

Fall 2024

## Professional Mourning: Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and the Remaking of Black Consciousness

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### Recommended Citation

Ng, Samuel Galen, "Professional Mourning: Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and the Remaking of Black Consciousness" (2024). Africana Studies: Faculty Publications, Smith College, Northampton, MA.  
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*Professional Mourning: Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit"  
and the Remaking of Black Consciousness*

Samuel Galen Ng

How can I tell you?  
As a boy,  
I was frightened by Billie's song,  
The way a child is frightened,  
Begins to fathom his own  
Capacity for mourning,  
Learning a grief  
That is racial,  
Cached in the soul  
From generations of suffering  
—Everything in our people  
That is strangulated, stillborn.<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to thank performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o for offering the conception of Holiday as a professional mourner, which I have developed here. I also thank my friends and colleagues Brooks Swett and Jennifer Guglielmo as well as the *Journal of African American History's* two readers for their astute feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

1. Cyrus Cassells, "Strange Fruit," *Callaloo*, no. 18 (Spring-Summer 1983): 5–6.

*The Journal of African American History*, volume 108, number 4, fall 2023.

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In his 1983 poem “Strange Fruit,” Cyrus Cassells, the presumed speaker, recalls his childhood experience hearing Billie Holiday sing “Strange Fruit.” Tellingly, Cassells can only relate this experience years after its occurrence. Even then, he struggles to narrate it, asking, “How can I tell you” about this? Cassells suggests that his experience, and perhaps the Black experience in general, of hearing Holiday sing “Strange Fruit” was mournful, traumatizing, and largely unspeakable, at least within a public sphere. Still, Cassells manages to describe his encounter with Holiday’s haunting song, highlighting how it frightened him but did so in a productive, pedagogical way: it prompted him not only to mourn but also to reflect on the significance of such mourning, namely, the ways in which his own Black subjectivity was and is structured around grief stemming from generations of suffering. Holiday’s performance thus transformed Cassells’s consciousness in a way that was ultimately, as the poem goes on to suggest, politically galvanizing—the poem ends with Cassells listening to Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” as an adult and dreaming of a world without racism.<sup>2</sup>

Cassells’s poem speaks to the ways Black listeners experienced Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” as a politicizing song of mourning. This article explores such experiences by examining the impact that Holiday’s singing of “Strange Fruit” had on African American audiences from 1939 until Holiday’s death in 1959. It argues that Holiday’s performances embodied and induced a state of mourning by way of their politically strategic efforts to frame Black existence as a site of ongoing endangerment and corresponding fear. I should note, here, that I view *mourning* as the public expression of *grief*, which refers to one’s relatively private or internalized grappling with the loss of something. With carefully crafted, professional expertise, Holiday’s mournful singing generated a feeling of shared vulnerability among her Black audiences and, furthermore, presented that feeling as the very foundation of Black being. Effecting its intended political work, her singing thus prompted some of these listeners to commit themselves to eradicating the social and political conditions that reproduced the pervasive feelings of threat and trepidation structuring their own Blackness.

Billie Holiday had already accrued celebrity status within the jazz world before she began performing what would become her signature song, “Strange Fruit,” across a twenty-year period. In addition to living through an advantageous historical era for political activism, she possessed the talent, work ethic, and personal experience required to become a designated professional mourner within the larger Black Freedom Struggle. To suggest that Holiday was “designated” to take up this position is not meant to strip her of political agency. Rather, I mean to underscore her initial reluctance to perform a song that

2. Ibid.

differed starkly from others in her repertoire and that could have deleteriously affected her career if not also endangered her life. Holiday was invited to sing this song by her White male colleagues, who believed she possessed the potential to be a professional mouthpiece for the anti-lynching ballad, which had been circulating through predominantly White leftist milieus for about a year prior. That Holiday accepted this invitation and committed herself so deeply to the song underscores her own political resolve and willingness to sacrifice her emotional and physical well-being and risk her livelihood to advance the Black Freedom Struggle.

Holiday liked to say that she never performed the same song twice, and “Strange Fruit” was no exception. She worked assiduously to perfect and rearticulate the piece, which came to mean so much to her. Through “Strange Fruit,” Holiday embodied and performed a collective sense of Black suffering that persisted into and beyond the midcentury. Her repeatedly altered renditions of this song and her masterful efforts to embody anew the haunting legacies of anti-Black persecution worked to reinforce such legacies as the bedrock of Black subjectivity. By provoking and rendering even more acute feelings of persistent, collective endangerment among her Black audiences, Holiday fortified their commitment to anti-lynching and Black liberation.

Researchers of “Strange Fruit” have tended to focus attention on White audiences. Doing so is understandable, since Holiday’s audiences were often predominantly White and were, consequentially, responsible for generating most of the firsthand testimonies detailing audience reception. Still, the song reached and deeply affected Black people during and beyond the two decades Holiday sang it. Investigating *this* experience, as it surfaces in archives, newspapers, interviews, poems, and films, illuminates how the song functioned as a performance of mourning, a sentiment not typically expressed by contemporary White audience members nor by critics of the song—journalist David Margolick, who has conducted extensive research on the song, describes Holiday’s early performances of it as a “call to arms,” whose “prevailing sentiment is not grief or defeat but cockiness and contempt.”<sup>3</sup> This article seeks less to contest this view than to expand upon it by focusing on Black experiences of the song, like those of Cassells, which were indeed often oriented around grief. Exploring “Strange Fruit” in this way, as a performance of mourning for Black auditors, showcases how Holiday, by way of her skillful and repeated confluences of Black being with endangerment and fear, ultimately affirmed and transformed Black consciousness in educational and politically inspiring ways in and beyond the years she sang it.

3. David Margolick, “A Song That Reverberates in the American Soul,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2000.

## TROUBLING COMPLACENCY

Between 1877 and 1950, over four thousand Black people in the United States lost their lives to lynching.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, lynching had shifted from being an expedient form of vigilante punishment used to enforce a frontier social order to a racist means of maintaining white supremacy, particularly in the South.<sup>5</sup> While Black people were more likely to experience other forms of racist discrimination, harassment, and abuse on a daily basis, two or three Black people were known to be lynched each week in the South in the period 1890–1917.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not it was taking place, though, lynching loomed large in the Black imagination as a particularly terrifying threat, a fiercely brutal and ubiquitous possibility.

By the time Billie Holiday started singing “Strange Fruit” in the late 1930s, the number of documented lynchings in the United States had been declining steadily—from twenty in 1935 to fewer than ten in each of the following thirty years, as recorded by the Tuskegee Institute.<sup>7</sup> A number of socioeconomic, demographic, and political phenomena contributed to the decline in lynching.<sup>8</sup> Especially crucial, however, for expediting and ensuring this decline was the ongoing anti-lynching movement, which effectively challenged the commonsense logics that legitimated lynching, successfully stigmatizing it by the 1930s as a barbaric and shameful act. Thus, by the time Holiday began singing “Strange Fruit,” White southerners largely viewed lynching as an embarrassment, a threat to the region’s reputation and economic aspirations.<sup>9</sup>

Southerners navigated these shifts in public attitude by relying ever more on the state’s criminal justice system to continue carrying out the work that it had

4. See Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd ed. (Montgomery, AL, 2017).

5. Mary Jane Brown, *Eradicating This Evil: Women in the American Anti-lynching Movement, 1892–1940* (New York, 2000), 3.

6. Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009), 1; Anthony C. Siracusa, *Nonviolence before King: The Politics of Being and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2021), 147; Andrew Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa: Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South* (Princeton, NJ, 2010), 40.

7. Samuel P. Perry, “Competing Image Vernaculars in the Anti-lynching Movement of the 1930’s” (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2011), 123; Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia, 1980), 7; Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 261.

8. These phenomena included the modernization of the rural South’s plantation economy, the mass migration of Black people out of the South, and the increasing involvement of the federal government, during the New Deal years, in southern criminal matters. See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880–1930* (Urbana, IL, 1993), 209, 251. See also Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 262.

