

A WEEK WITH A PLAY



PLAN-B
THEATRE

FIRE!

by Jenifer Nii

Study Guide

written by Sarah Meservy
reviewed by Aliyah Bacca



WELCOME TO A WEEK WITH A PLAY

FIRE!

by Jenifer Nii

Wallace Thurman was a queer Black man in Salt Lake City at the turn of the previous century. He attended West High School, the University of Utah, and Calvary Baptist Church.

He was also the heart of the Harlem Renaissance.

And he has been erased from Utah history.



Carleton Bluford as Wallace Thurman in FIRE!
Plan-B Theatre, April 2023

Q&A WITH PLAYWRIGHT JENIFER NII



A key component of A Week With A Play is a discussion of the play with the playwright - a local, living playwright! Unfortunately that's not possible in this case. In the fall of 2021, playwright Jenifer Nii was diagnosed with hippocampal atrophy: portions of her brain are calcifying. She is no longer able to write plays and is losing her ability to communicate in any form. The following Q&A is excerpted from a series of conversations she and Artistic Director Jerry Rapier recorded between the fall of 2021 and the spring of 2022.

Q: What inspired you to pursue playwriting?

A: I saw a Marsha Norman play at the University of Utah that really knocked my socks off. I hadn't had an experience like it before, with any other art form I'd been exposed to previously. Something about the experience of being in a tiny theatre with other folks, sharing in something thought-provoking, gut punching, eye opening - something happening right then, right there. I was really moved, and I wanted to be a part of it.

Q: You spent a good part of your professional life as a reporter. How did that inform your playwriting?

A: Part of what I loved about journalism was the fact that it required a lot of research, and constant learning. On any reporting "beat," you have to work really hard to know your subject, so you understand nuance and context in addition to whatever is happening to spur the story of the day. I learned to really love research and study, which ended up helping me a lot in my play writing. Especially when I was writing about events or people who actually existed, like Mr. Thurman. I knew it wasn't enough just to read everything I could that he'd written. I also had to understand the period, the places, who his peers were and what THEY were creating, so I could get a better sense of the factors that may have been pushing/pulling him.

Q: What do you find most interesting about Wallace Thurman?

A: He was so far along. He saw and thought about and understood complex issues enough to shine a light on them - looking out, and looking within. I don't know if that makes sense. But he was devoted to fomenting change and growth - which means that he was willing to ask questions of and even criticize his own community, his friends, himself. That takes work, and courage. Thurman was part of a movement wherein people of color were (re)claiming their voices as artists. Thurman was one of few voices saying, "Yes we are a part of a movement to free ourselves from oppression - racial and societal and artistic. But in our fight against these oppressions and injustices, we ought not forget what we are fighting for and who we are fighting with, so that we end up elevating the whole. We have to expect more from ourselves, the very best of ourselves, so we become and show who we really are." I think he was saying, "Yes, we can be artists, because we are human. But we should aspire to be artists who create art that is of quality."

Q: If he were alive today, what would you want to ask him?

A: I'd want to know if he felt loved. I desperately hope he did.

Q: If he were alive today, what would you want him to know about you?

A: That I'm better for having studied his life, and that I am grateful.

Q: In what ways are you similar?

A: I think I really was inspired by his questioning nature, and his desire to understand.

Q: You and I have talked about how complicated it was to grow up in Utah as a person of color. What commonality do you see between your experience growing up here and that of Wallace Thurman's?

A:Ha! I was just talking with someone, and the person said something about how I was one of the "safe" colored people. Which is something I've heard a lot, but have struggled to understand/navigate. And I remember how struck I was when I was researching Thurman that *he* felt he was considered "too Black," even within the creative, "progressive" communities he inhabited. There are nuances within nuances when it comes to issues of race.

Q: What are your thoughts on the erasure of Wallace Thurman from Utah history?

A: I think he is someone we can be so proud of, as Utahns, for all the right reasons. He was audacious. He was a pioneer. He was principled and strong. He saw potential in people and communities, and was courageous enough to ask tough, sometimes unpopular questions in the hope that in finding honest answers we'd rise up stronger together.

Q: What does FIRE! have to say to high school students?

A: I think high school is when a lot of young folks begin asking the tough questions of themselves and others. I hope FIRE! says to them, "Ask. Ask out loud. Keep asking."

