

The background features several abstract, organic shapes in shades of purple and blue. A large, irregular shape is on the right side, and a smaller circle is positioned above the main title. The shapes have a gradient effect, transitioning from light blue to deep purple.

The Harlem Renaissance

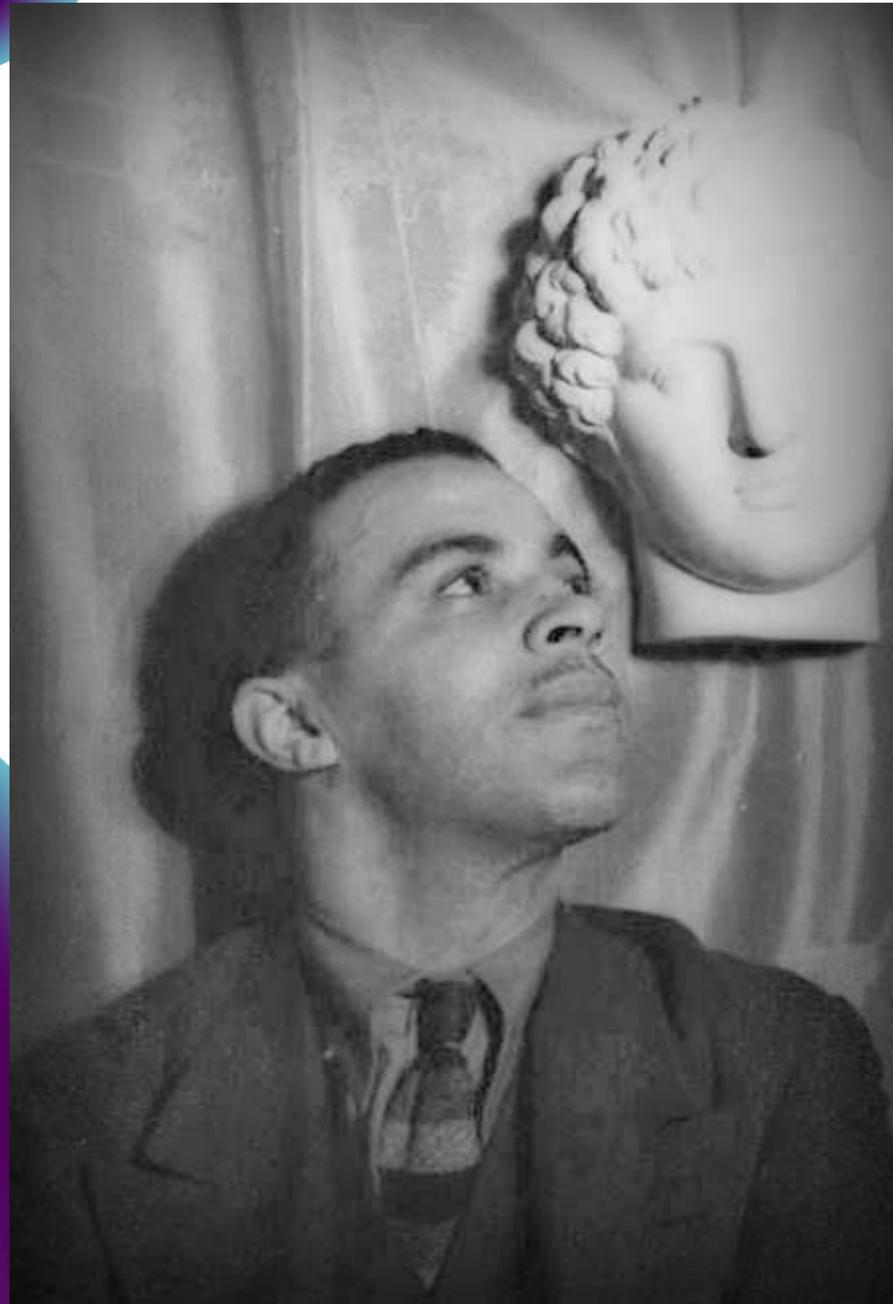
OLLI Spring 1, Week 5

01

Gay Harlem: Ma Rainey, Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes

What is "gay" in Harlem? Is there a "gay culture" in Harlem? How does same-sex love interact with the self-conscious Black identity of Harlem writers?

