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## Cross-Curricular Teaching Going Forward: A View from “Strange Fruit”

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### Abstract

“Strange Fruit”, a song popularized by Billie Holiday in 1939, paints a gruesome picture of racial violence suffered by former African-American slaves following Reconstruction, 1863-1877 (Foner, 2011). While many scholars have analyzed the lyrics of “Strange Fruit”, research that focuses on young people’s reaction to the song is scarce. This study explores the impact of Holiday’s performance of the song on students at a New England Research University. Institutional survey software was used to create an online questionnaire that participants (n= 40) answered in a controlled environment. The findings indicate feelings of disgust, anger, shame and

sadness after participants listened to “Strange Fruit”. Although few students could indicate the song’s time-period, many recognized the atrocities committed against African-Americans since slavery and the discrimination that continues. “Strange Fruit”, irrespective of whether the participants knew the background of the song, provokes a powerful reaction against racial violence, one which demonstrates the song’s value as a cross-curricular pedagogical tool for developing transversal competences linked to socially desirable values and principles.

### **Introduction**

The iconic anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit”, written by Abel Meeropol and first performed by Billie Holiday in 1939, emerged during what is known as the Jim Crow era in US history. As a testimony to the song’s ability to boldly represent this horrific past, Time Magazine named “Strange Fruit” the song of the century in 1999 (Sanburn, 2011) and a number of general interest books were subsequently published which explored the story of “Strange Fruit” and its important legacy to the Civil Rights Movement in the USA (Margolick, 2000, 2001).

Numerous scholars have documented their opinions and interpretations of “Strange Fruit” by analyzing the lyrics (O’Mathúna, 2008; Turner, 2016). A documentary was created about “Strange Fruit” in 2002, and mention was made of the song’s value as a teaching resource (Bakan, 2004). Some scholars have argued in favor of using “Strange Fruit” as a pedagogical resource in the following subject areas, although actual student responses to the song have not been collected and analyzed: history and origins of the Civil Rights Movement (Stone, 2004), ethics (O’Mathúna, 2008), and multicultural literacy to facilitate effective citizen participation (Banks, 2003).

Butler (2003) similarly argues that “Strange Fruit” is a compelling primary source that “both influenced and reflected its age” (p. 21). He uses the song with history students as a historical source portraying racial violence that was significant in galvanizing the Civil Rights campaign in the USA. However, student reactions to “Strange Fruit” are not documented. Stone (2004) provides a further interesting US perspective on how “Strange Fruit” could be used in the history classroom as a conduit towards a more united nationwide acknowledgment of the problems of racial divisions and racial violence, rather than laying blame exclusively on Southerners as the sole perpetrators of acts of racial violence. O’Mathúna (2008) uses carefully selected songs – including “Strange Fruit” – in his teaching of ethics to healthcare professionals. He contends that ethical dilemmas typically provoke an emotional reaction and concludes that “music is an excellent tool to introduce the emotional realm into ethics training. It helps people articulate the feelings they have about different situations...” (O’Mathúna, 2008, p. 53).

There is very little recent research on how people, particularly young people, react to socially relevant songs, although we know from Meeropol's account that when Holiday first sang "Strange Fruit", the audience at Café Society gave her "a tremendous ovation" (Margolick, 1999, p. 98). The term "socially relevant songs" is used in this study to describe a song whose lyrics trigger reflection and reaction in relation to a historical event. In the case of "Strange Fruit", the lyrics refer to act of lynching during the Jim Crow period or, more generally, to the underlying social issue of racial violence that the song tackles, which continues to be highly relevant in the 21st century. Furthermore, there has very little enquiry into whether these songs can evoke images and emotions which have a transversal pedagogical value in terms of encouraging the development of socially desirable values and attitudes that goes beyond the usual scope of a music listening or history of music class.

"Strange Fruit" is considered the most renowned protest song against lynching (Margolick, 2001; Turner, 2016). Protest songs are written to generate an emotional reaction that galvanizes people around a social cause. The importance of protest songs as a powerful galvanizing force for a social cause during the Vietnam War and the 2003 Iraq War has received much attention from numerous scholars. (Denisoff, 1970; Garofalo, 2013; Kizer, 1983; Mondak, 1988; Peddie, 2006; Rodnitzky, 1971). "Strange Fruit's" lyrics are indeed "creative expressions designed to elicit an emotional response" (Kizer, 1983, p. 5) against lynching.

The question this paper explores is the effectiveness of "Strange Fruit" as a creative expression against lynching, and how the emotional responses triggered may be useful either in a cross-curricular context or in an interdisciplinary approach to the teaching of music for the advancement of socially desirable goals.

Cross-curricular teaching, involves teaching topics or themes across various subjects in the curriculum whereas interdisciplinary teaching involves a multiperspective approach to teaching a specific subject. The National Curriculum Council in the United Kingdom defines these themes as "elements that enrich the educational experience of pupils... and include a strong component of knowledge and understanding in addition to skills. Most can be taught through other subjects as well as through themes and topics" (Savage, 2010, p. 10). Thus, a theme, such as environmental sustainability, citizenship or human rights can be studied in more than one subject (Barton & Smith 2000, p. 54). Beane (1997), one of the leading scholars on cross-curricular teaching, took the concept further by supporting the idea of curriculum integration around key issues with lesser importance given to defining subject boundaries. The significance of cross-curricular teaching, according to Resnick (1989, p. 33), is increased student motivation and engagement because when students experience an interdisciplinary approach, the value of what they are learning becomes clearer as they can apply their acquired competences to many subjects as well as to how they react to and operate

in the real world.

