

Deal Island Girl*

Bernard Demczuk, Ph.D.

She has skin the color of a cup of French *cafe au lait*. A soft tan color, lighter than a brown paper bag. Satin brown. She has a perfectly pretty face. Easy to look at.

Her skin smooth. Silk like. It shines when she looks at you in the soft gold light behind the bar where an orange and white Coors Light beer sign beams on her face. I can't determine whether her glow is from the sign's light or from her constant exposure to fresh, moist air her skin soaks up living on an island 24/7. She has that rosy-sweet-color of an Irish girl's cheeks saturated by daily doses of foggy fresh air that envelops Ireland. Perhaps it's both.

Her name is A'Chelle Waters. She lives on Deal Island, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. She's the part-time cook in Arby's Dockside Bar and Grill. The bar and grill is also a general store sitting in a docking harbor on the Manokin River that opens into the Chesapeake Bay. A dozen white-weathered watermen workboats bob gently on the picturesque water quieted by Sunday's day-off for rest, church and family gatherings.



Arby's Dockside Bar & Grill and General Store, Deal Island, MD.

A'Chelle has lived on the island her entire life. Population 371. 340 Whites, 22 African Americans, 3 Native Americans and 6 mixed race. She's one of the latter.

Thirteen generations live on the island, many of them having never left. Families stay so close together that intra-family marriages of distant cousins is not uncommon.

A'Chelle is 28 years old. Her light complexion is like a sun tan that White college girls sport when they return to campus from summer break. She could pass as White. On this island, none of that matters.

Her accent offers no trace of an African American vernacular inflection, intonation, slang or dialect. In fact, she has an Old English precision to her speech that defies a linguist's expert ear. She sounds like no Black person I have every heard before. Her measured words are Shakespearean in style. Poetic even. Her accent is a rare voice, soft and as calm as the waters on a breezeless day in the harbor where the bar and grill serve watermen daily.

Even more striking is her hair. Jet black. Very black and very thick but pulled back tight across her head and wrapped in a knot atop her head holding together what looks like a raging rush of full-throttle *nappy* hair trying to get free. There's something about her hair that is sad, yet hopeful. It reminds me of the old Negro Spiritual *This Little Light of Mine* - A'Chelle's hair is brilliant black, astonishingly beautiful but always covered up, cowed and not given the opportunity to show it's natural glory. It's aching to shine, to be big, natural and intimidating to those unfamiliar with natural Black hair. Alas, it stays bundled up. And shy.

On this cold, gray Sunday afternoon in January of 2021, A'Chelle is at the bar and grill cooking. She's a tall, 5'8", well built with strong legs on a hearty torso indicating her capacity to haul a couple hundred pounds of oysters from the depths of the Bay onto her father's workboat. Oysters are best in the cold dredging season of winter. The near freezing temperatures of salt water brine the plump delicacies perfectly for a taste like no other in culinary art. Why else would people engage in such arduous work scrapping the muddy bottoms of the seas to retrieve hard shells of ancient salt-rock other than to covet a unique seductive joy on the tongue?

Deal Island is a watermen's village, but the industry is slowly dying. About 45 boats compete for seafood today, but in 1950, there was over 200. In 1900, 400. Back then there was plenty of oysters and clams for the picking. Today, not so much making them in demand even more.

The town still harbors a watermen industry plying salty waters in the Bay and in hundreds of rivers, tributaries and coves offering an abundance of seafood delicacies. Pulling out fruits of the sea here has been happening for over 300 years. It's first inhabitants were English settlers in the early-18th Century aspiring to independence not just from Great Britain but from any form of restrictions on religious life and social norms. Fiercely independent people live here, proud of their self-reliance.

Even before them, however, the Native American Manokin peoples of the Nanticoke Tribe lived on this land and reaped the benefits of flora, fauna, seafood and waterfowl for over 3000 years. They lived along the islands in nomadic journeys following the flow of deer, muskrat, beaver and geese. Food was aplenty if one understood and followed its natural migration by the seasons.

