

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘The Blacker the Berry,’¹ or Finding Black History and Black Joy on Martha’s Vineyard

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Abstract

I had never heard of Martha’s Vineyard until *The View* co-host Sunny Hostin talked about it on 4 May 2021 as the setting of her novel *Summer on the Bluffs* (2021). Her comments about the rich Black history of Oak Bluffs and the public self-segregated Inkwell Beach piqued my interest and curiosity. Having visited the Vineyard three times now, it is a destination that speaks to Black excellence and independence and a racial co-existence unthreatened by white economic resentment that characterizes so much of US history—“Black Wall Street” (Tulsa, Oklahoma) in May 1921, Rosewood (Florida) in January 1923, and Ocoee (Florida) in November 1920. While still mostly white though politically progressive, the island vibe is both welcoming and idyllic, offering an escape from the proverbial “real world” to those who can afford to travel or live there.

Introduction

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 Sunny Hostin, a co-host on *The View* talk about the rich Black literary and cultural history on that island, the setting of her *New York Times* bestselling debut novel *Summer on the Bluffs* (May 2021). Here’s the *Amazon* book 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 skip of the Vineyard since the 1660s and began buying property in the 1800s, making this posh town the embodiment of “old money” [but with a racial twist].²

Hostin also explained that the island had lots of deep and rich Black history that many Black folks didn’t know either. Her comments piqued my interest as a scholar and educator who teaches African American literature and culture and has done so for the past thirty-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 was an opportunity to do a formal Black Heritage tour led by a Black tour guide who knew lots of fun facts and historical dates. Fun fact: Martha never owned a vineyard, a fact that delighted the other tour group travelers—mostly older African American retirees in their fifties and sixties visiting from other parts of the US. For this first trip, my wife and I flew from Phoenix to Boston and did this Vineyard trip as a side trip to explore Black history in Boston. From the relatively short rental car drive to Cape Cod from Boston, we then ferried to the island and discovered immediately upon arriving what really did look like Fantasy Island, from the 1978 television show that ran for seven seasons. With weather temperatures in

¹African American folk saying, “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice,” that counters intraracist colorism bias that privileges lighter skinned Black folks over darker hued Black folks. See Geneva Smitherman’s *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 61.

²Amazon.com: *Summer on the Bluffs: A Novel* (Summer Beach, 1): <https://share.google/5z3p5WHh4dQU6mPMx>.

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the low 80s (Fahrenheit) and a light ocean breeze, this place where either time stood still or rushed ahead in the best possible ways. There were no signs of food insecurity, no hugely marked class differentials, no overt racism or bigotry, and no stares from white folks who don't think Black folks deserve to be there. That first year, we only heard as we left the two-day island hop back to Boston that the annual African American Film Festival³ was happening the week after we were leaving. We hadn't heard anything about such a festival before planning or taking our trip. That was the year that the Obamas—who own a house on the Vineyard—were at the festival along with EGOT actor Viola Davis who was then promoting her wonderful *The Woman King* (2022) movie due out that fall. We knew then that we wanted to come back to the festival and did just that the subsequent two years following. Unlike the many US flags—appropriated by the January 6th US Capitol insurrectionists (2021)—that decorated almost every other home in upscale Cape Cod when we were lost and trying to make our way to the ferry, Martha's Vineyard had so many Black Lives Matter and Pride Flags welcoming all into this seeming utopia. After hearing more about the rich literary and cultural history of the island from our tour guide, we vowed to return the following year for the 21st Annual Martha's Vineyard Festival itself. And return we did, longing perhaps for some celebrity sightings but mostly to see some great new creative work in Black film. I always engage Black film in my literature courses and publish on Black film as well.

Our second return to the Vineyard found us staying in the famous Oak Bluffs section where rich Black history resides. Black presence was indeed a present there—Stevie Wonder and other US Black artists' music permeated the sidewalks as we decided which restaurants to try during the ten-day stay. Oak Bluffs was the site of Black presence and success that was not threatened or violated by white backlash like Tulsa, Oklahoma and Black Wall Street, or white angst even. Folks got along and not in that subservient racial and class hierarchy kind of US historical way. I found myself pinching myself because there was something actually quite surreal about the atmosphere there. 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, strangle, and destroy.

The Festival itself had something for everyone from shorts to features to documentaries. The films began at 11:00 am daily and ended around 10:00 pm nightly with talkbacks with actors, showrunners, producers, whole casts and others who contribute 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. Chuck D was there, and the audience of about 2500 sang "Happy Birthday" to him. MC Lyte warmed up the audience before Chuck D appeared to set off a party to beat all parties. Then they both came onto the stage to talk about women in hip hop. Both stars mesmerized the mostly Black audience.

In addition to documentaries about hip hop history and legacy, the *Black Barbie* documentary (Netflix)⁴ 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 who prompted Mattel to make Black Barbies. Such a documentary was especially important to counter the global hysteria of the then new *Barbie* movie⁵ whose publicity was everywhere. We also saw the snippets of author and activist Ibram Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning* documentary (Netflix)⁶ with its focus on Black women historians commenting on Black US history. For me, the big takeaway from the Kendi conversation beyond the history facts was that one of the documentary experts—Honoree Jeffries—is a former student in the MFA program when I taught at the University of Alabama many years ago.

