



Mari Evans

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Mari Evans's "Blackness: A Definition": New Dimensions

by Dana A. Williams

I remember the first time I met Mari Evans. It was on paper. The text? "I Am a Black Woman," of course. Easily her most anthologized work, "I Am a Black Woman" is, in many ways, the (un)official poetic voice of contemporary black womanhood. Its final stanza—

I
am a black woman
tall as a cypress
strong
beyond all definition still
defying place
and time
and circumstance
 assailed
 impervious
 indestructible

Look
 on me and be
renewed (lines 21-34)

announces the power of black womanhood and reminds readers of the black woman's potential to incite rejuvenation and to inspire hope to those she encounters. Even in all its grandeur, however, "I Am a Black Woman" represents, at best, merely a fraction of the fullness of the poet, essayist, producer, activist, public intellectual, revolutionary, dramatist, all-around writer and thinker that is Mari Evans. Far more "present" than the once disillusioned, now disappointed "New Negro" speaker who has "arrived" in her poem "Status Symbol," Evans opts for consciousness over prominence and avoids her speaker's fate of adopting assimilative integration as the path to progress only to realize that the coveted prize for such dutifulness is limited to "the / key / to the / White / Locked / JOHN" (lines 29-34). Instead, Evans commits herself and her life's work to clarity and community rather than to delusion and individual gain. It is, perhaps, this commitment to clarity that best characterizes her work, and she beckons all with whom she comes in

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contact through a variety of genre strategies to join her quest for awareness in equally varied arenas—political, aesthetic, artistic, and otherwise.

Born in Toledo, Ohio, in 1923, Mari Evans has built a career around her commitment to the Black community. A fashion design major at the University of Toledo, Evans abandoned one field of aesthetics for another and “drifted into poetry thought by thought” rather than by intention. Her return to academic life was as an instructor of African American literature and as a writer-in-residence at a number of universities, including Indiana University, Purdue, Northwestern, Washington University, Cornell, and the State University of New York at Albany. From 1968-1973, she also worked as a producer, writer, and director for the Indianapolis Channel 4 television program “The Black Experience.” Her community work also includes memberships on the Board of Management of the Fall Creek Parkway YMCA and the Indiana Corrections Code Commission, volunteerism in the public school and library systems in Indianapolis, and a choir directorship among many other activities. Her commitment to the Black community also extends to publication venues. She has consistently published her work at Black-owned presses, a choice that has likely limited exposure of her work to broader audiences. And her shrewd, early essays appear in periodicals that are far from “mainstream”—publications such as *Negro Digest*, *Black World*, *First World*, and *Black Books Bulletin*. This essay explores one of Evans’s publications in particular, “Blackness: A Definition,” which was published in one such venue, the November 1969 issue of *Negro Digest*.

In “Blackness: A Definition,” Evans succinctly articulates her interpretation of Blackness as a political and cultural concept. Nearly 40 years later, Evans’s essay provides an expression of Blackness that is as pregnant today with the possibility of being liberatory as it was when it was first written. Only ten short paragraphs in length, the essay does not have the benefit of exploring the fullness of its four primary dimensions, which I have characterized broadly under terms based on Evans’s concepts: Blackness as it relates to African; Blackness as it relates to Man’s relation to God or the “One Force”; Blackness as it relates to democracy; and Blackness as it relates to a redefinition of the New Negro and the Future. And while Evans does not explore the fullness of these dimensions in “Blackness: A Definition,” she does so meaningfully and consistently in her subsequent writings. Accordingly, I examine selections of Evans’s writing and her corresponding call for clarity about Blackness as a political and cultural concept to highlight their relevance and usefulness in a contemporary world so unclear about Blackness that it often finds itself embracing the words of Gil Scott Heron—Black is so terrible; it’s terrifying. But as Evans reminds us, Blackness, understood and viewed with clarity, is anything but terrifying. It is liberating for all.

