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Theme for English A, B and E: An Anthology of Identity in Cape Town, South Africa

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Noelle Elizabeth Rose
“To mature is to go on creating myself endlessly.”

The final semester of my undergraduate career at the University of Connecticut was spent in the warmth and sunlight of Cape Town, South Africa. The warmth I mention was not simply the warmth from the sun that curled around Table Mountain and into my window every morning, but chiefly from the people I encountered on a daily basis. One place in particular yielded the most warmth—a liquid, sunny fuzziness that made work a delight everyday. This place was appropriately named “Thandokhulu,” a Xhosa word meaning much love.

Thandokhulu Secondary School is located in Mowbray, a small suburb of Cape Town. For three months, it was my home, the place I walked to everyday to give English lessons to over a hundred 11th grade students from surrounding townships and suburbs. Guguletu, Khayelitsha, Langa, Fish Hoek, Paarl, Hout’s Bay—many different learners came together to create one cohesive, bright community. This came through at school-wide assemblies every seventh day of school. Together, students would pray and sing in Xhosa and would dance to rhythmic praise music. Shared religion and language united students from all different areas. While a non-practicing Protestant, I was always moved at assembly. It was the human spirit that united all of us: student/teacher, black/white, South African/American.

Being the only white American female at Thandokhulu certainly brought about a culture shock for the students and myself. For the students, I was initially an intriguing girl with an odd accent from that wealthy, far-off land of “America.” For me, I was the only white female teacher in the school who had a funny accent and who loved English. My entrance into Thandokhulu allowed me to view myself in a strange, new way; in
many ways, the entry brought about an identity conflict. I say conflict instead of crisis because, as I came to know later, this confusion was the beginning of the most profound, rewarding personal transformation that I would experience to date.

On my second day at Thandokhulu Secondary, I found myself in front of a class of 11th grade students teaching Shakespeare’s sonnet 116, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds.” Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds. The previous day, the teacher I had been assigned to work with, Nomdla Bopi, had told class 11 E that I would be teaching them about a love that they did not know: I would be teaching them about true love. This comment was met by the swooning of students, chattering with excitement about the next day’s love lesson and the new American girl who would be instructing them.

I had prepared Shakespeare’s sonnet the night before, brushing up on the differences between Italian and Elizabethan sonnets and reviewing rhyme scheme in order to give my lesson that day. I remember fifty sets of eyes staring at me in grades 11 A, 11 B, and 11 E (the three grade 11 classes in which Ms. Bopi taught English) as I explained the meaning of “true love” in Shakespeare’s sonnet, as well as his references to Father Time. I never knew how much I impacted the students that first day until the end of the semester.

When I felt the classes were comfortable enough with me in the middle of the term, I gave them their first poetry assignment. I distributed a copy of Langston Hughes’ “Theme For English B” to each student, which we read and discussed. Then, I told the students to write a poem about themselves based in the style of Hughes’ poem. The result: the collection of poetry in this anthology.
I was not able to include everyone’s work from the three classes, but the work included here is a testament to the strength of the overall work I received. In collecting and reading through the student’s work, a question formed in my head: how do high school students in Cape Town identify themselves? What social issues are paramount to the students I teach everyday and how do their passions manifest themselves in their lives? In this paper, I attempt to answer that question by analyzing four trends in these poems and relating them to student identity.
Swallow Your Pride and You Will Know Me
Phumlan Stemele, Grade 11 A

Allow me to take you to the world of me,
A world that was found in the early ‘90s, you see,
grew up in the dusty streets of Umtata and came to be
this young, black, proud, ambitious, passionate Capetonian, that’s me.

I enjoy listening to music, writing and I like to read.
I’m proud of being South African, I’ve been since I was a kid.
I’m this fruitful, big tree now, even though my mother planted a seed,
I also enjoy playing rugby, cricket and in soccer, I’m in mid.

People look at me and see a nobody who is black,
undermine me because I’m the townships, living in a shack.
I’m intelligent and brilliant, it’s only wealth that I lack
and for me to regard you a noble as I am, don’t talk on my back.

Large and in charge, I’m a loud and I’m proud,
all my life I’ve been lost, it’s only now that I’m found.
To find life I am bound, “bhuuh, bhuuh,” my heart makes a sound,
I might suffer now, but what comes around, goes around.

To love me, first know me, from the outside to my soul;
I can’t be more than this, I’m a human and I mole
as black as a coal, to finish school, it’s my goal,
I can’t be more than me, to be me, it’s my role.
Me as a Teenager
Luleka Dywili, Grade 11 A

Being a teenager
is like being a passenger.
Paying for education
and expecting attention.
Using brains
because we want to gain.

Looking forward in future
because of the nature.
Being premature
doesn’t mean you won’t be matured.
Being a teenager,
making mistakes…

making mistakes
and being corrected
because they want us to be directed.
Learning from our mistakes
could get us far
from where we are,
could get us far
just like a car
that could get you wherever
you want to go.
Me as a teenager,
I say life is great!
All About Me!!
Abongile Maliwa, Grade 11 A

I’m sixteen, black and a proud South African from Umtata down in the Eastern Cape. I’m slender and tender, tall and all!

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter, Similar to nature I provide the needy by words that revive and relieve the spirit of a mature person. To me, existing is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating myself endlessly.

I prove the nature of matriarchy, and at 16 as a teen. It ain’t easy, but I guess we all masquerade as we move on! Therefore, happiness does not depend on exterior things but on the way we see them. Points of view always matter, so I use my imagination to turn things upside and inside out to find different points of view.

I’m a real leader; I face the music, even if the time is whack! I’m a wench that enjoys living as it is. I exalt with those who exalt with me. I enjoy being loved and I know who I am, do you? Don’t answer that! I have a lot of experiences that are harsh and fine. Ever heard of the statement “A life without a past is a lost or wasted life, and a pupil without a soul is a pupil without a goal and aim to fulfill the prospect of life and its reciprocals?”