WHO WAS WALLACE THURMAN?

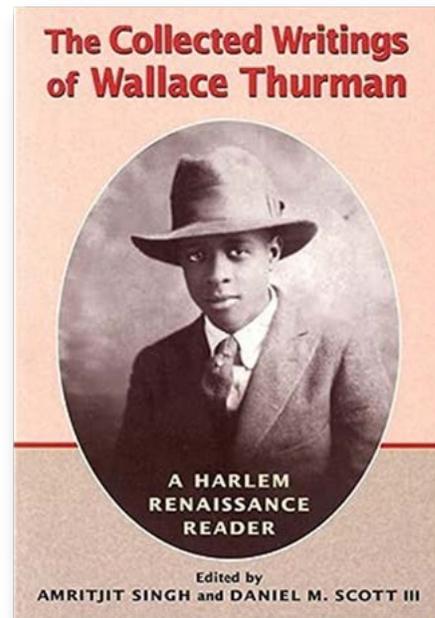
Wallace Thurman was a journalist, novelist, screenwriter, and playwright. He was born in 1902 in Salt Lake City. Thurman and his mother Beulah Thurman frequently moved, living in Idaho, Illinois, and Nebraska before he was twelve. Thurman spent his teens living with his maternal grandmother Emma Jackson (“Ma Jack”) in Salt Lake City where he attended West High School and (briefly) the University of Utah. In 1922, he moved to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles to study journalism but dropped out after one semester.

In 1925 Thurman moved to New York City and found work as a reporter and editor. He worked for several different publications throughout his short career, including three that he founded himself.

His play *Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life* (written in collaboration with William Jourdan Rapp) opened on Broadway in 1929 to mixed reviews and ran for 93 performances. He published two novels: *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) about color prejudice in the Black community and *Infants of the Spring* (1932) a satirical portrayal of the Harlem Renaissance. His third novel *The Interne* (unpublished) was intended to expose the terrible conditions in public hospitals.

Thurman spent two years working as a screenwriter in Hollywood writing two very controversial movies: *Tomorrow's Children* (1934) about forced sterilization and *High School Girl* (1935) about teen pregnancy.

Thurman was plagued by poor health from a young age. He struggled with mental health issues including alcoholism. He died from tuberculosis in 1934 (age 32) in New York City.



Langston Hughes with Wallace Thurman, 1934

UCONOCLAST

FIRE! first premiered in 2010 at Plan-B Theatre alongside a play about Wallace Stegner by Debora Threedy. The two plays intertwined under the title WALLACE. During the run of the play, the Rose Wagner Art gallery hosted an exhibit called *Uconoclasts* featuring portraits of some of Utah's most famous, beloved, and controversial literary figures. Learning about Wallace Thurman's life was the spark that inspired the artists to create the series. Not only did playwright Jenifer Nii find Thurman's story similarly inspiring, actor and playwright Carleton Bluford credits his role in the 2010 production of FIRE! as what inspired him to start writing.



