

Heir to AIDS: A Humument  
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## Heirs to an Epidemic: The Transgenerational Legacy of HIV/AIDS

For many, inheritance references bequeathal of coveted possessions from parent to beloved child. For others, it signifies transference of pathogenic and non-pathogenic biological characteristics. Through varying ontological conceptions of inheritance arises a paradox: while it usually functions as a means of postmortem caregiving, love, legacy, and provision, inheritance also serves as a means through which the next generation collects burdens from its forbearers.

These contradictory aspects uniquely manifest themselves in the inheritance of HIV/AIDS. Paradoxically, acts of love and care – pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding<sup>1</sup> – facilitate biological, viral inheritance. In addition, children face a double disease burden: for the nearly 600 children infected with HIV every day, along with infection, youth inherit statistically unquantifiable psychosocial burdens such as stigma, vulnerability, and marginalization (UNAIDS.org). Global perceptions of these children as “AIDS orphans”<sup>2</sup> are dehumanizing, oversimplifying their propensities for innocence, hope, and self-efficacy.

In rural South Africa, harsh realities for “AIDS orphans” are depicted as institutional apathy and familial unit rupture and abandonment (Dullaert & Backer 38). These themes, interspersed throughout humanitarian Ricus Dullaert’s experience of orphanage-building in Ubombo, South Africa, unintentionally marginalize children living in communities with high HIV/AIDS prevalence as orphans and stigmatize them as vulnerable and helpless.

Through a constructed “humument,” artist Pranalee Patel challenges this narrative of South African CLWHA<sup>3</sup>. Originally developed by artist Tom Phillips, a “humument” is brought forth from a pre-existing text through the artist’s selection of words that become dialogue, followed by artistic “treatment<sup>4</sup>” (Weisblum). In his own *A Humument*, Phillips explains his method as “fragments of poetry/fragments of/[his] mind/its petals/unfolding” (Phillips & Mallock 159). Within “Heir to AIDS,” Patel humumentizes Dullaert’s work to transform the narrative of CLWHA by imbuing elements of childhood innocence, hope, and self-efficacy, thereby humanizing marginalized and stigmatized children.

Written from the perspective of a young South African girl, whose name, Thembile, is the Zulu<sup>5</sup> word for “hopeful,” “Heir to AIDS” employs first person plural to represent the collective voice of CLWHA. While Dullaert’s original work instills themes of vulnerability for the reader through repetition of “child” or “orphan,” Patel omits either description, stating that “‘orphan’ as a label can marginalize youth affected by HIV/AIDS as helpless and vulnerable” and “‘child’ oversimplifies and ignores the maturing effect and subsequent sacrifice of innocence that accompanies parental death from HIV/AIDS”

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<sup>1</sup> Vertical HIV transmission from an HIV-infected mother to her child during pregnancy, labor and delivery, or breastfeeding (aidsinfo.nih.gov)

<sup>2</sup> A child who has lost a parent or parents to HIV/AIDS (UN.org)

<sup>3</sup> Children living with HIV/AIDS or in communities of high HIV/AIDS prevalence

<sup>4</sup> drawing, painting, and collage

<sup>5</sup> A dominant tribe in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in which names are decided before birth (africa.upenn.edu)

(Patel). Employing media such as crayon, colored pencil, and colorful three-dimensional shapes reminiscent of children’s pop-up books to evoke feelings of nostalgia and childhood innocence, Patel juxtaposes the optimistic, playful mood conjured by vibrant colors and childhood images of a rainbow, crown, simple human representations, and flowers with the esoteric nature of Thembile’s words, thereby emphasizing the drastic loss of innocence, that might be outwardly unseen but lies within children’s internal cognitions.

In the first stanza, words conveying the chaos and powerlessness associated with caregiver loss are portrayed as clouds obscuring a rainbow – a simultaneous symbol of hope after a tumultuous storm. Parental loss is characterized by “a bomb [striking],” a violent disruption of childhood development. Furthermore, the deliberate inclusion of “destination” as it appears in the pre-existing text, along with intervening phrases such as “lost” and “[un]known” signify the upheaval and uncertainty of a future for CLWHA, obscuring hope with doubts. This uncertainty is compounded by the loss of control over social circumstances, conveyed by Thembile’s sentiment of “paralysis,” the cause of which is injustice – pervasive, transgenerational injustice that results in the unwarranted inheritance of HIV/AIDS. While Thembile’s innocence humanizes her as a regular child, uncertainty about the future marginalizes her as “vulnerable,” a point of contrast for end of the piece.



“Heir to AIDS.” See addendum for full text.

Following the powerlessness and uncertainty of hope, the second and final stanza pivots to enforce Thembile’s self-efficacy; encircled in budding sprouts, the final lines, an emphatic claim of power and control, humanize Thembile as a self-determinant individual instead of an objectified “orphan” or “victim” of her circumstances as often portrayed, including by author Dullaert. The budding plants analogously represent the subsequent gains in maturity and personal growth at the expense of childhood innocence.

Themes of innocence, hope, and self-efficacy serve to humanize CLWHA that suffer from a double burden of disease. Through her artwork, Patel reveals the hidden psychosocial consequences of HIV/AIDS upon children globally and demands a call for action through her symbolic shrouding of a child in the red ribbon: instead of marginalizing or stigmatizing them as “orphans” or “victims,” CLWHA merit societal protection in ways that recognize their humanity and self-efficacy.

## Addendum:

### *Heir to AIDS*

***Our destination was lost/  
A bomb struck/  
We were paralyzed/  
By what seemed to be fair/  
Terminal but without a known destination/***

***I am Thembile  
I'm not powerless***

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