

Conversations
with Paule Marshall

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Talk as a Form of Action: An Interview with Paule Marshall

Sabine Bröck/1982

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Q: I've read that you got a lot of impulse for your writing as well as literary material out of remembering the kitchen talk of your mother and her friends . . . took that out of *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Can you recall other sources for your creativity, e.g. did you read any novels by black women writers of that time?

A: Well, the period that I was talking about when I referred to the kitchen talk were the thirties, when I was a little girl growing up in Brooklyn, and the forties, and at that period women writers who were around or who had been published by then were just unheard of, were just unknown on my community. They weren't taught in the schools that I attended, people like Jessie Fauset, people like Zora Neale Hurston, they just were not taught. And that's one of the great deprivations of education in this country and more specifically the black community in this country. We were just not exposed to, were just not given the privilege to read Black literature. The books that made up the curriculum in the English department were drawn from so-called Western and American literature, American meaning excluding Blacks, even though they might occasionally teach a Black male writer. Back in those days almost never would they teach a Black woman writer. So certainly there was not any opportunity for me in school to be put in touch with Black women writers in the thirties and in the forties. The things that I read as a little girl growing up were the standard kinds of Nancy Drew books about becoming a nurse and the Little House on the Prairie books. The bet-

ter kinds of literature that I got to later on in High School are Jane Austen, later on in college Joseph Conrad and Thomas Mann. And I began after a time to be somewhat influenced by these writers. I still had not made the acquaintance of Black American writers. When finally I got to read people like Wright, I found that although I was pleased in the sense that I was reading about Black life, I was yet having the sense that my particular experience as a young urban Black American woman was not really being dealt with in that literature.

And very slowly the idea of trying to do *Brown Girl, Brownstones* came about, came out of that sense that there was nowhere in the literature where I could turn where I saw not myself so much reflected but young women like myself reflected. Gradually, I mean these things are not conscious, some deep inner place I began wanting to attempt that story, to attempt to get something of the reality and texture and meaning of their life down on paper. Then something marvelous happened. It must have been in the fifties that I came across *Maud Martha* by Gwendolyn Brooks. I read it and found it a remarkable book. Not only from the point of view of style—that kind of spare poetic, very delicate but very sturdy kind of style—a way I couldn't write and don't—mine is much fuller. But I like that kind of poetic approach to prose. And I also was very much taken with *Maud Martha* because I think she in a sense was a truly vanguardal breakthrough character in American literature in the sense that Brooks took the life of a terribly ordinary young woman and made of it something of art. And in a sense even though I hadn't started writing at that point, I sensed that this was the kind of thing I would attempt when I started writing: to say that there was something of worth, something to celebrate, that there was something to acknowledge about the life of women who had been simply dismissed by society. That in the small number of Black books that I've read mainly by men I haven't seen the life, the ordinary community life in any way dealt with in its fullness.

And I think I wanted to do it for a couple of reasons: first of all, as I might have said before, I wanted to tell the story of the young urban Black woman—that's a very narrow sphere. On the other hand I wanted to in a sense tell the story of a young woman in relation to her community. What I sensed in so much of the literature, Black literature that I began reading at that point, this is in the mid-fifties, when I started thinking about writing—what I sensed in so much of the literature was that the reference was constantly the larger oppressive racist society, and that that defined almost totally the hero or the heroine. I had a sense that even though that was valid, yes, that a whole dimension was missing, that in the face of racism, in the

face of oppression, there was a Black community, that Blacks had been able to elaborate, to make, to fashion a life in a community that was a means of sustaining them. And that our lives were not solely defined by racism, that we did most of the time love our children, our husbands and our wives and we had a family life and these were things that have to be celebrated because by celebrating we said that in the face of an oppressive society we were still able to maintain a sense of humanity.

