

**Solidarity Across Shelves:
Children's Literature, Archives, and the Hijabi Librarians'
Collective**

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Abstract

Written by the founders of the Hijabi Librarians collective, this article offers a critical reflection on the group's bibliographic, pedagogical, and public-facing interventions, proposing a conceptual expansion of Middle East librarianship to include coalitional engagement with non-regionally defined librarian-activist networks. The Hijabi Librarians, a collective of Muslim women youth services librarians, operate at the intersection of library science, critical pedagogy, and public scholarship. Their work intervenes in cultural and archival spaces where SWANA, diasporic, and Muslim identities are frequently misrepresented or erased. Amid the intensifying crisis in the region and its impact on

communities across the diaspora, the collective's advocacy for nuanced #OwnVoices representation in children's and young adult literature takes on renewed urgency. Their interventions address enduring representational gaps while affirming the political, educational, and ethical power of youth literature. The article foregrounds the imaginative and empathetic potential of youth literature to serve as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, central metaphors in multicultural literacy, that enable readers to understand, connect with, and stand in solidarity with others. This literature is not only for children; it is for adults as well - creators, librarians, educators - who seek to preserve a sense of wonder, and resist the normalization of dehumanization. In a climate of escalating educational censorship that demands we relinquish imagination for political expedience, the defense of children's literature becomes a radical act: it resists the colonization of imagination and refuses to concede empathy, possibility, or humanity itself. The Hijabi Librarians' model aligns with and expands MELA's mission through anti-censorship work, public programming, evaluation toolkits, metadata ethics, and bibliographic equity. The article advances a coalition-oriented model of Middle East librarianship attuned to diasporic complexity, epistemic justice, and the ethical stewardship of children's literature as a transformative cultural force for both young readers and adult practitioners.

Keywords: Middle East Librarianship, Youth Literature, Hijabi Librarians, Epistemic Justice, Critical Pedagogy

Introduction

In 2014, former U.S. National Ambassador for Young People's Literature Walter Dean Myers penned a pivotal opinion piece for the *New York Times Sunday Review* asking, "Where are the People of Color in Children's Books?" Myers expressed a longing to "become an integral and valued part of the mosaic that I saw around me," describing how a story by James Baldwin helped him to feel "humanized" (Myers 2014). In the same year, when BookExpo America's 2014 BookCon featured only white authors, the *We Need Diverse Books* campaign began with authors, publishers, and bloggers advocating for broader diversity in children's literature. During this same period, Cheryl Klein, executive editor of Arthur A. Levine Books, co-founded the Children's Book Council Diversity Committee committed to publishing more books by people of the global majority, while publisher Lee & Low began developing what would become the 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey: a quadrennial assessment gathering concrete statistics about the racial, gender, sexual orientation, and ability makeup of employees across publishing houses and review journals to measure workforce diversity in the industry. Though calls for inclusive literature predated it, the rise of the international Black Lives Matter movement in 2013, sparked by police killings of Black Americans, amplified the urgent need for community-informed, nuanced representation in children's books as a means of showing who belongs, who matters, and whose stories deserve to be told.

Growth and awareness created by movements like #WeNeedDiverseBooks, gave rise to other diversity initiatives like Simon & Schuster's Salaam Reads imprint. Which in turn was heightened by the release of an infographic, produced by Sarah Park Dahlen and David Huyck, of the Cooperative Children's

Book Center's 2018 statistics, revealing the soberingly low representation of people of the global majority, especially as compared to animals and inanimate objects in youth literature published that year. Muslims were featured in only 1% of this literature. A figure more troubling when considered alongside numbers from a 2014 Pew Research Center survey showing that 62% of non-Muslim Americans report not knowing a single Muslim personally, relying instead on predominantly negative media portrayals that fuel anti-Muslim racism, directly impact Muslim children's safety and belonging in schools, and justify policies that harm Muslims in the United States and globally.