As important as the films themselves were, a highlight of the second trip was the nightly evening porch sitting sessions with other Black folks visiting the Vineyard and staying in Oak Bluffs, too. There was a mom and daughter from the southeast US and another business guy from DC who talked about coming to the Vineyard often and enjoying what he called "the thick Black presence." With evening ice cream, conversation and so many laughs, the ten days were full of community with folks who moved quickly and easily from stranger status to distant family through these nightly conversations. One of these porch sittings brought Georgia Senator Ralph Warnock right by our porch. He was pleasant and so much shorter in height that he seems on television. That is neither here nor there!

³See festival details at: <https://www.mvaaff.com/>.

⁴Laguera Davis, Director, *Black Barbie: A Documentary*, Lady & Bird Films (September 2023).

⁵Greta Gerwig, *Barbie*, Sony Pictures (July 2023).

⁶Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning*, One Story Up Productions (2023).

Our third trip back to Martha's Vineyard and the Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival brought actor and creator Natasha Rothwell (Kelly in Issa Rae's *Insecure*) and her then new September Hulu comedy drama series *How to Die Alone*; Sheryl Lee Ralph of sitcom *Abbott Elementary* to the conversation about behind-the-scenes; 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 Rustin who steered Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous 1963 March on Washington. That year, Domingo talked about his new prison film *Sing Sing* (2024)⁷, 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 the 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 crowd favorite was a documentary about Black mothers and their daughters on the subject of getting their first period. 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 into womanhood. Both Sheryl Lee Ralph and actor and vegan food personality Tabitha Brown were central to this documentary. Attorney Benjamin Crump was an audience favorite as he was cordial and generous with his time, stressing multiple times the reality of the historic move then to make US Vice President Kamala Harris the presumptive Democratic Presidential nominee and to remind us of the 2024 brutal death of Sonya Massey⁸ 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* that Friday night to actors like Coleman Domingo, Taraji P. Henson, and Lynn Whitfield, starring in the new films. 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 (Figure 1) and remembered our meeting when he came to Phoenix, AZ 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 then fast-moving momentum of the Madam President Kamala Harris train for November's pivotal US Presidential election (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Dr. Neal A. Lester. (left) with Civil Rights Attorney Benjamin Crump (right) at Martha's Vineyard African American Film Festival (August 2024). Photo courtesy of Neal A. Lester.

⁷Greg Kwedar, *Sing Sing*, Black Bear Pictures (September 2023).

⁸John O'Connor, "Sonya Massey: Former Illinois Deputy Who Killed Sonya Massey Is Sentenced to 20 Years in Prison," PBS News (29 January 2024).



Figure 2. Social media post celebrating 2024 possibility of former Vice President becoming the 47th US President. The t-shirt inspired by Presidential candidate Donald Trump—during the televised debate with Joe Biden—referenced the racially problematic idea of millions of undocumented immigrants taking what he deemed “Black jobs” and “Hispanic Jobs.” The t-shirt and meme asked: “What is a Black job? Becoming the first woman president of the United States of America.”⁹

As for the film festival logistics, the tickets to the festival were pricey, but there were 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 inside the auditorium, outside and adjacent to the auditorium was a large tent lounge where other free-to-the-public facilitated community conversations took place on timely topics ranging from Black maternal mortality, Black farming, Black veganism, the Black church and LGBTQIA+, US banned books, the ongoing Advanced Placement African American Studies controversy, and reproductive rights under attack. Also in this lounge space were several collateral giveaways, that third year from the National Nature Conservatory, National Planned Parenthood, and the not-so-healthy Simply fruit drinks.

As the finale to our third year’s visit, my wife and I ran into two young people of color during our hotel breakfast. In speaking with the two, my wife discovered that the partner Jerry Clicquot is an actor who had appeared in episodes of *Law & Order* and in *Wu-Tang: An American Saga* (2019), among other things. Jerry was finishing his role in a new play world-premiering that past month on the Vineyard. On the play’s closing night and our final night on the island, I managed to nab the very 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 HBCU Spelman College alum 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.

So, yes, there are ways to blend education, travel, and US history seamlessly in exploring and witnessing the Black presence, past and present, on Martha’s Vineyard. Since our last visit, we have heard others asking and expressing interest in visiting the island. Since then, I’ve learned of Black Book Festivals there annually, a “[Black] Womanist at the Inkwell” religious convention during July 2024, and of a Bravo reality show about young Black professionals and entrepreneurs vacationing in Oak Bluffs called *Summer House: Martha’s Vineyard*¹⁰ that premiered on 7 May 2023. Together, these visits to and happenings

⁹“Trump Invokes ‘Black Jobs’ When Speaking about Immigration.” Presidential Debate. CNN. 28 June 2024. https://youtube.com/watch?v=Vc0S2_xR5rs&si=qfSvaxKLCGVYuxGf.

¹⁰Carol Rocamora, “On Martha’s Vineyard the Spirit of August Wilson Lives on,” MVPlayhouse.org (19 July 2024).

on Martha's Vineyard remind me that Black folks are still visible and thriving even when the US political and social world seems to be chiseling away at the rights and livelihoods of fundamental Black existence. Such a presence and visibility register a profoundly uplifting Black joy and Black resilience that poet Lucille Clifton declares in her poem "won't you celebrate with me": "come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed."¹¹

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¹¹Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me," from *Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton (1965-2010)*, Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 2012.