Hope

the everyday and imaginary life of
young people on the margins

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The accounts, dialogue and images in the following pages are the thoughts and opinions of the authors and the young people who participated in the research. They do not necessarily represent the views of the organisations or people who supported the study and they are not a statement of South Australian government policy.

Ethical rules under which the research for this book was conducted required that the young people represented in the study remain anonymous. Young people contributing to this book are therefore not named and we have, for similar reasons, masked the eyes of people in their photos.

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author notes

Dr Simon Robb is interested in the experiences of marginalized young people and in exploring the limits of writing practice. He has published in the area of the sociology of education (Innovation and Tradition 2004) and experimental histories (The Hulk, 2003). He has also written and produced several documentaries for radio.

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preface

In 2006 a research team began a project aimed at investigating what hope and the future meant to young people on the margins of society. The research team spent time at two South Australian alternative education schools that catered for marginalised young people aged 13–18. These young people couldn't cope with mainstream schooling nor could these institutions cope with their needs. Many of the young people had major emotional, behavioural or drug problems, or engaged in criminal activities that made it impossible for them to stay within the mainstream. Their experiences were often characterised by troubled family backgrounds of violence and abuse along with involvement with child welfare. We felt that their views had been neglected. The research focused on the young people, but the teachers, social workers and related staff were also consulted. This book is the result of that research.

The research with the young people took place in their schools. At the outset the young people were invited to participate as assistant researchers on a project about hope. It was explained to them that we wanted their assistance in understanding what hope and the future might mean. We stressed that they were not the problems that the research was trying to solve, but that they were people whose understanding of hope and the future, in their own life, was valued by the researchers.

One of the planned outcomes of the research project was an exhibition entitled 'Hope' at the Migration Museum (Adelaide) in 2008. The exhibition strongly influenced the way the research was conducted. We needed methods that would lead to the production of visual, rather than simply textual, primary material that could be used in the museum. To do this we drew on research methods from visual anthropology and sociology, where photography and drawing is used to document experience and elicit information that would otherwise be inaccessible. Processes where the research subject is given the role as photographer (as sometimes occurs in the process of 'photo-elicitation') also encourages the research subject to engage creatively with the project in which they are participating.

Likewise, the autonomy and creativity offered by this method enhances the pleasure that the subject experiences during the process. Photo-elicitation was not only a research tool to 'elicit information'. It fulfilled a key need to collect objects or representations that had visual power.

The young people were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of places, people and things that made them feel hopeful and evoked for them a sense of the future. The young people had the cameras for up to two weeks. All the students did their photography away from the research team and were free to use the cameras wherever they wanted. When the photos were developed, we returned to the school and talked with the young people about the significance of the images they had selected. All of the photos in this book, including the cover, were taken by the young people. The young people and their teachers were interviewed, sometimes individually and in sometimes in small groups, about hopefulness and the future. In keeping with the philosophy of the research, the interview technique drew on the theory that underpins narrative therapy that has a central tenet that people are not problems, problems are problems. The interviews placed young people at the centre of inquiry where both their hopes and future could be discussed and contrasted with what might be seen as a more likely future. These interviews appear in this book as first person narratives about hope and the future. The young people were also asked to draw pictures of the future, of the future that they wanted and the future that they thought was going to occur, no matter what. Those drawings also appear in this book.

Some of this material might confront the reader, assault our gentle sensibilities, but it is important for understanding the complexities of hope. While we as authors would not condone the use of a Nazi swastika, for example, or the use of violence against others, we need to consider what leads a young person to see hopefulness there—and concomitantly, to help to develop more sustainable roads to hopefulness we need to first acknowledge the presence of hope conjured up through unsustainable means.