I’ll succeed because I focus on the journey, not the destination. This is me, Abongile Maliwa.
I am seventeen, still a teen, 
living with a bigger dream, to 
finish high school, study film, 
and be the best I can be. 
I am what you see and what you 
see is what you get.

Lugakazi, true Inzwakazi, 
born and bread in the hills 
of Eastern Cape, that’s why I’m very concerned. 
They say you are what you eat, 
so I strive to eat healthy. 
My goal in life is not to be wealthy 
because true wealth comes from good 
health and wise ways. 
I am always ready to take good 
care of myself.

I don’t eat any meat, 
no dairy, no sweets, only ripe 
vegetables on fresh tables and no wheat. 
I’m from the old school, my household 
smells like soul food: 
curry falafel, barbeque toast food, 
no fish, no candy bars, no cigarettes, only ganja 
and only squeezed juice from lanja 
and exercises daily to stay healthy, and 
I don’t really drink water because it’s filthy.
Poem About Who I Am
Andiswa Balewi, Grade 11 A

I am a young black South African
girl born and raised
in Cape Town
I am seventeen years old.

I don’t go where the
path may lead
me, instead I go
where there is no
path. I want to be
successful in life.

I like to play basketball a lot ‘cause
it makes me feel free, and
I also like to
listen to music and read magazines.

I go around smiling and laughing,
trying to show love
to others.
Who Am I…
Nolufefe Gulubele, Grade 11 A

Do I know me, myself and I?
No, I don’t think so,
but if I don’t know myself,
whose going to tell me
who am I…
Is there anybody who wants to tell me
who am I?
No, no, no, there is no one.

I describe myself:
I’m kind, passionate, hardworking,
a person who’s helpful in life.
A girl who doesn’t hesitate.
A girl who knows what she wants in life.
A girl who’s capable to look after her future.
“I’m a dreamer.”

If I don’t know myself,
who’s going to look at me
as a respectful person?
Who’s going to love me
if I don’t love myself?
No, I don’t think I have to hate myself.

I know life has many challenges, especially at my age.
Hatred kills,
speak out.
Don’t get yourself down.
Life has punished many people out there,
you want to experience, too.
No I don’t think you want to
experience the life that our
ancestors have experienced.

Our ancestors have taught this world,
but I see outside this world;
the world has changed.
The teenagers die because of
AIDS.
But I don’t blame them.
I say that it’s because of the word, APPRECIATE
Poem About Believing
Phiwiswa Jibe, Grade 11 A

I am in the twenty first century,
but I still feel that there is something missing in my life.
Perhaps I thought I knew myself,
perhaps I thought I knew the really inner me.
perhaps I thought I knew Phiwiswa Zimkhulu.

But I know one thing: I am a lover of books,
a friend of orange juice.
I love reading, going out with friends and I
like to know everything although I don’t keep up,
but I try.
Being my age is not easy:
You love keeping up with life, understanding
people around you.
Sometimes you just want to relax.

I adore people who are go-getters
like me.
I am black and I love being me.
I am not confused, I am
just looking forward
To what the future brings me.
You wanna know about me? Well…

I’m a girl who does not hesitate for who she is.
I believe in me, and
I like people to accept me the way I am.

I like friends and sharing with others.
I like reading and listening to music, not watching T.V.

In my life, I’ve been in so many difficulties, losing so many people that were close to me.
I accepted that their course was a part of life, its ups and downs.

As I am growing, I see life as a short thing not to be wasted. That is who I am.
Proudly South African
Andisiwe Mzukwa, Grade 11 A

Oh Africa, my beautiful land,
My hope of God
My life
My gift
My future
My spirit.
It’s good to be home
With care and tenderness,
My beautiful land.
My beautiful Africans, smiling with joy,
Young, black, beautiful and proud.
I thank you God for your creativity,
I thank you Father for your sperm donation,
I thank you Mother for your egg.
Thank you for this precious, young, beautiful and
Proud black child.
I welcome South Africa with open hands.
Mountains, rivers, trees, animals, all the resources,
It’s from our ancient South Africans.
Our dear God,
You are our only hope.
The smell, spirit of fresh, young, talented achievers
Of South Africa;
I’m a young, grateful, emotional and proud South African,
South Africa, my land!
I Am Who I Am
Phumza Gysman, Grade 11 A

I am an African
I was born to stand
For my country.
I fight for my country,
I always pray for my country.

I am who I am
Because I know who I am,

Because I was expected
To do amazing things.
Her Name Is...ME
Zintle Kolo, Grade 11 A

She’s dark and cute,
slender and well-built,
young and brilliant,
her name is...ME.

Once she enters a room,
laughter and smiles rule,
she becomes the center of attention,
not because she’s good looking, but
because she’s capable of proving herself.
Her name is...ME.

At high school level,
she’s exposed and has many choices.
She has made mistakes and learnt from them,
but don’t you dare judge her for those,
‘cause you don’t know what she is capable of.

She comes from Samora, a township
in which she’s not famous nor popular.
But one thing I can assure you:
she loves and values herself more
than you’ll ever tell.
Her name is...ME.
Who I Am, What I Do and Don’t Do
Zodwa Somoza, Grade 11 A

I am me, myself and I.
I am just an ordinary girl
full of passion and care.
I know who I am, I am me.
Some may think they know me, but I wouldn’t blame
them because I like communicating,
but do they really know me?

I am me, my image and I,
we are two, but one in number.
I do everything as normally as anyone else:
I argue with my friends and family,
but one thing is for sure—we always come
to a conclusion.
I love the outdoors, learning from others,
leading, communicating and doing a lot except
for carrying illegal weapons, doing illegal things
and vandalizing my country and those around me.

I love myself because I know that I am special,
unique and believe that nothing is impossible.
Sometimes I smile like the sun in the sky,
but when days are dark, I feel like a part of me
has been ripped out, and who is to blame—
is it me or the outside world?
Life has challenges and sorrows, but through
all that, I know that who I become is and ultimate reward.
I am a girl with dreams and hope for
the future, I’m proud of who I am.
I love myself.
The Person That I Am
Andisiwe Pangalabe, Grade 11 A

The person that I am:
I carry myself with pride.
active, but gentle.

