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## **Defiance in the Detail: Young Women's Embodied Future Selves**

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### **Introduction**

All of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be the chooser. (Bauman 1998, 86)

Future thinking, which may encompass ideas of hopes, aspirations, concerns and fears, has become an important focus of anthropological interest, with authors suggesting that such a focus stems from global feelings of crisis and uncertainty (Kleist and Jansen 2016). Within this larger global perspective, people also develop their own personal sets of hopes and aspirations. The ambitions of these are largely constrained by the opportunity and experience that individuals and groups have to imagine potential life paths (Appadurai 2013). People living in impoverished environments are expected to have a limited set of choices regarding their lives, because their experiences and their opportunities to enact change are constrained. But, as Hoffman (2017) argues in her study of youth in Haiti, limited options may reduce outcomes, but not necessarily the desire to make change. Disadvantaged people do not necessarily suffer from a 'poverty of aspiration' (Hoffman 2017, 18).

Young people are often the focus of studies about futures, hopes and aspirations, as they are in the process of actively constructing their own futures; indeed, the words ‘youth’ and ‘aspiration’ are often combined to inform a discourse of future planning that revolves around education, tertiary opportunities and a successful career. Implied is a step wise plan, in which each action leads to the next desirable outcome. Young women in Australia expect to have lives that are different from those of their mothers and grandmothers—they expect to be involved in the labour force and to delay marriage and motherhood until their late 20s (Wyn and Woodman 2006)—which implies a step-by-step rendering of their futures. As Kenway and Hickey-Moody (2011, 152) point out, this consideration of aspirations, which appears deeply embedded in educational policy, fails to recognise ‘how complex and diverse aspiration is and how it is rooted in social, cultural and spatial inequalities’. Harwood et al. (2017) have recently described research in which they engaged disadvantaged young people in discussions about their educational futures, including how they imagined their post-school educational options. Importantly, these young people conceptualised the future as being ‘both distant and fragile’ and only to ‘be dealt with seriously *after* the pains of the present, inflicted by schooling have been managed’ (Harwood et al. 2017, 132, original emphasis). Implicit in this is the suggestion that disadvantaged young people, whose present lives are problematical and unpredictable, are too busy responding and reacting to the present to make concrete plans for the future. For Indigenous youth living in Australia’s remotest regions, a range of structural inequalities resulting from colonisation, poverty and a history of exclusion from participation in economic, education and governance processes has resulted in the poverty of available choices (Senior and Chenhall 2008, 2012) or, in Appadurai’s terms, a reduced ‘capacity to aspire’:

If the map of aspirations (continuing the navigational metaphor) is seen to consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways, relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to general norms and back again. (Appadurai 2013, 189)

In 2008 and 2012, two of us published some of the results of our study of young women’s present lives and future aspirations in the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr in the Northern Territory (Senior and Chenhall 2008, 2012). We drew on material that we had collected through our extended periods of ethnographic engagement in the community

from 1999 to 2008. In our earlier papers, we discussed the limited range of options available to young women, their limited conceptions of future selves, and their limited agency to either make or imagine a different type of future. We concluded that:

Young women's agency examined within the context of a culture which is bound in age and gender hierarchies would appear very limited ... community living requires a series of compromises from the young women. (Senior and Chenhall 2012, 384)

The young women in our study described feeling trapped by what they considered to be traditional gender roles; they also considered escaping from these roles to be impossible. For example, one young woman commented that the only way she saw to avoid this was to 'go to Melbourne and get a sex change operation' (Senior and Chenhall 2012, 383). This possibility aside, it was clear from what the young women had to say that they thought that leaving the community would not enable them to take up opportunities unavailable to them in their own communities. Young people talked about the strong pull that the community and their families had on them, and made it clear that they could never consider living anywhere else (Senior 2003; Senior and Chenhall 2008). The limited range of choices available to young women in remote communities is also a strong theme of McMullen's research, described in Chapter 7 of this volume. This chapter presents findings from further work conducted with a group of young women in a remote Aboriginal community for whom the opportunities to engage, or even imagine engaging, in the sorts of trajectories set out in educational policies are very limited.

