

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Transnational American Studies

Title

Strange Fruit

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wr2q8j5>

Journal

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 12(1)

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Publication Date

2021

DOI

10.5070/T812154911

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Strange Fruit

GOENAWAN MOHAMAD

Strange Fruit

Blood on the leaves
And blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

— “Strange Fruit,” sung by Billie Holiday, 1939

Music is politics when deafness is power. Billie Holiday’s entire life, her childhood, her poverty, her husky voice, her musical phrasing, her drugs, her cancer, her memories of her mother who became a prostitute and the father she never knew (who is said to have died without treatment because he was a “Negro”)—were formed from a state of oppression like a neck under a boot.

The neck of a Black. The boot of a white. And not only George Floyd.
How many centuries has that trampling been ignored?

Not everyone hears. Not everyone wants to hear. But in 1939 in the Café Society in Greenwich Village, New York—a venue established to collect funds for the Communist Party—Billie Holliday sang “Strange Fruit.”

The lamps were dim, and on the small stage, Billie’s face was dark. Her voice seemed burdened by ghosts wanting to talk. The lyrics of “Strange Fruit” came in fragments. “Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh / Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.”

Billie Holiday and jazz: Sometimes it was like reading a lamentation. But more than that.

Adorno was wrong. The famous German philosopher who wrote about art with the sensitivity of an art critic, thought of jazz as merely an outburst of disenfranchised subjectivity. I wonder if Adorno ever reconsidered his ideas after hearing “Strange Fruit”? Or whether he ever heard it?

The lyrics and melody of “Strange Fruit” were written by Abel Meeropol, a teacher and member of the American Communist Party. Meeropol was moved to compose “Strange Fruit” when he saw a photo of two Black men who had been beaten by the mob and lynched in 1930. It quickly became the anti-racism protest song, even before Billie Holiday sang it.

Over history, jazz and the Left have walked in tandem. The American Communist Party, which was under continuous government surveillance, was at the forefront of opposition to racial segregation and demanded justice, particularly during the 1930s depression. Its membership rose rapidly, supported by intellectuals, writers, and arts practitioners. In Harlem, New York, Communist Party events usually presented jazz.

But Adorno, the famous German philosopher who was also a composer, thought that expression of revolt did not lie in jazz. He did not see the blues—in Bessie Smith’s and Billie Holiday’s bitter tones—as something that reminds us that misery must be eliminated, that the situation must change.

Maybe this was because Adorno saw jazz as springing from the Negro spiritual, the ancestor of the blues, the residue of slavery: “lamentations of the lack of freedom” which in a state of oppression, do not rebel. Adorno rejected the idea that jazz came from “wild” Africa. As he saw it, jazz came from the “domesticated body in bondage.”

In other words, there was no seed of emancipation.

Adorno knew, of course, that jazz was inseparable from syncopation: avoiding “basic rhythm,” with the beat falling unpredictably. But Adorno did not see this as freedom. And as for improvisation, which differentiated jazz from European music, Adorno saw this as merely “ornamental.” With its low vibrato and “whimpering saxophone,” he thought jazz was “suitable as a mass commodity.”

Writing in the 1930s, Adorno could not possibly have envisaged the birth of modern jazz—that there would be Miles Davis with *Kind of Blue*, first performed in 1959. This was a kind of music of liberation, freed of rigid tonality, with improvisation independent of harmonic base.

Even before that, in the early and mid-1940s, bebop was born. This was music that hardened into rebellion, rejecting music that was sweet and popular in the style of Louis Armstrong, who at the time, with his happy, nice tunes, was an icon of the “culture industry.”

At a time when Blacks were suffering acute segregation and entrapped by unemployment, bebop was a statement of separation from the American social mainstream—separation in music, dress, and behavior.

Amiri Baraka, the Black poet activist, thought bebop’s sound was “willfully harsh [and] anti-assimilationist” and that bebop was the part of jazz that resisted being sucked into trash music, monopoly music.

Like Baraka, the famous Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who also wrote about jazz, thought that “music lends itself to any kind of protest and rebelliousness much better than most other forms of the arts.” In his small book, *The Jazz Scene*, he

said that the blues, even the smoothest like the singer Bessie Smith, was the “purest jazz protestor.”

But who listens? Who remembers? American capitalism has a strange power: It can suck in, after first embracing, almost all forms of resistance, and turn them into part of that capitalism. Jazz is now a legitimate part of that society so full of contradiction.

Including the most vile racist expression. The Ku Klux Klan, formerly the angry voice outside, has now transformed into the face of politicians, police, city planners, and various parts of the establishment that tacitly perpetuate the alienation of “niggers.”

George Floyd died with a police boot pressing his neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds. He has opened eyes, and opened ears. Billie Holiday sings on, and there are always Black bodies hanging.

-- Translation by Jennifer Lindsay

The *Journal for Transnational American Studies* is grateful to Goenawan Mohamad and the translator Jennifer Lindsay for granting permission to reprint “Strange Fruit,” which originally appeared in the English-language edition of *Tempo* on June 23, 2020. Copyright 2020 Goenawan Mohamad and English translation copyright 2020 Jennifer Lindsay.