seeing the students understand it so much that it started to show in their daily character as well as their writing. — Teaching Artist*

A huge thank you to our Director of Education, Tracy Strimple, for another stellar school year!

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## **Seeing Something & Saying Something**

In 2008, Silk Road Rising produced the World Premiere of Yussef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat*, directed by Patrizia Acerra. The play is a darkly humorous and sensual look at identity, representation, love, and lust in the Arab American community. *Our Enemies* went on to win the 2009 M. Elizabeth Osborn New Play Award from the American Theatre Critics Association (ATCA).



Kareem Bandaely in Silk Road Rising's 2008 World Premiere of Yussef El Guindi's *Our Enemies: Scenes of Love and Combat*, directed by Patrizia Acerra.

Fueled by frustration over the scarcity of Arab voices in the US media, a struggling writer, Gamal, engaged in a series of pranks to shake up the establishment. But those in power always have a way of turning the tables.

When Gamal's lover, Noor, was convinced by a prominent publisher to alter her novel to satiate Western hunger for "Orientalist" fare, Gamal lashed out at the Arab community with shocking results.



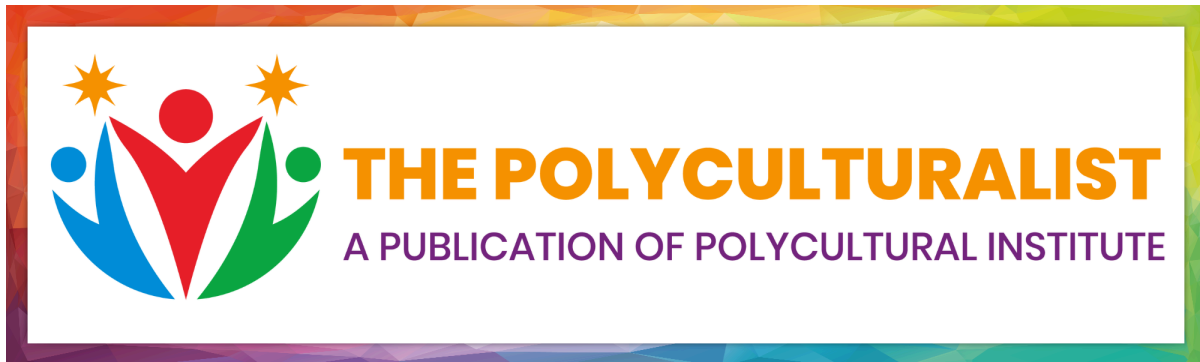
Actors Don Bender (left) and Monica Orozco (right)

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## The Thank You Corner

During the 2022-2023 academic year, you helped to employ 11 Teaching Artists and created opportunities for 16 Actors. You enabled Silk Road Rising to hire a diverse teaching staff so that our city's students could see themselves represented in the classroom and hear their words performed by actors who reflect their own backgrounds.

thank you  
thank you  
thank you



Our latest offering of *The Polyculturalist* features Michael Chalmers, a writer, researcher, and strategist.

## Harsh Storytelling with Michael Chalmers

*This interview was conducted on May 10, 2023, by Dr. Tasneem Mandviwala, Polycultural Institute's Advisory Council Coordinator.*

**Tasneem: What have your backgrounds in journalism and brand marketing taught you about communicating across cultures?**



**Michael:** Journalism and branding both rely on understanding range and nuance within the overall practice of storytelling. They require you to consider the details of the story, whether that's language, voice, tone, intent, and especially audience. You're always thinking about what message the audience is receiving. You're constantly thinking of how different people will receive the message, the way they might think, where they come from. When you're developing a quality long-form or short-form written piece or coming up with a piece of advertising, you're thinking about these things all the time. And you're often taking it further, in terms of what problems people might have and how to service them, how to inspire people, and how this story you're creating is going to impact them. So you're not only communicating across demographics and different markets, but very much so different cultures and different upbringings and different responses.



