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“Prophet of a Coming New World”: Eric Walrond at the Crossroads of Pan-Caribbean, Pan-American, and Pan-African Literary Studies

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Louis J. Parascandola and Carl A. Wade, editors, *Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage*. (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2012), 246 pp.

Perhaps more than any other major literary figure, Eric Walrond embodies the sort of intra-Caribbean migration story so crucial to late nineteenth and early twentieth century movement of labor within and beyond the Caribbean. In the same vein, as someone deeply immersed in both the Harlem Renaissance literary scene and Marcus Garvey’s UNIA movement, Walrond also is a unique bridge figure for two of the most important pan-African movements of the early twentieth century. However, only recently has Walrond emerged into broader critical view, his emergence coinciding with a transnational broadening of the boundaries of African American literary studies toward, for example, Caribbean writers and U.S.-Caribbean linkages, and a corresponding reconceptualization of black diasporas towards internationalism and, crucially, towards the multilingual and multicultural nature of black literary internationalism.¹

Much of the increased attention paid to Walrond is due to Louis Parascandola’s efforts to publish Walrond’s writings, his fiction, his journalism, and his essays, from 1998’s *Winds Can Wake Up the Dead”: An Eric Walrond Reader* to 2011’s *In Search of Asylum: The Later Writings of Eric Walrond*. Furthermore, last year saw the long-overdue re-issue of Walrond’s landmark 1926 short story collection, *Tropic Death*. Parascandola and Carl Wade’s anthology of Walrond criticism, which I explore in the remainder of this review, could not be better timed. All of these publications attest to a resurgence of interest in Walrond as a modernist writer exploring black life in the Americas of the early twentieth century.

Eric Walrond: The Critical Heritage is a collection of critical essays ranging across the astounding, albeit limited, corpus of Walrond’s writings. Part 1 of the collection, “Pioneering Voices,” includes early essays by preeminent West Indian literary critic Kenneth Ramchand and the late Robert Bone, scholar of African American literature and the Harlem Renaissance in particular. For this anthology, Ramchand has updated his essay, “The Writer Who Ran Away: Eric Walrond and *Tropic Death*,” first published in 1970 in the second issue of the groundbreaking Caribbean literary journal *Savacou*. But his update is rather more of a strengthening than a revision of his argument, as he himself notes in a brief

¹ See Edwards.

note after the essay: “I have thickened the argument that Walrond is a Caribbean writer not a North American one [...]. I have slowed up the beginning in order to argue that Walrond is of value to America because he was a Caribbean writer” (34). Ramchand’s is thus an important early intervention against misreading the West Indianness out of *Tropic Death*, published as it was from within the Harlem Renaissance.

In this way Ramchand’s argument both anticipates and runs counter to Bone’s essay, taken from his 1988 monograph, *Down Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story*. While Ramchand is arguing for the distinctively West Indian contribution Walrond’s work makes to the African American literary scene, Bone seems much more interested in reading Walrond into an African American literary tradition that may acknowledge his Caribbean roots/routes but harnesses them to a hardening sense, in 1988, of African American literature centered in the U.S. Thus, the West Indian migrations featured in Walrond’s stories—migrations that Walrond himself experienced, for instance to Panama from Barbados—Bone reins into a U.S.-centric frame: “Walrond has contrived, in short, a Caribbean version of the Great Migration” (45). By contrast, Ramchand reads Walrond’s depiction of Caribbean “folk” and representation of vernacular language as a precursor to later West Indian writers Louise Bennett, Kamau Brathwaite, and Earl Lovelace (29).

The distance between these two readings, Bone straining to bring Walrond’s writing into a U.S.-centric African American literary tradition and Ramchand positioning the West Indianness of Walrond’s stories as the reason he matters to African American literature, appears as a sort of unifying problem through most of the essays in the collection. This West Indian-African American thread dovetails with the way the various critics approach racial blackness in Walrond’s life and work, and, more specifically, the way discourses and performances of distinct New World black cultures circulate within the circum-Caribbean and between that region and the United States.

Again, Bone’s “pioneering” essay seems to stand on one side, struggling to apprehend what he dubs Walrond’s personal “anguish” because of his “fragmented self”: “Born in British Guiana, raised in Barbados and Panama, and growing to maturity in New York, he was beset by the problem of a multiple identity. Was he African or European; Anglo-Saxon or Hispanic; West Indian or North American?” (36). Proceeding from these stark identity binaries, Bone asserts early that “Walrond’s life and work reveal the secret longing of the colonized black for whiteness, enlightenment, gentility, metropolitan sophistication, and similar marks of cultural ‘salvation’” (36). Without having convincingly demonstrated this “secret longing,” Bone moves from his focus on Walrond the “anguished” biographical subject to Walrond the writer, but reiterates at the end of his essay his assertion at the start: “*Tropic Death* is in fact

the veiled confession of a colonized black that he cannot return to his primitive sources" (52). There is a not-too-subtle sense that "colonized black" means the tragic black intellectual from the British West Indian colonies, who, because of his British colonial training and perhaps his love for English literature, is distinctly more conflicted about his blackness than his black counterpart in the U.S.

