Introduction

As a child, I grew up with languages from two places: Ireland and Australia. The word *comhthéacs* is an Irish masculine word for contexts: places, histories and experiences that fold together to make contexts. The chapters in this book each have a title written in English and an Irish word expressing the focus of the chapter, to bring the two worlds that make up my context to the fore. My research participants also inhabit multiple worlds, and this book is made up of resonances between vastly different people’s experiences and their many different worlds. These shared voices, which have come together and been torn apart across countries, places, religions and cultures, have also become part of me as I have been immersed in them over the last five years.

In writing this book, I am reminded of the fact that I am attached to structures of feeling that are associated with Irish Catholicism in ways that are complex, largely involuntary and marked by conflict. I was born in 1977 to a politically left-wing father from the north of Dublin, of Catholic upbringing, and a mother from London who was raised in the Church of England. My mother was not religious when she married my father, who, in his younger years, fancied himself quite a rebel and devoted his life to performing political protest songs. My parents spent their honeymoon in an Irish Republican Army (IRA) safe house in Derry after marrying in Cambridge, where they lived for the first years of their marriage. They moved to Australia in 1974 and later my mother converted to Catholicism – and, to my father’s fury, I was raised a Catholic. These constellations
are just the very beginning of a complex emotional attachment I experience to religious icons, an attachment that has oriented my research methods.

When I was eight years old, I visited St Gabriel’s Church in Clontarf, Dublin, while staying with my grandparents in Ireland. I had travelled from Australia with my friend Emily and her father, Ciarán, who was also my father’s childhood friend. There, I discovered what I would come to call ‘the Virgin Mary section’ that miraculously inhabits all Catholic churches. The stained-glass windows arching around the plaster of Paris statue painted eggshell blue framed the sea of tea light candles at her feet beautifully, and the image resonated with me in a way that has stayed.

This first encounter with the Virgin Mary has to be understood in the context of wanting to recuperate my father’s social and emotional displacement, which has affectively shaped my life. My father’s displacement was also informed by his furious disavowal of the religion in which he was raised. This disavowal seemed symbolic of trying too hard to move away from Ireland. Or had the Church committed injustices against him, about which I will never know? Such questions will never be answered, but I suspect not, as on his deathbed my father asked for his last rites and to be taken back into the Church. In Six Days to Shake an Empire (1966), Charles Duff sketches the psyche of the distressed Irishman by saying that there is a particular kind of dark, angry man who is also ferociously divorced from his religion, and that turn of phrase rings true to me when thinking of my father.

Regardless, there I was, an eight-year-old girl in my best dress, staring at a plaster of Paris statue in a church and thinking that perhaps it was actually quite magical to be a girl. If I wore a blue-and-white dress with a veil, perhaps people would also light candles at my feet one day and make statues that looked like me. Indeed, as trips to the family farm in Charleville (County Cork) taught me, women wearing the white dress and blue veil are displayed with candles even in totally destitute surroundings, next to sickbeds, in dark corners of shabby rooms and in unruly, cold gardens. In fact, most places that might need brightening are quite brought to life by a plaster of Paris woman, a set of tea lights and some rosary beads – or a bottle of holy water, if the organising purpose behind the shrine is illness.
Three doors down the road from my grandparents’ house in Dublin, my friend Emily’s father became very ill. She looked sad and pale. Everyone spoke in hushed tones. Feeling lonely without her to play with on the street, I asked if I could sit with her at her dad’s bedside. She took me through their red front door and as we went upstairs the air got heavy. When Emily opened the door to her dad’s room, thick incense smoke poured out. Her grandmother, a priest and several aunts stood around her father Ciarán’s bed, holding plastic Virgin Mary bottles filled with holy water that was hopefully going to save his life. They prayed in Latin and shook water all over him. Clearly this Virgin Mary has many uses, I thought.

I returned to Australia, equipped with rosary beads chosen by Ma (my grandmother), determined to become a better Catholic. This wasn’t because I thought Catholics were correct, or better than others; rather, it was because they were where I belonged, and where my family was from – I was one of the people who gave women their own statues surrounded by tea lights. I hate to admit that the organising power of the plaster of Paris statue may actually have been top of my list of reasons.

My father read children’s stories to me in Irish and I learnt a few turns of phrase. I was told about the injustices of the English from a young age, but, more specifically, I witnessed some affective recounting of the issues played out between my mother’s English parents and my dad, which, as a grown woman, I have to say my father did nothing to appease. Suffice it to say, the emotional geography of my attachment to icons, sounds, smells and places was established, and this mapped across complex feelings of diaspora, class and nation. I am no more Irish than English. But I was raised Irish and not English and, by the age of eighteen, I had chosen my passport to match. My identification with Mary has never left me, although in what I would now characterise as the decolonial feminist consciousness of my late teens and early twenties, I developed a critical reading of the brightly lit shrines that had populated my childhood. In an aesthetic and symbolic reconfiguration of this attachment, I became increasingly interested in Our Lady of Guadalupe, who is not only non-white, but has clearly been through puberty, and in some representations has a natural moustache. She looks like she has not only given birth but also masturbates. At age twenty-one, I decided to mark this attachment to Mary with a tattoo on my back.
There are much more complicated histories of domestic violence, alcoholism, abuse and chronic illness that resulted in my father’s death, and which are woven through my experience of growing up. But these aspects only matter so much as to say that I have a complicated, critical, yet enduring attachment to Catholicism. It is not ‘religious’ in the sense that I am not a practising Catholic, nor do I believe in the orthodox teachings of Catholicism, but I am attached to aspects of affective landscapes of Catholicism, which are partly constituted through ‘the unchosen complexities of religious experience’ (Kitching, 2020: 6). This attunement to religious culture in everyday life has remained with me and informs my approach to fieldwork.

