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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**Lady Day's Manifesto: Becoming a Voice for the
Voiceless in Billie Holiday's Autobiography *Lady Sings
the Blues* (1956)**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bernalae', followed by a long horizontal flourish.

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My love for African American music, contrasted by the prevalent injustices and inhumanity their community faces, has given me a sense of purpose for writing this dissertation. As Holiday said, “Without feeling, whatever you do amounts to nothing,” and this work results from such feeling.

Abstract

Billie Holiday became a prominent icon in the realm of jazz around the 1930s, captivating the public with her unique soulful voice, and through her evocative lyrics. In *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), Holiday sheds light on her life, tackling her experiences of abuse, racial discrimination, and drug addiction.

Despite a rich tradition, the genre of autobiography has become a case study of scholarly pursuit in the 1980s (Spengemann, 1980). However, jazz autobiographies have been dismissed as literary insignificant or as tools to promote their careers (Stein, 2015). Hence, regardless of being a prominent figure in the music industry, limited literature deals with Holiday's autobiography.

The present dissertation intends to demonstrate that Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* enacts as a form of activism against the injustices of a country with a long history of racial inequality. Thus, it seeks to determine to what extent Holiday's autobiography is the embodiment of a political message to condemn the United States, a country where as a black American woman there was no place for her to share her voice and be heard.

With this in mind, I will conduct a close reading and literary analysis approach to determine the role of jazz and blues as manifestation of Holiday's resistance and the implied activism behind her life writing. Furthermore, I will consider Holiday's autobiography of the type of African American autobiographies Trudier Harris discusses: a composition with a political driving force but most importantly, a composition written for the people (Harris, 2014).

Keywords: *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holiday, African American studies, intersectionality, activism, autobiography, non-fiction.

0. Introduction

0.1. Billie Holiday and her time

Billie Holiday, alias Lady Day, became a jazz sensation in the 1930s and 1940s, achieving an eminent musical career that lasted throughout her life. Regarded by some as “the greatest female jazz voice of all time” (qtd. in Bracks & Smith 13), Holiday captivated the public with her distinctive soulful voice and the raw emotion she conveyed through her compelling and poignant lyrics.

Holiday was born as Eleanora Fagan in Baltimore, to mother Sadie Fagan and father Clarence Holiday, in April of 1915. While her parents were married for a brief period, her father left both Holiday and her mother to pursue his music career as a guitarist in a jazz band. Because of his departure, Fagan migrated for a better prospect to provide for her daughter, which forced Holiday to stay at her grandparent’s house. Nonetheless, despite her mother’s efforts, Holiday found herself in precarious conditions at a young age, obliging her to start working in order to sustain herself, from scrubbing floors and being a maid to becoming a prostitute at the age of fourteen. Holiday found in music the opportunity to escape from the impoverishment the world brought her into.

Although she eventually became one of the most renowned singers across the United States, Holiday’s life was marked by many adversities as a Black woman, which she describes in her autobiography. Within the paradoxical historical context of segregation and the blossoming of African American culture, Holiday, in *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), Holiday recounts the stories that shaped her persona through an evocative prose style. She delves into her relationship with music and her jazz influences, alongside episodes of abuse, racial bigotry and drug addiction.

0.1.1. Racial bigotry

The Reconstruction era after the Civil War was marked by a progress that came with the Constitutional Amendments, which rightfully bestowed the African American community the rights they never possessed. These reforms not only brought a guaranteed citizenship and a right to vote to the freed people, with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment, respectively, but it also ended slavery with the Thirteenth Amendment, in 1865. Notwithstanding, the discrimination and bigotry that black people faced during slavery did not cease with its ending.

As a result of the belief that asserted white people as the inherently superior race, justified through the American Eugenics movement, a racial segregation emerged. By 1890, this segregation was referred to as “Jim Crow” laws, a designation that originated from a character that shared the same name at minstrel shows. Fundamentally, these performances showcased white men in blackface, displaying African Americans as ludicrous figures, with the mere purpose to ridicule them while also feeding the white superiority sentiment (Swindler 5). As Hugh H. Smythe suggests, the term Jim Crow “infers that in the stratified social pattern of the United States a caste-like group exists [...] which has been assigned to a low position and for which the contacts with the group on a higher level are regulated” (Smythe 46). Therefore, these policies of segregation consisted of separating public institutions and facilities by race, drawing a legal division between black people and white people.

During this racial caste system that lasted over a century, lynching took over “as the weapon of choice” (*Equal Justice Initiative* 26) to brutally target African Americans. Thus, while the Reconstruction Act deemed every citizen equal under the law, Holiday’s autobiography exposes the racism against African Americans that was still remarkably present in her lifetime across the nation, but especially in the South. This racist attitude

arose to reinforce a white supremacy without slavery, materializing this anti-black sentiment in various forms of terrorism – including segregation, lynching and mass incarceration later on – used for racial subordination.

Holiday's hardships are a vivid portrayal of the segregation Black Americans suffered in the United States, particularly during the Jim Crow Laws. The systematic oppression they had to face relegated them to a second-class citizenship, exposing a country where “race and law intertwined” (Wertheimer 311). In this sense, slavery, despite its abolition with the Thirteenth Amendment, left a mark in an American society where the white supremacy was still perpetuated through segregation laws.

0.1.2. The Harlem Renaissance

Around the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance was born as the artistic flowering of black culture. Also known as the New Negro Movement, this movement was characterized by a vitalization and celebration of black identities through art, bringing a cultural awakening to the African Americans. Further to this, this movement challenged the status quo of the American modernism sphere by seeking to break away from the stereotypical chains that defined blackness in the United States. As Emily Bernard proclaims in “The Renaissance and the Vogue” (2007): “[b]lack intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance invested in the ideology of the New Negro all of their ambitions to liberate black people – psychologically, socially, and even politically – from the denigration of the slave past” (Bernard 30).

Among the black intellectuals that propelled the movement, Langston Hughes confined the black artist archetype in his influential essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), an essential piece of writing that expresses the essence of the Harlem Renaissance. Here, Hughes manifests that it is their duty to express their individual darkness without fear nor shame and to acknowledge their ugliness and beauty

within, by “paint[ing] and model[ing] the beauty of dark face and creat[ing] with new technique the expressions of their own soul-world” (qtd. in Porter 103). Moreover, in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926) W.E.B DuBois declared that “all Art is propaganda” (qtd. in Porter 96), demanding a black artistic expression that rendered a political commitment against the injustices of their community. Hence, black artists held the power to represent themselves through their artistic work. In this manner, they could offer a counter-narrative to the definitions imposed on them by segregation.

