literal signification of the lyrics. She was able to set in profound motion deeply disturbing disjunctions between overt statements and their aesthetic meanings. The listener is made to feel that the instrumentals represent the relatively easy existence a man can enjoy within a love relationship—the instruments were all played by men—while her voice establishes its female persona as an equal participant, all the while raising questions about such unquestioned inequality.

The conclusion of "When a Woman Loves a Man" reinforces the critical dimension of the song: repeating the phrase "and that's how it goes when a woman loves a man," her voice ascends at the end, sounding a question. If that is how it goes, must it always be this way? This aesthetic challenging of the finality of the lyrics, moving them from affirmative statements toward open-ended interrogations, creates the space for a liberating—though not liberated—female subjectivity. It is still possible to glean this kind of meaning from Holiday's art, many decades after it was performed and recorded, because Lady Day's art expressed and embodied a critical stance, in an aesthetic context, toward social relations that at the time were not popularly experienced as capable of historical transformation. We remain moved by her songs because we experience in them the anticipated, inchoate presence of a vantage point later produced and systematically elaborated by social movements that would insist upon historical transformations of gender, race, and class relations.

Angela Davis Blues Legacies And Black Feminism (1998)

"STRANGE FRUIT"

Music and Social Consciousness

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves, blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh
Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

—"Strange Fruit"[1]

This song, which Billie Holiday called her "personal protest"[2] against racism, radically transformed her status in American popular culture. She previously had been acknowledged by her contemporaries on the jazz scene as a brilliant and innovative musician, but her performance of "Strange Fruit" firmly established her as a pivotal figure in a new tendency in black musical culture that directly addressed issues of racial injustice. Though she was only twenty-four years old when she recorded this song in 1939 and integrated it into her repertoire, she had already been striving for some time to reach a mass audience and thus to achieve recognition beyond the circles of musicians and jazz cognoscenti who so unanimously praised her work.[3] She would not—or perhaps could not—perform the Tin Pan Alley material that made up her repertoire in the commercial vein that might have won her the popular success she desired. John Chilton

recounts a conversation between Holiday and Dave Dexter, then associate editor of *Down Beat* magazine, in which she said that

> she would quit the singing game if she failed to gain national prominence—"with the public as well as musicians and jazz fans," by the time she was 26. She admitted that she was aware of the great respect that musicians had for her, but said that she was discouraged "after nine years of hard work" and felt "at a loss as to why the public at large had failed to respond" to her.[4]

Holiday's own autobiographical reflections about that moment in her life, interestingly, draw a distinction between the mass recognition she had already achieved and the financial success she desired:

> I opened Café Society as an unknown; I left two years later as a star. But you couldn't tell the difference from what I had in my sock. I was still making that same old seventy-five dollars a week. I had made more than that in Harlem. I needed the prestige and publicity all right, but you can't pay rent with it.[5]

It was at Café Society, the newly opened interracial nightclub in Greenwich Village, that she premiered the song that, at first, seemed almost antithetical to her quest for financial success. Holiday never had a best-selling recording—neither during her lifetime nor after her death.[6] But what fame and commercial fortune she did enjoy would become inextricably, if ambiguously, tied to "Strange Fruit." Prior to her decision to sing "Strange Fruit," her work consisted almost exclusively of original and often subversive renderings of the conventional and formulaic popular love songs offered her by her record producers. In "Strange Fruit" she had a song with urgent and far-reaching social implications—a song about the hate, indignities, and eruptions of violence that threatened black people in the United States, a song that was able to awaken from their apolitical slumber vast numbers of people from diverse racial backgrounds. At the same time, it was not a song that could be counted upon for popular success. In fact, it seemed ready-made to damage her career and to further diminish her status as a popular singer. Nonetheless, once she decided to sing "Strange Fruit," she became obsessed with it. "I worked like the devil on it," she wrote, "because I was never sure I could put it across or that I could get across to a plush nightclub audience the things that it meant to me."[7]

As long as Holiday's work appeared to be without manifest social content, she was praised lavishly by critics. Their insistence on the nonracialized "universality" of art prohibited serious consideration of her work's relation to the collective struggles of black people. Since "Strange Fruit" was designed unambiguously to prick the consciences of those who were content to remain oblivious to racism, it was inevitable that many critics would dismiss it as propaganda.[8] But Holiday realized, to the contrary, that "Strange Fruit" would afford her a mode of expression that merged her own individual sensibility, including her hatred of racist-inspired brutality, with the rage of a potential community of resistance. Art never achieves greatness through transcendence of sociohistorical reality. On the contrary, even as it transcends specific circumstances and conventions, it is deeply rooted in social realities. As Herbert Marcuse has pointed out, it is at its best when it fashions new perspectives on the human condition, provokes critical attitudes and encourages loyalty "to the vision of a better world, a vision which remains true even in defeat."

