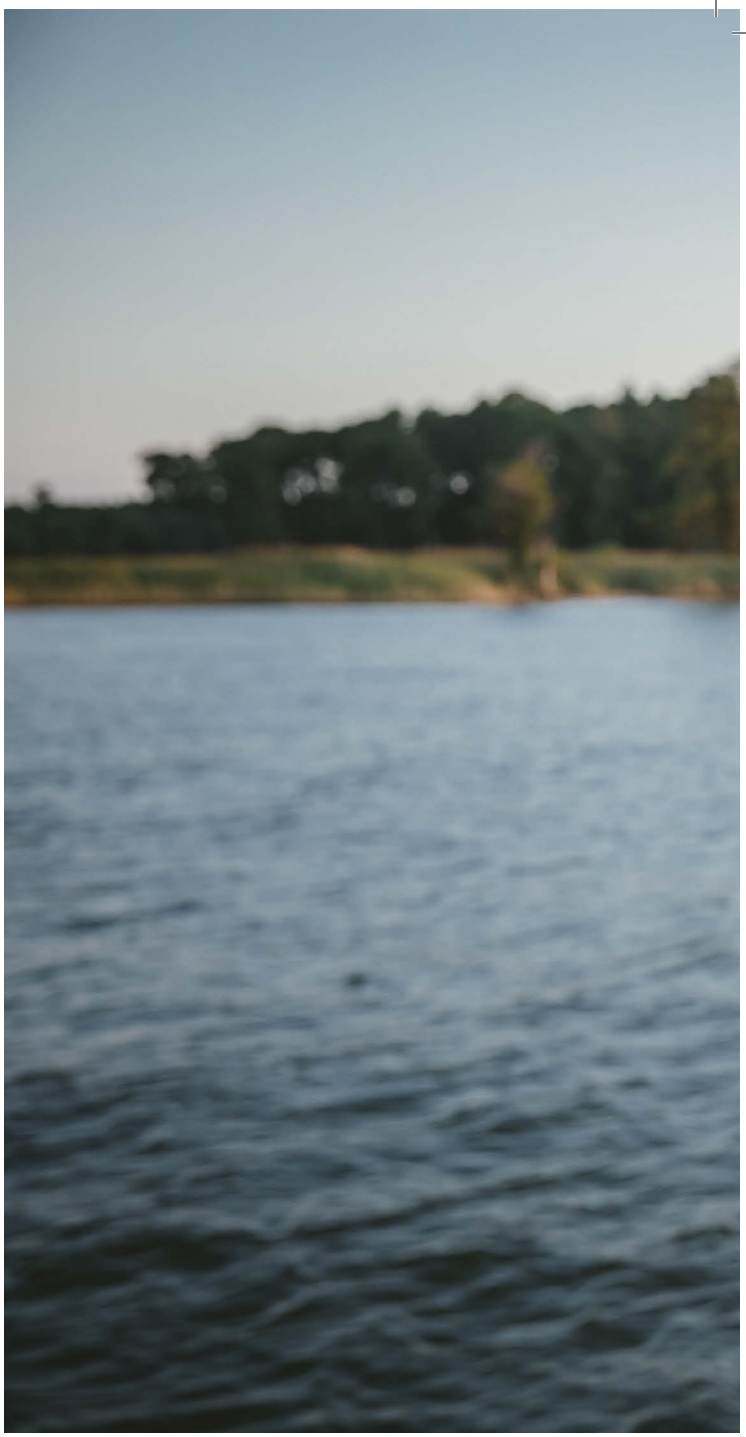
"A SPECK OF PEPPER IN A SEA OF SALT"

An interview with aquaculture activist Imani Black

BY RYAN SHEPARD



Photos by Caroline J. Phillips

ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS, AFTER THE LOCAL preacher finished his sermon and churchgoers said their farewells, Imani Black and her family would drive ten minutes down the road to her grandmother's house on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Their ritual was as predictable as the tides. The children would rush to change out of their Sunday best and sit down at the table for lunch, which usually included fish or crabs. Afterwards, they grabbed their fishing poles and headed to a small bridge that arched over the nearby Chester River, a tributary fed by the mighty Chesapeake Bay.