Mostly tied to a literary vogue with eminent figures, such as Zora Neale Hurston with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and Hughes himself with poems such as “The Weary Blues” (1926), these writers reproduced the black vernacular – deemed as vulgar and an unsuitable form of expression – in their works to vindicate for their black identity. However, this movement also encompassed art, politics and music. In fact, Hughes considered jazz to be “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America” (qtd. in Porter 103). With this, while the heyday of said Renaissance was in the 1920s, the blossoming movement was still taking place when Holiday rose to stardom around the 1930s due to her major jazz talent. Hereafter, the Harlem Renaissance influenced Holiday’s music, and its principles left a mark on Holiday that infused her life narrative.

0.2. Autobiography

Billie Holiday’s *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956) memoir contrives different themes. On the one hand, *Lady Sings the Blues* is a life narrative cantered on the story of a prominent black public figure and celebrity in the realm of Jazz, depicting her experience in the industry. On the other hand, *Lady Sings the Blues* is also an autobiography that delves into the personal experiences and private life of a woman whose story is conditioned by a dominant male power within a patriarchal and racist society.

0.2.1. Musical/Jazz Autobiographies

While Louis Armstrong's *Swing That Music* (1936) and Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues* (1946) are some of the most well-known examples of musical autobiographies, specifically jazz autobiographies, these have been subject of scholarly disregard. As Stein observes, this genre of life narrative is usually dismissed as literary frivolous or merely as a tool to further the careers of the artists (Stein, 2015). The collaborative process that the of majority of musical autobiographies undergo has led Stein to draw a thin line between a collaborative effort and a ghost-written one. Despite this, autobiographies can also be perceived as a “genuine opportunity to seize narrative authority” (Stein, 2023), as a way to construct their public image and to advocate for authority through their accounts (Stein, 2004).

Nonetheless, it could be argued that jazz autobiographies are often overlooked due to the connection that this music genre has with its African American roots. The prose styles in these accounts are characteristic for its improvisation and its use of jive – the slang associated with black jazz musicians –, traits which are present in the music genre of jazz itself. By creating the slang barrier both in their music and in their autobiographies, black musicians are able to fight for the dividing life they experience both inside and outside their musical careers.

During slavery, African Americans developed a unique bond with music, since it granted them a sense of kinship and a sense of resistance in spite of their enslavement, a music which bloomed into the genres of blues and jazz. With this, life narratives emerged as a mode of expression that enacted as both resistance and a quest for justice. Slave narratives, sought to shed light into the harsh realities of the abuse African Americans encountered when they were enslaved:

Through an emphasis on slavery as deprivation—buttressed by extensive evidence of a lack of adequate food, clothing, and shelter; the denial of basic familial rights;

the enforced ignorance of most religions or moral precepts; and so on—the ante-bellum narrative pictures the South's "peculiar institution" as a wholesale assault on everything precious to humankind. (Andrews 79)

Two of the most renowned accounts of these freedom narratives are Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The former enacts the role of literacy as an instrument for emancipation, while the latter exposes the deeper subjugation female slaves confronted, such as being treated merely as sexual objects, due to their condition of being both of black descent and women. While tackling distinctive themes, the core of these works revolves around the inhumanity of the institution of slavery, and the constant diminishment against black people by its perpetrators.

Henceforth, these liberation narratives belong to the tradition of African American communities with a vital political essence, devising life writing as a form of activism to condemn the racism and oppression in the United States, while striving for collective liberation. Having this in mind, the dynamic of jazz autobiographies is closely related to one of slave narratives. While jazz autobiographies focus on the musical expression which is deeply associated with a black identity, both turn into the autobiographical act to assert a collective fight for their agency. Hereby, this means that the discrimination against African Americans is reflected in the marginalization of their music and writing, which are deemed as unworthy cases of study.

0.2.2. Women's Autobiographies

Women's life writing – as almost every aspect of their lives – have been shadowed by male autobiographies, which are the standard that have dominated the literary tradition of life narratives. A paradigm embodied by Augustine's *Confessions* (4th century) and Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782-9), this neglect has caused women autobiographies to confront considerable barriers to represent their realities.

In “Women’s Autobiographies” (2014), Maria Dibattista addresses the lack of tradition of women’s autobiographies, which makes it difficult for women to create the female subject as the centre of the narrative. As Dibattista states, “women seeking to record their own lives [...] discovered they had few if any relevant models either to imitate or to defy” (Dibattista 210). In *Writing a Woman’s Life* (1989), Carolyn G. Heilburn has displayed some other issues on women’s autobiographies, exposing the way women have been deprived of the narratives that would have been given them the power to assert control on their lives. When writing a woman’s life, Heilburn emphasizes that “[i]t all needs to be invented, discovered, or resaid” (Heilburn 19).

Moreover, Dibattista highlights that a problem this genre suffers lies on whether women autobiographies offer a unique narrative defined by the exclusive female experience. In this matter, Heilburn points out that the inability to organise the elements that should constitute a women’s life writing causes the element of reinvention to “find the courage to be an “ambiguous woman”” (Heilburn 31). To exemplify this reinvention, Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958), through the prospect of finding the courage to explore her identity, Beauvoir sheds light into her real impulses by navigating her life as a woman challenging the social and gender norms of the bourgeoisie.

Nonetheless, as black woman in the music industry, Holiday’s life is shaped by the intersection of her identities, making the contribution of her autobiography, as well as its disregard, multilayered. For this reason, Holiday’s autobiography cannot be grasped through the lens of either racism or sexism independently. Considering the previous section that draws a connection between slave narratives and jazz accounts and the way they use life writing to denounce their society, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents* (1861) can be considered the blueprint of the black woman experience in the United States, displaying

the different layers of oppression she has encountered as an enslaved person. Hence, it could be said that Holiday's memoir also echoes Jacobs' suffering under the prism of intersectionality. The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989), using a traffic analogy to discern discrimination:

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (Crenshaw 149)

With this, Crenshaw unfolds the way various forms of oppression overlap, emphasizing that such oppression entails the interconnection of racism and sexism within the marginalized identities of the black woman experience. Following this idea of intersectionality, Smith and Watson, when tackling "Identities as Intersectional" in autobiographies, they argue that "identities are not additive but intersectional" (Smith and Watson 36). Bearing in mind Holiday's account through Crenshaw's concept as well as Smith and Watson's perspective on the identities that conform the autobiographical "I", it reaffirms the idea that the different categories that characterize Holiday's persona are what conditions her life.

0.3. Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956)

Along the lines of most musical autobiographies, *Lady Sings the Blues* was created through a process of collaboration. Taking into consideration that Holiday's life narrative was co-written with William Dufty, critics have questioned the issue of authorship arguing that the memoir was not written by her at all. While it is important to acknowledge that Holiday's account was not a product entirely forged by her, as she herself was not a

writer but a singer, the matter of whether being ghost-written or not does not take away the fact that the themes and experiences present in her autobiographical act are her own.