Some of the current key international curriculum issues include values education and competency-based approaches. Moreover, it is widely held that education systems "must impart values to achieve a more just and inclusive society, must provide a variety of learning experiences to train a competent and active citizenship...." (Tedesco, Operti, & Amadio, 2014, p. 527), which includes focusing on values and attitudes that show appreciation of freedom, solidarity, peace and justice. Competences in the sphere of education refer to the expected outcomes of learning and they can be key, generic or cross-cutting competences, which are sometimes referred to as transversal competences (Tedesco et al., 2014). A study conducted by UNESCO's Education Research Institutes Network (ERI-Net, 2015, pp. 4-5) included the following values as examples of transversal competences that should be encouraged in education policy making: tolerance; respect for diversity; democratic participation; empathy; integrity; compassion. These values can clearly play an important role in advancing social justice, racial equality and human rights. Competency implies a combination of practical skills, knowledge, motivation, ethical values, attitudes, emotions, and other social and behavioral components that are mobilized together to achieve effective action. Knowledge in practice is considered to be knowledge acquired through active participation in social practices and, as such, can be developed both in the formal educational contexts through the curriculum, as well as in informal contexts. Competences, therefore, can be defined as a kind of integrated know-how (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED), 1997; Rychen & Salganik, 2001).

The relationship between music and emotion has generated considerable interest among scholars since ancient times beginning with Plato's *Republic* (Jowett, 2000, pp. 165-171). Hanslick's (1974) seminal work, represented an important divergence from the notion that "the widely beloved and powerful art that has no other object than the form of these emotions. This art is Music" (Bonds, 1997, p. 400). Of course, that is not to say that instrumental music cannot trigger an emotion in the listener, but the emotion triggered is indefinite and not constant because the reaction may be different as time passes and among different listeners. More recently, Thompson & Quinto (2011) provide an overview of existing theories of music and emotion, although they argue that there is no single theory on which all scholars agree to explain what specific features of music in general can trigger an emotional response. The scientific literature in this area is extensive; while attempts have been made to establish a parallelism, for example, between instrumental music and psycholinguistics (Aiello, 1994, Jackendoff, 1987) as a way of creating an organizing framework to understand different musical phenomena, this has not been satisfactory because no models have been developed to explain the way in which instrumental music can evoke concrete images (Bregman, 1990, Palmer, 1997, Sloboda, 1990). Thus, this type of music is considered ambiguous in terms of

the variety of meanings it can convey (Bharucha, 1987, Cooke, 1962, Gaver & Mandler, 1987, Lerdahl, 1988, Sloboda, 1991). Indeed, according to Green (2006), “the notion of musical ‘autonomy’, the idea that music’s ‘true’ meaning and value rise above mundane social and political considerations, is rightly discarded nowadays” (p. 1-2).

By contrast, songs, as distinct from instrumental music, are more likely to trigger a more defined emotional response due to the content of the lyrics and their message (Salamé & Baddeley, 1989; Serafine, Crowder, & Repp, 1984; Serafine, Davidson, Crowder, & Repp, 1986). Indeed, Green defines musical meaning as a concept that involves a dialectical relationship between two aspects: “inherent” meaning, which refers to musical syntax or the pattern created by the arrangement of sounds and silences, and “delineated” meaning, involving the extra-musical concepts or connotations of music, namely its social, cultural, religious, political or other associations. Socially relevant songs through their lyrics have the power to provide much in the way of “delineated meaning” in an educational setting.

Bowman (2005) identifies the following to be among the educational aims to which music may be suited: “transmission of cultural heritage; the creation and maintenance of cultural vitality; enabling access to experiences and understandings that are not commonly accessible through informal means; imparting critical awareness that gives people more power and control over their lives; ... creating personal and collective identities; developing tolerance, cooperation, and ethical frames for action;... developing expertise and fluency in valued realms of human endeavour; and so on..” (p. 128). The list, as Bowman points out is possibly infinite, suggesting the value of socially relevant songs for developing transversal competences in an educational setting.

In a discussion on the affective dimensions of musical-linguistic practices, Turino (1999) suggests that music has emotional power due to the specific qualities of musical and linguistic signs that can trigger analytical reflection as well as an emotionally rich experience. Moreover, Turino (2008) has categorized two types of music performances: participatory and presentational. The former describes a situation with participants and potential participants performing different roles, while the latter involves artists playing for an audience that does not get involved in music-making. Equally relevant to this study, Turino (2016) stresses the profound impact that some music-making and dance occasions can have because they function as resources which are fundamental for habit change within individuals and social cohorts. Fundamental habit change is precisely what is required to develop lasting alternative forms of citizenship that challenge the status quo.

### **Historical Context**

Knowing the historical context of “Strange Fruit” is fundamental to fully understanding the

song's message. One of the most significant events in the history of the United States was the abolition of the legal institution of slavery after the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment was incorporated into the US Constitution in 1865. It declared that: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (The Library of Congress, November 30, 2015). However, the Black Codes and laws passed in the southern states between the Reconstruction period to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s restricted freedoms, exploited African-American workers and enforced racial segregation (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2017).

This period came to be commonly known as the Jim Crow Era, a term made popular by Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a 19<sup>th</sup> century northern, white, minstrel actor who performed in blackface and shabby clothes as a slave in his act, "Jump Jim Crow." As Rice gained popularity portraying a caricature of an enslaved person, the character became known as a derogatory term for African Americans. After the Civil War, the term became associated with laws in the South that discriminated against the formerly enslaved. The numerous and varied means that were used to oppress blacks during this era were featured in Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name* (Blackmon, 2009). Lynching was one horrific example of racial violence suffered by African-Americans. It was "... a criminal practice.... peculiar to the United States" (Cutler, 1905, p. 1) involving the extrajudicial and unlawful hanging and killing of black people by white mobs in mainly but not exclusively Southern and Border States. According to a study conducted by Tuskegee University, between 1882 and 1968, 4745 people were lynched of which 3446 were African-American (Tuskegee University, 2010).