## **Working with Young People in Ngukurr**

Between 2014 and 2016, we revisited Ngukurr to work with young people around their aspirations for the future. We combined participant observation with a series of workshops that included a body mapping workshop and a photovoice project, in which young people were asked to take pictures of the 'most important things in their lives and what they wanted their future lives to look like'. Twelve young women participated in the project and eight young men. The young men were enthusiastic about the photovoice project and embarked on producing photographs for a book to describe their lives, values and aspirations (Senior and Chenhall 2017; see also Chapter 3 of this volume). Although few of the

young men had completed schooling, they had a clearly thought-out process whereby they would be recognised as the future leaders of their community (Senior and Chenhall 2017). As with Kenway and Hickey-Moody's (2011, 153) 'Boys with Aerial Vision', they had viewed the community strategically, located an opening in the political structure and determined a step-by-step approach to achieve their plans, which included a series of meetings to consider their approach—which was to burst into the community's imagination and ensure their efforts were continually noticed and reaffirmed.

Although the young women also participated in the photovoice project, the method that caught their attention and enthusiasm was the body mapping workshop. They enjoyed the combination of storytelling and creativity. In this exercise, a series of hypothetical scenarios were developed and these were used to guide discussions and the decoration of life-sized body maps (for more details, see Senior and Chenhall, 2017) with groups of up to five young women at a time. The stories framing the discussion linked to their work on the body map and were designed to elicit information about how the girls imagined their character's (the body map's) hopes, dreams and plans for the future. Following Nilsen (1999), we decided to distinguish between hopes, dreams and plans, assuming that hopes are more tangible than dreams and that plans are more concrete paths to action.

We worked with three groups of young women and each group was composed of three to five participants. The ages of the young women were between 15 and 18. One young woman had a one-year-old baby and the remainder said that they were in a relationship. One of the workshops was conducted at an outstation 17 km outside the community, where several families had gathered for the holidays. The remaining two were conducted in the main community of Ngukurr. The young women were presented with a series of scenarios developed from our previous ethnographic work (Senior and Chenhall 2008, 2012) and in consultation with young women who had previously been involved in the research. These included the story of Lucy who returned to Ngukurr after being away at high school for two years, Cathie who lives in Ngukurr with her mum and dad, Sarah who thinks she may be pregnant and Julie who is a single mother with a one-year-old baby. Of these, the stories of Cathie and Sarah were chosen by the groups as characters to work on. The story of Lucy was dismissed as being 'a bit boring' and the story of Julie (although suggested by our participants) was thought to be unrealistic. They said

that a 16-year-old with a baby would be married. In local understandings, a young woman is married or 'all married up' when she moves in with her partner (see also McMullen, Chapter 7). As discussed later in the paper, a single state was something that young women aspired to, but they did not think it was possible at such a young age.

The young women were encouraged to spend time developing their characters and to think deeply about what sort of person their character was as they decorated her body. We wanted them to develop a rapport with their character and immerse themselves in the unfolding narrative. Our previous research alerted us to the importance of involvement as a means of developing an empathetic response (Senior and Chenhall 2017; see also Johnson 2012). As the young women drew their person's feelings and thoughts on their body map, they also engaged in discussion about the issues that their character was feeling. For example, in each of the stories, the words 'dumps her partner' are written. This statement, however, was framed by extensive discussions about how partners could be abusive and how a young woman might work up the courage to leave their partner. It was vital to capture these discussions among the young women as well as their visual depictions of their character. We worked as a team (Senior, Daniels, Hall and Turner) to determine the key themes arising from these sets of data, and then crosschecked our interpretations with the young women from the community who were participants.<sup>1</sup>

## Contemporary Life for Young Women Living in the Ngukurr Community

The community of Ngukurr is home to 1,000 Indigenous people and a small population of non-Indigenous people who work in institutions such as the school and the health clinic. Ngukurr is extremely remote: it is 750 km from the capital city of Darwin and 300 km from the nearest town of Mataranka. The town of Ngukurr was established by the Christian

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1 Ethics approval for this project (which includes the work with the young men discussed in Chapter 3) was granted by the University of Wollongong Ethics Committee (UOW 2015/197) following extensive community consultation about the project. The lives of young women in the community were a cause for concern in the community and had been the catalyst for the earlier research (2008 and 2012) into young women's lives and aspirations. In this case, community elders noted that there were very few opportunities for young women to talk about their lives and that they often felt lonely and isolated.