The Hijabi Librarians collective was founded in 2018 by Muslim women librarians of different ethnic backgrounds, including Ariana Sani Hussain (Indonesian and Okinawan American), Hadeal Salamah (Palestinian American), Mahasin Abuwi Aleem (African American), and Sarah Ahmed (Egyptian American), in order to intervene in the children's literature landscape critically. Building on a foundation of advocacy for the representation of people of the global majority, the collective operates at the intersection of library science, critical pedagogy, and public scholarship. Our work discerningly evaluates children's literature featuring Muslim characters, addressing frequent patterns of misrepresentation, tokenization, conflation, and erasure, particularly of SWANA (Southwest Asia and North Africa) and diasporic identities. Over the past six years, the collective has exemplified a new model of professional activism that transcends regional boundaries, engaging in anti-censorship advocacy, bibliographic equity, and evaluative methodologies.

Positioned within an evolving lineage of Middle East librarianship, the Hijabi Librarians represent a new generation of practitioners

who work primarily in public and school libraries rather than in traditional academic area-studies collections. Institutionally, members are youth services librarians and educators who select, review, and teach books by and about Muslims for children and teens. In practice, this includes English-language titles originating from or about the Middle East and North Africa (SWANA), translated works, and books set in diasporic communities in North America and beyond. We understand this work as part of Middle East librarianship because it shapes how young readers encounter stories about the region and its diasporas, and because it draws on, and contributes back to, the bibliographic and archival infrastructures developed by Middle East librarians in academic settings.

Our evaluative work is guided by Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of books as "windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors" and by bell hooks' insistence that "what we cannot imagine cannot come into being" (Bishop 1990; hooks 2000, 29). We defend children's and youth literature as a vital site for preserving collective imagination amid rising censorship and anti-Muslim racism. As a microcosm of the diverse global ummah, the Hijabi Librarians bring an "insider" perspective that helps library workers, educators, publishers, and creators move toward inclusive, intersectional representation. We do not evaluate doctrinal correctness; instead, we focus on whether self-ascribed Muslim identities are represented with nuance and dignity, shaped by intersecting factors such as culture, geography, imperialism, colonialism, and gender.

This article is co-authored by two of the collective's founding members, Ariana Hussain and Mahasin Abuwi Aleem, in collaboration with literary scholar Danielle Haque, who serves as an external interlocutor. While written in the third person to

maintain narrative consistency and analytical distance, the article is grounded in Hussain and Aleem's first-person, community-engaged praxis. Our connection to Middle East librarianship is not incidental; it is structural and historical. As American Muslim librarians engaged in youth services and public scholarship, we rely on the bibliographic, archival, and scholarly infrastructures built by MELA members and other librarians worldwide. At the same time, we expand the scope of the field by foregrounding how anti-Muslim racism, domestically through policing, surveillance, and censorship, and globally through militarism, occupation, and border imperialism, affects the epistemologies we steward and the youth we serve. The enduring effects of post-9/11 anti-Muslim racism, the Palestinian exception in education and public discourse, and the intensifying erasure of SWANA narratives under censorship regimes all underscore the need for a librarianship that is both historically anchored and politically responsive.

Theoretical Foundations: Critical Pedagogy, Multicultural Literacy, and Epistemic Justice

The Hijabi Librarians' methodology arises at the intersection of three interlocking frameworks: critical pedagogy, multicultural literacy, and anti-colonial/epistemic justice. Together, these approaches position children's literature not only as reflection (mirrors) but as intervention, cultivating critical consciousness and, perhaps unexpectedly for library work, love. First, critical pedagogy informs the collective's evaluative practices, particularly Gholnecsar Muhammad's notion of "criticality," the capacity "to read, write, think, and speak in ways to understand power and

equity in order to understand and promote anti-oppression” (Ferlazzo 2020). Literature, in this view, can both affirm marginalized identities and invite readers to question structural injustice. Building on this, Durryle Brooks’ theory of love as a framework for justice in education roots the collective’s work in an ethic of care that centers those most harmed by oppression and insists we confront systems of domination (Brooks 2019, 111).