9. Amy Louise Wood and Susan V. Donaldson, “Lynching’s Legacy in American Culture,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 62, no. 1–2 (Winter 2008/Spring 2009): 13.

performed since the late nineteenth century, alongside lynching and a slew of other practices, of violently regulating Black life. Unlike lynching, the criminal justice system could accomplish this work in a relatively humane manner that was, strictly speaking, legal albeit still woefully cruel and unfair in practice—African Americans comprised 22 percent of the South's population in the period between 1910 and 1950 but made up 75 percent of those executed in the South in this period.<sup>10</sup> By the late 1930s, in other words, the function of lynching had become more fully integrated into state operations and a staunchly white supremacist social order in general.<sup>11</sup> So while the decline in reported lynchings does indicate a growing opposition to lynching among the public, the racist, regulative work of lynching still endured legally within institutional and daily practices that organized Black American life.

Lynching, at the same time, remained a genuine threat, although it tended to take place in secret and lacked the public legitimacy of earlier years. While public opinion, even in the South, had shifted by the late 1930s toward favoring federal anti-lynching legislation, a majority of White Mississippians surveyed around this time expressed overt support for lynching in cases involving (alleged) sexual assault.<sup>12</sup> Despite persistent efforts on the part of activists, federal anti-lynching legislation was once again blocked by southern filibusters in the Senate after passing in the House of Representatives in 1937 and again in 1940. These filibusters were both symbolic of and a mechanism for sustaining the capacity of lynching to jeopardize Black lives with impunity at the state and federal levels.

Anti-lynching activists responded vigorously to this shifting landscape of anti-Black persecution. That there were fewer recorded lynchings taking place by the mid- to late 1930s worked, in fact, to reenergize the anti-lynching movement, which could now give relatively more attention and resources to those that did occur.<sup>13</sup> For activists, in these years, the fact that *any* lynchings were still taking place constituted a grotesque violation of the nation's alleged egalitarian, democratic ideals, one rendered especially hypocritical in the World War II era, as the country waged an international war against fascist forces.<sup>14</sup>

10. Seth Kotch, *Lethal State: A History of the Death Penalty in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019), 17, 30. See also Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3rd ed. (Montgomery, AL, 2017).

11. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 262–63. See also Kotch, *Lethal State*, 55–56.

12. Donald Clarke, *Wisbing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday* (New York, 1994), 166; Perry, "Competing Image Vernaculars," 123; Zangrando, *NAACP Crusade*, 148; Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (New York, 1939), x, 389.

13. Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 248.

14. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 193, 197–98. See also Wood and Donaldson, "Lynching's Legacy in American Culture," 13.

The anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” emerged within this heady context. Authored by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish public school English teacher in New York City with communist affinities, it originated as a poem and was later set to music. As a prolific writer and musician, Meeropol penned incendiary social and political commentary.<sup>15</sup> The text of his poem, originally titled “Bitter Fruit,” which appeared in 1937 in the *New York Teacher*, a teachers’ union publication, can serve as a template for “Strange Fruit,” a poem and song whose various versions show minor changes in punctuation but retain the original content:<sup>16</sup>

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
 (Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,)  
 Black body 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,  
 (And 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 a tree to drop,  
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.<sup>17</sup>

Meeropol’s satirical anti-lynching poem expands the purported scope of lynching’s violence. It not only depicts an atrocious lynching event but also underscores how the aftermath of lynching continues to violate the Black body—quietly, daily—over time into the present. It forces its readers to dwell slowly in this cross-temporal scene of subjugation and engage it in a multisensorial way. Such an engagement calls upon readers to be acutely attentive to the enduring violence of lynching and its aftermath and, concomitantly, to their own complacency in confronting white supremacy. In compelling readers to fully reckon with the loss and circumscription of Black life, to *mourn* Black life under threat, Meeropol’s poem encouraged its readers to rectify the conditions

15. Nancy Kovaleff Baker, “Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan): Political Commentator and Social Conscience,” *American Music* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 25–26.

16. Lewis Allan, “Strange Fruit” (New York, 1939), box 14, fol. 14, Abel Meeropol Collection, Boston University (hereafter cited as MC).

17. Abel Meeropol, “Bitter Fruit,” *New York Teacher* 1, no. 12 (January 1937): 17.



that reproduced “Strange Fruit,” both the spectacular and the ordinary manifestations of Jim Crow racism.

#### A QUALIFIED MOURNER

Billie Holiday deployed her life and artistry to embody and articulate the suffering and endangerment of Black people at the heart of Meeropol’s poem. She labored to transform such suffering into a sonic vehicle for collective mourning, education, and, ultimately, a newly invigorated political resolve. Holiday animated “Strange Fruit” in a way no performer had done before or would do after. She took what had been an anti-lynching protest poem and song, developed within the predominantly White leftist circles of the antifascist Popular Front, and recast it into a spellbinding performance of political mourning. Although only twenty-three years old when she first sang “Strange Fruit,” Holiday had by that point already enjoyed an illustrious career, albeit one that developed alongside an array of personal struggles. Born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia in 1915, Holiday grew up in working-class Baltimore. By 1929, she had relocated with her mother to Harlem, where she honed her craft by singing in speakeasies and nightclubs. John Hammond of Columbia Records heard her singing and arranged recording sessions with her and Benny Goodman in 1933 and with Teddy Wilson in 1935. She debuted at the Apollo Theater in 1934 and sang in Duke Ellington’s film *Symphony in Black* in 1935. She toured with Count Basie’s and Artie Shaw’s bands before arriving at Café Society in December 1938. She first performed “Strange Fruit” there a few months later. By this time, her recordings were already jukebox hits, and she was known, at least within the jazz world, as a prominent big band vocalist.<sup>18</sup>

As a celebrity, Holiday intrigued and mystified the public.<sup>19</sup> Her enigmatic quality captivated people; they longed to know her and what she represented.<sup>20</sup> Those close to Holiday often identified tragedy and pain as the most salient features of her persona. Indeed, Jack Schiffman, whose family owned the Apollo Theater, claimed to have never met a more “tragic figure” than Holiday.<sup>21</sup> Motown record founder Berry Gordy recalled that Holiday “sang from her soul, about her

18. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2010), 341–42. See also David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, 2000), 30–31.

19. See Glen Coulter, “Billie Holiday,” in *The Art of Jazz*, ed. Martin T. Williams (New York), box 15, fol. 27, MC.

20. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York, 2001), 158–59.

21. Jack Schiffman, *Uptown: The Story of Harlem’s Apollo Theatre* (New York, 1971), 83.



troubled life, coming from a place of both pain and purity.”<sup>22</sup> The singer Lena Horne likewise recollected that Holiday “had this air of sensuality and delicateness—and yet such open pain.”<sup>23</sup> The tragic public image of Holiday stemmed not from a calculated act but from real hardships that Holiday endured, but it still constituted a relatively reductive caricature of her dynamic life and personality. As Holiday said regarding the media’s portrayal of her: “They don’t remember the woman—they just remember the wreck.”<sup>24</sup> Eventually, as Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests, the stories of her arrests and drug addiction fused with her stage persona, that of the charismatic, sensual Lady Day, to create a new image: the ever-suffering Black woman who naturally sings her woes.<sup>25</sup>

Scholars have rightfully sought to refocus attention away from the calamities of Holiday’s life and toward the artistry of her singing and to make clear that the latter was not simply a product of the former. Yet as Robert O’Meally notes, Holiday’s dramatic lived experiences undoubtedly impacted and enriched her art—she could not help but be aware, sometimes with painful intimacy, of the adversity about which she sang.<sup>26</sup> At various times in her life, Holiday struggled with poverty, sexual assault, racism, drugs, alcohol, the death of her parents, family problems, the police and federal officials, and abusive men, difficulties that continued up until she was arrested for narcotics possession on her deathbed in 1959. O’Meally describes Holiday’s life as an “audacious self-invention,” a quest for power by a person who understood that she was born into a situation of comprehensive disfranchisement as a poor Black female “bastard” whose father was rarely around, whose mother was rejected by the rest of the family, and who was herself rejected.<sup>27</sup> Singing granted Holiday one of the few opportunities available to her as an uneducated Black woman to make money and access new social and aesthetic worlds, and it enabled her to make sense of and exert some authority over the experiences of her past and present life.<sup>28</sup>

Although Holiday had not herself witnessed a lynching, she had encountered racism directly throughout her life. Indeed, she left Artie Shaw’s all-White band in large part due to the constant indignities she suffered as its only Black member.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, close friends of hers had experienced lynching

22. Berry Gordy, *To Be Loved: The Music, the Magic, the Memories of Motown* (New York, 1994), 73.

23. Lena Horne, as told to Audreen Buffalo, “Lena!,” *Essence*, May 1985, 150.

24. Billie Holiday, “The Last Interview: ‘I Needed Heroin to Live,’” *Confidential Magazine*, October 1959, in *Billie Holiday: The Last Interview and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, NY, 2019), 100.

25. Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 31, 73.

26. Robert O’Meally, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (New York, 1991), 11.

27. *Ibid.*, 14, 172–75.

28. *Ibid.*, 175–76. See also Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 24.

29. See Dave Dexter Jr., “I’ll Never Sing With a Dance Band Again—Holiday,” *Down Beat*, November 1, 1939.

firsthand—the saxophonist Lester Young apparently helped his cousin escape a lynch mob when they were both in their early teens, and the singer Lena Horne fled a lynching in Miami when she was a child.<sup>30</sup>

Drawing upon these experiences, Holiday made clear that she identified with and cared deeply for oppressed people, especially poor and working-class African Americans.<sup>31</sup> Holiday called herself a “race woman,” feminizing the customary term “race man” used in this period to identify those engaged in the pursuit of Black empowerment.<sup>32</sup> Holiday did not elaborate, however, on what exactly the term “race woman” meant to her.<sup>33</sup> Such an elaboration, she likely felt, was unnecessary given how she demonstrated her politics both in the unapologetic way she lived her life—which was widely read as too lavish, hedonistic, and reckless for a Black woman of her public standing and influence—and in her work, especially her commitment to the incendiary “Strange Fruit,” the singing of which, she was well aware, generated enemies around her.<sup>34</sup>

Performing “Strange Fruit” allowed Holiday to voice the daily troubles of African Americans.<sup>35</sup> When her mother asked her why she would be willing to risk her career and possibly her life to sing “Strange Fruit,” Holiday responded that it “might make things better” and that it was a worthy undertaking even if she never lived to see the results.<sup>36</sup> In the language of cultural critic and philosopher David Kim, Holiday formulated her agency as a *vocation*, a calling that “insists that there are some things we simply must do and some ways of life we simply must choose to live.”<sup>37</sup> Fans began requesting the song, and it soon became a staple of Holiday’s repertoire. She continued to sing it even though it physically sickened her to do so. She stated in her autobiography

30. Julia Blackburn, *With Billie* (New York, 2005), 109. See also Lena Horne and David Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” May 23, 2012, in *Fishko Files*, produced by Sara Fishko, podcast, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/211902-strange-fruit/>.

31. Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York, 1998), 162, 193.

32. Dawn-Wisteria Bates, “Race Woman: The Political Consciousness of Billie Holiday” (MA thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2001), 34–35.

33. Barry Ulanov, “Day or Night, a Great Lady,” *Metronome* (October 1948): 14.

34. Jo Jones, interview in *Billie*, directed by James Erskine (Universal Studios, 2020), 98 min.; Kim Nalley, “*Billie* Documentary Is Actually Linda Kuehl on Billie,” Eat Drink Films, <https://eatdrinkfilms.com/2020/12/14/billie-documentary-is-actually-linda-kuehl-on-billie/>; Billie Holiday, quoted in Michael Levin, “Don’t Blame Show Biz!,” *Downbeat Magazine*, June 4, 1947, in *Billie Holiday: The Last Interview*, 16.

35. Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 139.

36. Billie Holiday, quoted in Meg Greene, *Billie Holiday: A Biography* (Westport, CT, 2007), 61. See also David Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” *Vanity Fair*, September 1998, 315.

37. David Kyuman Kim, *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics* (New York, 2007), 139.

that she felt compelled to sing the song because it “goes a long way in telling how they mistreat Negroes down South.”<sup>38</sup> Contemporary jazz critic Barry Ulanov encapsulated Holiday’s commitment to racial politics in writing that anyone “who has watched Billie sing *Strange Fruit* knows what the singing of that song does to her; anybody who really knows her knows that her tears over the victims of lynch mobs only stop when she wrenches herself violently away from the facts of Negro life.”<sup>39</sup> Tellingly, Holiday kept singing “Strange Fruit” throughout the McCarthy years, even as other civil rights leaders agreed to neutralize their politics.<sup>40</sup>

Holiday’s celebrity status, tragic public persona, traumatic life experiences, race-conscious politics, and dedication to addressing the plights of the down-trodden positioned her well for the role she came to embrace as a medium for the anti-lynching cause, but it was of course her singular voice and disciplined professional approach to her art that actualized this politics. Despite her small vocal range, Holiday had the capacity to profoundly affect audiences, to silence and unhinge them emotionally. She could make each member of her audience feel as though she were singing directly to them and could thereby produce a kind of collective public intimacy, or what performance theorist Shane Vogel has described as “shared inwardness.”<sup>41</sup> In her later years, Holiday counteracted the physical deterioration of her voice with the aura of maturity and wisdom she projected as well as with the arsenal of honed techniques that she now had at her disposal.<sup>42</sup> She declared in her autobiography, published three years before her death, that she was singing better than she ever had before.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, some scholars have found her later voice to be more intimate and greater overall in its communicative capacity.<sup>44</sup>

Holiday was known for her adept creativity in deconstructing and refashioning the insipid lyrics that were often offered to her by record producers. She restructured timing and rhythm as well, purposefully lagging behind the beat to cultivate a sense of suspense.<sup>45</sup> She prided herself on her uniquely slow

38. Billie Holiday, quoted in Greene, *Billie Holiday*, 61.

39. Ulanov, “Day or Night, a Great Lady,” 14.

40. See Farah Jasmine Griffin’s interview in *Strange Fruit*, directed by Joel Katz (California Newsreel, 2002), videocassette (VHS), 58 min.

41. Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 17. Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago, 2009), 23, 29.

42. Leslie Gourse, preface to *The Billie Holiday Companion: Seven Decades of Commentary*, ed. Leslie Gourse (New York, 1997), xviii. See also O’Meally, *Lady Day*, 157.

43. Billie Holiday with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York, 1956), 215.

44. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 172.

45. Gary Giddins, “Lady Gets Her Due/The Complete Lady,” in Gourse, *Billie Holiday Companion*, 91.

cadences, which could be put to particularly effective use in dirges like “Strange Fruit.”<sup>46</sup> The way Holiday controlled her body also assisted in her performances of mourning. She brought a gravity to nightclub spaces not only through such subject matter as lynching but also through her minimalist style of delivery.<sup>47</sup> Holiday, in general, stripped songs down to their bare essentials and sang them economically, perhaps with just a few concentrated notes and slight yet still significant alterations in articulation, phrasing, and rhythm.<sup>48</sup> Except for a snapping hand or beating knee to keep time (gestures she usually abandoned when singing “Strange Fruit”), she held her body still, and her expressions and mannerisms were sparse and controlled.<sup>49</sup> Never one for extravagance in performance, Holiday typically came onto the stage, sang, and left. Her dignified professionalism contrasted sharply with the minstrel-style depictions of Black people found within contemporary film and radio.<sup>50</sup>