Over the years and throughout her published and performed work, this call for clarity and the texts she proffers as ensuing responses presciently enlighten readers about contemporary issues ranging from articulations of

blackness as category and as a source of power to interrogations of America's relation to democracy.¹ The spirit of such critically necessary expressions is captured smartly in two poems from her collection *A Dark and Splendid Mass* (1992). The opening poem is aptly and simply titled "Search." In the poem, fog becomes the metaphor for the lack of clarity, and the determination to negotiate that fog as "Life-mist" assumes the posture of "hands outstretched." The conceit is simple, almost a direct command: search actively for meaning in life. She reminds readers again in "Let Me Tell you How to Meet the Day" that "Life is to be explored"; there is "a Self to be identified / clarified / outlined... / so there is room to breathe / so that the growth / is / Upward" (1-11). With clarity and progress as our indissoluble goals, we are to meet the day standing "before the sunrise / arms outstretched" (12-13). In both poems, the "outstretched" hands and arms complicate the speaker and the reader's relation to the world. It would seem that the outstretched arms connote a stance of receiving exclusively; however, by actively engaging the world (we are, after all, encouraged both to search and to meet the day), we do so prepared to make an offering of our own. We are thus reminded that, at their best, giving and receiving are reciprocal actions. Evans's life work speaks to such reciprocity.

Evans's call for and proclivity toward conscious awareness has not gone unnoticed by critics. Both Robert P. Sedlack, in "Mari Evans: Consciousness and Craft," and David Dorsey, in "The Art of Mari Evans," acknowledge her readiness to use written art forms to "Speak the truth to the people."² Yet both essays, in large part, supplant what Dorsey acknowledges as Evans's explicit commitment to "specific political instruction" and privilege, instead, a New Criticism/Formalist approach to her texts.³

On many levels, this deference should be welcomed. The absence of sufficient criticism that focuses on the artistry of Black Arts Movement writers and on their works at the structural level encourages the misconception that these writers trended toward forsaking art for propaganda. This deference as it relates to Evans's work is particularly tricky, however, in the sense that it curbs

¹ Evans's first published text appears in 1968, and she continues to write today. Her published and performed works include three collections of poetry, one anthology, five juvenile/young adult books, four play productions, one collection of essays, and numerous periodical publications. For a full list (complete with citations) of writings by the author, see Wallace R. Peppers's entry on the author in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

² This line appears in Evans's poem of the same title found in *I Am a Black Woman*.

³ I should note that both essays provide thorough, useful, and significant analyses of Evans's work. So, my observation is in no way a slight to their critical engagements with the texts. Both essays, in fact, contextually engage the socio-political elements of the works they examine. They do so, however, at least in part to conduct a formalist reading and to argue that Evans's concern with the political does not sacrifice the texts' aesthetic value. In short, both essays use context to complicate and access a structural analysis. Interestingly, the short biographical note of Dorsey as critic, which is included at the bottom of the first page of his essay, almost offers a disclaimer for the formalist reading of the texts: Dorsey's "education at Haverford College, the University of Michigan, and Princeton in Latin and Greek literatures is evident in his desire to combine formal with contextual analysis in the criticism of modern Black writing" (Dorsey 170).

if not limits the possibilities of liberation that undergird and inform Evans's writing. At a time when the progress of few has been devastatingly mistaken for progress of the race, a time when statistics suggests African Americans are more impoverished than they were when Martin Luther King, Jr. looked over the mountaintop and saw the promised land forty years ago, a time when "salvation is the issue" more so now than it was when Toni Cade Bambara proclaimed this affirmation years ago,⁴ the clear and cogent articulations Evans constructs of the relation of blackness to America and America's relation to democracy enlighten our search for the most viable approaches not only to meeting the day metaphorically but also to achieving liberation literally.