In the 1600s, before British immigrants arrived, the island was a playground and safe haven for pirates. Originally known as Devil's Island, the hidden coves protected pirating ships along meandering villages cloistered by tall wetland grasses and stiletto straight pine trees. Known as Loblolly Pines, they bend gently back and forth in winds ripping off the Bay across the island.

Up the road across the bridge is Dames Quarter, neatly snuggled among coves and harbors that too sheltered pirates and their ships. It's original name was Damned Quarters where all manner of debauchery satisfied the hedonistic pirates of the mid-17th Century.

The 2018 population of 371 is down 38% from 2000 when it was 571. For sale signs linger on homes for years. Idle crab pots stacked 3-5 high are covered with weeds and Morning Glory vines of blue and pink. The island is dying. Both its land and its people are being worn away by nature and nurture. The land is being subsumed by rising sea levels and harsh waves with each storm more frequent and intense than the year before. Climate change is ravishing the soil and wetlands like a hungry watermen chowing-down on a home-cooked meal of fried rock fish, beaten-biscuits, collard greens, fried potatoes and onions smothered in chicken gravy.

The island's people, too, are subsumed but not only from nature's wrath but from the mysterious lure of life on the other end of the island - civilization - or what masquerades as civilization in the form of seductive ghosts of modernity. A'Chelle has not yet succumbed to the allure but she's thinking about it. Long gone are her high school aspirations when she was a straight-A student. She was the captain of her volleyball team, on the "Deal Debate Team"

and the president of the the French Club. She is fluent. She started studying Spanish in the 8th grade which she mastered quickly since French was not difficult for her. Her counselor said she had her pick of HBCUs but should apply to all the Ivies to see who would give her the most scholarship money.

But now at 28, she has three children and no husband. She lives with her aging mother and father, Agnus and Aristotle Waters. They are 63 and 70 years old, respectively. Her mother was a teacher of social studies at the local high school. Retired, she now subs at local schools a few days a week if the family needs more money. She has time on her hands since their local church has shuttered due to a declining congregation. At one time, she ran the church's kitchen, day-care, remedial education and social services. But only a few African Americans remain on the island and they cannot keep church's the heat on. The church closed its doors in 2002.

Aristotle is still a waterman although his work load has slowed over the years as his body has aged and the seafood catch has slowed too. One good-16-hour day hauling from the sea brings \$2,800.00. Very good work if you have the stamina to do it. Working on the water is labor few men and women can withstand over years of grueling physicality in punishing sea weather. His old hand-worked skipjack of 27 feet is no competition for the larger mechanized boats stretching 55 feet. The new, big boats cobble-up oysters, crabs, clams and fish five-times the speed of Aristotle's hand-dredging techniques practiced for hundreds years. A modern-day workboat costs \$300,000. Independent waterman only make \$30,000 a year.

Aristotle Waters has a poem by Langston Hughes laminated and tacked inside the front of his boat's cabin that reminds him of why these rivers mean so much to Africans in America, *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers... / I've heard the singing of the Mississippi when old Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden at the sunset... / I've known rivers, ancient dusky rivers / My soul has grown deep like the rivers." There is a poetic justice to Aristotle's last name.

The Waters have lived on the island at least since the 1820s, officially. But Mrs. Angus Waters argues longer. Her ancestral tracking has taken her back to written records of the early 1800s but she firmly believes she is rooted in the mid-1700s. The first English Waters acquired "African indenture servants" to work the land growing tobacco, milling forests, harvesting corn, dredging canals and erecting roads that were Indian trails long before Europeans "civilized" the

tidewater region. The Africans worked anywhere from 5-7 years for the Englishmen who purchased them, then were freed and given a sack of corn, a musket and a tract of land to build their future as Africans in America. Their children became African Americans. They were free on an island connected to a world where permanent slavery was *la raison d'être* for the survival of new British Colonies in this land called America.