And this was the thing that I think I was after in the work, and this is why women, the kitchen talk, the women at the kitchen table, my mother and her friends were so important. Even though I couldn't have spelled it out, even though I wasn't conscious of what was happening at that table I sensed that they were artists. They were not permitted—given the nature of their lives—the means to develop as artists and so they had to find a medium through which they could give voice to this tremendous reservoir of expressive quality that they had. And so it was done through talk, and it was talk that even though it was spontaneous on one hand was on the other very finely tuned. So it was an artistic expression. I mean they just didn't sit around the kitchen table and tell a story “in any ole kind way”; a story was told with an eye to its structure, with an eye to the people they were talking about in the story—characterization, it was told with a sense of drama in mind. And so it was there in those early years that I really had sense of what went into making stories. And so this is why they were so important. And I wanted to write about them when I came to *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; because there was something of their lives that needed to be recorded, because it said something about the way Black women were able to make of their lives a kind of artistic expression through their talk. They were able not only to make an artistic expression, but for the hours that they would spend sitting around their kitchen table talking they were in a sense controlling their lives, and that's central. They spent most of their day working as domestics in the homes of white people being exploited, being disregarded, being considered the pariah of a society, but when they were able to gather together in a kind of a community of friendship and support which those sessions at the kitchen table represented, they were able to give vent to their artistic impulses and at the same time to, in a sense, control their lives, so the two things were at play and I wanted to capture something of that quality in the novel.

Q: I like this idea about taking control, something like the moment you're able to speak about hurt it's like you are not this helpless victim any longer.

A: Yes, so that my women, the women in my novels really represent a depar-

ture from the kind of women that you see so much of contemporary Black women writing. They are not victims. On one hand they are oppressed women, they have to go out and do the menial work and they are insulted and humiliated and so forth, but their whole way of reacting to that, their whole ability to find means of giving vent to their anger and frustration, their ability to exercise a kind of control of their lives, even if it's through talk, suggests that they're not victims. I think that's very important because there is in the dominant culture here a whole desire to see Black life as totally in disarray, as being truly shattered by the experience of racism. And I think this is one of the things that my work represents, it really is a departure from that prevailing notion that the women do find means by which they can escape being just simply victims.

Q: I think Robert B. Stepto wrote in an essay about Richard Wright when he talks about the women's writing after Wright that the difference between the women's writing and the characters in most of Wright's writing is that the women are oppressed and they are in a way poor creatures but they dream just the same. Do you think this is about the same as what you are saying: that there is this vision of being able to create or being able to love and not resigning to circumstances?

A: Yes, yes. With them, with the women, especially in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, it was not only dreaming. They did dream, I mean they had very practical dreams, they dreamed about property, they dreamed about making it in terms of the American materialistic ethic, they dreamed alright, but they also acted. I saw their talk as a form of action, because both the women in the novel and the women I knew as a girl growing up—their talk was not confined to the usual things that women are supposed to talk about, gossip, their husbands, how much food is in the stores and so on. These were women who talked about the economy, this was during the period of the post-depression and Roosevelt had just come along. They talked about Roosevelt who they considered their great savior, they were politically aware women, they talked about Marcus Garvey who was their great hero. When they came here as immigrant women in the early twenties and got their first jobs as domestics and so on, as sleep-in maids or just as day-workers, they contributed out of their small salaries to the UNIA movement which was Garvey's movement. They were members of his nurses' brigade and marched in the Garvey Day parades of 7th Avenue in their white nurses uniforms. And they contributed to the buying of the ships, the Black Star Line. I don't know how many of those women would actually have gone to Africa, if Garvey had achieved his dreams, you know, the whole repatriation. I don't

think one of them would have gone, but their embracing of the movement, their support of Garvey suggested something to me when I thought about it years later, which has been very important to my writing. Not only did it say that they had a political perspective, but they also saw themselves in terms of the larger world of darker people. And even though they might have had some of the same unhappy stereotype opinions and attitudes towards Africa, at that point their allegiance, their dedication to Garvey said that they saw themselves not just as Black Afro-Americans or Afro-Caribbeans living in this hemisphere, but they saw themselves as part of that larger world. And this has become, of course, one of the themes of my own work.

Q: I want to ask you about these very practical dreams you were hinting at. The criticism I read about was almost always in that vein, saying that this is a woman who is totally caught up in the typical American dream and she is all after power, and that was negative for these critics. They saw it as something which was not bearable or not right. I didn't understand it that way, I always thought it was a very avant-garde way in the fifties to portray a woman seeking after power and admitting it freely, that would have been avant-garde even for white women, let alone for Black women who just came here I don't know how many years before. I mean she wasn't even a "true American."

