

Multi Meets Poly:
Multiculturalism and Polyculturalism Go on a First Date

A New One Act Play by Jamil Khoury

Copyright © 2015
Jamil Khoury
6 E. Monroe St., Ste. 801
Chicago, IL 60603
(312) 857-1234 x203
jamil@silkroadrising.org

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Jamil Khoury's *Multi Meets Poly: Multiculturalism and Polyculturalism Go on a First Date* was originally released as a video play in 2015 by Silk Road Rising, Chicago, directed by A. George Bajalia, and featuring actors Gordon Chow as "Multi" and Virginia Lee Marie Martinez as "Poly." The video play can be viewed at www.silkroadrising.org

PERFORMANCE RIGHTS & SCREENINGS

To perform and/or produce *Multi Meets Poly: Multiculturalism and Polyculturalism Go on a First Date*, contact playwright Jamil Khoury at jamil@silkroadrising.org. To book a screening of the video play *Multi Meets Poly*, along with a presentation by Jamil Khoury, contact info@silkroadrising.org.

CHARACTERS

The two characters personify two actual ideas. The ethnicity, race, gender, and age of the respective actors playing each character, including mixed race actors, is at the discretion of the director and producer.

Multiculturalism (Multi) - Multiculturalism refers to the cultural diversity of communities. As an idea, it promotes the understanding that society is comprised of distinct cultural communities that should be afforded agency, sometimes even self-determination or autonomy, typically within an institutionalized framework—the state, the corporation, the university, the organization, etc.

Polyculturalism (Poly) - Polyculturalism refers to the interchange between cultures. As an idea, it promotes the understanding that society is comprised of fluid cultural communities that continuously intersect and redefine themselves through processes of dynamic interchange. Unlike multiculturalism, polyculturalism is less adaptable to public policy and organizational rubrics and more rooted in voluntary, often times spontaneous, engagements.

SETTING

Multi Meets Poly is set in Multi's home library or in a space that is clearly delineated as belonging to Multi.

THE PLAY

MULTI

It's a simple fact. Multiple cultures can coexist in one country. And they do.

POLY

Absolutely.

MULTI

Each culture is to be afforded respect and recognition.

POLY

Of course.

MULTI

Without hierarchies, without judgement, without bullying.

POLY

I love your optimism, but cultures are embodied by human beings.

MULTI

Precisely. And human beings see difference. My job is to realign *how* they see difference.

POLY

We exist to illuminate, not dictate.

MULTI

I employ a two pronged strategy. A) I safeguard the integrity of each individual culture and B) I guarantee that the relationships between cultures are peaceful and equitable.

POLY

We're ideas, not mandates. Culture is dynamic. It changes and evolves.

MULTI

You want to understand me? Talk to the Canadians. Canada is my laboratory. Nobody understands me better than the Canadians.

POLY

I am so gonna give you a run for your money in Canada. They're starting to notice some of the cracks in your portfolio.

MULTI

I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you.

POLY

Scared of a little competition?

MULTI

The proof is in the pudding. I work as a matter of policy and practice.

POLY

It's quite a legacy.

MULTI

And you? Polyculturalism? What can you boast?

POLY

I prefer my cultures flexible and open.

MULTI

Flexible or diluted?

POLY

Strong enough to take risks and think outside the box.

MULTI

Then why does the status quo fear me and not you?

POLY

The status quo has assimilated you, Multiculturalism. You have become cosmetic. A photo op. A Benetton ad.

MULTI

Art imitating life. Life imitating me.

POLY

I don't want to be an imitation. I'm more interested in the interchange of cultures.

MULTI

You are a ripple in my stream of consciousness.

POLY

I'm fascinated by what happens when cultures intersect and overlap, merge and collide. I'm not about cultures fossilizing themselves, I'm about cultures reinventing themselves. In relation to other cultures.

MULTI

Now tell me something I didn't say first. Cultural transformation? That's my domain. You get subsumed within my larger thesis.

POLY

Which I am building upon.

MULTI

Where then are your bricks and mortar?

POLY

I am a critique of you and a defense of me.

MULTI

You do know you're one of my footnotes? You've been traipsing around posing as my heir apparent. Multiculturalism 2.0. My logical conclusion.

POLY

Some say I replace you. Others say I correct you. I say I complete you. Your natural culmination.

MULTI

Adorable. You are not my sequel!

POLY

So you're a whiskey man?

MULTI

Authentic Kentucky Bourbon.