Missionary Society in 1908 in response to what they saw as the ‘desperate plight’ of Aboriginal people in the region who had suffered at the hands of encroaching pastoralists (Chenhall and Senior 2018). The mission brought together people from seven different language groups who now speak the common language of Ngukurr Kriol. Although Christian conversion was considered by the missionaries to have been largely unsuccessful, many of the values they instilled continue to influence Ngukurr life, such as modesty or emphasising a modest form of dress. For older women, this is usually an A-line dress (a zippy or pocket dress) and for younger women a long skirt or baggy shorts and t-shirt (Senior and Chenhall 2008, 274). Older women continue to enforce these standards among the younger women in the community.

The dirt road into the community and the two river crossings were often flooded during the wet season (November–March) making access impossible. By 2018, however, bridges had been built over the two most flood-prone river crossings, making year-round access by car possible for the first time. This has meant that travelling out of the community, even just to the closest town of Katherine, has become increasingly possible for young people. Ngukurr now also has a bus service linking it with the coastal community of Numbulwar as well as Katherine and Darwin.

Ngukurr’s conditions are similar to those of other remote communities, with high levels of premature mortality and preventable disease (Senior and Chenhall 2013). People live in circumstances of deep poverty and, although there have been recent attempts to improve local housing conditions, houses are often extremely overcrowded. Educational outcomes, although improving, remain considerably lower than those of non-Indigenous Australia, with very few young people receiving a Year 12 secondary education. Some young people undertake training in certificate-level courses after their school education.

Changes in local government have had an important impact on people’s lives. In 2008, the Ngukurr community, previously administered by a local government council, became part of a super-shire. The community was then administered from Katherine, 350 km away. This change eroded local decision-making and meant that initiatives, such as organising a sporting event, were the responsibility of workers from the shire, rather than the community (Sanders 2013).

In 2009, we described the frustrations expressed by youth in the community who were only able to obtain brief glimpses of a globalised youth culture and lacked the technology to engage more fully with it (Chenhall and Senior 2009). Although access to mainstream media, especially print media, was still extremely limited, Facebook and other social media were pervasive and accessed through people's mobile phones. Access to social media had considerably extended people's social networks and provided a means of exposure to life beyond Ngukurr (see also Kariippanon, Chapter 8, this volume).

Relationships were a source of tension for the young women (Senior and Chenhall 2012) and they continued to have babies and get married very young. Although babies are highly valued, they are accompanied by a loss of freedom for the young women as well as incorporation into the family of their partner. Despite this, negotiating and planning relationships—a domain in which they are able to make choices and have some sense of control—remains a high point in young women's lives (Senior and Chenhall 2008). Those in relationships talked about young men as being controlling and violent. There was some acceptance of violence in relationships as seen in the words of a 14-year-old girl:

Sometimes their wives are lazy and don't know how to cook or clean around the house. And they answer back their husbands when their husband is saying the right thing. When they answer back their husband gets cross and starts hitting them. I think it's their own fault because they should listen to their husband and what they say to them. (Senior and Chenhall 2012, 380)

On a return visit to Ngukurr in 2016, it appeared that relationships continued to be associated with the hopes and dreams of young women. The preadolescent girls played endless clapping games to what, at first, seemed like a familiar chant. On closer inspection, the words had been changed to reflect local interpretations of marriage:

Sittin' in the Apple tree  
My boyfriend said to me:  
Kiss me  
Hug me  
Tell me that you love me  
Marry me  
Choke me  
Boom! (Senior field notes 2016)

When asked why a marriage ends in choking, the young girls commented, 'that's what boys are like, always jealous and bossy of their partner' (Senior field notes 2016). We were interested to explore further young women's perceptions of young people's relationships in the community, but also to explore their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their lives in the future.