A: I think a couple of things enter into it. The criticism of her that you've come across comes out of the stereotype of the Black woman, of this all-powerful matriarch figure. She has been seen in the literature and apart from literature as a kind of castrating figure, and I think that the criticism comes out of that. And it's unfortunate, because the critics who condemn a character like Silla are doing so because they have accepted the dominant society's view of Black women, which, of course, is to discredit her. If you say a woman is castrating, that's a total condemnation of her. What they fail to see is that Black women historically have been strong, have had to be strong, and that strength is a positive feature and that strength does not take away from their "womanly qualities," their ability to be tender, to be emotional, giving creatures. What has happened is that "strong, matriarchal" has taken on a whole unhappy meaning which casts these women as unfeeling, as castrating, as larger than life. What I tried to do in *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* was to suggest that, yes, the mother is almost fierce in her desire to establish herself in this country, but that she does have needs. I'm trying to evoke memories of her as a young woman. There is the time when she is at the dance, there is the scene where she allows the father to take the money because they've had a night together, so she is not this iron clad, the iron maiden, so to speak.

Q: A lot of people saw her that way. I always felt just the opposite. The more detailed you described how fierce she was, the more I sensed her fighting against something in her own self so that this whole contradiction in herself was revealed without somebody being there to tell you, yes, sometimes she is needy or sometimes she is sweet, but you sensed it out of the writing.

A: Yes, that's what I was trying to convey. There are some negative features to her and I try to suggest those in the novel—these are the things that the young girl, Selina, questions about the kinds of values that her mother embraces. I think the mother's failing, the thing that makes for her emptiness in the end of the novel is that she has embraced the American materialistic ethic unquestioningly. In her whole ambitious drive to obtain the house, to see to it that Selina goes to college and becomes the doctor or whatever, she does it in such a way that she alienates the very people that she needs in her life, her husband, her children.

And I was trying to say something large, I mean my characters are on one level, yes, people in a novel but they are so on another level saying something about the larger society. So Silla is symbolic of the kind of thing that makes me so unhappy about American society: this kind of almost blind absorption in the material which makes for a kind of diminishing of life, of feeling. Because the book is really about the loss of love. In the face of her getting and spending this is what is forsaken, what is given up, this is what she loses. The book is also—as I see it—a kind of commentary on American society. So it's on one level about Black women who refuse to be victims, about a Black woman who is defined not by racism solely but by her community and by the people who made her up, the old woman who represents love to her, the old hairdresser, Suggie, the neighbor, who represents sexual love . . . so that you get in Selina the creation of a complex and intelligent protagonist who is seen in terms of her community. This might be some of the reasons that the book somehow has become a kind of classic, you know the fact that it has been brought out again and it's been selling fairly well, because not only do Black young women see themselves to a great extent in Selina, but she has a kind of larger application, because it's a story of the rites de passage and those stories were only told about young boys.

Q: What did you consider your audience to be like in the fifties, and has it changed since, and how would you explain the fact that your novels were lost to a wider audience after they received critical acclaim on their appearance? Barbara Christian told me that she remembers *Brown Girl, Brownstones* being taught in school, so that young girls read it at a certain time, but

she couldn't tell whether there was a larger audience to it, and she suspected that there was not.

A: When it first came out in 1959 it was very well received critically and there was hope that it would be a commercial success. There was Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* at the time and they had hoped that because that had received great acceptance that maybe there was room for an acceptance of a novel by and about a Black woman. That didn't prove to be the case. The book at that period was read mainly by people who were interested in a well-written book, who had some interest in Black literature. There was certainly Ellison very much on the scene and Baldwin, but because there wasn't that much interest in women's writing it did not have as large an audience as it does now enjoy. And even now it's being mainly read in colleges, new women's studies programs, Black studies and working class women novel courses—that kind of thing. It's having a much larger audience now than it did when it first came out.

