Stories of Decolonisation:

Experiences from Children and Young People



Research Briefing / Proceedings Book

Hamide Elif Üzümcü Stories of Decolonisation: Experiences from Children and Young People

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Event Overview

On Tuesday 10 June 2025, from 9:30 to 14:30 in Room 1.55 at Edinburgh Futures Institute at the University of Edinburgh, the public engagement symposium, 'Stories of Decolonisation: Experiences from Children and Young People,' brought together university scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds to create sociological fiction, narrating stories inspired by children and young people with whom they worked in their research. Through these narratives, we explored how children challenge, navigate, and transform the colonial structures that shape their daily experiences.

The symposium provided new perspectives on decolonisation by showcasing how children and young people, through their unique ways of thinking and acting, resist and reshape their environments. The speakers explored various decolonial approaches to researching with children, ranging from young people's engagement with their surroundings, to creative arts-based methodologies, drawing on their own research across diverse topics and geographies.

The symposium aimed to create a space where diverse voices and experiences could come together to deepen our understanding of decolonisation in religious, cultural and social contexts from children and young people's perspectives.

This event was co-sponsored by the Susan Manning Workshop Fund from the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and the Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World at the University of Edinburgh. It was organised by Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü, IASH-Alwaleed Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh and chaired

by Prof Lynn Jamieson, Professor of Sociology, Families and Relationships and Dr Shruti Chaudhry, Chancellor's Fellow in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh.

Collaborators & Organising Committee

- Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü, Dr Ben Fletcher-Watson & Lauren Galligan - Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), University of Edinburgh, UK:

The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities was established in 1969 to promote interdisciplinary research in the arts, humanities and social sciences at the University of Edinburgh. It provides an international, interdisciplinary and autonomous space for discussion and debate. Since its foundation, more than 1,500 scholars from 70 countries have held Institute fellowships; and up to 28 Fellows are in residence at any one time.

- Dr Mira Al Hussein & Tom Lea - Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World (The Alwaleed Centre), University of Edinburgh, UK:

Based in the University of Edinburgh's School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures and affiliated to Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies, the Alwaleed Centre is inherently interdisciplinary, connecting different schools and departments across the University of Edinburgh through its focus on contemporary Islam and the Muslim world. Alongside its world-class research and teaching, the Alwaleed Centre has developed a reputation for delivering high-impact outreach projects, promoting a better understanding of Islam and Muslim culture locally, nationally and internationally.

- Prof Lynn Jamieson, Dr Shruti Chaudhry & Dr Emma Davidson - Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), University of Edinburgh, UK: The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) is a leading interdisciplinary research centre based at the University of Edinburgh, with partnerships across several Scottish universities. CRFR's work brings together academics, policy-makers, practitioners, and communities to explore the everyday dynamics of family life and social relationships, with a strong emphasis on public engagement and social impact. CRFR's research spans five main themes: Childhood and Youth, Institutions and Civic Society, Environment and Sustainability, Health, Illness and Wellbeing, and Family and Relationship Dynamics. By supporting innovative and accessible research, CRFR continues to inform policy, practice, and public understanding of relationships in all their diversity.

- Dr Emma Davidson - Binks Hub, University of Edinburgh, UK:

Formed in 2021, the Binks Hub is a network of academics, researchers, community members, practitioners, and policy-makers using creativity and the arts to co-create research that makes a difference to people's lives. As well as undertaking co-creative research with a range of partners, the Hub is committed to ensuring a permanent presence within the University of Edinburgh—providing a space where researchers, practitioners, policy-makers, and community groups can collaboratively discuss and share artistic and creative methods. Working together, the Hub seeks to ensure that co-creative forms of knowledge are shared, valued, and used as evidence in policy-making and decision-making.

