

ABSTRACT

Ethnicity and the "mulatto of style": Towards a theory of Caribbean aesthetic in the work of Derek Walcott 1948 – 1993

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This dissertation is an exploratory mapping of the ideological and conceptual nature of Walcott's conception of a theory of Caribbean aesthetic. It plots his exposition and orchestration of the tropes and paradigms germane to what he calls a "New World" aesthetic from his juvenilia to his signal moment of international recognition, the Nobel Prize in 1992. Derek Walcott has been arguably the Caribbean's leading poet and dramatist to date. His views are influential in any discussion of Caribbean culture. Especially since Walcott's theorizing about poetry seems to contradict his practice in drama, this dissertation considers his theoretical maneuvers within and across genres. To this end, his complete oeuvre (newspapers articles, essays, plays, speeches and poetry produced during the period under study) has been examined to get a sense of his total creative output. This dissertation examines the stylistic impact of Walcott's penchant for cultural and racial hybridity deployed through his master trope, the "mulatto of style".

"Ethnicity and the 'Mulatto of style'" argues that the nature of Caribbean ethnicities has a determinative effect on Walcott's aesthetic conceptualization and the protean and syncretic nature of the tropes and paradigms he engages. The syncretic nature of Caribbean ethnicities (forced or voluntary) informs Walcott's poetics of place in which disparate aesthetic strategies, literary genres and cultural expression are fused to provide the creative energy of his New World aesthetic. Cross-cultural mixing informs Walcott's notion of diasporic and indeterminate identification.

"Ethnicity and the 'Mulatto of style'" contributes to the vast corpus of scholarly work on Derek Walcott by locating his aesthetic theorizing within the context of cross-cultural hybridity. In comparing Walcott's theorizing and critical practice with the positions of other Caribbean intellectuals like Fanon, Césaire, Glissant, Carpentier, Harris, Rathwaite, and Wynter, this dissertation posits the liminality of Walcott's aesthetic as it inhabits the interstitial space between the local and the imported, between the classical and the folk and between the scribal and the oral. It complements and contributes to the works of scholars like Gordon Rohlehr, Edward Baugh, and Patricia Ismond who argue

the Carib-centric focus of Walcott's mulatto aesthetic as one of the myriad manifestations of Caribbeanness.

Key words: Harold N. McDermott, hybridity, syncretism, mulatto, style, intertextuality, poetics, aesthetic