I think there are some other reasons for the small audience when it came out. In this country it's not enough to write fine literature or to attempt to—because it's a country too committed to public figures, the writer has to do something else, the writer has to find ways of becoming a public personality, and I'm not very good at that. I have such a hell of a time to get the words on paper, that is such a struggle for me, that then to take on this other thing which is also a major undertaking is something that I've not been terribly good at. One has to find ways of promoting oneself in the hopes of promoting the work and my attitude was, look, I've written the book, I've got an agent and the publicity persons in the publishing house, let them go out and sell it . . . but it doesn't happen that way. So one of the reasons for *Brown Girl, Brownstones* not doing very well that first time around was in part that I didn't understand what the whole literary establishment was all about what it's like in this country. I'm beginning to learn now and even though it doesn't sit very well with me, I do try to attend a conference here or make a talk there, because that's all part of it.

Q: Did you feel you would have had a harder time trying to promote your work as a woman, especially because that scene was very "hero oriented" with Baldwin and Ellison being around?

A: Well, I think that even though there were Baldwin and Ellison there was also Hansbury who was very well known a that period, so that there was room for the Black woman writer, although not as much room as there is now. When Petry's *The Street* came out it was fairly well received and fairly

well read, I think. Gwendolyn Brooks was a Pulitzer Prize poet, you see, so that there were a few Black women writers on the scene who had some popularity, some public acclaim and recognition. It just didn't happen, only with the mid-seventies and eighties, that Black women have come on the scene. They had been there, certainly in the Renaissance, e.g. Hurston and Nella Larsen, these were writers who were being published and who were fairly well known certainly in the reading portion of the Black community and to a limited degree in the white community.

Q: But both died in rather obscure circumstances?

A: That's true.

Q: And they had to be dug out again by women writers like Walker in the eighties?

A: Yes, America is such a crazy scene artistically—there is this whole kind of periods of soaring popularity and then one can easily disappear off the scene.

Q: So you don't think it's a special problem for women writers, this disappearing without anybody taking notice and being forgotten?

A: I think it's both. It's in part the way American society treats its artists, then as a further extension of it is what being Black means in this country. I think there is still a kind of amazement of a part of the larger society that Blacks and especially Black women maybe can write, that they can actually sit down and write a book. This is a definite problem. E.g. when I teach, I'll have my male colleagues say to me that their wives have read my book and they loved it. But they themselves, only very few of them will say that they have read it, because they see it in the domain of women and part of it is their sexist attitude, but part of it also is a sense that a book by a Black woman writer can't be alright serious . . . so let the wife read it.

These kinds of attitudes make it a real uphill battle for the Black woman writer. So that when you see the kind of extraordinary success of say a Toni Morrison, you have to look at that very closely, very carefully, because there is another thing that operates in the literary establishment. She has even talked about it: there is only room for one at a time. She laments the fact, e.g., that as an editor at Random House she has writers like Toni Cade Bambara whom she has not been able to really kind of push. (Bambara is the author of *The Salt Eaters*.) They have all these kinds of tacit agreements in the literary establishment that there is only space for one, maybe with a second edging off. So there is that to contend with, this principle of tokenism.

In the face of all of these impediments what does a writer like myself do, someone who has been writing since the mid-fifties, who has published

three books. I should have published many more, but that's my own problem, I mean I'm a very slow, fussy, meticulous kind of writer . . . you have to understand the society, understand America's attitude towards her artists, her writers, and very quietly but very consistently continue with your work, and try not to take on all of that other stuff, because that can be the suicide. Or you start doing things that will get you the public recognition, you start making compromises. And one of the most rewarding and gratifying things that have been said about me and my work is that there is a kind of basic integrity there. I'm not going to use the kind of themes that are fashionable because they would sell, I'm not going to suggest that Black life is in such disarray, that our unity is so disintegrated that we don't constitute any kind of force in this country. I'm not going to portray Black women as the eternal victims, I'm not going to give the impression that the whole thing that one reads in so much of the literature of rape, of incest, and so on is a pattern in the Black community. Selina, I think, has become a kind of durable and enduring character because she is both ordinary and extraordinary. She is an ordinary young girl finding her way to womanhood, she is extraordinary for me at least because she doesn't go through all of those terrible things that are supposed to happen to Black people, to young Black women. She is not raped by her father, or her stepfather, or her mother's boyfriend, she does not witness physical brutality between her mother and father, she is not, in other words, a social statistic, she is rather my attempt to create life, the life of a young woman on paper. That's one of the ways in which she is kind of special, and it is one of the reasons why succeeding generations of young women Black and White, come to her and find something that says something to them, which is really most gratifying for a writer.