## Exploring the Body Maps

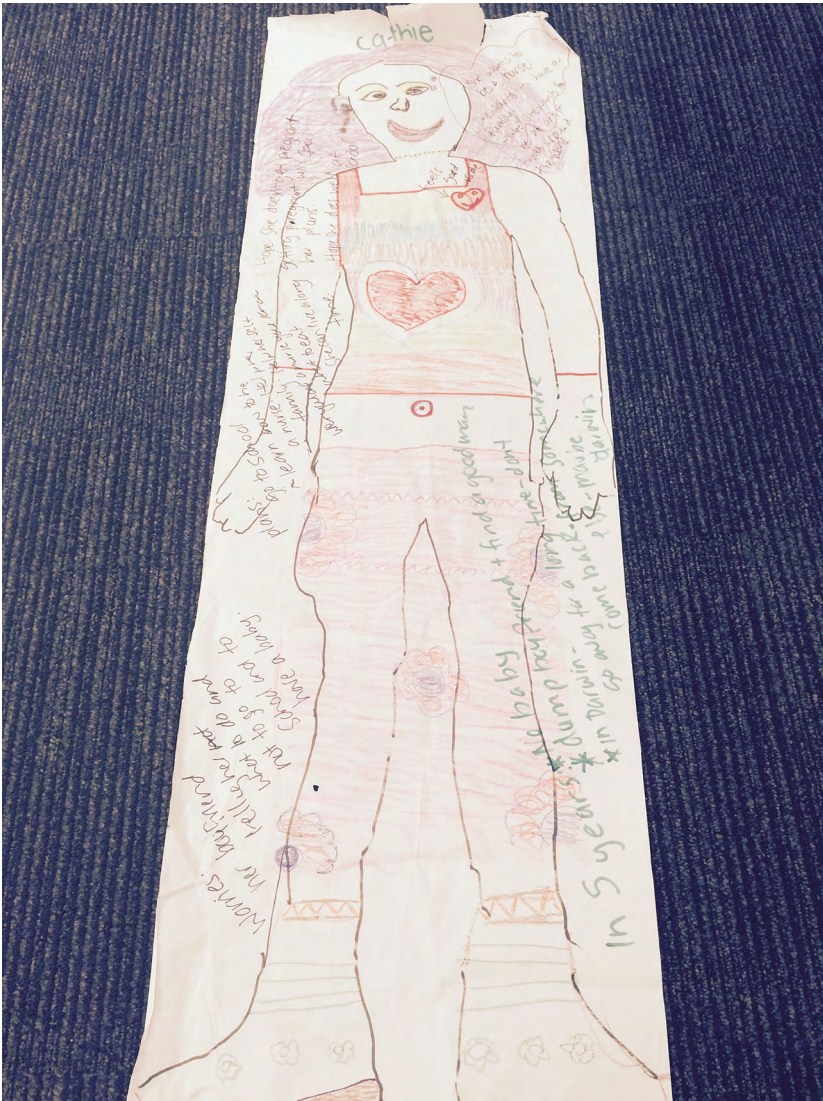
The character depicted in Figure 2.1, Cathie, is in a relationship with a young boy in Ngukurr. She is dressed in a tank top, which is decorated with a large heart that exposes her bellybutton and a matching long flowery skirt. She wears earrings, eye make-up and nail polish. Another heart near her shoulder has the words 'feels good inside' written over it.

Cathie's key hope is that she doesn't get pregnant, as 'getting pregnant will spoil her plans'. She also hopes that she does well at school. Her plans are to 'go to school and learn how to be a nurse'. This was considered by the girls to be a desirable career because of the benefits that it would bring to her family: 'When you are a nurse, you know what to eat and she can live for a long time'. The group of young women constructing Cathie added the category of 'worries' to their list, arguing that young girls worry about the things that might spoil their plans for the future. Cathie worries that her boyfriend will tell her what to do and that he will force her to leave school and that he may want her to have a baby.

We believe that these young women were speaking of their dreams when they were imagining Cathie in five years time. They said that 'she won't have a baby', and that she will, by this time, have 'dumped her boyfriend' and found a 'good man in Darwin'. The young women said that to accomplish her dreams Cathie would have to leave the community: 'she will go away for a long time, and don't come back, maybe to Darwin'.

