Coming Apart

Alice Walker

These three paragraphs by Alice Walker tell why she wrote Coming Apart: "Many Black men see pornography as progressive because the white woman, formerly taboo, is, via pornography, made available to them. Not simply available, but in a position of vulnerability to all men. This availability and vulnerability diminishes the importance and power of color among men and permits a bonding with white men as men, which Black men, striving to be equal, not content with being different, apparently desire.

"Many Black women also consider pornography progressive and are simply interested in equal time. But in a racist society, where Black women are on the bottom, there is no such thing as equal time or equal quality of exposure. It is not unheard of to encounter ‘erotica’ or pornography in which a Black woman and a white woman are both working in ‘a house of ill-repute,’ but the Black woman also doubles as the white woman’s maid.* The Black man who finds himself ‘enjoying’ pornography of this sort faces a split in himself that allows a solidarity of gender but promotes a rejection of race. ‘Beulah, peel me a grape’ has done untold harm to us all.

"I have, as we all have, shared a part of my life—since the day I was born—with men whose concept of woman is a degraded one. I have also experienced, like the woman in this piece, Forty-second Street; I felt demeaned by the selling of bodies, threatened by the violence, and furious that my daughter must grow up in a society in which the debasement of women is actually enjoyed."

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A middle-aged husband comes home after a long day at the office. His wife greets him at the door with the news that dinner is ready. He is grateful. First, however, he must use the bathroom. In the bathroom, sitting on the commode, he opens up the Jiveboy magazine he has brought home in his briefcase. There are a couple of Jivemate poses that particularly arouse him. He studies the young women—blonde, perhaps (the national craze), with elastic waists and inviting eyes—and strokes his penis. At the same time, his bowels stir

* Ed. Note: This is the situation in the movie version of The Story of O.
with the desire to defecate. He is in the bathroom a luxurious ten minutes. He emerges spent, relaxed—hungry for dinner.

His wife, using the bathroom later, comes upon the slightly damp magazine. She picks it up with mixed emotions. She is a brownskin woman with black hair and eyes. She looks at the white blondes and brunettes. Will he be thinking of them, she wonders, when he is making love to me?

“Why do you need these?” she asks.

“They mean nothing,” he says.

“But they hurt me somehow,” she says.

“You are being a) silly, b) a prude, and c) ridiculous,” he says. “You know I love you.”

She cannot say to him: But they are not me, those women. She cannot say she is jealous of pictures on a page. That she feels invisible. Rejected. Overlooked. She says instead, to herself: He is right. I will grow up. Adjust. Swim with the tide.

He thinks he understands her, what she has been trying to say. It is Jiveboy, he thinks, the white women.

Next day he brings home Jivers, a Black magazine, filled with bronze and honey-colored women. He is in the bathroom another luxurious ten minutes.

She stands, holding the magazine: on the cover are the legs and shoes of a well-dressed Black man, carrying a briefcase and a rolled Wall Street Journal in one hand. At his feet—she turns the magazine cover around and around to figure out how exactly the pose is accomplished—there is a woman, a brownskin woman like herself, twisted and contorted in such a way that her head is not even visible. Only her glistening body—her back and derriere—so that she looks like a human turd at the man’s feet.

He is on a business trip to New York. He has brought his wife along. He is eagerly sharing Forty-second Street with her. “Look!” he says, “how free everything is! A far cry from Bolton!” (The small town they are from.) He is elated to see the blonde, spaced-out hookers, with their Black pimps, trooping down the street. Elated at the shortness of the Black hookers’ dresses, their long hair, inevitably false and blonde. She walks somehow behind him, so that he will encounter these wonders first. He does not notice until he turns a corner that she has stopped in front of a window that has caught her eye. While she is standing alone, looking, two separate pimps ask her what stable she is in or if in fact she is in one. Or simply “You workin’?”
He struts back and takes her elbow. Looks hard for the compli-
ment implied in these questions, then shares it with his wife: "You
know you're foxy?"

She is immovable. Her face suffering and wondering. "But look,"
she says, pointing. Four large plastic dolls—one a skinny Farrah
Fawcett (or so the doll looks to her) posed for anal inspection; one,
an oriental, with her eyes, strangely, closed, but her mouth, a pouting
red suction cup, open; an enormous eskimo woman—with fur around
her neck and ankles, and vagina; and a Black woman dressed entirely
in a leopard skin, complete with tail. The dolls are all life-size, and
the efficiency of their rubber genitals is explained in detail on a
card visible through the plate glass.

