Introduction

In this chapter, I explain my research methods. They primarily consist of a multi-sited ethnography, which I extend with arts-based methods for young research participants. Arts-based methods are an excellent way of communicating complex information. Life experiences are not always able to be expressed in words, and often my research participants speak languages other than English, but the artworks they create communicate affectively, regardless of language. In this book, I examine stories from my qualitative data only, while my extensive quantitative data is considered elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, Horn and Garg, 2023). In my ethnographic work, I look for everyday stories and experiences of belonging, faith attachment and ‘what really matters’. These experiences are often expressed through images, words, memory, allegory, anecdote and collaborative exchanges. My approach to research, and to what is popularly termed ‘data collection’, is concerned with making space to recognise subjugated, non-mainstream knowledges. Making art with culturally and linguistically diverse children and talking to their parents is an everyday decolonising approach (Menon, Thapar-Björkert and Tlostanova, 2021) to a feminist, new materialist methodology (Coleman, Page and Palmer, 2019) concerned with the agency of experience, places, matter and things. My approach acknowledges the centrality and importance of vernacular culture (Fiske, 1989) and responds to the agency of matter and political landscapes that shape global flows of faith and local communities (see Harris, 2017).
My methodology recognises that meaning and communication are often non-verbal and are constituted in the vital present in ways that are shaped by complex political, social and cultural histories (Hickey-Moody, 2011, 2013, 2019). The methods I have developed de-centre dominant and, thus, often explicitly colonial stories, and physically and materially make space for affective communication through centring the voices that emerge from migrant communities. My materialist methods span a range of media and employ various making practices. These methods offer different articulations of my core theoretical position: that attachments and orientations are often experienced and performed unconsciously. Such methods may be best understood affectively, by working with the material and the unconscious. In what is to follow, firstly I explain my multi-sited ethnography as a feminist new materialist practice with a decolonial ethic. I then examine the methods – many of which are presented in the form of lesson or workshop plans – as a performance of my methodology. I also introduce the focus groups and interviews that I employed when working with adult research participants.

**Multi-sited ethnography**

Multi-sited ethnography is a set of practices popularised by George Marcus in 1995 to describe ‘ethnographies … both in and of the world system’ (95). Many scholars have taken up multi-sited ethnography as a method (Burawoy, 2000; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Kenway, Kraack and Hickey-Moody, 2006). The primary difference between what once might have been considered ‘classic’ ethnography and multi-sited ethnography is that multi-sited ethnography is a method for exploring relationships between communities across the globe. It enables researching global themes and patterns of experience, such as connections to religion or, in this case, faith. Multi-sited ethnography has been usefully critiqued by Ghassan Hage (2005) in a way that breathes life into the project of undertaking a multi-sited ethnography in transnational contexts. Hage makes some points of critique that I suggest can (perhaps unexpectedly) be read as explaining exactly why multi-sited ethnography might be useful. More than this, his perspective is grounded in practice in a way that brings the ethnographic experience to life. My eyes grew moist with...
tired recognition while reading Hage’s (2005) discussion of jetlag, exhaustion and the practical difficulties of international multi-sited ethnography. Often the logistics of multi-sited ethnography require more from a person than they can give.

Before discussing this further, I want to introduce my reading of multi-sited ethnography. I sketch out some of the ways we might come to understand a multi-sited ethnography as a:

less common mode of ethnographic research self-consciously embedded in a world system, now often associated with the wave of intellectual capital labelled postmodern, [that] moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse space-time. (Marcus, 1995: 96, emphasis added)

Multi-sited ethnography is embedded in more than one place. Ethnographic research is typically concerned with understanding culture from the ‘inside’ and developing site-specific knowledge about cultural meaning. In contrast to this, multi-sited ethnography looks for cultural meanings that are important in more than one place. It is a conversation between places that is made up of issues, attachments and experiences shared between sites. For example, all my research sites featured children who were worried about climate change, and parents who were interested in faith in unorthodox ways. Multi-sited ethnography finds resonances (and differences) across places, people, culture and things.

The central purpose of my ethnography is to map the circulation of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse space-time. This purpose is explained by Hage’s (2005) suggestion that when undertaking multi-sited ethnography, one must ‘treat all these locations, dispersed as they [a]re, as just one site’ (466). The global sites in which my ethnography is embedded are both world systems and lived experiences of cultural meanings of faith, objects, surfaces and identities. Systems of schooling, religions, the global politics of migration and associated migration services, are transnational structures that I have come to know through weeks and months of being embedded in their operations. Within and outside of these systems, I paid attention to the circulation of cultural meanings of belonging as well as meanings of faith, home and terrorism and of objects, such as the Virgin Mary, the headscarf, the altar and the
prayer mat. The cultural meanings, objects and identities that led my inquiry were defined by my research participants. They are not necessarily what I was ‘looking for’ in understanding faith communities, so much as what I found. Across the book, I explore the themes of young identities as defined in relation to friendship, religion, soccer, the spectre of adolescence and climate change. Even though these stories are told by many different voices across a variety of social contexts and places, their similarities are striking.

Multi-sited ethnography is an ethnographic practice that traces cultural meanings across sites. Without initially intending to, I have conducted an ethnography of children’s plans for combating climate change, as this theme came up as ‘what really matters’ to them. Therefore, I have explored this theme as part of an ethnography that explores faith, religion and belonging, community and attachment. All these themes characterise data from twelve sites and two countries. Multi-sited ethnography is a practice comprised of ‘strategies of quite literally following connections, associations and putative relationships’ (Marcus, 1995: 97). More than this, Marcus (2011) notes that multi-sited ethnography looks ‘beyond the situated subjects of ethnography towards the system of relations which define them’ (19, emphasis added), such as class, race, language, religion, gender and sexuality.