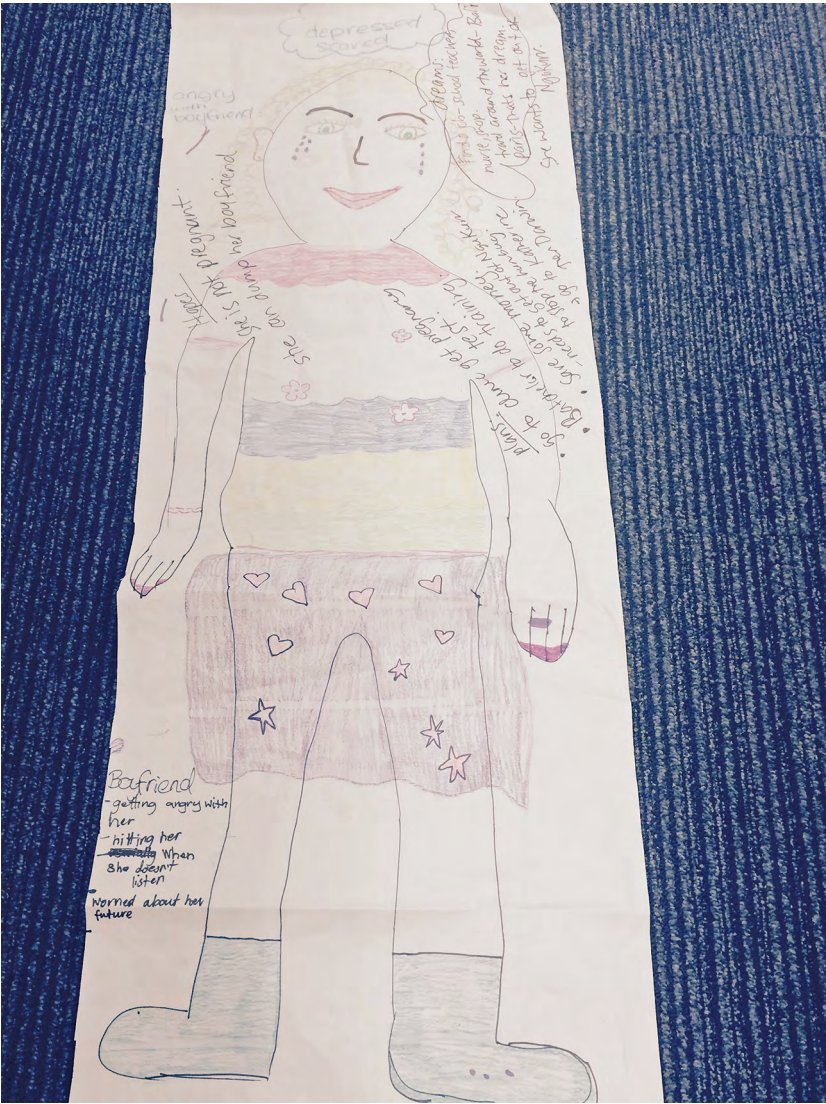
The scenario chosen by the group who created the young woman shown in Figure 2.2 was that of Sarah, which was a vignette of a girl in a relationship who was worried that she might be pregnant.





**Figure 2.1: Body map Cathie.**

Source: Photograph by Kate Senior.



**Figure 2.2: Body map Sarah.**

Source: Photograph by Kate Senior.

As with the previous body map, considerable attention was paid to her clothes. She is dressed in a flowery tee-shirt and a short skirt covered in hearts and flowers. She has make-up on as well as jewellery (a ring and a bracelet), her fingernails are painted and her hair is dyed blonde. Unlike the character in the previous body map, she is obviously unhappy, with tears pouring from her eyes and the words 'depressed' and 'scared' written about her head. Her key hopes are that she is not pregnant and that she can 'dump her boyfriend'. Her angry, jealous boyfriend is drawn beneath her left foot. He is saying 'stop going to school, stop dreaming about what you gonna be. I want you to have a baby; I want you to stay at home with me'. The young women summed up this behaviour with the statement: 'Boys are bossy'. Her plans are to go to the clinic and get a pregnancy test and then (if the test is negative) to go to the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education<sup>2</sup> to do some training. She will need to plan to save money: 'She needs to get out of Ngukurr to stop the Humbug'. The participants explain that she will not be able to save money unless she moves away from what anthropologists call a 'demand sharing environment', in which 'everyone' has the right to ask her to share her resources. She plans to go to Katherine first and then to Darwin.

