

## **The silence of the fruit is the seed of communion, of commotion and of indignation<sup>[1]</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT:** By means of a clinical experience and of the biography of the “Strange fruit” song, the author proposes to think about the aesthetic experience. This song, which conveys immense pain and makes prejudice and cruelty clear, was of vital importance in dampening the secular racial hatred against African Americans. The hard truth brings an aesthetic penetration, and it is considered by the author as a catastrophic change, a concept proposed by Bion and, according to Meg Harris Williams, considered by him to be the most aesthetic of his concepts.

**KEYWORDS:** “Strange fruit”, aesthetic experience, catastrophic change, caesura, truth

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1. This paper was originally presented on the 26th of July 2021 as part of the International Online Meeting “Psychoanalysis and Aesthetic Experience”, organized by Brazilian Society of Psychoanalysis of Ribeirão Preto (SBPRP), Brazil. This English version was written by the author himself.

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My patient Rodrigo, a humanities teacher, often met an old philosophy teacher for whom he had great respect. This old master always drew his attention to his tendency to “want to be like competent and successful professionals” instead of focusing on his own resources. This attitude also appeared repeatedly in his analysis and was invariably accompanied by the justification that he was indeed limited and, therefore, was left with no alternative but drinking from the fountain of the competent.

This attitude caused several practical hindrances. First, it put Rodrigo in the strange position of being an “eternal student and wannabe professor”: he would then be haunted by the possibility of not being able to bear the avalanche of contents taught in the plethora of courses he attended. In his desperate attempt to avoid that, he was constantly drowned in a mess of records such as audio and written notes and the like, never admitting that his own subjectivity could be a reliable record.

In a given session, the patient arrives angry with his old master because he had once again warned him about his illusion of being able to take possession of the resources of others instead of using them to improve his own. By the way, it should be noted here that this consultant of sorts had offered him a beautiful visual model of his stance, telling him that it is deceptive to believe that we can enjoy the abundance of a tree’s canopy if its roots have not been planted by ourselves. His annoyance is attributed to the fact that he has struggled, with the aid of his analysis, to get rid of such obsession, but his master insists in not recognizing his progress.

In our next session, Rodrigo tells me that he had had an interesting dream. He was in some sort of yard with a colleague he often sees (and who has always appeared in his analysis as a source of jealousy because the colleague came to admire me after watching some of my conferences, and the patient suspects he wants to steal me and have me be his analyst) and also his own father, who was having fun making stunts with a bicycle. The scene has changed, and now he found himself standing before a beautiful tree that he associates with one he had planted on the sidewalk of his home, and which caused a conflict with his neighbor who had cut its branches on her own as they were spoiling her view. Rodrigo also recalls that the tree was mutilated on one side after a storm had taken a big branch off of it.

Back to the dream, the patient says that he was fascinated with the beautiful tree and started to climb it, but noticed that its branches would get thinner and thinner, despite holding a lush fruit that swayed with the wind as if inviting one to catch it. He tried to catch the fruit, but he could not because it kept escaping him, as a fleeting award, a sort of key to penetrate Paradise. Nevertheless, he had a feeling of great freedom, almost a heavenly sensation.

I find it curious that at no moment did the patient associate the fantastic tree in the dream with the one in the model presented by the old professor. He is surprised when I bring this up, and even more so when I suggest that the tree in the dream was already a tree whose roots had been planted by himself, and also that he in fact did not have to harvest that beautiful fruit, since now *he himself was the fruit*. He reacted

with surprise and wonder. I promptly agreed that that would be a “strange fruit” and associated it with Billie Holiday’s homonymous song.

In the next session, Rodrigo starts complaining that he was upset with me due to his jealousy, and because he had had a dream but no session on the following day so he could narrate it. He begins the account of this dream describing a wonderful soybean plantation that had been sown by a maternal uncle but that, eventually, was left with an unplanted strip of land, and there, with elaborate maneuvers, the uncle used a hand plough to complete the plantation with a handcraft touch. He, Rodrigo, observed everything from an elevated perspective, savoring the beauty of the plantation and the sheer syntony he felt with the spontaneous joy of his uncle. His impression was that this “handcraft sowing” was intended to create a landscape that would not deviate from the homogeneity of the sector sown using modern technology.

At that moment a cousin (also from his mother’s side) appeared and made an envious comment: “though the craft plantation is beautiful, the pods contained few seeds.” When checking that, Rodrigo verified to his dismay that the statement was true and marked by disdain of the old against the new. Suddenly the uncle rushed into the healthy field running away from a beast, but Rodrigo felt anguished as he noticed that the uncle was running towards a dead end where he would be fatally caught. Deeply upset, he wakes up and immediately associates the dream with the drama experienced by another cousin on Christmas.

The cousin mentioned had been studying hard for a public position for a few years, but had learned on Christmas Eve that the government had reduced the available positions by 30% and therefore, in order to remain “alive” in the selection, he would have to study insanely to get a 10 on the final theoretical test. Eventually, that did happen, but Rodrigo realizes he had not yet congratulated his cousin on his deed.