Class is expressed non-verbally through geography, taste and aspiration. Race articulates differently for everyone – there is no one way of being Bangladeshi-English or Palestinian-Australian. However, race is an enduring organising feature of subjectivity, religion and community life in the Australian and English communities in which I worked. Language, which is invariably tied closely to emotion, imagination and aspiration, is something I have worked to avoid relying on solely as a totalising system for exchanging information. I have tried to create ways of sharing information that also incorporate the non-discursive. The people involved in my project speak a wide variety of languages at home: Bengali, Urdu, Khmer, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Persian, Samoan, Rohingya, Arabic, Burmese, Maori, Bosnian, Tamil, Mandarin, Greek, Sinhalese, Filipino and Dinka, to name but a few. However, most people wanted to speak to me in English as much as possible, without interpreters. I was constantly told not to book interpreters, or I booked interpreters that participants did not want to use, as the opportunity to speak
English with a fluent English speaker was relished as an opportunity for language development. I protested that we should speak in the ‘language you think and feel in’, but, for the most part, my research participants did not care what I said – they wanted to practise their English with me and nothing was going to stop that from happening. They were understandably proud of the English they had acquired and preferred to talk using the few English words they had. Often, I left an interview or focus group trying to come up with a new strategy for involving interpreters in conversations.

The last three organising systems that I see as shaping research participants’ experiences of their social and spiritual worlds are religion, gender and sexuality. Religion is fabulously diverse, not just in terms of the number of different religions that exist, but also in terms of what constitutes religion for those who are religious, and indeed for those who are not. Differences between religion and culture are as divergent as individual people. As I have argued, those who are not religious are still sustained by faith: faith in capitalism, faith in doing the right thing, faith that there is something else ‘out there’. I went into this ethnography somewhat naive about how competitive some religious communities actually can be. Church and mosque communities are all very distinct – the church that was substantially involved in this ethnography is politically progressive and is very different from other churches I approached in my research. In no uncertain terms, the mosque communities in Australia and London were more welcoming and more genuinely interested in my work than the church communities. Within these communities, I have been part of really interesting conversations about differences and relationships between faith, religion and culture. Outside religious institutions, I have learnt about the porosity of religion in ways I never imagined. In writing this sentence I can see in my mind’s eye several mothers who changed how I thought about what it means to be Muslim. For example, a mother in an inner Melbourne suburb wears a burqa, and when I asked her about her religious practices, she explained that she prays every day. Not five times a day, but every day. I asked her about praying at her local mosque and she said she did not have a mosque, but rather prayed at home. She lives in an area with many mosques, but clearly was not interested in leaving her home to pray. This was not the only woman who identified as Muslim but did not belong to a physical religious
institution. A mother in south-east London offered a very similar account of her religious life, saying she prays at home, where she prepares food for her family and watches TV in her first language (Punjabi). She doesn’t know the names of any of the local mosques, nor does she visit them. These women are connected to their spiritual practices and have strong religious identities, but they are not part of networks that extend beyond their homes. These examples of faith belonging stick to me: they are everyday, vernacular ways of believing and persisting that have been developed to suit people’s characters and lives. These are the kinds of stories I found in abundance: stories that animate the unorthodox ways faith works in people’s lives.

Very few of my research participants say that their religion is their culture; rather, for most, it is a set of practices that reflects their beliefs. However, sometimes people’s religious lives occur almost entirely outside religious institutions. In west Sydney, I caught up for lunch with Reyhan, a research participant who had moved from Adelaide. I got to know her through my fieldwork in Adelaide and I would consider her to be a very religious person. Moving to Sydney had taken her away from her mosque community and introduced much longer commutes into her life: Sydney is a much larger city than Adelaide and is notoriously expensive. Reyhan explained to me that making prayer time was now much more difficult because she did not have a local mosque to which she was connected. She was having to bring a mat to work and pray there, and she missed having the community that a mosque brought with it, the community that her mosque south-west of Adelaide had been. Most of my Hindu research participants prayed at home with home altars, and those who were Buddhist or religiously hybrid (e.g. both Christian and Muslim), or ‘spiritual but not religious’, developed a sense of themselves as a spiritual person outside institutional life through reflection and intentional life practices. What struck me most when I began this work in 2016, and is accounted for by Ammerman’s superb discussions of finding religion in everyday life (2014), are these independently religious people, whose identities are religious, and yet who are not part of an institutionalised group (Ammerman, 2013, 2014). Ammerman suggests that understanding these people is a scholarly project that requires a turn to thinking about materiality. The places in which people pray, the icons to which they pray,
are their institutions. She explains, ‘[l]ooking for lived religion does mean that we look for the material, embodied aspects of religion as they occur in everyday life, in addition to listening for how people explain themselves’ (2014: 190). I follow this approach in my interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observations.

My research participants are involved in diverse communities: some are religious and some are non-religious, but they nevertheless remain sustained by all kinds of faith. Family homes animate faith in all kinds of ways, every day. While I often joined in prayers in Adelaide, Sydney and Manchester, I also really wanted to pop over for home prayer with many of the participants I met through schools who did not pray in institutional settings. As I go on to discuss, for the children in the fieldwork, religion is a transversal space characterised mainly by other worlds, or the possibilities of other worlds. Children worry about climate change and how to stop it, they are connected to soccer, and many think about ice-cream as much as God. They hope for futures that involve faith-based pilgrimages and places of worship, alongside developing the skills to stop the destruction of the planet. Believing something is possible – be it seeing God, or stopping climate change – is a huge act of faith.