Agnus Waters insists that her ancestors on Deal Island were never enslaved. She can trace their lineage to enlightened White Methodists who were influenced by evangelists John Wesley and Francis Asbury. While Wesley preached and ordained ministers in England, he sent George Whitefield and Francis Asbury to America as itinerant Englishmen spreading a new gospel of Methodism during the mid-1700s. Wesley consecrated Asbury as the Bishop of the Methodist movement in America. Their gospel denounced slavery as a sin against God's children regardless of their race. Their proselytizing took them on horseback along Indian trails from the Delaware Bay, down into the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia and further into North Carolina. They were disruptors. They preached against the King's Anglican Church that not only engaged in the terror of the Atlantic Slave Trade but refused to acknowledge the soul of the African, thereby, reducing their humanity to mere chattel slavery. With no soul, the enslaved Africans could be stolen, kidnapped, branded, raped, tortured, sold, slaughtered and worked mercilessly as if an animal.

John Wesley Methodism spread by Asbury's preaching to common folk in open-air "camp meetings" was "good news" to poor Whites and Blacks alike. They flocked to a "new method message" of the New Testament. The good news came to be known as "The Great Awakening" where poor men and women regardless of race could communicate directly with God. The King through his Bishops implored the poor to obey the King and their owner for their reward will be in heaven, not on the soil which they work. Methodism turned that upside down.

Methodism spread like wild fires fueled by strong winds across dry fields and deadwood in the outstretching countryside of Somerset County where Deal Island is located. With the spread of Methodism, pockets of free African Americans were formed in small towns, on large plantations and in hidden coves and islands throughout the Shore. The moral suasion of Methodism spurred free persons of color in higher numbers on the Shore than any of the thirteen British Colonies. By the 1790s, Black Waters were tilling and toiling fertile lands, culling curvaceous waterways and building free communities of color and opportunity.



John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church and its ancestors, Deal Island, MD.

The Waters, like other African indentured servants on Deal Island, eked out a living, raised families and built a religious community on this land. Thankful to Methodism and its founder, they built a chapel on the island in 1877 and named it the John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Chapel. The original chapel burned in early 1900s. The current church of late Victorian Gothic Revival design above was built in 1914. The church's steep gable indicates the upward motion into the heavens where men and women aspire to be seated at the Golden Table of their Lord on high. Mrs. Agnus Waters argues her ancestors's folklore says that their former English employers left land and sailing vessels to their former Black indentured servants upon their owners death (1). The rhetoric of the American Revolution helped spread these ideas of freedom and "In God We Trust". The new US Constitution backed up these lofty words.

The Black Methodist Waters were part and parcel of thousands of African Americans on the Eastern Shore that were not enslaved in the 1800s. In 1860, 50% of African Americans on the Eastern Shore were free at the outset of the Civil War. Slavers on the Shore fought for the Confederacy to preserve their *peculiar institution*. Methodism, along with Quakerism and the Nicholites, two other anti-slavery religious orders on the Shore, were driving moral forces

opposed to slavery. The Waters were beneficiaries in the spread of the Great Awakening reaching to the outer skirts of independent islands scattered across the Chesapeake Bay. Agnus, Aristotle, A'Chelle and their extended families of hundreds of Black Waters have been worshipping at John Wesley for well over 150 years. But as large seafood industrialists captured the lion's share of the Bay's bounty, working the water became harder to make a decent living working hours long and arduous. Youth had opportunities to go to college, work elsewhere and join other "civilized" worlds away from the islands to nearby cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, DC. Those youth who went off to college or the military starting in the 1950s, rarely came back to work long hours plying the dangerous waters of the Bay. Hard is hard but watermen work is even harder.

But the Deal Island girl, A'Chelle, never left the island to come back. She had her first child at 17. Her second at 19. Where was she going to go having dropped out of school in the 12th grade with one toddler and another on the way?

A'Chelle's family lives near their church five minutes from Arby's Dockside Bar and Grill. The popular gathering spot has been serving its customers happily for 37 years. The owner, Debby, relishes in the fact that her cafe is the local depository of all things important on the island. The pulse of the island is found in Debby's cafe and the pulse is honorable.