Holiday’s ingenuity, hauntingly intimate singing, and stark performance style combined with her reputation, personal experiences, politics, and a generally advantageous historical period for antiracist protest to lead to her nomination and development as the right mouthpiece for “Strange Fruit.” The song came to Holiday by way of Robert Gordon and the Theatre Arts Committee (TAC). TAC, a group initially organized to raise funds to aid loyalist Republicans against Francisco Franco’s military coup in Spain, presented “Strange Fruit” in one of its political cabarets.<sup>51</sup> Gordon coproduced the TAC cabaret, in which he heard “Strange Fruit” performed in late 1938. Gordon was also responsible for directing the first floor show at the soon-to-be-opened Café Society, owned by Barney Josephson.<sup>52</sup> Gordon introduced the song to Josephson, and the two of them invited Meeropol to the nightclub to sing and play it for Billie Holiday, who, having recently left Artie Shaw’s band, was to perform at the club’s opening on December 28, 1938.<sup>53</sup> Josephson thought the song would fit the club’s political theme and that Holiday was the right candidate to sing it—but only if she so desired, as was Josephson’s policy. Josephson saw the political potential in having Holiday sing a song that contrasted sharply

46. Holiday with Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 47.

47. See O’Meally, *Lady Day*, 31.

48. Ibid., 32–33, 198. See also Ralph J. Gleason, “The Golden Years,” in Gourse, *Billie Holiday Companion*, 78.

49. Melvin Maddocks, “Turning Back the Clock for Lady Day,” in Gourse, *Billie Holiday Companion*, 175. See also Seymour Peck, “Jazz Singing To Remember,” *PM*, n.d., Billie Holiday Clip-pings, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University (hereafter cited as IJS).

50. O’Meally, *Lady Day*, 30–31.

51. Lewis Allan to Linda Kuehl, July 28, 1971, box 12, fol. 2, MC.

52. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 37.

53. Leonard Feather, “Café Society,” *Melody Maker*, March 15, 1941, 5.

with her persona and repertory—while Holiday had already experienced her share of personal difficulty, her public persona as a tragic figure had not yet solidified. Her reputation at this point was that of the finely adorned Lady Day with an aristocratic bearing.<sup>54</sup>

Holiday debuted the song sometime around February 10, 1939.<sup>55</sup> She was at first reluctant to sing it but stayed true to her own politics as a “race woman” and decided to adopt and transform it into her own “personal protest,” and it soon became indelibly identified with her.<sup>56</sup> “Strange Fruit” deeply impacted Holiday’s career and advanced her reputation as a politically conscious artist. It marked the second phase of her repertoire as she turned in the 1940s to singing slower, more mournful dirges and torch tunes.<sup>57</sup> According to David Margolick, something of the melancholy of “Strange Fruit” seems to have remained with Holiday for the rest of her life.<sup>58</sup> She dedicated herself to the song, which developed into the centerpiece of her repertoire.<sup>59</sup> It came to mean so much to her personally that she grew possessive of it and resented when others like Black blues and folk singer Josh White covered it. She often claimed that the song was written specifically for her.<sup>60</sup> As the turmoil of her personal life mounted across the 1940s, Holiday turned to the song for solace or a means of expressing her own pain.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, her piano accompanist Mal Waldron recalls that she would often sing it when things were going badly in her life.<sup>62</sup> In her hands, the song was simultaneously a personal and a political performance of mourning.

#### A SPACE FOR MOURNING

Holiday needed literal space in which to perform mourning, and it had to be meticulously crafted to enable “Strange Fruit” to carry out the political work that Meeropol and Holiday hoped it would. Initially, that space was, and perhaps only could have been, Café Society, which was located in a basement, a former speakeasy at 2 Sheridan Square in New York City’s Greenwich Village.<sup>63</sup>

54. O’Meally, *Lady Day*, 133–36. See also Barney Josephson and Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People* (Urbana, IL, 2009), 46.

55. Barney Josephson, untitled document, n.d., box 12, fol. 2, MC. See also Baker, “Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allan),” 75–76 n. 56.

56. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 46–47. See also Holiday with Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 98.

57. O’Meally, *Lady Day*, 9.

58. Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” *Vanity Fair*, 312.

59. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 187.

60. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 47.

61. *Ibid.*, 112–13.

62. *Ibid.*, 124. See also Blackburn, *With Billie*, 112.

63. Stuart Nicholson, *Billie Holiday* (London, 1995), 110.

Like Holiday's rendition of the song, the club itself represented a fusion of jazz and Popular Front politics. Its owner, Barney Josephson, the son of Latvian immigrants and a former shoe salesman with no experience in the entertainment business, endeavored to open a fully integrated nightclub, the first of its kind in New York City outside Harlem.<sup>64</sup> Café Society differed from integrated Harlem nightclubs like the Savoy Ballroom in its explicit endorsement of a prolabor, antifascist, antiracist politics.<sup>65</sup> The employees of Café Society were all unionized, and the performers participated frequently in fundraisers for a variety of leftist causes.<sup>66</sup>

Aware of her presence as a Black woman singing about lynching before a predominantly White audience, Holiday delivered "Strange Fruit" with purposeful intensity and demanded total attention from her spectators.<sup>67</sup> As Josephson recalls, Holiday never moved when she performed the song. She held her arms at her side and did not even touch the microphone.<sup>68</sup> While the song certainly affected her personally, Holiday strove to craft and edit her emotional, corporeal, and vocal performances of it. As she explained in her autobiography, "I worked like the devil on it because I was never sure I could put it across or that I could get across to a plush night-club audience the things that it meant to me."<sup>69</sup>

Holiday's efforts were aided by Josephson's ritualistic staging of the song. Josephson, who considered "Strange Fruit" agitprop to be executed dramatically, not only insisted that Holiday close each of her three nightly sets with it but also sought to promote an atmosphere within the club that would be conducive for intensifying its impact.<sup>70</sup> Before Holiday began singing, Josephson halted all service. Waiters had to freeze wherever they were with whatever they were carrying.<sup>71</sup> Josephson demanded stillness, silence, and darkness. Loud customers were asked to leave.<sup>72</sup> Not even a match could be struck.<sup>73</sup> The house lights went down, and a small pin spot illuminated Holiday's face. When she had finished, she stood motionless as the pin spot went out. Holiday

64. Denning, *Cultural Front*, 325.

65. David W. Stowe, "The Politics of Café Society," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (March 1998): 1387 n. 5, 1406.

66. Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics during World War II* (New York, 2013), 45. See also Stowe, "Politics of Café Society," 1397.

67. Bates, "Race Woman," 38. See also Dorothy Vella to David Margolick, July 15, 1999, Dave Margolick Correspondence, IJS.

68. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 48.

69. Holiday with Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 99.

70. John White, *Billie Holiday: Her Life & Times* (New York, 1987), 50.

71. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 47.

72. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 50.

73. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 48.



then walked off and, as instructed, did not return to the stage even for a bow, no matter how thunderous the applause. When the lights came back, she had vanished but, akin to the lynching victims in the song, remained a haunting presence.<sup>74</sup> People had to remember “Strange Fruit,” Josephson explained, and get their “insides burned with it.”<sup>75</sup> Josephson hoped that when people exited Café Society they would “remember every word of the song or at least [go] out thinking about it.”<sup>76</sup> Still, Josephson would eventually cut the tension by having the band go into a dance, a move some clubgoers found diluted the song’s resonating effect.<sup>77</sup>

Holiday was hesitant the first time she sang “Strange Fruit” and regretted it momentarily when she finished it to no applause.<sup>78</sup> After this initial silence, a lone person started clapping nervously and was then joined by the rest of the club.<sup>79</sup> It felt to Josephson like a “bomb” was dropped that, before exploding, had incited an interval of absolute silence. Then people rose to applaud—it was a “terrific thing.”<sup>80</sup> Entertainment and gossip columnists started writing about the song.<sup>81</sup> Josephson now advertised not only Holiday but also “Strange Fruit,” and people flocked to the club to request it.<sup>82</sup> Holiday’s career took off. According to jazz critic Leonard Feather, she began to amass a host of fans among the intelligentsia and the Left.<sup>83</sup> Holiday told pianist Teddy Wilson around 1941 that she had finally found a singing style that satisfied her, one developed during her time at Café Society.<sup>84</sup> With her rising stardom, Holiday began attracting offers that Josephson could not match, and she left Café Society after an initial nine-month stint there.<sup>85</sup> She continued to perform “Strange Fruit” wherever she went for the rest of her career and kept much of Josephson’s staging—indeed, she sang it only at the end of her sets.<sup>86</sup> A maître d’ at New York’s Birdland apparently confiscated all cigarettes so that Holiday

74. Nicholson, *Billie Holiday*, 113. See also Linda Kuehl book manuscript, MC-079, box 1, fol. 9, IJS.

75. Barney Josephson, quoted in Stowe, “Politics of Café Society,” 1395.

76. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 47.