Richard Bruce Nugent



- Author, activist, and professional ballet dancer, Nugent was among the most well-known writers of the New Negro Movement at the time, but has long since been forgotten for very obvious political and homophobic reasons.
- While he did fraternize with other gay Harlem writers like Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Wallace Thurman, he was the only writer at the time who was open about his attraction to men.
- Nugent spent most of his early life in Washington, D.C. He passed as white as a young man in order to garner higher wages for himself and his grandmother, with whom he lived at the time.
- After moving to Harlem and becoming friends with Thurman, who published a story of Nugent's in *Fire!!* magazine, he would spend the rest of his life in the location.
- His work was fearlessly open about same-sex desire, even among different races. His first story was a modernist stream-of-consciousness account of interracial bisexuality.

Richard Bruce Nugent



"he passed a woman...she was not beautiful...and he was sad because she did not weep that she would never be beautiful...was it Wilde who had said...a cigarette is the most perfect pleasure because it leaves one unsatisfied...the breeze gave to him a perfume stolen from some wandering lady of the evening...it pleased him...why was it that men wouldn't use perfumes. . . they should...each and every one of them liked perfumes...the man who denied that was a liar...or a coward...but if ever he were to voice that thought...express it...he would be misunderstood...a fine feeling that...to be misunderstood...it made him feel tragic and great...but maybe it would be nicer to be understood...but no...no great artist is...then again neither were fools...they were strangely akin these two"

"Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers" Michael L Cobb (2000)

"Poignantly, the critical and literary neglect of one of the most explicitly queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Richard Bruce Nugent, echoes Gates' concern that there is a repetitive desire not to risk mixing the African-American literary tradition with a sustained and systematic discussion of same-sex sexuality. Nugent's virtual absence from the black literary and cultural scene seems significant because he is often credited with being the first African American to write and publish a story with explicit homosexual content. Whether this is true or not, his early crossing into the taboo territory of same-sex sexuality has cast him into the role of race traitor, and, as a consequence, he provides a fruitful place to begin asking more detailed questions about race and queerness in the Harlem Renaissance's literature. Significantly, Nugent becomes a re-occurring and rich icon of the queer in Harlem, and his penchant for insolence, as we shall see, is certainly an issue."

"Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers" Michael L Cobb (2000)

