

Humument Project- *Breaking the Chains*
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Humument Reflection
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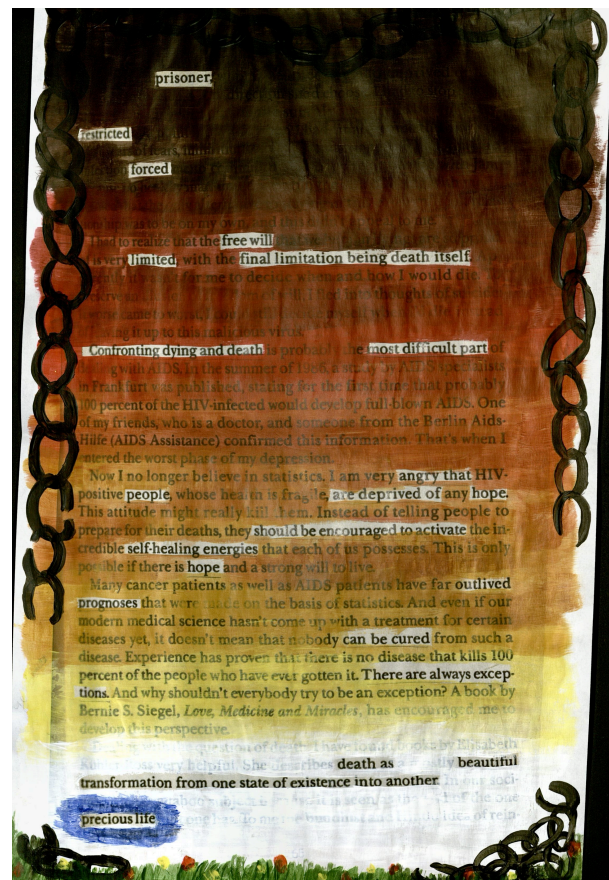
Introduction

An overwhelming theme found in many narratives about living with HIV, or discovering that one is HIV positive, is hopelessness and despair at the diagnosis. Many such narratives express a bleak outlook on life, and rarely show a change in that outlook to one of hope and healing. While all these sentiments are valid and should not be made to seem unwarranted, it is important that people be reminded that HIV is not a death sentence and that one can live a normal life with it if they adhere to treatment. This is not to say that absolutely all narratives are fatalistic, hopeless, and lacking in a hopeful view towards the future, but these themes appear frequently and deprive audiences from seeing that there is life beyond a positive diagnosis. To depict the transition between despair and hope, Morales creates a work that shows the gradual process of breaking free from such a mentality and accepting that HIV does not mean certain death. Her combination of art and words shows the varying emotions one feels throughout the road to acceptance.

The Text

Morales selects a page of text from Reider and Ruppelt's *Matters of Life and Death*, a book that compiles women's short stories about living with HIV, to be the base for her art. Specifically, she selects a page from a short story entitled *Life and Blood* by a woman named Elisabeth. This page details Elisabeth's change in attitude from when she received her positive diagnosis, to when she finally accepts her situation and begins to see that it should not stop her from living a full life (Ines, Ruppelt 65). At the beginning, the narrative emphasizes Elisabeth's feelings of restriction, being a prisoner, and having limited free will, because of her disease. This portrays the exact attitude detailed in the introduction. However, throughout the piece, her attitude changes as she finds herself "confronting dying and death", and eventually is seen to be reminding herself that many have outlived initially bleak prognoses, and that "there are always exceptions".

Morales uses Tom Phillip's idea of using the original text in *The Humument* to change the way Ines and Ruppelt's text is interpreted. As William Gass says in *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* in reference to a work produced by Phillips from a text by W.H. Mallock, "These spaces drip or trickle down the page where



most of the time we can still see traces of (the) original text...Many times they will be found to contain tender bursting buttons and other abrupt poems.” Such is the feeling Morales attempted to convey by allowing Ines and Ruppelt’s original text to still be mostly visible but emphasizing particular phrases and words to depict shifting attitudes and sentiments toward a positive HIV diagnosis. While much of Ines and Ruppelt’s piece focuses on feelings of anger, hopelessness, and limitation, Morales selectively picks out words and phrases showing a transition to seeing death as a “final limitation” to a “beautiful transition from one state to another”. Morales frames the words to convey a realization of hope and the idea that HIV positive people “should be encouraged to activate... self healing energies” (Morales). By emphasizing these parts of the original narrative, Morales communicates that although one may initially feel despair at their diagnosis, their outlook should not remain bleak, as HIV positive people can now lead perfectly normal lives with proper treatment and adherence.

The Art

Morales uses changing shades of color to depict the shift in attitude she wants the audience to focus on. She depicts feelings of being a prisoner to HIV and limited free will with darker tones of brown and red, and gradually shifts to yellow and white, by which point the selected text reads “there are always exceptions” and emphasizes that death should be seen as a “beautiful transformation from one state of existence into another”. Morales uses chains around the top of the page to further depict the text’s description of feeling restricted and like a prisoner, but as the color changes, the chains begin to deteriorate, eventually breaking apart. This is meant to represent the audience “breaking free” from the negative thoughts and outlook associated with HIV, and to see their life as precious instead. The final phrase selected, “precious life” is outlined in blue to contrast the original sentiments expressed by the text, and is surrounded by grass and flowers to depict that regardless of HIV status, life truly is precious and should be treated as such. At the bottom of the work, broken chains lie in the grass to further symbolize a person separating themselves from the negativity and hopelessness tied to a positive HIV status. The piece is intended to be a visual representation of the road to acceptance and emotional healing.

Works Cited

- Gass, William H. "A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel." Tom Phillips – Home. N.p., n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2016.
- Reider Ines and Ruppelt, Patricia. *Matters of Life and Death: Women Speak About AIDS*. Sep. 1989. Maria de Bruyn Papers, 1988-2012. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University Libraries, Durham, NC. Dec 2017