The person that I am
defines my character, and oh, not forgetting my personality;
character and personality shape my world.
The challenges I face, I conquer,
not because of what I did, but because of who I am.

The person that I am
has awarded me with great dignity,
has enabled me to release the confidence in me.
The talents that I have are unknown.

That makes me wonder: am I really who I say I am?
I Am the Future
Vuyiseka Sithuizi, Grade 11 A

I am the future.
I am the future of tomorrow.
When I look behind my back,
I see no future.
What I see:
I see the teenagers getting pregnant,
I see the teenagers getting HIV…
When I look in front of me,
I see the future:
I see the doctors of tomorrow,
I see the lawyers of tomorrow,
I ask myself, should
I follow them or
should I leave them?
I am the future,
the future of tomorrow.
I am who I am.
I’m a black, young and beautiful girl.
I’m still at high school.
I like being with my family,
Watching TV and reading poetry.

I’m a quiet person.
I don’t like people who judge
A book by its cover;
Gossiping isn’t my style.

I’m from the Eastern Cape
Where you will find nice people,
People who care,
People who give and receive.

Life is great,
Life is fun,
Life is impressing,
And life is full of surprises.
Already a Parent
Pamella Tyatyeka, Grade 11 A

I didn’t know the pain,  
I didn’t know the consequences.  
It was fun, interesting,  
I even forgot who I was.  
But now, fear after fear—  
I’m already a parent.

How could I take care of her?  
How could I describe it to the other girls?  
How can I show myself again in public?  
Sometimes, I get upset,  
but that won’t change anything.  
What’s done is done;  
I have to accept it.  
like it or not,  
I’m already a parent.

Time for me to enjoy my childhood is gone,  
will I ever get it back again?  
I don’t have education,  
I don’t have dignity,  
I have nothing.  
It was just a fling,  
and there’s only one thing that’ll follow me ‘til I die:  
I’m already a parent.
Who Am I?
Sibulele Fodo, Grade 11 A

I am who I am.
I am the angel
with a peaceful life.
There are no obstacles,
there is no anger.

I came from the earth
and from the sky.
like the angel that
comes from heaven,
and there is no one
who can block me
in anything I do.

When I look at the
sky, I see the stars, the moon,
shining on top of
my hair, with a
bright life and
bright future…
I am who I am.
Our Life
Dalasile Ncebakasi, Grade 11 A

Every life in this world is written by God with his own hands. That is why I am thankful—He has written my life story.

Our life.
Life changes sometimes because of little things, but life is fine.

Life is fine without abuse, life is fine without using drugs and drinking alcohol.

Life is good when you are concentrating on God.
Oh No! What Can I Say About Me…
Babalwa Nongcula, Grade 11 A

I am a black, confidential girl.
I was born to be who I am.
My color does not change the way I do things.
I am a listener,
I am the voice of myself.

I was born in the Eastern Cape and I’m proud,
I do not please anyone by lying about things that make me happy;
no one knows me besides me.

I am a South African and
I cannot blame anyone for putting me here.
I know I can be who I want to be,
no matter how South Africa is.
I am…
I am a world lover.
Love is Good
Silanda Odwa, Grade 11 E

I am a person who needs love.
I was born in love.
And to live like I did
before, you may see me
crying for love because
I was born for love.

To have love doesn’t mean
to have money, you can not
buy love, but you can
have love. I was born for love,
and I will die for love.
I am a man,
I am a student.
I am honest at
school and at home.

I want to advise
students of something:
Listen, listen student.
I am saying, work hard,
because student, this time
is bad.

I say, listen student,
listen. Don’t undermine
your teachers because
they give us food when
we sleep, when we walk,
when we go.

Listen, student, listen.
Be a hero tomorrow.
School is number one.

I am a hero of tomorrow.
How is Living in South Africa?
Vuyokazi Mbele, Grade 11 E

South Africa is such a diverse country with so many cultures that accommodate the whole of the state, and living in South Africa is such a great pleasure and experience.

Who Am I?

I am the confident young woman that believes in herself and everything she does. I like challenges and I trust my judgment at all times. I enjoy working with people and I believe that in life you have to strive for success and do your best in everything. I am a jolly person who likes to laugh a lot and to have fun, and most of all, I am a confident, proudly South African, young black woman.
Who Am I
Neziswa Cele, Grade 11 E

I am a young black woman,
a proud South African
raised by respect, love, honesty and humanity.
I am a girl of many responsibilities,
a girl of many possessions and dreams.

I come from the dusty, small area
of Langa, near Bontheuwel,
and still, I wake up in the morning and say
I am proudly South African, despite the
circumstances and the problems that we may encounter,
I stand tall and say I am proudly South African.

I like being myself, my only self,
and I look up to myself in every activity I do.
I am my own role model
And my own manager.

The decisions I make are the decisions that will make me
the person I want to be tomorrow.
The subconscious mind that I have will determine the person
and the results that I will encounter in the future.

I am ambitious,
I am realistic,
I am a survivor and
last, but not least,
I am a young, beautiful black woman.
I am Neziswa Cele.
Who Am I?
Sizwekazi Muimbi, Grade 11 E

I’m a teenager of today, but a woman of tomorrow.
I’m a dream promising myself with visions.
I’m a person with ambition about herself.
I have got passion when it comes to people I love.
I have got a high self-esteem:
Who will ever give me love if I don’t give it to myself?
Who will ever embrace me if I don’t embrace people that love me and care for me?

But why do all my enemies say bad things about me? Why do all people wish to be my enemy in life?
I like being poor in life so that I can see the choice in it, and I wish to succeed and make all my enemies jealous so that they can kill me because of my success and what I believe in—that is who I am—but they can’t get me because I don’t want them to, because I am a proudly South African young woman. That is who I am.
The Prayer of the Poor Person
Luzuko Minyela, Grade 11 E

Father, who has all powers,
stay with me in this trouble
when today I did not have a wife,
but the head of the home is still alive.