77. Linda Kuehl book manuscript, MC-079, box 1, fol. 9, IJS. See also Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 51–52.

78. Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” *Vanity Fair*, 312.

79. Holiday with Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 99.

80. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 48.

81. *Ibid.*

82. Greene, *Billie Holiday*, 61. See also Blackburn, *With Billie*, 111.

83. Linda Kuehl book manuscript, MC-079, box 1, fol. 9, IJS.

84. *Ibid.* See also Denning, *Cultural Front*, 327.

85. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 58. See also Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon*, 172–73.

86. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society*, 52.



could perform the song in total darkness except for the pin spot on her face. When club owners refused to let her sing "Strange Fruit," Holiday demanded a clause in her contract that would enable her to do so whenever she desired.<sup>87</sup> The song, at least where it could be safely performed, became a nightly ritual for Holiday, and the applause it garnered grew ever more enthusiastic.<sup>88</sup>

#### DISSEMINATING "STRANGE FRUIT"

Café Society patrons began inquiring when they could expect to hear a recording of "Strange Fruit." Fearing a loss of White southern customers, Columbia Records refused to produce the song.<sup>89</sup> Holiday, however, in a demonstration of her dedication to broadcasting the song's political message, convinced Columbia Records to release her from her exclusive contract so that she could do a one-time session to record the song with Milt Gabler's small, left-leaning Commodore Records.<sup>90</sup> Backed by Frankie Newton and his band, which also accompanied her at Café Society, Holiday thus came to first record "Strange Fruit" on April 20, 1939, at the Columbia-owned Brunswick label's World Broadcasting Studios.<sup>91</sup> The recording, overall, likely sounded quite similar to the live performances at Café Society.<sup>92</sup>

The record was released July 22, 1939, and sold ten thousand copies its first week.<sup>93</sup> Despite being priced at a dollar each, twenty-five cents more than most full-price records, the ten-inch record sold fifty thousand copies by 1946.<sup>94</sup> Gilbert Millstein of the *New Yorker* named the record Gabler's greatest commercial success. It outsold all other Commodore records, which were considered hits if they reached five or six thousand sales.<sup>95</sup> As Gabler explained, some of this success was no doubt due to the popularity of the song "Fine and Mellow" on the other side.<sup>96</sup> Still, the record enabled a significant number of dispersed White and Black audiences to experience Holiday's haunting execution of her "personal protest" song.<sup>97</sup>

87. Greene, *Billie Holiday*, 63.

88. Margolick, "Strange Fruit," *Vanity Fair*, 312.

89. O'Meally, *Lady Day*, 139.

90. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 63.

91. Greene, *Billie Holiday*, 61.

92. Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon*, 169.

93. Greene, *Billie Holiday*, 62.

94. Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon*, 169; Margolick, "Strange Fruit," *Vanity Fair*, 318; Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 68; Gilbert Millstein, "Profiles," *New Yorker*, March 9, 1946, 34.

95. Millstein, "Profiles," 34.

96. Josephson and Trilling-Josephson, *Cafe Society*, 52. See also Kitty Grime, *Jazz Voices* (London, 1983), 161.

97. Holiday with Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 98.

## REENVISIONING LYNCHING

Holiday's "Strange Fruit" invited White audience members to participate in a collective effort to produce an image of lynching that expanded upon those circulating in the anti-lynching press, which as visual representations might turn repulsed viewers away from the subject without fostering critical thought or antiracist action. It helped that Holiday's White audiences were often made up of relatively progressive patrons who could be receptive to a song like "Strange Fruit."<sup>98</sup> Such political leanings, however, could not mitigate the agonizing and transformative experience of hearing Holiday sing "Strange Fruit." For White audiences, Holiday inspired a discomfiting awareness of their own complacency and role in sustaining as normative anti-Black violence across the Jim Crow United States. Her singing prompted them to feel a range of emotions, including shock, horror, agony, and outrage, regarding the continued threat lynching posed to Black people. Concomitantly, the song generated feelings of guilt pertaining to their responsibility in enabling, and in turn preventing, lynching. In this way, Holiday galvanized White listeners to give more focused attention to lynching than they had and to work more actively toward eradicating it.<sup>99</sup>

The song's lyrics and Holiday's particular performances of it would have also challenged White audiences to view lynching as a specifically anti-Black violence in ways that differed from representations of lynching circulating in the 1930s in contemporary cinema and even in the larger anti-lynching movement, both of which portrayed lynching as a generic assault on civilization and democracy that threatened all Americans. Such portrayals stemmed, respectively, from various forms of censorship regulating the motion picture industry and from strategic attempts by Black anti-lynching activists to appeal to those White moderates who championed a lawfully organized society but still associated Blackness with criminality.<sup>100</sup> Through the absence of a visual representation, save her own multifaceted, Black embodiment, Holiday was able, then, to disrupt the relatively generic and cursory modes by which White people normatively encountered lynching and its attendant imagery. Via measured cadences and delivery, Holiday slowed this witnessing process down while infusing it with conflicting sensory experiences that extended well beyond

98. David L. Smith to David Margolick, June 19, 1999, Dave Margolick correspondence, IJS.

99. This summation of the song's impact on White listeners draws from the written testimonies that David Margolick collected for his research. See Bernice Brucker to David Margolick, May 24, 1999; George Sinclair to David Margolick, May 26, 1999; and Humphrey F. Noyes to David Margolick, June 1999, all in Dave Margolick correspondence, IJS.

100. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 225–28.

seeing.<sup>101</sup> Dorothy Vella, who collected Holiday's records and witnessed her perform "Strange Fruit" in nightclubs in the 1940s and 1950s, recalled: "It was actually *painful* to hear Billie sing that song. She made you feel the horror, the obscenity of lynching; you *saw* 'the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth'; you *smelled* 'the sudden smell of burning flesh.'" This haunting, multisensory encounter with lynching, Vella claimed, lingered with her across the half-century since she last witnessed Holiday perform the song.<sup>102</sup>

### CONJURING BLACK ENDANGERMENT

Black audiences responded to "Strange Fruit" in ways that overlapped with their White counterparts. The song also left them feeling outraged, shocked, and introspective and could likewise function as a politicizing vehicle in service of the anti-lynching movement, as was Holiday's intention. They tended, however, to engage the song in an even more direct and intimate way as a harrowing reminder of the violence that circumscribed *their* lives—as South African journalist and critic Khanya Mtshali has claimed in reflecting on her own experience of the song: "What Holiday created [in "Strange Fruit"] was something akin to a communal obituary for the premature deaths of black people at the hands of white supremacy."<sup>103</sup>

Singer Lena Horne reiterates this perspective in relating her experience hearing Holiday sing "Strange Fruit" in Café Society. "The song, I think, it tells a lot of things about life for Black people in those early years and even in the years before I was born [in 1917]," Horne avers: "So I mean it's a song about being *Black* and how dangerous and frightening it was to be it around."<sup>104</sup> According to Horne, then, the song not only narrated the daily struggles of life for Black people in the Jim Crow United States; it captured and expressed something as quintessential about Black subjectivity, namely, the pervasive feeling of endangerment and fear that underpinned it in these years. Indeed, Black American Erthel Mitchell described to journalist David Margolick how she consistently felt a sensation of fear along with outrage and horror every time she played her compact disc recording of Holiday singing "Strange Fruit."<sup>105</sup> In rendering Black subjectivity as an experience of endangerment and fear, Holiday's "Strange Fruit" offered Black people like Horne and Mitchell an

101. Ned Rorem, "That Blue Voice," *New York Times*, October 29, 1995, sec. 7, 32. See also Samuel Perry, "'Strange Fruit,' Ekphrasis, and the Lynching Scene," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 43, no. 5 (2013): 452–53, 463–65.