"Strange Fruit" was written by Abel Meeropol – a white, Jewish, New York school teacher and a communist – in reaction to a gruesome and disturbing photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. Originally published as a poem, "Bitter Fruit" appeared in the January 1937 issue of *The New York Teacher*, a union publication, under the pseudonym "Lewis Allan". The poem was soon after arranged to music by Meeropol, renamed "Strange Fruit" and popularized by Billie Holiday following her first performance of it in 1939 at Café Society, New York's first racially integrated nightclub. She started the song in complete silence, with the lights dimmed and a small spotlight solely on her, and ended it with the lights out as she disappeared. Already a well-known artist, Holiday's popularity increased after her dramatic performance of the song. Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit" for Commodore Records and the song remained in her repertoire for the next 20 years. The song has subsequently been covered by other artists, including Nina Simone, Diana Ross, Annie Lennox, India Arie. More recently, Nina Simone's version was sampled in Kayne West's "Blood on the Leaves" (Tillet, 2014).

As the first protest song that brought a hard-hitting political message to the sphere of entertainment (Lynskey, 2010), “Strange Fruit” became somewhat of a landmark. Stowe (1998) and Margolick (1999) provide an interesting account of the mixed reactions to “Strange Fruit” following its debut at Café Society. However, according to Meereopol, from the very beginning Billie Holiday “...gave a startling, most dramatic and effective interpretation, which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywhere”. He wrote of her debut, “Billie Holiday’s styling of the song was incomparable and fulfilled the bitterness and shocking quality I had hoped the song would have” (Margolick, 2000, pp. 97-98).

Previously, African American protest songs needed to be covert, sung in code with hidden messages of protest understood within the community of the enslaved and their ancestors, but not by whites. On the other hand, white protest music was designed for specific purposes – political party meetings and public protests organized by labor unions – and was more direct in its message. “Strange Fruit” was neither a song with a coded message, nor one that directly roused unity for a social cause. It was a different kind of protest song; one that shocked and haunted with powerful metaphor and irony. Baker (2002) writes, “No musical work had grappled so directly with the brutality of lynching before ‘Strange Fruit’. The text is exceptional in its selected gory detail” and Holiday’s gut-wrenching performance inspired by her own experiences with discrimination and segregation made the song even more powerful and “real” (Baker, 2002, p. 46).

The hypothesis of this study is that when a group of young university students listens to a song with strong social content, independently of whether the song is popular at the time of listening, the song’s lyrics facilitate not only the building of historical knowledge that may be related to the song’s topic but also the development of transversal competences related to the song’s content in an interdisciplinary context: in this case, history through music.

The goal of the study is to explore the impact of a song with strong social content on a group of young university students. The cohort came from a freshman level general education music course entitled “A History of America in Song” and the questionnaire explored their reaction to the audio version of “Strange Fruit”.

The objectives of the study are:

1. To explore whether after a cohort listens to a song with strong social content an emotional reaction is triggered that can eventually facilitate the development of transversal competences.

2. To explore the types of emotional responses produced in each of the participants as a result of listening to Billie Holiday's interpretation of "Strange Fruit" and having access to a copy of the lyrics.
3. To know if by using a socially relevant song in an educational setting it is possible to arouse a greater interest in the topic being studied, in this case the Jim Crow period of US history and how it links to the broader theme of the ongoing civil rights movement.

## Method

### *Design and Information Sources*

This study focuses on the audio rather than audio-visual representation of "Strange Fruit". The reason for avoiding interference from visual stimuli is that the study explores whether the audio version, which focuses on the song's lyrics as sung by Holiday, may have a cross-curricular application and serve to assist the teacher in developing transversal competences in a classroom setting. However, as detailed in the method, ICT enabled participants to access the online questionnaire and facilitated their participation at their own pace but at the same time in a controlled environment.

Forty (40) undergraduate students enrolled in a general education freshmen-level music course on "A History of America in Song" at a New England state research university volunteered to answer the semi-structured online questionnaire. They came from a range of degree programs with majors ranging from Electrical Engineering to Political Science. The students had just started a unit on African American Music and participated in a class focusing on Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers. This unit also would cover the early 1900's and spirituals, but would not focus on the practice of lynching which would be covered in a third unit on Civil Rights. Therefore, although the group was aware of African American music, they had not yet dealt with, at least in this course, the themes directly connected to "Strange Fruit" prior to responding to the questionnaire.

Participants were told the general topic and the aims of the research in advance and were read the following text before being provided with a participation code and the link to access the online questionnaire:

*The aim of our research is to investigate awareness of and attitudes to the song entitled "Strange Fruit". The benefits of the study include the advancement of knowledge in relation to awareness of significant social issues. You will be asked to answer an online survey questionnaire, including some demographic questions and further questions relating to your familiarity with and understanding and opinion of "Strange Fruit". You will then listen to the song and will be given access to a copy of*



*the lyrics to help you answer the final questions which will ask you to comment on the song's message as well as what the song makes you feel, think and its relevance.*

The questionnaire was answered in a controlled environment from 11:00 to 12:00 o'clock on September 29, 2016, in a lecture hall on campus, with a researcher present at all times. Participants accessed the questionnaire via their laptops or other electronic devices. A proprietary online survey software was used to create the online questionnaire and each questionnaire submitted logged a date/time at completion. Therefore, the researchers were able to ensure that only completed survey questionnaires submitted during the aforementioned controlled time period would be included in the study. The online questionnaire provided a link to Billie Holiday's audio version of the song:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI>

After listening to the song, the participants had access to the lyrics reproduced below and proceeded to answer the five open-ended questions.