The island is only 3 miles long. A'Chelle needed work and Debby needed help. She took the weekend job as a short-order cook, waitress, dish-washer and cashier at the general store connected to the cafe. During the week, she helps her father haul oysters, clams and crabs into his workboat. Hard work. Harsh weather. Helping hands holding families together. She is living the American dream, albeit, toiling along the way building not only her family but her character. She's the kind of woman I would want in a fox hole with me. Someone I could trust and depend upon. Someone quiet and tough.

A'Chelle has a round face like the rich satin-brown pie crust prepped for a smattering of sweet potato mix ready for the oven. She has large dark eyes and an enchanting smile with bright white teeth sporting a slight gap in the upper front middle. Her pleasant face pulls you into her thinking. Her walk is erect and deliberate moving quickly between tables with ease keeping up with everyone's orders and requests small and large. She takes the order, cooks the food and serves it all in one easy breath. She works with aplomb and offers quick smiles with positive nods juggling numerous tasks. She's quick with banter. Her language, to an outsider, is

different. Slow and soft. Her accent is not southern, not northern, not foreign, not anything heard outside of Deal Island.

A'Chelle's accent finds its roots in island history. Black indenture servants came to Deal Island in the mid-1700s from Liverpool, England. English settlers were granted land in the British colonies by the Crown. They received more land, the more indentured servants of the Irish, Scots, Africans or enslaved Africans brought with them to work the land to produce more tobacco, hence more profits, for the King. When they settled on Deal Island, they settled in for the long haul neither having the means nor the desire to leave the island well into the 20th Century.

Deal Island's natural resources and the Bay's bounty fed well the settlers. A'Chelle's dialect is a hold-over of the Elizabethan English that survived on the island for over 200 years, a creation of its own time and place due to its geographical isolation. Other unique dialects can be heard in Louisiana Cajun Country and in South Carolina's Gullah-Geechee culture where centuries of locals stayed put and cultivated their own linguistic sound. A'Chelle's dialect is called "High Tider" dialect, pronounced "*Hoi Toider*." It has its own cadence, charm and seductive lilt. It has a "rhythmic swing" on the ear. It's highly unfamiliar hearing it for the first time. Unbeknownst to her, she possesses a mysterious air conjuring all manner of intellectual fantasies that drive cultural historians wild with imagination. This author included.

Deal Island is located in Somerset County. The county, too, has its own unique history and culture, especially important to African Americans. It is the poorest county in the state of Maryland with Deal Island being one of the poorest townships in the county with a median household income at \$35,000 (national average is \$60K, Maryland is \$81K). However, counter-intuitively, the poverty rate is only 4%, whereas the national poverty rate is 14% with Maryland is 9%. Deal Island actually has an abundance of food staples due to its natural resources and its cultivation of land, sea, air and the spirit of community. Waterfowl, deer, turtles, muskrats, snakes, chickens, hogs, and all manner of plant-life and vegetables bloom out of some of the richest soil in America. The island's dirt is a well-balanced mix of sand and black loam, a result of millions of years of flooding and the decomposition of trees, plants, animals and fish.

The county boasts of America's first free African American when Anthony "Antonio a Negro" Johnson won his freedom from early slavery in Jamestown, Virginia and settled in Somerset County in the 1640s with his family. He cultivated hundreds of acres of tobacco building a successful homestead. But he and his family mysteriously disappeared in the early 1700s, a

victim of either an Indian raid or racist attacks by slavers. It is, perhaps, one of the first massacres of Blacks that came to define America's poisonous racism and White supremacy for the next three centuries.

The early Eastern Shore of Maryland was not for the faint of heart. To survive, you had to have a strong back, iron will and not afraid to chop wood, haul water and keep your eyes on a prize of survival not guaranteed to anyone. That prize did not come to Anthony Johnson. Somehow, somehow it came to the Black Waters over a 200-year extended ordeal living on Deal Island fearful of Indian attacks, hurricanes, constant flooding, freezing winters, disease carrying mosquitos and poisonous snakes in summer.

50 miles from Deal Island is Berlin, Maryland where the famed African American minister Rev. Charles Albert Tindley was born into slavery in 1851, yet free because his mother was free but his father enslaved. Rev. Tindley is known today as the "Father of Gospel Music" credited with authoring a plethora of great gospel songs and archiving the AME Hymnal, the most comprehensive gospel song collection available.