> In the transforming mimesis, the image of liberation is fractured by reality. If art were to promise that at the end good would triumph over evil, such a promise would be refuted by the historical truth. In reality it is evil which triumphs, and there are only islands of good where one can find refuge for a brief time. Authentic works of art are aware of this: they reject the promise made too easily; they refuse the unburdened happy end. They must reject it, for the realm of freedom lies beyond mimesis.[9]

"Strange Fruit" evoked the horrors of lynching at a time when black people were still passionately calling for allies in the campaign to eradicate this murderous and terroristic manifestation of racism. While she never sang "Strange Fruit" exactly the same way twice, each time Holiday performed it she implicitly asked her audiences to imagine a dreadful

lynching scene, and to endorse and identify with the song's antilynching sentiments. Yet her performance of this song did much more. It almost singlehandedly changed the politics of American popular culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture. The felt impact of Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" is as powerful today as it was in the 1940s. By placing this song at the center of her repertoire, Holiday firmly established the place of protest in the black popular musical tradition. Her use of this work in her career helped dismantle the opposition, firmly entrenched until her singing of this song, between fame and commercial success on the one hand and social consciousness in music on the other.

The most common portraits of Billie Holiday highlight drug addiction, alcoholism, feminine weakness, depression, lack of formal education, and other difficulties unrelated to her contributions as an artist. In other words, the image she has acquired in U.S. popular culture relies on biographical information about Holiday's personal life at the expense of acknowledging her role as a cultural producer, which is, after all, the reason for her enduring importance. This is the approach taken by the Motown film based on her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*. This image of Lady Day, who is played by Diana Ross, tends to imply that her music is no more than an unconscious and passive product of the contingencies of her life.[10] If one accepts this construction of Holiday, "Strange Fruit" appears to be an anomaly. In fact, John Chilton explains her encounter with Lewis Allen,[11] who composed the lyrics, in language that emphasizes Allen's active role—although Allen never did this himself—and that of the white men who owned and operated Café Society, while utterly downplaying Holiday's part in deciding to sing the song:

> Poet Lewis Allen, then working as a schoolteacher, approached Barney Josephson [the owner of Café Society] and Robert Gordon (who helped organize the floor-shows) with a set of lyrics that he had adapted from his own poetry; they recommended that Allen should meet Billie and offer the song to her. At first, Lady was slow to understand the song's imagery, but her bewilderment decreased as Allen patiently emphasised the cadences, and their significance. After a few readings, Billie was "into" the song, but was unconvinced that the material was suitable for her. Her incredibly gifted interpretations of lyrics had enhanced many songs, but these songs, for all the varying skills of their composers and lyricists, had only dealt with the problems of love, unrequited or otherwise, skies blue and June moons. Here, Billie was being asked to provide a musical commentary on an issue raw enough to be unmentionable in urban New York.[12]

In Barney Josephson's own description of Holiday's initial encounter with "Strange Fruit," he takes all the credit for her decision to sing it:

> A young man came in one evening with a song and showed it to me. Not reading music, I could read, so I read the lyrics. I read these lyrics and was just floored by them. I said, "What do you want to do with this?" He said, "I'd like to have Billie sing this song." So he sings the song to her. She looked at me and said, after he finished it, "What do you want me to do with that, man?" And I said, "It would be wonderful if you'd sing it—if you care to. You don't have to." "You wants me to sing it. I sings it." And she sang it. And that song was "Strange Fruit."[13]

Chilton describes Holiday as being "bewildered" by the imagery of "Strange Fruit," implying that she could not comprehend metaphorical presentations of anything other than women in love or spurned by lovers. According to Chilton's interpretation, Allen not only offered her the lyrics but taught her how to sing them. But it is more plausible to argue that Holiday translated an antiracist literary text into a dynamic musical work whose enduring meaning stemmed from the way she chose to render it as song. Josephson's description is nothing short of embarrassing. As important a figure as he may have been in opening New York's first truly interracial nightclub—where people of color were welcome in the audience as well as onstage—Josephson's depiction of Billie Holiday is problematic at

best: he paints her as an illiterate, ignorant, and passive woman, willing to sing "Strange Fruit" simply because he asked her to do it. His attempt to recapture her speech—"You wants me to sing it. I sings it"—is reminiscent of the worst kind of minstrel caricatures of black "dialect."