*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  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.  
Here is 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.*

### ***Fieldwork Development***

The three authors were involved in drafting a semi-structured questionnaire comprising a mix of open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Two expert researchers from the Faculty of Education also revised the initial draft questionnaire before it was shared among a group of American students undertaking study abroad at a Spanish university. The objective was to ensure that there were no ambiguities as to what each question was asking, that the multiple-choice questions were well designed, and that the questionnaire overall was well structured and easy to follow. For example, a "none of the above option" was included in three multiple-choice questions, reflecting the feedback received from this preliminary exercise. All three researchers agreed on the types of questions to be included and the final content of the

questionnaire. A trial run ensured that the online link worked and that the 20-minute time limit set to answer the questions was working correctly.

The questionnaire was designed to meet the following research goals:

1. Exploring the impact of a socially relevant song from the past on a cohort of university students.
2. Investigating the relationship between student background and their awareness of and reactions to “Strange Fruit”.

Qualitative content analysis techniques (Jansen, 2010; Krippendorff, 1989, pp. 87-89) were used to analyze the data generated by the five open-ended questions which probed participants’ reactions to the song in terms of what it made them think and feel, their understanding of its message, their knowledge of the historical period in which it was set, and whether it was considered relevant in the 21st century. The technique of investigator triangulation (Patton, 1990) improved efficiency and objectivity in terms of the analysis of the data generated.

### ***Analysis Strategies***

For the analysis of the five open-ended questions, the following standard interpretation procedures were employed: data reduction, keyword selection, dimensional grouping of phrases, and exhaustive editing and classification of categories. One researcher, in consultation with the other researchers, carried out the first stage data reduction, keyword selection and dimensional grouping of phrases, whereas the exhaustive editing and classification of categories were subsequently done by all three researchers as a team. After several discussions, the researchers were able to agree on the final categories that represented the qualitative data generated from the five open-ended questions. The categories that emerged followed by their respective exemplar quotes and the participant ID numbers are presented in the following results section.

## **Results**

Most of the participants were US citizens and European Americans although African Americans, Asian Americans and Middle Eastern Americans as well as those of mixed ethnicities also were represented. However, when we analyzed the texts, we observed no differences in the responses based on nationality, ethnic group, gender, or whether the participant was first, second or third-generation American. Therefore, the results are presented by focusing on the categories and themes generated by the participants as a single cohort of university students all of whom were aged 18-25 years.

The results indicate that 23% of the group were familiar with “Strange Fruit” and most of those who were familiar with the song (95.7%) could also identify the song’s precise historical context, namely the Jim Crow period. Seventy percent attended a history class in the last two years (20% attended one more than three years ago), and 78% of the cohort recalled having studied the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement among other topics, but the majority were not able to identify the historical context of the song as the Jim Crow period.

After listening to “Strange Fruit” and having access to the lyrics in the questionnaire, 10% made the connection between the song and its anti-lynching message when asked the second open-ended question about the message of the song. Moreover, 28% of the group were able to correctly relate “Strange Fruit” to the Jim Crow period when asked the first open-ended question regarding its historical period. The other categories that emerged in response to the question about the historical period of “Strange Fruit” include the following: Civil War (1861-1865), Pre-Civil War Period-Antebellum (before 1861), Slavery period, and Civil Rights Era.

The majority did not connect the song specifically to lynching. However, much broader categories relating to the following themes emerged in response to the second question about the song’s message: oppression of African-Americans/slavery, atrocities/violent crimes/hate crimes, racism/racial tension/racial violence, grieving for cruelty towards African Americans, remembering the reality of race related atrocities, and a protest song about the civil rights movement.

The exemplar quotes are as follows:

- *Slaves were treated very harshly while the public knew but decided not to acknowledge it (P34)*
- *The oppression of African American people in America. (P7)*
- *To depict the violence associated with racial tension and the deeply rooted historical significance behind this continued violence. (P16)*
- *It depicts the horrors of how African Americans were treated ...As for a message, I would say one of sorrow and grieving for the way an entire people were violently, and unjustly treated. (P13)*
- *The author is attempting to portray the sad truth of the history of Blacks in the south. The other message of the author is to show that we may think that a certain part of history is not very bad but in reality there is so much that can be explained in detail to show how horrible the event was. (P23)*
- *The song is definitely a song concerning racism. The words and meaning is very powerful. It must be a protest song in the early black human rights movement. (P31)*

The remaining three open-ended questions 3, 4, and 5, were designed to meet the study's second objective which is to explore the types of participant reactions. The third open-ended question which asked the participants to describe what they felt after listening to the song produced the following categories: creepy/eerie, unsettling, disturbing, dark, sad/unhappy/despair/, depressed/gloomy, angry/disgusted/horrified, upset, pain, and guilty/ashamed.

