**In my life: youth stories and poems on HIV/AIDS: towards a new literacy in the age of AIDS**

Claudia Mitchell*

*McGill University, Montreal, Canada*

This article comes out of an HIV and AIDS prevention and education project with young people in two townships in the Western Cape of South Africa. As part of that project, a small anthology—*In my life: youth stories and poems on HIV/AIDS*—was produced and distributed locally as well as in several districts in other provinces. The avid consumption of *In my life* by local youth in Khayelitsha and Atlantis but also as far away as Durban in KwaZulu-Natal speaks to the power of a youth-to-youth connection. In the article I examine some of the ways in which literacy is changing in the age of AIDS in an area of the world which has been ravaged by the AIDS pandemic.

It’s a challenge. It’s a call to everybody. Nobody has to neglect that call. Everybody has to respond positively to it. (Tembinkosi, Grade 6 teacher, rural KwaZulu-Natal)

Tembinkosi is speaking about the ‘AIDS all around’ situation in the rural community where he teaches. In many districts, more than 25% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are HIV positive; with girls and young women making up 75% of all those between the ages of 15 and 24 who are infected (Lewis, 2004). Recent work on health promotion in the area of HIV and AIDS suggests that unless young women and young men are given a more significant voice in participating in policy dialogue about their own health, and sexuality, and in producing (and disseminating) locally relevant gender-sensitive messages, prevention and awareness programmes organized ‘from the outside’ (i.e. by adults, donors and so on) are doomed to failure (see, for example, Ford *et al.*, 2003). Thus, an overarching concern is the increased recognition of the place of youth engagement and youth participation in keeping young people hopeful and ‘alive and on board’ with its own campaign or orientation to prevention, treatment and care. ‘It’s a call to everybody.’ It is a particular call to the whole area of language and literacy where issues of self-expression, and of participation and engagement, are already at the heart of what we

*McGill University, Faculty of Education, 3700 McTavish Street, Montreal, Canada. Email: Claudia.mitchell@mcgill.ca*
do. Can we begin to think about a new literacy of AIDS, one that is about keeping young people alive?

**In my life**

*In my life* is a 68-page anthology made up of the writings of 14 young people. The book, which is meant to be read by other young people, is organized according to author segments in such a way that each author introduces herself/himself, ‘Hi my name is ... and I live in ...’ followed by between three and five selections by that same author. Many of these read as short artists’ statements that show how young people are positioning themselves as cultural workers and activists in the context of AIDS in their own communities. There is also a picture of the author beside the introductory autobiographical piece and a group picture on the back of the book. In total the book contains 90 pieces of writing, some written as poems (both found poems as well as experiments with other forms), some written as interviews with people who are living with HIV and AIDS or who are AIDS workers, and some which are simply narrative pieces in response to the various prompts such as ‘In my neighborhood’ or ‘What people are saying about AIDS’. Most of the authors whose writings are represented in *In my life* had already participated in a year-long series of workshops where they learned more about AIDS, but where they also came in contact with many local groups who were using the arts to address HIV and AIDS. As Marilyn Martin (2004) points out in her essay ‘HIV/AIDS in South Africa: can the visual arts make a difference?’ there is a rich tradition of using the arts to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS. In producing *In my life*, the group of young writers participated in writing workshops over several weekends at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town. The workshops were co-facilitated by a writing specialist who had conducted writing workshops with many community groups (although not specifically in the context of writing about HIV and AIDS) and a public health worker who regularly conducts workshops with young people about sexuality and HIV and AIDS (but not specifically in the context of writing as cultural production).1

Although the authors of *In my life* worked with common prompts that were suggested by the writing facilitator, the concerns that they chose to depict were by no means uniform. Their concerns include the deeply personal ways that young people are experiencing HIV and AIDS in their own families and communities, the social context for HIV and AIDS more generally, newly emerging areas such as orphan care, stigma and voluntary counselling and testing, as well as the whole area of ‘taking action’.