Subjective experience is a result of socialisation. Raymond Williams (1977) identified the imagined ‘distance’ placed between our feelings and society as a strategy of governance. Imagined distance between feelings and society is a way of suggesting to us that it is not society’s fault that we feel depressed or unsatisfied. On the contrary; those bad feelings are our own fault for not being more-successful people – or so says society, anyway. Feelings, in other words, are as much products of institutions, formations and positions as biographies – and, of course, they in turn shape biographies. The ‘Virgin Mary section’ of St Gabriel’s Church is very special to me, but St Gabriel’s is also not so different from any other Catholic church, all of which have their own version of a ‘Virgin Mary section’ featuring a statue, candles and other adornments signifying cultural value. The economy of the Virgin Mary, and of her precursor, the Muslim figure Maryam, runs worldwide.

These connections between religion, culture and everyday life are at the heart of my research. In the Australian Research Council (ARC) grant application that funded this research, I argued that counter-radicalisation initiatives are not working because they too often focus on, and misrepresent, the Islamic religion and, therefore, are divisive. If the Australian Government actually wants to address concerns about religious intolerance and violence, it needs to change popular, inaccurate attachments between religion and radicalisation. More than this, popular media and mediatised discourses of religion need to be informed by everyday religious or faith experiences.

The strategy I put forward for this was to conduct arts workshops with children, exploring their attachments to religion, social values
and ‘what really matters’, alongside focus groups and interviews with parents examining themes of identity, religion and belonging. This qualitative work was followed by a quantitative survey that established whether the qualitative data generated was reflective of broader community sentiments. This methodology has been refined in process, but the key components of the method were established in the initial bid and the qualitative findings are the substance of my discussion in this book. The quantitative findings are discussed elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, Horn and Garg, 2023).

My empirical research for this book began in 2016 with funding from the University of Sydney’s Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. This faculty grant supported an experimental pilot of my methods and ways of recording them, which formed the basis for the methods that feature in this book. This early work was undertaken at a community service provider in west Sydney. This organisation became an ongoing partner in the research, hosting three series of week-long workshops for children and follow-up focus groups and interviews with parents and carers. I was able to examine experiences of community, belonging, attachment, faith, belief and ‘what really matters’ in contexts as diverse as Manchester and London in the UK, and west Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide in Australia. Each of these sites is geographically and culturally specific in ways that shape residents’ experiences of community and belonging. The methods I developed for working with children and communities were employed consistently across all sites, with variations depending on available materials, environment and weather (see Hickey-Moody et al., 2021). At the time of writing, the project has 628 research participants, adults and children combined. I have run thirty arts-based research workshops (each taking three to four days) in Australia and the UK, and I have undertaken twenty-two in-depth interviews with parents or carers and twenty-four focus groups. Artworks made in the project have been exhibited in four exhibitions to date, with more planned.

As I have suggested, during my fieldwork I try to be as consistent as I can about the ways I invite children to make art, and the materials I give them. I have developed a set of nine workshop or lesson plans for encouraging collaboration through making, which scaffold and build on children’s skills. These lesson plans are designed to be implemented in sequential order and are discussed in my
methods chapter. The workshop structure I have developed supports debate and collaboration exploring values, beliefs, history and culture (Barker-Perez and Robbie, 2021; Vertovec, 2007; Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010) – the big stuff of life. After a round of failed papier-mâché and some pilot research questions that were too direct to elicit interesting or complex answers, I developed methods that have proven effective and enjoyable for children aged five to twelve, and which can also be modified to be used with different age groups. The artwork produced as a result of these collaborative making processes offers engaging windows into children’s experiential and imaginary worlds, and illustrates their values and experiences of daily life. Such windows into experiential and embodied worlds provide a unique base from which to build relationships with parents, carers and members of the community. Parents have usually heard about me through their children’s stories about their art-making before they actually meet me in person.

In this chapter, I introduce research locations and some key themes, while the following chapters explore my theoretical framework and then my methodology and methods, unpacking arts-based research and multi-sited ethnography in detail. I will begin by introducing the themes of faith and object attachment, as seen through the eyes of my research participant Philomena, who is describing her sacred wall at home:

There’s a saint everywhere, wherever you look. And ... so I knew – I always knew I wanted a place like that in my own home. When we first moved in, I made it. The Muslim plaque is from a Turkish friend of mine. We used to live in a unit and she was our neighbour and even at the unit I always had a religious spot, so that was a gift from her and so I very proudly put that up on my wall. I didn’t even give it a second thought – it was, ‘Wow, what an amazing gift, I’m going to put it up with the cross’, and I’ve had that cross since I was fourteen years old. So ... what else is up there? Oh, then there’s another plaque there, which I picked up, I remember which shop and everything and, that meant a lot to me, so I put that up on the wall as well. And these ones here, I went searching for a picture and I ended up finding these ... which I loved and I got my husband to put the shelf up, no questions asked. He didn’t say, ‘No, that’s not Muslim’ or whatever, just – yeah, it’s just a given, just ‘I want this, put it up’.

(Philomena, west Sydney, interview, 2019)
Like Philomena’s wall of saints, symbols and memories, adults’ worlds are made up of complex ways of beliefs, images and experiences. Of living and dead people, icons and places. Children’s worlds are also shaped by such images and memories, and by their very visual imaginations. Flying soccer balls that are ice-cream factories inside, cars with wings, mobile recycling plants, streets that are rivers: these are just some of the many inventions that children have offered up to me as examples of ‘what really matters to them’, their childhood version of Philomena’s special wall featuring ‘a saint everywhere, wherever you look’.