Q: When you talk about your description of the Black community, you certainly are not suggesting that things like rape or incest don't exist?

A: I'm saying that they do exist but that it's not the total story of our community, and I'm saying another thing: it's important to write about that but what happens (because the larger society is always trying to discredit the Black community) is that that view of the community tends to become the only view and my attempt in my work is to present other aspects of our community.

Q: In almost all Black women's novels the female blues singer plays a prominent role or you find the text of blues songs or hints at blues songs. Would you say blues singers or the songs were an inspiration to you?

A: No, I wouldn't say that they were or are. What I would say—the blues songs that I use in *Brown Girl*, *Brownstones*, the little "Romance in the Dark"

e.g., that I use as an epigram. They are important to me, even though they were not a great influence on me, because they are about the texture of the Black community, they are about some of the things that give our community its unique and special quality. James Baldwin said in his early collection of essays: "It is perhaps only in his music that the Black man in this country has been able to tell his story." So that music is a very important artistic expression for Black people in this country, it has been the way we have been able to funnel a lot of our feelings and angers and hopes and dreams, and because that is such an important aspect of our artistic life, songs, blues songs and music figure in my literature, even more so in the book that's coming out in January.

Q: I was talking with Mary Helen Washington about this blues singer phenomenon, because I had the impression that there was a certain difference between the female blues singer and the novelist, the difference being that the singer could be more outspoken about certain internal aspects of the Black community, e.g. sexuality, or male-female relationships in general. Would you agree with that?

A: I think both the blues singer and the writer are dealing with those subjects in their own way. The very art-form of the blues is distillation, is finding a kind of metaphor, the song, to express some of the difficulties, some of the longings, some of the positive things about relations between black men and women—the novelist or the writer in her work is dealing with this in her own way. The blues is a tightness, a distilling. With the novelist you have a chance to expand it, to do it in greater detail, e.g. the whole trouble of relations between mother and father in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* comes out of some of the pressures that impinge upon them from the society, the mother's overwhelming ambition and the whole adjusting to a new society. A song would do it in a line or two, whereas I devoted a whole novel to it.

Q: Do you think the difference might also be in a different kind of relation between artist and audience which is much more direct for a singer who sings in clubs?

A: I don't know if that's effective. I think that the demands of the form, of the particular artistic expression as such has these requirements and that in essence they are both addressing the same thing, coming up with the same reactions and feelings, but doing it in a different kind of artistic expression. I like to use lines from songs because they reinforce the material, they give it a kind of cultural authenticity.

Q: Did you know any other Black women writers at the time you wrote your novel?

A: No, not really. Even though at that time, when I started writing *Brown Girl, Brownstones* I had this terrible job working for a magazine, and just out of desperation I started writing this novel, and as I got into it I realized what an awesome undertaking it is to create life on paper, which is what artists like myself are all about. I just had the need to be with other people who were doing some things so awesome and so terrifying. And so I looked around for the longest time for a group and finally came across an organization called the Harlem Writers' Guild, a group of Black writers who met and read their work and discussed matters of craft. I don't know how much I got out of it in terms of real solid help for my own work, but just the kind of support from being with people who were attempting the same thing was at that point in my development very important.

Q: That would have been my next question. I wanted to know about this specifically in the sense of: do you feel you got support as a woman writing about another woman, because you said you felt like doing something that had not been done before. Did they realize it and how did they react?

A: No, I don't think they saw it so much as a woman writing about women, but rather they saw it as Black writers trying to get a hearing, they saw it as Black writers, male and female, supporting each other so that within the Harlem Writers' Guild there wasn't, at least I didn't sense it then, this whole kind of stated or unstated war between the sexes, but rather we were all so eager just as Black writers to get a hearing.

Q: What did this group do? I read you got politically involved during the Civil Rights Movement.

A: Yes, we were involved, not only this group, but I was member of a group called The Association of Artists for Freedom with people like Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis and Lorraine Hansberry and James Baldwin. I was part of the whole ferment of that period. And for me it was something that I came to in a very natural way because, as I said, there was always this talk of politics when I was growing up so that I had the sense when I started writing that it wasn't enough to try to get the story of my community told but that it also had to have this larger meaning. And that's why when you read *The Chosen Place*, you'll see a very sharp political direction which that book takes.