Stuart Nicholson published a biography in 1995 entitled *Billie Holiday*.[14] It is to his credit that he omits these stories that foreground white men as the responsible parties in Holiday's decision to sing "Strange Fruit." However, Donald Clarke, Holiday's most recent biographer, further develops this narrative, emphasizing her alleged illiteracy. "Lady was nonpolitical; when she first looked at 'Strange Fruit' she didn't know what to make of it. She never read anything but comic books—promoter Ernie Anderson once brought her bundles of them—and she was used to learning songs, not reading poetry."[15] To bolster this interpretation he quotes Josephson, who said in an interview, "At first I felt Billie didn't know what the hell the song meant."[16] Clarke also quotes Arthur Herzog, whose memories of Holiday's initial encounter with "Strange Fruit" represent her as not understanding the song's meaning, which later "hit" her—as if her comprehension were entirely external to her own allegedly backward mental processes: "When she first started singing this song, I really don't believe she knew what she was doing or that the impact hit her. . . . My recollection is that the song didn't have much punch at first, and suddenly the impact of it hit her, and she put herself into the song."[17]

Compare Clarke's, Chilton's, and Josephson's accounts of the meeting between Holiday and Allen with her own (as transcribed by William Dufty in *Lady Sings the Blues*):

> It was during my stint at Café Society that a song was born which became my personal protest—"Strange Fruit." The germ of the song was in a poem written by Lewis Allen. I first met him at Café Society. When he showed me that poem, I dug it right off. It seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop.
>
> Allen, too, had heard how Pop died and of course was interested in my singing. He suggested that Sonny White, who had been my accompanist, and I turn it into music. So the three of us got together and did the job in about three weeks.[18]

Her father, jazz guitarist Clarence Holiday, had inhaled poisonous gases during a battle in World War I. He developed chronic lung problems, and in March of 1937, while on tour in Texas with Don Redman's band, he contracted a chest cold for which he received no treatment because of segregated hospitals in that state. By the time the band reached Dallas, where he was able to seek medical attention, his condition had progressed to pneumonia, and he died of a hemorrhage in the Jim Crow ward of the Veterans' Hospital.[19] According to Holiday's account, the antilynching theme of "Strange Fruit" resonated with her own anger about her father's death and with her desire to protest the racism that had killed him.

I have considered these conflicting accounts of the genesis of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" because they reveal—even in the narratives of those whose relationships to her should have afforded them special insight into her musical genius—the extent to which her stature as an artist and her ability to comprehend social issues were both disparaged and defined as results of plans conceived by savvy white men. Chilton's, Clarke's, and Josephson's stories capture Holiday in a web of gendered, classed, and raced inferiority and present her as capable of producing great work only under the tutelage of her racial superiors. The importance Holiday herself accorded "Strange Fruit" is revealed not only by the fact that she reconstructed her entire repertoire around it, but also by her thwarted decision to name her autobiography *Bitter Crop*, the last two words of the lyrics.[20] *Lady Sings the Blues* was deemed a more marketable title by her publishers.

In order to suggest the historical context and impact of "Strange Fruit" and to comprehend the ease with which Holiday could compare the metaphorical lynching scene evoked by the song's lyrics with the Jim Crow death of her father, it is important to examine the debate around lynching during that period. Billie Holiday first sang "Strange Fruit" in 1939. During the preceding decade—the Depression years—public consciousness regarding lynching grew even as the numbers of lynching victims began to decline. While it was true that the lives of black people were no longer systematically consumed by mob violence in numbers that mounted into the thousands—as had been the case during the decades following emancipation—this did not mean that the scores of contemporary lynch-

ing victims could be dismissed as insignificant. According to one historian, during the four years following the stock market crash in 1929, 150 black people were lynched.[21] Black feminist historian Paula Giddings points out that