The exemplar quotes are as follows:

- *Made me feel somewhat uneasy. It didn't make me feel sad, or mad, or even regretful. It just felt like a gory scene. (P20)*
- *My initial thought was that the song was very morbid. In producing this image of the mistreatment of those enslaved, they must use shocking and disturbing imagery to get people to react and think about these horrors. (P5)*
- *This song is very sad and makes me feel angry and upset. It makes me feel this way because it was socially acceptable at the time for racist people. (P 9)*
- *The song makes me feel somewhat sad that this is the history of Black people and this topic is what people had to sing about. It makes me feel guilty that White people, like myself would inflict so much pain on another group of people. (P17)*

The fourth open-ended, question relating to the thoughts prompted by “Strange Fruit” produced the following categories: racial violence/white supremacy/Klu Klux Klan (KKK)/racism/lynching, graphic images of lynching, ambiguity of the song’s message/metaphor/title, strangeness of the metaphor/image, Black Lives Matter, timeless song/relevant today, powerful, disgusting, shocking metaphor/image, importance of remembering past acts of racial violence, and cover versions of “Strange Fruit”.

The exemplar quotes are as follows:

- *Images of lynched people in the south. Racial violence is something I am really sensitive to. I really hope that we can move forward progressively as people to a more peaceful place in society. (P3)*
- *Early America was a dark place filled with white supremacy. (P25)*
- *I just really thought of the KKK and how awful they were to Black people, and how much fear Black people have to live with on the daily basis. (P17)*
- *I'm a little confused as to why the lyrics talk about a strange and bitter crop. (P34)*
- *The fact that “strange fruits” and “black bodies” were somewhat compared to each other and are supposed to represent the same thing shocked me’(P31)*
- *My main thought was how weird it is to compare bodies to “Strange fruit” the song is*

- clearly meant to disturb. (P14)*
- *It made me think of the black lives matter movement because there are similar themes in this song that relate to what is going on in our society at the moment (P21)*
  - *The description of the bodies hanging as well as “bulgin’ eyes and the twisted mouth” makes my stomach turn because of how descriptive it is (P29)*
  - *I did not like the feeling of unjust death and murder that, for me, was depicted in the song. At the same time, it is a time period that needs to be remembered and understood. Learning is the only way to end social injustice (P16)*
  - *I thought of a new version of the song that I have heard (P28)*

The fifth and final open-ended question, regarding the relevance of “Strange Fruit” produced a majority of categories that support its present day relevance based on the following reasons: discrimination/oppression /social exclusion /inequalities between races persists, existence of racism/ racial divide racial violence/hate crimes/cop killings continue, Black Lives Matter confirms relevance, Kanye West sampled “Strange Fruit” for his rap song “Blood on the leaves”, and highly relevant to remember the past and learn from past actions.

The exemplar quotes are as follows:

- *Yes. Racism is still institutionalized in our society today and needs to be addressed (P16)*
- *I think this song is very relevant to what is happening in today’s society. I think that there still is a lot of racism still embedded in American society. I think that people who are immigrants or are of color are also considered a strange fruit to Americans. (P19)*
- *Sadly yes, racial tensions have reached an all-time high... While this song mentions the great, beaten evils, it is still relevant to today, change the lyrics to mention bullet holes and gallant cops, and bam, it’s relevant. Which is a shame. (P26)*
- *I think this song is very relevant ...The fact that the stench of rotting black flesh is in the air can’t be avoided. Tamir Rice, Eric Gardner, Mike Brown and countless others have died because of the lack of humanity which this song addresses. (P35)*
- *Yes, I do consider this song relevant today. With the rising racial tensions in today’s community with the Black Lives Matters protest, it is clear that songs that address the mistreatment of the African American community are obviously still quite relevant today. (P4)*
- *Kanye West’s “Blood on the Leaves” clearly takes a lot of inspiration from Strange Fruit, in a pop culture reference to the song. In addition, criminal justice against blacks is still a pressing issue in our society, at the forefront of our national dialogue--the song is still relevant. (P14)*
- *I do believe it is. It is actually featured on a popular artist (Kanye west) song. I think*

- that the time period this came from was very important and controversial to our nation and should not be forgotten. (P27)*
- *I think this song is relevant today for the sole purpose of history. Luckily these horrible events don't happen to people anymore these days but is an important part of our history that must be studied and remembered. We must learn from past mistakes in order to form a better future, and that's what I feel this song is good for. (P23)*

A much smaller number of categories emerged which supported the contrary view that “Strange Fruit” is no longer relevant: not relevant now but historically important, not relevant, and not relevant – slavery abolished.

The exemplar quotes are as follows:

- *I do not because common lynchings do not exist but social injustice against certain groups does exist to different extents. (P8)*
- *No, I think the song was more relevant a 100 years ago, however it does have historical meaning and can be used to teach today about the actions of the past. (P6)*
- *No, because we do not have slaves anymore, although some people may treat others with different skin tones with disrespect. (P34)*

### **Discussion**

The results demonstrate that in general the students were unaware of the period of American history that is the subject of “Strange Fruit,” despite most participants having recalled studying the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, despite “Strange Fruit’s” significance in the world of protest music and relevance from a social perspective, the song was unknown to most of the students. However, the variety of the resulting categories clearly demonstrates that the listening experience of “Strange Fruit” could transcend a purely musical analysis and suggests the song’s potential role in developing transversal competences in a cross-curricular context.

The lyrics of “Strange Fruit” create a horrific image of lynching that triggered a powerful affective reaction of disgust, anger and even shame in the participants. Of course, this response was also partly provoked by Billie Holiday’s powerful performance, with her vocalizations, accents, and nuances, creating almost the impression in the listener that Holiday was singing from first-hand experience of witnessing the lynching described. Hobson (2008) argues that Holiday’s ironic tone in her interpretation of “Strange Fruit” is in fact what turns it into a protest song, thereby “altering the political soundscape.”(Hobson, 2008, p. 448) Thus, in a music class about American history and culture the variety of categories emerging in the results suggest – in line with the first study objective – that the song could be used in an

interdisciplinary context , or to support the development of a cross-curricular theme , for example in history, politics, ethics, music and literary studies classes, thereby facilitating the development of transversal competences.