102. Dorothy Vella to David Margolick, July 15, 1999, Dave Margolick correspondence, IJS.

103. Khanya Mtshali, introduction to *Billie Holiday: The Last Interview*, viii.

104. Horne and Margolick, "Strange Fruit," *Fishko Files*.

105. Erthel Mitchell to David Margolick, June 1, 1999, Dave Margolick correspondence, IJS.

opportunity to mourn Black life under threat and then to work in more deliberate ways toward addressing that threat.

Within Black communities, then, and in the context of the anti-lynching movement, “Strange Fruit” was not simply a song of protest. Rather, as Farah Jasmine Griffin claims, it was an elegiac song, a “song of mourning” that incited activism.<sup>106</sup> Specifically, it worked to establish and maintain consciousness among Black people about lynching and the ways it collectively endangered them.<sup>107</sup> Such consciousness could not be taken for granted. This period saw the development of an urbanized African American middle class that challenged the unity of the Black community. Intraracial differences pertaining to class and region fueled the heterogeneity of Holiday’s Black audiences.<sup>108</sup> Black folks had frequently fled the South, after all, to distance themselves from lynching; for many, it was an excruciating subject best left untouched and unspoken.<sup>109</sup> By the 1940s, even the NAACP had begun to shift focus away from lynching, preferring instead to promote auspicious images of Black progress and accomplishment.<sup>110</sup> Yet lynching continued to menace Black people everywhere, and Holiday’s performances of “Strange Fruit,” in and outside the South over a twenty-year period, reminded them of this distressing reality—as Holiday’s piano accompanist Mal Waldron points out, the song was “like rubbing people’s noses in their own shit.”<sup>111</sup> Holiday embodied and enacted this reality on stage and through such efforts nurtured among Black audiences a group consciousness that many were understandably reluctant to acknowledge or embrace.

Such reluctance can be seen in the response to Holiday’s singing of “Strange Fruit” by one largely Black crowd at the Apollo Theater. This moment, worth quoting at length, appears in the memoir of Jack Schiffman, whose father, the theater owner, initially resisted having Holiday perform the controversial elegy.<sup>112</sup> Although Schiffman is a White man, his testimony offers valuable insight into the effect that Holiday’s singing of “Strange Fruit” had not only on White audience members, such as himself, but on Black ones too. Indeed, the collective sigh that Schiffman hears among the audience following Holiday’s performance is particularly noteworthy and will be unpacked in detail. Schiffman recalls:

106. See Farah Jasmine Griffin’s interview in Katz., dir., *Strange Fruit*.

107. Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 131–32.

108. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 171.

109. Albert Murray, quoted in Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 96. See also James H. Cone, “Strange Fruit: THE CROSS and the Lynching Tree,” *African American Pulpit* (Spring 2008): 19.

110. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*, 264.

111. Mal Waldron, quoted in Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” *Vanity Fair*, 312. See also Margolick, “A Song That Reverberates in the American Soul,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2000.

112. Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” *Vanity Fair*, 320.

Not all of the magical moments are of the riotous variety. Some, like Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit," are so quiet you want to cry out your heartbreak. The song portrays lynched black bodies—the "strange fruit"—swinging from trees, blood oozing from twisted lips, the bruises on their faces changing from black to blacker. If you heard it done anywhere else, you might have been touched and nothing more. But at the Apollo the song took on profound intimations. Not only did you see the "fruit" evoked in all its graphic horror, but you saw in Billie Holiday the wife or sister or mother of one of the victims beneath the tree, almost prostrate with sorrow and fury. . . . And when she wrenched the final words from her lips, there was not a soul in that audience, black *or* white, who did not feel half strangled. A moment of oppressively heavy silence followed, and then a kind of rustling sound I had never heard before. It was the sound of almost two thousand people sighing. One of those sighs was my own. I felt as if I had just had a noose removed from my neck.<sup>113</sup>

Holiday's subtle, intimate, quiet singing skillfully aroused "profound intimations" among the patrons of the Apollo. Her performance induced a visuality, allowing attendees not only to witness an act of anti-Black affliction but also to envision her as related to the event in a familial way. Through her performance and Black embodiment, Holiday became part of the lynching scene and implicated her audience in it as well, positioning Black and even White audience members as potential victims of the mob, compelling them to *feel* the threat of lynching in an inescapably immediate way. In so doing, Holiday generated opportunities, however limited and ephemeral, for White audience members to feel solidarity with the victims of lynching and, by extension, with Black people at large and for Black audience members to experience a kind of reluctant recognition concerning their common peril.

She thus fostered a sense of commonality among her diverse spectators, one wrought through the invocation of a feeling of shared vulnerability. Through her narration and delivery of the lyrics and her on- and offstage embodiment of Black suffering, Holiday dissolved whatever distance her northern, urban audience members may have felt from the incursion of racist terror. The heavy, lingering silence her singing promoted here and elsewhere allowed time for this racial consciousness to sink in and develop and signaled that it was in fact doing so. The subsequent massive sighing of two thousand people is indicative of the commencement of this consciousness's painful solidification.<sup>114</sup>

113. Schiffman, *Uptown*, 38.

114. Black consciousness has long been structured around a literal and metaphorical effort to breathe within in a racist, lynch-prone environment. See Lewis R. Gordon, *Fear of Black Consciousness* (New York, 2022), 14–15.

The tension of this performance of “Strange Fruit” was not broken by upbeat music, as had been the case at Café Society but rather by a collective exhaling, one that speaks to the audience’s hesitant recognition, particularly within an entertainment setting, of the persistence of their common precariousness, a recognition likely combined with a sense of futility and resignation. This massive sigh, a collective release of breath, also points to Holiday’s technical capacity to captivate and suspend large Black and White audiences during her performances of “Strange Fruit.” Indeed, Holiday’s singing felt like a strangle and release for White people like Schiffman. But this sigh for the African Americans in the theater, while undoubtedly denoting an alleviation of sorts from the tensions of the song, also indicates a collective acknowledgment of the ongoing threat of white supremacy in their lives, a kind of mass last gasp of breath among a group of people brought through Holiday’s performance into a space of death.

Breathing, as religious studies scholar Ashon Crawley points out, is an inherently communal practice in that air is not simply sharable, it *must* be shared and used by all to enable life. Crawley thus identifies moments of collective breathing, such as those inspired by “Strange Fruit,” as opportunities to break down categorical differences separating people from each other and to encourage alternative modes of coexistence and knowledge.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, hearing the simultaneous sighing of hundreds of others undoubtedly reinforced a dynamic of “copresence” typical of cabaret spaces, in which audience members, willingly or not, participate in the performance and are aware that they are being watched by others as they watch the act. This dynamic heightens spectators’ self-consciousness and leads to a subjective permeability that facilitates their transformation into an “audience,” a provisional unit produced in relation to a shared event.<sup>116</sup> Through “Strange Fruit,” Holiday generated audiences that came to feel at least for a moment their own presence as an intimate collective and, for African Americans especially, the constitutive violence subtending their association. Given the provisional nature of such collectivities, Black performances like “Strange Fruit,” as cultural critic Fred Moten has suggested, must operate continually across time to remake and refound Blackness.<sup>117</sup> The race-conscious Holiday thus remained dedicated to presenting the song in new ways for the rest of her career.

115. Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York, 2017), 45, 63.

116. Vogel, *Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 64–65.

117. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, 2003),

14.