Scientific Committee

Dr Ben Fletcher-Watson, University of Edinburgh, UK
Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü, University of Edinburgh, UK
Prof Lynn Jamieson, University of Edinburgh, UK
Dr Harika Karavin Yüce, Trakya University, Türkiye
Dr Liam Berriman, Sussex University, UK
Dr Rowena Robinson, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay, India

Review Committee

Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü, University of Edinburgh, UK Dr Ben Fletcher-Watson, University of Edinburgh, UK Dr Shruti Chaudhry, University of Edinburgh, UK Dr Emma Davidson, University of Edinburgh, UK

Programme

Morning

Chair: Prof Lynn Jamieson

09:30-10:45 Storytelling Session I

- Dr Sukanya Krishnamurthy (School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh), Space and Knowledge: Rethinking Children's Geographies in the Majority World
- Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü (Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities & Alwaleed Centre, University of Edinburgh), Sufi Stories from Children in Minority Contexts in the UK
- Dr Alysa Ghose (School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh), The
 Impossibility of Black Motherhood, the Impossibility of Black
 Childhood?: Kinship and Sovereignty against the Backdrop of
 Migration from Cuba to The US

– Q&A

10:45- 11:00: Refreshment Break

11:00-12:15 Storytelling Session II

- Dr Anurima Chanda (Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh), Rewriting Roots: Mapping the Spectrum of Childhoods in Indian English KidLit
- Prof Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (Research Centre for Peace and Security, Coventry University), Expressions of Self: How Do Care-Experienced Young People Negotiate Their Sense of Self
- Joana Avi-Lorie (School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh), Fictional Stories & Children's Eco-emotions

 Dr Kholoud Al-Ajarma (Alwaleed Centre for the Study of Islam in the Contemporary World, University of Edinburgh): Storytelling,
 Memory, and Resistance among Palestinian Refugee Children

– Q&A

12:15-13:15 Lunch break

Afternoon

Chair: Dr Shruti Chaudhry

13:15-14:30 Networking Session

Lauren Galligan - Institute for Advanced Studies in the
 Humanities

- Dr Mira Al Hussein & Tom Lea - Alwaleed Centre

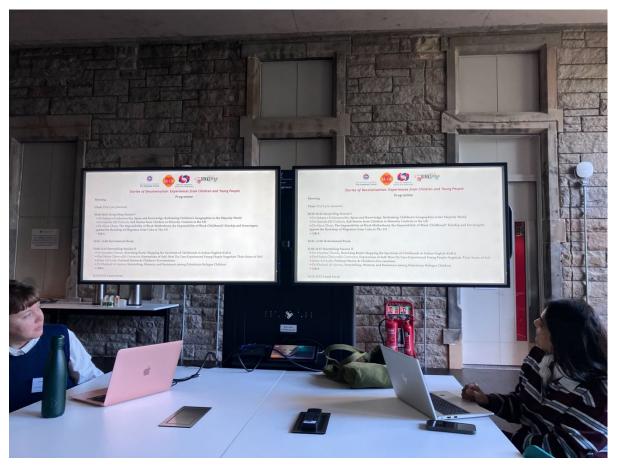
 Prof Lynn Jamieson - Centre for Research on Families and Relationships

- Dr Emma Davidson - Binks Hub

- Networking among the speakers, collaborators, and audience.

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Key messages



'Stories of Decolonisation: Experiences from Children and Young People' event programme

- Children and young people actively challenge and transform colonial structures involved in their everyday lives, in diverse and authentic ways.
- Exploring decolonisation from children's voices reveals critical perspectives for challenging dominant narratives, deconstructing colonial legacies and reimagining cultural, religious, and social relations.
- Fiction serves as a powerful tool to explore, analyse and share children's experiences and resistance in nuanced ways. It fosters empathy, critical reflection, and broader public engagement with their lived realities.

 The symposium critically engaged with a range of innovative decolonial research approaches to foreground the nuanced perspectives of children and young people across diverse geographies and cultural contexts.

Contributions



Prof Lynn Jamieson chairing the morning paper session

The morning programme, chaired by Professor Lynn Jamieson, opened with two storytelling sessions, presenting seven scholars from diverse disciplines including Geosciences, Humanities, Divinity, English Literature, Health in Social Science, and Islamic Studies. This rich interdisciplinary and geographic diversity—from India, Cuba, the US, the UK, and Palestine—facilitated the unpacking of children's decolonial engagements with colonial histories and ongoing power structures. Dr Liam Berriman (Director of the Centre for Innovation and Research in Childhood and Youth & Associate Professor in Childhood and Youth Studies at the University of Sussex) was also scheduled to contribute but,

unfortunately, was unable to attend due to urgent unforeseen circumstances.