Gender is a fundamental organising feature of human life. Like all people’s experiences of being human, for the children and adults involved in the study, gender shapes how they become who they are, how they relate to the world and form attachments to it. Gender orients people’s relationships to religion and faith practices. For example, a caring and engaged father in a church community in Adelaide was left feeling uncomfortable after we went for prayers in a mosque, having been separated from his daughter for the duration of the prayer. She had come with me into the women’s prayer area, but for him, parenting is closely linked to his spirituality, so praying is something best done with the family together. Another father in east London explained how his relationship with Islam deepened after his father died. For him, his religious identity was a way of feeling close to his father once he was no longer alive. He grew a beard and started wearing a taqiyah (Muslim cap). He took his son on a pilgrimage to Mecca. His masculinity and religion were very closely linked, as the way he had learnt to be a man, following his father, was to be a Muslim man. There are aligned stories to be told about women and the veil and the intimate relationship between the
gendering of religious practice and identity. Suffice it to say, everyone’s distinctive approach to religion or faith is intricately entwined with their gender identity.

Sexuality is the final organising factor that orients my participants’ lives. I explore this, along with a discussion of class, race and digital community in the chapters to come. Here, I briefly introduce sexuality as an organising feature of both children’s and adults’ subjectivities. Children’s sexualities are attitudes that shape how they take up space. They express their pleasures and desires in a sideways fashion (Bond Stockton, 2009). Their sexuality is ubiquitous. As ‘adults’ we are taught not to be interested in children’s sexuality, because any such interest is assumed to be perverse. Therefore, it can be quite hard to put into words the non-sexual experiences of learning about nascent child sexuality. Religion and sexuality are closely linked, as both are expressions of a person’s most intimate self. Stories about religion and sexuality that I have heard show that religion is almost a sexual experience for some, but also acknowledge how much more work needs to be undertaken in order for religious spaces to be able to accommodate and make space for discussions around sexuality (Rasmussen, 2017). Such conversations need to happen more often, as media discourses broadly construct sexuality as a secular concern, whereas my research, and indeed much other research on religious families and cultures (Ammerman, 2013, 2014), shows us that this is not the case: spirituality and sexuality are closely linked, regardless of religious and sexual orientation.

The organising features and contextual expressions of the world systems of class, race, language, religion, gender and sexuality create my sites of ethnographic investigation, along with the themes arising from the children of climate change solutions, football, friendship, intergenerational relationships and fear of homelessness. These themes are significant, as they point to other worlds, to relationships with adults, and identify a lack of trust in the adult world. The children’s faith in the idea that another world is possible (a world where we can stop climate change and eat ice-cream) is one of the most significant acts of faith I discovered. A focus on themes differentiates a multi-sited ethnography from other forms of ethnography. Multi-sited ethnography is a study of themes or experiences, and only secondly a study of place and individual identities.
Marcus (2011) operationalises an ‘understanding of the multi-sited field emerging from strategic collaborations with which fieldwork begins’ (23). He looks to study ‘distributed knowledge systems’ (24) in which ‘the object of ethnographic inquiry is ... moving’ (25). For me, this ‘moving object’ of ethnographic inquiry is often a symbol, colour, pattern, idea, practice, orientation or mode of embodiment. Marcus’s ‘distributed knowledge systems’ include school curricula, religious beliefs and practices and systems of governance (welfare, schooling, law). Ethnography therefore becomes, in part, the act of ‘stage managing in collaboration with connected events of dialogue and independent inquiries around them’ (Marcus, 2011: 28). This quote stood out to me because it explains the responsive nature of maintaining conversations across geographical places. Responsivity is critical when listening to resonances between children’s voices, cultures and engagements with systems in the UK and Australia. Below, I briefly discuss some examples of global circulating cultural meanings that frame my research, before going on to situate the political nature of my inquiry.

Circulating meanings of community and belonging

People experience community and belonging in diverse ways. In my fieldwork these include attachments to queer culture, being part of online single-parenting communities, work communities and volunteering communities, ethnic and religious communities, local and diasporic geographic communities, school communities and football communities. I developed my research methods specifically to ask about and understand people’s attachments to, and their experiences of, community, as well as to invite discussions of differences between perceived dominant discourses about lived cultures. Some of the many responses that parents offered when I asked them about their experiences of community include the following statements chosen from different research sites:

I live in Atherton Gardens (an estate), so I feel like I’m in the local community ... all the kids there. Yeah, I grew up there, went to school there, came to this school too. (Kirsten, inner-north Melbourne focus group, 2019)
Religion is something that sticks with you, I guess – and you don’t forget it. When you are taught it [religion], you just rely on it. And it does stick with you throughout the whole week and it doesn’t change. In the community it’s, let’s say, a way of belonging when you’re with other people, because I am Christian and Muslim. (Anna, west Sydney focus group, 2018)

I’ve been building a mums’ network community, of which I’d say I was strongly part of, which is part of a group of mothers in the Greenwich Peninsula. I’m deliberately focused on doing that. And also a group in East Greenwich for isolated women. And I’m just about to join a community of parents with mixed-heritage children. Because the parents don’t always have the heritage information, so it’s to come together and work around supporting each other and also sharing. (Emily, south-east London focus group, 2018)

My mum was training to be a reverend, so I would say that the Church of England and going to church was something that we would always do. I was in that community, until I had to start working on Sundays, so I had to drop my involvement in that community a little bit to get some money. But my daughter very much goes to church. My dad wasn’t very religious but he really gave support to mum, so I would say that’s progressive faith in itself. I think their work ethic is crazy and that’s rubbed off on me a little bit, so I would say that’s a community I’m closest to. (Jackie, north-west Manchester focus group, 2018)

