Faith and children’s art are a means through which people create and explore the possibilities of other worlds. Both faith and art are interested in how things might be better, both in this world and after our death. Cusak suggests that ‘many stories have the potential to be read as transcendent and uniquely meaningful (as mythology, theology or other explanatory narrative) by certain individuals and groups’ (2016: 575). This statement brings together old and new faith systems and creative art practices. For example, children often make art about popular cultural stories (video games, fictional characters) and these artworks might simultaneously include comments about the way they wish the world was. For example, they often imagine a world in which we can actually stop climate change, or a world where housing is not a problem. Faith has often served similar functions in the respect that it can be a way of hoping for a better life during trying times. In this chapter, I explore the theme of other worlds, as it explains why people maintain their faith and what children often make art about. I examine the appeal of faith as a way to imagine a better life: both a life after death and a better way of having life now. I then move on to consider the roles that other worlds play in children’s artwork: both fantasy worlds that children wish were real, and the act of making art as a way of envisaging changes that could be undertaken to make our world a better place.
Faith in other worlds

In what follows I explore parents’ sentiments about the ways their faith connects them to other worlds, and/or is a resource on which they draw in order to reconnect to their world.

Ahmed: Being in God’s hand is like that, sometimes in your life, your parents put you into God’s hand and then you practise God, you go to the church, you go to mosque and then sometimes you fall out of that area because you’re following the wrong people. Then comes a stage of your life where you realise ‘ah, I’ve been [off], I need to go back to the same spot, I need to reconnect’. So you reconnect. […]

Philomena: It gives you calm, it makes you relax, that’s important – Ahmed: Absolutely. There’s a bigger picture than what we see – Philomena: You rely on someone stronger, someone out there, you ask them what about happiness? Okay, don’t worry, I’m in safe hands, I’m in a safe place.

(Philomena and Ahmed, west Sydney focus group 2018)

Philomena and Ahmed’s discussion shows us that they rely very much on their relationship with more than ‘what we see’. Indeed, their happiness comes from being in the ‘safe hands’ of a God that neither they, nor anyone, can see. This relationship with the unseeable God also shapes their relationship with death. Ahmed and Philomena are not alone here, as this subject was picked up in other focus group discussions:

Rahmatollah: The thing is that following religion, especially for me, makes it more meaningful and gives me more motivation to live, it’s more meaningful, my life. When I think about life after death, it makes me a little bit of sadness. It’s very depressing. But when I think about the war, about the universe, everything, everything, it’s like everything is like, must be controlled by some very strong person like God.

(South-east Melbourne focus group, 2018)

Rahmatollah deals with his fear of death by believing in God. More than this, for Rahmatollah, God helps him reconcile injustices that otherwise cause him great distress (such as war). The idea of a ‘very strong person like God’ is clearly not only sustaining, but it is also required to combat the sadness or depression that can accompany
contemporary life. Similar experiences were shared by women from the same community, who felt not only that their relationship with God was sustaining, but a range of kinds of spiritual practices supported their day-to-day life in different ways:

Patrizia: I used to go to a [yoga] class, to a lady in Glen Waverley. She was very good and she was very spiritual. It was a good grounding experience, you know?
Maria: I think death is really interesting in terms of spirituality, because I think sometimes when people are dead, they're not there anymore but you feel like they're still there.
Patrizia: Yes.
Maria: And that's really a funny feeling.
Patrizia: For me, they've gone back to God. Yeah, it is a funny feeling. And if you really think about that, it's that funny feeling with God as well. And it's hard to describe. It's a presence. It's a presence.
Anna: When people aren't here, can you still feel their presence?
Patrizia: Yeah, you feel their presence. And I suppose it's now I'm wanting to feel the presence of God more. Whereas before, I was too busy. I was too busy. And I still am, but I think, like the lady said, it's nice to find that time. That time where it's just peaceful and it's just you. And sometimes I even just close my eyes on the train and it's just – I block everything out. It doesn't matter where you are; you can pray anywhere, I think.