There, they would lazily cast their poles into the water and watch their lines tense and ease as fish took nibbles of bait. Black and her siblings almost always threw their catch back into the water, an offering of gratitude for the many ways the bay sustained their family. The Blacks had a long history of working in fisheries and on boats.

From a young age, Black felt the undeniable tug of the water that surrounded her coastal community. An internship with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation when she was a teenager cemented her purpose.

Now, more than a decade later, Black is a full-time graduate student studying environmental science and the founder and CEO of the nonprofit organization Minorities in Aquaculture (MIA). The nonprofit aims to educate minority women about aquaculture and to create a more diverse and inclusive aquaculture industry. For her, starting a nonprofit was an effort to find community on the waterways that have long stopped reflecting the Black faces that used to captain them.

Ryan Shepard: Tell me about the Chesapeake Bay. What is it, and what comes out of it?

Imani Black: The Chesapeake is the largest

estuary in the world. It has one of the most unique and rich histories in the world as well. There is a lot of culture and cultural connections that are here on the Chesapeake Bay that really started during slavery. We are known for Harriet Tubman. We are known for Frederick Douglass. Those are our two martyrs. They were born here on the Chesapeake Bay and on the Eastern Shore, and so just having a place that is built off of that—it's unreal.

There's no other place like the Chesapeake Bay. When you come here and you are out on the water and you get to see the bay in its real element, you can really feel the history.

RS: Speaking of history, can you tell me about the history of Black and Brown people working in Chesapeake Bay fisheries?

IB: First and foremost we have to recognize that Indigenous people were here and they cultivated the land before anybody else. They were the first to have shellfish as part of their diet. Then settlers came over and brought their slaves with them. Then slaves became the second demographic that got integrated into fisheries.

When Black people were taken from their homeland and forced to work on the waterways here, that relationship wasn't their choice. They

had to then mend that relationship with the water in order to feed themselves.

[During the early 1800s,] enslaved African Americans were able to have slave rights to go out onto the water. Basically, this meant that if they worked out in the water, they got extra privileges because they had less supervision than they would if they were on the plantation.

That's actually how Frederick Douglass escaped slavery: He dressed as a sailor and used his navigation of the the waterways. The same thing with Harriet Tubman: She used her navigational skills and her knowledge of the tides, the water, and the marshes to help hundreds of slaves escape.

At one point, there were mostly African Americans working out on the waterways. Then the industry started booming, especially during the Industrial Revolution. That's when African Americans got left behind, because not only did they not have the capital to be able to upgrade their boats or their fishing gear to be able to go out farther where the competition was, but banks weren't giving Black people loans.

They had to settle for lower-paying jobs in shucking houses or elsewhere. There was a collective of them that became charter boat captains. But today, there are only ten or eleven living Black captains operating on the Chesapeake Bay, and most of them are over the age of sixty.

RS: Why did you feel the need to create Minorities in Aquaculture?

IB: I was going through a lot of microaggressions and a lot of bigotry, sexism, misogyny, and racism at my last oyster job. Really, I had been dealing with that my entire career, just because I am a woman in aquaculture. I am the first to say that in a lot of those spaces, it didn't matter whether I was Black or white. It only mattered that I was a woman. And there were times when it doubly mattered that I was Black and a woman.

In those times, I never had a Black woman or a woman of color I could text or call and be like, "Oh my God, I can't believe this," or "I was trying to do this, and what do you think?" There was nobody [with whom] I could really digest what was going on, and to have that safe space with.

So I thought, *Well, I'm going to create it. I'm going to bring people together, and we're going to do it together.*

RS: Let's say you accomplish everything you wish for Minorities in Aquaculture. What does success look like for you?

IB: Success would mean that I can look at my phone and call at least ten Black women that are running farms. It would make it even sweeter if they came through MIA and had some connection with the organization, but that is not necessarily a requirement.

Another wish would be for our members to continue to find value in MIA, and that we continue to advocate for them in the best ways that we can. And that we are continuously changing the culture and changing the face of the aquaculture industry worldwide.

Ryan Shepard is an Atlanta-based writer whose work focuses on food and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. She recently earned an MFA in narrative nonfiction from the University of Georgia.

Imani Black, the founder of Minorities in Aquaculture, was the winner of SFA's 2022 John Egerton Prize. She is also pursuing a masters at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science.