**Everyone is infected or affected**

An ongoing theme in the popular discourses of AIDS in South Africa is the idea of ‘everyone is infected or affected’. The counter discourse is that ‘AIDS has nothing to do with me’. Even President Mbeki until fairly recently declared that he personally
knew no-one who had died of AIDS. The authors in the ‘in my life’ group may be exceptional for their willingness to engage at the level of ‘this is who we know’, and to write pieces which addressed the way in which a sister or a cousin had become infected, and, as we see in Wendy’s account below, the ways her own family is dealing with the situation:

That day I was feeling bad at school. I went to toilets so that I could cry. But I didn’t know why. I felt down emotionally but not physically. When I arrived at home everyone was crying, but I ignored everything. My mind was telling me that my sister is dead, and I didn’t want to believe it. So I went to buy electricity, and on my way back again I found it hard to walk home. I just wanted to sit at the side of the road and cry, because I loved her so much.

She had a hard time breathing. In the hospital the doctors were busy with other patients. She tried opening her nose and she tried having as much air as she could. She tried to fight. The doctors arrived at her room and found her, still fighting. She was afraid. The machines were making sounds. Tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii ... The doctors tried to do their work but it was over. My mother was trying her best to cope with work, and I was trying my best to cope with school work. My mother got there after her death. The doctor didn’t want to tell us what was the cause of her death. But in the end he did tell us. (pp. 58–59)

As we see in this account, families are struggling—either with incorporating death into their everyday lives, or with the presence of an illness that brings with it a great deal of mystery and fear.

However, unlike these narratives of care, as they might be called, there were others that portrayed the total desperation of the situation. ‘Everything about my friend who is HIV positive’ tells the story of a girl whose mother dies of AIDS and finds out in a letter written by her mother that she herself is also HIV positive. She is raised by her grandmother, who dies and she has to go to stay with her father in a one room dwelling where she becomes a victim of sexual violence. Poignantly, one of the authors discloses her own HIV positive status:

It was 2:30 in the afternoon. It was me, my sister, my young brother, and my father. We were going to town. On the Old Paarl Road we saw three men at the side of the road. They were asking for a lift. My father stopped the car for them and they got in. After a few minutes, one of the men took out a gun and shot my father and my sister and my young brother and so I lost most of my family that I loved very much. I am left only with my lovely mother now.

My life is so complicated because I live with HIV. I was infected with HIV last year in October, and from then until now, I live with it. There were many problems I had to face, and have been keeping this secret for 7 months. That was a difficult time in my life. I felt like I was crossing a river with one big pain inside my heart, thinking about everything that happened. I’m still not sure I am ready to tell the whole world about it. My life is like when you mix salt and water, the solution is dissolved.

I always dreamed about having a nice future and a beautiful marriage with two children, and having a big house and driving a nice car. I want to be a Magistrate in the court, or work in Parliament. (p. 20)

In her writing, her references to the past and the tragedy of her father, sister and brother dying, her description of her present HIV status and a silence over what
must have happened to her the previous year, and particularly the darkness of keeping all of this secret, and at the same time her dreams for the future—all this forms a complex picture, but one that carries with it a hopeful tone: ‘I want to be …’ and not ‘I wanted to be …’.

In some cases the participants went out and interviewed people they knew who were HIV positive to find out how they were living with the disease. In the story of Lala, for example, we learn about public disclosure and also the place of support groups:

**Lala**

Lala is a brave young girl who lives two blocks away from my house. She is HIV-positive. She told me:

‘When I first arrived at school, I thought everyone knew about my status and I was uncomfortable. I wanted to cry and run away. But I decided to calm down. I was new to the school and if I went home, I would be in big trouble. I also thought that I needed to talk to a guidance teacher about my status. So I went to the class and was introduced to my class teacher and I met some new friends. After school I attended support group at the school where I found that I was not alone in my situation. At first it was hard for me to disclose my status in front of the group, but they supported me and I gained strength from them. I am now a full member of the support group. I also managed to disclose my status in front of the whole school. I talked to them about HIV and gave them advice on how to handle the situation’. (pp. 35–36)

As in the narrative above, the interview with Lala reveals that while the school is a site of stigmatization and fear, other avenues for support exist within communities, and a sense of hope develops.