Faulted for its exaggerations and falsifications (Stein, 2023), Holiday's life story has also raised objections about its legitimacy and authenticity. Even so, as Stein suggests it could be stated that the fabrications of her narrative can help to empower Holiday to take control of the narrative of her life (Stein, 2004). Herewith, I will regard the autobiographical narrative the way Dufty and Holiday depicted it, despite transgressing Philippe Lejeune's coined notion of 'autobiographical pact', which refers to the implicit agreement between the author and the reader regarding the veracity and legitimacy of the autobiographical text (Lejeune, 1989). Thus, providing that collaborative process was not actually collaborative, and that the truthfulness was not in fact true, the study I conduct in this dissertation is still relevant since it complies the investigation of the personal narrative of Billie Holiday, not focusing on the veracity of such accusations, but rather on the experiences narrated in the autobiography.

I choose to conduct this research because I believe that Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* is a worthy case of study that offers a rich and multifaceted life narrative, overlooked by its fusion of the African American autobiography, the jazz autobiography as well as the women's autobiography. Because Holiday's life is shaped by the intersection of her identities – a black woman in the music industry – the contribution of her autobiography as well as its disregard is multilayered. For this reason, Holiday's autobiography cannot be grasped through the lens of either racism or sexism independently. Further to this, Holiday's memoir provides the perspective of a black woman navigating the music sphere, and the insights of the forms of discrimination that intertwined and shaped her life. At last, I consider that this analysis on *LSB* is significant because it amplifies marginalized voices, defying the white male dominated narrative.

0.4. State of the Art

In “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography” (2004) Daniel Stein deals with the sensationalism of Holiday’s public persona portrayed in her memoir. Despite pointing out that *LSB* is as a performative act, Stein affirms that this fictionalisation of her self-image allows Holiday to break away from the narrative that society has traced for her.

When it comes to the role of music, Alfonso W. Hawkins, Jr. in “A Nonnegotiable Blues Catharsis in Character: Billie Holiday in *Lady Sings the Blues* and Ursa Corregidora in *Corregidora*” (2006), argues the intrinsic relationship between Holiday’s life struggles and her music, and the way the blues becomes an outlet for her to express, confront and release her trauma. In Hawkins words: “[blues] transfigures affliction into a transitional spirit, uncompromised, non-negotiable, and cathartic” (Hawkins 56).

In terms of the rendition of blues, Megan Winsby in “Lady Sings the Blues: A Woman’s Perspective on Authenticity” (2012) explains that blues can only be sang by oppressed communities, such as women and black people, because they portray the pain and sorrow necessary to perform the blues adequately. Given this pattern of oppression, Winsby excludes white men to participate in the performance of blues, because they are incapable to understand the suffering that it encapsulates. Since they typify the privilege white women and black people lack, they are incapable to execute the blues properly.

Considering the limited study on Holiday’s life narrative, I will also conduct my research in light of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), which provides a general understanding of how to analyse the more important aspects of this autobiography. They unravel different autobiographical “I”s that shape the narrative of first person accounts, giving insights on the personhood that conducts the narration through their tone. Furthermore, Smith and Watson put on display the intersectionality of identities of the autobiographical “I”, a

multiplicity of identities that cannot be separated when it comes to analysing the figure portrayed in the memoir. Lastly, they also tackle the political force that remembering manifests, attributing life writing as a tool for activism. This work grants an interpretation of Holiday's use of the first-person noun, her intersecting identities and the activism through her autobiography.

Lastly, *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography* (2014)'s chapters on "Women's Autobiographies" (2014) by Maria Dibattista, and "African American Autobiography" (2014) by Trudier Harris bestow a framework of investigation that are tied to study of Holiday's life narrative. While the former unfolds how women are forced to reinvent themselves in their life writings, since male accounts are the paradigm of life narratives, the latter expresses the need of African Americans of life writing, tracing it back to slave narratives, to face the racism and inhumanity they suffer in a white predominant society. Therefore, these chapters give room to analyse the perspective of an African American woman recounting her life in a patriarchal and racist society.

0.5. TFG Outline

With this dissertation, I aim to demonstrate the activism displayed in Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues*, drawing special attention to the way jazz and blues, and life writing has served Holiday as devices to denounce the social and political injustices of her country. I begin with the notion of Billie Holiday as a renowned jazz singer and how, as black woman in the United States, was forced to endure the discrimination of her nation, while dealing with a substance abuse. Taking into account that she is a prominent figure in the music industry, there is little literature that deals with the rationale behind her account. Therefore, I intend to shed light into the manner in which Holiday vindicates her black

identity and advocates for a change. My methodology will consist of a close reading of relevant passages of Holiday's memoir.

I begin by contextualising the figure of Billie Holiday within the era of Jim Crow Laws and the Harlem Renaissance, emphasizing the historical and cultural movements that influenced her work. I also tackle the significance of jazz autobiographies and women's autobiographies, framing *Lady Sings the Blues* within the categorisation of these life narratives.

The first chapter delves into the roles of jazz and blues music as a form of protest and resistance, and how they echoed the African American struggles against oppression. Along this path, I examine the impact of "Strange Fruit" in the narrative, as a protest song against lynching and racial violence, and I discuss Holiday's prose style, particularly, her use of Black English, and how it reinforces her narrative. Chapter two provides an intersectional analysis of Holiday's identities as a black woman. It explores how these intersecting identities shape her experiences of abuse, including her encounters with the criminal justice system, the racial and gender biases that influenced her treatment, and how this same bigotry translated into the criminalization of her drug addiction.

Finally, the dissertation concludes by summarizing how *Lady Sings the Blues* serves becomes a powerful act of resistance and a form of activism. Her life narrative underlines the injustices of her time, demanding a revaluation of attitudes towards race, gender and addiction.

1. Blues and Jazz as a resistance

Lady sings the blues,
She tells her side,
Nothing to hide,

Now the world will know,
Just what her blues is all about
(Holiday 0:42-1:18)

In the midst of the brutality, horror and abuse in the southern lands of the United States, African American enclaves found in music a refuge to resist their condition. This not only bestowed them a sense of humanity, but also gave them the strength to persist. In this context, Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* typifies the way jazz and specially blues took form as a resistance to the black American struggles. Considering that blues was part of the conception of jazz, the development of these genres are naturally tied to the forms of expression of the black community. As Hawkins suggests "the blues was created out of a need to hone blackness for and by blackness. It acts as a bandage of sorts – producing a self-sustaining scab that heals the wound" (Hawkins 42).