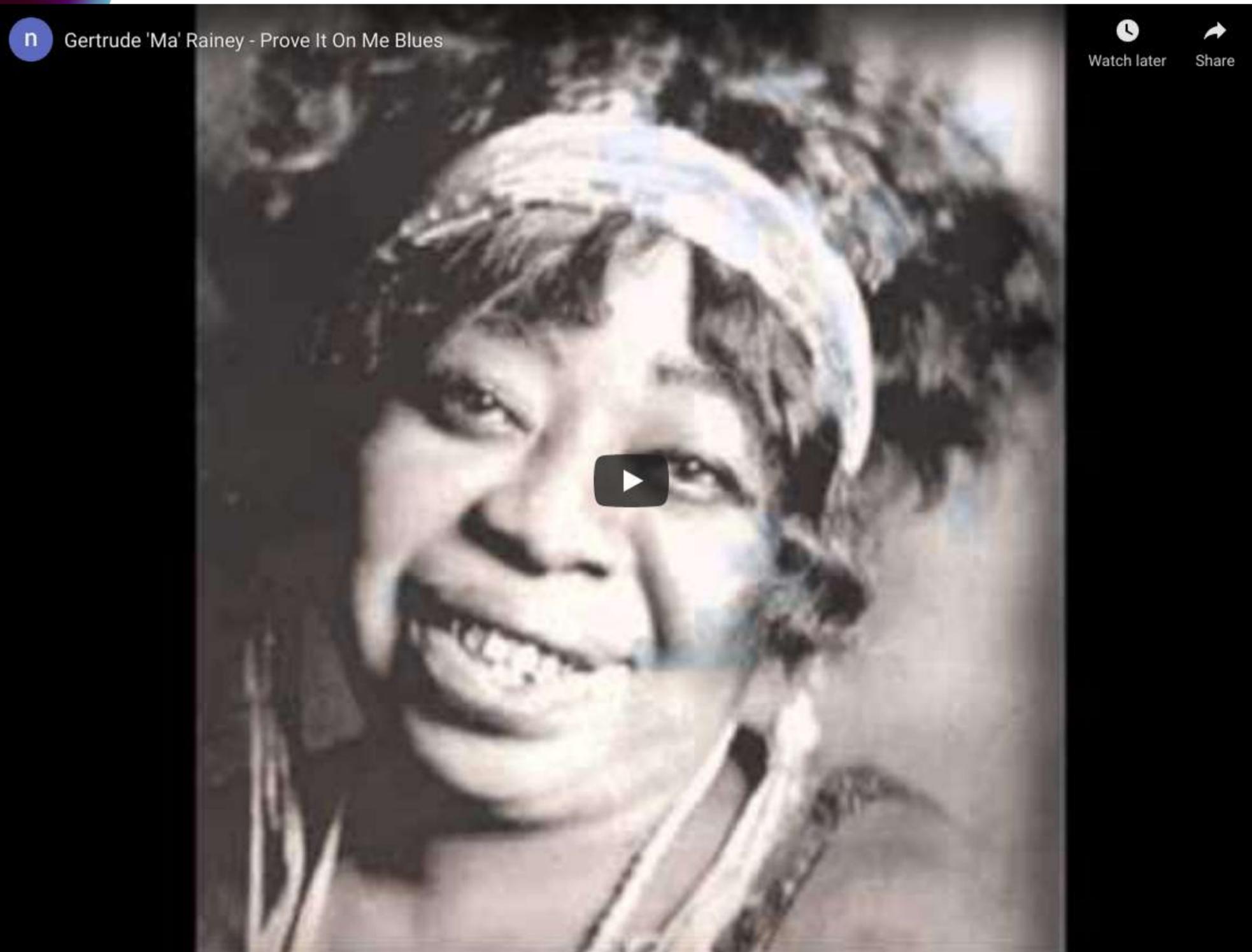
"Countee Cullen, in his *Opportunity* column, 'The Dark Tower,' iterates the journal editors' sentiments when he reviews, 'There seems to have been a wish to shock in this first issue, and though shock-proof ourselves, we imagine that the wish will be well realized among the readers of *Fire*. However, ample extenuation for what some may call a reprehensible story can be found in the beautifully worded, *Smoke, Lilies, and Jade* by Richard Bruce' (25). But it is important to remember that such attempts to shock, via a "reprehensible [but beautiful] story" about queer sexuality, were self-consciously asserted, ushering in an aesthetic rupture that hoped for a new possibility of younger African-American art, the possibility of art that has its origins in a group of younger artists self-baptized as 'the Niggerati' (Hemenway 43). The older figure and exemplar of the dominant traditional aesthetic convention in Harlem, the icon who needed to be broken by the likes of Nugent, was, as we shall see, Alain Locke, whose advisory presence among the editors of *Fire!!* was a noticeable strain on the younger artists. Often, in both the literature of and work on the period, Locke becomes a convenient figure of literary repression and obsession with quasi up-lift projects that stifle the younger artists of *Fire!!*. Zora Neale Hurston, for instance, characterized him as 'a mother hen constantly clucking to keep his flock in line' and as 'a malicious spiteful little snot.'"

