

The Problem with Stigma  
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## The problem with stigma

29 years have passed since antiretroviral therapy has made it possible to live a normal life with HIV/AIDS. 12 years have passed since South Africa launched its national antiretroviral treatment programme. Yet today a Duke student claims he wouldn't date someone who has HIV. The stigma remains.

Pasquale's "Problem Tree" explores the roots of HIV/AIDS stigma that persist despite medical advancements that make HIV undetectable in the bloodstream. Utilizing Tom Phillips' *Humument* technique, she takes advantage of the human instinct "to take pleasure from works that contain both word and image," suggested by Chris McCabe in his review of Phillips' work (2012). The *Humument* technique turns text into art, using creativity and imagination to transform a page into a completely novel story.

The jet-black background obscures all evidence of the authentic text save a few chosen words: "problems deeply/ hands toes fingers/ poisoned/ manifestations condition minds." The eye is drawn to these white blurbs, but not before inspecting the spindly, scarlet tree that occupies the center of the page. The choice of red not only serves to contrast the tree with the rest of the page, but also invokes the image of the red AIDS ribbon without mentioning the virus's acronyms outright on the page.

Pieces of words such as "dying", "poisoned", and "problem" appear in the trunk, branches, and roots, stained by the red pastel, as if marked by HIV/AIDS. These are the words wrongfully associated with people living with HIV/AIDS and the words that perpetuate stigma. Once colored over, they are red forever; the pastel cannot be erased. The effect of shading over the words in red paints a picture of the permanency of both HIV/AIDS and the stigma associated with it. In an interview about the piece, Pasquale stated, "the red pigment has reached every crack and crevice of the fibrous paper, a metaphor for the entrenchment of the associations between negative thoughts and HIV/AIDS in our minds."

The chosen words are those of Maria de Bruyn, a medical anthropologist whose career focused on women's sexual and reproductive rights and advocacy around the world. Pasquale's selection comes from de Bruyn's curriculum materials for a skills-building workshop in Kosovo. Titled "Problem-Tree Analysis", the interactive activity detailed on the page involves participants using their bodies to become trees to explore the root causes and outward manifestations of HIV/STI infection in young boys and unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion in young girls (2000).

Pasquale intentionally neglects to reference the tree activity in the body of the poem. In the spirit of Phillips, who has never read the original text cover to cover of his artistic template, Pasquale creates something completely new without reference to the purpose of what was once beneath it. Her decision to include the corporal words "toes", "hands" and "fingers" reflect the importance of the relationship between HIV/AIDS and the

human body, and the visible AIDS-related opportunistic infections that once were a clear marker for the disease before the development of efficacious treatment. Despite the fact that HIV/AIDS itself is not visible to the human eye, “manifestations condition minds.” We have not overcome our past, and we still see people living with HIV/AIDS as sick, disabled, and lesser even when they are healthy and strong.

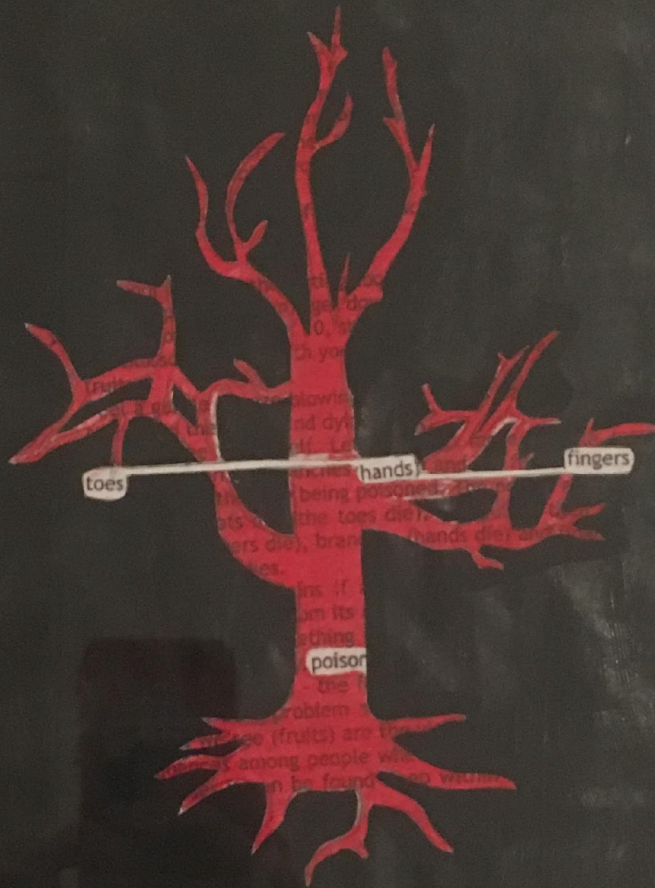
Although the overall tone of Pasquale’s piece is dark, she suggests the use of a tree as the main artistic feature sheds hope on the future of PLWHA via regeneration: “The tree depicted is barren, but it is just a snapshot of a single point in the life cycle. There is certainty that it will bud in the spring and eventually produce verdant, lush leaves.” Pasquale’s perspective is optimistic, but not so well executed in the body of the piece. The tree she depicts looks surely dead rather than in hibernation—maybe a tree shedding its leaves would have been more effective.

De Bruyn’s interactive activity explores the causes and manifestations of problems by utilizing a tree, from its roots, buried deep beneath the ground, to its branches, meeting eye-level and extending beyond; Pasquale, on the other hand, utilizes the tree’s seasonal existence to suggest that although HIV/AIDS stigma is conditioned in today’s minds, life is ephemeral and cyclical. One day the tree may bloom, full of vitality with no evidence it was once barren. Although HIV/AIDS stigma has deep roots today, Pasquale suggests there is a future, however distant, where it only exists as a forgotten past.

One problem is yet to be solved: how do we make that future come sooner? Through the exhibition of “Problem Tree” on the student art wall at Duke University’s Perkins Library with 23 other pieces telling just as powerful messages, it is the hope that through exposure, education, and narrative, tomorrow’s Duke students will no longer shy away from someone who has HIV.

PROBLEM-TREE

problems  
deeply



manifestations  
condition  
minds

## References

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- McCabe, C. (2012). "A Little White Opening Out of Thought." *Poetry Review*. (Vol. 102).