Strange Fruit:

Poetry, Communists, and the Anti-lynching Movement

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The American Communist Party, the anti-lynching movement, a Jewish schoolteacher and Billie Holiday are an unlikely compendium of people and events; but in 1939 their paths intersected, creating a legacy that would continue to express itself some twenty-five years later. This convergence illustrates the ability of activities, circumstances, and ideologies to ferment social change and influence a movement. While the elements of this list have overlapping characteristics, such as overcoming oppression, they collectively did not form a movement themselves. Rather, it was the result of “common consciousness” that made is possible for this varied cross section of American culture to traverse (Freeman & Johnson, 1999).

The American Communist Party (CPUSA) was firmly entrenched in New York at the turn of the 20th century. With Eastern European Jews as its largest ethnic group, the CPUSA was an instrumental influence to the American labor movement and unionization, especially within the garment industry (Holmes, 2007). After WWI, the rise of anti-immigrant, anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic fervor cast the CPUSA as “pariahs” to the American public (Holmes, 2007). However, American Jews empathized with the party’s members -- possibly from the party’s platform, which emphasized equality as crucial to the working class. This sentiment was an important value to the many Marx-influenced eastern European immigrants. (Johnson, 2008).

In 1930, after much internal debate about the issue of African American inequality, the CPUSA leadership placed emphasis on the “liberation of the Negro race from all white oppression” (Johnson, 2008, p. 250). Their position also included the condemnation of Jim Crowe laws and segregation and contained especially strong language regarding lynching.
The CPUSA admonished white workers to take a leadership role in fighting for equal rights for African Americans. Following this official stance, the CPUSA found success in advocating through its work to organize steel workers in Birmingham and leading in the struggle to organize sharecroppers (Johnson, 2008). They also became active in the integration of neighborhoods and fought against job discrimination practices in the North.

Between 1892 and 1940, more than 3,000 African Americans, mostly men, were lynched in the United States (Brown, 2003). Lynching became a post-Civil War tactic, primarily used as means to exert control and enforce white supremacy. It also was used to stifle political, social and economic gains made by African Americans. More often, however, black men were accused of rape, a claim that white southerners used to justify mob action in order to protect white women (Brown, 2003). Led by black women, the anti-lynching movement began in the 1890s. Black journalist, Ida B. Wells-Barnett began protesting lynching, then launching it into a full movement. Her efforts enabled anti-lynching activists to dismantle the theory that lynching was necessary to the protection of white women. Wells-Barnett formulated a strategy of “investigation and exposure,” which proved to be key to future swells of the movement (Brown, 2003, p. 378).

The founding of the NAACP in 1909 was a crucial milestone in the anti-lynching movement. It made the anti-lynching battle its priority, with both black and white women at the forefront of its actions (Brown, 2003). When federal anti-lynching legislation, the Dyer Bill, was introduced in the 20s, the NAACP relied on women to court voters and influence moral authorities for support (Brown, 2003). The movement gained nationwide attention as the New York Times ran stories of highly publicized lynchings in Kentucky and Pennsylvania (Brown, 2003). Other investigative pieces, many featuring work by activist
STRANGE FRUIT

W.E.B. DuBois, were published in regional magazines and in the Crisis, the NAACP’s publication (Brown, 2003). These tactics illustrate how media was successfully used to influence awareness that could lead to social change, if not legislatively then by collective and individual action.

While reading through a civil rights magazine in New York, Abel Meeropol saw a photograph of a particularly disturbing double lynching that had taken place in Marion, Indiana in 1930. The well-publicized image was significant because the hangings had occurred north of the Mason-Dixon line (Margolick, 2001). Meeropol, who was born to white Jewish Russian immigrants in 1903, was actively involved in issues of equality and worker’s rights. He went to college and eventually graduated from Harvard University with a master’s of arts degree in English literature (Baker, 2002). Meeropol was hired to teach English at his former high school. He wrote poetry and songs in his spare time, expressing his political views and exploring topical issues, often through humor. He was a member of the Young Communist League and the Theatre Arts Committee – the creative affiliate of the CPUSA that used art and theater to convey political and social views. He moved in the same social circles with other “artistic activists” and frequently collaborated with other members of the Composers Collective (Baker, 2002, p. 29). Meeropol used the pseudonym, Lewis Allan, in his published works (Baker, 2002).