In Session I, the speakers explored how children and young people's stories reveal complex interactions between their environments, cultural traditions, and identities—ranging from access to physical spaces like playgrounds, to engagement with Sufi storytelling and Islamic environmental ethics, to the lived realities of Black childhoods shaped by migration.

After a brief refreshment break, Session II continued by exploring how children's literature shapes understandings of childhood, how care-experienced youth negotiate their sense of self, how ecological emotions are conveyed through fiction, and how storytelling serves as a means of resistance. Both sessions concluded with Q&A segments that generated rich reflections and meaningful dialogue from the audience.

Following the lunch break, the afternoon session chaired by Dr Shruti Chaudhry provided a valuable opportunity for networking. Participants engaged with academic collaborators, including representatives from the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, the Alwaleed Centre, the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, and the Binks Hub, who each gave brief introductory speeches about their research centres. This session fostered meaningful connections that encourage ongoing dialogue and future collaboration on children and storytelling.

The symposium was shared across collaborators' websites and newsletters, advertised publicly on Eventbrite, and attracted considerable interest from a wide audience. It was fully booked in

advance, reflecting strong engagement with its themes. The audience comprised postdoctoral and PhD researchers in the humanities and social sciences, alongside literary authors whose work engages with families, young people, and parents.



Dr Shruti Chaudhry chairing the afternoon networking session with representatives from the partnering research centres

Each paper engaged with the themes of childhoods, decoloniality, and storytelling from diverse perspectives, generating impactful implications:

Dr Sukanya Krishnamurthy, in her paper "Space and Knowledge: Rethinking Children's Geographies in the Majority World" critically examined how children's access to play and social spaces were influenced by structural inequities and colonial legacies in urban design and knowledge production. Drawing on fieldwork and storytelling vignettes from workshops with children in Ramnagar, India, she highlighted how formalised play infrastructures remained physically and socially inaccessible-often distant, poorly maintained, and surrounded by unsafe routes, including unlit roads and the presence of stray dogs. These limitations reinforced the marginalisation of children's everyday geographies. Rather than romanticising spontaneous street play, her paper explored how children's imaginaries were informed by dominant notions of formal play spaces, and how these imaginaries intersect with issues of access, safety, and value. Engaging with Aufseeser's (2023) critique of categorical childhoods, Dr Krishnamurthy called attention to the parallel issues in categorising play spaces, arguing for an approach that values lived experience and plural epistemologies. Over two years of collaboration with twenty young people who also identify as activists, Dr Krishnamurthy reflected on the power of performative storytelling dance, street theatre, speeches, and song-as decolonial practices of placemaking. She concluded by arguing that "designing for play means listening to those who live with its absence," and that decolonising children's geographies requires both material and epistemic shiftsforegrounding the knowledges, values, and aspirations of those often rendered peripheral in urban and academic discourse.

Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü, in her paper "Sufi Stories from Children in Minority Contexts in the UK" explored how children aged 12–15, living in Sufi-oriented families in the UK, engage with Sufi narratives and environmental ethics through participatory storytelling methods. Drawing on the rich narrative traditions of Sufism, her paper argued how these stories function as tools for contemplation (*tafakkur*) and dialogue (*sohbat*), particularly in relation to ecological awareness (Irawan, 2022).

Preliminary findings investigated how children creatively respond to Sufi environmental texts and articulate their own understandings of humannon-human relations. In conversation with decolonial theory, childhood studies challenge dominant, universalising conceptions of childhood and instead recognises children as active epistemic agents embedded within broader social and ecological networks (Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). Her paper explored how Sufi perspectives on tawhid (oneness) might offer a compelling framework for reimagining environmental belonging as part of a decolonial approach to childhood, through children's narratives, designed stories and fiction. It further proposed the use of sociological fiction as a tool for public engagement, enabling childhood researchers to disseminate children's voices and stories: By blending empirical research with narrative imagination, sociological fiction allows for a more nuanced understanding of social realities (Watson, 2022). It brings to light the often-overlooked experiences and agency of children and young people, making their struggles and resistance against colonial influences more accessible and relatable. A fictional approach also encourages empathy and critical thinking, inviting audiences to creatively consider complex social issues through fresh and compelling narratives, thereby contributing decolonisation of academic knowledge production in childhood studies.