In response to the third study objective, and in accordance with Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff (2002), topic interest and learning is linked to an affective response. In this study the participants' potential interest in the topic of "Strange Fruit" is suggested by their strong affective responses and their respective comments. Even though most students had studied the period that gave rise to "Strange Fruit" (78% had claimed to have studied the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement), the results indicate that the affective stimulus provided by listening to "Strange Fruit", in accordance with Banks (2003), made a powerful impact. In a classroom setting this impact has the potential to lead to increased awareness of and commitment to socially desirable goals relating to human rights, racial equality and social justice.

The lyrics of "Strange Fruit" clearly provided participants with a strong emotional stimulus. Hidi & Baird (1988) state that "situational interest" in a topic can be generated by the stimuli provided by certain texts. Several authors have established a link between high-interest texts and increased comprehension and recall in an educational setting including (Benton, Corkill, Sharp, Downey, & Khramtsova, 1995; Harp & Mayer, 1997; Schraw, Bruning, & Svoboda, 1995). A study conducted by Ainley et al. (2002) found that topic interest was related to affective response, affect was then related to persistence with the text, and persistence was related to learning.

Applying the conclusions of Ainley et al. (2002) as well as Turino's (1999) argument for the emotional power of music resulting from its musical and linguistic signs to the present study, a student, who, for example, may not initially be interested in human rights issues and racial violence, after listening to "Strange Fruit" may react in the same way as the participants in this study did with emotions of anger, disgust, sadness and shame. These emotions are likely to come from a sense of empathy towards the suffering of people of colour. This reaction, if followed up with teacher-student interactions, could promote greater understanding of the importance of and, therefore, a greater interest in racial equality and human rights. In fact, the findings relating to the relevance of the song, which are subsequently discussed in more detail, indicate that participants considered the song to be relevant in absolute terms, whether or not the lynching scene described in the song was no longer occurring in present-day America. The sentiment, indicating a high interest in the topic of "Strange Fruit", is captured in the following exemplar quote, suggesting that for this participant "Strange Fruit" has an important present-day relevance: *Sadly yes, racial tensions have reached an all-time high... While this song mentions the great, beaten evils, it is still relevant to today, change the lyrics*

*to mention bullet holes and gallant cops, and bam, it's relevant. Which is a shame. (P26)*

Thus, the participants in this study formed a kind of “cohort” in Turino’s (2008) sense of the word, even though they did not participate in the music making. Listening to Billie Holiday’s interpretation of “Strange Fruit” and participating in this study resulted in critical reflection on the song’s content and triggered a powerful and united emotional reaction against racial violence.

The results underscore the song’s continued power as a potential protest song that could serve to galvanize present day university students. “Strange Fruit” provides a gruesome reminder of racial violence and hate crimes against people of colour even to the first-time listener in the twenty-first century. Although only about a quarter of the participants could correctly link “Strange Fruit” to the Jim Crow Era and the practice of lynching, they all connected the song to the more general issue of racial violence against African Americans.

In line with the second objective of the study the following issues will be explored: the individual categories that emerged in response to the open-ended questions about the feelings incited and thoughts prompted by “Strange Fruit; and, the song’s present-day relevance, historical period and overall message.

The feelings aroused by the song produced categories which concur with O'Mathúna’s (2008, p. 52) interpretation relating to “Strange Fruit’s” discordant tone: unsettling/haunting /disturbing, dark; sad/unhappy/despair/, depressed/gloomy; angry/disgusted/horrified, and are expressed in the following exemplar quotes: *shocking and disturbing images (P5), it creeped me out (P14, gives a chill (P24), horrifies (P29), disgusted in my country (P40), and this song has a creepy vibe (P32)*. Perry explains that the visual image of the lynching is enhanced through the rhetorical device of “ekphrasis”<sup>1</sup>. Abel’s lyrics and Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit” triggers the listener’s senses, transporting them to the ghastly lynching scene and provoking a powerful protest against lynching. Thus, “in developing the visual aspects of a lynching scene through ekphrasis, Meeropol’s lyrics and Holiday’s performance engage audiences in a way that encourages them to experience the lynching scene with all five senses” (Perry, 2013, p. 449).

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<sup>1</sup> Ekphrasis, a Greek term for a literary device which involves a “vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the “action” ... the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/glossary-terms/detail/ekphrasis>



The other affective categories that emerged – angry, sad, disgusted, horrified, upset, pain – in response to the question about the feelings evoked after listening to the song also suggest that the participants were transported to the horrors of the lynching scene. The second stanza of "Strange Fruit" presents the audience with pleasant and appealing images of the south: "Pastoral scene of the gallant South". But the fantasy, sung in ironic tone by Holiday, is quickly shattered when the listener is immediately transported to the reality of a lynching scene – "the bulging eyes and twisted mouth" – a powerful and shocking image of the torture and suffering of the victims. Again, a sharply contrasting and appealing image follows, "the scent of magnolia sweet and fresh", only to be sensually overwhelmed by the horrors associated with "the sudden smell of burning flesh". These sharply contrasting images of pleasure and pain appear to have heightened the emotional response – angry; disgusted; horrified – which indicate a sense of empathy for the suffering of the lynching victims and is embodied in the exemplar quote: *This song is very sad and makes me feel angry and upset. It makes me feel this way because it was socially acceptable at the time for racist people (P 9).*

The category guilty/ashamed in response to the feelings aroused by "Strange Fruit" reflected in the exemplar quote – *The song makes me feel somewhat sad that this is the history of Black people and this topic is what people had to sing about. It makes me feel guilty that White people, like myself would inflict so much pain on another group of people (P17)* – is further evidence of the strong emotional and empathetic reaction produced by engaging the senses through the following lines: "Black body swinging in the southern breeze/ The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth/And the sudden smell of burning flesh..." Furthermore, the aforementioned exemplar quote suggests the song's lyrics have produced an empathetic reaction towards the human rights of people of colour that have been totally violated by the image created through the lyrics of "Strange Fruit". Hence, this type of response indicates that transversal competences, reflected in values such as empathy and compassion, can be developed in the classroom by using powerful and evocative socially relevant songs.