Give me the power to educate my children,
to keep them like my teeth.
Give me the advice to survive.
When the promises end,
protect me from my enemies
in the times of tornadoes.

Stay with my wife wherever she is,
give her the power to be strong.
make her know that soldiers die in war.

God, keep that poor person
under the trouble she has—
make her come back home.
Amen.
**South Africa**
Bonke Matyala, Grade 11 E

I’m 18 years old,
I’m a South African,
I was born in South Africa.

South Africa is my country,
my background, the best
country. South Africa is bright
like a bulb in the dark.

South Africa is the country of peace,
the country of joy and happiness,
the country of progress.
South Africa is a beautiful country,
like a bird flying in the sky.
Where I Am From
Lufuta Akhona, Grade 11 E

I am seventeen, black, born in Cape Town. I went to school there, in Mowbray where I am attending high school. We are all black students in our school. When I am going home, I travel by train. There is no direct train to where I live, so I have to change.

I live in a township where every weekend, you see someone stabbed or dead. Where I am from, there are drugs, alcohol, guns. I love none of it; I wish for music.
Life Can Be Good
Bonginkosi Nogom, Grade 11 E

I wonder why I’m quiet,
I wish I was vigorous.
I live in my imagination
where heart and loneliness are friends,
where love and happiness are lost.

My visions and dreams
are falling apart.
Being at school helps
my mind, keeps me busy.

I come to school by train;
I live in Philipi.
I am twenty-one years old
In grade 11 at
Thandokhulu High School.

Life can be good,
as phenomenal as love.
It preoccupies my mind.
Being black is fine.
In analyzing the works of these students, there is a clear parallel between several of their personal experiences and their work. These experiences mainly include political history, religion, social-economic issues in South Africa and attitudes that students have developed about themselves based on their educational experiences. The four main themes found in the poetry of these students include self-promotion, self-doubt, self-exploration, and self-definition in the context of South African social issues. I will address each one of these themes in regards of the experiences that shape these students’ work.

*I’m this fruitful, big tree now, even though my mother planted a seed.*

Instances of self-promotion found in these works of poetry are infectious. Statements of personal celebration among students are the most predominant and declarative statements in the anthology as a whole. Overall, statements of self-promotion allow students to explore their personal strengths and to talk about them with pride. Such moments may be labeled as boasting, but for these students, they are times for them to stand back and examine their accomplishments and successes.

In much of the poetry in this anthology, self-promotion comes in the form of declarative statements of celebration. Abongile Maliwa has some great examples of declarative statements in her poem “All About Me!!”:

> I’m sixteen, black and a proud South African
> from Umtata down in the Eastern Cape.
> I’m slender and tender, tall and all!

In many instances, students take some claim of their identity right away. In this opening stanza, Abongile establishes three self-identifiers for herself: in the first line, she proudly declares her age and nationality, identifiers that cannot be determined simply by looking at her. Secondly, she references her specific geographic location, noting the home that
influenced her and partly shaped her identity today. Finally, Abongile gives visual
descriptions to describe herself, noting her race in the first line and her physical size in
the third line, my favorite: “I’m slender and tender, tall and all!” The three self-
identifiers Abongile uses are most commonly used throughout this anthology; students
find a strong need to convey their physical appearance, nationality and specific
geographic locations. These moments of self-promotion also usually appear at the
beginning of a given poetic work. In the poem “Life Can Be Good,” Bonginkosi Nogom
states: “I come to school by train; / I live in Philipi. / I am twenty-one years old / in grade
11 at / Thandokhulu High School.” This stanza focuses more on geographic location
than physical appearance, as Bonginkosi names his home, gives his age (which cannot be
seen specifically) and describes how he travels to school each day.

In terms of these three identifiers—race, nationality and specific geographic
location—many of the students choose one identifier to celebrate profusely, creating a
resounding passion in their work. In her poem “Oh No! What Can I Say About Me…”
Babwala Nongcula speaks out about being black:

I am a black, confidential girl.
I was born to be who I am.
My color does not change the
way I do things.

Here, Babwala makes a celebratory personal claim: she states that race does not change
the way people act and suggests that the social construction cannot hold people back from
what they want to accomplish in life. This is a profound and moving statement from a
girl in grade 11, yet a stirring echo of post-apartheid philosophy. As Babwala continues,
her second and third stanzas address her geographic location and nationality,
respectively. However, these two stanzas notably shift in tone from her stanza on race;
while she speaks fondly of her home in the Eastern Cape, she expresses disappointment in the current state of South Africa in stanza three:

I am a South African and I cannot blame anyone for putting me here. I know I can be who I want to be, no matter how South Africa is.

This stanza creates an interesting contradiction in Babwala’s piece. While she clearly expresses some disappointment with South Africa and possibly with being South African, it is clear from the first stanza that Babwala has taken something very significant away from South African history—the meaning of the freedom of the post-apartheid era and the mentality of a “rainbow nation.” While Babwala doubts the future of South Africa, she knows that race is not a precursor for success or failure, and this she ultimately gained from the dismantling of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994. While Babwala acknowledges the important influence of her race in South Africa, she still doubts the future of her country. This skepticism is mostly likely the result of observing the many social struggles of the country, which are addressed in many of these student’s works and which will be addressed later in this paper.

Many students in this anthology celebrate their nationality thoroughly. Indeed, pride in being South African is a thread that links many of these poems together. In her poem “Proudly South African,” Andisiwe Mzuka eloquently describes what it means to her to be South African:

I welcome South Africa with open hands. Mountains, rivers, trees, animals, all the resources, it’s from our ancient South Africans. Our dear God, You are our only hope. The smell, spirit of fresh, young, talented achievers
In these few lines, Andisiwe celebrates the past, present and future of South Africa. First, she describes its physical beauty and versatility. She equates the magnificence of the land with “our ancient South Africans,” suggesting that ancestors have contributed to what South Africa is today. Next, she calls on God, suggesting that religion and belief in God is of utmost importance in South African culture. Indeed, while not universally practiced, a majority of South Africans in Cape Town are Christian; most of my students attend church on a weekly basis, and Christian practices and values are reflected in school wide assemblies at Thandokhulu. Finally, she appeals to the bright future of South Africa, referring to talented youth and suggesting that their spirit will carry the nation. Also, she describes herself and seems to place herself among the youth of South Africa.