Something that jumps off the pages of *In my life* is that life is not just about HIV and AIDS. HIV and AIDS have to be read in a context where there are many other challenges from gangsterism to sexual violence. In the narrative above, the grief at losing a father, sister and brother at the hands of a gang almost overshadows living with AIDS. And Ann’s narrative about the girl whose father rapes her offers up a world where the girl is herself HIV positive but the fact that she has nowhere else to live and is pregnant are features of her life that place ‘AIDS in context’. Violence, as many of the narratives highlight, is all around:

**In My Neighbourhood**:

On the 24 December, 2002, this guy was carrying a gun. He was going around the area alone because his friends had been arrested and he was not found yet. Later he found out that there were people looking for him. But in the meantime this gang went to his house and found his mother. They asked her where her son was, and she said she didn’t know. So these guys shot and killed his mother, then they went looking for him. When he got back, he found his mother dead in cold blood and the neighbours told him who did it. He went after them, but they shot him in the head. He fell and the police came. The gang had run away. The police called the ambulance. He was crying and he was sad. He said he was going to be ok, and go after them and kill them. But he didn’t have enough time—he passed away and that was the end of him. (pp. 3–4)

In ‘The story of something that happened’ a young woman is raped and then shot. Her boyfriend commits suicide:
It was in the middle of the night at about 3am and Khunjulwa was coming back from her boyfriend’s house. They had had an argument so Khunjulwa decided to go home and her boyfriend didn’t bother to go with her. While she was walking near the graveyard she heard footsteps and she decided to walk faster, but the footsteps were getting worse so she decided to run. A man was following her. Khunjulwa couldn’t take it any more so she decided to stop. She asked the man what he wanted. He didn’t answer her, instead he forced himself on her. Khunjulwa fought with the man and called for help, but there was no one there to help her. Khunjulwa fought until the man got sick and tired and pushed her and then he shot K. seven times in the body and two more in the head. K. died on the spot. It was so terrible. When people woke up, they went to check to see if they knew the person and they saw it was K. They went to report the matter to her parents, and they were so devastated. They buried their daughter and the person who shot K. was not found and K’s boyfriend was left with guilt. He couldn’t take it anymore, and he committed suicide. (p. 35)

Many of the narratives suggest that the violence is just ‘ordinary’ and part of the mix of what happens:

In my neighbourhood, accidents and incidents, people lose their loved ones, people die in front of me, people shoot guns, carry knives in front of me. I have watched these things happening all these years. Drugs, stealing goods, cops go in and out chasing gangs, carrying guns. House breaking also happens around my street vandalizing, gunshots, people highjacking cars. The guys in my neighbourhood do not have a good future, to be honest, because they smoke dangerous drugs like cocaine. Most of them even do house breaking and some carry guns. (p. 61)

At the same time people still get up, go to work, go to church, do the ironing for the next day and laugh:

A lot of things happen in my street, people fight and steal and even kill. But the loving side to all this is people and children enjoy themselves in our street. Dogs, cats and chickens walk around too. Mothers, fathers and children walk around too, walk around like people must do. We have a Tuck Shop in our road. I enjoy it because I can buy sweets there. The people where I live are ‘busy bodies’. They like to go to parties and drink at the Green Shebeen. We call it that. Susan is the lady in control. I think she is a fat lady and she knows it. I have friends, everywhere, people love me because I care. I like the people where I live, they’re cool. (p. 30)