> [t]he lynching of twenty Black men in 1930 amounted to nowhere near the numbers at the turn of the century, or even in the immediate aftermath of World War I. But the news reports of the horrible crimes were made more vivid by the technological advances in communication and photography, and the sensationalism of yellow journalism.[22]

In the fall of 1934, a mere five years before Lady Day's encounter with the poem "Strange Fruit," a particularly brutal and well-publicized lynching occurred in Florida. A newspaper described the event:

> An eye-witness to the lynching . . . said that [Claude] Neal had been forced to mutilate himself before he died. The eye-witness gave the following account of the event which took place in a swamp beside the Chattahoochee River:
>
> . . . First they cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it.
>
> Then they sliced his sides and stomach with knives and every now and then somebody would cut off a finger or toe. Red hot irons were used on the nigger to burn him from top to bottom. From time to time during the torture a rope would be tied around Neal's neck and he was pulled over a limb and held there until he almost choked to death, when he would be let down and the torture begun all over again. After several hours of this punishment, they decided just to kill him.
>
> Neal's body was tied to a rope on the rear of an automobile and dragged over the highway to the Cannidy home. Here a mob estimated to number somewhere between 3,000 and 7,000 people from eleven southern states was excitedly waiting his arrival. . . . A woman came out of the Cannidy house and drove a butcher knife into his heart. Then the crowd came by and some kicked him and some drove their cars over him. What remained of the body was brought by the mob to Marianna, where it is now hanging from a tree on the northeast corner of the courthouse square.
>
> Photographers say they will soon have pictures of the body for sale at fifty cents each. Fingers and toes from Neal's body are freely exhibited on street-corners here.[23]

Historian John Hope Franklin describes a lynching in 1934 when he was a student at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Cordie Cheek, who lived in a Fisk-owned house on the edge of the campus, was lynched by a white mob after he struck a white child while riding his bicycle. The child was only slightly wounded. "As president of the student government I made loud noises and protests to the mayor, the governor, and even President Franklin D. Roosevelt, but nothing could relieve our pain and anguish or bring Cordie Cheek back."[24]

"Strange Fruit" rose out of sociohistorical circumstances that provided the most resonant background since the brief era of Radical Reconstruction for the reception of an impassioned plea for racial justice. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s had stimulated an expanding awareness of African-American art and culture in the wider population even though this awareness was marred by racist conceptions of black culture as "primitive" and "exotic." The 1930s saw the emergence of important multiracial political alliances. Organized challenges to lynching dated back to the turn-of-the-century efforts of Ida B. Wells and the antilynching campaign developed by the NAACP during its early years. However, white public opinion of the period through World War I and well into the 1920s was so poisoned by racism that it was difficult to draw substantial numbers of white people into antilynching campaigns. With the upsurge of mass movements during the thirties, white people began to take a more active role in antilynching efforts. Although the case of the Scottsboro Nine did not involve an extralegal lynching, it came to symbolize the pressing need to resist the racist ideology that so easily justified lynching. Lillian Smith,

who allied herself with the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, was inspired by Holiday's song to write a novel, *Strange Fruit*, exploring inflammatory themes of race, sex, and violence. In 1936 the ASWPL had been endorsed by over 35,000 white southern women.[25] Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" echoed through circles of people who had been sensitized both by the transracial economic and social tragedies of the Great Depression and by the multiracial mass movements seeking to redress the grievances of blacks and whites alike.

Before the vast movements of the 1930s and the consequent radicalization of large sectors of the population, the phenomenon of "Strange Fruit" would have been inconceivable. Indeed, New York's interracial Café Society, where the song first was performed, could not have existed earlier. Barney Josephson, who opened the club at a time when even in Harlem black and white people could not listen to jazz under the same roof, told Holiday that "this was to be one club where there was going to be no segregation, no racial prejudice."[26] And, in fact, according to Holiday's biographer, John Chilton, "the liberal atmosphere of the club, with its clientele of 'New Dealers,' and the humanitarian principles of its owner, made it a receptive setting for the presentation of the song's dramatic anti-lynching lyrics."[27]