Dr Alysa Ghose, in her paper "The Impossibility of Black Motherhood, the Impossibility of Black Childhood?: Kinship and Sovereignty against the Backdrop of Migration from Cuba to The US" explored the intersecting dimensions of kinship, migration, and Black life by focusing on an intergenerational Cuban family navigating a journey to the United States under the constraints of the parole system. Through ethnographic storytelling and the lens of reproductive justice (Ross and Sollinger, 2017), her paper highlighted the right to parent children in safe and healthy

environments as central to understanding how Afrodescendant families resist and reconfigure normative kinship structures amid racialised and bureaucratic violence. Dr Ghose narrated the case study of a Cuban woman whose unexpected migration reoriented the family's experience of motherhood and childhood, illustrated how children are central actors in global migration (Yarris 2014). In attending to children's agency, Dr Ghose critiqued how humanitarian policies like parole both responded to and perpetuate crises they helped manufacture, judging kinship through heaemonic and racialised norms. Her paper brought together insights from Afro-pessimism, postcolonial theory, and migration studies to interrogate what it means to be a child-imagined or otherwise-when that identity was constructed outside the category of the human. Drawing from lived experience and critical ethnography as subversive storytelling, Dr Ghose asked what futures became possible when Black childhood and motherhood were reclaimed as sites of resistance and reimagination, in the face of systemic dispossession and precarity.

Dr Anurima Chanda, in her paper "Rewriting Roots: Mapping the Spectrum of Childhoods in Indian English KidLit" traced the colonial origins of children's literature in India, where British missionary influence introduced English-language books aimed at young readers, often embedding Western ideals of childhood. Prior to this, rich oral traditions existed, but they were not categorically defined as "children's" stories. The colonial legacy idealised elite childhoods and marginalised diverse lived experiences, a tendency that persisted in post-independence Indian English children's literature (Wood, 2014). Her paper explored how, over the past two decades, a wave of independent publishers has begun to challenge the dominance of singular, Western-centric representations by bringing to the fore stories that reflect the complex realities of Indian childhoods. These works address themes such as caste,

poverty, gender, and violence, thereby offering a more plural and grounded understanding of what it means to be a child in India today. Dr Chanda argued that decolonising childhood studies through literature involved re-engaging with indigenous knowledges and storytelling traditions, while also creating space for contemporary narratives that disrupted the normative ideals of childhood (Abebe, Dar, and Lyså, 2022). Her paper foregrounded literature as a critical site for reimagining and rewriting the roots of childhood, shifting the focus from imported frameworks to local, lived experiences.

Prof. Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, in her paper "Expressions of Self: How Do Care-Experienced Young People Negotiate Their Sense of Self" explored how Black and Muslim care-experienced children and young people in the UK articulate and navigate their identities within systems that often marginalise them (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al., 2024). Drawing on narrative life history interviews with 26 Black youth aged 14-19 who have lived in foster care, adoptive families, or institutional settings, her research employed creative and participatory methodsincluding photo elicitation and drawing-to invite reflections on ethnicity, religion, and belonging. Against the backdrop of stark inequalities – such as the 2022 finding that 13 local authorities reported no ethnic minority children being adopted — Prof. Cheruvallil-Contractor argued for the urgent need to centre minoritised children's perspectives in care debates (Barn and Kirton, 2012; Miller and Butt, 2919). Her paper highlighted identity as a process of negotiation: involving the structures of the care system, the cultural identities of caregivers, and the young people's own evolving self-understandings. These identities emerged as nuanced, shifting across time and experience, and potentially empowering-especially when children are listened to and given space for self-expression. By sharing video narratives from the perspectives of young people, Prof. Cheruvallil-Contractor offered a theoretical and practice-informed lens through which care could be reimagined as a site of identity-making, resistance, and creative self-expression.