These findings concur with authors who have affirmed the impact of "Strange Fruit" on the Civil Rights Movement and the importance of remembrance and awareness of past acts of racial violence. Pinheiro (2015) discusses the link between jazz and political commentary, citing "Strange Fruit" as one of the first songs that openly described the horrors of the lynching of African-Americans. Campbell (2004) argues that the very lynching photographs that inspired the song provide important evidence of racist history. A theological interpretation of "Strange Fruit" is provided by Pramuk (2006), based on an analogy between the Passion of Christ and the suffering of African-Americans as victims of oppression and racial violence.

Thus, the visual image of a lynching created by the lyrics of "Strange Fruit" is an effective

pedagogical resource that transports the listener-student to a ghastly lynching scene. As the results of this study have indicated, this horrific image unleashes an emotional response that would not only enrich the learning experience about this historical period but can also aid the development of transversal competences in a cross-curricular context. For this to happen, effective teacher-student interaction is required, which could be in the form of class discussion about the origins and importance of concepts such as human rights, civil rights and racial equality.

The question related to the thoughts prompted by “Strange Fruit” gave rise to the category strangeness of the metaphor/image and ambiguity of the song’s message/metaphor/title. The respective exemplar quotes in the results section suggest that the ironic metaphor produced a discordant reaction: *The fact that "strange fruits" and "black bodies" were somewhat compared to each other and are supposed to represent the same thing shocked me* (P31). Turner offers a possible explanation for this reaction in that the twenty-first century “first-time listener to Holiday’s performance of “Strange Fruit” must contend with numerous obstacles before appreciating the ironies that are at the foundation of the lyrics” (Turner, 2016, p. 48).

Turner (2016, p. 45) contends that the “layers” of irony in “Strange Fruit” provoke “guilt, stinging pain or sadness” and applies Yus’s (2000) framework for understanding the intended irony in the song’s lyrics as well as Billie Holiday’s performance. Yus states that for every ironic communication there is a leading contextual source, which is the most readily accessible access point of entry to ironic interpretation. Turner’s (2016) analysis of “Strange Fruit” for ironic utterances makes several initial assumptions among which the following are highly relevant: “the listener has no previous knowledge of Strange Fruit, is aware of the culture of racial violence in early twentieth-century America...” (p. 50). Therefore, the listener was assumed to possess the leading “contextual source”, namely knowledge of the culture of lynching. The cohort in this study generally lacked the necessary “contextual source”, an assumption that Turner deemed necessary for understanding the irony embedded in “Strange Fruit’s” lyrics. By contrast, the mid twentieth-century audience would have been exposed to the postcards and press photos of lynchings, whereas the cohort in this study would not have seen these types of images in the press and therefore connected the song to racial violence against African Americans in a more general sense. Hence, in response to the question about the thoughts prompted by the song, the category *strangeness of the metaphor* emerged, suggesting that the metaphor was not understood or particularly liked. Had the historical context been known, the metaphor would have almost certainly been better appreciated.

An alternative interpretation provided by Frankowski (2014) offers a different explanation as to why the metaphor was considered strange, confusing, or shocking, as indicated in the

following exemplar quotes:

*I'm a little confused as to why the lyrics talk about a strange and bitter crop. (P34)/The fact that "strange fruits" and "black bodies" were somewhat compared to each other and are supposed to represent the same thing shocked me (P31)/My main thought was how weird it is to compare bodies to "Strange fruit" –the song is clearly meant to disturb (P14).*

Frankowski (2014) suggests that critics “must also think through how the song makes the normative violence strange and to see how its aesthetic presentation is also a type of political discourse with neglect” (p. 144). Indeed, the use of the word “strange” to describe the “fruit”, a symbol of the tortured hanging black bodies suggests that lynching’s were unusual, thereby neglecting the extent of this racist and extremely violent practice. The idea being that the chosen expression “strange fruit” for what is depicted through the lyrics represents a kind of conflict between “remembrance and neglect” because ultimately, “the song cannot be a remembrance, because it does not disclose a content” (Frankowski, 2014, p. 159).

In essence, Frankowski (2014) argues that “Strange Fruit” makes no specific reference to lynching and presents the whole horrific scene with an ironic metaphor that no doubt made a powerful impact on audiences in the mid twentieth-century who were aware of the racial violence taking place and the practice of lynching. However, as suggested by the findings of this study, this metaphor is lost on the twenty-first century listener with no prior knowledge of the historical context of “Strange Fruit”. Frankowski’s (2014) critique of “Strange Fruit” suggests that the song alone does not serve as a means by which to identify the precise historical period in which lynching occurred: “This song is not easily explained in reference to this history. It does not reconcile this history, nor does it perform the work of remembrance” (p. 159).

