

## Mari Evans: Cultural Historian and Activist for Black Children and Young Adults

In the 1976 theatric production of Mari Evans' *I am a Black Woman*, profound words are given to a seventeen-year-old black female character who proffers to an older black woman, "I have/Never been contained/Except I/Made/The prison, nor/Known a chain/Except those forged/By me/O I am slave/And I am master/Am at once/Both bound/And free." This moment in the performance registers in two ways: 1) it speaks to black young adults having a more agential experience than older Black Americans, and 2) it speaks to the ways a despised experience of systemic oppression, both fatal and interventional in mode as it becomes the basis for an intergenerational dialogue required to prevent more suffering. In this brief talk, I will trace the narrative of Evans' role as a cultural historian that preserves this dynamic.

Box 34 of Evans collection housed at Emory University's Manuscript and Rare Books Library holds the file she promised to return to before her death; in spite of drafted poetic works related to the box's contents, she did not. The box contains the data she collected for the 1971 documentary *Happy Birthday Mrs. Craig!*, a project produced by Richard Kaplan. The work (based on Evans' grueling, cross country trips to Craig's descendants over a period of four months in 1970) captures the narrative of 102-year-old Mrs. Craig—one of the last living black migrants to sojourn to a black Kansas' plains settlement in 1877. For the township's name, the people chose Nicodemus, an etymological signifier for the *people's victory*, which became a contested proclamation throughout much of town's existence.

Careful examination of Evans' copious handwritten notes and suggested set directives, which were the bases of what is visually produced in the end, emphasizes the ethos of Evans' invested interests in telling intergenerational narratives and in preserving healthy bonds between the two generations. This narrative insistence on cultural preservation and intergenerational unity is at work from the moment the film begins. Viewers immediately engage with the materialized legacy that withstood freezing conditions, famine, death, and broken government covenants: Mrs. Craig's palimpsest of resilience and pride is embodied in her seventeen-year-old great granddaughter, Marjorie Owens. As the narrator, Marjorie weaves in concepts exhibiting Black Power Movement ethos that are in dialogue with Mrs. Craig's position on the Reconstruction, Jim Crowism, and oppositional politics against white supremacy.

This filmic dialogue illuminates Evans' role as a cultural preservationist and activist for Black young adults. As I will present, Evans continued this commitment up until the time of her death, as she expressed her support and concern for black youth participating in the Black Lives Matter movement. Any discussion of Mari Evans oeuvre is incomplete if it omits 1) her commitment to black young adults through her activism and YA fiction and 2) the cultural intertextuality that exists between Evans role in the Black Power Movement in the pan African sense as well as the local context (if consideration is given to her Indianapolis based television show *the Black Experience* which ran between 1968 and 1973) and the role current black youth activists play in the Black Lives Matter Movement such as Indianapolis' own Kuyuna Brown (the high school senior who initiated a successful Black Lives Matter protest movement close to the grounds of Evans' Indianapolis home before beginning her freshman year in college).

A discussion of Evans' legacy at the seam of time marking her centennial must include this narrative. In some ways, as I argue, Evans is the Mrs. Craig who posthumously reminds us that the people's victory is still at bay.