Sunday is the most respected day in my community. When it is Sunday everybody wakes up early and people get ready to go to church. Later most people are busy in the house, ironing their clothes because the following day is Monday. (p. 34)

On Sundays, our neighbourhood is a very quiet place. People resting. Ironing school clothes and putting their stuff ready for work and school. The morning and night is church. Mommy and Daddy get ready for church. After church we eat our lunch and watch a movie or two. Near three o’clock I wash up, dry off, and see if everything is okay. Then we all take a nice rest and wake up at six. Mommy puts our school clothes ready and Daddy’s work clothes. I wash myself. Go to bed till the next day. That’s how our Sunday is at home. (p. 17)

Although only a couple of the narratives make direct reference to the situation of children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS (e.g. ‘When I think of all the AIDS orphans it makes me sad and depressed, and yet also motivated to do my bit in the struggle against HIV and AIDS’), a re-reading of the texts shows both the
invisibility of orphan care (a presence of absence) but also the ways in which the issues are being experienced directly or indirectly by families: Thozamile speaks directly about losing his mother. How she died is not the point of his story but rather his sense of grief:

_His Mom_

My story is about how I lost my mum last year. The pain effect is in my heart. I was so shocked to hear the news. There was a silence the whole afternoon, the sky changed. For me was a big shock. Even at TAC, they felt the pain too, there were there for me. I’m so sorry I can’t explain in words, because it is hard for me to talk about this. I hope you will understand .... (p. 61)

Barbara in one of her narratives refers to losing her brother and sister along with her father on a rural road, and is left ‘only with my lovely mother now’; Wendy talks about the death of her older sister and the fact that she and her mother are now caring for her sister’s daughter who is also HIV positive. And Ann’s account of her friend who was left with her grandmother when she was only three weeks old and whose mother and grandmother both die, forcing her to go live with her father, highlights what NGOs now refer to as ‘double orpaning’.

**Taking action**

What also stands out in the narratives is the way that the authors position themselves as agents of change. Taking action, for some, means starting with oneself. As we see in the narrative which follows, the author takes up the issue of voluntary counselling and testing:

... We had a girls’ night that day and we were talking about the issues. We talked about HIV, and then my friend disclosed her status to me. I didn’t know what to say. After that I didn’t know what to do. She was healthy and beautiful. We always did everything together at that time. It was then that I realized that HIV is something real. I became interested in HIV and AIDS. We went to the workshops together and got more information and we have ended up being informed. After that I realized that I have to know my status. I thought about it first and then the next week I went for an HIV test. I tested HIV negative. (p. 5)

Others spoke about the ways that they offer advice and information. As Wendy writes:

After my sister’s death, a doctor tested my niece and she was found HIV positive and I found that it was my duty to explain to my mother the whole process of being HIV+ and how we should treat her. From there until now I’m doing what I can so that we can live a positive life. My mother is trying her best to give her what she needs and wants. Since then I’m a teenager but with the life of an adult. And the road is rough. (pp. 58–59)

Lindeka chronicles the arrival of her sick cousin and baby to stay with the family, the announcement that the cousin is HIV positive and the way that the family comes to terms with this. In her writing there is a sense of the emotional response, but also an idea factually of how to deal with the issues (the need for support groups; how to address misinformation):
When my cousin was fit enough to walk on her own she started attending support groups and becoming more informed and confident about her status. I wanted to go with my cousin to her support groups but she told me that she was not ready for that yet. She joined the Treatment Action Campaign in 2001 and she took me with her on June 16 to a rally they had. I enjoyed myself and learned so much. Every bit of information I learned I brought back home to educate everyone.

When my mother started separating and marking my cousin’s dishes and telling us that she would not use them when they were for my cousin only, I told my mother that she was wrong to isolate her like that and that I had read that AIDS does not spread that way, and she actually listened to me. (p. 47)

But the idea of taking action extends beyond the family, as we see in Nombulelo’s narrative ‘The lady at the bus station’:

… I was curious and asked to join the group (in my school) and they taught me about HIV and AIDS. I went to workshops and camps and we planned an awareness campaign at the school where we taught people about HIV and AIDS.