In the poem “I Am Who I Am” by Phumza Gysman, a personal desire to stand by South Africa and to celebrate nationality shines through in the first stanza:

I am an African  
I was born to stand  
For my country.  
I fight for my country,  
I always pray for my country.

Here, Phumza does not even question her nationality; she declares that because she was born in Africa, she must act as a proud South African citizen in order to be a loyal African citizen. Her outlook here very closely mirrors the philosophy of Pan Africanism, the idea that all Africans work together and think in a unique way from the rest of the world. Phumza is suggesting that in order to be a good African citizen, she must be an
active South African citizen, combating social negativity and striving for personal success.

Another common form of self-promotion in these works is the listing of activities students enjoy. Phumlani Stemele enjoys “playing rugby, cricket and soccer,” while Vuyokazi Mbele simply states, “I am a jolly person who likes / to laugh a lot.” Sindiswa Mangndogana likes “being with my family, / watching TV and reading poetry,” while Phiwiswa Jibe declares, “I am a lover of books, / a friend of orange juice.” In these instances, the students are conforming to a style of identifying oneself that Langston Hughes establishes in his poem “Theme for English B,” one which the student’s assignment was based.

Self-promotion in these poems also comes through in student’s comparisons between moments of pride and self-doubt. In many instances, moments of pride win over moments of adversity in the eyes of observers. Many students make themselves the subject of social criticism as a way of displaying their resilience. Phumlani Stemele juxtaposes moments of self-doubt with moments of pride thoughtfully in his poem “Swallow Your Pride and You Shall Know Me.” He has a very strong parallel between outsiders’ assumptions of him and his strong human spirit in stanza three:

People look at me and see a nobody who is black,
undermine me because I’m the townships, living in a shack,
I’m intelligent and brilliant, it’s only wealth that I lack
and for me to regard you a noble as I am, don’t talk on my back.

Here, Phumlani recognizes how some people may negatively perceive him by taking note of stereotypes that are often attributed to black South Africans—that they are poor, live in unfavorable conditions and are vapid in terms of education. For many black South Africans, unfavorable life conditions reign; township populations surrounding Cape
Town are overwhelmingly black, with short tin roofs and plastic walls of shacks marking a heartbreaking way of life for their dwellers. In this stanza, Phumlani is not denying the difficulty of township life. Here, he boldly states where he lives and he uses it to empower him. Phumlani, the president of his class at Thandokhulu, recognizes the power of his incredible spirit and the worth of his intellectual brilliance, and his township roots drive him forward, propelling him towards success.

When Phumlani introduces outside criticism about his living conditions, the comments he makes could easily deflate a high school student’s self-esteem; his words in stanza three remind me of a heartbreaking instance I faced in Cape Town. For one week, I volunteered at Baphumelele Children’s Home in the township of Khayelitsha, just outside of Cape Town. As I was riding home from volunteering with a woman who worked there, she disclosed a story about a small black boy from the township who lived at Baphumelele. The boy attended school in the township, and recently, his teacher had told him that he could not learn anything because he “was stupid.” Believing his teacher, the boy engrained her words deep within him, closing himself off to education simply because he believed he would never be fit to learn anything. This heartbreaking story demonstrated the power of other’s words, especially on impressionable children: many of these school children grow up learning that they cannot learn.

In his poem, Phumlani refuses to let adversity get the best of his personal strength. Rather, he uses criticism to empower him and to discover his full intellectual potential.

*Why do all people wish to be my enemy in life?*

While the students yield an aura of self-assurance and pride in their pieces, instances of self-doubt are prevalent throughout this anthology, marking the identity
questions that arise among many students who are learning and growing in South Africa. While Phumlani uses outside criticism for empowerment in his poem, other authors meet adversity in a less bold fashion, experiencing the pain hurtful comments are meant to bring. Some authors take criticism and try to yield some sort of literary revenge on their “enemies.” Sizwekazi Muimbi seeks war on her enemies in her poem “Who Am I?” She asks the question heading this section in bold above and then responds this way:

I like being poor in life so that I can see the choice in it, and I wish to succeed and make all my enemies jealous so that they can kill me because of my success and what I believe in—that is who I am—but they can’t get me…

In asking the question, “Why do all people wish to be my enemy in life?” Sizwekazi is accomplishing something far different from Phumlani: while Phumlani recognizes outside criticism and persuasively argues why they are insignificant, Sizwekazi asks a rhetorical, heartbreaking question. In saying “all people,” it sounds as if Sizwekazi believes that everyone is working against her. In this line, she seems to adopt a defeatist attitude; however, the way she combats the question is inventive and highly spirited: first, she acknowledges that she is poor and celebrates it, noting that she sees poverty as a temporary state that she can overcome and actually choose to eradicate from her life. Next, she suggests that she can overcome her doubt and seek the greatest vengeance by evoking envy from those her oppose her. Then, she introduces an interesting twist, stating that she would be satisfied if she died for what she believed in. While she clearly does not want to die, the point she makes is clear: if people wish to harm her because of jealousy for her success, she would be happy knowing that she represented perseverance. While Sizwekazi’s self-doubt is curtailed by her inner strength, her doubt is presented in
a much different way than Phumlani’s, as he does not let any criticism weigh him down at any point in his poem.

Zodwa Somoza infuses her poem “Who I Am, What I Do and Don’t Do” with a moment of very honest doubt. After declaring her love for herself, she writes these haunting lines:

Sometimes I smile like the sun in the sky,
but when days are dark, I feel like a part of me
has been ripped out, and who is to blame—
is it me or the outside world?