(South-east Melbourne focus group, 2019)

The idea that ‘It doesn’t matter where you are; you can pray anywhere’ is very powerful. Trains, workplaces, homes, religious spaces, parks – all become possible sanctuaries. Such an approach means that, regardless of social alienation within colonised or colonising contexts, acceptance and protection are assumed to be embedded in all places. One only has to ‘block everything out’.

Parents from Anglo backgrounds in England discussed near-death experiences and how coming close to death had inspired faith in them: not faith in a particular God, but faith in an unseen, or unseeable, ‘bigger picture’ and the accompanying ideas that everything happens for a reason and there is more to life than what we can see. Others discussed family trees and the act of tracing their heritage across generations as a way of being connected to their spirituality and the aspects of their existence that extends beyond
what we can see, hear or touch. One of the other significant themes running through the data is children’s fears about what the world might become. For many children, the hope that other worlds are indeed possible was accompanied by the fear that if we don’t act now to minimise climate change, then the world of their future will be extremely different to how it is now – in a way that they want to avoid. Children’s art depicted ‘other worlds’ they imagine, and some which they see but do not necessarily inhabit.

Climate change and other worlds

The most pronounced theme that runs throughout the visual data from children (the artworks they made) is their fear of climate change. I have discussed this fear in detail and my approaches to it elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, Horn and Willcox, 2019; Hickey-Moody, Knight and Florence, 2021). Worlds that include technologies designed to ward off climate change, or worlds that have been even more severely impacted by climate change than our own, feature centrally in the artworks created by children, so it would be remiss of me not to discuss this here. Discussions of climate change began, somewhat unexpectedly, in my research in 2017 in Manchester, where children painted a collaborative future city made up of everything they thought ‘really mattered’. The city featured a range of novel ways of responding to climate change, such as streets that were rivers of seawater designed as a tactical intervention into city life. The rivers were designed as transport systems that promoted biodiversity and keep the ocean fish alive while allowing people to get around. This city also featured a glass dome that protected the environment’s flora and a flying mosque. This painting is reproduced below (Figure 8.1).

Protecting their future city with a glass dome designed to regulate the climate and protect wildlife is a good example of the inventive responses that children come up with when trying to mitigate their fear of climate change. Consistently, children in London, Sydney, Melbourne, Manchester, Adelaide and Canberra expressed the fear that climate change would ruin the world and posited creative alternative ways of stopping such disasters. At an inner-north Melbourne school, two years after I was presented with streets
made out of rivers of seawater in Manchester, my introduction to the project, which asks the children ‘what really matters?’, was met with immediate concern about global warming, climate change and environmental pollution. In my plenary group discussion before we started making, the children brought up their concerns. Climate change was their primary example of ‘what really matters’ for the future: stopping climate change. An excerpt from my fieldwork notes further illustrates this point:

Field notes, inner-north Melbourne

Everyone seemed motivated and set out immediately on drawing their component of the future city. Two boys started creating a recycling factory, and the environment, climate change and pollution came up as topics several times. The children are clearly aware of these issues. Two other boys in the other group started with the idea to put all the national flags of the country of origin of their families together, but somehow then got side-tracked and did something totally different, which was a beautiful tree with some rivers and bridges across the river. One of the boys (his family was Burmese, asked me to check the flag) has a talent for drawing and explained
how he wanted to include rivers and a park etc. (Fieldwork notes, inner-north Melbourne, 2019)

The children immediately drew future inventions that would stop climate change or were designed to restore versions of our increasingly damaged climate. Children in Canberra, Sydney and Adelaide showed similar concerns. Fieldwork notes from Adelaide show children’s first responses to the question of ‘what really matters’, which included the environment:

Simon made an image of a green leafy tree with the word ‘environment’ written in capital letters. When asked about it, he said that the environment was really important: it is what really matters most to him. (Fieldwork notes, Adelaide, 2019)

I have a huge number of images produced by the children that relate to climate change in different ways (Hickey-Moody, Horn and Willcox, 2019; Hickey-Moody, Knight and Florence, 2021). For now, I want to flag it as a motivating reason to create other worlds. As suggested by a painting depicting a future city being designed around what was called a ‘tree of life’ by the children, future worlds need to be different. This city has all the things one needs to live, including a hospital, school, housing, an airport, a mosque, parks and a pool, and all roads lead to the tree. This focus on the environment was ever-present in this fieldwork site, as was the fear that the world would end if action wasn’t taken to recycle, clean the ocean or develop green solutions to transport.