Some time later, I was going from a Saturday School in Cape Town to an HIV and AIDS meeting in Athlone. While I was waiting at the bus station I met a lady. We started talking and she asked me where I was going. I told her I was going to an HIV and AIDS meeting. When the bus came, we got on and she asked me to sit with her because she said she had a problem and would like to share it with me. She told me her daughter was HIV and that she was in the hospital. I could see that the lady was very stressed about the situation and needed help. I told her that she should have counselling, offered to help. I gave her my number and told her that I would speak to a nurse that I know. I also asked her if I could get my teacher involved and she agreed.

When I got to school the next week, I spoke to my teacher and we called the nurse. She referred us to a counsellor who spoke to the lady and made an appointment. She went to the counsellor and she got strong and well.

Unfortunately her daughter has recently died. But after I did this, I felt stronger and I feel that now I have all the tools that I need to help and teach people about HIV and AIDS. The reason why I wrote this is because I am proud of what I did and I want to tell people that if you help someone you are playing a big role in his or her life and also in your own life. (p. 36)

Thozamile’s text called ‘My story’ maps out the various paths that his life has taken and the ways in which he is ‘taking action’:

I grew up in the township called Gugulethu in the 1980s. That time was during the Apartheid era, and there was a lot of criminal activity in my life. We used to vandalize property, hit trucks, do hijackings. The police sometimes chased us. We used to carry tools to defend ourselves. I’ve done these things and played my role with gangsters.

I didn’t stop my criminal activities when we moved away from Gugs, and went to Khayelitsha, I continued to have street fights and sometimes we stole goods.

Then something happened to change my life completely. My best friend told me that she was HIV-positive. I didn’t believe her at first, because we used to joke around a lot of time, doing crazy stuff together. She was always joking with me. We were both in school. We spent our time studying, having fun, sharing ideas. We always joked a lot and made up stories, so it took me a whole year to believe her. But it was difficult for her
to cope, and even though at that time I knew nothing about HIV and AIDS the one thing I knew was to give her the support she needed.

It was a time of change, and something changed about me. She made me understand life and about HIV and AIDS, and other issues. Since then my life changed completely. I quit a lot of things and I took a big step in my life and quit being in a gang. She and I started an Action Committee at school. The whole school supported us. We did a lot of complaining at school and around using condoms, awareness about HIV and AIDS.

Since that day I never looked back again. I’m still supporting her all the way through, giving her love, care, understanding, openness, acceptance. I understand there are new things around us, some for good some for bad, and sometimes we have to accept things in life the way they are.

I dream of making this world a better place for all of us, one in which we have peace, respect, and openness about our health conditions so that we can save a lot of people living with HIV and AIDS by providing them with treatment and prevention earlier.

(p. 63)

Mapping out a new literacy in the age of AIDS

If there is a critical lesson to be taken from this work it is that there is a need for a new approach to conceptualizing literacy, one that considers how the cultural legacy of bringing about social change through narrative and the arts can now be mobilized as central to youth and HIV and AIDS prevention programming work. Developing the In my life stories and poems through the involvement of a writing teacher and a public health worker, and publishing them through a local publisher, who managed to produce inexpensive copies, demonstrates ways of invoking literacy in AIDS programming and AIDS in literacy programming. The avid consumption of In my life by local community members in Khayelitsha and Atlantis speaks to the significance of a new literacy of AIDS in several ways.

The In my life stories demonstrate that there are new stories to be told for and by young people in South Africa today, ones that are almost beyond the imagination of many adults currently writing fiction for young adults who did not themselves grow up in the age of AIDS. This youth voice is critical and not just in South Africa, as Michael Hoechsmann observes in his analysis of reading youth writing produced by Young People’s Press in Toronto—‘media by, and for, youth’ (Hoechsmann, 2004, p. 112). We need to find approaches to talking about and writing about community writing in ways that highlight the texts themselves. Joseph Tobin talks about the ways in which one line in a transcript of children’s conversations could be read like a line of Shakespeare for what it can reveal about a range of themes (Tobin, 2000).

