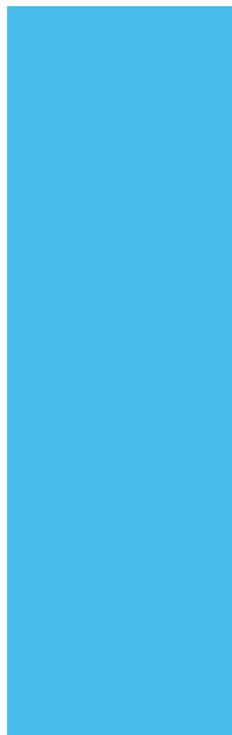




BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY

DRAMATURGY (FOR ACTORS)

Dr. Kristyl D. Tift
Vanderbilt University
February 22, 2022



THE GREAT DEPRESSION (1929-1939)

- Began with the Stock Market Crash of 1929
- Resulting:
 - Hunger
 - Homelessness
 - Unemployment



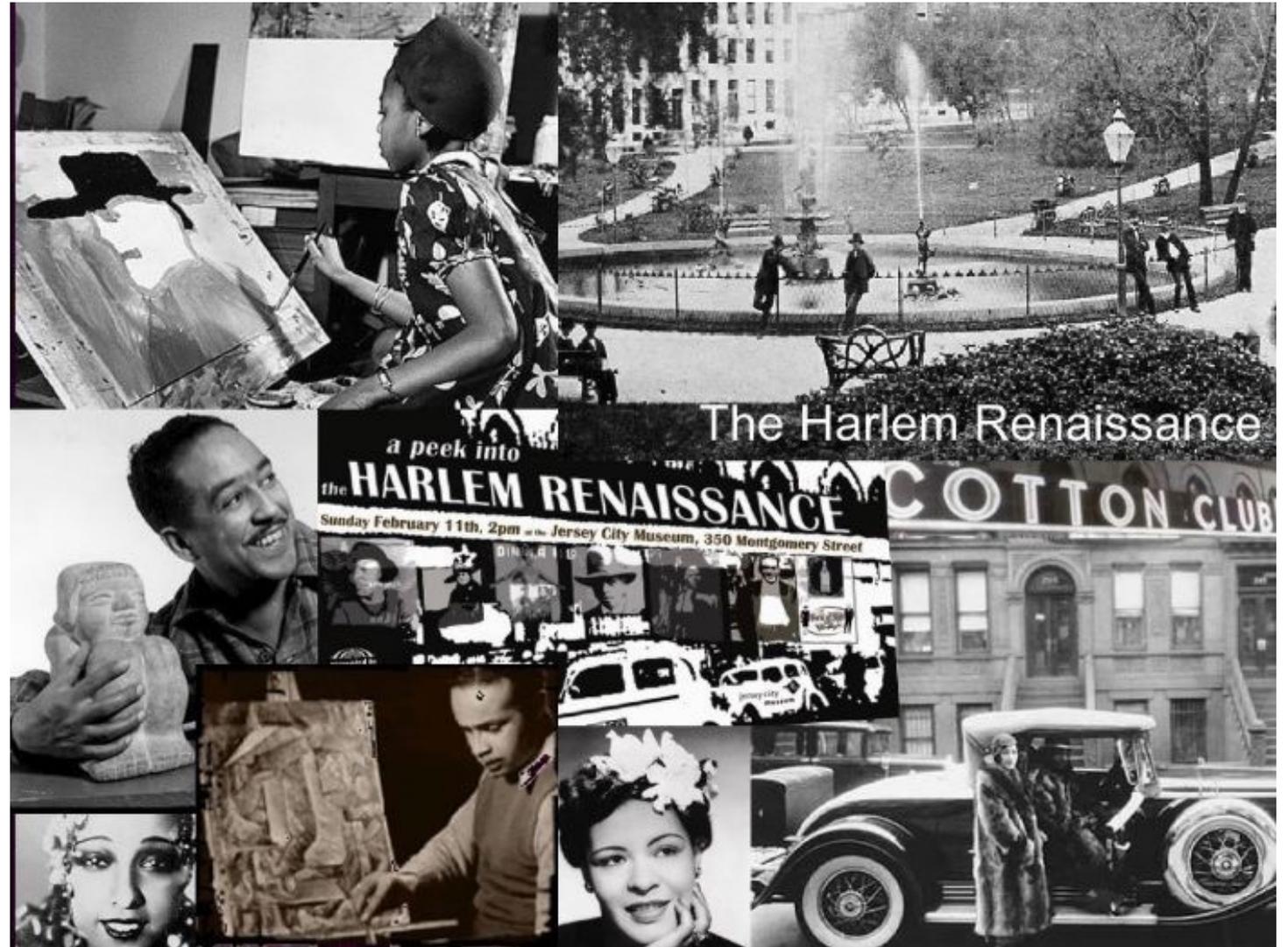
HARLEM RENAISSANCE (1910S-1930S)

“Considered a Golden Age in African American Culture, manifesting in literature, music, stage performance, and art” (History.com, 1).