At this point I feel inclined to question him about his initial remark that he was upset with me due to jealousy – he resists to deal with the subject as “this is my endless issue with Pedro, I know it is almost a delusion of mine.” Pedro is the friend I mentioned before. I revisit earlier considerations when I commented that, in psychoanalysis, every issue needs to be investigated within each new context since the uses of a given thought are varied and changeable.

Little by little he accepts my suggestion, and we can thus consider this dream as the continuation of the tree dream; that is, here too a “strange fruit” appeared, the luscious pod that, however, seemed to follow the popular saying “a fair outside and a foul within.” I nonetheless suggest that this was a deceiving view, since the few seeds had great value due to the fact that they had been produced by himself with the aid of his analysis, ensuring that the credit for the roots to grow from these would be only his. The uncle, with whom he was fully identified, represented two stages of the patient’s development: the man cornered in the dead-end alley stood for the stage in which Rodrigo only valued the competence of the “top analysts” and reduced his own value to zero; conversely, the judicious farmer was the version

of himself that produced few seeds as the result of strenuous psychic work. In this regard, by the way, the association with the cousin who had succeeded leads us to what has recently been proposed by Ogden (2019) concerning the migration from an epistemological worldview – for which what matters is the accumulation of knowledge and interpretations – to an ontological perspective – for which emphasis is placed on that which *is*. The cousin had succeeded because *he was a fighter*. This is what has been going on with Rodrigo, as he leaves his notes and recordings behind in favor of solo flights, such as the recent insertion of two poetic quotations of his in graduation theses.

The conquer of fruits by our own effort is the only effective antidote against envy and jealousy, since such fruits might well be the object of greed, but can never be destroyed or stolen.

These interpretations were in fact evolutions from an ultimate reality (Bion's O) connected to his enduring certainty of being a second-class person who could only survive at the expense of constant transfusions of regenerating sap from higher beings. That configuration was already present in the self-mutilations inflicted upon the tree he had planted, whether by his own envious self (the neighbor who had cut out the branches that hindered her view) or by his helpless self (the branches torn out by the storm).

In summary, at this point I believe that Rodrigo would already deserve some of the sayings of Goethe (1884/1907) to his character Wilhelm Meister, hero of the *bildungsroman*:

Art is long, life short, judgment difficult, opportunity transient. To act is easy, to think is hard ... The boy stands astonished, his impressions guide him; he learns sportfully, seriousness comes on him by surprise. Imitation is born with us; what should be imitated is not easy to discover. ... Who knows it half, speaks much, and is always wrong ... but flour cannot be sown and seed-corn ought not to be ground. ... The best is not to be explained by words. ... Action can be understood and again represented by the spirit alone. ... Whoever works with symbols only, is a pedant, a hypocrite, or a bungler. ... The true scholar learns from the known to unfold the unknown, and approaches more and more to being a master. (Vol. II, p. 188)

I should now digress briefly to tell a story about the uncanny, amazement, and awe, key elements in the heart of psychoanalysis, that is, of metapsychology. The year is 1930 and we find ourselves in the main square of the small town of Marion, Indiana, in the American Midwest. A mob of around four thousand people gathers to applaud the lynching of two young black men removed from jail, where they had been sent accused of stabbing a white worker and raping his girlfriend. After being violently beaten, the men are hanged and suspended from the branches of a leafy poplar tree. By midnight, the crowd is still gathered around the horrific scene, as if at a party enjoying some curious attraction.

The lynching of black people by white Americans was relatively frequent in the South of the United States as some sort of gruesome inheritance from the Civil War: between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1968 there are accounts of 4.742 such events, but this specific one gained worldwide fame due to a photograph taken by a professional photographer, Lawrence Beitler, who used it for commercial purposes charging 5 cents per postcard with the iconic photo.

Many years later, an obscure Jewish teacher from New York, Abel Meeropol (1937), stumbled upon the picture and expressed his indignation through a poem entitled “Bitter fruit”, which began with the lines:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees

In 1938, Meeropol decided to turn the poem into a song – which is considered by many as the first North American protest song, named “Strange fruit” –, but emphasizing its militant nature over melody, and whose syllables should be scanned so as to reach the consciousness of the listener like a blade. Maybe we could regard it also as the herald of the Black Lives Matter movement, since he decided to send the song to the 96 senators at the time urging them to approve an antilynching law that dozed in Congress since 1919.

Perhaps tired of crying in the wilderness, or even inspired by Tolstoy, to whom music is the shorthand of emotion, covering words with a coat of meaning, Meeropol took his song to a famous night club called Café Society and suggested his owner pass it on to a certain Billie Holiday, who used to perform there and whose recordings he had listened to. Although the song became famous to the point of *Time* magazine considering it the song of the century in 1999, its assimilation by Billie’s airy and childish mind was difficult until she could finally feel that the song had a vital importance in lessening the century-old racial hatred against African Americans.