Second, multicultural literacy theory anchors our emphasis on authentic representation. Bishop’s foundational metaphors of literature as mirror, window, and sliding glass door affirm the importance of both self-recognition and empathetic connection. Uma Krishnaswami extends this with the notion of “prisms” that reflect multifaceted, intersecting identities, while Ebony Elizabeth Thomas exposes how distorted or absent representations teach children that they are devalued (Krishnaswami 2019). Thomas’s concepts of “mirror hunger” and the “imagination gap” highlight the psychological and political stakes of representation for Black and Muslim youth in particular: when children of color are confined to narratives of trauma or villainy, their possibilities for joy, agency, and wonder are narrowed (Thomas, 2019, 23). Like bell hooks, Thomas insists on the radical potential of imagination and the danger posed by its suppression.

Finally, anti-colonial theory and epistemic justice frameworks help us name how literary norms are shaped by colonial power. Following Edward Said, we recognize how Western cultural production often reproduces Orientalist tropes that reduce Muslim communities to fixed caricatures and justify political, military, and cultural domination. In children’s books, this operates not only through overt representation but also through what is treated as “good craft” and “universal” storytelling (Salesses 2021, 5). We

therefore question supposedly neutral standards that privilege Western aesthetics and erase other narrative traditions. In light of the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the starvation of Palestinian children, we also draw on Judith Butler's question of whose lives are grievable to ask: whose stories are considered worthy of protection, circulation, and preservation in youth collections? For the Hijabi Librarians, children's literature is a critical space for decolonizing the imagination and affirming the grievability of lives routinely denied mourning.

The Crisis of Muslim Representation in Children's Literature: Stereotypes, Systemic Erasure, and the Radical Possibility of Imagination

Understanding Muslim representation in children's literature requires examining a broader media landscape that persistently distorts and erases Muslim identity. While Muslims constitute 24% of the global population and 1.1% in the U.S., and is the most ethnically diverse American faith group, only 2% of children's books published in the U.S. in 2024 featured any Muslim representation, according to the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC). This reflects a doubling from just 1% between 2018 and 2022, yet the number remains disproportionately low. Even these modest gains occur within a fraught cultural climate: book bans targeting titles with LGBTQ+, BIPOC, and religious minority characters have reached record levels, and Muslim representation is particularly vulnerable to politicized erasure. Notably, CCBC data does not assess quality, and many portrayals by non-Muslim authors, especially of secondary characters, are superficial, further diluting the progress of faithful representation (Siddique & Rabinowitz, 2023).

This representational crisis intensifies in broader media, where Muslims continue to be portrayed through narrow, often racist frames. A 2013 Media Tenor study found that 80% of U.S. television coverage of Islam and Muslims was negative, while Middlebury College's Media Portrayals of Minorities Project revealed not a single month of positive coverage between 1996 and 2016. Terrorist acts by Muslims receive 357% more coverage than those by other groups, skewing public perception. In scripted entertainment, USC's *Erased or Extremists* study found Muslims comprised just 1% of nearly 9,000 speaking characters across 200 popular television shows, and only 12 were regulars, with a gender ratio of 174 men to 1 woman. Western news outlets often reinforce anti-Muslim racism through linguistic strategies like exclusion and passivation, upholding a binary of West vs. Islam that legitimizes dominant ideologies under a guise of neutrality (Rezaei, Kobari, and Salami 2019). These distortions carry real consequences. A 2020 ISPU study found that 50% of Muslim families reported school-based bullying of their children, one-third involving educators. Such experiences reinforce a sense of unbelonging. Meanwhile, research by Common Sense Media demonstrates that higher-quality depictions of Muslims lead to reduced support for discriminatory policies among white audiences, and greater feelings of safety and inclusion among Muslim audiences. In this context, children's literature becomes not merely a pedagogical tool but a site of cultural resistance, offering the possibility to rewrite narratives of erasure and rehumanize the Muslim experience for both children and the broader public.