If white people had developed a greater sensitivity to the plight of African Americans, it was perhaps because enormous numbers of them had experienced in one form or another the devastation of the Great Depression. Workers' wages were cut almost in half, and by the last crisis year 17 million people were unemployed. Even more important to the development of this sensitivity were the great mass movements of the 1930s—the campaign against unemployment and the extensive organizing of industrial unions associated with the CIO. The Communist Party, the Young Communist League, and the Trade Union Unity League joined forces to establish the National Unemployed Councils, which were responsible for spectacular demonstrations throughout the country. On March 6, 1930, well over a million people participated in hunger marches in major urban centers—110,000 in New York, 100,000 in Detroit. In December of 1931 and early 1932, national hunger marches to Washington dramatized demands for unemployment insurance and other means of bringing relief to the unemployed.[28]

Such mass opposition to the antiworker policies of the Hoover administration played a pivotal role in the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the subsequent inauguration of the New Deal. Far from pacifying those who suffered the effects of the Great Depression, the New Deal served as a further catalyst for the organization of multiracial mass movements. Black people in particular were dissatisfied with the sedatives offered them by the New Deal legislation. One of the most consequential of the mass organizations initiated during the Roosevelt years was the American Youth Congress, founded in 1934. Although the government was responsible for the inception of the AYC, the more than four and a half million young people who joined it before the outbreak of World War II in 1939 made it into an organizing force beyond anything imagined by its government sponsors. Young African Americans, especially in the South, played an indispensable role in developing the strategic direction of this organization. The Southern Negro Youth Congress, according to William Z. Foster, was "the most important movement ever conducted by Negro Youth"[29] before the era of the civil rights movement. According to Robin D. G. Kelley, in his remarkable study of Alabama Communists during the Depression,

> Black Communists in SNYC promoted their own Double V program of action despite the Party's official opposition to the slogan. The Youth Congress fought racial discrimination in the armed forces, expanded its voter registration drive, continued to investigate police brutality cases and civil liberties violations, collected a mountain of data on discrimination for the FEPC [Fair Employment Practices Committee] hearings in 1943, and even waged a campaign in Birmingham to end segregation on buses.[30]

As a result of the work of organizations like the NAACP, the American Youth Congress, and the National Association of Colored Women, the issue of federal antilynching legislation was placed on the national political agenda for the first time in this century since the thwarted efforts of the NAACP to secure passage of an antilynching bill in 1921. Although the Costigan-Wagner bill, introduced in 1935, was passed by the House, it was defeated in the southern-dominated Senate. Nonetheless, when Billie

Holiday first sang "Strange Fruit" in 1939, her message fell on many ears rendered receptive by mass demands that the Roosevelt administration support the enactment of a law against lynching.

This is not to say that Billie Holiday herself was directly involved in the political developments of the thirties that served as the backdrop for her own cultural contributions. She was among a host of artists who moved into the stream of political radicalization by following paths carved out by their art, rather than by explicit political commitments. The thirties, according to cultural critic and socialist organizer Phillip Bonosky, constituted "a watershed in the American democratic tradition. It is a period," he continues,

> which will continue to serve both the present and the future as a reminder and as an example of how an aroused people, led and spurred on by the working-class, can change the entire complexion of the culture of a nation. This period, for the first time in American history, saw the fundamental placing of the Negro and Jewish questions, which brought them out of the murky realm of private and personal ethics to their real roots in a class society. . . . [It] saw a dramatic change in every aspect of culture—its most characteristic feature being the discovery of the organic relationship between the intellectual and the people—the workers first of all. . . .[31]

Billie Holiday was not directly associated with the artists' and cultural workers' movements related to the Works Progress Administration, but she clearly was conscious of the need for radical change in the status of black people in U.S. society. On countless occasions she herself was the target of vitriolic expressions of racism. As a vocalist with Artie Shaw's all-white band, she encountered the crassness of Jim Crow on a daily basis when the band toured the southern states. In Kentucky, for example, a small-town sheriff who tried his best to prevent her from performing finally came up to the bandstand and asked Shaw, "What's Blackie going to sing?"[32] In St. Louis, the man who had hired the band to play in one of the city's largest ballrooms contested her presence by saying, "What's that nigger doing

there? I don't have niggers to clean up around here."[33] Needless to say, there were numerous incidents concerning hotel rooms and the eating establishments where she attempted to dine. "It got to the point," she wrote, "where I hardly ever ate, slept or went to the bathroom without having a major NAACP-type production."