POLY

Next time I'll host and indulge you in this delectable California Champagne I just discovered.

MULTI

Champagne comes from Champagne (uses French pronunciation), which is in France. Not California!

POLY

Can you believe this is finally happening? You and me, here.

MULTI

It's quite an honor for you, no doubt.

POLY

Look at this collection! You have a most impressive library.

MULTI

We don't exist without books now, do we?

POLY

You've inspired volumes. I'm barely in print.

MULTI

I wonder why?

POLY

But here we are, two hot ideas on a first date.

MULTI

Two hot ideas? One of us is rather obscure, wouldn't you say?

POLY

I like to think I'm emerging.

MULTI

Emerging into what? For the record, *this* is not a date... yet.

POLY

Excuse me? "Join me for a little discourse." I know what that means.

MULTI

You have been polemicizing against me.

POLY

It's what ideas do, no? Discursive battle. I thought I was flirting with you.

MULTI

Notice who isn't responding?

POLY

You asked me out.

MULTI

I scheduled a meeting. But, if you were to stop being so objectionable...

POLY

What can I say? I'm passionate! I'm like you, Multiculturalism. I see a big world out there comprised of hundreds of cultures.

MULTI

I see hundreds of cultures. You see one big blur.

POLY

I see motion graphics. You see still photos.

MULTI

I think you're a charlatan, Polyculturalism. An unsubstantiated idea vying for attention at my expense. And I certainly don't appreciate you stealing my Greek name, Poly. Plagiarism does not become you.

POLY

Multi, with all due respect...

MULTI

You could dispel my suspicion.

POLY

I can teach you things too, you know.

MULTI

Teach me!

POLY

I'm more original than you think. Music. Music is one of my favorite incubators. Right now I'm all about Iraqi music. Some crazy good stuff.

MULTI

I'm a great admirer of Arabic music.

POLY

As am I, but Iraqi music is not always Arabic. It can be Kurdish, Assyrian, Turkman, Armenian,

Hebrew...

MULTI

Thank you for the cultural geography lesson. I guess I have a blind spot when it comes to me. Get real, teacher.

POLY

You have been studiously avoiding me. You've publicly denied ever hearing of me... Why today? Why now?

MULTI

The idle chatter of the intellectual classes managed to put a bug in my ear, go figure. That bug would be you.

POLY

Charming. (notices Critical Cultural Review) I see you're keeping up with your critics.

MULTI

A great idea always has critics. Critics are lightweights. You need to be re-reading me! I don't segregate cultures. I don't cordon off communities...

POLY

Whoa! I am here with an enormous amount of respect for you and your work. My very inception I owe to you. I wouldn't exist without Multiculturalism.

MULTI

You said that I sequester cultures in their own little silos. Trap people in hermetically sealed cultural ghettos.

POLY

February is African American month. March is Women's History month. May is Asian American month. September 15 through October 15 belongs to Latinos. I'm sorry. It's problematic.

MULTI

As opposed to all twelve months belonging to white folk?

POLY

You had your month, now go away. We ate your kabobs at Taste of Chicago. We watched you mamba at Lincoln Center. We caught your textile exhibit at the Smithsonian. Oh, I just love those exotic beads you sell.

MULTI

Better everyone be erased? Or be appropriated by the white man?

POLY

You gerrymander cultures into these constructed little narratives through which to interpret the world. "As an Asian American." "From a Latino perspective." "As a Black man in America." Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.

MULTI

I create space for each culture to count, to matter. To flourish and contribute, on its own terms.

POLY

Yes, and I thank you for that. I am in awe of you for that. You and I, we have a lot in common.

MULTI

You were my carbon copy till you started meddling with the keyboard.

POLY

For starters, we both detest Cultural Assimilation.

MULTI

Good ole Cultural Assimilation. You'd have thought he'd have tired by now. But no. The old geezer still thinks he can beat me. Poor guy.

POLY

We scoff at the mere mention of Cultural Normativity. We're the sworn enemies of Cultural Imperialism.

MULTI

Remind me to share my war stories with you someday. I have the scars to show for it. But you should see the other guys!

POLY

We thrive where there's a variety of cultures.

MULTI

I have changed the entire world. I have transformed our cultural landscapes. I have reimagined how cultures perceive each other, speak to each other, relate to each other.

POLY

But it's all kind of engineered. I'm coming at this from a more holistic place. More integrative. More organic.

