

Zone III

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ARIZONA INFORMANT

Martha's Vineyard Finding Black History, Black Joy

I had naively and wrongly assumed that Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts – about an hour's drive from Boston--was a place solely for the rich and famous White folks until I heard "The View" co-host Sunny Hostin talk about the rich Black literary and cultural history on that island which incidentally was the setting of her 2020 New York Times bestselling novel *Summer on the Bluffs*.



DR. NEAL LESTER

Here's a blurb about her novel and its Vineyard setting: Welcome to Oak Bluffs, the most exclusive Black beach community in the country. Known for its gingerbread Victorian-style houses and modern architectural marvels, this picturesque town hugging the sea is a mecca for the crème de la crème of Black society – where Michelle and Barack Obama vacation and Meghan Markle has shopped for a house for her mom. Black people have lived in this pretty strip of the Vineyard since the 1600s and began buying property in the 1800s, making this posh town the embodiment of 'old money' [but with a racial twist].



Hostin also explained that the island has lots of deep and rich Black history that is not well-known. Her comments piqued my interest as a scholar and educator who has taught African-American literature and culture for the past 30-plus years. For me, traveling to Martha's Vineyard was necessary recovery work I was ready to begin.

My first year to the Vineyard in 2022 included a formal Black Heritage tour led by a Black tour guide who knew lots of fun facts and historical data. For instance, Martha never owned a vineyard, a fact that delighted the other tour group travelers – mostly older retirees visiting from other parts of the U.S. My spouse and I first visited the Vineyard as a side trip to

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'Blacker The Berry': MVAFF A Sweet Retreat

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our exploration of Black history in Boston. From the relatively short rental car drive to Cape Cod, we then ferried over to the island and discovered immediately upon arriving what really did look like Fantasy Island, from the 1978 television show. Unlike the many U.S. flags—seemingly appropriated by the MAGA crowd—that decorated almost every other upscale home in Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard had been festooned with Black Lives Matter and Pride flags welcoming all into this seeming utopia. With temperatures in the low 80s and light ocean breezes, this was a place where either time stood still or rushed ahead in the best possible imaginations.

There were no signs of food insecurity, no hugely marked class differentials, no overt racism or bigotry, and no stares from others who don't think we deserve to be there. As we left the two-day island hop back to Boston we learned that the annual African American Film Festival was happening the following week. That was the year that the Obamas—who own a house on the Vineyard—were at the festival along with Viola Davis who was promoting her wonderful *The Woman King* (2022) movie about the all-female Dahomey warriors saving an African kingdom due out that fall.

We vowed to return the following year for the 21st Annual Martha's Vineyard Festival, longing perhaps for some celebrity sightings but mostly to see great new creative work in Black film. I always use Black film in my literature courses and publish on Black film as well.

Our near-end-of-summer return to the Vineyard found us staying in the famous Oak Bluffs section of the island where lots of rich Black history resides. There was indeed a robust Black presence there. Stevie Wonder and other Black artists' music permeating the sidewalks as we moved among a predominantly Black crowd during the ten-day stay. Oak Bluffs was the site of Black success that was not threatened or violated by White backlash like Tulsa, Okla., and Black Wall Street or even by White angst. Folks got along and not in that historically American subservient racial and class hierarchical kind of way. I found myself pinching myself because there was something actually quite surreal about the atmosphere. Clearly, it was a monied place, but it was more. It was about a harmony that could indeed exist when folks got along and gave in to the ties that bind rather than the ties that compete and strangle.

The Festival itself had something for everyone from shorts to features to documentaries. The films begin at 11am daily and end around 10pm nightly with talkbacks with actors, showrunners, producers, whole casts and others that contributed to a film's production.

This was an opportunity to witness Black magic, Black joy, and Black excellence all in one place, the

Martha's Vineyard High School auditorium. The atmosphere in 2023 was filled with multiple nods to the 50th anniversary of hip hop. MC Lyte warmed up the audience with a party to beat all parties before Chuck D came onto the stage to talk about women in hip hop. Both stars mesmerized the mostly Black audience.

Among documentaries about hip hop history and legacy, the *Black Barbie* documentary (now on Netflix) premiered there with a conversation with the writer and director, a young Black woman who talked about hating dolls until she learned that her aunt was one of the three Black women to prompt Mattel to make Black Barbies. Such a documentary was especially important to counter the global hysteria of the then new *Barbie* movie whose publicity was everywhere. We also had a chance to see the snippets of author and activist Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning* documentary with its focus on Black women historians commenting on Black U.S. history.

The big takeaway for me from that session with Kendi beyond the fact that one of the documentary experts—Honoree Jeffries—was a former student in the MFA program when I taught at the University of Alabama many years ago wherein each Black scholar painfully explained their personal "Phillis Wheatley moment" wherein they had to justify themselves creatively and intellectually under the gaze of white and typically male skepticism.