Blackness: A Definition

Even before Barack Obama's remarkable and carefully measured ascent to power prompted conversations about "authentic" and "essential" blackness and, precariously if not dangerously, about the present moment as a post-race one, critical texts claiming to probe contemporary blackness abounded. Consider, for example, John McWhorter's *Authentically Black: Essays for the Silent Majority* (2003), Shelby Steele's *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, (1990), or Debra J. Dickerson's *The End of Blackness: Returning the Souls of Black Folks to Their Rightful Owners* (2004). Not coincidentally, most of these texts were authored by black neoconservatives who were and who continue to be quite satisfied with keys to the "white locked john," particularly when this *john* becomes a metaphor for patronage at its finest under the guise of fellowships and institutes, not at all unlike the patronage system of the Harlem Renaissance that encouraged writers to exploit the more "exotic" aspects of black life. The mandate has quite obviously changed—the black to be carefully imagined today is race-less rather than ethnically exotic, committed to rugged American individualism rather than to African-inspired ideas of community.⁵

The obvious response to such critical examinations, one might argue, would be the commissioning of alternative texts of blackness that counter these articulations. But anyone even vaguely familiar with the Black Arts and Black Power Movements and their literary and written productions quickly realizes the utter lack of necessity to reinvent that wheel. In short, there is no need for black intellectuals, be they mainstream or radically nationalist, to undertake this task because we remember, even if we do not accept, the varied definitions of blackness that emerged from the preceding movements.

⁴ Toni Cade Bambara, "Salvation is the Issue," in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (New York: Random House, 1984), 41.

⁵ Among the most astute critiques of this trend is Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Betrayal: How Black Intellectuals Have Abandoned the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008) which examines the relation of race and neoconservatism and the rise of post-Civil Rights movement black public intellectualism.

Evans, in one such articulation of blackness, acknowledges the lack of unified acceptance of any such definition even before she begins her statement. The Negro doctor whose story opens her essay does not know if he's "Negro, black, a Tom or super-Tom," and she concedes he "represents the confusion of the numerical majority of Negro America" ("Blackness" 17-18). This confusion notwithstanding, she writes: "Our methodologies may be disparate and our goals varied—but collectively we do know what Black is, and what it exacts" (20). It is foremost "a political/cultural concept." Subsequently, "It affirms an identity that is African in root"; it is "powered by the demands of Man's moral and spiritual nature," thus emphasizing "the indivisibility of Man with the One Force"; it "identifies the oppressor" and "understands that American democracy has been from the beginning a fascist system based on racism"; it considers its past but takes the future as its major consideration, and it envisions "the creation of a New Man and a redirected, reshaped Society supportive of him" ("Blackness" 20-21).

Blackness as African

As Evans notes, blackness "recognizes Man's need for a knowledge of where he has been in order to determine where he must go" ("Blackness" 20). Here, "Man" represents humankind; and a truthful, informed awareness of origins has liberating potential for all humankind. Conversely, the lack of ancestral memory creates limitations. In "I Am Cut Off from My Memory" the speaker mourns the unknown ancestral past slavery denies her. Throughout the poem, she repeats the lines "I feel mute before your pictures" and "they have told me what they know / but they must skip some / For all they know is what they heard." The little she does know comes from tales "that had no end" and from parts (of tales) that were "told in passing." Her ancestors' lives were characterized almost exclusively by interruption. So she must recreate from speculation her past as it relates to her identity:

They say Odugon people all
got big behinds and I
must be Odugon
Say you look like a Fulani
 in the face
Or like Masai or from the East. . . .
An Uncle Morris? Spittin image of them
Blueblack Mollyglascoes ("I Am Cut Off" lines 30-35; 40-41)

While she is reminded that she also has Native American ancestry, her self-image is shaped most identifiably by her African ancestry. Significantly, the poem does not suggest that the lack of ancestral memory dooms the speaker. Instead, it simply asserts what is—at base, the speaker is fundamentally African, and being cut off from the full memory of that Africanness does not negate

that reality. This predicament of being a diasporic African is a symbol of honor in "The Elders," and the line enjambment Evans employs further highlights the continuity between the past and the present, the African and the African American. The speaker celebrates the elders "With their bad feet / and their gray hair / bony symbols of indomitable will / having triumphed over Goree / endured the Middle Passage / survived cotton and cane / branding iron and bull whip / crossed Deep River into Canaan / strode through the dust bowl and depression / Smiled through smoking Watts and / Newark, smoldering Detroit and / locked old arms with young to sing / surely We Shall Overcome" ("The Elders" lines 28-40). Distinctly African American experiences assume the weight of their characterization, but they are undeniably African at their core.