Contained within this cultural materialist reading of In my life is a recognition of the place and cultural currency of a local text like this ‘on the streets’. Not only were many copies of the book in circulation when it first came out, but its authors were also in circulation as public figures. Some of the authors took on celebrity status in their communities shortly after the book was published and were given opportunities to speak at AIDS events and looked to for advice from neighbours and friends. In follow-up evaluations to the project, the majority of the young authors said that this
experience had been very empowering and was one of the critical aspects they took away from writing their stories. Status became a kind of social commodity.  

A second feature of a new literacy of AIDS relates to the ways in which AIDS has also influenced how we think about literacy practices and leaving something behind. The phenomenon of Memory Books is a good example. Henning Mankell in his study of memory books in Uganda in *I die, but the memory lives on: the world AIDS crisis and the memory book project* (2004), draws attention to the significance of memory work and the idea of a ‘portable’ identity through memory books along with body maps, photographs, memory baskets and other artefacts for the child survivors:

The memory books, small exercise books with pasted-in pictures and texts written by people who could barely recite the alphabet, could prove to be the most important documents our time has produced. When all the official reports, minutes, balance sheets, poetry collections, plays, formulae for the control of robot, computer programmes, all the archival materials that represent the foundation on which our life and history is based—when all that has been forgotten, it could be that these slim volumes, these memoirs left behind by human beings who died too soon, prove to be the most significant documents of our epoch. (p. 29)

Mankell goes on to talk about the dual challenges of literacy addressed through these books vis-à-vis the producers and the consumers:

> What can children say about their parents if they do not remember anything because they were so young when their parents died? Or to put it another way, how can parents explain who they were to children who are so young that they can't comprehend? (p. 30)

As we read Mankell’s powerful portraits of the 30 or so Memory Books that he worked with in Uganda, it is clear that these texts have an immediacy and urgency that goes beyond the *In my life* stories. Memory Books—‘writings as death approaches’ (p. 29)—are produced for particular children, and sometimes even for the unborn. At the same time, the *In my life* stories can also be read as ‘leaving something behind’ documents in the sense that they are produced by young people and will often be read by young people just entering adolescence. Like the Memory Books, texts like *In my life* also suggest new relationships between author and reader.

This work reminds us of the significance of ordinary citizens (in this case young people) taking action as cultural producers, and as knowledge-producers more generally (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Drawing attention to the phenomenon of youth publishing and Young People’s Press specifically, Michael Hoechsmann observes that much of this writing is community-based rather than school-based. Within this framework adult editors work alongside and with young people who are ‘empowered to recognize the value of what they have to say before being taught how to do so’. This approach valorizes the youth voice over writing competence. My point is not to dismiss school-based writing, but rather to advocate a view of literacy that includes the idea of cultural production.

In some cases this will not be limited solely to the type of production that is highlighted in the *In my life* stories. It could also include working with the visual. For
example, elsewhere we have worked with young people to produce ‘in my life’ onzuuzulu stories through video production (Mitchell et al., in press). In this project, the video-making workshops were organized as one-day events where participants brainstormed ‘in my life’ issues that were significant to them, and then selected a topic that they wanted to explore further through video production. Each small group of five or six participants was facilitated throughout the workshop by one member of our research team or by a member of a local youth group with whom we have worked in previous projects. Each group had one video camera, a tripod and chart paper for brainstorming activities. In the original brainstorming stage, participants identified many critical issues, ranging from teen pregnancy through to gangs and poverty. For example, in one group of girls, the very first issue that was raised in their brainstorming ‘in my life’ session was ‘I am worried that I will get pregnant before I finish school’. Group members had a chance to vote independently on the topics that they thought were the most significant. A key point with the actual film-making was to have everyone involved in several aspects of the process, from learning to story-board through to learning to use the camera. While a variety of themes were addressed in the documentaries of the entire group (which was made up of teachers, community health care workers, parents and young people), the issue that five out of six of the groups of young people chose was gender violence, represented through such titles as ‘Trust no one at school’, ‘Rape’, ‘Raping and HIV and AIDS’ and ‘Stop sexual abuse’. It is beyond the scope of this article to do justice to the five documentaries, each of which is worthy of its own in-depth analysis, both as an example of video-making and as a text on gender violence. What is worth noting though is that these local documentaries are now part of a school-strategy for addressing gender violence.3