For her this is the stuff of nightmares because all the dolls are
smiling. She will see them for the rest of her life. For him the sight
is also shocking, but arouses a prurient curiosity. He will return, an-
other time, alone. Meanwhile, he must prevent her from seeing such
things, he resolves, whisking her briskly off the street.

Later, in their hotel room, she watches TV as two Black women
sing their latest hits: the first woman, dressed in a gold dress (because
her song is now "solid gold!") is nonetheless wearing a chain around
her ankle—the wife imagines she sees a chain—because the woman
is singing: "Free me from my freedom, chain me to a tree!"

"What do you think of that?" she asks her husband.

"She's a fool," says he.

But when the second woman sings: "Ready, aim, fire, my name is
desire," with guns and rockets going off all around her, he thinks the
line "Shoot me with your love!" explains everything.

She is despondent.

She looks in a mirror at her plump brown and blackskin body,
creaky hair and black eyes and decides, foolishly, that she is not
beautiful. And that she is not hip, either. Among her other problems
is the fact that she does not like the word "nigger" used by anyone
at all, and is afraid of marijuana. These restraints, she feels, make
her old, too much like her own mother, who loves sex (she has lately
learned) but is highly religious and, for example, thinks cardplaying
wicked and alcohol deadly. Her husband would not consider her
mother sexy, she thinks. Since she herself is aging, this thought
frightens her. But, surprisingly, while watching herself become her
mother in the mirror, she discovers that she considers her mother—
who carefully braids her average length, average grade, graying hair
every night before going to bed; the braids her father still manages
to fray during the night—very sexy.
At once she feels restored.
Resolves to fight.

"You're the only Black woman in the world that worries about any of this stuff," he tells her, unaware of her resolve, and moody at her months of silent studiousness.

She says, "Here, Colored Person, read this essay by Audre Lorde."
He hedges. She insists.

He comes to a line about Lorde "moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love," and bridles. "Wait a minute," he says.
"What kind of a name is 'Audre' for a man? They must have meant 'André.'"

"It is the name of a woman," she says. "Read the rest of that page."
"No dyke can tell me anything," he says, flinging down the pages.
She has been calmly waiting for this. She brings in Jiveboy and Jivers. In both, there are women eating women they don't even know.
She takes up the essay and reads:

This brings me to the last consideration of the erotic. To share the power of each other's feelings is different from using another's feelings as we would use a Kleenex. And when we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.

He looks at her with resentment, because she is reading this passage over again, silently, absorbedly, to herself, holding the pictures of the phony lesbians (a favorite, though unexamined, turn-on) absentmindedly on her lap. He realizes he can never have her again sexually, the way he has had her since their second year of marriage, as though her body belonged to someone else. He sees, down the road, the dissolution of the marriage, a constant search for more perfect bodies, or dumber wives. He feels oppressed by her incipient struggle, and feels somehow as if her struggle to change the pleasure he has enjoyed is a violation of his rights.

Now she is busy pasting Audre Lorde's words on the cabinet over the kitchen sink.

When they make love she tries to look him in the eye, but he refuses to return her gaze.

For the first time he acknowledges the awareness that the pleasure of coming without her is bitter and lonely. He thinks of eating stolen candy alone, behind the barn. And yet, he thinks greedily, it is better
than nothing, which he considers her struggle's benefit to him.

The next day she is reading another essay when he comes home from work. It is called "A Quiet Subversion," and is by Luisah Teish. "Another dyke?" he asks.

"Another one of your sisters," she replies, and begins to read aloud, even before he's had dinner:

During the Black Power Movement, much cultural education was focused on the Black physique. One of the accomplishments of that period was the popularization of African hairstyles and the Natural. Along with (the Natural) came a new self-image and way of relating. It suggested that Black people should relate to each other in respectful and supportive ways. Then the movie industry put out Superfly, and the Lord Jesus Look and the Konked head, and an accompanying attitude ran rampant in the Black community. . . . Films like Shaft and Lady Sings the Blues portray Black "heroes" as cocaine-snorting, fast-life fools. In these movies a Black woman is always caught in a web of violence. . . .

A popular Berkeley, California, theater featured a pornographic movie entitled Slaves of Love. Its advertisement portrayed two Black women, naked, in chains, and a white man standing over them with a whip! How such racist pornographic material escapes the eye of Black activists presents a problem. . . .