While Billie Holiday is renowned for being a jazz artist, the presence of the blues in her music cannot be denied, especially how the word 'blues' itself is recurring in her lyrics and in the title of her autobiography. Among some of the examples that could be mentioned, Holiday sings "All I see for me is misery/ I gotta right to sing the blues", "If love goes a thirsting/ 'Til you feel like bursting/ Then nothing but the blues are Brewin" or "I've been so sad and blue/ I've been so lonesome too". In these verses, the concept of blues or feeling blue encapsulate emotions of affliction, absence of love, or loneliness. Notably, Holiday is not the only singer who has used the blues as subject matter, especially in the jazz age in the thirties. Take for instance Bessie Smith's "Washwoman's Blues" (1920-30), which conveys the sorrowful enslaving experience of African Woman relegated to domestic workers washing white people's clothes, or Mamie Smith "Crazy

Blues” (1920) expressing the outrage of a woman tortured by her lover’s mistreatment where she sings: “‘Cause the man I love/ He don’t treat me right/ He makes me feel so blue”, a song that Holiday covers herself.

The titles of these records have laid bare the blues Holiday and every other black artist contemporary to her are referring to. Considering the definition of the word ‘blue’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, blue is described as:

Of a person, the heart, [...]: depressed, low-spirited, sad, sorrowful; dismayed, downcast; (of state or feeling) miserable, melancholy, dejected. In early use often in to look blue; now frequently n to feel blue (originally U.S.)
In later use perhaps influenced by *the blues* [...]

Going further into the meaning, ‘blues’ is similarly explained as “[f]eelings of melancholy, sadness, or depression” (“Blue”). Nonetheless, when taken as a phrase “to sing (also cry, wail) the blues” it means “to lament or complain” (“Blues”). Taking the aforementioned lyrics, Holiday uses the blues as an outlet to convey her misery. In this line, Lawrence W. Levine argues that blues “functioned not merely as a mechanism for individual catharsis but also as a vehicle for passing on group knowledge” (qtd. in Hawkins 39), which answers the reason why blues is used as a perpetual theme in black music, to share generational black experience through music and as a way to perpetuate it. Having this in mind, the blues that reappears in the title of her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* – coinciding with the title of one of her songs – encapsulates the meaning of her memoir: Holiday is singing about all those injustices that have been prevalent in her life. Hence, music plays a crucial role in Holiday’s autobiography, especially by the way she channels her suffering into deeply moving songs to portray her experience as an African American woman.

1.1. The Blues of the Jim Crow Laws

In chapter one, 'Some Other Spring', Holiday recounts the atrocities of her great-grandmother's memories of "how it felt to be a slave, to be owned body and soul by a white man" (Holiday 4), foreshadowing the life that she herself would carry. Later on, in chapter 4, 'If My Heart Could Only Talk', Holiday compares the situation her great-grandmother experienced during slavery, which contrasts with her own experience throughout the Jim Crow period: "[b]ad as things were in those days, black people and white people at least lived in the same world" (Holiday 35). Clearly, Holiday is denouncing the dividing situation the segregation laws brought, depicting an American society where "[a] whorehouse was about the only place where black and white folks could meet in any natural way" (Holiday 7). With these passages, Holiday highlights the way black and white people could only meet in the margins of society. Notwithstanding, these limitations were caused by the marginalized system that white people have imposed on people of color, forcing them to exercise on their relative freedom only in stigmatized settings. While she depicts a world that obliges individuals to find slivers of autonomy in a segregating division, Holiday discerns a world where this separation is only ruptured when black women's bodies become direct objects of consumption for white men.

Following her great-grandmother's path, Holiday dwelled a similar life her ancestors lived, a world where white people "decided who got what to eat, who got bought, and who got sold" (Holiday 35). In this sense, the Jim Crow Laws was "a belief system that defined one person as less human than another" (Litwack 10). While in principle African Americans were not subject to be treated as merchandise anymore, they were still perceived as "three fifths of a person", which entailed the diminishment of enslaved people by being counted as three-fifths, during slavery, to determine congressional representation. In other words, Holiday and her African American community would still not be considered as fully fleshed citizens as opposed to white

people.

Although Holiday endures these instances of segregation early in her life, such as the segregated schools she attended in Baltimore, these experiences are more emphasized in her tour with Artie Shaw and his Rolls-Royce, formed by white members. In chapter eight, 'Travelin' Light', during their tour across the country, she struggles on finding diners or hotels that would provide their services to her since most establishments did not allow the entrance of black people. Moreover, not only she "hardly ever ate [or] slept" (Holiday 66), but the most striking part was the fact that she even had a hard time to carry one of the most basic necessities as a human being; to go to the bathroom:

Almost every day there was an 'incident.'

In a Boston joint they wouldn't let me go in the front door; they wanted me to come in the back way. The cats in the band flipped and said, 'If Lady doesn't go in the front door, the band doesn't go in at all.' So they caved.

Eating was a mess, sleeping was a problem, but the biggest drag of all was a simple little thing like finding a place to go to the bathroom. (Holiday 68)

Among the prevalent inequality that Holiday has to face, she is denied access through the principal entrance and is forced to enter through the back door. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that even as an artist that was positively launching her career with a predominant white band, she is still reduced to the color of her skin. In "Jim Crow Blues" (2004), Leon F. Litwack brings the attention on the dynamics of the segregation acting as reminder of the inferiority of black people, which draws a connection with Billie's treatment:

The laws made no exception based on class or education; indeed, the laws functioned on one level to remind African Americans that no matter how educated, wealthy, or respectable they might be, it did nothing to entitle them to equal treatment with the poorest and most degraded white. (Litwack 9)

Unfortunately, despite having the support of "the cats of the band" (68), this dehumanization of her persona is only a portrayal of how "the world [she] lived in was still one that white people made" (Holiday 35).

In chapter 11, 'I Can't Get Started', Holiday reiterates the enslaving condition her

great-grandmother experienced, when singing in 52nd Street in the late thirties and early forties, a street that embodied the jazz and street life. She recalls that despite being a renowned artist she was still subjugated to a plantation worker:

By the time the ofays got around to copping “swing” a new-style music was already breaking out all over uptown. [...] Anyway, white musicians were “swinging” from one end of 52nd Street to the other, but there wasn’t a black face in sight on the street except Teddy Wilson and me. [...] There was no cotton to be picked between Leon and Eddie’s and the East River, but man, it was a plantation any way you looked at it. And we had to not only look at it, we lived in it. We were not allowed to mingle any kind of way. The minute we were finished with our intermission stint we had to scoot out back to the alley or go out and sit in the street. (Holiday 87)

Holiday affirms that she did not need to live in the slavery times because she was experiencing a glimpse of it. She states that “we had to not only look at it, we lived in it”. Interestingly, Holiday points out how white musicians reproduced the style of music of swing. By putting into quotes the word swing, Holiday displays a lack of conviction with their performance, which could be embedded with the fact that they are white. With this, Holiday’s judgment echoes Meghan Winsby’s argument about blues being played by white people asserting that they “lack the experience of the blues necessary to perform convincingly” (Winsby 165). Taking this into consideration, white musicians could appropriate black musical forms of expressions, but black people were still forced to avoid “to mingle in any kind of way” with white Americans, because they were still not perceived as equals.