All of which extends into the realm of imagination. The Hijabi Librarians recognize children's literature as resistance against what they call the colonization of imagination. Especially in our current moment, which is marked by escalating censorship, rising

authoritarianism, and genocide, the forces of dehumanization are increasingly normalized through policies, media discourses, and educational practices that suppress empathy, discourage curiosity, and demand cultural conformity. For SWANA and Muslim communities, in both the Middle East and in diaspora, these dynamics manifest as erasure, vilification, and the denial of political and narrative agency. Against this backdrop, children's literature emerges as a vital source of possibility, shaping how imagination, dignity, and humanity are understood. The collective understands this terrain not merely as pedagogical, but as profoundly political: resisting the colonization of imagination and sustaining the capacity for alternative, humanizing possibilities. It is also a space alive with wonder, whimsy, fun, and play, affirming that humor and delight (and weirdness!) are as essential to liberation as the telling of difficult truths.

Drawing on Perry Nodelman's concept of the "hidden adult" in children's literature, including the idea that such texts not only speak to young readers but also reflect the values, lessons, and cultural frameworks imposed by the adults who create, curate, and teach them, the Hijabi Librarians highlight how children's literature can serve as both this site of possibility and a space where imperial and colonial narratives about childhood are reproduced. In their work, they actively confront this shaping power, selecting and recommending books that resist adult nostalgia for an imagined, sanitized childhood and instead center the lived realities, identities, and agency of young readers (Nodelman 2008, 42). After all, "DEI" censorship is a war on imagination, and ultimately, empathy, because if you can imagine and identify with a people, you may begin to believe that they have as much right to exist as you do, that they too are fully human. For adult practitioners, children's literature serves not only as a pedagogical resource for

children but often as a site of personal and political recovery. It is a space to reclaim empathy, rediscover wonder, and begin healing the wounds left by exclusion and misrepresentation. In a world that continually pressures adults to relinquish imagination and accept dehumanization as inevitable, these stories offer refusal. They remind us that children's literature is not just for the young, but for all who seek to preserve their capacity to see one another fully and humanely.

As you read this, consider the books from your childhood that shaped your understanding of the world and yourself; those that made you feel seen, brave, safe, challenged, curious, adventurous, or uniquely understood. Which stories linger with you still, and how often do you find yourself returning to them? This intergenerational understanding reframes adults not as neutral facilitators but as co-participants in the preservation of imaginative capacity, a stance that becomes overtly political amid escalating book bans and cultural retrenchment. For the Hijabi Librarians, maintaining the imaginative and empathic potential of children's literature, from board books to young adult romances, is not merely an educational or representational goal but an act of resistance. Without the capacity to envision alternative futures, the collective argues, social transformation is foreclosed. Their mission, while focused on Muslim representation, insists on a broader framework, because improved Muslim understanding serves the liberation of all communities. In this light, children's literature becomes not only a tool for inclusion but a radical medium for reimagining democratic possibility and shared humanity.

The Hijabi Librarians Collective: Mission and Methodology

In 2020, Ariana Sani Hussain and Mahasin Abuwi Aleem co-authored a public-facing Hijabi Librarians Toolkit. Updated in 2024 by Hussain, Aleem, and Hadeal Salamah, the toolkit is structured in three parts: (1) learning about Islam and Muslims, (2) collection evaluation through guiding questions, and (3) inclusive programming practices. Rather than prescribing a list of “approved” titles, it is designed as a practical decision-making aid for librarians and educators who are selecting, displaying, and teaching books that feature Muslim characters and communities.

The first section offers accessible background on the diversity of Muslim communities, including brief explanations of major religious practices, ethnic and linguistic variation, and common misconceptions that appear in youth literature. The second section presents guiding questions such as: Who created this text and what is their relationship to the community being represented? How are Muslim characters framed in relation to power, agency, and joy? Does the book rely on tropes of trauma, terrorism, or “good/bad” religiosity? The third section supports programming decisions by prompting practitioners to consider local context; for example, how to pair titles, design displays, or facilitate discussions in ways that resist tokenism and anticipate potential challenges in climates of heightened censorship.