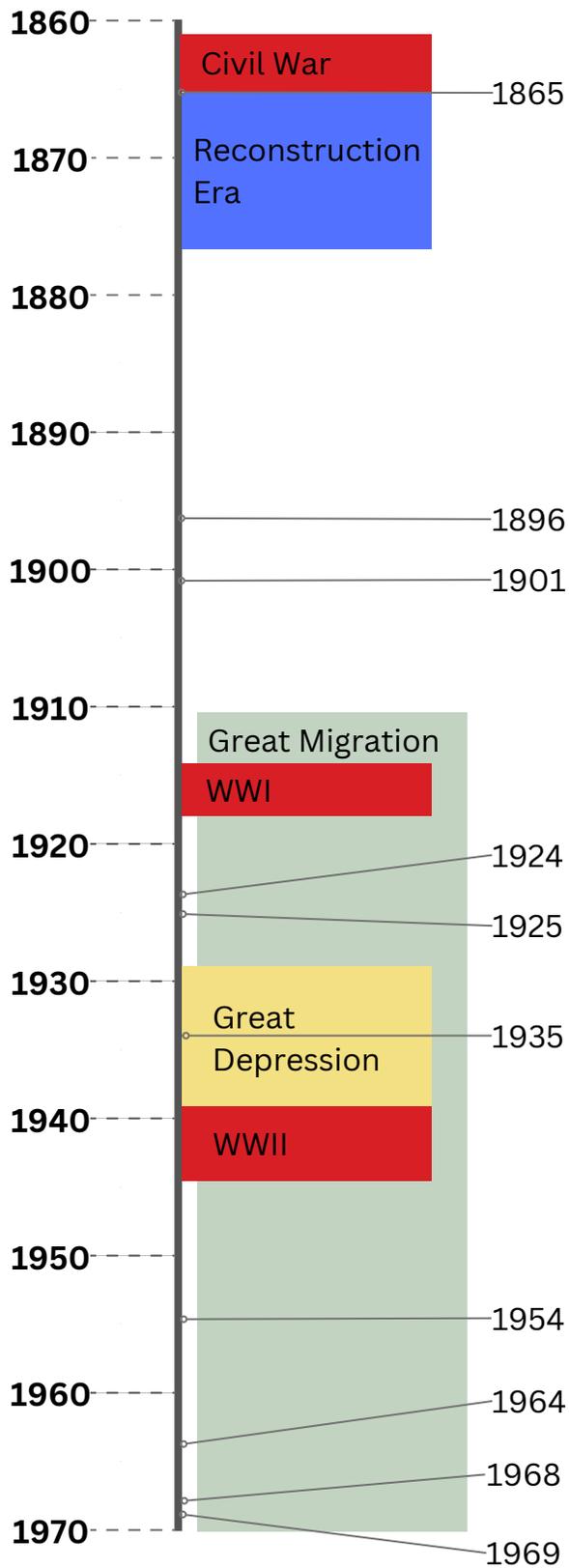
Portrait of Wallace Thurman from the 2010 exhibit "Uconoclasts" by Trent Call and Ken Sanders. Copyright 2010-2022 by the artists. All rights reserved.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Listed below are just a few of the notable events in the fight for civil rights in the United States. Divide the events among your class so that everyone has one or two to research. Then come back together to share what you learned. Work together to place the events on the timeline on the following page while discussing what was significant about each event. What other events could you add to the list?

- Juneteenth
- The first Black labor union is organized. their motto is: *Fight or be slaves*
- Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated
- Brown v. Board of Education
- Plessy v. Ferguson
- Klu Klux Klan founded
- Klu Klux Klan march on Washington
- Civil Rights Act
- League of the Physically Handicapped protests
- 13th and 14th amendments ratified
- 15th amendment ratified
- NAACP founded
- Stonewall Riots
- Society for Human Rights established

U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS TIMELINE



THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Culture Lost

Beginning in 1619 and lasting for more than two hundred years, people were kidnapped and taken from Africa to North America where they were enslaved. They were given new names, punished for speaking their native languages, forbidden to learn to read and write, and forced to adopt the religion of their captors. Slavery stripped them of their identity, their roots, their families, and their culture.

The Great Migration

Making slavery illegal (1862) and granting former slaves American citizenship (1865) was not a magic switch to suddenly end all inequality. Small gains towards economic and political equality for Black people were made during the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, but due to concerted efforts by white supremacists, most progress was undone and inequality was coded into law in states across the country, but most notably in the south.

Between 1910 and 1970 millions of Black Americans moved north searching for a better life, a movement often referred to as the Great Migration. Many made their way to New York City.

Who was Jim Crow?

Jim Crow was the name of a character portrayed by white entertainer Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who toured his song-and-dance comedy act across the United States and England in the 1830s and 40s. Jim Crow was a clownish (and extremely racist) caricature of a Black slave and became a very popular character with white audiences. The name became first a derogatory way to refer to Black people and eventually a way to describe [laws enforcing segregation](#).



*Thomas Dartmouth Rice
as Jim Crow in 1837*



In Utah, interracial marriage was illegal until 1963.



