

“Speak Truth to the People”: Children’s Literature and Mari Evans’ Political Pedagogy
Kristin L. Matthews
Associate Professor of English
Brigham Young University

In perhaps her most anthologized poem, Mari Evans commands, “Speak truth to the people,” an injunction that resonated with the aims of the Black Arts Movement and larger freedom struggle. For Evans—poet, critic, educator, anthologist, editor, television host, and activist—some of the most important “people” were black children. In my 2013 interview with her, Evans stressed that children “are valuable and they get bashed around and I care. I had a wonderful childhood and wish all had that love.” She continued that children need “different kinds of love” because each is his or her own person, and this type of love requires “a lot of work. A lot of thought. A lot of empathy. A lot of patience.” Thus, my paper will discuss how such work, thought, empathy, and patience undergird Evans’s child advocacy and children’s literature. Always the teacher, Evans used her children’s books to teach black children that they are valuable and valued for who they are and from whence they’ve come. Both the subject matter and the accompanying images in books like *Singing Black* (1978) celebrate the particularity and diversity of black culture, speaking truth to children about their own experience and the varied experiences of blackness. At the same time that these books “speak truth” to children, Evans’s children’s literature also models a type of parenting similar to that she experienced and wanted for all. Her stories and poems depict parents engaged in their children’s lives, as well as in their local communities and the struggle for black nationhood. Paratextual material like that prefacing and following *I Look at ME!* (1974) takes such modeling a step further as Evans walks parents through how they might teach their children to read, advocating specific reading practices as well as patience and praise. Thus, Evans strives to foster literacy and healthy familial relationships, and ideally, by extension, a strong black community. In many ways, Evans’s children’s literature fits the aims of the Black Arts Movement as it offers up a “corrective” to black readers’ ways of seeing their own blackness, their cultural creations, and their community, teaching both children and adults to value the individual ways in which blackness manifests itself. At the same time, this work evidences her particular commitment to creating strong black individuals—an emphasis sometimes at odds with black nationalism’s communal ideology. In sum, I will demonstrate that Mari Evans’s children’s literature is a key component of her efforts to bring about black liberation, personhood, and nationhood.