Finally, it is critical to address the significance of accurate information, something that has had its own politics in South Africa as Peter Gill explores in Body count: how they turned AIDS into a catastrophe (2006), and an issue that the young authors themselves take up in relation to Thabo Mbeki’s views on AIDS. As one of the authors writes:

I wish that the President would see HIV and AIDS the way I see it, and do something about it, and that he would stop saying anti-retrovirals are toxic, because it makes people distrust them. (p. 2)

As noted above, the production of In my life came out of a series of workshops co-facilitated by a writing specialist and a public health worker. A critical issue in the ‘making public’ stage of any cultural product involving HIV and AIDS, an area which is already infused with misleading and outdated information, myths and stereotypes, is ensuring that what is going to be read or viewed (particularly by young people) is accurate.

The young authors identify getting accurate information as an important part of AIDS in their lives:

(The Drama Miss) … says that we have to do a play on HIV and AIDS. Most of us do not know much about HIV and AIDS. So we set out on a mission to find out all we can about the disease. (p. 15)
Another issue, though, is having accurate information to share, one of the key messages in many of the narratives, as we see in texts like Lindeka’s:

> Every bit of information I learned I brought back home to educate everyone.

> When my mother started separating and marking my cousin’s dishes and telling us that she would not use them when they were for my cousin only, I told my mother that she was wrong to isolate her like that and that I had read that AIDS does not spread that way, and she actually listened to me. (p. 47)

> After my sister’s death, a doctor tested my niece and she was found HIV positive and I found it was my duty to explain to my mother the whole process of being HIV and how we should treat her. (p. 59)

In producing two documentaries, Fire and Hope and Unwanted Images, on HIV and AIDS and gender violence, we ourselves have been confronted with the question of which statistics to include, how to ensure gender representation and so on. In an essay that we produced about the making of Unwanted Images, for example, we questioned our decision to position the young artists, most of whom were between the ages of 11 and 17, as ‘children’ rather than ‘youth’, realizing in retrospect that this positioning could actually work against ensuring that young people are given information and read more, as ‘after all they are only children’ and need to be protected (Mitchell et al., 2004). Similarly we have looked at the politics of including a Medical Research Council statistic ‘Sixty per cent of 15-year-old boys will be HIV positive by the time they are 30’ in Fire and Hope, a documentary that is viewed by 15-year old boys (Mitchell, 2006). In editing the narratives and selecting texts for inclusion in In my life, there were similar issues around giving out accurate—but hopeful—information. A good example of this can be seen in what Nosbusio has written:

> Just because you have tested HIV positive, doesn’t mean that you have AIDS. If you take care of yourself in a responsible and respectful way, you’ll be fine. You can and may as well be living with HIV for many years before getting to AIDS itself. (p. 27)

It is tricky to deal with common myths and stereotypes in this kind of writing for fear that in even committing the myth to writing (‘a man can cure himself of AIDS by sleeping with a virgin’), it will be taken up by an inexperienced reader who misreads it as the truth (‘it was in writing’). Clearly this is a key challenge in the whole area of Entertainment Education more generally: what information can be embedded into the soap opera episode, video, hip hop piece or other narrative and what mechanisms need to be put in place to make sure that the information is accurate and up-to-date? The actual dynamic state of information about AIDS also poses a challenge, and it is vital that young people learn how to read critically the up-to-datedness of information and its source. In producing In my life it was vital to work closely with a public health worker. This points to the need for strategic alliances between and amongst the various groups who work with youth in schools and communities.