MULTI

Are you now? I'm sure people of means and trust fund babies love you! Organic! "May I have a side of your finest grass fed, locally sourced polyculturalism to go with my privilege please?" What about equality? Visibility? Representation?

POLY

Great. Now everyone can have their own cable television network. Maybe their own beauty pageant? You erect borders and you police boundaries.

MULTI

Police? I create inclusion, regardless of race or ethnicity or language or creed...

POLY

Separate but equal doesn't work.

MULTI

Who said anything about... I represent the mosaic not the melting pot.

POLY

To hell with mosaics and melting pots. I want open borders.

MULTI

Reality check! Cultures have integrity. Cultures have specificity, meaning.

POLY

They're a work-in-progress. Don't you see you've opened this door to cultural relativism. Swapping biological determinism for cultural difference still has the same effect. It's no longer polite to talk about the size of their brains or the shape of their foreheads. Instead, we're going to talk about "their culture." It explains away everything. Sexism, violence against women, homophobia, classism. Shhhh, we need to respect their culture.

MULTI

Right, I'm a relativist. How convenient. Funny how ills that exist in all cultures only get projected on *despised* cultures. Usually as a pretext for abusing and exploiting those cultures.

POLY

Defending patriarchy in the name of culture...

MULTI

Cultures change from within! In accordance with their own values and their own needs. External force never creates change. It creates resistance.

POLY

Yes, but your methodology doesn't acknowledge that cultures can change from within. You keep cultures under permanent lockdown to feed your insatiable appetite for all these eternal *differences* you concoct.

MULTI

Is German culture superior to Nigerian culture?

POLY

Whoa, that's your pissing match, not mine. My cultures don't compete, they collaborate.

MULTI

Your entire MO is dodge ball!

POLY

A) How do you measure superior? B) Which German culture versus which Nigerian culture? And C) what is the proximity between these German and Nigerian cultures?

MULTI

Hard to be held accountable in a world of hypotheticals.

POLY

It's not hypothetical. Cultures *are* not static, not fixed. You see everything through these hegemonic lenses. Black people live in their bodies. Asians live in their minds. White people divide their bodies from their minds.

MULTI

Oh, so now I peddle stereotypes?

POLY

Identities are fluid and malleable and situational. Not immutable.

MULTI

I am the King of Identity Politics! You're going to tell me?

POLY

Cultures don't come in black and white, they come in grey.

MULTI

Cultures have distinct histories and narratives...

POLY

A culture is the sum total of *all* the cultures it has encountered *plus* all the cultures it has yet to encounter. There is no finish line in culture.

MULTI

Have you any idea what America was like before me? Everyone had to fit into Mayberry! But if you didn't look like Mayberry, speak like Mayberry, Mayberry didn't want you.

POLY

So we changed Mayberry.

MULTI

We? I so appreciate your aspirational eloquence. You're a one woman clarion call. But dare I say, I'm a lot more sophisticated than you are, Poly. Infinitely more pragmatic, hence effective. I empower entrepreneurs, innovators, artists, and rock stars. Because I practice the art of the possible. You dream the impossible dream. Mine is the world of realpolitik and yours is a conclave of motivational speakers. I understand that change is incremental, not elastic. Which is why I'm strategic and your... sporadic. You see, I'm a revolutionary when need be and I'm a reformer when need be. One day I demand absolutism, next day I'm negotiating a compromise. Style switching comes second nature to me. Idealism without realism produces heartbreak. I keep my eye on the prize. A better, more *multicultural* world.

POLY

A little humility goes a long way.

MULTI

I stand with the oppressed and the downtrodden. The powerless, the marginalized, the outcast.

POLY

Great! But should our final destination always be the pity party? Are we here to liberate cultures or create a permanent victim class? I think there's something deeply colonial about your thinking.

MULTI

Colonialism is your forte, Polyculturalism, not mine. The English trotted the globe having all sorts of polycultural experiences. They called it Empire!

POLY

You can do a bait and switch on divide and rule but it's still divide and rule. You want to dominate cultures? Keep them distrustful of one another. That's your stock-in-trade.

MULTI

There's a reason everyone flocks towards me and not you. Governments, universities, businesses, organizations. I am the King of Social Engineering.

POLY

Identity Politics, Social Engineering... You have a King complex, don't you?

MULTI

I have applied utility. I can be implemented. Can you? Can a state legislate polyculturalism? Can you be adapted for public policy?

POLY

No. That's the point. I'm a phenomenon, not a grand bargain.