Joana Avi-Lorie, in her paper "Fictional Stories & Children's Ecoemotions" discussed how children articulate and process complex emotions about the climate crisis. Working with children aged 9-12 who self-identify as experiencing eco-anxiety, she created a participatory, arts-based space to explore their emotional responses through storytelling. She highlighted that, at this critical developmental stage, children are not only particularly vulnerable to climate-related distress but also remarkably capable of imagining hopeful and alternative futures. Through a series of storytelling workshops, children were invited to narrate and illustrate their own stories, beginning by drawing themselves as characters and progressing to represent emotions through colour, scale, and character development. These stories offered insight into how young people experience and communicate eco-emotions like fear, anger, empathy, and hope in response to climate information, personal experiences, and fictional narratives. The extended storytelling sessions fostered trust and emotional safety, allowing children to explore their feelings beyond the dominant frameworks of news, education, or policy discourse. Avi-Lorie's research not only amplified children's voices but also called for a decolonisation of the language used to describe ecoanxiety. Avi-Lorie further argued that children's own vocabularies, expressed through art and fiction, could provide a vital counterpoint to adult-centric narratives. Her findings underscored the potential of fiction not simply as a coping mechanism, but as a tool for moral reflection, emotional articulation, and transformative climate education.

Dr Kholoud Al-Ajarma, in her paper "Storytelling, Memory, and Resistance among Palestinian Refugee Children" drew on long-term ethnographic and oral history work with Palestinian children and youth to explore how storytelling becomes a site of memory, resistance, and epistemic reclamation. Challenging Eurocentric portrayals of Palestinian children as passive victims of violence, she documented how children actively resist both the material and symbolic violence of Israeli colonialism. Through intergenerational storytelling, creative expression, and memory work, children re-articulated their experiences of displacement and asserted their presence in the face of erasure. Dr Al-Ajarma shared diverse accounts of storytelling sessions, led by community elders and volunteers, who narrated tales of steadfastness to their grandchildren and to children in refugee camps—stories rooted in the Nakba, their own childhoods, and the foods etched in their memories, such as figs, olives, and freshly baked bread. Children, in turn, responded with their own drawings and stories, depicting tanks, human shields, and fragmented landscapes, reflecting their everyday experiences of violence. Dr Al-Ajarma held sessions for children about the basics of oral history and visual archiving, contributing to a counternarrative that critiques the silences of official archives. She argued that to decolonise childhood is to honour children's memories, drawings, and knowledge as vital sources of truth, resistance, and political imagination. Echoing Edward Said (1993), Dr Al-Ajarma affirmed that "the very act of narrating is a political struggle."

Insights and Implications

- All papers emphasised the importance of decolonising dominant knowledge frameworks by valuing children's lived experiences, local knowledges, and diverse narratives.
- Each contribution addressed how systemic factors; colonial legacies, racialisation, migration policies, institutional care, impact childhood experiences and marginalise children and young people.
- Rather than being viewed as passive subjects, children were revisited as storytellers, activists, knowledge producers, and resistant actors who negotiate and transform their worlds in complex ways.
- Arts, fiction, oral histories, and performative storytelling emerged as recurrent tools through which children reclaim identity, memory, place, and agency.
- Storytelling and narrative methods provide safe, participatory spaces for children to explore and articulate their everyday experiences, empower children to narrate complex identities and resist marginalisation.
- Children actively resist colonial violence by narrating and visualising their lived experiences. Decolonising childhood requires valuing children's memories and creative expressions as political and epistemic acts.
- Children's own vocabularies offer critical challenges to adultcentric, colonial narratives.
- Emotions, ethics and identity negotiations are integral to understanding children's experiences in a decolonial frame.
- Findings advocate for listening to children's voices in urban design, care systems, education, literature, and migration policies to promote equity, empowerment, and cultural resilience.

- Bridging empirical research with artistic expression through interdisciplinary collaborations holds the potential to deepen our understanding of children's lived realities.
- Recognising children as active agents in social transformation has important implications for reimagining both policy and practice.

