Lycée de la Côtière **Southern trees 1ere- Myths and heroes – BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN AND CIVIL RIGHTS – DOC 2.**

It was during my stint(1) at Café Society(2) that a song was born which became my personal protest – *Strange fruit.* The germ of the song was in a poem written by Lewis Allen. I first met him at Café Society. When he showed me that poem, I dug (3) it right off. It seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop. Allen, too, had heard how Pop had died and of course was interested in my singing. He suggested that Sonny White, who had been my accompanist, and I turn it into music. So the three of us got together and did the job in about three weeks. (…) I worked like the devil on it because I was never sure I could put it across ar that I could get across to a plush (4) night-club audience the things that it meant to me.

I was scared people would hate me. The first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake and I had been right being scared. There wasn’t even a patter of applause when I finished. Then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everyone was clapping.

It caught on after a while and people and people began to ask for it. It became my biggest-selling record. It still depresses me everytime I sing it, though. It reminds me of how Pop died. But I have to keep singing it, not only because people ask for it but because twenty years after Pop died the things that killed him are still happening in the South.

Over the years I have had a lot of weird experiences as a result of that song. (…) One night in Los Angeles a bitch stood right up in the club where I was sensing and said “Billie, why don’t you sing that sexy song you’re so famous for? You know, the one about the naked bodies swinging in the trees?”. Needless to say I didn’t. But another time, I finished a set with *Strange fruit* and headed, as usual, for the bathroom. I always do. When I sing it, it affects me so much I get sick. It takes all the strength out of me. This women came in the Ladies’room at the DownBeat Club and found me all broken up from crying. I had come off the floor running, hot and cold, miserable ans happy. She looked at me, and the tears started coming to her eyes. “My God”, she said, “I never heard anything so beautiful in my life. You can still hear a pindrop out there”.

Just a few months ago, in a club in Miami I had run through an entire two-week date without ever doing *Strange fruit.* I was with no mood to be bothered with the scenes that always come on when I do that number in the South. I didn’t want to start something I couldn’t finish. But one night after everyboby had asked me twenty times to do it, I finally gave in. (…) When I came to the final phrase of the lyrics I was in the angriest and strongest voice I had been in for months. (…)When I said “…for the sun to rot”, and then the piano punctuation, “…for the wind to suck”, I pounced on(5) those words like they had never been hit before. I was flailing (6) the audience, but the applause was like nothing I’d ever heard. I came off, went upstairs, changed into street clothes, and when I came down, they were still applauding.

Billie Holiday, *Lady sings the Blues* (1956)

1. During my stint = pendant que je bossais (2)Café Society = a New York nightclub in the late 1930’s (3) dig (slang) = love (4) plush = chic (5) pounce on = attaquer (6) flail = fouetter