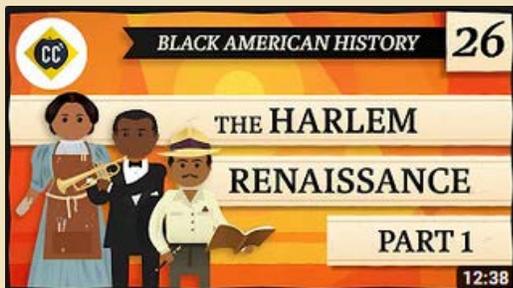
Three women in Harlem, 1925



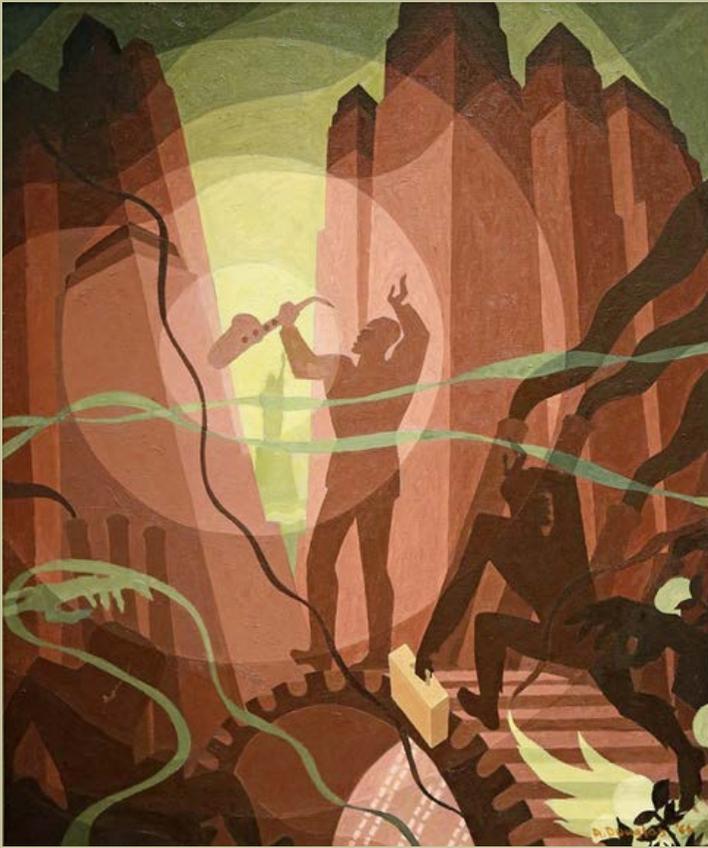
Lindy Hop dancers in a night club, 1930's

During the 1920s, something magical happened for Black Americans. Able to travel freely, attend university, find work, and establish new communities for themselves, Black Americans created a new vision despite what was taken from them during the dark centuries of slavery. A rebirth or *renaissance* of African American culture was blossoming all over the country but was especially notable in Harlem, a neighborhood in the NYC borough of Manhattan. During the Great Migration, Harlem became a predominately Black neighborhood and was home to many popular nightclubs where jazz musicians like [Ma Rainey](#), [Louis Armstrong](#), and [Duke Ellington](#) performed.

Wallace Thurman was not the only queer artist who thrived during the Harlem Renaissance. Some, like poet Countée Cullen maintained a public image that helped them be accepted by more mainstream audiences while secretly pursuing same-sex relationships. Others like Richard Bruce Nugent didn't hide their sexuality. The story Nugent contributed to *Fire!!* brought no small amount of criticism for portraying a sexual relationship between two men. Harlem had a thriving drag culture and performers like [Gladys Bentley](#) were popular.



To learn more watch:
[Arts and Letters of the Harlem Renaissance: Crash Course Black American History #26](#)
(12:37)



Song of the Towers by Aaron Douglas 1934

From the Dark Tower

*We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Nor always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made eternally to weep.*

*The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall.
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.*

-Countée Cullen
Published in Fire!! (1926)

Harlem

What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.*

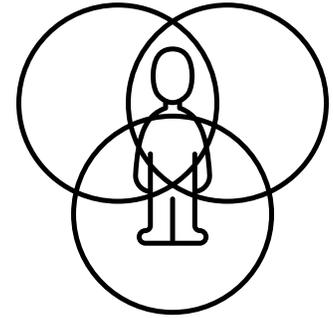
Or does it explode?

-Langston Hughes
(1951)



Charleston, by Aaron Douglas, 1928

INTERSECTIONALITY



Aspects of Identity

Pair up with a classmate. Identify something you have in common and a way in which you differ. Repeat the activity with several different partners.

What does the word *identity* mean? Come up with a definition together as a class.

