

"Unpackaging" the Narrated Box

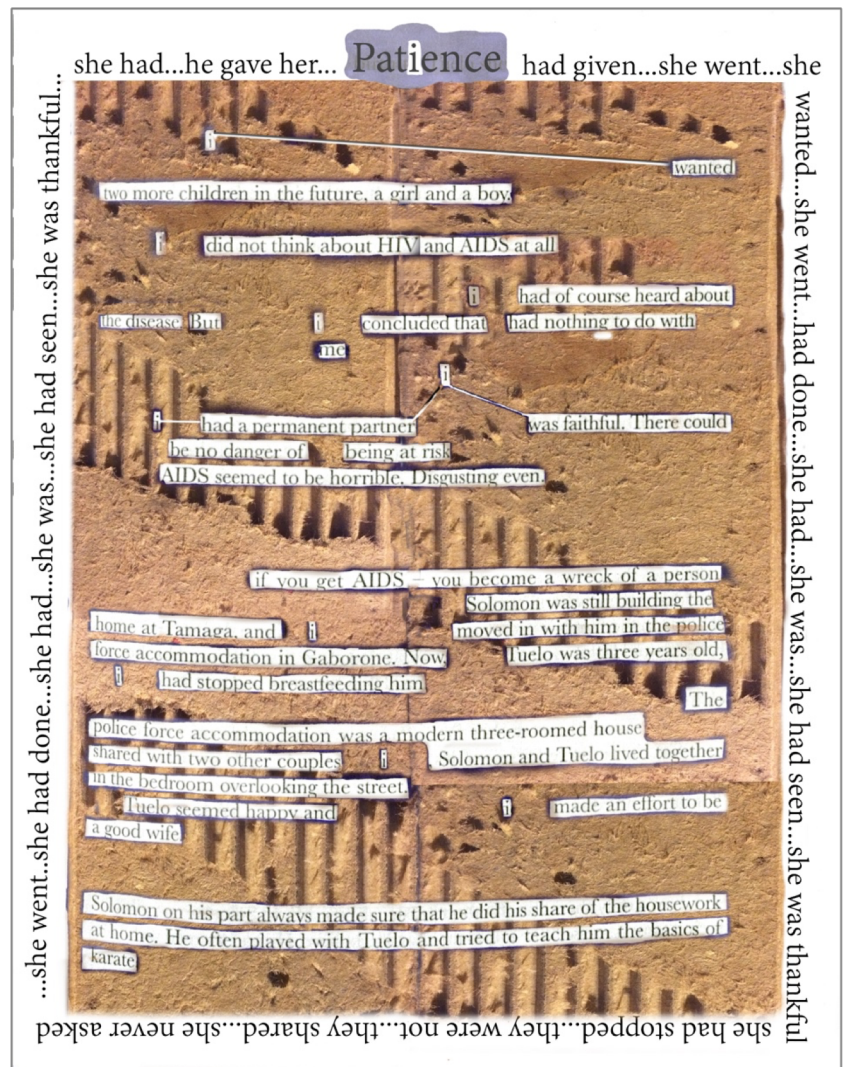
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In “*Unpackaging*” the Narrated Box, artist Meade Inglis has repurposed a page from a journalist’s third person narration of a woman’s experience with HIV to read as a first person account. In doing so, she has constructed not only a new narrative, but one that constitutes a commentary on the implications of the external narrating gaze and the agency conferred through narrative ownership.

The technique used by Inglis is borrowed from the artist Tom Phillips, who took a Victorian novel by W.H. Mallock, *A Human Document*, and repurposed it as a canvas for the creation of a new book and work of art: *A Humument*. In a review of the book, Daniel Maidman wrote that with this technique, “Rather than laboriously recreating a text in its absence, [Phillips] has laboriously obscured a text in its presence.” This obfuscation is artistic yet deliberate, exposing and composing a new narrative.

Harnessing that expositional potential, Inglis took a page from *A few days more: the story of a young woman living with HIV in Botswana*, a book written by Swedish journalist Anna Koblanck. She covered the original page with a layer of peeling cardboard and then cut holes into it to expose certain lines of text beneath. In doing so, she eliminated Koblanck’s narration of the story of Patience, the young woman mentioned in the book’s title, and exposed and constructed a new narrative, this time in the voice of Patience. The cardboard, one can assume, is the material representation of the “box” referenced in the piece’s title: “*Unpackaging*” the Narrated Box. From the artist’s statement, we learn that the phrases printed around the cardboard’s border are Koblanck’s third person, narrating phrases from the original page. Their displacement from the text represents Inglis’ displacement of the external, narrating gaze: visualizing both its foreignness and the potential it holds for distancing the reader from Patience.

Thus, Inglis constructs a new narrative but also a commentary, one that critiques the distancing effect of an external narrating gaze. This commentary does not exist in isolation and is not solely Inglis’, but instead is seen throughout the field of documentary



studies and, even specifically, HIV narratives. In particular, it is reminiscent of the technique used in *Chiezda's Song*, a 2015 Zimbabwean narrative film. The film tells the story of a young woman named Chiezda living with HIV in Zimbabwe. Just as Inglis' work tells the story in the voice of Patience, the entirety of the film is told through Chiezda's voice, with the cinematic perspective placed within her metaphorical eyes. The viewing experience that this precipitates is actively empathetic, transporting its viewers directly into the narrative and delivering a sensuous experience. It removes the distance viewers are allowed to maintain when viewing or reading through third person narration. And even more conceptually, it invites viewers to reflect on the significance of Chiezda's perspective as an example of the agency conferred through self-narration. This awareness and this reflection is the same that Inglis attempts to prompt with her artwork.

There is, however, a notable discrepancy between Chiezda's narration and Patience's constructed narration that constitutes some irony. The words in Inglis' artwork are not Patience's words. They are first a narrative constructed by Koblanck and then a narrative selected by Inglis. In effect, within the creation of the piece, Inglis commits the selective external narration that she intends to critique. This is in line with a greater limitation in the global health narrative field: to self-narrate requires a level of agency that many people don't have. To provide that agency, some techniques such as Literacy through Photography² and Photovoice³ have been employed in documentary work and qualitative research, but only sparingly so. The scarceness of this use and the continuation of the norm of third person narration is a consequence of complex causes, but through pieces such as *Unpackaging the Narrated Box* and *Chiezda's Song*, we can reflect on the consequences of this norm and consider the power of its alternatives.

Endnotes

1. See Maidman, Daniel.
2. See "Literacy Through Photography."
3. See Wang and Burris.

Works Cited

Koblanck, Anna. A few days more: the story of a young woman living with HIV in Botswana. *Sida*, 2005, Page 81. Box 11. Maria de Bruyn papers. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. Duke University, Durham, NC. 16 Nov 2017.

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