My dad’s part of the Ahmadi Muslim community and they are hugely community-centred. So that is an absolute strength. There is this community focus, because it is largely Pakistani-dominated. I mean there are lots of converts from all around the world, it’s growing very fast. But there is a really, really, really strong sense of community and giving and service … Like if you were to go to any event run by this church community, it is amazing. There are always older boys manning the gates and I mean, it tends to be very gendered, which I don’t like. But there are girls just going automatically and helping with the cooking, kids and the minding. And there’s this real sense of village. And I feel like that is hugely lacking in Australia as a culture. (Samia, inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

For our community, we always do the open mosque day or something like that. We always open our hand, but we are afraid to go into like a general Australian like what they are doing. For us, because we want our kids to be brought up as an Aussie because they’re living here,
they have to be mingling with everybody. Not only in the Muslim community. So we put them in scouts which makes them able to interact with everybody, not only their friends, in their own groups. (Zahar, Canberra focus group, 2019)

These quotes give some indication of the diverse ways women – and in this instance, women from Melbourne, west Sydney, south-east London, Manchester, Adelaide and Canberra – experience community: through place, race, religion, family, history and recreation. A number of mothers taught ways of understanding cultural differences through food, like, for example, Sophie from Manchester who explains how her grocery-shopping experience has changed as a result of:

the amount of Black people, mixed-race people now because it makes it easier, you know to get yam, to get potato, cassava, things like that, okra. (Sophie, inner-south Manchester focus group, 2018)

More than anything else, I am interested in people’s experiences of community and belonging. Discourses and experiences of community and belonging circulate across the ways that both adults and children respond to, and engage with, my research methods. I developed the methods to understand, express and explore people’s experiences of community and belonging. Notably, community and belonging are different for everyone, and they are not something that people are always able to define explicitly: some might say they are an active member of the church, but until I ask about community, people often don’t use the word ‘community’. I read any sense of attachment to a collective as a form of community belonging, because while only some people will use the word community, everyone exists in relation to the communities to which they are attached (Hickey-Moody and Willcox, 2019). As collectives and experiences, community and belonging are as unique as identity. I define them through the words and artworks of my research participants, who express their own versions of community and belonging in myriad ways.

Children also develop a sense of community while working together through the collaborative methods I employ. An example of this can be found in my field notes from outer-east Adelaide:

Video making: The children paired up – one older and one younger – to make the videos introducing themselves and explaining their
special objects and things that made them feel they belong. They moved around their refuge tents with pride.

They took to making the videos of each other’s work very fluidly – while parents expressed concern that they would drop/throw the iPads, instead, they took care in choosing the camera angles. Pablo and Fraser used the zoom to focus in on their partners while they were explaining their artwork. This showed a clear engagement with the task and also an interest in recording each other’s stories.

The children leading this exercise really had to take ownership of their spaces and listen to each other. They worked as a team, were engaged and very respectful of the equipment. This collaboration through partnered video making showed their willingness to rely on one another and seemed a positive step in working towards exploring their understanding of community and belonging. (Fieldwork notes, September 2019)

Children in my research expressed community and belonging through colours, symbols and sounds, and most adults broadly articulated their experiences of community and belonging in relation to place and/or religion. One parent in the Adelaide church group characterised her experience of community by saying:

What was really nice about joining my church was the storytelling and making sense of the world and those kinds of things that come from religion. So, we both really thought this was important, as refugees from other religions. This community has been a place to talk to others, with other people, around values and ethics. And those kinds of things, the lovely things about religion, without the dogmatic aspects of religion. (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

An ocean away, in south-east London, a mother with a very different background and culture explained her belonging in terms of city geographies, ethnicities and heritage:

When people migrate they normally look for everywhere their community is. So like you said with Italy, the Italians have come to East London … why don’t they think of going somewhere in North London or somewhere, or South London? Because, you tend to find that people look for their own community. I’ve seen people who come from Australia, they look for South West London … from South Africa, Australia, you see lots of people, but they look for their own community, so that’s where their comfort zone is
or what they’re familiar with. (Samia, south-east London focus group, 2018)

Here, I have provided two examples in which community and belonging are defined by people of different races, ages, religions and communities across two different countries, and yet they share a focus on discussions of values, community and similar ethics. Community can be a region of a city in which you live, where people share your ethnic heritage. It might be a group of people with the same sexual orientation or a shared desire to discuss social and spiritual values. Community is all kinds of different forms of connection, and most people belong to multiple communities. ‘Your people’ may be those with whom you make meaning, or they may be those who hail from similar places. One Manchester mother expressed belonging in relation to a very broad sense of spirituality:

I don’t follow an organised religion. I’m spiritual, and I believe there is something bigger, and there’s a lot of similarities across ninety-nine per cent of religions. What I have an issue with is the way people in power use religion as a tool to make us fight against each other, when actually we’ve got a lot more in common than we’ve got difference. (Sandy, north-west Manchester focus group, 2017)

I saw a comparable sentiment in the words expressed by a Muslim man in Sydney who explained his belonging in relation to Islam and Muslim communities, while lamenting that Muslims as a collective are held accountable and scapegoated for the actions of those who do the ‘wrong thing’:

If one person is doing something wrong in the society, we shouldn’t put blame on every individual … we have been advised by our religion to do the right thing. If one person is doing the wrong thing, we should blame him, not the whole community. We should not … pass it to everybody. We should not blame the whole community. (Abdul, west Sydney focus group, 2017)

Religion is clearly a site of belonging for many. There were, in many instances, quite mixed feelings resulting from the identification of religious communities or beliefs as a primary site of belonging and the perceived and actual judgement of secular
others who believe religion is wrong. Secular people can enact a sense of superiority, which can make religious people feel embarrassed to identify their beliefs. Stephanie, a mother from Adelaide, explains this feeling:

*I went to church and nobody else who we hung out with went to church, I was definitely excluded because I was a ‘goody-two-shoes’. Because I was involved in the church, there was definitely a presumption about what I would do and wouldn’t do and how people should act around me and stuff like that. I was a teenager then, and even now, I wanted to get my kids baptised, have a christening because that’s how I’d kind of grown up. But then Brett wasn’t religious at all and both of us didn’t want to lie and so we didn’t want to go up there and say those words, we will bring up our children in the Christian way ... blah blah – and especially not lie in church, which is really wrong [laughs].* (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

While this candid statement frames the superior position so often taken by secular people (Rasmussen, 2015), there are also thinly veiled assumptions made about race and class repeatedly in the ways Anglo communities in Australia and England respond to and frame religion.