Nonetheless, by longing to attain a fair treatment within the white predominant American society, Holiday recurs to the only way of expressing herself that she knew: her music. As Raymond Gavins points out, the “[c]ultural expression, folk and formal, reflected African Americans' quest for liberation and represented their collective sense of dignity and identity” (Gavins 14). Hence, in order to regain her agency and her individuality that the society has stripped away from her, solely for the color of her skin, Billie Holiday uses her pain as fuel to fight.

1.2. The Making of “Strange Fruit”

Hailed as “the best song of the century” (Fischer 9) by *Time*, “Strange Fruit” is the emblem of Billie Holiday’s defiance against the systematic racism of the United States. The song was created by Abeel Meerpol, alias Lewis Allan, to lament the “targeted racial violence” (*Equal Justice Initiative* 73) against African Americans, after stumbling upon a photograph of a double lynching that took place in Indiana in the 1930 (Margolick, 1999) which he said to have “haunted [him] for days” (Margolick 95). Winsby points out that blues “has historically given voice – literally and figuratively – to women musicians wishing to confront the social, political and material conditions of their lives. Themes of reversal, independence, and protest against physical abuse permeate the lyrical content of women’s blues” (Winsby 161).

Indeed, Holiday’s song was not the first song that sought to materialize the resilience of the black experience, taking for instance Louis Armstrong’s record “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” (1929) which is a racial protest against the oppression and hardships African Americans suffered within a racist white society. Nevertheless, “Strange Fruit” became the first song – or as Leonard Feather puts it “the first significant unmuted cry” (qtd. in Margolick 92) – to bluntly address a form of terrorism that turned into a “symbol of power and control over the Black community” (Stevenson 38). The explicit image of the verses describing the “[b]lood on the leaves and blood at the root” as well as the “[b]lack bodies swinging in the southern breeze” (Holiday 1:17-1:33), depict a brutal and terrorizing picture of the cruelty that white supremacists could amount to. These lines also suggest how the fruit at the trees – that represented African Americans lynched– have been so conductively abused, that eventually they became “strange” because they are “the product of a violent and fearful form of life” (Carvalho 112). In “‘Strange Fruit’: Music between Violence and Death’ (2013), John M. Carvalho

manifests that the violence of the song lies in the “searing effect of imposing silence where there was noise, of reenacting the violence and death that silenced so many” (Carvalho 112). In fact, the first time Holiday sings it she “was scared people would hate it [...] There wasn’t even a patter of applause when I finished. Then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everyone was clapping” (Holiday 75). However, although there is not direct mention of the word lynching, the audience captures the underlying message more deeply thanks to Holiday’s performance of the pain and sentiment she poured into the song.

While Holiday did not write the lyrics, she connected with the song on a personal level because it represented the suffering that black people endured. Despite not experiencing at first hand the loss of someone through lynching, she identifies this sense of sorrow and helplessness with the mistreatment her father endured, a mistreatment that took his life:

It wasn’t the pneumonia that killed him, it was Dallas, Texas. That’s where he was [...] trying to get help. But none of them would even so much as take his temperature or take him in. That’s the way it was. (Holiday 60)

Therefore, within her resilience, “Strange Fruit” arises in the most significant grieving period of her life, turning it into her “personal protest” (Holiday 75). The pain that caused his death “was an awful blow” (Holiday 60), but she found in her sorrow – in her blues – the strength to overcome the loss. As Janell Hobson notes, the song is “a call to action [...] speaking for numerous subalterns while bearing witness to a scene that she may or may not have personally encountered” making Holiday claim it eventually “as a form of individual expression” (Hobson 447). In a sense, she addressed racial issues because it was part of the reality she was living, leading her to sing the truth as she knew it.

Later on, despite the effect that it has on her, Holiday recalls that the song possessed a daunting element because it “seemed to spell out all the things that killed Pop” (Holiday 75). However, what made her keep singing after hearing the news was the

fact that she found in music her resilience against the injustices her people were facing, while simultaneously giving a voice to an African American community that was constantly and perpetually silenced.

[It] became my biggest-selling record. It still depresses me every time 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. (Holiday 75)

As Archie Shepp notes “[b]lack music has transmitted the seeds of Black experience far more effectively than mere words acquired second hand” (qtd. in Kholi 148), blues is the representation of the suffering of a black community that has been enslaved. Holiday pours her soul into the song, but despite depressing her, she keeps going because she is aware that it is part of her fight. The act of writing and performing black music grants voice to a marginalized community and serves as a form of resistance against racial injustices.

1.3. The Jazz and Blues Vernacular

The prose style of Holiday is characterised by the blunt and frank manner she addresses the reader. It possesses an anecdotal tone that is achieved through the autobiographical “I” which is compromised by various “I”s. In “The Producer of the Autobiographical ‘I’”, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson distinguish three “I”s present in the autobiographical act: the narrating, the narrated, and the ideological. They explain that the narrating “I” tells the autobiographical narrative, the narrated “I” is the agent of discourse and the ideological “I” is the dynamic representation of the “I” within a cultural context. Bearing this in mind, the narrating “I” provides a direct and personal account of her experiences. By using the first pronoun singular, Holiday’s perspective allows the addressee to

understand the world through her lens, making her audience relate more to her experiences.

However, in order to understand her world, one has to understand the manner in which she defines said world. For this reason, language plays a huge role in how she perceives their world. In chapter two, ‘Ghost of Yesterdays, when Holiday is still a kid, a woman intends to collect her because Holiday’s mother is not available. At this point, Holiday had already experienced her sexual abuse at the hands of Mr. Dick – an important event that will be thoroughly addressed in Section 2.2 – which is the reason why she seems to be uncertain about the woman’s intentions:

But I came to take you to your mama,’ she told me. I noticed she didn’t say ‘mother’ and she didn’t say ‘mammy’. She said ‘mama’. And the way she said it kind of made me think I might take a chance. (Holiday 16)

In this passage, Holiday conveys the power that language holds, recognizing the black identity that lies within their usage. In this sense, ‘mama’ acts as a key word to make her believe that she is safe. If it is the case that the person she is taking her to is not actually her mother, it sort of alleviates her to think the use of that particular way of saying mother is a guarantee that she will not be harmed.