Much of the work produced during the research process with the young people is organised into themes: people and places that make you feel hopeful, and the future. Hopefulness, according to this work, is to be found in relationships with friends and family, in caring

for others and the pleasures of companionship. Yet it is also clear that sustaining these relationships may sometimes lead to violent and harmful events. Likewise, typical places of hopefulness are to found in the home, or in nature, yet hopefulness seems also to exist in any place where relationships of care and companionship can flourish, or where the self is protected or sheltered from the world outside. This might include places that appear to be ruins. We also see, in ideas about hopeful things, the presence of the car, mobile phones and the television set alongside drugs and knives. It is as if throughout this book we see the presence of mainstream hope alongside those things commonly associated with hopelessness. This is also evident in drawings about the future that display an unsettling blend of desire and destruction. How do we read these disturbing images? Are they signalling intent or trying to contain disturbing thoughts, common to many teenagers, not just those who are troubled? Or are they an expression of resistance, a desire for change or difference from the position of marginality in an attempt to break from the status quo?

As for the teachers, hopefulness is felt most strongly in relationships of openness, friendship and care that develop between themselves and the students. This was the key to discovering the hopefulness of teaching. We found that for both the young people and their teachers, hopefulness is the feeling that life is worth living or worth sustaining. This feeling can be produced through bodily experiences, relationships and the imagination. We found that hopefulness exists universally, but the way that it is produced is not necessarily benign or positive. On the one hand, hopefulness is produced in ways typically attributed to notions of social sustainability, which is through relationships of care and friendship, employment, procreation and the legal acquisition of property. On the other hand, hopefulness can also be produced by self-destructive activities and violence against others and their property; activities that are typically seen to be antithetical to a sustainable society. We would suggest that destructive activities are not the result of an absence of hope, but rather a reflection of the limited opportunities available for the production of hope through sustainable means. In the later part of the book the researchers discuss and explore the complexity and implications of some of these key themes.

The idea of researching hope and marginalised young people had its origins in a desire to expand and enrich the idea of social sustainability, which is typically about the articulation

of hopes for a better society in the context of options for practical change. We decided to expand on the idea of social sustainability by thinking about hope without limits, which is another way of talking about utopias. Utopias are that aspect of hope that is left out of social sustainability. Utopias are absent from social sustainability debates, as too are the voices of those we call young people on the margins. Their views offer a different and generational challenge to the more anodyne depictions of hope and the future found in conventional views of sustainable societies, and indicate that we may need to consider the centrality of marginal ideas when thinking about hope and the future.
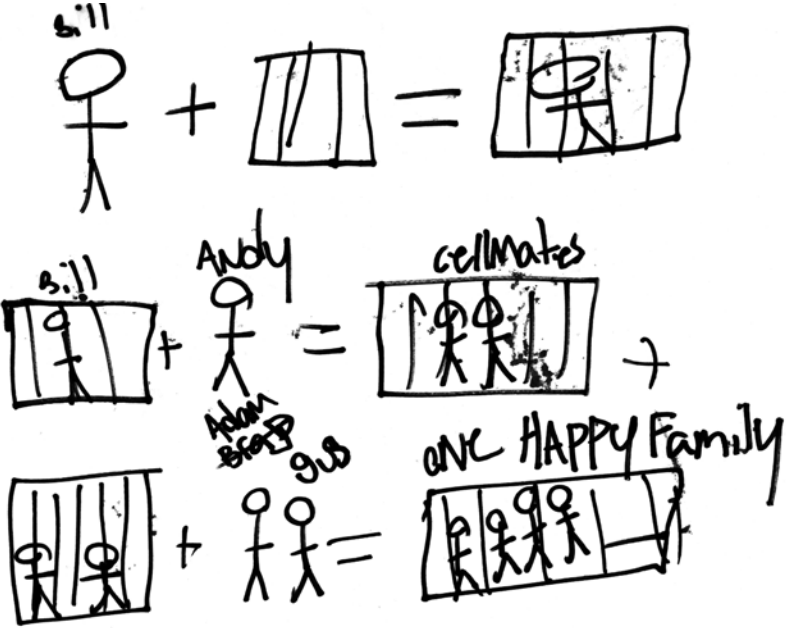
people

When I think about being hopeful I think about being with my girlfriend and my Mum. They bring tranquility and calmness. They make me calmer, which makes me hopeful. I don't do the calm thing very well. I'm usually very aggro. Hopefully in the future I can see myself being different. I'll have a job and I'll have my anger under control. Sometimes I go off the deep end a bit. People staring at me makes me angry. I'd just like people's respect.

