

## **REMEMBERING FEMALE DEAD BODIES IN NARCO-CULTURE: AESTHETICS OF VIOLENCE IN LORETTA COLLINS' POEM "SNORT THIS"**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper aims to briefly explain the context of violence in the Caribbean to demonstrate how the poem "Snort This" by Loretta Collins aestheticizes violence due to narco-traffic, specifically in Puerto Rico. Narco-culture, the subculture of the drug-trafficking world, centers in the excesses in the living bodies and the remembering of the dead. Bodies make possible narco-traffic and violence— using drugs, transporting, selling, and killing or getting killed for them. Female bodies, however, have been underrepresented and, therefore, not remembered. My paper's primary objective is to analyze and explain how Collins' poem portrays the female body as the object of violence of narco-culture within the Caribbean, and how it is also an attempt to represent and remember female bodies.

Keywords: narco-culture, Caribbean, violence, women, poetry

### **Resumen:**

Este ensayo de investigación explica, brevemente, la violencia en el Caribe para luego demostrar cómo "Snort This" de Loretta Collins poetiza la violencia en el narcotráfico, específicamente en Puerto Rico. La narco-cultura, la subcultura del mundo del tráfico de drogas ilícitas, se caracteriza por los excesos de los cuerpos vivos y por la recordación de los muertos. Los cuerpos hacen posible el narcotráfico y la violencia—al usar las drogas, al transportarlas, al venderlas y al matar o morir debido a ellas. Los cuerpos femeninos en este contexto, sin embargo, no han sido representados y, por tanto, tampoco han sido recordados. El objetivo principal de este trabajo es analizar y explicar cómo el poema de Collins representa al cuerpo femenino como el objeto de violencia de la narco-cultura en el Caribe, y cómo "Snort This" es, al mismo tiempo, un intento de representar y recordar los cuerpos de las mujeres muertas.

Palabras clave: narco-cultura, Caribe, violencia, mujeres, poesía

## Introduction

“The cocaine bales jettisoned overboard in haste,...[ ] the archipelagoes of floating cargo lacing the Caribbean sea” (Collins 23). This image in Loretta Collins’ poem, *Snort This*, blends drug trafficking with the Caribbean seascape. Narco-traffic is one of the primary reasons for the rampant crime and violence in the region (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 107). Deborah Thomas argues that violence takes diverse cultural forms depending on its location, “and it is critical to explore not only the histories that generate these forms (Whitehead 2004), but also the representational spheres through which these forms are aestheticized. (Roach, 1996: 10-11) This paper aims to briefly explain the context of violence in the Caribbean and demonstrate how *Snort This* aestheticizes violence due to narco-traffic, specifically in Puerto Rico. Narco-culture, the subculture of the drug trafficking world, centers in the excesses in the living bodies and the remembering of the dead (Cintrón, 2014). Bodies make possible narco-traffic and violence—using drugs, transporting, selling, and killing or getting killed for them. Female bodies, however, have been underrepresented and, therefore, not remembered. The paper’s primary objective is to analyze and explain how Collins’ poem portrays the female body as the object of violence of narco-culture within the Caribbean, and how it is also an attempt to represent and remember female bodies.

Before entering the discussion on how violence is aestheticized in *Snort This*, a brief explanation about violence in the Caribbean and narco-culture is needed. Mayra Buvinic, Andrew Morrison, and María B. Orlando have traced, in general terms, the causes and effects of violence within Latin America and the Caribbean, which includes social inequality, processes of social exclusion, deficit in the rule of law, the huge corruption among the police, as well as the machismo culture (qtd. in Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 89). A study from the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, which focused primarily in the Caribbean, reports various reasons of why this region is highly vulnerable to crime: its geographic location between producers (South America) and the consumers (United States) of various drugs; as islands, it is very difficult to enforce law along the long coastlines; the small criminal justice can be easily overwhelmed; police deals with heavy tourists inflows that exceed local population; the Caribbean has one of the highest prisoner-to-population ratios in the world; and, finally, periods of political instability in some countries may have an impact on violence and crime (qtd. in Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 107). However, this is a general picture of violence in the Caribbean scenario and, as Deborah Thomas argues, violence varies by location (10-11). In Puerto Rico, for example, violence is highly influenced by narco-traffic, which has given way to the narco subculture (Cintrón, 2014).

Narco-culture is literally the culture in the world of drug trafficking or narco-traffic. Luis J. Cintrón explains that in Puerto Rico narco-traffic allows the lower social strata to obtain economic acquisition (2014). The author focuses on the funerary rituals as representations of the excesses in the bodies of narco-culture. These excesses happen both in the living and dead bodies. Tattoos, murals, shirts and bumper stickers with images of dead community and family members or friends, common in Puerto Rican narco-culture, are a constant reminder of the brevity of life for those who are still alive. However, this type of remembering usually extols the leaders of the drug world (which are commonly beloved by the community where they came from) but not the users or the victims. That said, I argue that through literature, Collins in her poem *Snort This*, represents and remembers the bodies of narco-culture in Puerto Rico, more specifically, female bodies.

In *Caribbean Women Writers: Identity and Gender*, Emilia Ippolito argues that literature has been marked by the silence of minorities, groups considered this way because of ethnicity, skin color and gender (5). Further, "...[t]raditionally, the voicelessness of women within the West Indian literary tradition has meant the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization, women's rights and other social and cultural issues" (Ippolito 5). *Snort This* portrays a woman's point of view to this social and cultural issue. When Collins states in her poem that: "I think about these two women— not about/ bullet-riddled boys littering the streets of el barrio" (23), there is clearly an intention to represent and remember women in narco-culture.