Further to this, the prose style of Holiday shows an important trait within the Harlem Renaissance movement, which is the reproduction of the African American’s vernacular, also referred as black English. In the Harlem Renaissance it was essential to incorporate their black identity into their artistic forms of expression. Given this, Holiday uses terminology that pertains to the black community. For instance, when referring to white people, Holiday uses the word “ofays” (Holiday 45), or when she is talking about men in general she uses the word “cats” (Holiday 62). As Amor Kholi suggests “words are recast with irregular meanings and usage, including semantic inversions, in order to register a protest or complaint against mainstream American society” (Kholi 147). Along

with this, Holiday displays a common grammatical trait of black English, which is the contraction of ‘am’ and ‘not’. Holiday explicitly pays attention to this contraction when singing: “When I ended the number I held onto the word ‘ain’t’, then I held no.” (Holiday 66). Simultaneously, her language is impregnated with profanity with her constant use of “bitches” (Holiday 5) throughout the narrative, as a way to convey the cruel reality of her life. This narrative technique seems to be a deliberate and stylistic choice in order to proclaim her individuality, her true self. Hence, by employing a prose fused with slang, profanity and contractions, Holiday is vindicating her roots and embracing her origins.

In a similar manner of Hughes and Hurston to display the black vernacular in their literary works in the Harlem Renaissance, Holiday embraces this vernacular in her mode of writing, while being aware that this form of expression is often considered vulgar and unfit for written text. By doing this, Holiday challenges the idea that only one normative way to speak or write exists, asserting the value of diverse linguistic practices. For marginalized groups, the use of slang and vernacular can be an act of resistance against dominant language norms. With this, Holiday reclaims a language that historically has been used precisely to ridicule their community and to discriminate against them in the social sphere.

2. Holiday's autobiography as a form of activism

I ain't gonna just sit around and cry,
I know i won't die
[...]

Lady sings the blues,
I'm tellin' you, she's got 'em bad,
But now the world will know,
She's never gonna sing them no more.
(Holiday 1:33-2:18)

Among the motifs *Lady Sings the Blues* possesses, the life narrative of Billie Holiday holds political significance. Taking into account Smith and Watson's stance when tackling 'The Politics of Remembering', she declares that autobiographical narratives can be used to profess a criticism against a perpetuated ideology. Within the constraints of being a black woman in the time of the Jim Crow Laws, Holiday cannot position herself in the white prominent forces that govern her country. Hence, recounting the injustices she experiences – in terms of the criminal justice system and in her drug addiction – becomes her form of activism, embedded in the intersection of her identities.

2.1. Abuse intersecting her identities

The hardships Holiday has encountered throughout her life are caused by the intersection of her identities. Billie Holiday is born into a low-class environment, she is a woman, and she is from African American descent. However, the multiple aspects that define her life are not interdependent, but rather a combination of all these markers of identity. Smith and Watson's stance on the intersectionality of identities (Smith and Watson, 2001), reiterate how the different categories that characterize Holiday conditions her life.

Bearing this in mind, Holiday uses her life narrative to delve into the different layers that conform her personhood are mutually attacked by the American system. In

this matter, Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality draws a crucial understanding of the interplay between racism and patriarchy to analyze the abuse Holiday has narrated in her novel. From the sexual abuse she experienced at ten to the government persecution for her drug addiction, these struggles encompass the intersectional oppression of Holiday's identities.

The first layer of oppression lies in her low socio-economic class status. Her poverty is the first manifestation of the marginalization of black women. In Holiday's case, this burden is exemplified in chapter one, 'Some Other Spring', and how she is forced to stay at her grandparents' because her mother cannot take care of her while working as a maid in the North. It was a crowded house with limited space. Nonetheless, not only is she forced to share the bed with her cousin Ida's children, Elsie and Henrie, but she also must endure constant sexual assaults by the latter. Holiday stated that "[h]e even tried to do 'that thing' to us while we were sleeping" (Holiday 3), an abuse she has to suffer in silence otherwise, her cousin Ida might beat her. In this same chapter, Holiday also describes some jobs she has to turn to to earn money. Because her mother is a single mom working as a maid, life forces Holiday to make a living early in her life, such as scrubbing floors or running errands for members of a whorehouse. Despite claiming that she used the money to be able to listen to music at the parlor of the brothel, both Holiday and her mother are examples of what Crenshaw refers to as "racially discriminatory employment" (Crenshaw 1246). Because black women are not given the same opportunities as white women, considering the context of the Jim Crow, both for being black and a woman, Holiday is also obliged to recur to other means to sustain her life, becoming a prostitute at the age of fourteen. While her undoubtedly talent to sing turns her into a famous singer, the early stages of her life displays the reality of African American women in the employment sphere, often finding themselves in subordinate

roles as maids or sex workers. Interestingly, in chapter fifteen, 'The Same Old Story', Holiday is given a part in a Hollywood movie, however, the role consists of playing a maid. While Holiday insists that there is nothing wrong with the job per se, considering that her mother was one, Holiday uses her narrative to portray a diminishing connotation behind her casting. By reducing her to play the job the white American gaze expects her to be as a black woman, Holiday exposes the perpetuation of the generalization of African American women of being docile maids, but also, to display the limited options they were given to progress in a society that did not view them equally.

Along with the class dimension, her life struggles have also been caused by her black descent. Holiday turns into the past of her ancestors and their enslavement, using it as a metaphor for her reality. Holiday expresses that despite her status as a jazz celebrity, and the luxurious items she uses to dress, she is still regarded as an enslaved person. Holiday states: "You can be up to your boobies in white satin, with gardenias in your hair and no sugar cane for miles, but you can still be working on a plantation" (Holiday 87). Similarly, her job as a singer only fed her idea of subjugation in the music industry, stating that "[i]t wasn't long before I was one of the highest-paid slaves around. I was making a thousand a week—but I had about as much freedom as a field hand in Virginia a hundred years before" (Holiday 96). By linking the language of enslavement with her music career, Holiday achieves to interpret the forms of oppression that materialized in her environment. As Natosha Briscoe affirms, "[b]lack autobiography continues to speak for and to the masses in an attempt to heighten the conscience of the Black community by using words to break the chains that were meant to keep it in bondage" (Briscoe 102). Hence, Holiday uses her autobiography as a means to represent the ways in which the dynamic of master of and slave are still present.

Following these different surfaces of oppression, the epitome of her marginalization is shown in her tour with the white band formed by Artie Shaw and his band, in chapter eight. After experiencing several episodes of segregation that was prevalent in the South due to the Jim Crow Laws, Holiday encounters the overlapping of her two identities oppressed by the system:

But when the time came to open, the head man of the school came out and explained that it wasn't me, they just didn't want any female singers at all. So the two of us had to sit in the bus together all night and listen to the band playing our songs. Did I razz her! "You see, honey," I said, "you're so fine and grand. You may be white, but you're no better than me. They won't have either of us here because we're both women." (Holiday 67)

In this passage, Holiday is not allowed to sing at one of the concerts she and her band booked. However, the reason does not only lie in her black body, but it is rooted in her gender as well, affecting the other singer of Rolls Royce, who happens to be a white female. Thus, the multiplicity of Holiday's identities intersects to unveil a double oppression.