> Sometimes we'd make a six-hundred-mile jump and stop only once. Then it would be a place where I couldn't get served, let alone crash the toilet without causing a scene. At first I used to be ashamed. Then finally I just said to hell with it. When I had to go I'd just ask the bus driver to stop and let me off at the side of the road. I'd rather go in the bushes than take a chance in the restaurants and towns.[34]

Billie Holiday experienced more than her share of racism. While she did not tend to engage in extended political analyses, she never attempted to conceal her loyalties. "I'm a race woman," she proclaimed on numerous occasions.[35] According to Josh White, who became her friend after an initial collision over his performance of "Strange Fruit," "she had more thought for humanity and was more race-conscious than people thought."[36]

Billie Holiday never witnessed a lynching firsthand. The fictionalized scene in the film *Lady Sings the Blues*, in which she sees a black man's body swinging from a tree, is a gross oversimplification of the artistic process. This scene suggests that Holiday could only do justice to the song if she had experienced a lynching firsthand. The film dismisses the connections between lynching—one extreme of racism—and the daily routines of discrimination which in some way affect every African American. Holiday's own description of the process that led her to embrace "Strange Fruit" recalls the perspective outlined by Frantz Fanon when he writes:

> One cannot say that a given country is racist but that lynchings or extermination camps are not to be found there. The truth is that all that and still other things exist on the horizon. These virtualities, these latencies circulate, carried by the life-stream of psycho-affective, economic relations.[37]

Fanon's observation also works in reverse: the specter of lynchings inevitably conjures up other forms of racism. Thus, the lyrics of "Strange Fruit" led Holiday to reflect upon the circumstances of her father's death.

Billie Holiday's gift of aesthetic communication did not consist simply in her ability to render in song the profound emotions underlying her own private woes. However skillful she may have been in musically conveying her own state of mind, she also achieved a mode of expression that forged community even as it remained deeply personal. Her songs acted as a conduit permitting others to acquire insights about the emotional and social circumstances of their own lives. For black people and their politically conscious white allies, "Strange Fruit" publicly bore witness to the corporeal devastation occasioned by lynching, as well as to the terrible psychic damage it inflicted on its victims and perpetrators alike. Her song also signified possibilities of ending this violence and the web of racist institutions implicated in the culture of lynching. For those who had not yet grasped the meaning of American racism, "Strange Fruit" compellingly stated the fact of lynching and passionately contested its cultural permanency. As critic Burt Korall said of Billie Holiday, she "so illuminated human situations as to give the listener a rare, if frightening, glimpse into the realities of experience. Where others fear to tread, she reached out and touched, where others mask their eyes, she defiantly kept hers open."[38]

"Strange Fruit" is a song that poses serious problems for its singer. Its metaphors are so forceful that an overly dramatic rendition might have transformed its powerful emotional content into histrionics. The intent behind the song—both Allen's and Holiday's—was to evoke solidarity in its listeners. This kind of art sometimes misses its aim and occasions pity instead. If those who were touched by "Strange Fruit" were left feeling pity for black victims of racism instead of compassion and solidarity, this pity would have recapitulated rather than contested the dynamics of racism. It would have affirmed rather than disputed the superior position of whiteness. But unless one is an incurable racist, it is difficult to listen to Billie Holiday singing "Strange Fruit" without recognizing the plea for human solidarity, and thus for the racial equality of black and white people in the process of challenging racist horrors and indignities. Her song appeals to listeners of all ethnic backgrounds to identify the "black bodies

swinging in the southern breeze" as human beings with the right to live and love. Jack Schiffman, son of Apollo Theatre owner Frank Schiffman, who initially argued against the inclusion of "Strange Fruit" in her Apollo show, described its impact on the audience when she sang it there for the first time. Following her performance there was "a moment of oppressively heavy silence . . . and then a kind of rustling sound I had never heard before. It was the sound of almost two thousand (black) people sighing."[39]

But, predictably, some listeners were impervious to her message. In a Los Angeles club a woman requested that Holiday sing "Strange Fruit" by saying, "Why don't you sing that sexy song you're so famous for? You know, the one about the naked bodies swinging in the trees."[40] Most accounts of this story simply point out that she refused to sing it. However, what is interesting about this anecdote that seems permanently fixed to the story of Holiday's relationship with "Strange Fruit" is the bizarre and racialized way the woman links the song with the ubiquitous engagement with sexuality in Holiday's work. Indeed, there is a silent dialectic throughout her body of work between pain and pleasure, love and death, destruction and the vision of a new order.[41] In the popular imagination, lynching was the established order's ideological affirmation and corporeal destruction of black hypersexuality. Because of the historical linkage of sexuality and freedom in black culture, Holiday's decision to foreground "Strange Fruit" in her musical oeuvre accorded her love songs a richly textured historical meaning.