Spirituality and a relationship to God were expressed in multiple ways by my research participants, and these often excluded, or differed from, traditional divides between secularism and religion. See, for example, the following two statements:

*[I see] meaning as something that is, that’s constructed in groups between people and that’s what, if I was gonna use the word God, it’s like that’s where God is. Like when people get together to make meaning about the world and yeah. That’s my storytelling and meaning making.* (Inner-east Adelaide focus group, 2018)

A mother from Manchester expressed the significance of spirituality:

*We’re bringing up Rose very much, if she asks, ‘Is there a God?’ we say, ‘We’ve not got the arrogance to say we full [sic] know.’ And I don’t mean that in a bad way to anybody else, but we don’t know.* (North-west Manchester focus group, 2017)

As these quotes show, conversations about the co-creation of meaning, geography, location, ethnicity, heritage, spirituality and religion are key factors in determining the ways community and belonging
are experienced. I explore aspects of community and belonging in greater detail later in this book, especially through the lens of children’s artwork and adults’ narratives of religious subcultures. Children’s art and their worlds, as uniquely expressed through their artwork and their identities, are core subjects that I examine across ‘diffuse space-time’ (Marcus, 1998: 79). I explore these themes through the idea of childworlds, and art as the medium through which childworlds are primarily constructed.

Childworlds

One of the most important operationalising concepts and practices in my methodology is to work towards being in children’s worlds with them. Make-believe is often central to children’s art practices. The capacity to invent imagined worlds and to reimagine their own realities is key to children’s making and understanding, which facilitates the collaborative making process that is at the heart of my methodology for working with children. Inquiring into the ways child participants understand and negotiate place-based religious discourses and mediated representations usually prompts discussion regarding the extent and nature of young people’s media engagement and mediated engagement practices. The increasing deindustrialisation and gentrification of a number of the fieldwork sites in both Australia and the UK prompt consideration of the ways children feel they identify/do not identify with their home and community (as evidenced through their own observations and artwork creation) and how and why this is potentially shifting. As this book progresses, I examine the collaborative works made by children in this light, mindful of Kitching’s (2020) insightful observation that:

children find various ways of negotiating differences, conflicts and ambiguities that are present both within and across religious and secular settings ... they grow ‘sideways’, finding creative ways of negotiating their own differences, knowns and unknowns within and beyond adults’ religious/secular representation of the world. (25)

I continually question how I can best bring out the everyday cultural politics of the ‘cultural meanings, objects and identities’ (Marcus, 1995: 96) that matter to children from their artworks. With this as a
primary and organising focus of my work, I have found that homelessness, climate change/global warming, soccer, friendship and ice-cream are the subjects and objects that matter the most to the largest number of children I have worked with across Australia and the UK. As I will go on to suggest, these topics and objects have more to do with faith, belonging and growing up than we might think.

Matter as method

The matter of making together brings into being shared visions of life made by children from often quite different cultural backgrounds. The matter of drawing can show intimate experiences in ways that cannot be codified into words. Doing and being both matter and make matter in ways that can consistently provide complex alternatives to contemporary ‘legacies of coloniality’ (Mignolo, 2007: 452). For Walter Mignolo (2000), the ‘decolonial’, as opposed to ‘postcolonial’, is a word he uses to describe oppositional practices by ‘people of colour’, ‘Third-World intellectuals’, and ‘ethnic groups’ (87). Mignolo (2007) defines decoloniality as a movement ‘away and beyond the post-colonial’ because ‘decolonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy’ (452). For Mignolo, decoloniality is a method for breaking away from ‘contemporary legacies of coloniality’ (452). However, he locates these practices in relation to a now historical concept of west Europe. The project of undertaking a ‘programmatic delinking from contemporary legacies of coloniality’ (Mignolo, 2007: 452) needs to be undertaken in a fashion that is more context-specific than writing against Europe. As a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, I believe that Europe as it is currently defined certainly cannot be held synonymous with all colonial power. Europe is partly constituted by decolonising flows of migrant bodies and languages, which have agency and whose stories must be told. Ireland is a decolonised republic. I also see close relationships between the projects of postcolonialism and decolonialism and argue that they are complementary.