The police make me angry. The very presence of them makes me furious. I hate them. They lock my Mum up all the time. So I've hated them all my life. If I could imagine being with anyone it would be my Mum. She makes me feel safe. She knows what to say. She's always been there, unless she's in gaol. I think what my Mum would want for my future is for me to read and write and make a good wage and see me happy.

The people who're important to me help me by keeping me calm and keeping me out of gaol. I've been in gaol. It's probably a black mark on my future. But it pointed me in the right direction, I think, because I didn't want to be there. I want to give myself a good future. I want to have money in my pocket. I don't want to have to go out and steal money and steal things. I want to be a bricklayer. A builder. I like the work. My Mum can help me with that.

No-one really gave a shit about me in the past. They think I'm just a druggie who's going down and I've got a bit of a bad mouth. My anger could get in the way of my future. And the police. Everyone else has knocked me down already so I'm glad to get back up from it. When my mum was in gaol I ended living at friends' places and they just steal from you and ended up kicking me out and keeping everything that I owned. So I just lived here, there and everywhere. All I hope for is that I have a job. I don't know if it will come true.

Some people just think that we should know better, so to speak. But we haven't been taught another way. So we don't know another way. We haven't had another way. So for the future that means we'll end up being drug dealers. I don't want to be a drug dealer. Been there done that.

If I work for the money I'm not going to go and spend it all on pot, I might like to go and buy some gold, or clothes, something nice, something I can keep, hold on to.

I've done the other future. My mother was a drug dealer her whole life. And then she went to gaol. That put it into perspective for me. We used to be sitting pretty. We had everything we wanted. But now we've got nothing, we're living in a car. I don't want that. I want to have money. I don't want the cops to be able to take it from me. I want to say 'no, it's not drug money mate, look, I fuckin' worked mate, this is my fuckin' house, get fucked'. I want to show everyone—the people who kicked me out when my Mum was in gaol—stick it to them all, fuck them. I don't need them, I can do it on my own.

Hopefully I'll have a decent future. Hopefully I've got a connection with a decent builder. And a job. In 20 years hopefully I'm a builder with a child. He won't have fuckin' drug addict for a mother and he won't have a drug addict for a father. And he'll always have that option, that he has the freedom to do what he likes, and he also has the comfort of his family around. I'd like my Mum to be standing with me.

In the future I want a house. That's all I want. A house that's mine and no-one can take it away from me. I want my child and my family to know that I'm not a stuff-up. I want to have an everyday life like you see in a fuckin' movie.

Hᴏᴘᴇ ɪs ᴛʜᴇ ɴᴇᴡ ʙᴇɢɪɴɴɪɴɢ, what's coming to the future, what we're going to see, what our pathway is going to be.

I felt hopeful about being born.

Last year was the worst year of my life. I lost my best friend with a mistake, and then two weeks ago, she called me up and now we're talking again, as she's realised it was the guy, and it wasn't me. And she put me through so much hell. I couldn't go to the Plaza or anything because she wanted to smash me.

I like school. That's where my friends are. My mum's hugs make me feel hopeful, like a little princess.

I'm going to get a hairdressing job, I can see it already. I'm going to start off my life.

The closest things to me are probably my family and my friends. If I didn't have them in my life, I would probably be crashing down at the moment. I'm on depression pills. If I didn't have the support of my family I think I would have gone through a breakdown.