The collective’s culturally sustaining review practices reflect principles that librarian and former *Kirkus* children’s editor Vicky Smith articulates in her writing on evaluation methodology. These practices include considering audiences beyond dominant culture readers, evaluating authenticity without requiring books to serve as cultural education for outsiders, recognizing when reviewers need

cultural context they may lack, moving beyond asking whether diverse books meet traditional criteria to examining whether evaluation frameworks themselves honor the cultural contexts from which these stories emerge, and understanding how reviewers can perpetuate or challenge cultural hierarchies through their assessment approaches. Multiple members of the collective have contributed reviews to professional literature review journals, including *Kirkus*, and bring with them a deliberate engagement with identity-centered evaluation. Their experience with *Kirkus* informs the Hijabi Librarians' evaluative lens, reinforcing the centrality of identity (ethnic, religious, linguistic, and beyond) in critical reviewing. As *Kirkus* editor Laura Simeon emphasizes, authors writing outside their own identities must go beyond good intentions by engaging in research, self-reflection, and consultation to avoid perpetuating harm or stereotypes in young adult literature (Simeon, "When Writing," 2023). This imperative to approach representation with care and accountability connects directly to broader struggles over intellectual freedom. Simeon believes that the defense of a young person's right to read extends beyond access to books, encompassing the need to resist political censorship and to honor the full humanity of all readers (Simeon, "In Defense," 2023).

The toolkit outlines common representational pitfalls. One such pattern, what they term "headscarf reductionism," relies on hijab as a visual shorthand for Muslim identity, often in the absence of meaningful character development. This erases the diversity of Muslim expression, renders Muslim men and non-hijabi women invisible, and reduces complex identities to static symbols. Similarly, the collective critiques cultural conflation, where broad terms like "Middle Eastern" or "Muslim" collapse distinct ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities into Orientalist generalizations.

Their analysis also identifies a recurring victimization narrative wherein Muslim characters are depicted solely as passive subjects of oppression, undermining portrayals of resilience, complexity, and growth. As a corrective, the collective champions stories that center joy, ordinary life, family, and celebration; the kinds of narratives that affirm multidimensional humanity and address Thomas's "mirror hunger": the psychological need for children to see themselves as whole, valuable, and fully human. It is equally essential for non-Muslim child readers to encounter portrayals of Muslim children leading ordinary lives, embedded in familiar contexts such as families, neighborhoods, and schools, rather than solely through lenses of cultural difference, trauma, or exoticization.

Book reviewers, publishers, and educators have increasingly applied critical evaluative frameworks to youth literature. The Hijabi Librarians' work stands in solidarity with parallel initiatives developed by reviewers and collectives such as *American Indians in Children's Literature*, *Latinx in KidLit*, and the *We Are Kidlit Collective*, who center BIPOC narratives and challenge imperialist and white supremacist structures. These overlapping commitments reflect a shared landscape of critical reviewing practices. Inspired by the collective's toolkit and the Council of Interracial Books on Children's Guide: *10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Sexism and Racism*, Sarah Park Dahlen worked with colleagues in the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) to develop the *Rubric to Evaluate Asian American and Pacific Islander Youth Literature*. This rubric, developed in consultation with the Hijabi Librarians and other groups, includes questions related to broad Asian Muslim representation. The Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL) explicitly mirrored elements of the Hijabi Librarians' toolkit in its 2022 *Evaluating Jewish Representation in*

Children's Literature. These collaborations affirm the toolkit's transferability and its capacity to support nuanced evaluations across a range of communities, while honoring the distinct leadership and expertise that each group brings to the broader work of bibliographic justice. They also offer a generative model for the future of Middle East librarianship that integrates youth services and education with an emphasis on cross-community solidarity and equitable pedagogy.