The two women the author refers to in the verse above are two female bodies she (de)constructs to represent victims of narco-traffic. The first one was a drug mule, assassinated in the process of trafficking drugs inside her body:

*There is something to admire about a precision cut,*  
you say, as you line up the white powder on glass.

The precision of the evisceration suggested a keen  
medical knowledge: which internal organs

to remove, which to leave. The incision carving  
a half-circle on Yohaira's abdomen was precise. (Collins 21)

Yohaira was carrying cocaine-packed condoms inside her body; she was killed in order to get the drugs out of her internal organs. The verses and stanzas in *Snort This* are all structured like the fragment above, where a stanza is a pair of verses separated from another pair. This is a visual representation of “precision cuts,” they represent both the cut in Yohaira’s abdomen and also cocaine divided with a blade. In addition, the cut in Yohaira’s abdomen was not any cut, but so precise it must have been done by an expert. The word “evisceration,” which means to remove the internal organs, is a medical term and the author uses it to suggest that the person who did it had medical knowledge.

The first three stanzas quoted above have three points of view: the author, a drug user and the reader. This style is common in Caribbean women writers: “A [...] related feature in the fiction of Caribbean women [...] is the multiplicity of narrative voices and perspectives within the text. Stylistically, this facilitates the representations of a world of fluid boundaries between self/ other; living/ dead; mad/ sane; dream/ reality” (Ippolito 8). In “Snort This,” Collins centers on the female body as the object of violence giving various points of view. When putting all perspectives together—the drug user’s admiring the sharp cut in Yohaira’s abdomen and/or lining up the cocaine, and the author’s describing the incision—the reader, who is another point of view, sees the image of Yohaira’s dead body. Further in the poem there is a more direct image, when the author writes that Yohaira’s body was found in “[...] blood-soaked sheets in the backseat of a car travelling erratically/ in Bayamon [...]” (Collins 21). This image renders her body to a mere dead object, which contrasts with the next image Collins portrays: “Haven’t you noticed, on those pleasure trips/ to the sunshine isles that the Caribbean/ woman’s body is a beautiful thing?” (21). Collins now depicts a sexually objectified image of the female body, common in publicity posters that portray the Caribbean as a tropical paradise full of women with tiny bikinis.

The second female body Collins portrays is a 69-years-old woman, who was raped with a plastic tube by a group of heroin addicts, led by a boy she had helped raise, trying to steal her pension check. Her body is portrayed at the moment of the attack: “Yesmarie, 69, sexually violated with a plastic tube/ by these addicts, nearly bit her tongue in half” (Collins 22). The language is so succinct that it suggests a police report description, where the female body is portrayed as the object of violence. Before this description, the author used first person in the poem to explain how she would like to be living at 69-years-old: she wishes to be in peace with her body, taking care of a garden and taking long walks to the market. These relaxing images are highly contrasted with the raw image of the rape, again, depicting the female body as the object of violence in narco-culture.

To contrast the description of the women's body as mere sexual or dead objects, Collins humanizes them, making them intimate to the reader, implying the possibility of them being a family member. Collins suggests that Yohaira was somebody's daughter once and she "drew pictures of pájaros and palm trees" (21), while Yesmarie was probably somebody's mother once, she was for certain somebody's daughter, an aunt may have taken care of her when she was sick, and "[s]he was photographed while chasing a hermit crab" (22). Collins uses the aesthetics of the poem to go beyond a mere police report (or a journalist) description and suggest that these women could have been someone the reader knows or even the reader itself.

Nature images throughout *Snort This* suggest a Caribbean nature context. Drawing pictures of palm trees and chasing hermit crabs in the sand are things children do in the Caribbean. These images suggest a healthy environment, when contrasted to the sickness of the drug trafficking world. However, both realities are juxtaposed in the Caribbean experience. These images are important because they let the reader know the specific context in which these dead bodies are portrayed: this is a Caribbean situation and, more specifically, a Puerto Rican one.

*Snort This* is an aestheticized representation of violence, particular to Puerto Rico, where the author (de)constructs female bodies as the object of violence in narco-culture. Three main images of women's bodies are portrayed. First, the female body is portrayed as a sexual object in a tropical paradise. Second, the woman's body is depicted as intimate, as a family member. Third, the female body renders as a dead object. The remembering of the dead bodies is central in the drug trafficking world, but female bodies have been forgotten. In fact, there is little record or police statistics of violent acts against women in the Caribbean, since the majority of incidents are not reported to the police (Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 108). Silence has impeded the awareness of this situation.

Literature gives Caribbean women writers a voice; the silencing of their perspectives is no longer the case, as Emilia Ippolito argues with optimism (5). Collins takes advantage of this possibility in an attempt to give a woman point of view to the issue of violence in narco-culture in the Caribbean. Further, "Snort This" is an aestheticized representation of violence, particular to Puerto Rico. Building upon a fragmented structure of a multiplicity of narrative voices and perspectives within the text, she constructs and deconstructs images of female bodies, going beyond their description as dead objects. The remembering of the dead bodies is central in the drug trafficking world, but female bodies have been

forgotten. Therefore and in conclusion, “Snort This” is an act of remembering the female dead bodies, forgotten as victims of violence in narco-culture.

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