While Frankowski’s (2014) critique is thought-provoking, it need not undermine the value of “Strange Fruit” as a powerful pedagogical resource in a cross- curricular context. Through “Strange Fruit”, students as a group can explore the Jim Crow period and react to the topic of lynching, as they did in this study. The historical context would be clarified during the process of student/teacher interaction, and the history of this period could thereby be accurately remembered by future generations.

This study produced categories indicating that “Strange Fruit” was considered a relevant song irrespective of its present-day relevance: *highly relevant to remember the past and learn from past actions; and not relevant now but historically important*. Furthermore, the results in response to questions about the song’s message and the thoughts it prompted also produced

similar categories related to the significance of remembering the past: *remembering the reality of race related atrocities* (song's message) and *the importance of remembering past acts of racial violence* (thoughts prompted). Thus, the categories that emerged from the cohort in this study suggest an intuitive acknowledgment of Santayana's (1905) concept, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (p. 248) and this was expressed in absolute terms, that is to say regardless of whether the song "Strange Fruit" was felt to have a present-day relevance. Frankowski (2014, p. 144) similarly argues for the importance of keeping alive the memory of the African-American past because doing so encourages animosity towards present acts of anti-African-American violence. The goal of remembering the past has an important educational function which can also be realized and reinforced by a cross-curricular approach to include the listening of socially relevant songs like "Strange Fruit" not only in history but also ethics, politics and sociology classes and general music listening classes.

Of the 23% of the students familiar with "Strange Fruit", most of them (95.7%) could link the song to the Jim Crow period. This indicates that they learned about the song in a historical context. The inability, in general, of the other students to connect the lynching scene described in "Strange Fruit" to the post-Civil War oppression of African-Americans is a further finding of the study. Most of the categories that emerged in response to the historical context question erroneously linked "Strange Fruit" to the slavery period, the Antebellum or Civil War Period. Further research would need to be conducted to provide verification on how the Jim Crow Era is covered in high school U.S. history textbooks. For instance, students may have assumed that the song was anti-lynching and represented a broader period that included slavery, or they may have been more familiar with other terms that describe that period, such as Reconstruction, segregation, poll taxes, literacy tests, sharecropping and other forms of social, economic and legal oppression in the post-slavery South. Another consideration is that perhaps they were not familiar with the colloquial term "Jim Crow".

Several other categories emerged from this study – atrocities/violent crimes/hate crimes, racism/racial tension/racial violence – indicating an awareness that the song's message was understood to be connected to the racial violence and hate crimes against African-Americans and the civil rights movement. Therefore, the results demonstrate that there is enough relevant content in the lyrics alone for a first-time listener to make these connections. The findings underscore the value of "Strange Fruit" as an effective cross-curricular pedagogical tool, and this concurs with Bank's view that Billie Holiday's interpretation of Strange Fruit "will give students an image and experience with the lynching of Blacks in the South that is more memorable than most textbook accounts" (Banks, 2003, p. 2).

Turning to the cross-curricular application of "Strange Fruit", as the aforementioned literature

has indicated, several scholars have cited the song as a valuable pedagogical tool. However, this study adds something novel to the existing literature given that it explores students' reactions to "Strange Fruit" rather than the opinions or experiences of scholars. The findings also give rise to the possible approaches for using "Strange Fruit" as a cross-curricular teaching resource. For instance, the role of the history teacher would be to ensure that the student is made aware of the historical context and the practice of lynching so that the ironic metaphor can be fully understood and appreciated. In a literature class, for example, literary devices such as irony, ekphrasis and metaphor, could be exemplified by analyzing "Strange Fruit's" lyrics in the same way that a poem would be analyzed. In politics classes, the song can be presented as an important legacy to the Civil Rights Movement. In this way, the students would not only be learning about literary devices, history or politics but also about the song's important theme of racial violence, thereby simultaneously developing transversal competences relating to human rights, tolerance, openness, and respect for diversity.

### ***Strengths and limitations of the study***

The strengths of this study include the methodological approach and the adoption of investigator triangulation to minimize researcher bias in both the structuring of the questionnaire as well as the analysis of the results and the defining of the categories. The study also offers a novel approach compared to the existing body of literature on "Strange Fruit" which has tended to focus on the opinions and interpretations of scholars, rather than conducting research among audiences to gauge present-day reactions to this emblematic anti-lynching protest song. Furthermore, the study explores the implications of the results for education from the cross-curricular perspective as well as for the development of transversal competences.

The limitations of this study are based on the involvement of a rather small cohort of New England university students. Therefore, more studies would need to be conducted with "Strange Fruit" and other socially relevant songs to establish whether these results are transferable to university students in other areas of the US and other countries as well as to students of secondary schools.

### **Conclusions**

British singer Rebecca Ferguson's acceptance of an invitation to sing at the 2017 inauguration of President Donald Trump on the condition that she sing "Strange Fruit" was essentially a protest against perceived racist and far right elements of the incoming Trump Administration. Unsurprisingly, her offer was rejected. "Strange Fruit" remains a powerful legacy of the Jim Crow era that graphically depicts the brutality of racial violence.

A relatively unknown song to the cohort in this study, “Strange Fruit” nevertheless evoked anger, disgust, shame, despair and sadness in response to the vivid and horrific image of a lynching depicted by the song’s lyrics. Furthermore, songs like “Strange Fruit” – given the acknowledged link between affect and topic interest – can also provide the impetus for developing transversal competences associated with social justice, racial equality and human rights. Finally, this study has demonstrated that “Strange Fruit” can be a flexible pedagogical tool in a cross-curricular context because the song transcends the scope of a specific subject area.

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