All of the future cities that children created featured technological and imaginative inventions designed to stop climate change. They also featured low-cost, affordable housing, as a fear of homelessness is a theme that runs across many of my research sites. The need for futures characterised by low-cost, affordable housing features most notably in the artworks made by children in Manchester, Sydney and London. Discussions and representations of this theme began in 2017 in Manchester, where children painted multiple high-rise flats in their future cities comprised of ‘what really matters’. They then explained these architectural choices (featuring only high-rises) by stating that it is very important that ‘everyone has a home’. In recent years, groups of homeless people have camped out
in sizeable tent communities under bridges in Manchester, and there have been ongoing protests attempting to negotiate the right to space for those who were sleeping rough (Rhoden-Paul, 2015). An old community radio studio was commandeered as a centre of the protest in Levenshulme and was covered in a huge cardboard sign, claiming the right to the city for the homeless (Maidment, 2020). The sign stated: ‘HOMES FOR PEOPLE NOT FOR PROFIT’. The tent city in the centre of Manchester and the frenzy of media stories on the occupation of homeless people in the city (BBC, 2015a; BBC, 2015b; BBC, 2015c; Pidd, 2015) had clearly left an impression on the children’s consciousness.

In two of the Manchester schools, a majority of the children were from refugee backgrounds. They were children who had had difficult journeys across countries, had been displaced, and in some instances, had arrived in England to less-than-desirable conditions. Media stories about refugee communities in Greece, Syria and Italy, alongside displaced people living in tents under Manchester bridges, brought up old memories of refugee centres or the experience of
being without a home. These were things the children struggled to describe in words, but their art focusing on housing estates made clear the very real fear of being displaced once again. For many, their financial situation made this fear rational. Alongside the low-cost housing featured in artworks, children placed green spaces, zoos, carbon-neutral technologies, waterways: things that stopped climate change or were designed to try to stop climate change. Making art was a way of creating other worlds.

A few weeks later, when I was in south-east London, similar images of cities made up of high-rise apartments surrounding a park were generated by children who were concerned with housing availability and climate change. It was clear that, as far as these children are concerned, high-density living protects residents from possible homelessness and green spaces contribute to stopping climate change.

The image in Figure 8.3 speaks of a place belonging through the ways that the children have positioned their community on the edge of a river, which is analogous to their community’s geographic

---

Figure 8.3  A city where ‘everyone has a home’, acrylic paint and felt-tip pen on canvas, south-east London, 2017
location on the banks of the Thames. As you can see, their future city features a church, a hospital, a mosque, a temple, housing estates, high-rises and a swing set, all built around a central green park. It is not dissimilar to the urban geography the children actually inhabit. The artwork provides a glimpse into the very things the children know they need in their lives, or are afraid of losing. Access to green and healthy environmental spaces, water, health services, religion, education and housing are central to their city. While Manchester and London have enduring issues with homelessness, so too do Melbourne and Sydney. Concerns about climate change and homelessness carried on in my Australian fieldwork, especially in the inner-urban Melbourne site where homelessness is clearly visible. The children involved in my project live almost entirely in high-rise council housing estates. Some fieldwork notes from my work in the Melbourne school illustrate how the concern with homelessness is reflected in approaches to their future city planning.