2.2. Prison system in the United States

Holiday's narrative depicts a deeply flawed prison system characterized by racial profiling and discrimination. As previously mentioned in the first chapter, while the thirteenth amendment finally brought the abolishment of slavery, the reform that took place in 1865 did not prohibit the labor force to those who carried out a criminal act. Because "[n]either slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime [...] shall exist within the United States" (*National Archives*), the American criminal justice found a loophole on the constitution which was manifested in the way the black community became a huge target for incarcerations, sometimes for minor or non-existent crimes. This form of enslavement, the way the prison system benefits from the labour of

its prisoners, is still present nowadays in every corner of the world. However, what Holiday explores in her narrative is the connection between her blackness and her gender and the way both are weaponized against her.

Holiday describes multiple incarcerations within her autobiographical account, but the first time that she is held prisoner is when she becomes a victim of rape with just ten years old. In chapter one, 'Some Other Spring', Holiday reveals the trauma of being sexually abused by a neighbor, Mr. Dick, after a scheme of his making her believe that Holiday's mother told him to take care of her after school. While Mr. Dick is rightfully locked up after committing this horrible crime, the police officers made Holiday responsible for the incident as well. Holiday describes that "instead of treating me and Mom like somebody who called the cops for help, they treated me like I'd killed somebody" (Holiday 11). The marker of self-referentiality aforementioned in section 1.3, allows the grasp on the vulnerability of Holiday's words. Through this occurrence, there is a distinction of autobiographical "I"s that are necessary to analyze the text. While the narrated "I" (the child) is not aware of the reason why she is being punished for a transgression she did not commit, the narrating "I" suspects that the officers believed that she tempted her perpetrator. Thus, through the narrated "I", the reader can hear the suffering voice of a little girl traumatized by a sexual assault, and the ideological "I" provides the voice of a grown woman that identifies the criminal judicial patterns of raced and gendered biases that allows this abuse to happen.

Then, Holiday conducts her criticism through this ideological "I" that is conscious of the markers of her identity that she embodies as a black woman. Holiday, in this sense, represents the collective suffering of women who were persecuted by their race but also by their gender. In chapter 2, "Ghosts of Yesterdays", Holiday narrates how maids – such as her mother – were targeted in the street after work and charged with prostitution which

most of the time forced them to plead guilty despite the possibility of going through hell because otherwise “[i]f you pleaded not guilty, you might even get worse” (Holiday 20). This racial and gender profiling manifests the devalue of black women’s lives that is perpetuated in the trauma of the narrated “I”. Kali N. Gross and Cheryl D. Hicks in “Gendering the Carceral State: African American Women, History, and the Criminal Justice System” (2015) lay out diminishment of Black women with policies that have failed to protect black women who become victims of sexual assaults, because they are criminalized by the white American gaze. Linking this notion to Holiday’s case, her narrating “I” gives her the authority to challenge the prison system of her country, because she has been a victim herself of this type of discrimination.

Among the imprisonments that Holiday has to face, her conviction for the possession of drugs turns out to be one of the most damaging periods of her life. After being sentenced to a year and a day, Holiday recalls the poor condition that she had to experience in the jail of Philadelphia: “damp all the time, with rats in it big as my Chihuahua. There were women there with t.b. and worse, doing life terms for murder and stuff, and I had to eat with them.” (Holiday 121). Nonetheless, it is not until chapter eighteen, ‘Travelin’ All Alone’ in the prison of Alderson, when Holiday encounters once again the segregation laws that separated the colored women from the white ones, but most importantly, the labor they were forced to carry out as a consequence of their crimes. Holiday herself is aware that it is an intrinsic part of being convicted and that “nobody lays off work there” (Holiday 123). In fact, she has to change her duties several times because the guards were unable to find a job that would fit her, but eventually eventually Holiday would find her place in the kitchen:

By the time my chores were over in the evening, the recreation time was over and it was time for bed. Then I had to be up at five in the morning, have the dining room open, the tables laid, the cereal cooked, the milk poured into glasses, the bread counted off in slices, the water poured, and the coffee made. (Holiday 124)

While the job may not seem difficult, the lack of both recreation and rest implies a dedication that goes beyond healthy limits. She even mentions that during her prison sentence, not a single musical note came out from her. Despite this, Holiday has no other option than to follow the rules otherwise, she would represent the gateway of a system that enabled the enslavement of prisoners concealed as prisoner's duty, a gateway which did not exist.

2.3. Crime vs Illness

Along with the prison system, which perpetuated the transgression of the black body, Holiday also highlights the criminalization of drug addiction, which she identifies as a mental illness rather than a crime. Gross and Hicks emphasize the persecution of drug consumption was a scheme to preserve legal segregation. The criminalization of substance abuse took form as a way to criminalize its consumers. With this, Holiday sought to shed light into the narcotic problem that was perpetuated in the media and change the narrative. The motivation of the narrating "I" in this part of the analysis is to expose of her truth as she lived it, aiming to illustrate that the reason people get addicted is because it is an illness that should be treated.

While Holiday is also persecuted because she becomes a symbol of the fight of the Black community with her song, 'Strange Fruit', the main focus of this section is her perception of her substance abuse within the public eye:

The wire-service despatches said the cops said they entered our hotel room and caught me "in the act of using a drug."

This was a damn lie.

Then they added a nasty sentence saying I had been "recently released from a New York [wrong again] federal institution as 'cured' of drug addiction." And they put quotation marks around the word "cured." That gave the wise ones all they were waiting for. (Holiday 147)

Holiday offers her perspective of the events, contradicting the image the media portrayed for her. By writing her life, she is regaining her agency and taking control of her own narrative.

For this reason, in light of her history of substance abuse, Holiday takes a clear stance on the drug problem in the United States, challenging the status quo. In chapter twenty-three, 'Dream of Life', Holiday crosses the Atlantic Ocean for a European tour across the continent, a stay in which she discovers that the trials she has experienced in her own country were not ubiquitous: "You just take for granted sometimes that if things are mixed up and crazy in America they got to be that way everywhere" (Holiday 170). This cultural shock is mostly notable in the treatment of drug addicts in the United States compared to Europe, a treatment that she defines as a civilized attitude:

I felt like the fool of all time.

People on drugs are sick people. So now we end up with the government chasing sick people like they were criminals, telling doctors they can't help them, prosecuting them because they had some stuff without paying the tax, and sending them to jail.