The gruesome image of the double lynching weighed on Meeropol for days. He turned to writing poetry to articulate his anger at the injustice of the lynchings and ultimately, as a polemic for passage of the Dyer bill (Baker, 2002). The poem, Bitter Fruit, was stark, violent and unforgiving in its brutal nature. The unnatural imagery of a hanging body compared to the natural beauty of hanging fruit is a simple, yet frank metaphor.
STRANGE FRUIT

It was first published in the January 1937 issue of a union publication, The New York Teacher (Margolick, 2001). Eventually, Meeropol set the poem to music at the urging of his friends. His wife Anne performed the song, now known as Strange Fruit, regularly at left wing events (Margolick, 2001). The song gained further notoriety by progressive friends and members of the local teachers union who performed the song at gatherings in hotels and homes around New York. African American vocalist, Laura Duncan, performed the song at Madison Square Garden (Margolick, 2001).

But Strange Fruit would soon take on a new life when it was sung by a quartet of black singers at an anti-fascism fundraiser. Robert Gordon, who directed shows at Café Society, a progressive nightclub in New York, happened to hear the song. Gordon had just scheduled blues singer Billie Holiday, who had quit performing with Artie Shaw’s band after a particularly negative incident at a nearby club; she had been forced to take the freight elevator because of the establishment’s segregation policies (Margolick, 2001).

Café Society viewed itself as the antithesis of New York high society. Blacks and whites performed together on stage, the doormen purposely wore rags, and anyone arriving in fancy evening clothes was relegated to the worst seats in the house. The club attracted patrons such as Charlie Chaplin, Errol Flynn, Langston Hughes, and Carol Channing. Eleanor Roosevelt was purported to have visited during a stay in New York (Margolick, 2001).

Gordon asked Meeropol to bring the song to the club. When he arrived, Meeropol sat down at the piano and played Strange Fruit for Holiday. She was indifferent at first because it was a change from the Tin Pan Alley material she had usually performed. When Meeropol asked if she would sing it, she replied in her characteristically lively manner, “You wants
me to sing it? I sings it” (Margolick, 2001, p. 28). Meeropol later recalled that a few moments into the song, he spotted a tear running down her cheek. Holiday took the song later that night and performed it at a party in Harlem. She received positive response from partygoers, who had all quieted to listen to the words. Before she sang it at Café Society, owner Barney Josephson instructed the staff to stop serving and for the audience to be silent. The lights were lowered, except for a single spotlight on Holiday. After the song, she would quietly leave the stage. Josephson later recalled, “People had to remember “Strange Fruit,” get their insides burned with it” (Margolick, 2001, p. 34).

Despite the song being well received and critically acclaimed, Holiday’s record company, Columbia Records, refused to record the song and release it. Holiday’s manager found a company that eventually recorded it as a B-side, which sold well, but was banned by most radio stations. By 1945, 50,000 copies had been sold (Margolick, 2001).

The Theatre Arts Committee sent the record to ninety-six senators, along with a letter urging passage of the anti-lynching bill. Unfortunately, neither the Dyer Bill, nor any other anti-lynching legislation was ever passed in Congress (Baker, 2002).

Holiday continued to perform Strange Fruit until her death in 1959. Singer Nina Simone recorded a version in the 1960s and sang it with other civil rights songs. She did not perform it often, however, because it was emotionally “too hard to do” (Margolick, 2001, p. 112).
Strange Fruit

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 the 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.

(Margolick, 2001, p. 1)
Reference List


