

Cultural and Humanitarian Seminar Series

**Creative Empowerment of Marginalized Youth in Refugee Camps:
Experiences and Lessons from the West Bank**

Chairs: *Jennifer Leaning*, MD, SMH. Co-Director, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. Professor of the Practice of International Health, Harvard School of Public Health. Associate Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School. and *Doris Sommer*, Director, Cultural Agents Initiative. Ira Jewell Williams, Jr., Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures and African and African American Studies.

Event Information:

Host: Cultural Agents Initiative and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative

Sponsor: Harvard Humanities Center

Date: October 26th, 2009

Time: 5pm – 7:00pm

Place: Barker Center, room 133 – 12 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA

Abstract:

Marginalized youth living in refugee camps today endure a fragmented childhood filled with experiences of loss, displacement and often violent psychological trauma. Sharing their stories and experiences is important not only for their sense of identity, understanding and recognition by others, but as a form of creative expression and advocacy of issues in their lives. How does one tap into the latent creative potential of marginalized youth in ways that improves their fluency in expression through different forms of media? What tools, techniques and methods support an environment of creative production and empowerment? How should one conduct and evaluate such programs with youth in conditions of conflict and crisis? These are some of the questions posed by Nidal al Azraq and Dr. Nitin Sawhney, through their ongoing participatory media arts programs with youth in refugee camps in the West Bank.

Speaker Biographies:

Nidal al Azraq is a Palestinian refugee who was born and raised in the Aida Refugee Camp in Bethlehem, West Bank, Palestine. Nidal

volunteered at Lajee Center, a youth center in Aida camp from 2001–2003, where he taught a computer class for children ages 8 to 11, coordinated local summer camps, and co-directed a youth play. Nidal was the administrative director of Lajee Center, from 2003–2006. In the United States in 2007–2008, he taught a second-year Arabic class for children ages 6 to 10 years old at a cultural institution that serves the children of Chicago area. Back in Bethlehem in 2009, Nidal coordinated a two-week international summer camp for 20 internationals and 30 Palestinian teenagers in the summer, and co-led a delegation of youth to Belgium for a cultural exchange program. He has published “A Refugee’s Childhood in the West Bank,” co-authored with Amahl Bishara in *The Child: An Encyclopedic Companion* (University of Chicago Press 2009) and *The Boy and the Wall* (2005), a bilingual children’s book produced with Lajee Center, published in Ramallah, West Bank. This book received the Psychologists for Social Responsibility’s 2008 Josephine “Scout” Wollman Fuller Award for the promotion of peace and social justice in the Middle East.

Nitin Sawhney, Ph.D. is a Research Affiliate with the Visual Arts Program in the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 2008–2009 he served as a Visionary Fellow with the Jerusalem 2050 project sponsored by the Dept. of Urban Studies and Planning and the Center for International Studies at MIT, conducting research on urban renewal and social empowerment through the media arts in divided cities. Nitin received his Ph.D. and M.S. degrees from MIT, as well as M.S. and B.E. degrees from Georgia Tech. He previously conducted research at the MIT Media Lab on open design collaboration, mobile and wearable computing, speech interfaces and auditory perception. Nitin’s current focus is on creative empowerment of marginalized youth through participatory new media technologies and programs. In 2006, he founded Voices Beyond Walls, a nonprofit initiative to conduct digital video and storytelling workshops with youth in refugee camps in the West Bank. He also co-founded and organized the annual Boston Palestine Film Festival since 2007. Nitin was born in New Delhi, India and lived in the Middle East for over 12 years.