- Freedom in the air despite conservatism of the time (such as prohibition)
 - Artistic
 - Personal
 - Social
 - Political

• <https://youtu.be/h1uq8lAl30I> - Queer Harlem Renaissance

• <https://youtu.be/0HY8d4ABHQA> - Political Thought during the Renaissance



HARLEM NIGHT LIFE

THE COTTON CLUB (1923 -1940)

○ <https://youtu.be/BbUw7Ngphl4>

- BLACK PATRONS COULD NOT ENTER (UNTIL 1935), THEY COULD ONLY PERFORM
- DUKE ELLINGTON, CAB CALLOWAY THE NICHOLAS BROTHERS, ETHEL WATERS, BESSIE SMITH, THE COTTON CLUB DANCERS, ET AL.
 - Scene from The Cotton Club
 - <https://youtu.be/XHGyMsemJNA>

THE SAVOY BALLROOM (1927-1933)

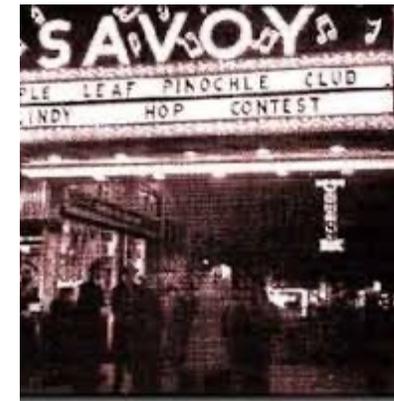
- Integrated dancehall
- Jazz music

THE LAFAYETTE THEATRE (1912-1951)

the entertainers and most of staff were African-American. Dancers at the Cotton Club were held to strict standards; they had to be at least 5'6" tall, light-skinned with only a slight tan, and under twenty-one years of age.



Shows at the Cotton Club were musical reviews that featured dancers, singers, comedians, and variety acts, as well as a house band. Duke Ellington led that band from 1927 to 1930, and sporadically throughout the next eight years. The Cotton Club and Ellington's Orchestra gained national notoriety through weekly broadcasts on radio station WHN some of which were recorded and released on albums. In this clip Duke Ellington and his





JOSEPHINE BAKER (1906-1975)

Born in St. Louis, Missouri to a poor working-class mother

- Began performing as a girl (dance, comedy, song) on “The Chitlin’ Circuit”
- Took France by storm with her “Banana Dance”
- Awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Rosette de la Résistance for her service in the French Army during World War II
- “But, far from Harlem, African-American expatriate extraordinaire, Josephine Baker, sips champagne in her dressing room at The *Folies Bergère* and laughs like a free woman” (Blues, 4).

LANGSTON HUGHES

(1901-1967)

- **Writer**
 - Known for his jazz poetry during the Renaissance
 - *The Weary Blues* (1926)
 - *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)
- **Born James Mercer Langston Hughes in Joplin, Missouri**
 - Raised by his grandmother until age 13
 - Moved to Lincoln, MO to live with his mother
 - Studied for a year at Columbia University
 - Began writing for *The Crisis*
- He presumed to have been gay, but more covert than, say, Bruce Nugent, who was openly gay during the 20s and 30s

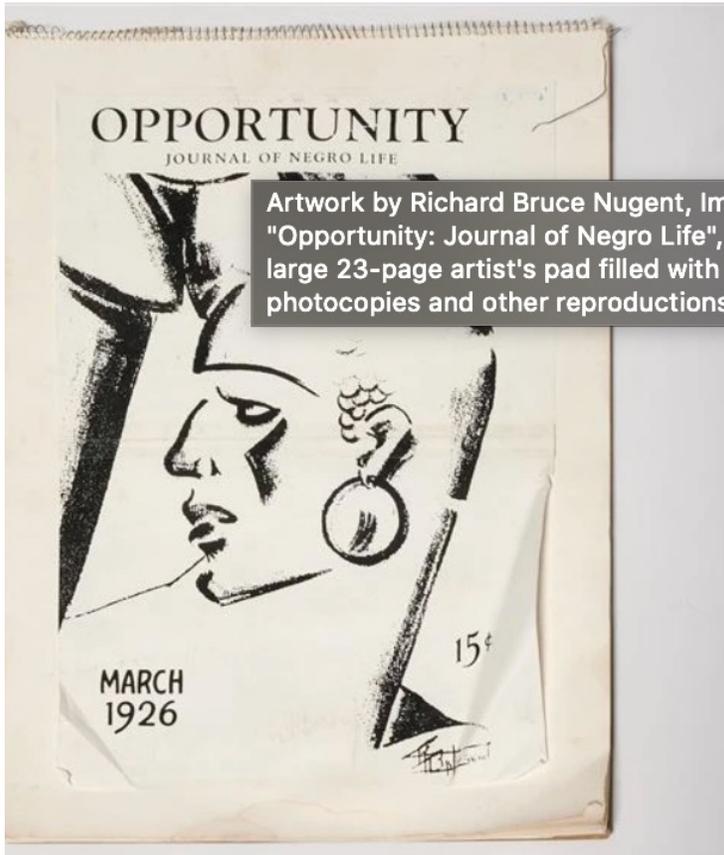


ZORA NEALE HURSTON

(1891-1960)