Yet methodological cross-pollination is only one facet of the Hijabi Librarians' coalitional work. Our engagement also extends to shared advocacy, co-developed programming, and relationally grounded solidarity. In moments of intensified book censorship, particularly those targeting BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and Muslim authors, members of the collective have:

- Written educator guides that help teachers and librarians frame contested titles in curriculum and programming;
- Contributed reviews to *Teaching for Change's Social Justice Books* booklists;
- Presented webinars on Muslim representation and critical book evaluation through *Library Journal's Inclusive Collections* courses and *PCI* Webinars, now featured in the "How to Build and Defend Inclusive Collections" on-demand series;
- Delivered conference presentations at venues such as the 2024 National Conference of African American Librarians (Uniting the Global Majority: How Black Culture Shapes Resistance Movements Around the World), the 2020 ALSC Institute (CCBC Publishing Statistics, Muslim Representations, and Counting Diversity in Youth Literature), and the 2018 Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (Evaluating and Using Diverse Materials for Children and Young Adults);

- Guest lectured in teacher education programs on selecting, evaluating, and teaching diverse youth literature; and
- Contributed articles and curated booklists for outlets such as *School Library Journal* and *EdTrust* (The Education Trust).

Our work has been taken up by colleagues in youth services, publishing, and curriculum development. Librarians and reviewers such as Kit Ballenger, Laura Simeon, and Tiffeni Fontno point to the Collective's critical analysis as uniquely valuable because it amplifies not a single reviewer's voice but a constellation of Muslim practitioners - SWANA, African American, Southeast Asian, and others - who are trained in professional book evaluation and grounded in specific cultural and religious knowledge. They note that the site speaks simultaneously to insiders and outsiders, to professionals and parents, and to the intersections between schools, libraries, and publishing.

By cultivating a praxis of collaborative advocacy, the Hijabi Librarians extend the boundaries of Middle East librarianship. Their work situates Muslim representation within intersecting struggles against anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, and anti-Asian racism, while also addressing shared concerns about cultural erasure, diasporic complexity, and epistemic justice. In this context, the collective's methodology has become a critical asset to library and information science (LIS) practice, education, publishing, and research. It offers tools for professional development that go beyond superficial cultural awareness to cultivate critical cultural competency, supporting librarians in ethical collection development and community-centered programming. Within publishing and LIS education, the collective advocates for ethical partnership, encouraging professionals to

move from performative inclusion toward structural transformation. Their approach also opens research pathways, especially longitudinal studies on how inclusive collections influence Muslim children's identity formation, academic engagement, and sense of belonging.

Conclusion: Toward a Transformative Middle East Librarianship

Returning to our own voice, we, as Hijabi Librarians, speak not only as analysts but as library professionals engaged in the daily labor of youth services, working in school and public libraries, with children and families. Although the members of the Hijabi Librarians Collective are based in public and K–12 school libraries rather than in academic Middle East collections, our work is deeply engaged with Middle East and SWANA librarianship. We routinely select and evaluate English-language youth titles originating from or about the Middle East and North Africa, including translations from Arabic and other regional languages. At the same time, the majority of the books we review are set in Muslim diasporic communities in North America and other parts of the global North. Our primary focus is thus on Muslim youth literature, both from and about the SWANA region and from its diasporas, rather than on Middle East area studies more broadly. We argue that public and school librarianship around Muslim youth texts is an essential, if often unrecognized, dimension of contemporary Middle East librarianship because it mediates how children encounter stories about the region, its histories, and its people. We also hope to help cultivate a new generation of Muslim youth services librarians and children's literature specialists whose leadership is visible across professional organizations.

We envision Middle East librarianship not as a geographically bounded or static field, but as one rooted in shared epistemic struggles: between erasure and visibility, dominance and dignity. In doing so, we align with other critical librarian-activist collectives whose mandates may or may not be explicitly regional but whose ethics and goals resonate with our own. This shift from territorial to coalitional librarianship reflects contemporary realities and strengthens the profession's ability to serve diverse communities. Through bibliographic activism and collaborative programming, we resist misrepresentation and reclaim narrative space for Muslim youth and other underrepresented communities. Our work draws from and contributes to a broader ecosystem of critical practice, where tools like evaluation rubrics and community review become instruments of structural change. We aim to expand our engagement with the education sector, offering guidance for initiatives such as Arab American Heritage Month and supporting curricular shifts in ethnic and religious studies that are increasingly urgent in today's political and pedagogical climate.