In "Blackness: A Definition," Evans further acknowledges this diasporic quandary, noting that Blackness understands "that an infusion of European/ Asiatic strains has possibly expanded but certainly not destroyed that basic African identity" (20). "A Lace of Perforations" makes this point as the speaker grapples with the choice between life and death. The lines "We desperately / want to stay but O the bones we loved / transiting plane have left / a lace of perforations / How they wait, a splendid company / but incomplete" allude not only to the speaker's awareness of the continuity between the past and the present, as symbolized by the use of perforation as metaphor, but also to the collective nature of the struggle, as evidenced by the use of the plural pronoun "we" ("A Lace" lines 11-16). "Hands outstretched" yet again, "we" must "feel the way / blindfolded" until our ambivalent and reluctant but stubborn heart "hums of sunlight after struggle" and "sways / to ancient obeah rhythms still / residual / unsuppressed / penultimate survival songs" (lines 17-18; 23; 24-28). The ancient rhythms invoke for its feelers a spirit of endurance; it then generates a new directive: "claim the Right-to-Live / claim fiercely / and stay / To Sing / sing, strong!" (Lines 32-36).

Man and the One Force

The ancient rhythms not only compel their hearers to claim the right to live; as obeah rhythms, they also connote spirituality or religion, thus reminding hearers and readers alike of "Man's moral and spiritual nature." Blackness, Evans reminds us, "emphasizes the indivisibility of Man with the One Force, securing forever the dignity of the individual and his right to freedom by whatever means necessary" ("Blackness" 20). Despite the revolutionary overtones of the phrase "by whatever means necessary," the "means" Evans consistently purports are non-revolutionary, unless, of course, one characterizes the decolonization of the mind (especially the minds of children) as revolutionary. Her children's books are particularly effective in this regard. In *I Look at Me!* (1974), a book she co-authored with Mike Davis, for instance, she offers a note to parents in the book's preface, warning them not to delay their children's learning until they are of school age: "Your two-year old can learn to read most of the words in this book. Try him!" (n. p.). After recommending

tips in pedagogy that are most likely to keep the child interested in reading the book, she writes: "If you keep this up, by the time he goes to school you won't have so much to fear from indifferent, incompetent teachers. . . . you can counteract their potential damage by giving your child his own private, Black Start."⁶ The child's natural proclivity toward learning—learning that affirms his blackness and reinforces his innate right to dignity and freedom—must be cultivated; the mind is the most necessary "means" of all.

Even outside of her children's books, Evans frequently combines parenting and nature as spirit force to affirm further this individual dignity and the right to freedom. This approach allows her to emphasize "the indivisibility of Man with the One Force" without the burden of didacticism or proselytizing. In "Ode To My Sons," the speaker invokes nature imagery while she informs her children that even though she is the vessel from which they came, "the lode filled with imaginings" (line 2) for their futures, her dreams alone cannot sustain them. "Your center is the earth the / cool continuum of mountain stream / the blasting winds" (lines 6-8), she tells them. Her job is to nurture them and to wish them "joy and love and strength / a centering of mind and will" and "a homeward journey" to their cores, "an overflow of peace" and "a quiet soul" once "chaotic winds subside" (lines 13-18). In "A Rock for Sheltering," the parental speaker is a bit more protective: "Child / with guilty darting / eyes / find surcease / in / my love and know / no cause / for subterfuge / nor hide / your troubled face / for / Here I stand: / A rock for sheltering— / Child / take my hand" (lines 1-15). Here, even the mischievous child remains reconciled with the creator. The poem that immediately follows "Ode," however, "Eulogy for a Child Whose Parents Prate of Love," warns of what happens to an unloved child. Again, parenting and nature as necessary sustaining forces are combined. The unloved child's life is "barren. . . . Rife with chlorophyll for / One last melancholy spring" ("Eulogy" lines 5, 7-8). The poem's final lines are poignant: "If some protective sun could just / Embrace him / He would live" (lines 16-18).