As important as the films themselves were was the nightly porch sitting time with other Black folks visiting the Vineyard and staying in Oak Bluffs. There was a mom and daughter from the southeast and another business guy from DC who talked about coming to the Vineyard often and enjoying the invigorating Black presence. With evening ice cream, conversation, and so much laughter, the ten days were full of community with folks who moved quickly and easily from stranger status to family through these nightly conversations. During one of these porch sittings Georgia Senator Raphael Warnock strolled by, offered pleasantries and a bright smile of recognition. He is shorter than he seems on television. That is neither here nor there! He is in the U.S. Senate doing admirable and necessary justice work.

Our third trip to the Vineyard for the Festival just ended and we are thrilled to have attended once again. This year brought actor and creator Natasha Rothwell (Kelly in Issa Rae's "Insecure") and her new September Hulu comedy drama series "How to Die Alone"; Sheryl Lee Ralph of sitcom "Abbott Elementary" to offer behind-the-scenes glimpses; and AMC's "Fear of the Walking Dead" actor Coleman Domingo who starred in the 2023 Netflix story *Rustin*, about queer Black civil rights icon Bayard Rus-



Me with Civil Rights Attorney Benjamin Crump at Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival during August.

tin who steered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous 1963 March on Washington.

This year, Domingo screened and discussed his new film *Sing Sing* (2024), about drama and the arts allowing incarcerated Black and Brown men to experience vulnerability and humanity despite their caged circumstances. The subjects of the films ranged from a documentary about the Chattanooga Five who successfully sued the KKK, a film that civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump helped produce, and another film about daughters and their incarcerated fathers. A favorite was a documentary about Black mothers and their daughters on topics dealing with navigating puberty, including the onset of menses. This documentary was educational and worked to demystify the taboo about those who bleed monthly. One big myth was challenged: having a period as early as some Black girls are having their periods does not automatically move them to "womanhood" and the many complexities that term signifies.

Both Ralph and actor and vegan food personality Tabitha Brown were central to this documentary. Another audience favorite was civil rights attorney Crump who was cordial and generous with his time, stressing multiple times the reality of the historic move to make VP Kamala Harris the presumptive Democratic Presidential nominee and the brutal death of Sonya Massey whose family he was representing.

This festival is everything for creatives. From A-list celebrities to US

politicians like Corey Booker who introduced *Sing Sing* to actors like Coleman Domingo, Taraji P. Henson, and Lynn Whitfield. A highlight for many was watching the variety of Kamala 2024 t-shirts worn by attendees and one in particular worn by Attorney Crump who graciously agreed to a photo with me and remembered our meeting when he came to Phoenix, Ariz., after Michael Brown's murder by police. Crump excitedly shared the Black-owned website of messageinabottle.com with audience members so that they too could come aboard the fast-moving momentum of the Madam President Kamala Harris train for November's pivotal US Presidential election.

Admittedly, the tickets to the festival are pricey. But there are options for a nine-day, six-day, or single day or even movie-by-movie options. In addition to the many films on far ranging topics, was an auditorium adjacent tent lounge with free-to-the-public facilitated community conversations on timely topics ranging from Black maternal mortality, Black farming, Black veganism, the Black church and LGBTQIA+, banned books, the ongoing AP African American Studies controversy, and reproductive rights under attack. In this lounge space were also lots of collateral giveaways this year from the National Nature Conservatory, National Planned Parenthood, and Simply Fruit as well as free food.

As the finale to this year's visit, my spouse and I ran into two young people of color during our hotel breakfast. In speaking with

the two, my spouse discovered that the partner Jerry Clicquot is an actor who has appeared in episodes of "Law & Order" and in "Wu-Tang: An American Saga" (2019), among other things, and that Jerry was finishing his role in a new play world premiering on the Vineyard. On the play's closing night and our final night on the island, I nabbed the last ticket for the sold-out show about a Black woman centenarian's life on the mostly white inhabited island generally and in Oak Bluffs more specifically. Full of excellent acting, emotional intrigue, and good ole storytelling, the play—*Miss Maybelline's Nocturnal Flights of Fancy* by Spelman College alum and Vineyard resident Kathleen McGhee-Anderson—was a perfect ending to a fulfilling and exhilarating research trip and vacation.

While the play was indeed about Black racial struggles, aging and mental health, Brown youth on the autism spectrum, and everyday racism on the island, it culminated in moments of great Black joy and amplified the infinite possibilities of strong human connections through human vulnerability, and risk-taking as bold manifestations of our individual and shared humanity. Within this still predominantly white space of the Vineyard, co-founders of the Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival Stephanie and Floyd Rance have for 22 years very successfully created a space of Black excellence, Black magic, and Black joy akin to Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston's opening scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1935):

The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths.

For more about the festival, visit mvaaff.com.

Selected Resources:

- "10 Historical Facts about Black History on Martha's Vineyard" (Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce)
- "African Americans on Martha's Vineyard, Then and Now" (2012)
- "The Power of Place: An Overview of Black History on Martha's Vineyard" (2020)
- "How Martha's Vineyard Became a Black Summertime Sanctuary" (2021)
- "Martha's Vineyard: The History of a Black Haven" (2023)

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