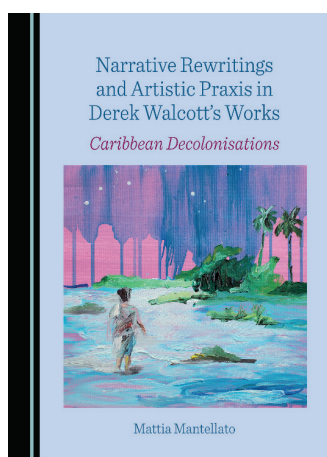


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Maria Cristina Fumagalli

Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works: Caribbean Decolonisations

Mattia Mantellato. 2022. Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott's Works: Caribbean Decolonisations. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 344 pp., £ 69.99, ISBN 1-5275-8806-8



<https://www.cambridgescholars.com/product/978-1-5275-8806-6>

In 1992, when the St Lucian writer Derek Walcott won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Nobel committee famously described his work as “a poetic oeuvre of great luminosity, sustained by a historical vision, the outcome of a multicultural commitment”¹. Arguably, therefore, no critical reading of Walcott’s work could be either valuable or illuminating without fully engaging with these three major features of his oeuvre. Happily, Mattia Mantellato’s *Narrative Rewritings and Artistic Praxis in Derek Walcott’s Works: Caribbean Decolonisations* not only competently pays tribute to, and creatively engages with all three, but it forcefully reasserts, more broadly, the value of interdisciplinarity for the

¹ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1992/summary/> (consulted on 25/10/2022).

formulation, expression, and dissemination of critical thinking. This is particularly true if this intriguing monograph is read in conjunction with the remarkable intersemiotic dance-theatre adaptation of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*" that Mantellato has directed, co-choreographed and co-interpreted².

The monograph's primary exemplifications are extremely well chosen, namely two plays (*The Joker of Seville* and *Pantomime*) and two major poems ("The Schooner *Flight*" and the book-length *Tiepolo's Hound*) produced at different times in Walcott's career (the 1970s and the late 1990s). Mantellato is therefore simultaneously able to put Walcott's poetry in dialogue with his theatre production (which are often approached separately by critics), and to highlight important continuities and discontinuities in the poet/playwright's overarching vision. Honouring Walcott's unique way of foregrounding the local and a localised perspective when negotiating, exploiting, and, ultimately, subverting different (colonial) cultural legacies in the Caribbean (Spanish, English, French), Mantellato approaches the works in question from a variety of relevant theoretical perspectives (i.e. the Decolonial model, as theorised by Walter Dignolo and Anibal Quijano in particular, but also Postcolonialism, the works of Martinican theorists Édouard Glissant, Frantz Fanon's anti-colonial stance, and Riane Eisler's partnership model). The multimodal and intermedial web of references woven into the fabric of Mantellato's analysis (from Caribbean Carnival to the Music Hall and Broadway, from Impressionism to the Afro-Caribbean folk tradition, from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla*) chimes well with Walcott's own ability to always engage, simultaneously, with a multiplicity of perspectives.

Mantellato's critical stance, moreover, also prepares readers (and viewers) well for the last chapter, the highly original "The Dancing Wor(l)d of The Schooner *Flight*, an Intersemiotic and Multimodal Translation/Adaptation". Building on the thoughtful and persuasive examinations of the importance on the body and music in Walcott's plays conducted in previous chapters, here Mantellato offers invaluable reflections on the production of his own dance-theatre adaptation of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*". Mantellato's decision to capitalise on what he calls the 'urgent desire to decolonise the rigorous, academic Western stage' of different female choreographers (i.e. Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, and, particularly, Pina Bausch) who reconfigured expression and movement to better relate to societal problems and contemporary issues, results in a production which premiered in June 2019 at the Teatro Verdi in Pordenone and confronts the here and now of audience and interpreters alike. Walcott's Caribbean concerns and context(s), in fact, are intriguingly translated into a contemporary local setting: multi-ethnic, multi-racial and culturally diverse Trinidad, 'becomes' the desert-like area of the *Magredi* in multicultural Friuli Venezia Giulia; in the same way, the struggle towards self-understanding and self-acceptance of Shabine, the protagonist/narrator of Walcott's "The Schooner *Flight*", a living compendium of different legacies and heritages, is made to resonate with the need to cautiously negotiate multiple identities experienced by those living and operating in the broader society in which the theatre is located.

² Video abstract: <https://youtu.be/58SO1aFmH08>; video production: <https://youtu.be/jEB0nxBxZIO> also available to readers with a QR code at the end of the book.

Mantellato's aesthetic choices as director, co-choreographer, and co-interpreter constitute the backbone of the dance-theatre adaptation and demonstrate his outstanding ability to translate his knowledge and critical analysis into the dance medium. Mantellato, however, also shares the stage with his co-choreographer Raffaele Simoni, with whom he dramatises Shabine's divided self through skilfully intertwined movements and gestures, but also with a group of young dance students from a local ballet school who embody Shabine's previously silenced and marginalised ancestors. Mantellato's production thrives on an inventive and fascinating choreography that also gives a special role to the complex triangulation of gazes exchanged between the hybrid Shabine (as Mantellato and/or Simoni), the young dancers, and, crucially, an audience invited to 'participate' rather than simply 'spectate' in a move that recalls Walcott's Shabine directly addressing readers, involving, and implicating them in what he describes and reveals. Further displaying Mantellato's in-depth knowledge of Walcott's texts and his profound (and, arguably, embodied) understanding of Walcott's overarching vision, as both readers and audience are reminded of the value of collectivism, collaboration, solidarity, and partnership – key words in Mantellato's approach and, as this book forcefully argues, in Walcott's works – this concluding, innovative final chapter not only brings the monograph to a very dynamic close but, crucially, it urges us to ponder the different ways in which praxis, far from being derivative or ancillary to more traditional forms of critical engagement, can illuminate and guide our understanding in peculiar and compelling ways.

Maria Cristina Fumagalli is Professor in Literature at the University of Essex. She is the author of *Derek Walcott Painters: A Life in Pictures* (Edinburgh University Press, in press); *On the Edge: Writing the Border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic* (2015; 2018); *Caribbean Perspectives on Modernity: Returning Medusa's Gaze* (2009); *The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante* (2001), the editor of *Agenda: Special Issue on Derek Walcott* (2002-2003), and the co-editor of *The Cross-Dressed Caribbean: Writing, Politics, Sexualities* (2013) and *Surveying the American Tropics: A Literary Geography from New York to Rio* (2013).

mcfuma@essex.ac.uk