Ma Rainey



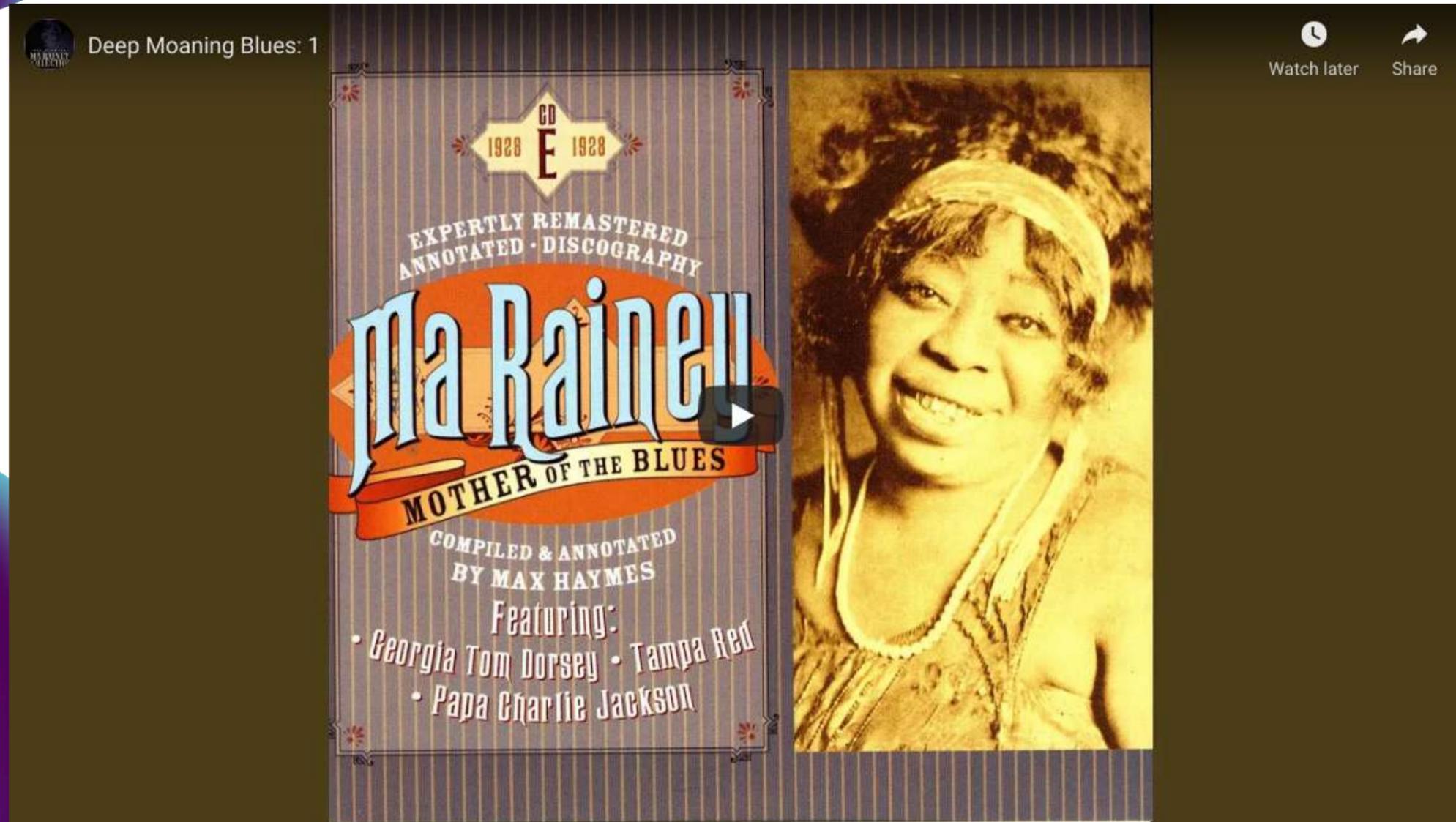
- Known as the "mother of the Blues," Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett in Alabama in 1882.
- After marrying William 'Pa' Rainey, she took the name 'Ma' Rainey as a play on her husband's nickname.
- After hearing a girl perform a sad song about a man leaving a woman, Ma Rainey decided to add the song to her repertoire and claims to have coined the term 'blues' when describing the music she wanted to perform.
- By 1914, she and her band were performing throughout the south. In New Orleans, especially, she spent time performing and working with artists including Louis Armstrong and Joe Oliver.
- It was at this time that Rainey began mentoring Bessie Smith, a young singer who was also attempting to make a career in the blues circuit.
- In 1923, she becomes the second African American woman to have her music recorded and as one of her first records, she sang "Prove It On Me," a ballad that very explicitly reveals her bisexuality. She later recounted that the lyrics were inspired by an incident where she was arrested for having an orgy of women from her chorus in her home.

Ma Rainey, "Prove it On Me"



They said I do it, ain't nobody caught me.
Sure got to prove it on me.
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends.
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no
men.
It's true I wear a collar and tie.
Makes the wind blow all the while

Ma Rainey, "Deep Moaning Blues"



Mmmn, mmmn

Mmmn, mmmn

My bell rang this morning, didn't know which way to go
My bell rang this morning, didn't know which way to go
I had the blues so bad
I sit right down on my floor

I felt like going on the mountain, jumping over in the sea
I felt like going in the mountain, jumping over in the sea
When my Daddy stay out late he don't care a thing for me

