The word “Renaissance” is translated as “rebirth” in French. The classical renaissance is a period in the 17th C that involved the flowering of Latin and vernacular literatures, the political development of diplomacy, and the scientific shift to inductive reasoning and observation.

In Black literature, we commonly recognize the term as attached to the Harlem Renaissance, a period of exceptional artistic productivity that united artists and the community in order to effect social and political change. More recently, the term has also defined other literary movements such as the Black Chicago Renaissance and the Southern Renascence.

This year’s Black Literary Suite will focus on *The Mississippi Renaissance*, placing it in conversation with the aforementioned movements and highlighting the importance of Mississippi to Black writing and culture. Exploring commonalities in form, content, and symbols, we are recognizing the historical and social conditions of Mississippi as a source of inspiration and major influence. This year we are featuring ten authors in the exhibit: William Attaway, Fannie Lou Hamer, John Hatch, C. Liegh McInnis, Anne Moody, Mildred Taylor, Margaret Walker, Jesmyn Ward, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Richard Wright.

Fannie Lou Hamer was born in Montgomery County, Mississippi, but moved to Sunflower County two years after she was born. Following the family tradition, she began to pick cotton at six. In the 1950s, Hamer became active in the Regional Council of Negro Leadership, an early civil rights organization.

Though she was imprisoned on false charges during the summer of 1963, she threw herself into civil rights and voting campaigns, and organizing the “Freedom Summer” voting initiative in 1964. Elected as Vice-Chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, she led a delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1968 where she gave a memorable speech. By the time of her death in 1977, her legacy as a foundational member and influential orator of the Civil Rights Movement was indisputable.
"Biblical myth is as integral to the spirit of the South as the heat and humidity... Hip-hop, which is my generation’s blues, is important to the characters that I write about. They use hip-hop to understand the world through language."

Jesmyn Ward was born in DeLisle, on the coast of Mississippi. Surviving Hurricane Katrina and the Mississippi coast are ever-present in her work. In 2008 she published Where the Line Bleeds, her first novel, and in 2011 Salvage the Bones, which was awarded the National Book Award for Fiction. In 2013, Ward published Men We Reaped, a memoir about five young Black men, including her brother, who lived and were killed in her hometown. Her groundbreaking collection The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks About Race appeared in 2016. Since 2014, Ward has been on faculty at Tulane University as an associate professor in English.
John Hatch was born in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1941. Hatch credits family lore for what would eventually become “The New Africa Chronicles” series. As the story goes, in New Africa, Mississippi where Hatch’s mother was raised, a fight broke out when loggers attempted to destroy the nearby wooded area locals considered their sanctuary. *Mississippi Swamp*, the first novel of the chronicles was released in 2001, followed by *Africa, Love* in 2002. Hatch also released a book of poetry in 1991 titled *St. Gorbachev and Other Missionary Positions*.

"In my own lifetime, I had refused to write about Mississippi because the fiction I had read didn't seem worth adding to. Especially, I couldn't make human sense of the murky time of Reconstruction. There are so few stories in the public consciousness about what actually happened in the day-to-day lives of black people or of our elected representatives.”
Margaret Abigail Walker was born on July 7, 1915 in Birmingham, Alabama and died in 1998. Graduating from Northwestern University, she began working for the Chicago unit of the Federal Writers’ Project and became an active member of the Southside Writers Group. In 1937, Walker wrote her seminal poem “For My People” and later in 1942 published her award winning volume by the same name. Walker had a lengthy and influential teaching career at Jackson State College (now JSU). She published her only novel, Jubilee in 1966. Based on the story of her great-grandmother, the novel ushered in the era of neo-slave narratives. Walker published twelve books during her lifetime, including Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius (1987) and This is My Century: New and Collected Poems (1989). Her major legacy is the Institute for the Study of History, Life and Culture of Black People which she founded in 1986, and later renamed the Margaret Walker Center in her honor.
Mildred Taylor

“Although there are those who wish to ban my books because I have used language that is painful, I have chosen to use the language that was spoken during the period, for I refuse to whitewash history.”

Mildred Taylor and her family moved to Toledo, Ohio shortly after her birth in 1943. Despite the move, the stories of her family in Mississippi largely inspired Taylor’s literary works. As the first winner of the Council on Interracial Books for Children contest, she published Song of the Trees in 1975. This first book began a series that documented the Logans—african American family in Mississippi whose land firmly establishes the family’s livelihood and history. Her most famous book, Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, was published in 1976 and earned Taylor the Newbery Medal in 1977. Taylor is one of America’s most widely read children’s authors.
Richard Wright was born near Natchez, Mississippi in 1908 to sharecropper parents. Living in Jackson, MS with his grandmother, Wright first began to write. He moved to Chicago at the age of nineteen and was employed by the Federal Writers' Project, becoming a part of the Black literary community including Margaret Walker, Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, and others. In 1937, Wright published "Blueprint for Negro Writing," a manifesto for a new generation of writers. Literary critics quickly applied the term "protest fiction" to Wright's work and made him a household name. Wright published extensively throughout his life including a collection of short stories *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940), *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), and his acclaimed memoir *Black Boy* (1945). For him writing was a weapon, and his influence was felt throughout the world. Wright died in 1960.

“I was leaving the South to fling myself into the unknown . . . I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink of new and cool rains, bend in strange winds, respond to the warmth of other suns and, perhaps, to bloom”

“As I began to publish, I realized how difficult it was, particularly being a Mississippian and an Afro-Mississippian, there was no real outlet... If we don't have outlets that publish Mississippi writers that are specifically Afro-Mississippi writers, we are not going to have anybody to tell our story.”
Ida B. Wells was born in Holly Springs, MS in 1862 to former slaves and died in Chicago, Illinois 1931 at the age of sixty-nine. Wells’ career as an activist and journalist began in Memphis, TN where she moved after her parents’ death (Yellow Fever) and became an educator to take care of her surviving siblings. In the midst of her teaching career, she became a journalist to openly express and critique racial violence in the South. Her anti-lynching crusade became a worldwide endeavor.

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them”
William Attaway

Novelist William Alexander Attaway was born in Greenville, Mississippi in 1911. After working for the Federal Writers' Project, he published his first novel *Let Me Breathe Thunder* in 1939 and a second novel *Blood on the Forge* in 1941. *Blood on the Forge* is a migration tale about three brothers who escape sharecropping in the South only to encounter similar unjust treatment and hardship in the steel mills of western Pennsylvania in the North. Attaway died in 1986.

*William Attaway was “the most important of the novelists to view the black problem in Marxist terminology.”* - Addison Gayle Jr., *The Way of the World* (1975)
Anne Moody, Civil Rights activist and writer, was born in 1940 in Centreville, Mississippi. While at Tougaloo College, she participated in the wave of civil disobedience that characterized the 1950s and 1960s in the U.S. In addition to helping to organize the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), she also participated in a sit-in at a Woolworth’s Department Store in 1963. Her biography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* published in 1968, recounts Moody’s childhood in Mississippi and the socio-economic context that shaped the experiences and activism of African Americans in the Deep South. Years later, Moody published *Farewell to Too Sweet* (1974) and *Mr. Death: Four Stories* (1975).

“But courage was growing in me too. Little by little it was getting harder and harder for me not to speak out.”