- Anthropologist, Writer, and Filmmaker
- Known for writing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1939).
- *Friends with Langston Hughes*
 - Co-wrote the play *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life* (1931) then they had a falling out.
 - Died penniless and in obscurity in Ft. Pierce, Florida
 - In the 1970s, Alice Walker found her unmarked grave and paid for a headstone
 - Brought attention to Hurston's folk research and writing.





RICHARD BRUCE NUGENT (1906-1987)

- Artist and writer known for his work in popular black publications such as The Urban League's *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*
- Born to a middle-class family in Washington, D.C.
 - Mother was a pianist.
 - Father was a pullman porter.
 - One of his teachers was Angelina Weld Grimké, who wrote the anti-lynching play, *Rachel* (1916).
 - Openly gay



QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT DURING REHEARSALS

- How does my character walk through Harlem? Is it a haven or a space of insecurity?
- How do they talk to others (or even to themselves)?
- What does that voice sound like? What/where/who has influenced the accent, dialect, tempo, cadence of their speech?
- What are their primary concerns (worries, wants, needs)?
- What is their overarching goal (for the length of entire play)?
- What tactics do they use (scene by scene) to achieve that goal?
- What/who do they turn to to help them reach their goals from scene to scene?

RESOURCES

- ❖ “The Great Depression: Crash Course Black American History #28”
<https://youtu.be/f14kiGoexVg>
- ❖ “Arts and Letters of the Harlem Renaissance: Crash Course Black American History #26”
<https://youtu.be/vKaegbtcE00>
- ❖ Poets.org. <https://poets.org/poet/langston-hughes>
- ❖ History.com. <https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance#josephine-baker>
- ❖ “Josephine Baker’s Banana Dance.” <https://youtu.be/P6OYsNld2YU>
- ❖ See “The Cotton Club Remembered” (1985) <https://youtu.be/f0u0PvG2N98>
- ❖ See the film, “The Cotton Club” (1984), directed by Francis Ford Coppola.
- ❖ See the film, “The Josephine Baker Story” (1991), directed by John Kemeny.

The Great Depression and Queer Harlem

The Great Depression was a time of extreme economic uncertainty in the United States. Caused by the **Stock Market Crash of 1929**, the result was poverty, hunger, homelessness, and unemployment for a lot of individuals and families in the United States. African American people were especially disadvantaged, considering that, prior to the Depression, they suffered more unemployment and lower wages than their white counterparts. While this time of despair and lack was difficult for U.S. citizens of all races, the Harlem Renaissance produced art, literature, poetry, political activism, and social work that offered a bright light in the darkness. These achievements were recognized nationally and internationally. An exciting time of creativity in the literature, art, and music, Renaissance artists included poet Langston Hughes, artist Richard Bruce Nugent, actress and singer Josephine Baker, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston, poet Countee Cullen, writer Alain Locke, blues singer Bessie Smith and many more.

The Hamilton Lodge Ball was a ballroom located in Harlem, New York in the where LGBTQ people of color came to commune and dance. Oliver Stabbe writes, “In 1869, within Harlem’s Hamilton Lodge, drag balls began. As the secret of the balls spread within the gay community, they became a safe place for gay men to congregate. Despite their growing popularity, drag balls were deemed illegal and immoral by mainstream society.” According to Jonathan Lykes, “These multifaceted queer and of color subcultures—found as far back as the 1920’s—have always been social spaces of safety and acceptance for those involved in the ballroom scene. If you have watched the Ryan Murphy television series, “Pose”, The Hamilton Lodge Ballroom was the inspiration for the 1980s drag balls recreated in the show; it is where it all started.

Resources

See Oliver Stabbe, “Queens and Queers: The Rise of the Drag Ball Culture in the 1920s” (April 11, 2016) <https://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/queens-and-queers-rise-drag-ball-culture-1920s>

See History.com, 1891, January 7 Zora Neale Hurston Is Born
<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/zora-neale-hurston-is-born>

See <https://queermusicheritage.com/nov2014hamilton.html>

See <https://nationalbluesmuseum.org/harlem-renaissance-and-blues-20th-century-black-art/#:~:text=Bessie%20Smith%20and%20Billie%20Holiday,and%20spread%20throughout%20the%20country>

Listen to: “Bessie Smith and The Harlem Renaissance” on NPR’s Tell Me More, February 18, 2009, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100808735>