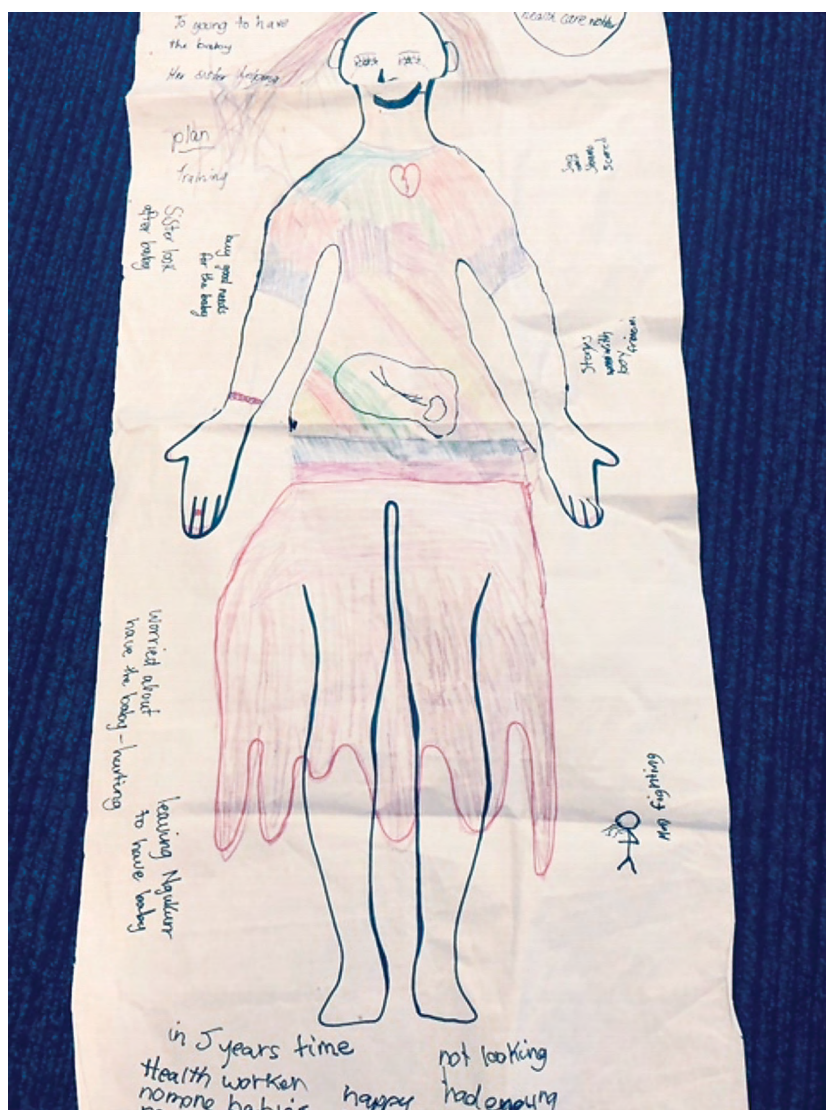
Her dreams are 'to find a job, maybe a school teacher, a nurse or work at the shop'. She wants to travel 'around the world, Bali first and then Paris, Paris that's her dream'. She wants to get out of Ngukurr. In the future, she'll be living in town, she'll have her own house and she'll be earning her own money. She will be single, or she'll have a relationship with someone from outside the community. The young women in the group say 'you gotta get out of here to find a good man'. They say Sarah 'worries about her future'. She worries that her boyfriend will get angry with her and hit her 'when she doesn't listen'.

The third group also chose the scenario of Sarah who has just found out that she is pregnant. As with the other body maps, Sarah is depicted in pretty, feminine clothes, with make-up and nail polish. She was initially depicted wearing a very short skirt, but the girls decided to make it a knee length skirt 'because she is pregnant'. The foetus is shown in Sarah's uterus.

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2 The Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education provides both vocational and higher education. It is based in the town of Batchelor near Darwin, but has annexes across the region, as well as providing training in communities.





**Figure 2.3: Body map Sarah.**

Source: Photograph by Kate Senior.

Sarah is worried and frightened. She is crying because she is scared of being pregnant at age 16 and of the potential pain of having a baby, as well as having to leave the community for the birth (see McMullen, Chapter 7, this volume). She thinks she is too young to have the baby and she is upset because her parents are fighting about it. Her sister is prepared to help her.