Then brainstorm different aspects of identities such as gender, race, and age. How many more can you list?

What is intersectionality?

The term *intersectionality* was coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to describe a framework for discussion about how people often face discrimination in overlapping ways. To better understand the need for this framework, watch Crenshaw's TED talk [The Urgency of Intersectionality \(18:49\)](#).

Wallace Thurman was a bisexual dark-skinned Black man who lived in Utah as someone not of the dominant religion. He was also no stranger to disability; he struggled with chronic health and mental health issues. How did these aspects impact his life? What discrimination did he face? Why do you think he has been erased from Utah history?

"... the few who didn't seem to mind whether I was feeble, or did or didn't worship the Lord, or turned up Negro."

-FIRE! by Jenifer Nii



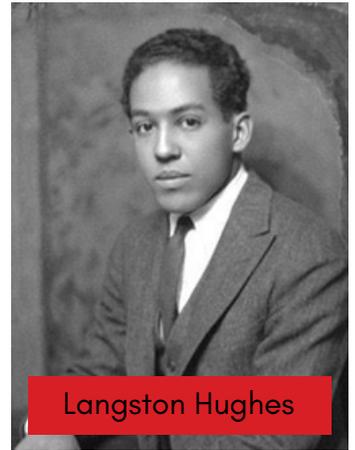
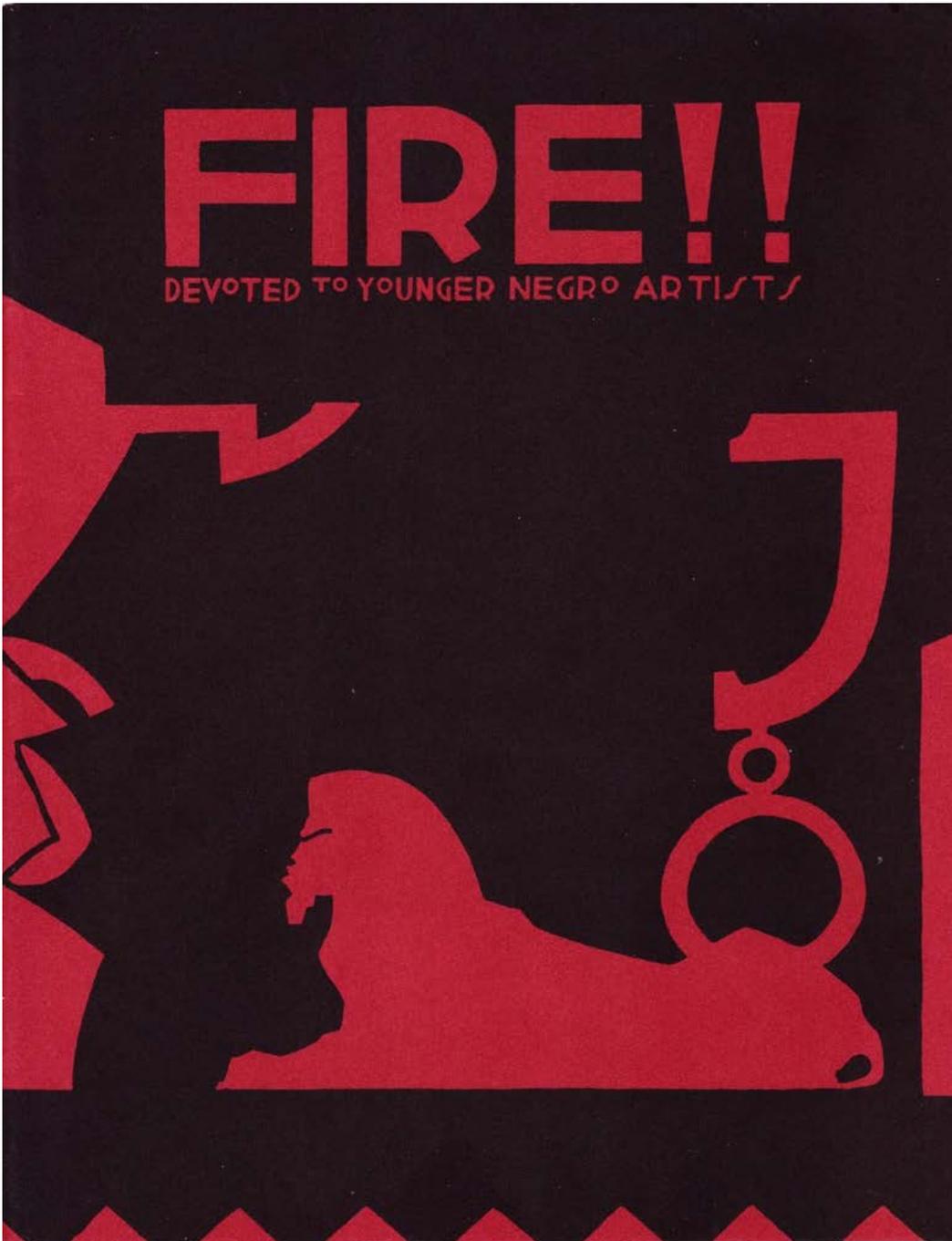
Utah Black History Museum is a mobile exhibit on wheels featuring educational, inspiring, and informative traveling displays highlighting local and national Black History.