In the 1780s, Harry "Black Harry" Hosier started accompanying Francis Asbury on itinerant preaching journeys throughout the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia. Hosier was born into slavery in North Carolina but won his freedom after being sold to the Harry Gough plantation in Baltimore. That is where he received his name "Harry." He was selling hosiery when he met Bishop Asbury and quickly became Asbury's aide de camp, carriage driver and assistant preacher. Originally illiterate, Asbury learned that Hosier could memorize all of Asbury's sermons instantly and repeat them verbatim. Today, he would have been known as a *savant*. Harry "Black Harry" Hosier became a valued associate preacher with Asbury preaching to Black people in their vernacular, colorful style and cadence. He established hundreds of Black Methodist churches along the Eastern Sea Board. It is possible that he could have established the John Wesley MEC on Deal Island.

Just 15 miles from Deal Island is the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, a HBCU college within the University of Maryland state-wide campuses. Located in Princess Anne, the college boasts of alumni like professional star running back Emerson Boozer, famed saxophonist Clarence Clemons of Bruce Springsteen's band, the president of Morgan State College, Dr. Earl S. Richardson and the 2019 Maryland Teacher of the Year, Dr. Richard Warren, Jr. The beautiful campus is nestled between the Manokin River and the Manokin Branch River possessing a picturesque pond for philosophical musing.

Other extraordinary African Americans hail from the Eastern Shore such as abolitionists Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. A'Chelle Waters and her family come from this stock of Black excellence and Black genius on the Shore. She carries herself accordingly yet without pretense, arrogance or malice. Her smile sincere. She knows who she is. In the world of athletics, we call her "A Natural." She has that "it", whatever that it is.

But here's the rub, where does she and her family go when the high tide stays high? Climate change is ravishing the island, eating it up like a hungry animal. What happens when the tide will not recede? The island is sinking or to put it another way, the unending tide is rising, non-stop, nano-inch by nano-inch. Ironically, her "High Tider" dialect we cultural historians find so charming may be the phrase that undoes her honorable history, family, ancestors and her future.

Where does she go when the tides do not recede?

Since 1950, the water in, on and around the island has risen 1 foot. By 2040 or sooner, it will rise 2 feet. By 2100 or earlier, three feet and the island is gone to the depths of the mighty Chesapeake Bay swimming with the fishes, traversed by crabs and happily settled by oysters. Water water everywhere but not drinkable anywhere unless you're a fish or drown. Nature always seems to reclaim herself, or as Toni Morrison taught us: "All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was." Deal Island is not flooding, she would suggest, the water is remembering. In West African spirituality, memory of the ancestors is the essence of progress in life's struggles and water is life.

Will A'Chelle stay on the island where 200 years of her ancestors are buried around the John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church? Does she want her children to know the beauty, mystery and the majesty of the island like her ancestors before? In African American spirituality, ancestral worship holds a dignified place of utmost reverence. When African Americans sing, stomp their feet, raise their hands to the sky and shout "hallelujah", they are thanking their ancestors who were the bridge that got them over turbulent waters. When God troubles the waters, God is calling her people to come home, hold on to hope, have faith and bring their families along with them. They know Scripture. They know *their* truth: "If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14). Can Deal Island be healed in these times of rising tides?

The bridge over troubled waters is a frequent theme in gospel music and found in the “good news” Gospel that John Wesley preached over 250 years ago. Wesley’s words were fully embraced by African Americans on the Eastern Shore and Deal Island as a guiding light in cold darkness across icy swamps wading to freedom. They carry-on into dark waters toward freedom yet unknown using the strength of the ancestors as their faithful guiding light. If their ancestors could survive and make it over the troubled waters during the Middle Passage chained into 115 degree heat for two months in the dark bottom of a rat infested, urine and feces strew hellhole, then surely the faith in their ancestors will carry them over the next flow of rough waters.