There are religious saints, social ideals and icons throughout the stories in this book. The social and cultural contexts in which my research takes place are united by complex, postcolonial circumstances and policy agendas that are racist strategies used to transmit cultural fear. These historical, sociocultural and political colonial contexts are the ‘big picture’ within which my research sites are located, but each site has a distinct demographic, atmosphere and sense of identity.

Places

West Sydney

My first site for the project was Auburn, in west Sydney, New South Wales. My trousers would stick to the train seat on the ride out west. Wollongong (my home when I started this work in 2016) to Auburn (where I was researching) is a minimum two-and-a-half-hour commute by train. Finally escaping the train, I would buy coffee at a hole-in-the-wall cafe and walk along the side of the station, taking in the wall-length mural featuring faces of people from different backgrounds and symbols of hope such as two large white doves, multi-coloured handprints and the words ‘peace’ and ‘love’. I’d stop and look at the fruit-and-veggie shops, wondering whether I would ever be inspired enough to cook again, and more than once I enthusiastically bought a mezze plate so big I couldn’t fit it all in. I really like Auburn. It has a feeling like you can be whoever you want and no one cares, a multicultural demographic and atmosphere, with streetscapes peppered with Lebanese, Ethiopian,
Vietnamese, Chinese and Greek grocery shops, cafes and eateries and various types of doctors and fortune tellers. Auburn is well known in Sydney as a multicultural area.¹

My research sites in Auburn were a settlement services association and a mosque. The settlement services association became a significant and enduring research site for the project. The service provider in Auburn and the mosque invited their communities to be involved in my research.

Auburn was always hot and busy and had a life of its own that carried me away. I was always exhausted, as there were significant numbers of children and families involved in my project. Parents brought me food, and I made friends with some English-speaking families and became acquainted with those who didn’t speak English. I had the most delicious Lebanese lunches and planned the details of workshops on train station platforms, while my ‘car next door’ rent-a-car was stuck in traffic, or while enjoying a respite from the heat on the Bankstown-line train. Chinese medicine clinics, migrant support centres, churches, halal cafes and money lenders are offset by the silhouette of the gorgeous Turkish mosque. It is a place where all kinds of people are making a life for themselves in all kinds of ways, which is freeing and interesting. I ran three three-and-a-half-day workshops, three focus groups and numerous follow-up interviews in a range of locations across the suburb over two-and-a-half years. It was enlivening, exhausting, rewarding and eye-opening to be welcomed into such a complex community.

Manchester

Blue and yellow ‘magic’ buses with free Wi-Fi and cartoon wizards painted on them, colourful corner shops selling everything from twine to tahini to halal meat, long walks along Chorlton Brook, and multiple visits to art-supply shops in the Arndale shopping centre: my second research location was Manchester. I had three research sites there: Levenshulme, Hulme and Moss Side. In terms of community life and liveability, Manchester is an interesting, engaging and very human place to undertake ethnography. The local shop owners in Levenshulme, where I was staying, got to know me; my colleagues at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) listened eagerly to stories from the field on days when I felt like my head was
exploding; and I felt grounded within the community. Levenshulme is the most gentrified area of Manchester I worked in. A former working-class neighbourhood, ‘Levy’ is rapidly developing a large middle-class resident base.\(^2\) Levenshulme is economically much more well-to-do than some of my other research sites, including the neighbouring sites of Moss Side and Hulme. My research sites in Levenshulme were in a primary school and a ‘kids’ club’ daycare facility. I recruited children and their families through these sites.

Not far from Levenshulme, but noticeably bleaker, Moss Side has a reputation for its history of gang violence, which came about in the 1980s as a result of the large council investment in social housing in the 1970s. A lack of accompanying education, training and development opportunities led to a lot of people with little money and little to do. Moss Side is much less dangerous now than it was in the 1980s, but it is still economically deprived and, broadly speaking, felt like a desolate place in which to work and live.\(^3\) My research site in Moss Side was a local primary school. The school was notably different from the other research sites in terms of its very strict attitude to discipline and an associated broader atmosphere of anxiety. The data from this school is quite different from the data from other sites, which are clearly connected thematically. Consequently, my work in this school is not a focus of the analysis in this book, but it does form the subject of my ongoing analysis elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, Horn and Willcox, 2023).

My third research location in Manchester was a fabulous primary school in Hulme.\(^4\) Floor to ceiling, the walls of the school corridors were covered in children’s artwork telling popular stories from British history (the Wars of the Roses, the Great Fire of London) and the narratives of famous Shakespeare plays (Hamlet, Macbeth). Soon after my first visit, the brightly coloured canvases that the children had made in my workshop took pride of place on the walls of the upper-primary reading room. The school had well-kept grounds and a genuinely inclusive culture. The communities in which I worked in Manchester are majority-white communities but significantly ethnically diverse (see footnotes for specific breakdowns). Despite this fact, my research participants in Manchester were mainly non-white; they were largely migrant families and not English speakers at home. They came from Somalia, Pakistan (often via Italy), Nigeria, Kenya, Syria, Yemen and China, and there was also one white Canadian
and one white English-born mother who took part in the work. The other research site in England was London, and two primary schools formed the location of my research in south-east London.

London

Grey streets with blue skies, street markets that sell vegetables by the coloured plastic bucketload alongside ladies’ underwear, the gentle sway of the Light Railway ambling over the river: my fieldwork in London was embedded in south-east London, not far from areas in which I had lived and worked previously. I have a familiar feeling for that part of the city and the kinds of communities that constitute it. My research sites were primary schools in Charlton and the Isle of Dogs. The primary school where I worked in Charlton shares the name of the neighbouring housing estate. The families whose children attend primary school are mainly the white working-class residents of the housing estate, who, in most instances, have lived on the housing estate for a couple of generations. Gentrification has transformed London, and although Charlton⁵ has a working-class history, and the estate and school in which my work was located are very clearly working-class, the area is gentrifying.