Visit ubhm.org to invite the bus to your school.



MOVING FORWARD.

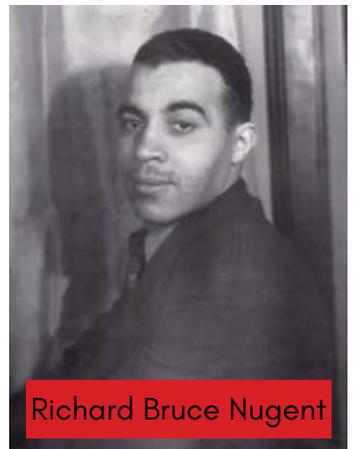




Langston Hughes



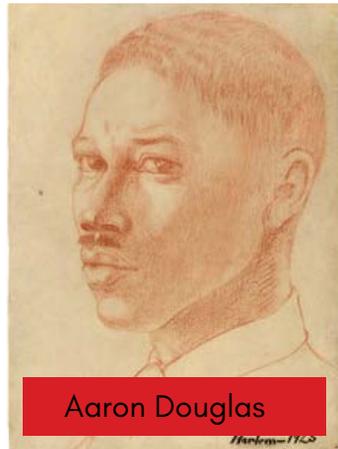
Wallace Thurman



Richard Bruce Nugent



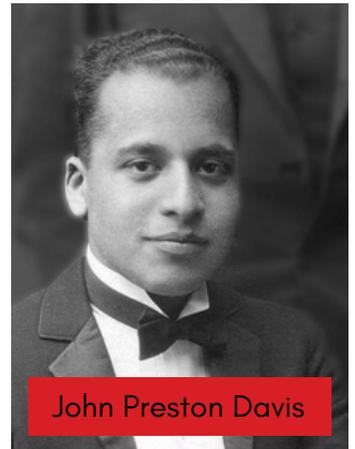
Gwendolyn Bennett



Aaron Douglas



Zora Neale Hurston



John Preston Davis

FIRE!!

Langston [Hughes] said that the Negro in America was like the phoenix and that some day he would rise from the fire to which America had consigned him.

-Richard Bruce Nugent

Read the passage below, then discuss these questions with your classmates:

- Why did they want to start a new quarterly magazine?
- Why do you think paper quality and beautiful type was so important to Thurman?
- Why didn't older Black intellectuals like the magazine?

Extract from Langston Hughes autobiography *The Big Sea*.

During the summer of 1926, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, John P. Davis, Bruce Nugent, Gwendolyn Bennett, and I decided to publish “a Negro quarterly of the arts” to be called Fire — the idea being that it would burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, épater le bourgeois 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.

Thurman went on with the work of preparing the magazine. He got a printer. He planned the layout. It had to be on good paper, he said, worthy of the drawings of Aaron Douglas. It had to have beautiful type, worthy of the first Negro art quarterly. It had to be what we seven young Negroes dreamed our magazine would be— so in the end it cost almost a thousand dollars, and nobody could pay the bills. I don't know how Thurman persuaded the printer to let us have all the copies to distribute, but he did.

