

I Am Not Always Brown
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Chris McCabe, in his critique of Tom Phillips' *The Humument*, writes, "In a poem all the unused words are invisible, their invisibleness determining the impact of the words chosen on the page" (McCabe 1). This idea of selection and narrative invisibility in many ways encapsulates the meaning behind Elizabeth Brown's *I am not always brown*. Brown's piece challenges the viewer to look critically at the uniform nature of HIV/AIDS storytelling, and to instead search for the complexities of life beyond one disease. Through ironic document selection, text manipulation, and metaphor, Brown forces the audience to consider their own complicity in obscuring the extraordinary lives of HIV+ individuals.

The original document comes from a report on the 9th International Conference on AIDS + STD in Africa in 1995. Featured in box 4 of the Maria de Bruyn collection, the text describes a series of public health interventions and research projects. The subjects range from masculinity and HIV transmission to family planning and orphaned children. These five line summaries of anonymous HIV/AIDS patients and studies are illustrative of Brown's argument. Though each study is different, they are somehow overwhelmingly the same: these are sick people, this is why they are sick, and this is how "our" intervention will make them better. Brown seeks to make the viewer uncomfortable with the way stories are then condensed, typed up, and printed for consumption by International Conference attendees. For Brown, the prevalence of this type of document itself is the problem, and thus she obscures but a few choice words.

Brown manipulates the document's own words to convey the bleak reality of HIV/AIDS narratives. She groups 'commodities gathered' and 'information conversations relationship sex' to create an image of the narrative silos within the HIV/AIDS field and their monetized deployment. She circles and connects 'appropriate role' with 'accepted situations' and 'part of their being' to implicate the audience: we all expect and allow for only one type of sick person. Brown's most powerful grouping, perhaps, is 'limited' 'context,' 'limited' 'individuals.' Her black lines on the orange page seem to shout, "You only see what you are allowed to see...you don't know the half of it." Hauntingly, the only word Brown allows to stand in solitude is 'money.' Throughout the poem Brown stirs the notion of capitalist narrative consumption. With the abandoned 'money,' the commodification of HIV/AIDS narratives is made abruptly clear.

Surrounding and supplementing her biting poetry, Brown places fallen leaves somewhat haphazardly. In many places it seems to the audience as if the leaves might just obscure a piece of the poem. Brown uses these leaves as a metaphor for the HIV/AIDS narrative. Leaves are their most praised, appreciated, and collected during the fall, the time when they turn to brown, yellow, red, and orange and crunch under our feet. Though beautiful, this color change indicates the death of a leaf, the end of a life. Brown's point is that we only 'gather' the stories of HIV+ individuals that pertain to their disease. We do not care to hear about the rest of their life; their triumphs, their lovers, their favorite sports, their passions. We collect only 'accepted situations.' Further, these 'appropriate role[s]' do not just ignore an HIV+ person's rich history, but also work to obscure its uniqueness. Brown symbolizes this ignorance towards difference with the green thumbprints placed aimlessly around the document. These thumbprints are meant to mimic leaves at their peak: green, thriving, and each singular in its pattern and shape. Much like the life of an HIV+ individual beyond their disease, however, no one collects or appreciates a leaf in its prime. Brown drives home her metaphor through

competing dimensional materials. The brown leaves—the uniform illness narrative—are 3D; allowed to be real, truthful, and present. The green leaves—the vivid life of a person who just happens to also have HIV/AIDS—2D; relegated to flatness.

In the recent documentary *Chiezda's Song*, the female protagonist states, "I am more than a virus." Brown represents this sentiment through the combination of provocative, challenging poetry and powerful, thought provoking visual metaphor. Brown effectively manages to make the audience consider HIV/AIDS narratives (whether they be in the form of a research summary or documentary) as 'commodities gathered' like a pile of dead leaves for 'money.' Her title gives voice to the inanimate leaf and the muted HIV+ storyteller – "I am not always brown."

Bibliography

9th International Conference on AIDS + STD in Africa. 1995, Page 16. Box 4. Maria de Bruyn papers. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Duke University, Durham, NC. 20 Nov 2017.

McCabe, Chris. "A Little White Opening Out of Thought." *Poetry Review*, vol. 102, no. 3, Aug 2012.