Mmmn, mmmn

Mmmn, mmmn

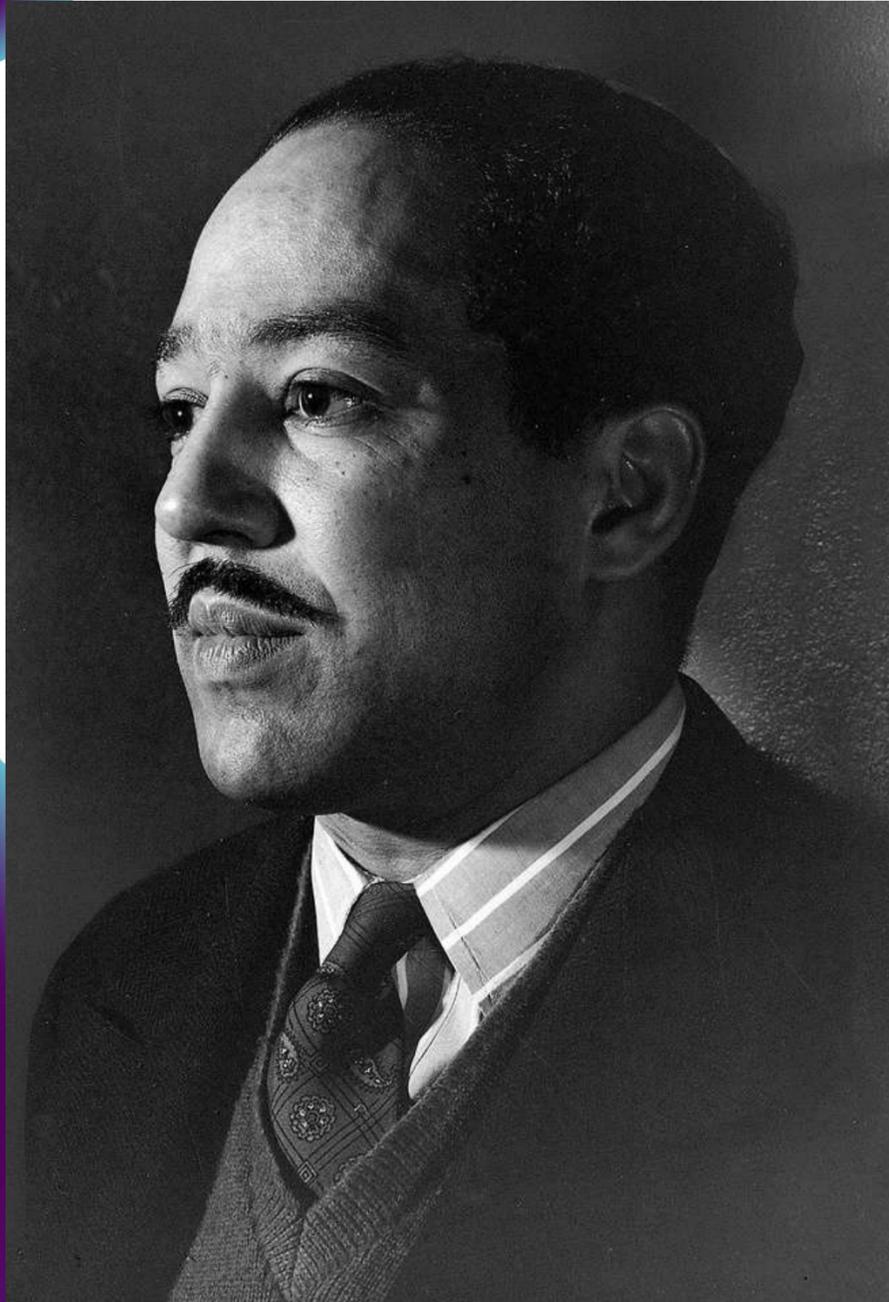
Daddy, daddy, please come home to me
Daddy, daddy, please come home to me
I'm on my way, crazy as I can be