**Tasneem: You've described yourself as a harsh storyteller. What does that mean, and how does polyculturalism inspire your creative processes?**

**Michael:** The stories I seem to be good at telling have a harsh beginning or a harsh throughline. My upbringing wasn't all bad, but it contained a consistent amount of inter- and intrapersonal conflict, existential roadblocks, and sociocultural collisions among race, religion, and demographics. I grew up in a place that could easily and ignorantly be defined as "redneck," but also probably on a higher level just be described as small. I was constricted by the limitations of the adults around me, including their cultural ignorance. It took me well into adulthood to not just understand what had happened to me and what I had been through, but to productively move away from it, and move away from that type of thinking. In terms of polyculturalism, I want to use the fact that I was able to move away from that as a tool to create insights in writing so that people understand that you're not locked in to those type of attitudes.



Michael found himself seeking out various forms of escape growing up—a segue for an adult life spent cultivating numerous creative pursuits. (Pictured here at 18 years old with his nephew.)

**Tasneem:** In your opinion, how can polyculturalism contribute to the unlearning of racist [and other oppressive] ways of thinking?

**Michael:** A few years back, I had a newspaper that went out to 25,000 people a month, and we really spotlighted substance abuse in a way that just wasn't being done yet in the area. Shining a light on something and saying it is okay to talk about creates an openness for people. When I think about polyculturalism, I think about bringing social, emotional, political challenges out into the open, to not only recognize them, but understand them. It serves to humanize the characteristics in other people that we might be resistant to. In marketing, we often use the phrase, "Give it a name." When we name

something, we validate it in order to unpack it, deconstruct it. If you apply that same formula to humans, I think that's where polyculturalism can find traction. It can become an interesting playing field where people can experience topics and perspectives in a way they haven't before and receive information from people they wouldn't have otherwise considered.



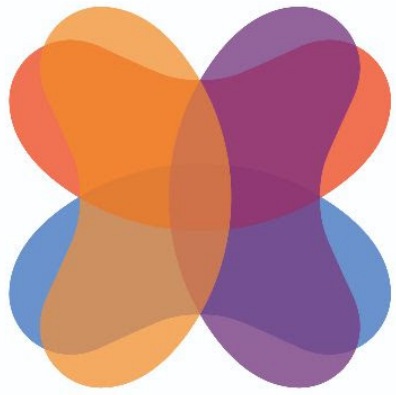
Once known on the national level for its thriving industrial output and railroad accessibility, Martinsburg, West Virginia, Michael's hometown, is now likely known more for its opioid overdose deaths, which often lead the nation per capita. In 2014, Michael tragically lost his brother to a heroin overdose.

**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.**

**Michael:** It's actually a collection of stories that forms the early part of my life when I was a person much different from who I am now. For reasons I'll never really know, there were people who let me be me, despite it probably being quite a challenge not to say something or write me off. They still liked me, still loved me, and still invited me to parties. They went with me after school to get a meal or go to practice. I realize this in hindsight, and I'm extremely grateful for their patience and their simple support. I recognize now that it was probably difficult not to give me a sharp rebuttal, or yell at me, or tell me off when I said something horrible or insensitive. That said, I am an extreme beneficiary of white male privilege in this regard. I got away with a lot because I was a white guy born in the seventies in America. But I have been surprised by people's patience over the course of my "recovery years," as I call it. The proof is in the fact that I still have those relationships today; I'm almost fifty. I still talk to a lot of the people I knew in my younger days, and we have rich relationships. So it wasn't one moment, unless you can count my realization as a singular moment, but even that happened over the years.



West Virginia can be a place where strict conservative political and social values often dominate, but it also encompasses a seemingly endless and undeniably inspiring backdrop of natural beauty.



**Polycultural**  
Institute

**Connecting People, Cultures, and Communities**

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**Support a Vision of America that is  
Welcoming, Polycultural, and Dynamic.**

**Support a Vision of the World that is  
Open, Willing, and Creative.**

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