Consequently, my decolonial feminist new materialist methodology is unorthodox: drawing on Rosi Braidotti’s (2018) affirmative ethics of generative scholarship, I bring together aspects of
postcolonial politics and practices with a ‘programmatic de-linking’ (Mignolo, 2007: 452) of ideas that haunt Mignolo’s suggestions that contemporary Europe as a whole can be held responsible for the colonial agenda, and that the postcolonial should be seen as distinct from the decolonial. I contend that the two positions bring complementary perspectives and can be mobilised in unison. After the thought-provoking work of Hinton et al. (2015) and Leppänen (2018), I take up Hinton’s scholarly agenda that:

race and the very processes through which racialized bodies come to matter (in both senses of the word) still have to be considered as areas that are underrepresented in many new materialist approaches. It appears that new materialisms still miss a strong link with post and de-colonial theories, as well as with critical race and migration studies. (2015: 1)

Hinton et al.’s call to embrace decolonial theory brings a much-needed perspective to both new materialism and decolonial theory, as new materialism needs to consistently address issues of race and intersectionality, and decolonial theory needs to avoid creating false binaries between a historicised ‘Europe’ and decolonial ‘other’. Contemporary Europe is filled with migratory flows and non-white citizens. It is inaccurate to cast contemporary ‘Europe’, the European Union, as a white colonial entity. Parts of Europe, such as the Republic of Ireland, are constitutionally decolonial. Decolonial bodies and refugees map movements across Europe that call us to attend to their presence. Further, colonisation is not confined to Europe, and neither is all of Europe ‘colonial’. Decolonial theory looks to break the reproduction of colonial power. In order to do this, we have to listen for the voices of decolonial subjects in both ‘colonised’ and ‘colonising’ places. I do this through a focus on material, geographic, cultural and sensory scapes created by, and bringing together, the largely non-white communities with which I have worked since 2016.

While postcolonial theory rose out of Indian scholarship and politics in Asia (Spivak, 1983; Chambers and Watkins, 2012), decolonial theory has emanated from South America and, more recently, the Republic of Ireland (Feldman, 2018; Gray, 2004; Ignatiev, 1995; Meaney, 2010; Ó Cuinneagáin, 2018) and France (Vergès, 2021). The central premise of postcolonial theory is aligned with the goals
of decolonial theory and can be thought about as a way of redressing the cultural, political, aesthetic, economic and social impacts of colonial rule across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its impacts on contemporary life, values and subjectivities.

Bringing a new materialist lens to thinking about decolonising practices and communities, I have worked with the primary materiality of decoloniality: bodies, their physical objects of attachments, their places of belonging and, following on from this, their stories of diaspora. To avoid historically specific constructions of colonial Europe, the immigrant and migrant communities now living within and across the European Union need to be recognised along with the decolonising activities of Europeans, some of whom, such as those in the Irish Republic, have been resisting imperialist notions of colonialism for decades. In the context of Australia, Indigenous peoples and their long history and relationship with immigrants predates European invasion and needs to be acknowledged and given ownership. Colonisation is being contested in everyday ways in diverse communities and we all need to tell these stories of contestation, along with existing histories of successful revolts such as those fought on Aboriginal lands today. Some matter is inherently resistant to a colonial agenda – it can indeed be resistant to all agendas – instead remaining as an often-unifying connection across language, culture, past and present, and many geographic places.

Across the materiality of making with children, and group and individual conversations with adults, I have listened for stories that de-centre or question colonial or colonising dominant narratives. This is an everyday decolonising way of doing and making, new materialist research, the methodologies for which are detailed below.

**Arts-based methods for working with children**

Art offers a way for children to express themselves non-verbally but, more than this, making visual art creates a space for contemplative reflection and collaboration. Such a space can provide opportunity for critical thinking, and for expressing feelings and illustrating imagination in ways that conversation alone can fail to provide. Building on my work on affect as method (Hickey-Moody, 2011, 2013, 2015), I take socially engaged art practice as a cultural
pedagogy or process, and as a text that has the capacity to change culture. My work (Hickey-Moody, 2009, 2013) has been inspired by an ethos of practice popularised by the phrase ‘the social turn’. This name was first used around 2005 (Bishop, 2005) to describe the rise of socially engaged art that is collaborative, participatory and involves people as a medium or material. In her now classic 2005 essay ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents’, historian Clare Bishop argues that art which operates under the umbrella of the social turn tends to happen outside museums or galleries, although this is not always the case. Because much of the art produced through socially engaged practice is collaborative and focuses on constructive social change, it is rarely commercial or object-based. Rather, it is about process, about making feelings, ideas and relationships. Social practice is ostensibly about making the social matter, and the artform is the practice of making the social into matter. Consequently, socially engaged art practice is more than an engaged aesthetic – it is an invaluable political resource. It is a means through which people and, in my work, children in particular, can communicate complex ideas. Art can make complicated issues visible, as it communicates through images, icons, feelings, colours, textures and sounds. It moves us to feel positively or negatively about subjects.

The arts-practice workshops with children designed for the Interfaith Childhoods project were the first stage of my empirical data collection and were the way I developed relationships with communities. As I have suggested, the data collected from these workshops and parent focus groups forms the substantive focus of my analysis in this book. The arts workshops occurred in a location that was already embedded in the children’s worlds – either their school, their religious institution or a local service provider. I designed the workshops to support children in thinking about and expressing their opinions and experiences individually, and then to develop collective visions of the future and community life.

In most instances, the workshops employed the same (or very similar) media in all the research sites and followed a similar order of events. Each workshop was prefaced by a plenary discussion in which I led the children through an exploration of their responses to (and existing knowledge of) the subject with which the day’s workshop was concerned. The topics ranged from identity, belonging and
values, to ‘what really matters’ and ‘imagining a future city’. These discussions resulted in the children’s main ideas being written on a whiteboard and then drawn on as a resource for art-making across the course of the workshop.

The workshops were broken into sections. Workshop one focused on expressing feelings visually through line, shape, form, tone, colour and texture. I began by asking the children to draw a self-portrait and to think about the ways that they could show their character, their history, and their culture by using symbols, colours, textures and so on. Often, I started by asking children to make some ‘feeling pictures’ – drawing feelings of ‘happy’, ‘sad’, ‘angry’ and so on. Then, taking their newly practised expressive drawing to their identity pictures, children were asked to represent visible and invisible parts of their identity. This included aspects of subjectivity or identity, such as language, heritage, religion, taste and personality. Children drew these things in all kinds of ways, and their modes of expression were significant: they expressed their imagined worlds, tastes and attachments.