In reading Zodwa’s poem, there is a sincere tone as she describes what she likes to do and remarks that she argues with family every once in a while. Before the lines above, she says that she loves herself because she is unique. When she transitions into these four lines, however, I believe she is being the most honest with her reader. In the first line, she reflects joy she feels in life by relating it to the warmth of the sun. Then, when she introduces her self-doubt, she does so in an inventive way—she asks if the sadness she experiences in life is created by her own doing or by the perceptions and pressures of peers around her. Ultimately, this is a question many of the poets should ask themselves: when they experience self-doubt, is their uncertainty a product of their own questioning of their identity or a questioning that arises from other’s perceptions of their identity? I think in the case of most of these poets, self-doubt is a blending of both personal questioning and outer questioning. I am pleased that Zodwa was brave enough to ask this question in her piece.

*I’ll succeed because I focus on the journey, not the destination.*

Self-exploration refers to the journey these poets take in trying to find who they are. The poems in this anthology represent a quest in which poets strive to find
themselves: many of the poets declare that they know themselves very well, while others struggle to define themselves in their poetry. Self-exploration is very much a product of both self-promotion and self-doubt: through personal successes and uncertainties, poets are allowed to take poetic journeys that ultimately represent their life journeys.

Moments of self-promotion fit seamlessly with moments of self-exploration, as students explore how personal qualities and strengths move them through life and propel them through obstacles. Lungakazi Batyi celebrates personal health in her untitled poem:

I am seventeen, still a teen,
living with a bigger dream, to
finish high school, study film,
and be the best I can be…
They say you are what you eat,
so I strive to eat healthy.
My goal in life is not to be rich or wealthy
because true wealth comes from good
health and wise ways.

The first four lines are the opening of Lungakazi’s poem, introducing what she wishes to achieve in the future: graduation from high school (to which she is close) and a chance to study film, interwoven with a general desire to “be the best I can be.” These lines establish a goal, or end point, that Lungakazi wishes to reach. In establishing this end point, Lungakazi continues her poem by describing how she intends to reach her goals. She goes into great detail about her eating habits, noting that eating healthy allows one to upkeep her overall health and keeps her on a steady path to reach her dreams. The young author introduces another intriguing layer to her poem in lines seven through nine of this excerpt: she comments on an “anti-goal,” a superficial value that contradicts her overall dream. This “anti-goal” is obtaining monetary wealth, which Lungakazi admits that many people hold in high regard in society. She quickly undermines this vapid value,
replacing it with her personal regard for health. She says that it is more important to have personal wealth (wellness) than to have monetary wealth, which often stifles the importance of the goals that truly matter in life. Thus, she demonstrates that she will achieve her overall goal by practicing healthy eating habits.

Some of the poets in this anthology are already so in tune with who they are that their confidence appears to be unshakable. Vuyokazi Mbele achieves this air or assurance in her poem “How Is Living In South Africa?”

I am the confident young woman who believes in herself and everything she does.
I like challenges and I trust my judgment at all times.

Vuyokazi seems to be exhibiting a moment of self-promotion, yet this self-assurance is slightly more defined by experience than instances of self-promotion in other poems. The author celebrates challenges and declares that she trusts her judgment, suggesting that she has used her judgment to overcome challenges in the past.

Neziswa Cele demonstrates the importance in her decisions shaping the route of her life in her poem “Who Am I?”

I like being myself, my only self,
and I look up to myself in every activity I do.
I am my own role model
and my own manager.

The decisions I make are the decisions that will make me the person I want to be tomorrow.

Here, Neziswa takes claim over the direction of her life. Despite influences and pressures from others that she most likely experiences, in her poem she does not waver from the concept that ultimately, she is responsible for the course she travels in life. She
Neziswa boldly states, “I am my own role model / and my own manager.” Neziswa exerts full control over her life in the first four lines above and establishes power in a unique way. In saying “I look up to myself in every activity I do. / I am my own role model,” Neziswa is stepping outside of herself and regarding her actions as an outside observer would. This phenomena of observing oneself from afar is often referred to in the literary realm as “double-vision.” In the instance above, Neziswa is using double-vision to praise herself and to show steadfastness in her life decisions.

For many students, self-exploration is closely linked with a spiritual journey. In the poem “Our Life,” Dalasile Ncebakasi shares her belief in God with her readers:

Every life in this world is written 
by God with His own hands. 
That is why I am thankful—
He has written my life story.

Dalasile introduces a new emphasis on self-exploration—the importance of a life plan set out by God. Here, Dalasile is very clear: she believes that God “writes a story” for all to follow. Because the young author believes in the direction of God in life, she bases her poem around the idea that people should live according to God. She declares that people would be fine living without vices, such as drugs and alcohol. She ends her poem saying, “Life is good when you / are concentrating on God.” Here, while she seems to suggest that one can change their life path by not focusing on or believing in God, Dalasile says that in order to have a good life, one must follow the path God sets forth. For Dalasile, then, self-exploration means fulfilling and understanding the life God has created for her.

Phiwiswa Jibe finds it helpful to explore uncertainties about herself in order to engage in self-exploration. Her “Poem About Believing” allows readers to physically see her thought-processes as she struggles to define herself:
I am in the twenty first century
but I still feel that there is something missing in my life.
Perhaps I thought I knew myself,
Perhaps I thought I knew the inner me.
Perhaps I thought I knew Phiwiswa Zimkhulu.

But I know one thing: I am a lover of books,
a friend of orange juice.
I love reading, going out with friends and I
like to know everything although I don’t keep up,
but I try.
Being my age is not easy.

In this excerpt, Phiwiswa uses different techniques for self-exploration. The first two lines suggest urgency in maturing: because she is growing older, Phiwiswa feels pressure to know her identity fully. She repeats in lines 3-5, “Perhaps I thought I knew…” This repetition suggests the confusion in defining oneself—perhaps Phiwiswa had identified with labels that have not fit her, and thus, she has been forced to redefine herself.