Sarah's hope is centred on the behaviour of her current boyfriend. She hopes that her boyfriend 'changes' and that he 'stops smoking drugs'. She plans to do some training and thinks that her sister may be able to look after the baby. She plans to save some money to buy 'good things for the baby'. She also plans to stay with her current boyfriend while she has the baby. She dreams of being a 'good mum' and maybe 'a health care worker'. In the future she dreams that she will have no more babies and no husband. 'She's not looking, she's had enough. She's happy being single'.

## Discussion

As Beck (1992) famously commented, the contemporary, globalised life is a project that must be planned. But what chance do these young women have to plan their lives? Despite their engagement in schooling, which highlighted future educational and career possibilities, their embodied futures remain constrained by what other people—notably their partners—expect them to be. The young women's short-term hopes centre around events, which they consider largely unpredictable, but which they hope *will not* happen, such as pregnancy and beatings from their boyfriends. In these young women's environments, the meaning of hope seems very different from the ability to perceive positive futures (Bishop and Willis 2014). Such responses, however, echo Harwood et al.'s (2017, 132) discussion of tenuous futures when those anticipating them are negotiating difficult environments.

Becoming pregnant, the young women say, would spoil their dreams for the future. But what are these young women's dreams? Each of the three groups of women that participated in the body mapping exercise talked about future careers as being an important dream. Among the limited range of suggested careers was becoming a health worker or a nurse. These suggestions were very similar to those suggested by young women in 2000–04 (Senior and Chenhall 2012). In both studies, the participants lacked clear articulations of what such jobs might entail and the steps required to obtain them. Acknowledgement of the steps that the young

women would have to take to achieve these goals was missing in their accounts. They did not appear have what Kenway and Hickey-Moody (2011, 154) describe as ‘aerial vision’:

They have foresight. Their life-lines are connected to future opportunities through the logic of ‘if’—‘if I do this now, then’ ... they understand cause and effect and operate in terms of actions and consequences.

Nor did the young women display the confidence demonstrated by the young men (see Chapter 3, this volume) to carve out a different kind of future.

In the young women’s stories, careers would somehow happen if they went away ‘for training’, which was not well understood or articulated. The young women provide much clearer descriptions of the things that are holding them back—the things that prevent them from achieving their personal dreams. They describe being constantly ‘humbugged’ for money and the impossibility of saving. They said that their boyfriends put pressure on them to stay home and have babies. In their stories, the only way to address this problem is to leave and head for the big city of Darwin. This is in marked contrast to the young women in the previous study who wanted to ‘live in Ngukurr until I die’ (Senior and Chenhall 2008). Ten years later, young women talk about the potential freedom of leaving the community, which includes the freedom to work and to save money, to choose a boyfriend who respects them or to choose to be single.

This freedom, they argue, is both well-deserved and hard-won. As one group stated of their character (who was by then 19 years old) ‘she is going to be single, because she has had enough’. Leaving the community, however, is a very difficult choice. Underpinning these young women’s life stories are deep commitments to their families. One group talked about the young woman’s sister who would help her look after the baby. Another group talked about their character wanting to be a nurse, because the knowledge that this person acquired through their training would be good for the family—‘when you are a nurse you know what to eat and you can live a long time’. A concrete example of the importance of family is provided by Angelina Joshua (see Chapter 1, this volume), a young woman who has experienced leaving the community. Her story is one of isolation and the pain of being continually called back by her relatives:

I was living in Darwin and I wanted to experience new things, but my family were calling me, calling me back home. They were saying 'It's not the same without you'. It made me really sad. I missed my best friends, hanging out with them and laughing, and I missed my brothers and sisters. I didn't have anyone to talk to. It was a really hard time. I was experiencing city life, but I didn't really like it. At least I gave it a go.

The young women's ideas about leaving the community and living in Darwin or Katherine are like their ideas about having a career, in that they are conspicuously lacking in detail. In one of the stories, living in Darwin (which is a reality for some Ngukurr residents) is described in the same sentence as travelling the world and going to Paris. For these young women, moving away is conceived as a necessary act required for creating a different kind of life—one that remains in the realm of dreams. Despite their limited articulation, these plans are significant for our understanding of these young people, as they represent a clear departure from earlier views from this age set. With regard to the ethnographic literature, such plans address the emerging theme of mobility as a key to changes in young people's lives (Hoffman 2017, 23).