MULTI

Shines in theory. Pales in practice. Even the leading business schools conceded victory to this old radical.

POLY

You're proud of being useful to capitalism?

MULTI

You want economic growth? Access to new markets? A competitive edge globally? Hire a diverse workforce!

POLY

Diversity is a beautiful thing, my friend, until it becomes a synonym for "deflect." Pay no attention to those Wall Streets robber barons trading in our futures. No! Look at our VP of Marketing. She's African American!

MULTI

The fact that she's African American, and a she, and in a position of power, and building personal wealth, actually matters. A lot.

POLY

What? We should be advocating tokenism?

MULTI

Fairness, leveling the playing field, is not tokenism. It's what we call progress. Forget it. Too real.

POLY

For a "revolutionary" idea you sure have thin skin.

MULTI

I don my armor for hypotheses that matter.

POLY

The armor is looking rather dull these days. Lost its luster.

MULTI

More "flirtation," I assume?

POLY

So we are on a date?

MULTI

You are so out of your league.

POLY

What happened to that hopeless romantic I've been busy deconstructing. And here I thought...

MULTI

I exist in response to the world. And to injustice. You exist in response to me.

POLY

Success sure can breed ego. Beautiful Moroccan rug you have here.

MULTI

It's not Moroccan.

POLY

Yes it is. Look at the black and white pattern, the irregular angles and square motifs, how they repeat...

MULTI

It's made of synthetics! An *esteemed* colleague gave it to me as a gift. I couldn't refuse.

POLY

I'm beginning to detect a theme. You don't play well with others.

MULTI

You have defamed me as an essentialist. A biological determinist. A multicultural imperialist.

POLY

We're a dialectic in progress.

MULTI

That would presuppose an actual conversation.

POLY

Conversation presupposes that both parties are listening.

MULTI

Cultures engage each other for mutual benefit. Not to get lost in each other. We're not making smoothies. I dare to dream of racial harmony.

POLY

I'm not interested in racial harmony. I'm interested in ending racism. You're multicultural. I'm anti-racist.

MULTI

Multiculturalism is anti-racism! Look at my DNA! You don't end racism by pretending race doesn't exist.

POLY

Or by freezing it in time.

MULTI

How about respecting cultural authenticity?

POLY

Because it's a false construct. Culture is highly subjective.

MULTI

Hypothesize till you are blue in the face, there's a reason cultures get passed down from generation to generation.

POLY

Like artifacts preserved in formaldehyde? Please! Each generation remakes its culture in its own image.

MULTI

If you're Black or Brown in America, you're not allowed to forget it.

POLY

White American mother, Kenyan father. Born in Hawaii. Raised in Kansas and Indonesia. Moved to Chicago. Married an African American woman. America's first polycultural President. Barack Obama.

MULTI

Barack Obama is mine. I made him possible. You can have Tiger Woods.

POLY

I already do.

MULTI

The reason so many people on the right hate Barack Obama isn't because he's "polycultural," it's because he's Black. If you are not white in America...

POLY

You make everything about race. You place white people at the center of everything you do. Whiteness is the canvas upon which you paint your beloved people of color. I think you're kind of racist.

MULTI

You, who never met a race you didn't want to blend, are calling...

POLY

All sorts of synergy exists between Asians and Africans without a white person in sight.

MULTI

Because whitey is hiding behind the curtain pulling the strings.

POLY

Not every portrait has a white master in it. People do have agency.

MULTI

Unless they are denied agency. White people need to be taught that they are one of many. They are not *the one*.

POLY

Then why not practice what you preach? Peoples of European background are one? We of all ideas should be refuting such nonsense, not advocating fortress Europe.

MULTI

It's time to play Parse the White People! Yaaaay! Tell me Miss Poly, where do you stand with rich whites? Because I have them exactly where I want them.

POLY

Au contraire, monsieur. They selected their own seats for your little joy ride. At the front of the bus!

You're a great investment for rich white folk. That little extortion fee you charge them? Small price to pay for keeping all their power.

MULTI

My left wing detractors have taught you so well. Sad how the left eats its own.

POLY

The only white people you battle are the poor whites and the working class whites. Marginalized whites. You ascribe them all this privilege and power. Privilege and power they don't have!

MULTI

Whiteness is power.

POLY

Unless you're white and powerless. Multiculturalism, you failed poor whites and working class whites. Chased them away.

MULTI

Or, maybe the bigots in their ranks have been chasing me away.