Her personal redefining process comes through in the second stanza of this excerpt, where she begins to define herself “from scratch,” naming the basic things she enjoys, from reading to orange juice. In many ways, Phiwiswa’s struggle is a universal struggle: most people experience similar confusion in defining themselves. Such universality comes through when Phiwiswa confesses, “I like to know everything…” Indeed, a desire to know everything about one’s life is a common sentiment among most people, despite where they are in life. For high school students in South Africa, however, desperation to know where life is headed may be more extreme.

In her poem “Her Name Is…ME,” Zintle Kolo sees life as a learning process:

At high school level
she’s exposed and has many choices.
She has made mistakes and learnt from them,
but don’t you dare judge her for those,
‘cause you don’t know what she is capable of.
Zintle sees high school as a forum for experimenting with life, making inevitable mistakes and learning from them. She notes that choices are an important part of learning in high school outside of the classroom. Perhaps Dalasile would argue that certain mistakes should not be made (those that go against God’s values), however, Zintle takes a different stance, insuring her readers that making mistakes is a normal and essential part of life. Thus, she appeals for her audience not to judge her, as she says that making mistakes and growing in spite of them is a universal experience.

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

As many of these student poets explore their identities, they also become activists, defining themselves through social issues that are important to them. Two poets closely examine issues that are important to them and discover how they affect their lives. Others discuss issues frankly and actively fight against injustices. Four main issues that are discusses in the poetry are pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, poverty and crime. These are all issues that South Africa is struggling with today, and many would argue that some issues are products of others (i.e. crime is a product of poverty). Certainly, current South African president Thabo Mbeki, often considered an AIDS denialist, would draw a connection between HIV and poverty. What I value about these students’ work is that they present these four social stresses in a very sincere light; through their work, I am able to comprehend the gravity of these four issues in South Africa better than I could through any textbook.

Vuyiseka Sithuizi from grade 11A presents the negativity of social issues as something than can be overcome in the future with the bright, sharp minds of today’s youth in her poem “I Am the Future.” She herself resigns to become someone who
actively fights against social ills in the future. However, her dedication to help combat social problems does not come easily at first:

I am the future.
I am the future of tomorrow.
When I look behind my back,
I see no future.
What I see:
I see the teenagers getting pregnant,
I see the teenagers getting HIV…
When I look in front of me,
I see the future:
I see the doctors of tomorrow,
I see the lawyers of tomorrow,
I ask myself, should
I follow them or
should I leave them?
I am the future,
the future of tomorrow.

Here, Vuyiseka examines social ills by using her physical direction. When she studies the past and present, she looks behind her, seeing two issues she considers important: teenaged pregnancy and HIV transmission. The act of looking behind her suggests that these are two issues that South Africans can escape and keep in its past. Vuyiseka illustrates this by then looking in front of her in the poem, seeing the youth of today grown up and working as “doctors and lawyers,” two titles that suggest activity towards social change. Thus, she believes that the educated youth of today can cure the social ills that have plagued South Africa for years. While Vuyiseka seems quite invested in becoming active in advocacy throughout the course of this poem, she asks a very honest question at the end of her piece, “I ask myself, should / I follow them or / should I leave them?” In asking this question, Vuyiseka makes an earnest point about social activism; she suggests that often times, it is easier to become a bystander to social problems than to become an active agent against social wrongs. Here, she is wondering whether or not true activism is a real possibility for her—does she have the drive to become a doctor or
lawyer? Can she advocate for change despite the less-promising past of South Africa?

Indeed, Vuyiseka seems to recognize that if one does not become an advocate actively fighting for change, one becomes part of the greater social problem. Thus, she ends very positively, becoming resolved to assisting with social change, “I am the future, / the future of tomorrow.”

Some poets comment on the impact of crime in South Africa, expressing sheer resolve against it:

I love the outdoors, learning from others, leading, communicating and doing a lot except for carrying illegal weapons, doing illegal things and vandalizing my country and those around me. -From “Who I Am, What I Do and Don’t Do” by Zodwa Somoza, Grade 11 A

I live in a township where every weekend, you see someone stabbed or dead. Where I am from, there are drugs, alcohol, guns. I love none of it; I wish for music. -From “Where I Am From” by Lufuta Akhona, Grade 11 E

In her poem “Who I Am, What I Do and Don’t Do,” Zodwa illustrates a small portrait of crime in South Africa by placing criminal activity on a list of things she does not do. What is interesting is that she sets such activity against a list of things she likes to do, demonstrating criminal activity as a common occurrence. Zodwa mentions types of crime that she probably sees most frequently in her community, carrying illegal weapons, illegal activity and vandalism. It is very likely that Zodwa is describing activities involved in gangsterism, a specific form of crime that plagues youthful communities, such as in townships and school yards.

Lufuta describes crime in a slightly more personal way, relating it to where she lives in a township. She describes the sensation of seeing crime in action; watching someone become the victim of violence. After describing the action of crime, Lufuta mentions more underground types of crime, including the consumption of illegal drugs and acquiring of guns, which ultimately lead to the violent crimes she discusses. The last
line of this stanza, and in fact her poem, is beautiful and haunting, offering some hope: “I love none of it; I wish for music.” Clearly, Lufuta wishes to combat crime. But will she be an activist like Zodwa or simply a bystander, waiting for the music to play?

Two poems in this collection, written by Pamella Tyatyeka and Luzuko Minyela, are unique to the rest of the anthology: they both focus on one social issue in detail. One author writes a poem on pregnancy, a topic that has personally affected her life, while the other author writes a narrative poem on poverty, adopting a persona outside his own.

In her poem “Already a Parent,” Pamella discusses how her life has changed after mothering a child:

I didn’t know the pain,
I didn’t know the consequences.
It was fun, interesting,
I even forgot who I was.
But now, fear after fear—
I’m already a parent.

How could I take care of her?
How could I describe it to the other girls?
How can I show myself again in public?
Sometimes, I get upset,
but that won’t change anything.
What’s done is done;
I have to accept it.
Like it or not,
I’m already a parent.

