

Arts & Living

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NHA artist-in-residence seeks Cape Verdean ties on Nantucket

Jarita Davis will host Five Corners Gam Thursday

By Hadley St. John
I&M Staff Writer

Speaking to Joseph Hufnagle's social studies class last Tuesday at the Nantucket New School, Jarita Davis said her grandfather's native island of Brava in Cape Verde is even more isolated than Nantucket.

"It took me five days to get from New York to Brava. I took a plane too," she said.

Working as the Nantucket Historical Association's poet-in-residence, for the past two weeks Davis has met with both students and adults to talk about her trip to Cape Verde and her collection of poetry, "There Should be More Water" about the Cape Verde archipelago, the group of islands off the west coast of Africa – and its people.

In pointing out Nantucket's geographic location relative to Brava, Hufnagle took out a map showing the two islands across the Atlantic. "In a way we're kind of looking at each other from across the ocean," he said.

Most students on Nantucket learn about the historic significance of Cape Verde as it relates to the whaling era in the 1700s and 1800s, when Cape Verdeans made up a sizable portion of some whaleboat crews, but Davis said she's equally as interested in the modern-day Cape Verdean-American communities still alive in places like Nantucket, New Bedford, Providence and Fall River.

Some connections are closer than expected.

Davis' great-grandmother Ana Gomes' family is from the island of Brava and, according to Nantucket Historical Association archives, there was a Joseph Gomes who worked at the Nantucket Golf Course in 1915, a possible relative.

Davis said that despite the fact that her family told her there were no living relatives in Brava, she managed to scrounge up a few on her trip. "I unexpectedly found relatives that were still there," she said.

Davis said her one disappointment with her Nantucket trip thus far is she hasn't met anyone from the community with Cape Verdean heritage, something she hopes will be remedied tonight. At 7 p.m. Davis will host a Gam at the African Meeting House at 29 York St. where people from the community can share their family stories in an informal setting.

"I believe these people exist," she said, laughing about her attempts to find Cape Verdean-Americans on Nantucket. "The whaling industry is dead but there are still people coming from Cape Verde," she said.

Davis' curiosity about her personal heritage is what prompted the 30-year-old to visit her family's native country and start what is now a 60-page collection of poems about Cape Verde and its people, part of her dissertation at the University of Louisiana where she received her

Ph.D. in English with a concentration in creative writing last May.

Growing up in an Italian community in North Haven, Conn., Davis said people often asked about her ancestry.

"I have had a lot of personal experiences where people want to know what I am," she said. Although she knew the simple answer to the questions, Davis said her knowledge was lacking. "Part of the reason it bothered me so much is I didn't have a full understanding," she said.

Davis' poetry project was fueled by her desire to know where she came from and the culture she witnessed among her relatives. Watching her grandfather, a merchant mariner in New Bedford cooking pots of soup with fish heads sticking out of them prompted some questions.

"It made sense that this odd, mysterious part of who I am came from this man who was at sea," she said.

Davis said her grandfather often asked her if she was taking Portuguese in school. "He said, 'You're going to need to use it when you go back to the old country,'" she said.

After learning the language upon arriving in the "old country" in 2001, Davis realized the majority of Cape Verdeans spoke Crioulo, or Cape Verdean Creole, and she learned the language in this isolated part of the world.

She was also inspired to write poems about the islands' unique landscape that ranges from flat and dry to tall rocky peaks. "I was walking through clouds at one point. To me, it seemed very dream-like," she said.

Like Davis' grandfather who came to the United States as a young child, most of Cape Verdean-Americans who relocated to New England originally came from the leeward islands of Fogo and Brava, but they were collectively referred to as Bravas.

Like many other immigrant populations who made their home in America, Cape Verdeans weren't always received with open arms. According to a Nantucket Historical Association essay about Cape Verdeans, Harper's New Monthly Magazine printed an unsigned essay entitled "The 'Gees'" by "Moby-Dick" author Herman Melville in which Melville describes for the entertainment of Harper's readers the humiliating treatment of men from Fogo aboard Nantucket and New Bedford whaleships.

Although racism toward Cape Verdeans existed on Nantucket, immigrants succeeded in integrating into the community-and town positions. In 1989 Augusto "Augie" Ramos of Cape Verdean heritage became selectman.

What started as a creative writing project at the University of Louisiana turned into a collection of poetry since Davis said poetry lends itself better to explaining the culture of Cape Verdeans from all over the country. Davis said she took a historic figure like Sweet Daddy Grace from Brava who became a preacher in New Bedford and South Carolina and integrated him in her poetry.

Davis' project has also led her to Cape Verdeans from all over the country. "What's neat about the project now is I'll meet someone in Detroit who will be like, 'I'm Cape Verdean too!'" she said.

NHA poet-in-residence Jarita Davis will host a Gam tonight at the African Meeting House, 29 York Street at 7 p.m. For more information, call Bette Spriggs at (508) 228-9833.

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