The Isle of Dogs is in the Tower Hamlets borough. Tower Hamlets is renowned for being one of the most multicultural areas of London. Some of the suburbs in Tower Hamlets include Blackwall and Cubitt Town, Millwall, Limehouse, Stepney, Old Ford, Poplar, Bromley-by-Bow and Bethnal Green. Tower Hamlets is huge and includes the shiny business district of Canary Wharf, as well as the residential areas named above. Within this broad and famously ‘multicultural’ borough profile, the primary school where I undertook ethnography for three years is part of the Millwall ward in the Isle of Dogs.⁶ Both London sites showed signs of gentrification and poverty mixed together. The next place in which I began my research was Adelaide, South Australia.

Adelaide

I grew up in Adelaide. For six years, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, I waited for my chronically ill father to die, so that I
felt able to leave. Adelaide is a city of 1.306 million people, and it operates at half the speed of most urban centres. Its highlights for young people include two shining mirror balls in the central shopping area, Rundle Mall, popularly known as ‘the Mall’s Balls’, and a green water fountain in the middle of the same shopping strip.

Our past is a place that lives on in all of us. I try to avoid Adelaide as much as I can. It reminds me of a childhood marked by violence, disability and conflict, a place that moves so slowly that one feels escape is impossible. Most of my high-school teachers were pathetically surprised when I was accepted into my university degree of first choice, and sitting in classes at the University of Adelaide, I remember looking at my female peers and wondering, ‘Are you filling in time until you get married and have kids?’ At the age of nineteen, I knew these were not my goals, but exactly how I was going to get out of Adelaide was not clear. I thought that maybe I would suffocate with grief and never escape. Whenever I go back there, I think maybe I still will.

Most of my research sites were chosen because they have a notably diverse population. This is only the case for one of the two research sites in Adelaide: the mosque. The first site I discuss here is a church that approached me. After hearing about my research, they invited me to come and work in their community. Although I was aware that their congregation was more white and middle-class than my other fieldwork sites, their views towards faith and religion added new perspectives to my research. My experience with churches in west Sydney was very difficult. All the churches I approached refused to be involved, and I was left crying in a hot street by a church administrator who told me I was ‘going to hell’ because I believed all people are equal. I had coffee with a pastor who asked about the ‘gay and lesbian radicalisation’ of children being undertaken in contemporary culture, and he wanted to know: was I able to fix this? I encountered suspicion layered upon suspicion. The Sydney mosque in which I worked welcomed me with open arms, as did the multiple mosques I visited on field trips to Manchester (fifteen in total and more shared meals than I care to count. I remember the imam at Manchester Central Mosque chasing after me with a bag filled with rice and curries for my dinner). Yet churches proved a completely different story. I not only hit a series of brick walls when trying to approach Anglican churches
in Sydney, I found the brick walls attacked me. Consequently, I felt that I could not refuse the offer of coming to work with a church in Adelaide, even if I risked accidentally drowning in a sea of grief with each return visit. The open and reflexive nature of this church community is most likely due to its liberal nature, which is embedded in its constitution; the many church stories that run throughout this book are from this wonderful community.

My second fieldwork site in Adelaide was a mosque and, in the third round of workshops, the church and the mosque came together and the communities collaborated across three days of art-making. The church that invited me is in Norwood, Adelaide.7 The church members with whom I worked were welcoming, and their church has a lovely outdoor garden and a well-equipped children’s Sunday School room. The second Adelaide suburb I worked in is not that much more ethnically diverse but of lower socioeconomic standing.8 The mosque is a huge hub for the Islamic community in Adelaide, with fantastic facilities and a warm and welcoming atmosphere. The mosque congregation is very multicultural, far more than the demographic of the area suggests, and the imam delivers all services in Urdu. Though the church site is less diverse than most of the other communities with which I work, by bringing the church group together with the mosque community, a rich community backdrop was formed that allowed for imagining the possibilities of how to create future cross-cultural collaboration.

Melbourne

I am based in Melbourne and my fieldwork sites here are ongoing. The first of these is in Noble Park.9 Driving through the sprawling suburb, houses look similar: new builds sold off the plan that quite suddenly appear out of nowhere. The local shops remind me of growing up in the suburbs of Adelaide. Things feel far away from Melbourne’s city centre here, with large houses and little to do within walking distance of the school. I wonder what the young people do for fun. I sip my coffee on a crisp August morning and get ready to meet the children. It’s cold in the community room, so I turn up the heating and unfold the making tables.

My site in Noble Park10 is an accelerated arts-based learning program for artistically talented children, which is also a skills and
mentoring training session for children that may need support outside the classroom for working on their creative talents. The program recruits from different local primary schools, so the children involved in my research are from a selection of local schools. The incredibly diverse nature of the participants in my focus groups, and their eagerness to respond to my questions about interfaith and intergenerational experiences, speaks to the complex nature of the program. It supports children in developing artistic talents, but it also offers a service that provides childcare on weekends and a space for mentoring and skills training for those who may not get this at home. It is hard to describe in words how engaging this fieldwork site is, which I go on to analyse further in a later chapter.