Langston Hughes



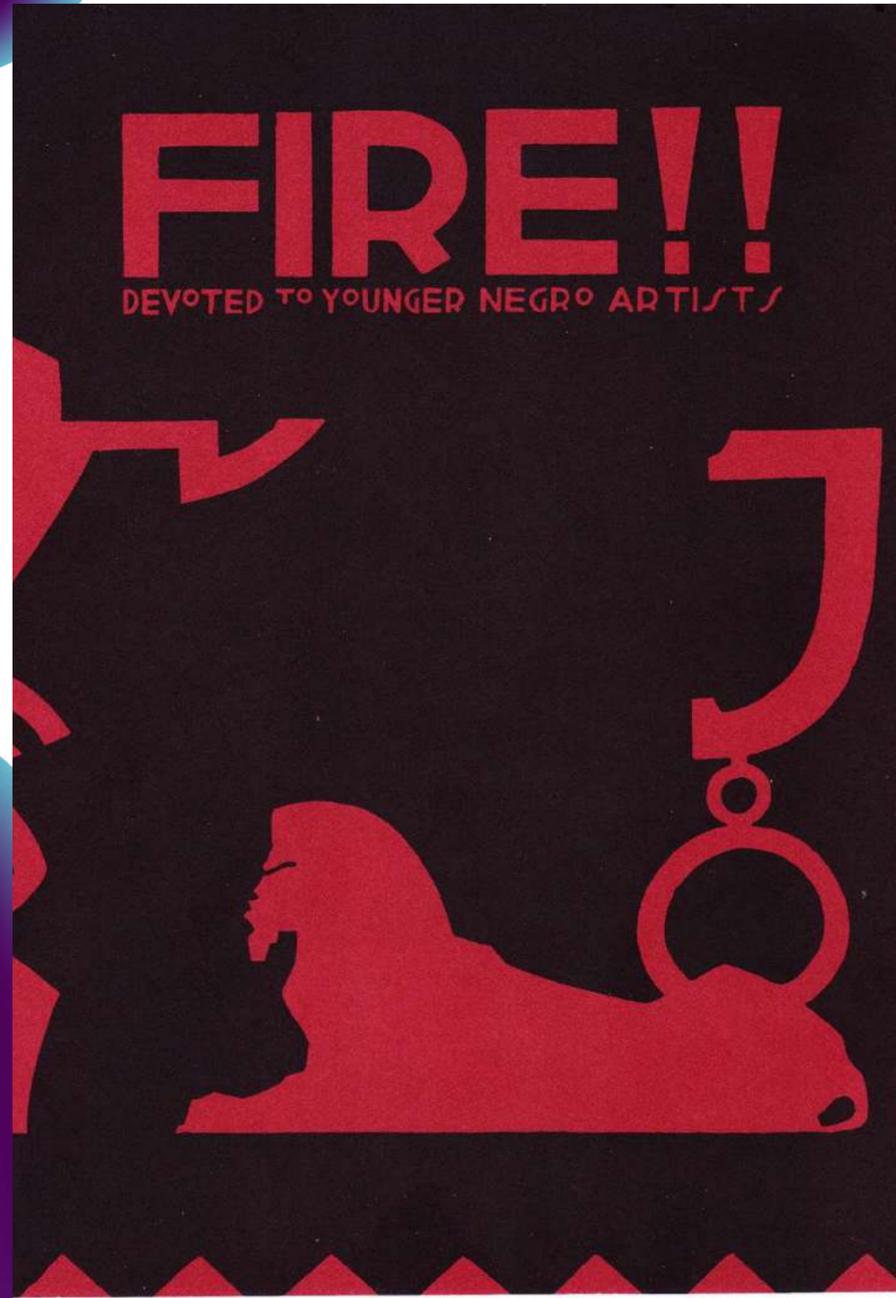
- James Mercer Langston Hughes was born in Missouri but raised mostly in Kansas by his maternal grandmother. His early childhood was spent in many midwestern towns until his parents separated and his father moved to Mexico to avoid the racism of the Jim Crow U.S. and his mother traveled around looking for work, leaving young Langston with his grandmother.
- In middle school, he moved back in with his mother in Illinois and was elected class poet by his fellow students. It was in high school that he came into his own as a writer. He lived at the time in Cleveland with his mother.
- His father agreed to pay for his tuition to Columbia if he studied engineering, but after a year he dropped out because of racial prejudice he experienced from the other students and professors. It was at this point he traveled all around the world, including to Paris, London, Washington D.C., eventually going to Lincoln University in PA (where he studied with Thurgood Marshall) and then settling in Harlem where he would spend the majority of his life as a writer.
- His homosexuality was an open secret, though he often had affairs with women as well. Scholars have read his poetry has coded with his sexuality in similar was that Walt Whitman's poetry is said to be coded with his own homosexuality.

Langston Hughes



- "The younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves." -The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain
- "What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
[...] Or does it explode?" (Dream Deferred, 1951)
- "Degenerates,
some folks say.
But God, Nature,
or somebody
made them that way" (Cafe 3AM, 1951)

Fire!! (1926)



- Founded and published by Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Richard Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, Lewis Grandison Alexander, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes, this magazine was at the forefront of young Black thought at the time.
- It was devoted exclusively to young writers and featured risqué themes including homosexuality, bisexuality, interracial relationships, promiscuity, prostitution, and color prejudice.
- Langston Hughes wrote that the name was intended to symbolize their goal "to burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past ... into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing" (*The Big Sea*)
- After its first issue was published, however, the magazine's headquarters burned down and they never published another issue.

The background features a dark purple gradient with several organic, glowing shapes in shades of blue and purple. A small, dark sphere is positioned in the upper left quadrant.

Next Week....

**Négritude, Marcus
Garveyism, and the
Global Echoes of
the Renaissance**