In an article called ‘Sick of AIDS: life, literacy and South African youth’ (Mitchell & Smith, 2003), I first argued for a re-examination of the meanings of literacy in the
age of AIDS. The point of that article was to draw attention to the importance of youth engagement and youth participation as a way to counter what was clearly a type of ‘AIDS fatigue’. Three or four years later these issues remain, and there is still relatively little ‘up close’ research on youth-focused projects and the meanings that young people themselves are making of the pandemic. In the meantime, many more young people are becoming infected, many more young people are dying, and many more young people have had to assume new responsibilities such as heading up households. New literacy challenges are emerging. One relates to obtaining appropriate identity documents and death certificates (of parents) in order to apply for the social grants that are available to eligible children who have lost parents. Another relates to financial literacy and managing a household. Now that anti-retrovirals are increasingly available, there are also new literacy issues in relation to compliance and adherence. Language itself is critical. There are eleven official languages in South Africa. How do language policies relate to emerging ‘new literacy’ issues? Life-skills teachers that I interviewed a few years ago in a township school, for example, noted that they always conduct classes on HIV and AIDS in the learner’s first language. The information, they said, is too critical to be lost as a result of only partial comprehension. These concerns appear to be remarkably similar to the kinds of issues that fit within most versions of language-across-the-curriculum, multi-literacies and situated literacies. What the authors of In my life add in, however, are the social meanings of personal expression, the significance of the literary, ‘getting informed’ and, more than anything, community involvement and taking action.

Selfless spirit and champion in the struggle against AIDS
Every struggle gives birth to its own heroes
The apartheid struggle had Steve Biko and Chris Hani

Tupac Shakur was shaped by the racial dynamics
Of life in New Jersey’s inner city
And by the meaningless existence
Of the black youth in capitalist society.

The HIV and AIDS war has its own warrior
Zackie Achmat
Who leads the country’s battle against
The multi-national drug companies
And takes on the South African Government
Over its confusing HIV and AIDS policies
Nkosi Johnson and Gugu Dlamini
Gave AIDS its face
In their fight for treatment
Achmat, a founder member
Of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC)
Mobilizes AIDS activists to take to the streets
go to the courts and to Parliament to prevent
Pharmaceutical companies making profits out
Of dying people’s lives
TAC, assisted by unions and other lobby groups,
Demands a roll-out of anti-retroviral drugs
In the public sector

HIV-positive Zackie Achmat
Refuses to take anti-retrovirals
Until they are given to all who need them. (p. 8)

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Notes on contributor
Claudia Mitchell is a James McGill Professor in the Faculty of Education, McGill University, and an Honorary Professor in the Faculty of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research focuses on visual and other participatory methodologies, particularly in addressing gender and HIV and AIDS, teacher identity and gender, and the culture of girlhood within broader studies of children and popular culture and media studies. She is the co-author/co-editor of eight books. An edited book, Combatting gender violence in and around schools (with Fiona Leach) will be published later this year.

Notes
1. Anne Schuster and Abigail Dreyer facilitated the writing workshops.
2. In a follow-up set of interviews with the young authors conducted in July 2006, I was once again struck by the importance of the publishing of In my life. Lindeka, for example, talks about how she still meets young people in Site B of Khayelitsha where she lives, who say ‘I know you. I read your story’.
3. For a further discussion of young people as cultural producers using visual methods to address gender violence, see Mitchell et al. (2006) ‘Speaking for ourselves’.
4. See, for example, the work of Cope and Kalantis (2000) and Barton et al. (2000).

References