Talking about leaving the community is a radical idea and one that may be difficult to achieve. There are, however, more immediate indicators of young women's propensity to imagine their lives in ways that are not controlled by authority—for example, the radical imagination described by Kenway and Fahey (2009, 114). Evidence for this is not in the words or thoughts that are ascribed to the characters, but in the way the images themselves are depicted by the young women.

At a superficial level, the young women depicted in these body maps may be assumed to be seeking relationships. They pay conspicuous attention to their appearance, including wearing make-up and jewellery, and are dressed (at least by the standards of the community) in provocative ways. Young women in Ngukurr have access to globalised images of youth culture through social media and are increasingly aware of the clothing choices of young people outside the community. Importantly, the images they create are dressed in an entirely different way to the young women who created them, who all wore baggy shorts and loose fitting tee-shirts in sombre colours, were unadorned by either make-up or jewellery, and seemed to be trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. The bodies that they created, when understood in the language of relationships in the community, take on a completely different meaning:

Young married women are expected to stay at home and do housework. When they are married they are expected to wear dresses past their knees. Married women are not allowed to shave their legs, pluck their eyebrows or wear earrings. (Senior and Chenhall 2012)

Paradoxically, the dreamed feminine figure, in a floaty dresses or midriff-exposing top, is a figure of emancipation and globalisation. She is a young woman who is not wearing the 'ugly clothes' expected by her partner and is, instead, expressing her personality and her sexuality through her clothes. Such provocative depictions of young women can be considered as acts of defiance when young women are expected to present themselves in the most inconspicuous way possible, so as not to provoke the jealousy of their partner. When considered in light of the constant reinforcement of the need for modest dress instilled by older women in the community, these images are also defiant.

In many ways, the young women's depictions embody Zournazi's (2002) ideas about hope being a useful concept to think about in the present, rather than encompassing a set of utopian ideas about the future. Hope is not the same as optimism, as hope resides in the sphere of uncertainty. Indeed, Zournazi argues that it is the uncertain nature of hope that provides its most important characteristic—the opportunity to experiment:

To speak of hope is therefore to speak of the not yet become 'seeds of change', connections in the making that might not be activated or obvious at the moment. (Zournazi 2002, 221, quoted in Anderson 2006, 745)

In their detailed depictions of what they could look like, and the detailed attention they gave to the pattern and colour of clothes, the shoes embellished with flowers and stars, and the styling of hair and make-up, the young women are experimenting with something that they have 'not yet become' (Anderson 2006, 741). During the process of experimenting, they begin to imagine a range of other freedoms, such as having a career or moving away from the community.



## Conclusion

In this chapter, young women's relationships emerge as a limiting factor in their lives. One young woman articulated this in her comment that '[boys say] stop dreaming what you gonna be'. Yet, it is in the area of relationships that the young women describe a step-by-step approach to life planning that involves a current boyfriend, possibly a baby, and then a move away from the community to be either single or to find a 'good man'. It is the final stage of this imagining—in thoughts about moving away from the community—that represents a new departure for these young women. Leaving the community was considered to be one of the worst possible outcomes in a person's life in the 2008 and 2012 studies, due to people's deep feelings of connection and support from family. However, moving away is largely uncharted territory for them, as few of them have experienced any lengthy residence outside of the community. Ideas about living without a partner are also tentative, as very few single women exist as potential role models in the community (with the exception of older widows).

The possibilities of a radical re-imagining of self, however, occur not in the young women's stories, but in the visual depictions of their characters. A preoccupation with pretty clothes, hair, jewellery and make-up may be assumed to be unsurprising for teenage girls, but in this setting, they are an act of defiance. No young woman in a relationship would be allowed by her partner to present herself in such a way. Therefore, the depictions of the young women's characters reinforce their partly formulated dreams of leaving the community to live a life in which such choices are possible. The body maps and the stories associated with the depicted characters alert us to the complexity and subtlety of aspiration for these young women, which would be easy to overlook from a conventional aspirations perspective.

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