My second fieldwork site in Melbourne is in a gentrified inner-city area; a bilingual primary school that services the residents of a large council housing estate built on the same road as the school. Fitzroy is a suburb of contrasts. As I jump off the tram and walk around the corner to the school, the smell of old beer wafts from the cellar of the local bar. Workers are unloading kegs through the basement door. A tree-lined street features a mixture of well-to-do terrace homes, dilapidated share houses with couches and beer bottles littering front lawns, and the high-rise Atherton Gardens council housing estate, which stands imposingly out of the landscape. The people that pass me on the road vary from hospitality workers stumbling home at 7 am after their Tuesday nights out (‘hospo’ nights in Melbourne offer cheap drinks for service workers), a group of mothers in orange-and-pink headscarves dropping their kids off at school and a man in a suit getting into his BMW. This area is made up of differences. New immigrant populations occupy many of the council housing estates, while hospitality workers, students and professionals take up the area in different ways. The area is alive – thrumming with artists, murals, food and cultures. This primary school remains an ongoing research partner. The two Melbourne sites could not be more different in terms of the areas in which they are located, although both have mainly non-white communities who are non-English-speaking.

The final research site is in a suburb of Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). This Islamic school was also an originally unplanned research site that invited me to come and work with them.
Faith stories

Canberra

A sea of moving blue. As the research team drives up to the school, the sea of moving blue parts and groups of girls in light-blue hijabs stare while we lug our suitcase full of quilt materials onto the steps of the school office. The surrounding grounds are brown, and the school, likewise, had a greyish-brown appearance. In summer, Canberra has a monotone brown nature: dry grass, brown rolling hills. The houses near the school are clean and neat, alike in appearance. The brown school disappears amongst a sea of blue hijabs. The school doesn’t currently have an art program, so the children and teachers are eager to partake. It is worth noting that, due to the fact this is an Islamic private school, a lot of the students do not live in the local area of Weston but travel in. Consequently, the statistical profile of the area does not reflect the multicultural make-up of the school and my participants. The children in this research site were unusually focused and well-behaved. Excitingly, ABC Canberra, the local branch of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the national public broadcaster, featured the arts workshops on their television news and morning radio show during the 2019 fieldwork, bringing the Islamic school’s efforts to create intercultural community collaboration into Canberra’s media headlines.

As you can see, the Australian research sites span incredibly varied socioeconomic areas in west Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra. There are three notably middle-class areas: Norwood in Adelaide (South Australia), Fitzroy in Melbourne (Victoria) and Weston in Canberra (ACT). The differences between these sites and the lower-socioeconomic sites of the project, such as Noble Park, Moss Side and Auburn are stark, not just in statistical terms but in terms of the aesthetics of place, the values expressed, the children’s energy and modes of engagement. The Australian fieldwork sites are two primary schools, a charity, a settlement services provider, two mosques and a church. Some outreach has been undertaken with the Islamic Museum of Australia and art gallery exhibitions in Adelaide and Melbourne, with further engagement workshops and exhibitions scheduled. As noted, the fieldwork in the UK across Manchester and London was undertaken in three schools in deprived (Moss Side, Hulme) or working-class (Levenshulme) areas in Manchester and two schools in traditionally working-class
areas in London. Some outreach work in galleries also occurred in the UK, at P21 Gallery (London) and the Whitworth Gallery (Manchester) and several mosques across Manchester. As a result, the sensory scapes of the places in which the research was undertaken vary quite significantly, as do my experiences of working in and with these places.

**Orientations**

My research sites feature a broad selection of orientations to faith and religion, which range from engaging children and parents who belong to religious or spiritual communities as a recreational and/or devotional practice, to working with those who identify as secular, humanist or searching. For example, one research participant in Manchester stated she hated being called a ‘non-believer’; she said, ‘Look up at the stars – something’s got to be there’. While she isn’t religious, she clearly wants to believe in the possibility of other worlds or higher powers. I have developed a unified approach to thinking about the orientation of my research participants as a result of working with, and across, this range of different orientations to religion. The people involved in my research are all united by the fact that they have faith. Whether it is faith in the secular nature of society, faith in family, faith in God, faith in the promises of capitalism or faith in the belief that life is worth living, everyone maintains, and is maintained by, faith. In Chapter 2, I draw on Braidotti’s suggestion that ‘all beliefs are acts of faith’ (2008: 11) to argue that faith is an ontological state, an orientation and a capacity to act. I develop an affective notion of faith as a set of practices, an embedded emotional geography that choreographs subjectivities and communities.

Philosophies of religion often account for transcendental frameworks, as a religion is a belief structure; however, like Ammerman (2013, 2014), I argue that as much as it can be seen as being transcendental, faith is material – it is a capacity to act that is characterised by belief in the world that brings together those who identify as being religious or spiritual and those who do not. Faith in the truth of a secular perspective remains a form of faith.

To put this another way, I am working to open up, rather than close down, the plurality of ways we can think about faith.
attachment to include thinking about aspects of involuntary experience, non-verbal attachments, material and geographic actants, embodied and inherited memory and trauma. To use Raymond Williams’s (1977) famous phrase, I am interested in the ‘structures of feeling’ that make up faith.\(^3\)

For now, I want to situate my approach to faith as one that builds on this cultural studies tradition of understanding everyday life, and the structures of feeling that shape everyday lives. As I introduced above, my approach is aligned with Karl Kitching’s work, and Kitching draws on Saba Mahmood in advocating approaches to religion, and, I would say, faith, that are grounded in cohabitation with icons, images and symbols (Mahmood in Kitching, 2020: 6). It seems to me that neither Kitching, Mahmood nor I is for a moment wanting to objectify or essentialise experiences of faith and religion. Quite the opposite: I want to examine intersections between religion and culture, between class, race and faith, between material cultures and attachment. For example, a mother in one of my ethnographic sites in Melbourne is a newly arrived Australian who speaks Arabic. She wears a hijab and identifies as Muslim, yet does not identify as either Sunni or Shiite, and neither she nor her husband attends a mosque. Rather, they pray at home and have a designated prayer space in their house. I read this story as illustrating the broad range of ways people practise religion. Once, after I joined in with Sunday evening prayer, a mother at the Adelaide mosque asked me how I distinguished between ‘culture’ and ‘religion’. The nature of this question suggested to me that I was involved in questions of culture and not attentive enough to questions of religion. My answer to the mother at the time still stands: there is no universal dividing line between religion and culture; this distinction is different for everyone. As much as some people can clearly identify religion, other research participants say they are religious but may not have much knowledge about their religion. Everyone involved in this project defines distinctions between religion and culture differently, and the most consistent thing this project has taught me about religion is that everyone who identifies as ‘religious’ in some way does ‘religion’ very differently. Like the instance of the Melbourne mother above, not all Muslims attend mosques or, like the Manchester mother, not all ‘believers’ believe in God – some might believe in a higher
power that is evidenced by the stars. Across this broad spectrum of ways of knowing and believing, people are sustained by various forms of their faith.