The collection's final poem, "Save One Bright Jonquil," seems to suggest that, in the absence of parental nurturing, nature itself will indeed remind the disillusioned of man's intrinsic relation to spirit. Like Jean Toomer's "November Cotton Flower," Evans's jonquil blooms in spite of the inadequacy of its growing conditions; it manages to blossom amid "dank air," "rotted wood," and "dreams that never / dared" (lines 1, 3, 4-5). It offers a singular glimpse of beauty and asserts itself as

⁶ While Evans's characterization of teachers as "indifferent" and "incompetent" may seem harsh, it is in line with her belief that the public school system, "archaic from its beginning and never designed to provide psychological freedom, still effectively inhibits the intellectual aerobics that are imperative for a colonized people if they are to liberate themselves" (*Clarity* 76).

Determinedly
 alive
 and smelling
 outrageously
 of
 Hope (lines 9-13)

Democracy Matters

At least part of that hopefulness is rooted in the belief that affirmations of man's oneness with the One Force has an inherently liberating impulse that can be facilitated largely, if not exclusively, by the decolonization of the mind. Again, children are foregrounded. In "Clarity: More than A Concept," an essay appearing in *Clarity as Concept—A Poet's Perspective* (2006) Evans writes: "Our ultimate salvation, indeed what is redemptive, lies in the children who must be nurtured and guided past the shoals of political amnesia and self-hatred" (*Clarity* 68). They must affirm rather than shun their blackness, blackness that, according to Evans,

understands that American democracy has been from the beginning a fascist system based on racism and that the issue from the beginning, and now, is control. [Blackness] advocates Black control in the degree necessary to serve the best interest of Blacks and with the realization that old governmental systems do not serve the best interest of Blacks. ("Blackness" 20)

"If we are ever to prevail," she continues, "our young must be taught to burrow beneath the layers of . . . deception . . . until they uncover 'the bottom line.' They must be taught to . . . use history, that of others as well as our own . . . as raw material onto which information can be layered and from which a clear view of our present, as well as useful indicators of the future, can be presented" (*Clarity* 68). While she burrows beneath the layers throughout her work, especially in her essays, she articulates and develops her perspective about the African American's relation to America and, correspondingly, about America's relation to democracy most effectively perhaps in "A Virtual Grounding African-Style: Race as Power/Democracy as Paradigm for Colonization," an essay appearing in *Clarity*.

Succinctly stated, the essay convincingly makes the following points. The 1960s saw a surge in above-the-surface level interrogations of America's political system. These interrogations ultimately failed because before any serious ground-level interrogations took root, once-upon-a-time activists were handily given positions in government sponsored organizations, groups, or institutions and thus co-opted by Americanism. Thus failing to engage America in battle in any substantive way, the post-1960s Black Power Movements and their affiliates also failed to learn that the most basic tenet of democracy—

majority rules—can succeed only if identifiable minorities are denied control of themselves. Democracy, then, even as it works diligently to characterize itself otherwise, must suppress and oppress if it is to be effective. If we accept this reality, we can consider democracy “as paradigm for the philosophy, methodology and structure of colonization” (80). Rather than recognize it as such, analyze it accordingly, or reject it outright, we accept the more palatable idea of democracy as a one person-one vote system that gives everyone equal voice. But in a majority-rule system, the minority voice—and the African American is always a minority voice—is rendered largely inconsequential, unequal. The African American response to this reality has not been resistance to a political structure that systematically ignores his voice; rather, his response almost exclusively has been a “rush to Otherness.” Manifestations of Otherness reveal themselves as new categories that vary from bi-racial to inter-racial to post-racial and turn on the crucial acts of labeling and naming. When we chose to label or name ourselves as anything other than black (or some definitively/identifiably black variation), we fail to internalize or to capitalize on “the concept of Race as Privilege, Race as leverage, *Race as a pocket of Power*” (86). All other American ethnic groups do so and to their advantage. Contrarily, Evans writes, African Americans “allow the word ‘American’ . . . to delude us, forgetting that the word is weighted according to how one is viewed in the society, and whether one is valued by the society. . . . ‘American,’ when coupled with ‘black,’ has little if any currency” (87). Absent white support for serious issues concerning the black community, the one person-one vote system of democracy offers no guarantee of social, economic, or political activity that is in the best interest of black communities. I quote her final points at length:

Democracy is a flawed system, one we have heard lauded as the ideal for so long we have come to uncritically accept the concept as true. . . . In this millennium, power must be shared, not hoarded, and we must find a way to do it. . . . Governments have to be flexible, balanced, creative, and visionary in the ways they arrange for diverse groups to share controls. 88

Not coincidentally, Evans’s urging of clarity as the starting point for any plausible solution to the imbalances of power that broadly characterize America is influenced by her adoption of South African Keorapetse Kgositsile’s statement “Clarity is more than a concept; it is a way of life” as the thematic focus of her essay collection *Clarity*. While she does not interrogate the post-apartheid South African government, readers familiar with that system would be imprudent not to recognize Kgositsile’s and others’ life work to birth a new South African Parliament, a government model committed, if only moderately, to building consensus and to ensuring shared power and “equality.” Flexible, balanced, creative, and visionary, the post-apartheid South African Parliament

has adopted a system of proportional representation with its National Assembly seating delegates from 16 different political parties.⁷ To its and its peoples advantage, it has continued to undergo transformations rather than remaining static.

In short, what we can glean from Evans's discussion of American democracy and black people's corresponding relation to it, is that the consequences of adopting democracy without careful analysis and deliberate interrogation are far-reaching, both for the majority and the minority but for the minority especially. The majority creates unjust laws and sacrifices its own integrity to fulfill its mandate of controlling the minority. In "In the Time of the Whirlwind" and in the collection's title essay "Clarity: More than a Concept," Evans offers glaring but no-less excused and ignored examples of majority-controlled propaganda that help control the minority, and she chronicles the history of America's use of legislation to assert this control legally when propaganda alone is insufficient. From the interment of thousands of yellow-skinned "Americans" to the sabotage of black paramilitary-style groups promoting peace and unity among black people in the 1960s and 70s to the recent, repeated declarations of war on brown-skinned peoples of the Middle East, Evans reminds us that we need not invoke the Native American nor the African, need not reflect farther than our own lifetime, to identify executive orders and legislation committed to ensuring the primacy of white America and its concept of democracy.⁸

The New Negro

If the ever-rising tide of anti-American sentiment is any indication of America's eventual compulsion to transform herself by creating new ideals that avoid the inequality intentionally inherent in her old ones "the time of rising," in Evans's words, is now.⁹ And blackness can lead the way. Evans captures this sentiment in her definition of blackness and throughout a poetic canon that exalts it. Blackness, by her characterization, is "innovative. . . . [It] re-thinks forms, systems and methodologies" and seeks to form "a New Man, and a re-directed, re-shaped Society supportive of him" ("Blackness" 21). "There is no better time no / Futuretime" ("The Time Is Now" lines 16-17) for us to be that something for others to believe in:

⁷ Readers will recall that it was Lani Guanier's "radical" writings about and support for proportional representation that precluded then President Bill Clinton from advancing his nomination of her as head of the Civil Rights Commission. Her belief in the government's responsibility to enforce equality seemed undemocratic to some and made her confirmation virtually impossible.

⁸ "In the Time of the Whirlwind" focuses primarily on dubious legislation that emerged during the 1960s in the name of internal security to preclude any attempts of minority populations to empower themselves, while "Clarity: More Than a Concept" considers more recent and subversive approaches to disempowerment. One can easily add the violations of freedoms inherent in the ironically titled Patriot Act which, like its compeers, was passed in the name of national security.

⁹ This line is taken from Evans's poem of the same title in *I Am a Black Woman*.

They need something to believe in
the young
That is only part of the truth
They need a map and a guide
to the interior

If we have the Word let us
Say it

If we have the Word let us
Be it

If we have the Word let us
DO ("Let Us Be That Something" lines 17-27)

For such a mighty exhortation only a mighty response will do:

Who
can be born black
and not
sing
the wonder of it
the joy
the
challenge

Who
can be born
black
and not exult!¹⁰

¹⁰ "Who Can Be Born Black," in *I Am a Black Woman*.

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