

Positive Music: Music, Women, and AIDS

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[SLIDE: Blank] When I mention that I am studying musical responses to HIV/AIDS, the song that most people bring up is TLC's 1994 hit "Waterfalls." Written by Marqueze Etheridge, "Waterfalls" was one of the most popular musical responses to HIV/AIDS.¹ It raises a number of questions concerning race, gender, and sexual power. Today I am going to concentrate on "Waterfalls" as a historical object, taking into account not just textual and musical elements, but also extra-musical elements including reviews and the "Waterfalls" music video. Although "Waterfalls" also provokes questions concerning authorship, audience, gang violence, the power of MTV, the place of the music critic, and the codes of popular music, I discuss these issues only in my larger project. Today I will make the case that "Waterfalls" played a significant part in the cultural construction of AIDS and that this piece could be understood as a type of community-level intervention, something that helped bring the black female voice into the public discourse concerning AIDS.

[SLIDE: TLC] Formed in 1991, the three members of TLC included Lisa "Left Eye" Lopes, Rozonda "Chilli" Thomas, and Tionne "T-Boz" Watkins. These women were "fly girls" who wore "short skirts, sequined fabric, high-heeled shoes, and prominent makeup."² Their songs covered topics ranging from love to female self-esteem to abusive relationships. TLC was one of the top-selling female groups of all time. Part of their success was due to "Waterfalls," a no. 1 single on the Billboard Hot 100. "Waterfalls" was released on their album *CrazySexyCool*,

¹ The words and music of "Waterfalls" are credited to Lisa Nicole Lopes, Rico R. Wade, Pat Brown, and Ramon Murray. See MTV, *Selections from 100 Greatest Pop Songs* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Hal Leonard), 448.

² Cheryl Keyes, "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity Via Rap Music Performance," *Journal of American Folklore* 113 (2000): 259.

which won Grammy Awards for best R&B album and best R&B performance by a duo or group.³ Moreover, the “Waterfalls” video won the MTV Video Music Award for “Best Video of the Year” in 1995.⁴ TLC – the trio – came to an end when, in 2002, Lisa Lopes died in a car accident in Honduras.⁵ Currently, the group is working to find a replacement for Lopes through a reality TV show titled, “R U the Girl With T-Boz & Chilli.”⁶

[SLIDE: 2nd verse] In this talk, I am going to focus on the second verse of “Waterfalls,” which concerns HIV/AIDS. As you can see in Example 1 on your handout, it contains no specific reference to HIV or AIDS. The line “three letters took him to his final resting place” reflects society’s uneasiness and confusion with AIDS. Presumably the three letters are H-I-V, but the letters are not named. Much like fact that we can’t see the three letters, the man “can’t see” and he “doesn’t recognize.” Other lines reinforce the connection to HIV. “She gives him loving that his body can’t handle” could have a number of meanings, but in this context we are supposed to understand that the woman’s body is contaminated with HIV. “His health is fading” strongly indicates that the man’s body has become infected as a result of his contact with the woman.

Although the text of “Waterfalls” is ambiguous, many of the reviews that discuss this song are not. “Waterfalls” was understood as an “AIDS song” from the beginning. As soon as it was released, reviews, in both local newspapers and national publications like *Billboard* and

³ Jon Pareles, “Lisa Lopes, Rapper, Dies in Honduras Crash at 30,” *New York Times*, 27 April 2002.

⁴ Brett Atwood, “TLC Video Director Gray Has Waterfalls of Offers,” *Billboard*, 14 October 1995.

⁵ Pareles, “Lisa Lopes.”

⁶ Nellie Andreeva, “TLC to Audition Singers in UPN Reality Show ‘R U the Girl’,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, 17 November 2004.

Newsweek, made the connection between “Waterfalls” and AIDS explicit.⁷ The women of TLC were known AIDS activists who sported condoms on their clothes at concerts to encourage women to protect themselves. A few years later, in a 1998 *Rolling Stone* interview, Lisa Lopes was even more forthcoming, saying unambiguously that “Waterfalls” was about “personal hardships” and that they “talk about an AIDS situation where a couple has been careless. That’s their waterfall. Anything that is going to hold you back in life is a waterfall.”⁸ Curiously, the “personal hardships” she describes are presented in a more collective context. In “Waterfalls” the personal hardship is refigured as a social hardship.