After completing their self-portraits, the children were invited to work in pairs and to collaborate on drawing a ‘values picture’ examining ‘what really matters’ to them. These value pictures were ‘doing’ actions – they were about things like helping, caring and stopping climate change, whatever the children thought was most important. The work of sharing a page with someone else was quite difficult for many of the children, who were aged between five and twelve. Most, but not all, were used to drawing, but few had consciously shared a piece of paper and collaborated with another person to make a shared drawing or piece of art. The nature of the task required not just sharing a page but also collaborating in relation to the idea being drawn, navigating who drew what and where and so on. After the pictures were drawn with partners, I asked the children to make groups of between four and six, depending on the total size of the class or group. These groups were asked to bring all the things ‘that really matter’ together in one large group image of the future. This ‘future’ was painted collaboratively and comprised places and objects that the children chose. These included: a flying recycling station, a flying mosque, flying cars, streets that are rivers (in order to stop climate change), housing estates that have ice-cream machines, zoos, churches, temples, parks and airports.
These world-making exercises were followed by discussions about why certain things were included in the cities, and the children’s answers demonstrated visions for future civic practices. For example, children in Manchester defined value as ‘love, respect, cooperation’. When I asked them what mattered most, they said ‘friendship, education, family, different countries – some countries are different from others’ (south-east London, 2017). The children identified the fact that ‘kindness’ was needed and ‘generosity’ was needed when some countries do not have enough food (north-west Manchester, 2017). Respect and understanding differences were brought up repeatedly by children when discussing what really matters in the community. These kinds of self-reflexive conversations were what my collaborative art projects were designed to create.

I explored three-dimensional art with children in the second round of workshops. The media I initially employed to work with three-dimensionally was changed in the later workshops. It began as papier-mâché but then moved on to tents and mobiles. My first attempt at papier-mâché three-dimensional shapes took place in summer in west Sydney, which is notoriously hot. We made globes: papier-mâché balloons that were again intended to result in imagined worlds made up of what mattered the most to the children. These papier-mâché balloons were painted in colours of the children’s choosing, varnished and adorned with collaged symbols of ‘what really matters’. These symbols were pictures, words and various semiotic forms of communicating values. I bought strings of LED lights to wrap around the globes so they could become bedroom decorations and night lights. There were rainbow-coloured globes, national flags, drawings of different places and imagined ‘worlds’, which included landscapes, symbols and people and animals. Covering the balloons with papier-mâché took hours. At home, I sat up late in my little local Airbnb loft bedroom trying to ‘catch up’ the balloons that needed more work, patch up errors and reinforce surfaces. Three-dimensional modelling clay has replaced papier-mâché in the craft world, and I wondered if I should have made modelling-clay globes. Even sourcing the materials for papier-mâché was difficult. Newspapers and PVA glue were not able to be procured from anywhere near the University of Sydney, where I was working at the time. I was distressed to discover that the young staff working in the university newsagent had not even heard of the...
university student magazine, let alone thought about stocking it. A large pile of Greek and Lebanese community newspapers from a grocer in west Sydney and four industrial-sized bottles of PVA glue from a craft superstore further out west finally solved my dilemma. This process stood in stark contrast to buying six canvases for the first workshop series, along with paper, paint and pastels, which was fabulously easy. At the community organisation where the fieldwork was taking place, children fell in love with the viscosity of PVA glue. While I had bought what I thought was enough to see me through most of my Australian fieldwork, and carefully poured what I thought was the appropriate amount out onto plastic plates, the children poured out more. They poured one liquid (glue) onto another (paint). They poured blended liquids onto balloons. They found and emptied bottles. They poured because they loved pouring. They squelched paper into the PVA and made globes that had accidental lumpy and spikey bits that I tried to smooth out. I sat the soaking wet creations in the sun and hoped they would dry. Some collapsed in on themselves and some survived. One would think I may have learnt my lesson and moved on slightly more quickly. However, it took even more time spent making papier-mâché balloons in an Airbnb in Manchester in a very wet and drizzly English ‘summer’ to establish my conviction that papier-mâché was untenable (see Hickey-Moody, 2019). Papier-mâché takes some time to dry in the Australian summer; however, it simply does not dry at all in the English equivalent. Looking for alternative options, I decided to try adorning tents with the symbols of what really matters, rather than decorating papier-mâché globes.

The tents brought with them new possibilities: interiors and exteriors, mobiles and play spaces. They brought a world with them. Tent cities speak of places of refuge, and I worked with the children around themes of refuge and home, but also empathy for others who have less than us. How do we make places that accept difference? What would an architecture of empathy look like? These were questions I asked the children and they responded through making. The tents also brought with them possibilities for play. Children filmed each other playing inside the tents, explaining their symbols about what really matters to them and why, and also living out their imagined worlds, which extend to gardens, views and broader community life. For example, Figure 3.1 depicts the home/
refuge decorated with symbols of ‘what really matters’, a vegetable garden built outside the home, and a ‘view’ that can be seen from the imagined home.

In the third and final round of workshops with children, I used textiles and digital animations. The textiles work was a process of making a quilt, a large colourful patchwork sheet comprised of children’s stories of home. Developing these large patchworks took some time – each child usually practised what they wanted to draw onto the textiles on a sheet of paper first. The child artist was asked to choose a patchwork square in a colour they liked. After experimenting with different ways of decorating the fabric, I decided that drawing onto the fabric with felt-tip pens was the easiest way to create images and narrative. These pens came in a huge range of colours, so children could choose how they represented their geographies of belonging. The glitter pens were always in huge demand – especially the gold glitter pens (Coleman, 2020). Children drew maps of their favourite places and remade geographies of belonging that brought together their favourite places, people and activities on a square of
material. I invented little homework packs that included a selection of decorative materials, a coloured fabric square and a worksheet for parents/carers and children to do together, exploring family stories of migration and mapping family history. Once each child had made two squares, one square alone and one with an adult, the fabric squares were stuck together on a sheet (see Figure 3.2). The co-location of everyone’s belonging geography had a very powerful effect. Suddenly all the different stories were one: together but distinct.