The song has a long history of acclaim and criticism that has been described in David Margolick’s *Strange fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an early cry for civil rights* (2000/2013). However, nothing can replace the experience of listening to the song as we follow the lyrics:<sup>[3]</sup>

Southern trees bear 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  
Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth

3. I recommend the recording by Nina Simone because of her tradition as a protest singer and due to its fine technical quality. It is available at <https://bit.ly/3BeK2lL>

Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh  
 Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck  
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck  
 For the Sun to rot, for the trees to drop  
 Here is a strange and bitter crop  
 (Meeropol, 1938/1964)

Meeropol (as cited in Margolick, 2000/2013, “Tragic story of lynching”) was happy with Holiday’s performance: her style, he said, “was incomparable and fulfilled the bitterness and shocking quality I had hoped the song would have. The audience gave her a tremendous ovation.” Jazz songwriter Spike Hughes (as cited in Margolick, 2000/2013, “Café Society”) felt that “it is a song that needs to burn with the fierce fire of anger, as well as the flames of pathos.” Holiday’s performances were always dramatic, with all lights out and a focus on her face. In the words of singer Sylvia Syms (as cited in Margolick, 2000/2013, “Sometimes perfection happens”), “you saw the world on that face. You saw everything that was human, everything that was alive, all the beauty and misery of life. There was an aura about this face that was celestial and otherworldly.” In my view, however, Billie’s distracted melancholy was not the fittest for a protest song where disquiet should be umbilically connected to anger: that is what leads us to Nina Simone.

To bear fruit involves going through a caesura that is similar to birth, evolving from a condition of “possibility of being” to “being” with all its implications of endurance and vulnerability, of having a shape while sustaining a reserve of amorphism, of not sticking to harmony so as to be able to reinvent oneself. Bearing fruit is also the sublime encounter between aesthetic and moral beauty, “strength and wisdom”, as Milton (1671/2011) teaches in *Samson Agonistes*. In short, it is part of the “aesthetic conflict” conceptualized by Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris Williams (1988).

The photographic, poetic and musical aesthetic records mentioned in this paper support Keats’ (1819) aphorism that “beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Shocking as these records may be in their heated indignation, they convey the truth of prejudice and cruelty with an aesthetic penetration that is not different in essence from the aesthetic penetration of communion: both stand for what Bion (1965/2018, 1966) termed “catastrophic change,” which Meg Williams (2010) regards as the most aesthetic of his concepts.

A fine example of communion is found in the episode where Ulysses, upon arriving at Ithaca, is challenged to prove to his father Laertes that he was indeed his son, the treasured fruit that got back home (Homer, 8th cent. BC/2017). To do so, he recalls a childhood memory of when his father led him through an orchard, and lovingly taught him the names of all the trees. Ulysses’ silence during the 20 years he remained far from his country acted as the seed of nostalgia that brought him back, eventually resulting in this beautiful communion with his roots.

To conclude, I would like to note that Bion (1966) created an aesthetic way to represent his concept of “catastrophic change”. By approaching the verb “to break” with its nuances of disruption, fragmentation, dissolution, penetration, buffering, and crossing with the suffixes “up”, “down”, “in”, “out” and “through”, Bion created scenarios of advancement, collapse, evacuation, absorption, and working through. That is what I tried to convey to you by means of my clinical experience with Rodrigo and with the biography of the song “Strange fruit”.

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### **O silêncio do fruto é a semente da comunhão, da comoção e da indignação**

**Resumo:** Através de uma experiência clínica e da biografia da canção “Strange fruit”, o autor se propõe a pensar sobre a experiência estética. Essa canção, que traduz uma dor imensa e deixa claros o preconceito e a crueldade, foi de vital importância no amortecimento do secular ódio racial contra os afro-americanos. A dura verdade traz uma penetração estética e é considerada pelo autor como uma mudança catastrófica, conceito proposto por Bion e, segundo Meg Harris Williams, considerado por ele o mais estético de seus conceitos.

**Palavras-chave:** “Strange fruit”, experiência estética, mudança catastrófica, cesura, verdade

### **El silencio del fruto es la semilla de la comunión, de la conmoción y de la indignación**

**Resumen:** Por medio de una experiencia de la clínica y de la biografía de la canción “Strange fruit” el autor propone pensar al respecto de la experiencia estética. Esta canción, que traduce un dolor inmenso y deja bien claro el prejuicio y la crueldad, ha sido de vital importancia para el amortecimiento del secular odio racial ejercido contra los afroamericanos. La dura verdad conlleva una penetración estética y el autor la considera como un cambio catastrófico, concepto que ha sido propuesto por Bion y que, según Meg Harris Williams, lo consideró el más estético de los conceptos que creó Bion.

**Palabras clave:** “Strange fruit”, experiencia estética, cambio catastrófico, cesura, verdad

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