Typically, he doesn't even hear the statement about the women. "What does the bitch know about the Black Power Movement?" he fumes. He is angry at his wife for knowing him so long and so well. She knows, for instance, that because of the Black Power Movement (and really because of the Civil Rights Movement before it) and not because he was at all active in it—he holds the bourgeois job he has. She remembers when his own hair was afro-ed. Now it is loosely curled. It occurs to him that, because she knows him as he was, he cannot make love to her as she is. Cannot, in fact, love her as she is. There is a way in which, in some firmly repressed corner of his mind, he considers his wife to be still Black, whereas he feels himself to have moved to some other plane.

(This insight, a glimmer of which occurs to him, frightens him so much that he will resist it for several years. Should he accept it at once, however unsettling, it would help him understand the illogic of his acceptance of pornography used against Black women: that he has detached himself from his own blackness in attempting to identify Black women only by their sex.)
The wife has never considered herself a feminist—though she is, of course, a “womanist.” A “womanist” is a feminist, only more common.* So she is surprised when her husband attacks her as a “worm-en’s liber,” a “white women’s lackey,” a “pawn” in the hands of Glorria Steinem, an incipient bra-burner! What possible connection could there be, he wants to know, between her and white women—those overprivileged hags, now (he’s recently read in Newsweek) marching and preaching their puritanical horseshit up and down Times Square!

(He remembers only the freedom he felt there, not her long pause before the window of the plastic doll shop.) And if she is going to make a lot of new connections with dykes and whites, where will that leave him, the Black man, the most brutalized and oppressed human being on the face of the earth? (Is it because he can now ogle white women in freedom and she has no similar outlet of expression that he thinks of her as still Black and himself as something else? This thought underlines what he is actually saying, and his wife is unaware of it.) Didn’t she know it is over these very same white bodies he has been lynched in the past, and is lynched still, by the police and the U. S. prison system, dozens of times a year even now?!

The wife has cunningly saved Tracey A. Gardner’s essay for just this moment. Because Tracey A. Gardner has thought about it all, not just presently, but historically, and she is clear about all the abuse being done to herself as a Black person and as a woman, and she is bold and she is cold—she is furious. The wife, given more to depression and self-abnegation than to fury, basks in the fire of Gardner’s high-spirited anger.

She begins to read: †

* “Womanist” encompasses “feminist” as it is defined in Webster’s, but also means instinctively pro-woman. It is not in the dictionary at all. Nonetheless, it has a strong root in Black women’s culture. It comes (to me) from the word “womanish,” a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: “You’re acting womanish!” A labeling that failed, for the most part, to keep us from acting “womanish” whenever we could, that is to say, like our mothers themselves, and like other women we admired.

An advantage of using “womanist” is that, because it is from my own culture, I needn’t preface it with the word “Black” (an awkward necessity and a problem I have with the word “feminist”), since Blackness is implicit in the term; just as for white women there is apparently no felt need to preface “feminist” with the word “white,” since the word “feminist” is accepted as coming out of white women’s culture.

† The excerpts that follow are taken from an earlier, longer version of Tracey A. Gardner’s essay, “Racism in Pornography and the Women’s Movement.”
Because from my point of view, racism is everywhere, including the Women’s Movement, and the only time I really need to say something special about it is when I don’t see it—and the first time that happens, I’ll tell you about it.

The husband, surprised, thinks this very funny, not to say pertinent. He slaps his knee and sits up. He is dying to make some sort of positive dyke comment, but nothing comes to mind.

American slavery relied on the denial of the humanity of Black folks, on the undermining of our sense of nationhood and family, on the stripping away of the Black man’s role as protector and provider, and on the structuring of Black men and women into the American system of white male domination.

“In other words,” she says, “white men think they have to be on top. Other men have been known to savor life from other positions.”

The end of the Civil War brought the end of a certain “form” of slavery for Black folks. It also brought the end of any “job security” and the loss of the protection of their white enslaver. Blacks were now free game, and the terrorization and humiliation of Black people, especially Black men, began. Now the Black man could have his family and prove his worth, but he had no way to support or protect them, or himself.

As she reads, he feels ashamed and senses his wife’s wounded embarrassment, for him and for herself. For their history together. But doggedly, she continues to read:

After the Civil War, “popular justice” (which meant there usually was no trial and no proof needed) began its reign in the form of the castration, burning at the stake, beheading, and lynching of Black men. As many as 5,000 white people turned out to witness these events, as though going to a celebration. (She pauses, sighs: beheading?) Over 2,000 Black men were lynched in the ten-year period from 1889–1899. There were also a number of Black women who were lynched. (She reads this sentence quickly and forgets it.) Over 50 percent of the lynched Black males were charged with rape or attempted rape.