Five years of conversations on this matter have left me with the conviction there can never be a right or wrong way, or even one definitive way, of categorising faith experiences. One person’s belief in a clear divide between culture and religion is completely disproven by another person’s unorthodox religious identity, which they nevertheless experience as being religious.

Conclusion

I have designed this book as an investigation of faith and belief systems in ways that respond to empirical experiences rather than theoretical framings. I hope this has resulted in an explanation of the systems of cultural value that articulate through faith. This book will provide a set of resources for those who wish to explore similar themes in complex social circumstances, either as ‘research’ or as ‘community engagement’. In such increasingly divided times, work like this is needed now more than ever.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how places live on in people, even when they leave them. The contexts of my ethnography are pasts and presents brought together in themes, experiences, colours, symbols, sounds, smells, the earth and the stars. Entangled with the places in which we live are complex histories and belief systems. Whether it was the harsh refusal of Sydney churches to accept my work, or the open arms of the mosques in Sydney, Manchester and Adelaide, affective moments have changed both the ways I conduct the research and also the ways I see faith unfold through everyday life, through people and place. I hope this chapter has given a glimpse into the richness and complexity of the diverse places and people with whom I conducted this research. May the saints that bless Philomena’s mantelpiece be a marker for the everyday lived experiences that faith has in making life worth living. Faith can, if you let it, mean that ‘there’s a saint everywhere, wherever you look’ (Philomena, west Sydney, 2018). Faith sustains people, and it is the most unifying aspect I have found across diverse populations. Because we all have faith in something.
Notes

1 Auburn’s population is 37,366 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016), and the average household size is 3.5 persons. It is rapidly gentrifying, with most of my research participants travelling ‘in’ to Auburn from further out west. Median monthly mortgage repayments are $1,733 and the median weekly household income is $1,240. (Please note all uses of the $ sign refer to Australian dollars unless otherwise specified.) The most common ancestries are Chinese (18.2 per cent), Turkish (8.0 per cent), Lebanese (7.3 per cent), Nepalese (6.1 per cent) and Indian (5.7 per cent). This was reflected in the constitution of my research group in Auburn, which had participants from China, Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. No participants were white Australian. 29.5 per cent of Auburn residents were born in Australia, and the most common other countries of birth are China (12.7 per cent), Nepal (6.5 per cent), Afghanistan (6.1 per cent), Pakistan (5.5 per cent) and India (5.0 per cent). The Auburn area is a migrant community, with 84.6 per cent of residents having both parents born overseas. This is reflected in my research, with only one family out of sixty having parents born in Australia. The most common religions are Muslim (43.0 per cent), no religion (15.5 per cent), Catholic (9.7 per cent) and Hindu (8.8 per cent). This diversity is also expressed through language, food and religion. Everyone speaks multiple languages, and many residents have very little English. Just 12.9 per cent of people speak only English at home. Other languages spoken at home include Arabic (13.3 per cent), Mandarin (12.0 per cent), Turkish (8.4 per cent), Cantonese (6.8 per cent) and Nepali (6.7 per cent). The community is broadly known as working-class, and this is statistically supported, with the most common occupations being technicians and trades workers (19.1 per cent) and labourers (18.0 per cent).

2 The 2011 UK census (UK Office for National Statistics, 2011a) states the neighbourhood currently has a population of 15,430 and its most common ancestries/ethnic groups are white (58.9 per cent), Asian/Asian British (27.8 per cent) and Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (5.1 per cent). The most common passports held are United Kingdom (73 per cent), no passport (10.8 per cent) and Middle East and Asia (7.9 per cent). In contrast to the low English-speaking population of Auburn, in Levenshulme 75.5 per cent of people speak English as their main language at home. This whiteness is expressed in artisan craft markets and ‘open garden’ days. 10.3 per cent of people have at least one person over the age of sixteen in their household who speaks English as a main language, and just 11.9 per cent have no one in their...
household who speaks English as a main language. The most common religions in Levenshulme are Christian (38 per cent), Muslim (28.4 per cent), no religion (24.6 per cent), religion not stated (6.5 per cent) and Hindu (0.9 per cent). A large proportion of my research participants here were either no religion, Muslim or Christian, which is reflected in the census data.

3 The population is 18,902. The most common ancestries/ethnic groups are white (32.8 per cent), mixed or multiple ethnic groups (7.3 per cent) and Asian/Asian British (18.5 per cent). While 65.2 per cent of people speak English as a main language at home, 19.5 per cent of people aged sixteen and over have no one in their household who speaks English as a main language. This shaped my focus group discussions, as we needed interpreters for a large amount of the discussion. The most common religions in Moss Side are Christian (36.2 per cent), Muslim (34.0 per cent), no religion (19.1 per cent), religion not stated (7 per cent) and Hindu (1.8 per cent). Household tenure in Moss Side consists of 44.2 per cent social renting (11.1 per cent of this group rents from the council or local authority), 32.2 per cent privately rented and 20.7 per cent owned home. The most common occupations in Moss Side are elementary occupations (22.6 per cent), professional occupations (13.8 per cent) and sales and customer-service occupations (13.6 per cent) (UK Office for National Statistics, 2011a; UK Office for National Statistics, 2011b). As this occupational profile suggests, Moss Side is still very much a working-class area.