POLY

Instead of giving voice to millions of disadvantaged whites, and they do need a voice, you manage to both vilify *and* erase them in one clean swoop.

MULTI

White people have a seat at the table just like everyone else.

POLY

Cultures tend to stagnate when they're staring at each other's differences from across the table. Then again you sure have built a lucrative business for yourself. Those high paid "diversity" consultants who wear your badge, they love you.

MULTI

My disciples are helping the world heal. It is because of me that an Indian kid or a Chinese kid or a Mexican kid...

POLY

Can be a statistic and not a human being. Unless you're half white, quarter black, and quarter Native American and struggling to determine which box to check.

MULTI

I shattered glass ceilings that were certifiably unbreakable.

POLY

You turned diversity into an industry. Created marketing data for corporations. Demographic polling for politicians. All the while casting doubt on the very people you set out to help.

MULTI

I undid centuries of ingrained thinking. I rewired society's brain.

POLY

I can't... You actually believe your own rhetoric. You are a lot more bark than you are bite. Multiculturalism doesn't do squat for economic inequality. You wax poetic about inequality perched inside the very boardrooms that maintain inequality. Military-industrial-prison complex anyone? For profit prisons. The highest rate of incarceration in the world. Time in the tank? A rite of passage for America's poor. 400 people control more wealth in this country than 50% of the population. 400 people! Is that fair? Most wealth in this country is inherited. And your response? A gutless "redress" you call affirmative action that leaves affirmative privilege entirely unscathed? Legacy admissions, trust funds, stock portfolios, property assets, liquidities? In America, we keep it all in the family. And you're not about to challenge that power.

MULTI

In a perfect world, I too might be a polyculturalist. Wouldn't that be lovely? But this isn't a perfect world. My work is nowhere near being done.

POLY

I integrate. You separate. I invite. You appoint. I facilitate. You regulate. I ask. You tell. I embrace. You tolerate. I emerge. You impose.

MULTI

In other words, I'm serious and you're a suggestion. You're a helpful hint.

POLY

No, I'm a destination, and you're a temporary weigh station. You see *groups* competing for resources, jockeying for power, demanding their due. I see human beings all working together.

MULTI

Wow! Imagine that. A world without history.

POLY

History is living. It's not archival.

MULTI

Maybe in the Kumbaya Pollyanna America you live in...

POLY

Great things happen within cultures. Absolutely. But the best things happen between cultures.

MULTI

Or the worst. I enable each culture to represent itself. That is the secret to my success.

POLY

Tell me. How does a culture represent itself?

MULTI

By speaking its own truths.

POLY

Yes, in relation to the culture it is representing *to* at that given moment.

MULTI

Culture is not show and tell. It is not a spectator sport.

POLY

Says the Grand Marshall of the Macy's Day Parade. I bet our enemies love seeing us argue like this.

Nationalism. Xenophobia. Sectarianism. They're laughing their guts out. Instead of tearing each other down, we should be building a united front against those who would destroy us both.

MULTI

You love rattling off all our "common enemies," but we're no Bonnie and Clyde in their eyes. You're harmless, an esoteric amusement. I'm the formidable foe.

POLY

Multi, baby, you need to venture outside your little echo chamber and re-engage some. The word on the street is that you're manageable and containable, whereas I am irreversible. That's scary stuff.

MULTI

London, New York, Toronto, Sydney. Great Multicultural cities. That dynamo can be traced directly to me.

POLY

Except today they're polycultural cities. People started venturing outside their demarcated enclaves. Imagine that? Black people learning with Asian people learning with Latino people learning with Arab people learning with White people learning with Black people.

MULTI

Because I tore down the wall.

POLY

No, the people did. You're still trying to catch up.

MULTI

Clean the wax out of your ears. Cast yourself as an addendum to me, and you'll be fine. Cast yourself as an alternative to me, and they will laugh you out of town.

POLY

Don't be so sure of that.

MULTI

Maybe you'll inspire a few dissertations. You might even spawn a theatre company or a fashion line. Help tweak the McDonald's menus in Russia and Brazil, Korea. But you will never have the impact I

have. Because you fail to grasp the single most important fact. The human animal is fundamentally tribal.

POLY

True, *and* the human animal is fundamentally curious.

MULTI

Good luck on that one. As for that date that you were so keen on, what do you have going on this weekend? I hear there's this great Korean Taco joint that just opened.

END OF PLAY