He cannot imagine a woman being lynched. He has never even considered the possibility. Perhaps this is why the image of a Black woman chained and bruised excites rather than horrifies him? It is the fact that the lynching of her body has never stopped that forces
the wife, for the time being, to blot out the historical record. She is not prepared to connect her own husband with the continuation of that past.

She reads:

If a Black man had sex with a consenting white woman, it was rape. *(Why am I always reading about, thinking about, worrying about, my man having sex with white women? she thinks, despairingly, underneath the reading.)* If he insulted a white woman by looking at her, it was attempted rape.

“Yes,” he says softly, as if in support of her dogged reading, “I’ve read Ida B.—what’s her last name?” *

“By their lynching, the white man was showing that he hated the Black man carnally, biologically; he hated his color, his features, his genitals. Thus he attacked the Black man’s body, and like a lover gone mad, maimed his flesh, violated him in the most intimate, pornographic fashion. . . .”

I believe that this obscene, inhuman treatment of Black men by white men . . . has a direct correlation to white men’s increasingly obscene and inhuman treatment of women, particularly white women, in pornography and real life. White women, working toward their own strength and identity, their own sexuality and independence, have in a sense become “uppity niggers.” As the Black man threatens the white man’s masculinity and power, so now do women.

“That girl’s onto something,” says the husband, but thinks, for the first time in his life, that when he is not thinking of fucking white women—fantasizing over Jiveboy or clucking at them on the street—he is very often thinking of ways to degrade them. Then he thinks that, given his history as a Black man in America, it is not surprising that he has himself confused fucking them with degrading them. But what does that say about how he sees himself? This thought smothers his inward applause for Gardner, and instead he casts a bewildered, disconcerted look at his wife. He knows that to make love to his wife as she really is, as who she really is—indeed, to make love to any other human being as they really are—will require a soul rending look into himself, and the thought of this virtually straightens his hair.

His wife continues:

Some Black men, full of the white man’s perspective and values, see the white woman or Blond Goddess as part of the American winning image. Sometimes when he is with the Black woman, he is ashamed of how she has been treated, and how he has been powerless, and that they have always had to work together and protect each other. *(Yes, she thinks, we were always all we had, until now.)*

*(He thinks: We are all we have still, only now we can live without permitting ourselves to know this.)*

Frantz Fanon said about white women, “By loving me she proves that I am worthy of white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man. I marry the culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine.” *(She cannot believe he meant to write “white dignity.”)*

She pauses, looks at her husband: “‘So how does a Black woman feel when her Black man leaves *Playboy* on the coffee table?’”

For the first time he understands fully a line his wife read the day before: “The pornography industry’s exploitation of the Black woman’s body is *qualitatively* different from that of the white woman,” because she is holding the cover of *Jivers* out to him and asking: “What does this woman look like?”

What he has refused to see—because to see it would reveal yet another area in which he is unable to protect or defend Black women—is that where white women are depicted in pornography as “objects,” Black women are depicted as animals. Where white women are at least depicted as human bodies if not beings, Black women are depicted as shit.

He begins to feel sick. For he realizes that he has bought some if not all of the advertisements about women, Black and white. And further, inevitably, he has bought the advertisements about himself. In pornography the Black man is portrayed as being capable of fucking anything . . . even a piece of shit. He is defined solely by the size, readiness and unselectivity of his cock.

Still, he does not know how to make love without the fantasies fed to him by movies and magazines. Those movies and magazines (whose characters’ pursuits are irrelevant or antithetical to his concerns) that have insinuated themselves between him and his wife,
so that the totality of her body, her entire corporeal reality is alien to him. Even to clutch her in lust is to automatically shut his eyes. Shut his eyes, and . . . he chuckles bitterly . . . dream of England. For years he has been fucking himself.

At first, reading Lorde together, they reject celibacy. Then they discover they need time apart to clear their heads. To search out damage. To heal. In any case, she is unable to fake response—he is unwilling for her to do so. She goes away for a while. Left alone, he soon falls hungrily on the magazines he had thrown out. Strokes himself raw over the beautiful women, spread like so much melon (he begins to see how stereotypes transmute) before him. But he cannot refuse what he knows—or what he knows his wife knows, walking along a beach in some Black country where all the women are bleached and straightened and the men never look at themselves; and are ugly, in any case, in their imitation of white men.

Long before she returns he is reading her books and thinking of her—and of her struggles alone and his fear of sharing them—and when she returns, it is 60% her body that he moves against in the sun, her own Black skin affirmed in the brightness of his eyes.