[SLIDE: Blank] In her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan SOHN-tag wrote, “Cancerphobia taught us the fear of a polluting environment; now we have the fear of polluting people that AIDS anxiety inevitably communicates.”⁹ Most often we are taught that those “polluting people” are white gay men. Just recently the media reinforced this myth by focusing on a story about a gay man with a virulent form of AIDS. The man was described as a crazed drug addict who carelessly spread his deadly strain of HIV.¹⁰ When I encounter such stigmatizing news, I am reminded why “Waterfalls” was so significant. It was momentous because women were telling the story, reminding us that people with AIDS can be women. By 1995, the country could associate AIDS with Ryan White, Magic Johnson, Freddie Mercury, Arthur Ashe, Tom

⁷ See, for example, Fred Bronson, “Back for Good for the First Time,” *Billboard*, 12 August 1995; Sonia Murray, “Local Producing Trio Behind Big TLC Hit Puts a Positive Spin on Its Brand of Rap That Revisits the Spirit of a ‘60s Soul Sound,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 14 November 1995; Jean Seligmann and Nina A. Biddle, “The Opposite of Unplugged,” *Newsweek*, 18 September 1995.

⁸ Janice Dunn, “Waterfalls,” *Rolling Stone*, 9 July 1998.

⁹ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 1989), 161.

¹⁰ This was a troubling report, but it was not unprecedented. For example, two cases of rapidly-progressing virus resistant to three classes of HIV drugs was documented by Dr. Julio Montaner in Vancouver in 2001, without a drastic public health crisis in its wake.

Hanks, or Denzel Washington, for example, but there were almost no major female figures associated with AIDS.

There were a number of events that contributed to the conflation of AIDS with men. One of the most egregious occurred in 1988 when the physician Robert E. Gould published an article in *Cosmopolitan*. “There is almost no danger of contracting AIDS through *ordinary sexual intercourse*,” he wrote – a “healthy vagina” offers sufficient protection against contracting HIV infection.¹¹ In the early 1990s, the connection between AIDS and gay men was so strong, national surveys revealed that nearly half the population believed that two HIV-negative gay men could acquire the AIDS virus merely by having sex with each other.¹² Although messages had become somewhat more accurate by the time “Waterfalls” was released late in 1994, AIDS was still mostly understood as a disease of white gay men. I do not want to overstate the power of “Waterfalls,” but it is at least noteworthy that the woman gives the man “loving that his body can’t handle” and that women’s voices tell the story. This song reminded its listeners that AIDS affects women.

Let me return to those “three letters” for a moment, because not everyone understood what they were. In my many conversations regarding this piece, both online and in person, I have heard some fascinating interpretations, including S-E-X, G-U-N, G-O-D, L-S-D, and A-I-D. Not

¹¹ Robert E. Gould, “Reassuring News About AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why You May Not Be at Risk,” *Cosmopolitan*, January 1988, 146.

¹² Between 1990 and 1992 Gregory Herek asked a question about two HIV-negative men having sex with each other: 19.1 percent of the respondents “believed that at least one of the men was almost sure to get infected or had a fairly strong chance of doing so – even if they used condoms. If the condoms were not used, 47.5 percent of the respondents believed that infection was likely.” Gregory M. Herek, “The HIV Epidemic and Public Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men,” in *In Changing Times: Gay Men and Lesbians Encounter HIV/AIDS*, ed. Martin P. Levine, Peter M. Nardi, and John H. Gagnon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 206.

everyone knew that “Waterfalls” was an “AIDS Song.” I am less interested in knowing who understood the coded language than discussing what this coded language said about AIDS.

[SLIDE: Reference to HIV/AIDS] When we compare “Waterfalls” to the other musical responses to HIV/AIDS that were on the Billboard charts, as I do in Example 2, we see an obvious tendency to avoid directly mentioning AIDS in the text, an evasion of actually naming HIV/AIDS. Prince’s “Sing O’ the Times” refers to “a big disease with a little name.” Salt-N-Pepa’s “Let’s Talk about Sex,” includes a reference to “a three-letter word I heard was a curse.” Liz Phair mentions “positive T-cell regeneration” in her song “Ride.” And Elton John sings lyrics like “Today I weigh less than a shadow on the wall” in “The Last Song.” And in Janet Jackson’s “Together Again,” the text does not mention HIV/AIDS or have any coded references to “three letters,” but in the liner notes, next to the words “Together Again,” there is a small red AIDS ribbon. “Waterfalls” and these the other popular American musical responses to HIV/AIDS are united by their omission of specific references to the epidemic, yet each song is clearly connected to AIDS and each song has something to say about AIDS.