4 The population of Hulme is 16,907. The most common ancestries/ethnic groups in this area are white (56.8 per cent), mixed/multiple ethnic groups (6.7 per cent), Asian/Asian British (16.9 per cent), Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (14.8 per cent) and other ethnic groups (4.8 per cent) The most common passports held are United Kingdom (65 per cent), Middle East and Asia (12.3 per cent) and no passport (9.4 per cent). Household languages in Hulme are reflected by the fact that 74 per cent of people aged sixteen and over speak English as a main language. 17.6 per cent have no people in their household who speak English as a main language, while 7.2 per cent of people have at least one English speaker in their household, but not all people over sixteen in their household speak English as a main language. Most of the participants in my project did not speak English at home. The most common religions are Christian (38.8 per cent), no religion (36.3 per cent), Muslim (13.1 per cent), religion not stated (7 per cent) and Buddhist (1.8 per cent). The household tenure in Hulme is 41.3 per cent privately rented, 38.1 per cent social renting (11.7 per cent of this group rents from the council) and 18.7 per cent owned home.
occupations in Hulme are professional occupations (23.6 per cent), associate professional and technical occupations (17.8 per cent) and elementary occupations (13.4 per cent).

The population of Charlton is 14,385. The most common ethnicities/ancestries are white (63.8 per cent), mixed/multiple ethnic groups (5.5 per cent), Asian/Asian British (13.6 per cent) and Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (15.5 per cent). Places of birth were United Kingdom (69 per cent), other countries (23.2 per cent), EU countries (6.5 per cent) and the Republic of Ireland (1.4 per cent). Passports held are United Kingdom (68.1 per cent), no passport (12.7 per cent), other Europe (7.2 per cent), Africa (4.4 per cent), Middle East and Asia (5.3 per cent), Republic of Ireland (1.7 per cent) and North America and the Caribbean (1.2 per cent). 79.4 per cent of people aged sixteen or over speak English as a main household language and only 9.4 per cent of people have no others in their household that speak English as a main language. The most common religions are Christian (47.2 per cent), no religion (29.4 per cent), religion not stated (8.4 per cent), Muslim (6.8 per cent) and Hindu (4.0 per cent). Household tenure is 41.1 per cent social renting (19.2 per cent of this of this group rents through the council), 15.9 per cent privately rented and 41.7 per cent owned home. 71 per cent of people are economically active and 60.2 per cent are employed, 5.8 per cent are unemployed and 5.0 per cent are full-time students. The most common occupations are professional occupations (22.8 per cent), associate professional and technical occupations (15.9 per cent) and elementary occupations (11.5 per cent).

My second research site in south-east London was not far away, in Harbinger Primary School in the Isle of Dogs, which has a more multicultural make-up than Charlton.

The population of Millwall is 23,084 and the most common ethnicities are white (52.4 per cent), Asian/Asian British (34.7 per cent), Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (5.6 per cent) and mixed/multiple ethnic groups (4.4 per cent). The most common countries of birth are the United Kingdom (47.9 per cent), other countries (38.5 per cent), other EU (12.6 per cent) and Republic of Ireland (1.1 per cent). The most common passports held are United Kingdom (57.8 per cent), other Europe (14.1 per cent), Middle East and Asia (13.8 per cent) and no passport (4.3 per cent). Household languages are broken down as follows: 62.2 per cent of people aged sixteen and over have English as a main language in their household, 23.4 per cent have no people in their household with English as a main language and 12.3 per cent of people have at least one but not all people aged sixteen or over in their household who speak English as a main language. The most common religions
are Christian (32.1 per cent), no religion (22.4 per cent), religion not stated (19.6 per cent), Muslim (18.0 per cent) and Hindu (4.9 per cent). Household tenure is 48.1 per cent of people rent privately, 27.5 per cent own their home, 20.6 per cent rent through social housing, 2.3 per cent have shared ownership (part-owned and part-rented). The most common occupations are professional occupations (32.2 per cent), associate professional and technical occupations (22.7 per cent) and managers, directors and senior officials (17.0 per cent) (UK Office for National Statistics, 2011a and b).

7 According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Norwood has a population of 3,322 and the average number of people per household is two. The median weekly household income is $1,485 and the median monthly mortgage repayment is $1,829. The most common ancestries are English (26.3 per cent), Australian (17.0 per cent), Irish (8.2 per cent), Scottish (7.2 per cent) and Italian (6.3 per cent). Over half the population of Norwood are people who were born in Australia (64.4 per cent). The broadly white nature of the area can be understood from the popular suggestion that there are ‘a lot of Italian people’ in Norwood – indeed, a whole 6.3 per cent of people with Italian heritage, which is obviously noticeable against a backdrop of white privilege. The most common countries of birth outside Australia are England (4.9 per cent), China (3.2 per cent), India (2.1 per cent) and Italy (2.1 per cent). Nearly half (43.2 per cent) of people have parents both born in Australia and slightly over one-third (36.3 per cent) of people have both parents born overseas. The most common responses for religion in Norwood are no religion (40.8 per cent), Catholic (18.7 per cent), not stated (11.2 per cent), Anglican (9.3 per cent) and Orthodox (4.1 per cent). Christianity is the largest religious group reported overall (46.8 per cent; this figure excludes not stated responses). Two-thirds (71.7 per cent) of people speak only English at home. Other languages spoken at home include Mandarin (3.6 per cent), Italian (3.2 per cent), Greek (2.8 per cent), Cantonese (1.1 per cent) and Hindi (0.9 per cent). The most common occupations are professionals (41.3 per cent), managers (14.9 per cent) and clerical and administrative workers (11.5 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