Field notes, inner-north Melbourne

The children were alert and willing to contribute, but needed warming up and familiarising with the idea of a ‘future city’. Various children spoke up and contributed ideas, including ‘apartment buildings’, ‘people’, ‘nature’ and other things. With some prompting, ideas around infrastructure and public buildings also emerged. Apartment living is important because it is affordable and it is where they live so it is what they know. (Fieldwork notes, Melbourne, 2019)

The children’s concerns with homelessness, housing availability and climate change are significant. Children’s voices on the issue of homelessness are not heard often enough (see Holland and Crowley, 2013).

Figure 8.4 was a practice drawing for what would later be quilt squares depicting what ‘really matters’ and stories of belonging. I googled the housing estate that the children live in and they used it as a reference point when making this picture. The image on my phone provided a resource that the children used to copy the level of floors in the building. The small house to the right is Frankie’s imaginary house in a well-to-do suburb, an imagined disassociation from where he really lives. There is a lot of academic work on youth, families and homelessness (Flatau et al., 2010; McNamara, 2015; Minnery and Greenhalgh, 2007; Sharam and Hulse, 2014),
some of which focuses on children and homelessness, including academic work that values children’s perspectives, (Kirkman et al., 2010; Moore, McArthur and Noble-Carr, 2008). Fear of homelessness and climate change speaks to children’s immediate and broader contextual insecurities. Similar concerns around homelessness are expressed by children from Manchester, as shown in Figure 8.5. This image includes a high-rise housing estate featuring a Tesco supermarket.

The children in my ethnography are all attending either school, a mosque or a church when they participate in my workshops. They are not homeless, they have somewhere to live, but many are still scared of being or becoming homeless or of not having enough. Crowded apartments shared with many family members in old buildings can be stressful places for a child. Though their family lives may be loving, the experience of moving countries, leaving family members behind and then being given a small flat to occupy does not always create a secure environment for many

Figure 8.4 A housing estate where the children live, a soccer pitch, and Frankie’s imaginary house, inner-north Melbourne, 2019
newly arrived refugee families. The children’s concerns about this run through the visual and audio data and are present in the ways children imagine the possibility of a liveable future. The ones that don’t live in council housing are often aware of the other students’ situations and, in the cases of Manchester and London, are attuned to media narratives that highlight the class struggle to find suitable homes. So many children in my research imagined ‘other worlds’ – safer, more secure worlds – as a way of coping with the precarious nature of the everyday. Children journey across multiple countries to reach safety; grow up in a number of different places with multiple national identities; often feel ashamed of where they live and – like Frankie – might pretend they have a different house; or, like a girl in Manchester, draw poo over pictures of themselves. These are experiences that the children in my ethnography have shared with me through their art and through their drawings. One example that stands out is from Frankie, whom I introduced above. He is an eleven-year-old boy from Melbourne, who lives with his carer after
escaping the conflict in West Papua. His stories and images resonate with precarity and violence. He and his uncle fleeing in a canoe, for example, was one of the first images Frankie made.

The image of Frankie in the canoe with his uncle (Figure 8.6) shows the flag from his country, and they are holding a gun to protect themselves. Frankie said people were always trying to kill them. Frankie also had complicated relationships with adults. He often drew images of war and guns, and I imagine his impressions of adults from childhood involved a lot of violence and fighting, which is why, he said, they had to escape. Frankie often felt angry and easily misrepresented. The very first task that I asked the children in Frankie’s class to undertake was to draw a self-portrait and turn it into a three-dimensional collage. Frankie drew an image of rubbish floating with guns in the ocean as his self-portrait. This piece of data can be read in multiple ways. One reading, which I have explored elsewhere (Hickey-Moody, Horn and Willcox, 2019), relates to Frankie’s awareness of climate change and his rising
anxiety around it. I suggest that polluted waterways and rising sea levels are emblematic of our contemporary moment. Another reading of this ‘portrait’ is that Frankie sees himself as rubbish. His journey across the ocean from West Papua to Australia was clearly a foundational experience for him, and I wonder if his depiction of himself as rubbish floating in the water could also be read in terms of his journey across the water, and his incredibly low self-esteem.