In most instances, I followed the patchwork geographies of belonging with a workshop on digital animations about identity. Here, children returned to the themes of the visible and invisible aspects of their identity and explored what they felt makes them ‘who they are’. Each child was given an iPad and a stylus, and the drawing happened using the application Procreate, which is designed specifically for digital art. Procreate records the drawing process, so once children finished drawing their ‘identity picture’, the application could play back the process of drawing, creating an animation of their identity story. I then worked with the children to write down the story of what they had drawn and recorded them narrating the story out loud. Exporting the animation and the narrative account of the animation into iMovie, I merged the two
together to make a narrated digital animation. The children’s voices brought their artworks to life with a depth and vivacity that is hard to communicate in written words.¹ The identity stories, conversations and imagined worlds generated through working with children form the focus of discussions in later chapters. The other key modes of qualitative data collection that have informed this book especially are the focus groups and follow-up interviews.

Focus groups and follow-up interviews

After completing at least three days’ worth of collaborative making, children took home invitations for their parents to join me in a group discussion about community values. These focus groups were sometimes one of the only times parents met each other, and were again held in places that were embedded in the children’s worlds, such as school staff rooms, classrooms or community spaces attached to a place of worship/religious building. The focus groups always featured food, and wherever possible this was a shared, halal meal. In Australia, I always started the focus groups with an acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the country, and in both Australia and the UK, I started the focus groups by acknowledging my own intersectionality and complex attachments to religion. I then asked participants to introduce themselves and include their name, country of origin, cultural background and their religion, if they had one. I then facilitated a themed discussion and tried to ask the following questions. I didn’t always have time to ask each of these questions to the group; the number of questions I was able to ask depended on the number of people taking part in the focus group and the amount of discussion that took place. The questions were broadly organised around three themes: identity, community and belonging/exclusion. All focus groups were conducted in English with the support of interpreters.

1 Can you tell me what role religion plays in your life? For instance, does it influence how you organise your day or determine what your special places are and the significance of celebration dates?

2 What values do you share with people from different faith backgrounds?
Can you tell me if you feel like you belong to a community, or a few key communities, and if so, what they are? (They don’t have to be Australian/British.)

Do you feel part of a broader Australian/British national identity? What does being Australian/British mean to you?

Have you experienced racism/exclusion because of your cultural or religious identity? Can you share an example with us?

What do you think will help us develop a more inclusive community that appreciates religious differences?

These questions were answered in very diverse ways, and I discuss the core themes that arose from the focus groups’ discussions in the following chapters.

All of the research participants in the focus groups were also invited to undertake follow-up one-on-one interviews, and at least one person per focus group accepted this invitation, often more. Interviews took place in a location chosen by the participant. These ranged from their home to schools or their mosque. Through the interview questions, I explored religion, faith, identity, community and belonging. The questions that I asked were:

1. Can you tell me about what your ethnic or religious identity means to you?
2. How important is religion to you? Could you please elaborate?
3. How closely do you follow the traditional teachings of your religion/faith?
4. How would you describe yourself (e.g. strict, relaxed, orthodox, devout)?
5. What do you consider the most important values of your religion/faith to be?
6. Can you tell me about how religion is a part of your life? For instance, is it part of how you organise your day, what your special places, dates and celebrations are?
7. Does the internet/social media play a role in the way you practise/experience your religion?
8. What are some symbols that signify/represent your religious identity?
9. Can you tell me if you feel like you belong to a community or a few key communities and if so, what are they? (They don’t have to be in Australia/Britain.)
10 What role does religion play in how you feel connected to communities?
11 Do you share values with people from different faith backgrounds? If so, what are they?
12 How comfortable do you feel engaging with people from different faith backgrounds?
13 What are some of the challenges of being a person from your faith background? Can you share a story with me?
14 Do you feel part of the broader Australian/British national identity? What does being Australian/British mean to you?
15 Have you experienced racism/exclusion because of your cultural/religious identity?
16 What do you think will help us develop a more inclusive community that appreciates religious differences?

The first five to eight of these questions formed the basis for the focus groups, and the second eight formed the basis for the interviews. Some overlap usually occurred in order to build on what had been discussed previously. In focus groups and interviews, I focused on trying to make space for connection. Sharing happens in lots of different ways, and I saw my role as holding space to create connections between people, especially between myself and others.

**Conclusion**

Often when I drop a pebble in a body of water, I notice how it makes a series of small ripples. As these ripples get larger, smaller, slower circles spread out from that initial point of contact. I imagine that my research methods make a similar pattern. The little stone I drop in the water is my ethnographic observations and collaborative art-making with children. But, by putting this detail into some sense-making context and adding perspective, focus group stories and individual interviews illustrate larger patterns of experience. Multi-sited ethnography is useful because it helps with finding common ground between diverse places. Art gives children ways of expressing complex experiences, and in focus groups and interviews I work to create space in which parents and carers can share ‘what really matters’ to them. In the following chapters, I explore...
resonant themes that run across children’s stories from the arts
workshops and the parents’ stories from the focus groups and inter-
views, with a view to thinking about how methods enable thinking
and making across sites.

Note

1 See www.interfaithchildhoods.com (accessed 19 October 2022) for
some examples of the animations.