Looking ahead, the next phase of our activism and toolkit development centers on further advancing archival justice and metadata ethics. We are also exploring more accessible formats for our work, including checklists, exemplar tables, and multimedia resources such as webinars and podcasts that can serve as professional development for youth librarians. Miranda Mims, founder of the Nomadic Archivist Project, writes that "archives, both in the physical and abstract, determine how we connect to the past," emphasizing the need for "alternative realities, alternative ways of knowing" to inhabit archival spaces, inviting future-oriented imaginings of memory and representation (Mims 2020). Mims introduces archival-futurism as a framework for reimagining archives through a social justice lens, drawing inspiration from

Afrofuturism to center the lives and histories of marginalized communities. As our future work includes advocating for archival justice, we can expand the mission of Hijabi Librarians by actively amplifying records that center Muslim voices and lived experiences, including those found in children's literature. This includes acknowledging the prolific presence of self-published children's books within many American Muslim communities; works that often circulate outside mainstream publishing and archival infrastructures. These texts are frequently the first places where diasporic children see their languages, rituals, and everyday lives reflected, yet they are most vulnerable to disappearance if libraries and archives do not intentionally seek them out. By challenging dominant archival practices, partnering with communities to ensure representation on their own terms, and safeguarding stories that reflect Muslim identities from a young age, we affirm the cultural labor of these creators. Archival justice (and futurism) in this context ensures that these narratives are not lost to institutional neglect but instead preserved as vital components of the historical and literary record for future generations.

Recognizing that descriptive systems are never neutral, we also challenge traditional cataloging structures, such as the Library of Congress, that perpetuate Orientalist assumptions and obscure the complexity of Muslim and SWANA identities. We advocate for metadata practices that distinguish religious and cultural identifiers, offer geographic precision, and reflect language used by communities themselves. This shift both disrupts colonial power embedded in classification systems and ensures greater discoverability and equity for those navigating collections through lived experience, not imposed taxonomies.

Thus, while our work is grounded in children's literature, it engages the broader ethical imperatives of Middle East librarianship: the preservation of our histories, the defense of community-centered archives, and the cultivation of inclusive evaluative frameworks. We see ourselves as part of an evolving lineage of Middle East librarianship. Earlier pioneers prioritized manuscript preservation and bibliographic control. We build on their foundation by advocating for equity in youth literature and the ethical stewardship of stories. In doing so, we join a tradition of bibliographic intervention while reimagining its scope for an age shaped by digital humanities, diasporic identities, and intersectional politics. Our coalitional practice is also relational. In this way, we contribute to the special issue's focus on pioneering practices and bibliographic innovation: by working not only within Middle East studies institutions but also with those reshaping them for a more just, representative future.

As educational censorship escalates and global crises reshape the conditions of belonging for Muslim and SWANA communities, whether connected to ancestral homelands, shaped by diasporic journeys, or rooted in lands claimed as home across generations, we are guided by the conviction that better Muslim representation is not a siloed demand but is inseparable from the liberation of all. Our daily work takes place in very local settings - school media centers, youth rooms in public libraries, regional conferences, online guides - but the stakes are global: which stories about Muslims travel, which are preserved, and which are allowed to stand as "the" story of the Middle East and its diasporas. As Simeon reminds us, "children need stories that reflect and affirm their identities, and they need windows into lives different from their own" (Simeon 2023). Our work echoes this ethos and extends it into Middle East librarianship writ large, insisting that public and

K–12 librarianship, youth publishing, and academic collections are interconnected sites of bibliographic power. Every catalog record, book selection, and programming decision holds political weight. If we are to meet this moment with integrity, we must move beyond passive multiculturalism toward systems-level transformation in how Muslim stories are acquired, described, taught, and archived. That is the work we have begun. That is the librarianship we choose to build.

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