Holiday sang “Strange Fruit” to Apollo audiences on several other occasions and likely instilled in them a similar experience of racial salience.<sup>118</sup> She sang before large Black congregations in the 1940s for benefits supporting the election and reelection of the communist Black lawyer Benjamin J. Davis Jr. to the New York City Council.<sup>119</sup> The song circulated to Black GIs in the South through jukeboxes in military base stores.<sup>120</sup> Chicago DJ Holmes “Daddy-O” Daylie played it a few times a month for its political message.<sup>121</sup> Studs Terkel recalls Holiday singing the song to an almost entirely Black audience on Chicago’s South Side in the late 1950s. By revealing her vulnerability, Terkel states, Holiday made everyone else feel vulnerable too and left all the patrons in tears.<sup>122</sup> Of course, other singers and dancers helped to circulate the song, which frequently served only to fortify its increasingly integral association with Billie Holiday.<sup>123</sup>

While David Margolick has stated that the song primarily reached the Black intelligentsia, Farah Griffin claims that the Black poor and working class identified with Holiday in general and viewed her as one of their own.<sup>124</sup> Both statements are likely correct—“Strange Fruit” proliferated among White and Black leftist intelligentsia circles, while Holiday’s impoverished upbringing and tragic public persona endeared her to those who felt similarly marginalized. Holiday may have presented herself, on the one hand, as the elegant, finely adorned “Lady Day,” but her open sexuality and hedonism deviated from what many middle-class Black people considered conduct befitting a “lady” and thus beneficial for the assimilation of the race.<sup>125</sup>

Holiday took advantage of her reputation and the public’s tendency to read meaning into her body and singing. For African Americans, “Billie Holiday” came to represent both the personal and collective traumas permeating Black life. Her singing “Strange Fruit” seemed to express her own confrontations

118. Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” *Vanity Fair*, 320.

119. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 98; Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/ Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark, DE, 1994), 107–8; “Paul Robeson and Joe Louis Head Sponsors of Ben Davis Rally Today,” *Daily Worker* (New York), October 28, 1945, 14; “6,000 at Golden Gate Davis Rally Pledge All-Out Effort,” *Daily Worker* (New York), October 29, 1945, 12; “Theatrical Stars Back Ben Davis,” *People’s Voice* (New York), November 3, 1945, 26.

120. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 91.

121. *Ibid.*, 93.

122. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

123. Robert Meeropol, “Strange Fruit: When Lyrics Change Worldviews,” interview by Lisa Lincoln, *Why* (Summer/Fall 1998): 38, Dave Margolick correspondence, IJS.

124. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 94. See also Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 84.

125. Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 30.



with racism, domestic abuse, and the premature death of her father.<sup>126</sup> Especially when she sang “Strange Fruit,” she became for these audiences an emblem of Black pain and suffering and an embodiment of collective violence, even as she also voiced the particular and largely neglected tribulations of Black women.<sup>127</sup>

Holiday functioned as what performance studies scholar Joseph Roach terms an *effigy*. Celebrities, Roach notes, often serve as effigies, “provid[ing] communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates.”<sup>128</sup> Holiday’s contemporary Black admirers certainly viewed her as an effigy, a spokeswoman for the race. By changing the original “Black body” of “Strange Fruit” to the plural “Black bodies,” Holiday seems to have taken up this position as a “race woman” who seized “Strange Fruit” to speak to the precarious position of Black people in America in its most general terms.<sup>129</sup> Drummer Max Roach claimed that Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” was revolutionary for stating what Black people felt at a time when few others were willing to speak out—Holiday became a “voice of Black people and they loved this woman.”<sup>130</sup> Holiday’s friend Malcolm X similarly asserted that Holiday “sang with the *soul* of Negroes from the centuries of sorrow and oppression.”<sup>131</sup> Indeed, she was, as the English poet Nicholas Moore declared in a poem published in 1941, “the dry bitter voice [that] spills the sorrow of the black world.”<sup>132</sup>

“Strange Fruit,” both its lyrics and Holiday’s adagio performances of it, allegorized the social and political neglect surrounding anti-Black violence in the United States. In so doing, it sought to make conscious and render “strange” an otherwise normative disregard for Black life and thereby subject it

126. “Billie Holiday Tells Story of Plantation Club Jim Crow,” *Chicago Defender*, December 30, 1944, 13; Michael Herman, “Abbey Lincoln Sings Billie Holiday Classics,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 26, 1987, 21, ProQuest Historical Newspapers; Ted Le Berthon, “White Man’s Views: Negroes Who Become Ill, Slowly Murdered By Medical Jim Crow,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 4, 1944, 6, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

127. Fumiko Sakashita, “The Politics of Sexuality in Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit,’” in *Gender and Lynching: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Evelyn M. Simien (New York, 2011), 116–17, 120.

128. Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York, 1996), 36.

129. Sakashita, “Politics of Sexuality,” 118, 130 n. 69.

130. Max Roach, quoted in Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 21.

131. Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965; repr., New York, 1992), 149. See also Robert O’Meally, “1939: Billie Holiday Records ‘Strange Fruit,’” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Greil Marcus and Wernor Sollors (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 731.

132. Nicholas Moore, “Poem For Billie Holiday,” *Jazz Music* (November 1943): 50, Billie Holiday clippings, IJS. This poem was reprinted from Nicholas Moore, *A Wish in Season* (London, 1941).

to interrogation and critique.<sup>133</sup> “Strange Fruit” depicts and enacts a state of deferment and waiting typifying Black presence in the Jim Crow era. In her renditions, Holiday stimulated literal albeit temporary moments of waiting, stillness, and silence that enabled the further production of Blackness in these terms but one now coupled with an acutely politicized awareness of the enduring subjugation and apathy organizing its existence. The song in this way served a pedagogical function for African Americans. Black Americans were not all, or did not want to be, fully aware of the impact and import of violence in their lives and collective existence. Holiday and other activists had to work to foment and sustain group consciousness among a diversifying population, which as a group was registering relatively less concern for lynching. Black children, for instance, could learn about racism through Holiday’s song. Consider the coming into consciousness of Morgan Monceaux. As a young Black boy in Louisiana in the late 1950s, Monceaux told his grandmother about the racist taunts he was experiencing, which represented his first explicit encounter with racism. His grandmother left him alone with a recording of Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” playing. He started listening to the song and experienced a revelation. He played it repeatedly to acquire a better view of the world and later became an artist himself.<sup>134</sup>

Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” nourished in Monceaux and others what Black feminist critic bell hooks has referred to as the “liberatory consciousness” of a disenfranchised group of people.<sup>135</sup> Vernon Jarrett, a Tennessee-born Black journalist who commenced his career in 1946 when he moved to Chicago to work for the *Chicago Defender*, experienced the expansion of such consciousness as well when he saw Holiday sing “Strange Fruit” in New York in 1947.<sup>136</sup> She seemed, to Jarrett, to be testifying to something she had personally witnessed. She appeared to have been wronged, lynched herself in some way, and exuded an aura of resignation that upheld little else save the expression of rage. In Holiday’s song, Jarrett “heard other kinds of lynchings, not just hanging from trees,” including the afflictions endured by his own college-educated parents. Holiday’s face and body expressed a collective Black actuality—that “we’re all taking a screwing, someone is messing with us.” Holiday seemed to be “psychoanalyzing herself and the black condition, telling us there were ‘no escape’ signs up, regardless of how great you were.” She was reconciling herself to “her own lynched existence. This is how most of us felt.” Jarrett

133. Alfred Frankowski, “Sorrow as the Longest Memory of Neglect,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (2014): 159, 162.

134. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 127.

135. bell hooks, “Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition,” in *Let’s Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance*, ed. Catherine Ugwu (Seattle, 1995), 218.