Together, these contributions urge us to radically rethink how we understand and engage with childhood in both research and practice. They demonstrate that decolonising childhood is not simply an academic exercise but a political and ethical imperative, one that requires us to listen to children not as passive recipients of policy, but as narrators of their own lives and agents of social transformation. The insights call for a shift in how institutions, schools, care systems, cultural sectors, and urban planning recognise and make space for children's knowledge, creativity, and resistance. There is a pressing need for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to co-create platforms with children, value their vocabularies and expressions. It requires investing in participatory, creative, and interdisciplinary approaches that do not merely include children but recognise them as political and epistemic actors. Decolonising childhood is not a metaphor; it is a call to transform how we listen, how we learn, and how we act together with children. In doing so, we can begin to dismantle colonial legacies and imagine more inclusive, responsive futures.

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Contributor Biographies

Chairs:

Lynn Jamieson is Professor of Sociology, Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh, a founding co-director of the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships and known internationally for her research on intimacy, identity and social change. Her current research interests include the intersection of families and relationships with responses to climate change, biodiversity loss and issues of sustainability.

Shruti Chaudhry is a Chancellor's Fellow in Sociology at the University of Edinburgh and co-director of the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships. Her research focuses on migration, family and intimate relationships, ageing and the life-course, gender, and intersecting inequalities. Her recent writing has focused on the cross-gender and cross-cultural friendships of South-Asian heritage older adults in Scotland.

Speakers:

Dr Sukanya Krishnamurthy is a Chancellor's Fellow/ Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people in cities that include three interrelated fields: children and youth geographies, participatory methods of engaging with children and youth, and inclusive urban planning/ design practices. Her research portfolio spans across India, Brazil, Netherlands, Turkey, Israel, and the

UK. She has been the Principal and Co-Investigator on numerous projects related to urban transformations funded by the UK, EU and third sector funding.

Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü is an IASH-Alwaleed Postdoctoral Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. Her current research explores how storytelling traditions guide family life practices—particularly among children and parents—in addressing Islamic environmental ethics. Elif is also the author of the sociological fiction 'Chronicles of Constrained Negotiations.'

Dr Alysa Ghose is an anthropologist who examines the interplay of race, gender, kinship, sexuality, and nation in Cuba. Her research focuses span Afrodiasporic religious traditions, migration, and reproductive justice, specifically in Latin America and the Caribbean. She has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Cuba since 2009.

Dr Anurima Chanda is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at Birsa Munda College, University of North Bengal. She completed her PhD on Indian English Children's Literature from Jawaharlal Nehru University. She was a pre-doctoral DAAD fellow at the University of Würzburg, a SUSI 2023 Fellow at the University of Montana, and has been awarded the Charles Wallace 2024-25 Visiting Fellowship at the University of Edinburgh. A literary translator and children's author, her notable works include *How I Became a Writer* (English translation of M. Byapari's autobiography, published by Stree Samya and Sage, 2022), *Bejonma* (Bengali translation of S.K. Limbale's autobiography, published by Doshor, 2022), and *Women of India* (published by DK Publishing, 2019).

Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor is Professor in the Sociology of Islam at Coventry University. As a feminist-pragmatist scholar, her research interrogates hierarchies in knowledge production. Her portfolio (c.£4million) includes research on digital Islam, minoritised children in care, human security, inter-convictional dialogue and minoritised histories. She has several publications including her most recent title, *Muslim Women in Britain, 1850–1950: 100 Years of Hidden History* (Hurst 2023).

Joana Avi-Lorie is a Portuguese PhD researcher, writer-illustrator, and eco-anxious mother working based in Scotland. She works mostly on projects for children and families and she is interested in the psychology of fictional stories and arts as tools for mental and emotional resilience. She also collaborates with the Scottish Communities Climate Action Network as part of a team of Story Weavers to amplify stories of community-led climate action and adaptation.

Dr Kholoud Al-Ajarma is lecturer in the Globalised Muslim World at the University of Edinburgh. She holds a PhD in Anthropology and Comparative Study of Religion from the University of Groningen (Netherland), MA in Peace and Conflict Studies (Coventry University, UK) and MPhil in Anthropology of Development (University of Bergen, Norway). Her academic interests and publications revolve around the topics of Global Islam and Muslim societies, refugee studies, pilgrimage studies, migration, gender, water, environmental justice, and visual culture in the Mediterranean region, Europe, and Latin America.

Author and Acknowledgements

Author:

This research briefing/proceedings book was written by Dr Hamide Elif Üzümcü who is an IASH-Alwaleed Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh.

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