None of the older Negro intellectuals would have anything to do with Fire. Dr. Du Bois in the Crisis roasted it. The Negro press called it all sorts of bad names, largely because of a green and purple story by Bruce Nugent, in the Oscar Wilde tradition, which we had included. [...] So Fire had plenty of cold water thrown on it by the colored critics. The white critics (except for an excellent editorial in the Bookman for November, 1926) scarcely noticed it at all.

We had no way of getting it distributed to bookstands or news stands. Bruce Nugent took it around New York on foot and some of the Greenwich Village bookshops put it on display, and sold it for us. But then Bruce, who had no job, would collect the money and, on account of salary, eat it up before he got back to Harlem. Finally, irony of ironies, several hundred copies of Fire were stored in the basement of an apartment where an actual fire occurred and the bulk of the whole issue was burned up. Even after that Thurman had to go on paying the printer.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Has anyone ever called you by something that wasn't your name? Maybe they shortened your name or made up a new nickname for you. How did that feel?

Think of some of the different ways others might refer to you or to any aspect of your identity. Are there labels that you like or dislike? Discuss these terms and/or the terms below with your classmates. Which do you think are respectful? Which seem disrespectful? Does the context of how it's being used matter? Are there names you don't mind being called by certain people (your parents perhaps, or your best friend) that you'd object to hearing from others?

Emo	Mormon	Baby
Slut	Nerd	Guy
Gay	Kid	Man
Homo	Girl	Ma'am

Throughout FIRE! You will read the word *Negro*, a word that many would consider racist today. So why did Wallace Thurman use it to describe himself and his peers? Thurman also refers to his group of friends as the Niggerati—a portmanteau of *nigger* and *literati*. Unlike the other terms discussed here, *nigger* has been an offensive racial slur for at least two hundred years. Why do you think Thurman used it? Would the name have been received differently if it had been made up by someone outside of their group, say for example, by a white person?

Colored, Negro, Black, or African-American?

When Thurman was born, *colored* was the preferred nomenclature. During the 1920s W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington advocated for a switch from *colored* to *Negro*. *Colored* became a term associated with racism and segregation while *Negro* was an identity Black civil rights activists chose for themselves. We see the preference for *Negro* in many of the works by Black writers during the Harlem Renaissance. So why do we say *Black* today? That shift happened forty years later when Stokely Carmichael sparked the Black Power movement. Speaking at a 1966 rally, he said, "We must stop being ashamed of being black," going on to declare, "we are black and beautiful." His words resonated with the community, and by the

seventies, *Black* had gained enough popularity that when Negro History Week (established in 1926) was expanded from a week-long celebration to a full month in 1976, it was named Black History month.

In the late eighties, Jesse Jackson pushed for a shift from *Black* to *African-American*, encouraging people to embrace their African heritage. While many adopted the label, others pushed back arguing that the term diminished their American identity associating them with a continent with which they felt no connection.

In the 2020s, as the Black Lives Matter movement brings renewed attention to Black activism, *Black over black* has become standardized. *Black* refers to a cultural group and should be capitalized just as we capitalize other cultural labels such as Native American or Latino.

It's important to note that all the shifts highlighted here are general trends rather than absolutes. Each of us is entitled to our personal preference of terms when it comes to describing our own identity. During the 2000 Census, a small minority (about 50,000 people or 0.001% of the Black population) went the extra effort of writing in that they identified themselves as "Negro" instead of checking the box for *Black, African-Am., or Negro*. However, when referring to a cultural group, the best way to be respectful is to use terms that are preferred by the majority of that group.

Linguistic Reclamation is when a group reclaims words used to disparage them. Many find it empowering to take back offensive labels and wear them with pride. It's a way to say, "I'm not ashamed of who I am."

More Examples of Linguistic Reclamation

- The term *impressionist* was coined by an art critic who was making fun of Monet, Renoir, and their peers. He meant it as an insult, a way to criticize their art for not being realistic, but the artists liked the term and adopted it to describe their style of painting.
- *Chicano or Chicana* were racial slurs for anyone with Mexican ancestry until Mexican Americans reclaimed the words in the 1960s. Now they are labels proudly claimed as a cultural and political identity.
- *Queer* originally meant *strange, weird, or unwell*. When people called gay and lesbian folks queer, they were essentially calling them weirdos or perverts. But the LGBTQ+ community reclaimed the word, and it is now an umbrella term for anyone who is not heterosexual or cisgender.