8 Marion is 10 km south-west of the Adelaide city centre. It has a population of 3,902 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The average number of people per household is 2.2, the median weekly household income $1,129 and the median monthly mortgage repayment is $1,517. The most common ancestries are English (28.0 per cent), Australian (25.2 per cent), Scottish (6.2 per cent) and Irish (6.2 per cent). In Marion, 68.6 per cent of people were born in Australia. The most common
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countries of birth for residents born abroad are England (5.6 per cent), China (3.5 per cent), India (2.8 per cent) and the Philippines (1.5 per cent). Slightly more than half (52.1 per cent) of people have both parents born in Australia and just over one-third (33.5 per cent) of people have both parents born overseas. The most common responses for religion in Marion are no religion (31.5 per cent), Catholic (18.8 per cent), Anglican (10.3 per cent), Uniting Church (10.2 per cent) and not stated (8.4 per cent). Christianity is the largest religious group reported overall (56.8 per cent; this figure excludes not stated responses). A majority of people (75.7 per cent) speak only English at home. Other languages spoken at home include Mandarin (3.3 per cent), Greek (1.3 per cent), Italian (1.2 per cent), Punjabi (1.1 per cent) and Cantonese (1.0 per cent). The most common occupations include professionals (23.2 per cent), clerical and administrative workers (15.7 per cent) and community and personal service workers (15.2 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Noble Park has a population of 30,998. According to the 2016 Australian census, the average number of people per household in Noble Park is 2.7, the median weekly household income is $1,108, and median monthly mortgage repayment is $1,500. The most common ancestries are English (10.6 per cent), Vietnamese (10.0 per cent), Australian (8.7 per cent) and Indian (8.3 per cent). Slightly over one-third (34.7 per cent) of the population was born in Australia. The most common other countries of birth are India (10.9 per cent), Vietnam (9.0 per cent), Cambodia (5.3 per cent) and Sri Lanka (4.4 per cent). In Noble Park, 76.5 per cent of people have both parents born overseas, while just 12.1 per cent of people have both parents born in Australia.

The most common religions in Noble Park are Catholicism (20.3 per cent), no religion, (17.0 per cent), Buddhism (16.4 per cent) and Islam (9.8 per cent). Nearly one-third (31.0 per cent) of people speak only English at home. Other languages spoken at home include Vietnamese (12.1 per cent), Khmer (6.8 per cent), Punjabi (6.4 per cent), Sinhalese (2.9 per cent) and Mandarin (2.4 per cent). The most common occupations in Noble Park are: labourers (18.5 per cent), technicians and trades workers (14.4 per cent) and professionals (12.9 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

Fitzroy has a population of 10,445. The average number of people per household is 2.1, the median weekly household income is $1,715 and the median monthly mortgage repayment is $2,286. The most common ancestries are English (20.4 per cent), Australian (15.6 per cent), Irish (9.5 per cent), Scottish (7.0 per cent) and Chinese (4.8 per cent). Just over half (53.3 per cent) of people were born in Australia. The other
most common countries of birth are England (3.9 per cent), Vietnam (3.3 per cent), New Zealand (2.9 per cent) and China (2.7 per cent). One-third (33.0 per cent) of people had both parents born in Australia and 40.7 per cent of people had both parents born overseas. The most common responses for religion are no religion (48.2 per cent), not stated (16.8 per cent), Catholic (13.1 per cent), Muslim (5.5 per cent) and Buddhist (4.1 per cent). No religion, so described, constitutes the main belief group reported overall (58.0 per cent). Well over half (61.0 per cent) of people speak only English at home. Other languages spoken at home include Vietnamese (4.1 per cent), Mandarin (2.5 per cent), Cantonese (2.1 per cent), Arabic (2.0 per cent) and Greek (1.6 per cent). The most common occupations include professionals (44.6 per cent), managers (16.6 per cent) and community and personal service workers (9.7 per cent).

12 Weston, Canberra has a population of 3,576 and is the best-resourced area in the research project. The average number of people per household in Weston is 2.5 and the median weekly household income is a generous $2,096. The median amount for a monthly mortgage repayment is $2,167. The most common ancestries are English (24.4 per cent), Australian (22.3 per cent), Irish (10.7 per cent) and Scottish (8.5 per cent). Over half (68.3 per cent) of people were born in Australia. The most common other countries of birth are England (3.9 per cent), India (1.4 per cent), New Zealand (0.9 per cent), China (0.9 per cent) and Pakistan (0.8 per cent). Slightly less than half (49.3 per cent) of people had both parents born in Australia and 27.6 per cent of people had both parents born overseas. The most common responses for religion in Weston are no religion (35.8 per cent), Catholic (22.4 per cent), Anglican (11.3 per cent), not stated (9.9 per cent) and Uniting Church (3.4 per cent). As a result, Christianity is the largest religious group reported overall (52.2 per cent). 76.1 per cent of people speak only English at home. Other languages spoken at home include Arabic (1.0 per cent), Mandarin (1.0 per cent), Urdu (0.9 per cent), German (0.7 per cent) and Italian (0.7 per cent). The most common occupations include professionals (35.4 per cent), managers (18.7 per cent) and clerical and administrative workers (16.5 per cent).

13 Williams developed the notion of ‘structures of feeling’ (1977: 128) in the 1970s to facilitate an historical understanding of what he called ‘affective elements of consciousness and relationships’ (1977: 132). Since then, the need to understand emotions, moods and atmospheres as both historical and social phenomena has become more acute in an era of social networking, and indeed this has become a key focus of the field of affect studies (see Coleman, 2018, 2020).