136. Yvonne Shinhoster Lamb, “Vernon Jarrett, 84; Journalist, Crusader,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 2004, B07.

concludes that Holiday's singing "enhanced [his] commitment to changing this stuff, that's what it did."<sup>137</sup>

For Jarrett, Holiday embodied and enacted a trauma and positioned that trauma as characteristic of the "black condition." She thereby prompted in him an understanding of Blackness as a collectivity demarcated by feelings of shared threat and vulnerability, feelings that encompassed him as well as his educated parents, who were not immediately affected by lynching. He thus came to see Blackness and its precariousness more expansively: "This is how most of us felt," as he claimed. While Jarrett perhaps viewed race along these lines prior to witnessing Holiday's performance, his utterance of this statement at the end of his recollection explaining the impact and significance of Holiday's "Strange Fruit" mirrors a thought process he likely had at some point after hearing her sing. Her song helped to clarify the young journalist's thinking around racial belonging and enabled his articulation of it in these expanded terms. Moreover, in stating that this refined understanding enhanced his political commitment to advancing the Black Freedom Struggle, Jarrett indicates that it drove him to take the subsequent step, encouraged by such an awakening, toward conscious activism. Indeed, Jarrett went on to enjoy a prominent career in Chicago dedicated to the social and political advancement of African Americans.

Cultural critic Emily Lordi's description of Holiday's effort to produce a haunting effect among her audiences is helpful for illuminating how listeners like Vernon Jarrett felt compelled to take political action or at least solidified their resolve to do so. Lordi argues that across the twenty-year period Holiday sang "Strange Fruit," she honed and executed a haunting effect by way of repeating familiar texts, tropes, and patterns with subtle, unsettling differences, a technique reinforced by the song's lyrics, which repeat and repurpose images and words like "fruit" to achieve a similarly disorienting impact. In this way, Holiday conjured feelings of both intimacy and, through the alienating disruption of that intimacy, haunting, which established the limits of familiarity and lingered with audience members long after performances.<sup>138</sup> Both Holiday, the singer, and her topic, lynching, thereby felt oddly proximate and enigmatic at the same time in a way that resonates, Lordi suggests, with Gayatri Spivak's characterization of the "untranslatable" as that which one "*never stop[s]* (not) translating." Haunting thus stems not from identifying with Holiday and the terror she narrates but from the ongoing failure to do so.<sup>139</sup> One is left not with

137. Vernon Jarrett, quoted in Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 60–61.

138. Emily J. Lordi, *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2013), 140, 158.

139. Gayatri Spivak, quoted in Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 170.

comprehension but rather with the disquieting detritus of discarded fruit, with the affective resonance of anti-Black violence that Holiday invokes, a violence that lingers precisely because it remains indeterminate.

The collectivities generated in relation to this haunting practice are thereby sutured more by reciprocity than outright identification, which explains Holiday's efficacy in producing politicized racial consciousness amid heterogeneous groups of people, who like Holiday herself could be receptive to experiences they had not personally faced.<sup>140</sup> Haunting compels action by drawing attention to, and thus inciting a need to address, the various absences and inadequacies in understanding that it accentuates.<sup>141</sup> Such gaps may be filled in a variety of ways. For some, personal experiences with lynching resurfaced in traumatic fashion.<sup>142</sup> Vernon Jarrett experienced this to a lesser extent in recalling the sufferings of his parents. Yet Holiday's haunting rendition also inspired in him a newfound resolve to alter the sociopolitical terrain that reproduced racial disparity. Haunting generated for Jarrett what sociologist Avery Gordon has referred to as a "something-to-be-done," a way of thinking, being, and acting oriented toward the eradication of the violent conditions that sustain an unsettling sense of haunting in the present. According to Gordon, haunting entails the direct or oblique disclosure of a "repressed or unresolved social violence."<sup>143</sup> One thus responds to a sensation of haunting out of a desire to correct a historical injustice, whose effects persist in the present.<sup>144</sup> Haunting, then, not only registers as a lingering systemic violation but also prompts reparative action such as that undertaken by Jarrett.<sup>145</sup>

While Jarrett offers rare testimony of a Black person undergoing this kind of political awakening in response to Holiday's "Strange Fruit," we can be sure he was not the only one to do so. The singer Lena Horne, who viewed Holiday as a mentor of sorts, attests to a similar kind of political development in relation to the song. As Horne states, "I sang ["Strange Fruit"] for many days in my life until I was able to understand it was part of our country's problem as well as it was mine. I don't mean I sang it out loud. I just sang it in myself, in my heart."<sup>146</sup> It is noteworthy that Horne, a professional singer, did not sing the song aloud, at least in this instance. Hers is an introspective engagement that can be read, in part, as an act of grieving, a working through loss via a process

140. Lordi, *Black Resonance*, 170.

141. *Ibid.*, 142.

142. Linda Kuehl book manuscript, MC-079, box 1, folder 9, IJS.

143. Avery F. Gordon, introduction to *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997; repr., Minneapolis, 2008), xvi–xvii.

144. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 134.

145. *Ibid.*, 207.

146. Horne and Margolick, "Strange Fruit," *Fishko Files*.

that is largely resistant to expression; Cyrus Cassells's question—"How can I tell you?"—points as well to such a process. By taking the song into herself, Horne's very body seems to incorporate, indeed consume, the violence Holiday bespeaks. Horne thus comes to find herself, her body and her Blackness, implicated within the nation's tradition of anti-Black terror in a way she had not been before. Her fate becomes affectively intertwined with those of other African Americans and with that of the country itself. That this sense of investment and responsibility emerges only after "many days" of singing, moreover, speaks to the repetitious work required of political mourning to produce expanded conceptions of racial belonging, even among African Americans in the Jim Crow United States.

Through their encounters with Holiday's "Strange Fruit," Jarrett and Horne underwent what Shane Vogel refers to as an "irrealization" of the self, a reorientation and re-placement of oneself "in a different affective relationship to the communities, relations, and identities of our perceptual world."<sup>147</sup> Specifically, Holiday intensified their feeling of belonging to an endangered community and, consequentially, their commitment to combatting anti-Black racism. Eventually, millions heard Holiday's "Strange Fruit."<sup>148</sup> More people than Holiday could have imagined found themselves politically galvanized by her voice and message. As Angela Davis opines, Holiday reignited traditions of protest within Black and American popular music, and her "Strange Fruit" persists as "one of the most influential and profound examples—and continuing sites—of the intersection of music and social consciousness."<sup>149</sup> A few days after her death, the *New York Amsterdam News* illustrated how Holiday maintained even then her capacity to silence Black patrons, who had come to view her with reverence. In a fitting tribute to the recently deceased singer, customers at a Harlem bar ceased conversation upon hearing Holiday's records playing on the radio. They all turned to listen to her "haunting voice" sing "Strange Fruit" and other songs. "It was almost solemn-like at the bar," the *Amsterdam News* reported.<sup>150</sup>

Long after Holiday's death, "Strange Fruit" continued to resonate across generations of people in and outside the United States. While the song was seen as too depressing for the Civil Rights Movement, it and Holiday enjoyed a kind of rediscovery in academia, popular culture, and politics in the 1970s.<sup>151</sup> It

147. Vogel, *Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, 201.

148. See Ernestine Steward Gray, "Billie Holiday: An Uncommon Heroine," *Human Rights* 47, no. 1 (October 2021).

149. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 195–96.

150. Jesse H. Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 25, 1959, 15, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

151. Margolick, *Strange Fruit*, 135. See also Hazel Carby's interview in Katz, dir., *Strange Fruit*.

was during the singer's lifetime, however, that African Americans most readily found in "Strange Fruit" an elegy that spoke to and rendered collective a sense of the trauma structuring their existence. It maintained and spawned anew politicized feelings of Black belonging that cohered around the torment it depicted and that Holiday so palpably embodied and performed. Holiday's masterful execution and dedication to this song represents a politicization of mourning that operated on an unprecedented level of professionalism and celebrity. Holiday was recruited specifically and individually to sing "Strange Fruit" to maintain the long-standing anti-lynching movement and to reconstruct and reunite a diversifying Black population around an issue that many for the first time could have ignored. This momentous and arduous task required someone with Holiday's particular willingness, experience, and expertise who could stun, silence, and haunt Black and White audiences alike and recast anti-Black violence in a way that left it indelibly strange.