[SLIDE: Blank] The “Waterfalls” music video is symbolically rich and it adds important dimensions to the story told in “Waterfalls” the song. The most frequent image in the video is of the three women of TLC standing in the water, like water nymphs. The “careless couple” they sing about is white. Recall that in the text there was no indication of race. The video also shows that before the couple had sex, the woman took and discarded a condom from the man’s hand, indicating that the condom was offered but not used. Further, there is a hinged picture frame with the woman on one side and the man on the other, but the male faces in the picture rapidly change in a sequence that represents the woman’s previous multiple sexual partners. And there is a scene with the man looking in the mirror with what look to be lesions on his face.

[SLIDE: “Waterfalls” video] [SLIDE: blank] This video raises new questions. Why is the couple white? Why is it the woman who discards the condom and not the man? If we are to assume that the man acquired HIV from the woman, why do we only see the effects of AIDS on the man? Is the song meant to suggest that the woman is somehow immune from the effects of AIDS? Or is she the new . . . fatal woman?

Although one could argue otherwise, I don’t think we should understand that the white woman in the video is the fatal woman. First of all, we can’t tell from the video or the song if the woman knows her serostatus. “She gave the man loving his body couldn’t handle,” but that does not necessarily mean that she knew that she was HIV-positive. Secondly, the women in TLC promoted safe sex in interviews, in concerts, and in other songs. We don’t see the condoms on their clothes in the video, but they made safe sex messages a priority. Therefore, I would suggest that TLC was not necessarily trying to blame the woman, but rather they were pointing out that “being fly and sexually independent undoubtedly comes hand in hand with sexual responsibility.”¹³

The video also raises important questions about race. Because the woman in the video is white, one could argue that “Waterfalls” characterizes AIDS as a white disease. However, this conclusion seems less appropriate. I titled this talk “Positive Music” because I think that, on the whole, the message of “Waterfalls” is positive. Metaphorically, this piece is HIV-positive. But it is also positive in the sense that it acts like an intervention. They were telling this story at a time when AIDS was the leading cause of death among black women, aged 25-44 years.¹⁴ Watching this video, I see three black women saying AIDS is important to them, that AIDS is their

¹³ Keyes, “Empowering Self,” 261.

¹⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Update: Mortality Attributable to HIV Infection among Persons Aged 25-44 Years – United States, 1994,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 45, no. 6 (1996): 121-5.

problem. But they were not saying that AIDS is only their problem. They were promoting safer sexual practices for men and women. The woman in the video is white because AIDS affects black and white, not to mention Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, and so on. In theory, at least, this song had the potential to do valuable cultural work.

“Waterfalls” is uttered in the voices of women and it concerns a woman who is HIV-positive. The women of TLC are in a position of power because they tell the story of the woman who is infected. We do not ever hear the voice of the woman in the video. We are permitted voyeuristic access to her act of discarding the condom. The infected woman may or not be understood as mad, but we know for certain that she is diseased. She is dangerous and deadly. The effect of this song would be very different if three men were telling the story.

The practice of representing mad or diseased women musically has been around for hundreds of years and I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of the musical genre of “Waterfalls,” the lament. The lament has long understood as a public place for women to voice their private concerns. “Waterfalls” employs a musical figure that one prominent musicologist has labeled the “emblem of the lament,” the descending tetrachord. But unlike historical laments, like Monteverdi’s *Lament of the Nymph* that features three men, three women tell the story in this modern lament. In “Waterfalls” women have moved from a position of passive grief to a position of active intervention. No longer told by men, we are hearing the words of strong black women. This piece did not have to be about AIDS. Like other historical laments, it could have dealt with other kinds of loss. But “Waterfalls” is about AIDS. For these reasons, “Waterfalls” interferes with the myth that AIDS affects only white gay men – one of the most powerful and deadly misconceptions of our time.

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