Time for me to enjoy my childhood is gone,
will I ever get it back again?
I don’t have education,
I don’t have dignity,
I have nothing.
It was just a fling,
and there’s only one thing that’ll follow me ‘til I die:
I’m already a parent.

Pamella’s poem is very much about a loss of innocence, but it also invokes many emotions about women coming of age—thus, the poem has much to say about gender.

Pamella’s piece also reminds me of the first lesson I taught her class, 11 A—the “real meaning” of Shakespeare’s sonnet 116. Before I gave my lesson to each class, Ms. Bopi had prefaced my lesson saying that I would be describing a love that none of them
understood or had experienced yet. This suggested to me that perhaps these students were unfamiliar with the constancy of true love. Situations such as the one Pamella finds herself in are most likely a product of never experiencing this steadfastness in love.

In her first stanza, Pamella describes her ignorance about sex; she says that she perceived it as “fun, interesting,” while being unaware of the consequences of her actions; perhaps she was not 

unaware 

of the dangers, but rather, unconcerned with them. Thus, the first stanza describes the carefree, “invincible” feeling that many young people hone when they begin to take risks (whether responsible or irresponsible risks).

In the second stanza, the author begins to ask a series of questions that provokes sensitive answers and issues. Now that she realizes the reality of having a child at such a young age, she begins to ask real questions: How will she care for a young child? How will she be perceived in public, especially by other girls? Will anyone understand her? The point she makes about other girls is important: it reminds us that this poem is written about a gendered issue that only young women who have been pregnant can wholly understand. Pamella struggles to discern how she can express her feelings with other girls who have never been pregnant. Perhaps she wishes to warn them about the dangers of unprotected sex. By the end of the stanza, the author is resigned to her situation, feeling as if she cannot escape it.

The last stanza illustrates the opportunities that Pamella feels she can no longer grasp because of having a child. She notes that she is not fully educated, implying that now that she has a child, it may be difficult to continue to attend school. She also remarks on her loss of innocence, noting that she will no longer be able to experience her childhood. What is most interesting about this stanza, however, is the feeling that the
author has lost her dignity. Dignity is a basic human right to which all are entitled. So, in Pamella’s saying that dignity is no longer with her and instead, emptiness reigns within her, she marries herself to defeat.

In his poem “The Prayer of the Poor Person,” Luzuko Minyela assumes the role of a poverty-stricken family man who hones the power of prayer to assist his family in their time of need. Luzuko’s poem is haunting and touching, displaying a great deal of desperation in being poor:

Father, who has all powers,  
stay with me in this trouble  
when today I did not have a wife,  
but the head of the home is still alive.

Give me the power to educate my children,  
to keep them like my teeth.  
Give me the advice to survive.  
When the promises end,  
protect me from my enemies  
in the times of tornadoes.

Stay with my wife wherever she is,  
give her the power to be strong,  
make her know that soldiers die in war.

God, keep that poor person  
under the trouble she has—  
Make her come back home.  
Amen.

This poem illustrates the terror in losing a loved one mysteriously and the heartbreak poverty can create in a family. In the first stanza, the speaker is established: a poor man who finds himself in trouble. He seems to have lost his wife suddenly—whether to death, kidnapping or fleeing is not for certain. This incident incites and urgency within the speaker; he becomes hyperaware of his mortality and the impermanence of his family and few possessions. Thus, he begins to appeal to a higher power, God, for strength and protection.

In the second stanza, suddenly aware of his humanness, the speaker begins ask God for specific attributes. In his prayers, the speaker’s values shine through. First, he
asks God for the power to educate his children in perhaps two of the most tremendous lines in this entire anthology: “Give me the power to educate my children; / to keep them like my teeth.” With his wife gone, the speaker wishes to educate his children, yet he also offers the incredible image of keeping his children close to him like his teeth. This image displays the fear the speaker feels now that his wife has disappeared; he fears that his children will vanish, as well, and so, he is desperate to keep them as physically close to himself as possible. Also in stanza two, the speaker makes a very simple appeal to God, “Give me the advice to survive.” The speaker then calls for protection “in times of tornadoes…when the promises end.” Here, the speaker recognizes his enemies and suggests that they stay at bay only because of “promises,” and that these are not lasting times of peace. This could very well be referring to gang activity.

In the last two stanzas, the speaker asks God to keep his wife safe, wherever she may be. Luzuko truly captures the essence of a father who has been left to take care of his children in the fearful pangs of poverty.

“The talents that I have are unknown.”

Overall, I think the poetry assignment was successful. When I first gave the assignment, I asked each classroom how many students wrote poetry in their spare time. In each room, only a few hands went up. Yet, as students shared their work aloud in each class, cheering for each other at the conclusion of each piece, it became so clear how talented each and every author was. I could not help but think, did they realize how talented they were? Did they know how powerful their poetry was? I remember when Luzuko read his poem aloud; it was difficult for him to get through because the students made him laugh as he was reading, as they were laughing, too. Yet, at the end of his
reading, I was so moved by his tremendous poem—he had created a work with an impact he did not realize.

A high school creative writing teacher once told me that “poems are bigger than ourselves.” I have found this maxim to be true time and time again. Poetry often invokes phrasing emotions and experiences in inventive ways that put personal experiences outside of ourselves, almost unrecognizable. Often, I will reread something I wrote and ask myself how was that inside me? Without the poetry exercise for grades 11 A, 11 B and 11 E, I think many of these young poets would never have experimented with poetry and would never have written about topics and experiences that are so embedded in their hearts.

Through self-promotion, self-doubt, self-exploration and self-definition through social issues, the students of grade 11 at Thandokhulu High School truly demonstrate the passion and power in their hearts. While they often doubt themselves and find some hardships as insurmountable, their personal respect, advocacy, dedication to South Africa, passion and hard work demonstrates their fervor for success. While some students express little hope for South Africa, most of them display unbridled hope for their “rainbow nation.” Bonke Matyala describes her nation with joy in her poem “South Africa”:

South Africa is the country of peace,
The country of joy and happiness,
The country of progress.
South Africa is a beautiful country,
Like a bird flying in the sky.