Imagine if the government chased sick people with diabetes, put a tax on insulin and drove it into the black market, told doctors they couldn't treat them, and then caught them, prosecuted them for not paying their taxes, and then sent them to jail. If we did that, everyone would know we were crazy. Yet we do practically the same thing every day in the week to sick people hooked on drugs. The jails are full and the problem is getting worse every day. (Holiday 170)

In this passage, Holiday explicitly tackles the problem of criminalizing drug addicts. Holiday ironically compares this illness with diabetes, drawing attention to how irrational it would be that were the case. Along this same line, Holiday also criticizes the U.S. capitalist health care system:

Sick people who are on stuff over there are treated like sick people. They go to their own doctor and he gives them what they need. [...] Nobody has to risk his life by going to the black market and paying a hundred bucks for something worth four cents—and then getting stuff that's so bad it's liable to kill you. [...]

Americans used to make fun of the British health system, where sick people could go to doctors and hospitals for free and the government picked up the tab [...] We hollered about this being government interference with the practice of medicine.

Well, let me tell you, in America if they haven't got government interference in medicine I don't know what it is. If you're on and you get a doctor for help, he can't help you because the government has passed out regulations saying, in effect, that if he does he will go to jail along with you.

Most countries in Europe are civilized about it and they have no "narcotics problem" at all. One day America is going to smarten up and do the same thing. (Holiday 170-1)

This passage displays a striking confession by Holiday, who, despite pertaining within the "sick people", was made to believe by the system made that there was no other alternative procedure for a person who engaged in the abuse of illicit drugs. In this sense, Holiday's mindset shifts as a result of leaving her country. Hence, after realizing the striking contrast between these two different western societies in terms of their management of drug addicts, Holiday uses this moment of epiphany to expose the U.S. government, while simultaneously demanding them to put the same methods into practice. For this reason, Holiday points out that the way addicts receive a more humane treatment in European countries should be imitated by the United States.

At this point, the autobiographical "I" seems to give a cry for help to raise awareness of the narcotic problem and seek a change in her society even if this change does not take place in her lifetime. In this manner, Holiday exemplifies her life and his relationship with drug addiction "for the sake of other people who've got to suffer until the country wakes up, for the sake of young kids whose whole life will be ruined because they are sent to jail instead of a hospital, I pray to God that we wake up soon over here" (Holiday 170). The awakening Holiday is referring to is embedded in the fixation of drug abuse as an illicit act, while also paying attention to the suffering of people that end up getting addicted. In fact, Holiday narrates that her chronic illness runs deeper than constantly seeking recreational drug use, but rather, it is rooted in her mental health, which has been profoundly impacted by the continuous oppression and mistreatment she had faced from society. This mirrors the manner in which she was physically violated as

a child. In chapter eighteen, the same chapter where she is imprisoned for drug possession, Holiday admits that “with all the doctors, nurses, and equipment, they never get near your insides at what’s really eating you.” (Holiday 130), expressing that behind her addiction, there lies a past that destroys her. She even hints at a dependency of substance in her shows which made her “need stuff to play or sing” (Holiday 171) to undergo the songs that deeply reflected her life. Thus, it seems that despite the incarceration and the medical treatment, despite the power of drugs to alleviate, nothing existed that had the force to heal.

At the end of the novel, in chapter twenty-three, ‘Dream of Life’, Holiday shares that her ultimate desire to any reader that comes across her autobiography takes only one thing from it is her stance on drugs: “All dope can do for you is kill you—and kill you the long slow hard way. And it can kill the people you love right along with you. And that’s the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but” (Holiday 172). At last, Holiday shares her truth by appealing the ethos of the addressee, turning the moral of her story to a declaration of substance abuse, an addiction that cannot free you from the difficult endeavor that life puts you through.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

By taking a closer look at the autobiography of *Lady Sings the Blues*, this thesis has demonstrated the driving political force that Holiday's work bears and the different aspects of the United States she condemns. From the structural racism through segregation laws to the criminalisation of her drug addiction, Holiday's life narrative has enlightened the oppression she has suffered as an African American woman.

A close reading of the text has shown the power that Holiday's account holds. In terms of the notion of jazz and blues as a form of resistance, Holiday has shed light into the way she has turned into music to alleviate her sorrow but, most importantly, as an influential instrument to cry openly about the inhumanity of a white prominent racist society she was living in. Along the same lines, the personal story of Holiday has shown the activism of a black woman through life writing, exposing the manner in which her intersecting identities has conditioned her life regarding the constant criminalisation of her persona.

In the rear of the hardships of her life, Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues* seeks to gain the manifestation of her truth in the form of a life narrative. Allowing her to regain the agency the system never bestowed her, her autobiography is used to unmask the façade of a nation that is proudly known to praise the liberty of its people. It denounces the violence that has been persistently inflicted upon her as a black woman while also demanding a change in the negative idea of drug addicts. Unfortunately, the inhumane treatment that Holiday faces throughout her autobiography are issues that are still prevalent nowadays. In spite of seeming to be an endless feud to achieve equality, Holiday's account embodies the resilience of a black woman that did not, in fact, cease to fight.

3.1 Further research

Considering the little literature that deals with Holiday's *Lady Sings the Blues*, there is room for comparative analysis of Holiday's account with other black women musicians, such as Nina Simone's *I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone* (1992). The analysis could focus on the way they deal with racism as an African American artist in the music industry within different periods of history in the United States. Moreover, scholars could involve a comparative analysis of *Lady Sings the Blues* with other autobiographical works by black women non-musician artists, such as the activist figure of Angela Davis's memoir *An Autobiography* (1974). This investigation could shed light into the implicit activism of Holiday and the explicit one of Davis, while both adding into the fight for justice for their community. In both cases, this comparative approach could explore on the common themes and strategies employed by black women navigating and resisting oppression in the United States.

Also, further research is necessary to delve into the toxicity behind the romantic relationships that Holiday was involved in, and how embedded it was in her childhood and her relationship with her parents. Despite tackling the traumas Holiday encountered as a child, analysing the abuse she has suffered in the hands of Jimmy Monroe, Joe Guy and Louis McKay, and how they took advantage of her as an artist, but most importantly as a woman, could also extend the understanding behind her mental illness that would develop into a drug addiction. In addition, in similar fashion to the study of Holiday's 'Strange Fruit', more investigation could be conducted about the impact of her musical repertoire present in her memoir. Taking for instance 'God Bless the Child', the record encapsulates the hopelessness of Holiday after realizing that she was all she had.

Overall, this further research into Billie Holiday would enrich the cognizance of her legacy as a cultural icon and her activist motifs, while appreciating the effecting social change that a life narrative can bestow.

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