Q: How do you recall the fifties in terms of possibilities for Black women? The reason I'm asking this question is, I went through the Afro-American Women's Journal at Howard, which came out from 1940 to 1946 (nobody knows what happened to it, unfortunately). The main goal of this magazine was to promote consciousness among Black women to find jobs in the defense plants and to become professional, and then suddenly you get this

rupture in 1945, after the war. You sense this big disappointment because the jobs were given back to men and there was a backlash for black women. How do you remember this time?

A: Let's see if I can. As I recall that time, and I'm really seeing it in terms of the reality I knew growing up in Brooklyn, there was an expectation on the part of young women like myself who were from lower middle class families which might even be from poverty line families, but families with upward mobile aspirations—there was the feeling (and I think this has to do with the fact that it was an African West Indian community largely) that you went on to college and that even though your choices weren't very great, that you became a social worker or an English teacher—that was all that was for you, but you did try to go on to one of the free city colleges. There was an expectation that young women would do something with themselves, but, of course, there was the expectation that one married, no matter what you did, you married. So that personally I have the sense that it was a period when young Black women were encouraged to do something more with their lives, while at the same time the old demands were being made upon them, demands of marriage and so on, very strongly in the fifties.

Q: Do you think it affected Black women as strongly as it did white women, I mean all these things Friedan is talking about in her book? Black women had to work all the time so they just couldn't stay at home and be nice, like white suburban women could.

A: Well, you have to understand one thing about American society: that it really is comprised of several cultures and that even though there are points of convergence sometimes, Black people in this country really do constitute a nation apart. So that what goes on in the larger culture sometimes really doesn't apply. I think that the whole business of the feminist movement in many instances doesn't apply to Black women, to the Black community, because Black women have always had another kind of experience, and another kind of life. First of all they always worked, there was none of this busi-ness of sitting around and being taken care of by some man. So the whole question on the part of the feminist movement to get the women out of the home is not true for the Black women except when it has to do with the fact that the Black women has been out there working, but in the most menial jobs. And, let's face it, the white woman has been the oppressor, because she has been the one that Black women had to go to work in their kitchens. There are divergencies, what Friedan is saying in large measure doesn't apply to Black women.

Q: Would you say that the new Black feminism which has emerged in the

last years among the mostly intellectual Black women is due to the fact that it deals more with themes like pornography or sexual violence or sexism on a more psychological level than on topics like equal work and topics Freidan dealt with in the fifties?

A: No, I wouldn't say that. I think that the Black feminists are concerned about adequate salary, better working conditions for women, and that their concern about that is to my mind as strong as their concern about the kinds of abuses women had to very quietly accept for so long. I would suspect that what has been given more play in the press (which is not controlled by us) are the more sensational aspects of the movement, whereas the concern inside the movement for issues which have to do with the economy is just as great.

Q: Can you recall having had discussions with other women about things like the blatant sexism of, say, *JET* magazine, e.g. pictures of naked women on its cover or—seldom enough—of babies. And they had always light-skinned, very soft-haired women, pale beauties.

A: Yes, I recall anger and frustration, because I was very intimately caught up in all of this because, I told you, that I worked for a magazine, a counter-part of *Ebony*. I served as food and fashion editor, and the kind of outrage that I would experience each time I got around to my fashion stories and the models came in to be interviewed and my editor, who had the final saying, when I would present him with the photographs of the women that I wanted to use as models—he would make sure that he picked out those that were what you would call the Lena Horne type, and that's why I didn't last very long on the magazine.

There was this kind of ugliness within the Black community, this non-acceptance of ourselves, this looking towards those within our community who were closest to white in appearance. And, of course, this is one of the reasons the sixties were so important, that some of the psychological damage was confronted and an effort made to redress it.

One of the reasons I wanted to write the story of a Selina Boyce was to give an answer to the prevailing image, to say that she was not a topsy, she was not any of the characters which you found in *Gone with the Wind*, or any of the other stereotypes. These had all to do with white America's hang-ups. I wanted Selina to be a departure from all of that, this is why *Maud Martha* is important, because she is a dark woman as is Selina—you get away from this whole Nella Larsen theme, you get to a type of Black woman who truthfully reflects the reality of most Black women.