Frankie explained his self-portrait (Figure 8.7) as a picture about climate change featuring weapons in the ocean:

*Frankie: That’s the sea, and that’s the grass.*

*Anna:* Why is the pistol in the ocean, is it just swimming?

*Frankie: Because some people chucked it in there and then they went out of the ocean.*

*Anna:* So, they chuck the pistols in the rivers and the oceans.

*Frankie: Yes.*

*Anna:* And do you want to tell me about your picture? We like to learn by sharing stories about our pictures.
Frankie: Okay, this is a butterfly changing, this is a whirlpool, this is heaps of beer bottles, this is three knives, one pistol and a double-barrelled shotgun, these are plastic bags with bottles in them. And this is a bird getting stuck in the rubbish.

(Inner-north Melbourne interview, 2019)

Beer bottles, three knives, one pistol and a double-barrelled shotgun are not what I would expect to find in the Australian ocean. I have the sense that Frankie’s identity ocean is a mixture of West Papua and Australia, and Frankie (as both butterfly and bird) is both caught up in, and weighed down by, the rubbish or residue of both places mixed together.

I came to better understand Frankie’s bad feelings about himself in one of the exercises he undertook with his class. Working with two other boys, Frankie made a future city. The boys named the future city with their initials. The future city was fantastic, with a recycling plant that could fly and locate itself wherever recycling needed to happen, a large mosque, high-rise apartments, a hospital and a cemetery. A photograph of the collaborative city on canvas is included in Figure 8.8, taken when the work was two-thirds complete. Significantly, the landscape features the images of two of the boys who drew the city and an image of Frankie, which was drawn by his friends. This caused Frankie great distress. Upon seeing an image of himself on canvas, Frankie burst into tears and howled. He was completely inconsolable until the drawing representing him was covered over by another hastily drawn minaret, not actually attached to the mosque (Figure 8.8).

Frankie’s visual depictions of his sadness and anxiety are also visible in this canvas, where he has drawn dead bodies falling out of an army helicopter. There are two helicopters – they are blue with a parachute underneath, and the dead bodies falling out are sketched in pencil. Frankie’s friends’ representation of him in the future city is entombed in (and covered over by) a minaret towering up from a high-rise housing estate. Later that year, Frankie had a fight with his art teacher and pushed her over. The teacher, who was amazingly dedicated and passionate, went on indefinite sick leave, and was clearly worried about working with Frankie, who could, at times, be volatile and difficult to control. In addition to being volatile, Frankie was very vulnerable and was clearly living
with post-traumatic stress. This profound fragility and distress was more acute in Frankie than in many other research participants, but in many other children involved in the project, insecurity and fear were expressed through worries about homelessness and climate change. A focus on inventions that make life better, on cars that have feathered wings, on sustainable cities, flying recycling centres and rivers for streets, clearly demonstrate the appeal for children of making other worlds.

**Conclusion**

Possibilities of better worlds, and ideas of other worlds, other beings, higher powers, life after death, clearly sustain both the adults and children involved in my work. Parents’ faith means that the possibility of an afterlife, or an all-encompassing power that has a reason for life events, are thoughts that can bring relief and help them cope with day-to-day life. The emotional landscapes of the
children involved in the project were equally composed of fear and joy. Anxiety about climate change and homelessness constituted the well-founded fears to which children responded by creating other worlds in their art. They possess questions about climate change to which there are, as yet, no answers. How will our planet survive? Concern for others’ needs, demonstrated by the demand that ‘everyone has a home’, also shows the empathetic and thoughtful capacities of children from the ages of six to twelve. Further, some children have grown up with such profound personal and political insecurity that they have internalised this to the extent that they feel that they are the problem, and have learnt to hate themselves, as evidenced by Frankie howling with tears and hiding under the table when his friends attempted to draw him alongside themselves on their collaborative canvas. In this chapter, I have tried to share the feeling that other worlds are possible, or perhaps already exist alongside the world we experience. This was an enduring sense that ran through my explorations of faith.