There are countless gospel songs in the AME Hymnal organized by Rev. Tindley that speak to the power of water, both its liberating metaphors and destructive ones as well. After all, John the Baptist sanctified Jesus in water. Harriet Tubman escaped from the Eastern Shore on water. Frederick Douglass was born on the Choptank River on the Shore. Yes, the water that enslaved was also the water that liberated. Each time an enslaved person ran to freedom, the blood hounds were not far behind. The runaway learned quickly to make his or her dash to the river. Once crossed, the runaway’s scent went down river with the flow confusing the dogs to the escapee’s whereabouts. The great Mississippi bluesman, Robert Johnson, captured the drama with his song “Hellhounds on my trail” -

“I gotta keep on movin’, keep on movin’,
Blues fallin’ down like hail, fallin’ down like hail,
And the days keep on worryin’ me, like hellhounds on my trail.”

The water that brings so much joy, sustenance and life to Deal Island will destroy it sooner than later. A cruel irony in words, speech and existentialism that A’Chelle knows to be true. At only 28, she needs to make a momentous decision for herself, her children and her future.

The John Wesley ME Church in which she grew up that was once her rock in turbulent storms has since folded. Most of its parishioners have abandoned the island before it abandoned them. The church sits alone and lonely subsumed by hot summer humidity eating away at its once proud steeple while torrential summer storms flood into its immaculate sanctuary through holes in the roof. Even the ancestors do not rest in peace and power any more. The grave stones and remains of ancestors are floating upwards into the mosquito invested high water table on church grounds becoming higher each year. Remains are buried on top of the ground on the island because the water table is so high. Some graves stones are already falling into



Grave stones falling into the high water table

the sea level hollowed out by the constant ebb and flow of daily tides.



“The Waters” ancestors - who will say the name?

What to do with the ancestors? How will they survive? Who will be around to call their names? The Waters are alive in memory as long as someone will call out their names. Who will be there

to say the names Waters's ancestors?

Soon those bones will become interred at the bottom of the sea like the three million Africans who never made it to Colonial America thrown over board unceremoniously having died at the bottom of a slave ship? What were their African names?

What will become of the spirits of A'Chelle's ancestors if she and her family leave the island? Who will be there to say thank you to them, to sing to them, to stomp their feet in their honor? Who will appreciate them for helping the Websters cross over the bridge to freedom? Who will be there to sing one more Rev. Charles Albert Tindley tune:

I'm pressing on to higher ground,
New heights I'm gaining everyday,
I'm pressing on the upward way,
New powers I'm gaining everyday,
Still praying as I'm onward bound,
Lord plant my feet on higher ground.

When will A'Chelle leave the island and be "Island Girl" no more, onward and upward planting feet on higher ground?

Bernard Demczuk Ph.D.

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Deal Island, Md.

Arby's Dockside Bar and Grill

*Dedicated to **Stacey Abrams** who today, January 5, 2021, has joined the Pantheon of Black Women Excellence & Genius along with Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Fanny Lou Hamer, Michele Obama and others. A woman of extraordinary intellect and political vision, **Stacey Abrams** is a Spelman, U. of Texas, M.A. and Yale Law grad, author of three mystery novels (under her *nom de plume* - Selena Montgomery) and two scholarly books on public policy and politics. At only 43 years old, she led a ten-year political

empowerment process of turning Georgia, a Deep South state (Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi & Louisiana) from Red to Blue in the 2020 election.

America's moral consciousness has always been led by Black women imbued with a spirit of *redemptive suffering*, that is, "The first shall be last and the last shall be first," accordingly to Scripture. **Stacey Abrams** embodies another Scripture, "If my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them and heal their land." Raised in Mississippi, both of her parents were born in Mississippi becoming Methodist ministers. Now living in Atlanta, Georgia, **Stacey Abrams** is healing the South's hurting lands and bringing hope to its people. Learning from history, we need to be listening to the genius of Black Women.

1. See promotional video: "The John Wesley Methodist Episcopal Church, African American Heritage Preservation Project, 2017 Grant, December 22, 2016" and "John Wesley Community Association, Inc. Facebook page.