Although Billie Holiday made "Strange Fruit" a permanent part of her repertoire soon after her decision to sing it at Café Society, she was unable to convince Columbia, the recording company with which she was under contract, to let her record it. "They won't buy it in the South" was the company's excuse. "We'll be boycotted. . . . It's too inflammatory."[42] Holiday persisted, and eventually Columbia released her for one recording date on Milt Gabler's Commodore label.

Billie Holiday's recording of "Strange Fruit" achieved something far greater than the permanent preservation of her most important song, the aesthetic centerpiece of her career. Eventually, millions heard her sing this haunting antilynching appeal—more people than she herself would ever have imagined. She could not have predicted that "Strange Fruit" would

impel people to discover within themselves a previously unawakened calling to political activism, but it did, and it does. She could not have foreseen the catalytic role her song would play in rejuvenating the tradition of protest and resistance in African-American and American traditions of popular music and culture. Nevertheless, Billie Holiday's recording of "Strange Fruit" persists as one of the most influential and profound examples—and continuing sites—of the intersection of music and social consciousness.

"Strange Fruit" was a frontal challenge not only to lynching and racism but to the policies of a government that implicitly condoned such activities, especially through its refusal to pass laws against lynching. The song was thus an undisguised rallying cry against the state. "The message of Lewis Allen's poem," in the words of jazz critic Leonard Feather,

> had a meaning more vital than any of the soufflé songs [Holiday] had been handed by record producers. This was the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism. It was radical and defiant at a time when blacks and whites alike found it dangerous to make waves, to speak out against a deeply entrenched status quo.[43]

Jazz critic Joachim Berendt called it "the most emphatic and most impassioned musical testimony against racism to become known before Abbey Lincoln's interpretation of Max Roach's 'Freedom Now Suite' of 1960."[44]

By transforming Lewis Allen's poem into an unsettling protest song and making it so central to her repertoire that it became her signature work, Holiday pioneered a tradition later taken up by musicians like Nina Simone, who would unabashedly incorporate into their musical creations explicit social critiques.[45] As a stylist, Holiday brought into popular musical culture a new and original approach to singing; with "Strange Fruit," her extraordinary interpretive capabilities blended with her consciousness as a black woman to create a particularly challenging brand of popular music that would be echoed by scores of singers and musicians who followed her,

and across a range of genres. "Strange Fruit" stood out from the rest of Holiday's repertoire in so pronounced a manner as to irretrievably prick the collective conscience of her listeners, both her contemporaries and subsequent generations. By disrupting the landscape of material she had performed prior to integrating "Strange Fruit" into her repertoire, she reaffirmed among her musical colleagues the import of employing their medium in the quest for social justice, thus perpetuating its musical voice.

At the same time, Holiday was following in the footsteps of a host of black artists who preceded her, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, who to varying degrees—and against the social conventions and expectations of the dominant culture, including the music industry itself—incorporated into their music their own brand of critical social consciousness. Holiday hardly forged this tradition—indeed, its roots lie in the early days of slavery—but she most decidedly stands as a bridge between the past and the present, with her career as a galvanizing transition between her musical ancestors and descendants. It is in Billie Holiday that we can identify links, for example, between the classic blues of Bessie Smith and the contemporary rhythm and blues of artists such as Tracy Chapman and Erykah Badu. Chapman is known first and foremost for the sociopolitical character of her songs, while Badu, also known as a socially conscious artist, has been explicitly compared to Billie Holiday for her musical phrasing. Whatever the merits of her music, Badu's occasional vocal resemblance to Holiday is an oft-articulated reason for her popularity among young people today. Such evocations of Holiday—both Badu's emulation and her fans' referencing of Lady Day—are a testament to the staying power of Billie Holiday's legacy, and indeed to her impact upon black popular culture as a whole.