Fortunately, the essays included in Part II, "Modern Critical Views," have departed from Bone's reading: none but James Davis's essay on Walrond's biography cites his work, and even Davis cites him to register a trenchant critique implied in the rest of the essays. To be sure, the essays written for the volume don't really cite Ramchand, either—again, Davis's essay is the exception—but there is a tacit agreement with his argument for attending to the cultural significance of being West Indian in Harlem, a black Caribbean in the heart of a major black intellectual and literary renaissance in the U.S. In this regard, Michelle A. Stephens's, Louis Chude-Sokei's, and Rhonda Frederick's contributions are all exemplary, which is to be expected considering the way each has treated black diasporic and Caribbean cultural differences in their respective monographs.²

Instead of the "problem of a multiple identity," Stephens highlights in her essay the way Walrond's writing "reflects the circum-Atlantic landscapes and seascapes he wrote within, part of a black, oceanic, interculture that existed in diasporic space between the African American New Negro and the Caribbean New World Negro of the 1920s and 1930s" (59). In other words, Stephens's contribution emphatically connects Walrond's writing to specific material experiences of early-twentieth century circum-Atlantic migration and the sorts of racial subjectivities that emerged because of those migrations. These subjectivities were fraught, to be sure, with multiplicity and fragmentation, but were much more a site of creative possibility than a dizzying and disabling identitarian vortex.

² See Stephens, *Black Empire*; Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky"*; and Frederick, "Colón Man A Come."

Stephens shares with Chude-Sokei an investment in the way Walrond's fiction de-centers U.S. blackness as the dominant—or only—signifier of blackness in the Americas or in the U.S. itself. Where the two scholars diverge, however, is the relative value that accrues to choosing to identify with African American blackness. Stephens sees Walrond's engagement with U.S. blackness as providing him, as with Bert Williams and Claude McKay, with “an alternative political language of freedom with which to identify” (59). By contrast, Chude-Sokei emphatically favors Walrond's fiction over McKay's because of its “unrepentant fetishizing of black linguistic and historical *otherness*,” as against McKay's “much more commercially viable black-on-black masquerade” in *Home to Harlem* that “provided readers with recognizable African American settings and racial types despite its many attempts to complicate them with Caribbean themes and characters” (85). This argument carries forward Chude-Sokei's subtle contention that the reason for Walrond's disappearance from critical study, along with *Tropic Death* being out of print for an unconscionably long time, has much to do with how much Walrond's work refuses to be recognizable to a narrow sense of U.S. black life.

Like Stephens and Chude-Sokei, Rhonda Frederick in her essay highlights what she calls “contentious intra-racial specificities” (101). Drawing upon recent major work in Black Diaspora Studies—Stephens's *Black Empire*, Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora*, Michelle Wright's *Becoming Black*—Frederick turns to Walrond's depictions of women to foreground Walrond's prescient ability to “question simplistic conceptions of unity among African-descended peoples” in precisely the way that Edwards, Stephens, Wright, Chude-Sokei, Stephanie Batiste, and many other contemporary scholars have done in their works (107). Her powerful close analysis of the relationship between Ella, the female protagonist of his short story “Panama Gold,” and Poyah, the “Colón Man” who has returned to Barbados with Panama money, reveals the way that Walrond was not merely attentive to the cross-cultural differences between blacks in the U.S. and blacks in the Caribbean, but also the way cultural differences and color prejudices cut across intra-Caribbean—or in this case, intra-Barbadian—relationships between men and women, rural folk and urban migrants, lighter- and darker-skinned blacks. There is nothing of the pastoral romance of, for example, Bitá and Jubban in McKay's *Banana Bottom*.

I have spent quite a bit of time on these three more contemporary essays and the two pioneering ones before them not to sideline the other contributions to the anthology but to draw attention to how the currents of literary criticism have shifted such that Walrond's writing can be summoned to do the work of complicating facile notions of black diasporic unity and the oft-times concomitant elevation of U.S. black experience and literary achievement. In fact, the essays in Part III, the closing section of the anthology, “Biographical Sketches,” echo many

of the issues raised in the earlier pieces: Walrond's outsider status or foreignness vis-à-vis African American blacks, his location somewhere between W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, and his representational focus on intra-black cultural difference and conflict through what might be called an alternative black modernism. Even if the "biographical sketches" often tend more to literary criticism than biography proper, it is exciting to catch a glimpse of James Davis's forthcoming biography of Walrond in his contribution and the accompanying essays' revelations on a pre-Harlem Brooklynite Walrond and a post-U.S. Walrond in England.³

Where Davis's contribution falls short is in its call at the close. While his point that "this is an opportune time to re-evaluate the career of Eric Walrond for the fields of African American studies and British post-colonial studies" is an excellent one, less compelling is his point that "it is also an opportune time to revisit his work—or to introduce it, as the case may be—in relation to Caribbean studies" (182-83). This is not because Walrond should not be evaluated within Caribbean literary studies but because Ramchand's 1970 essay in *Savacou* and Stephens's, Chude-Sokei's, and Frederick's essays in this very volume are already carrying forward an emphasis on Walrond's relevance to pan-Caribbean literature. It is a bit strange, furthermore, that Davis should issue his call in a book published by the University of West Indies Press.

But Davis's point hints at the one limitation of the book. While many of the contributors gesture toward the pan-Caribbean nature of Walrond's work—and not merely its West Indian challenge to Afro-America—something more rigorously pan-Caribbean, in the sense of multi-lingual comparison, is missing. Thus, while Parascandola and Wade's introduction usefully opens with the fact that Walrond "lived in or visited the anglophone, hispanophone and francophone areas of the Caribbean as well as metropolitan cities with large diasporic communities" (1), the contributions do not push deeply enough into the particularities of blackness in the Spanish- and French-speaking Caribbean, in Panama, in the Dominican Republic, and in Haiti, all places to which Walrond travelled. Both Stephens and Chude-Sokei gesture to such black complexity, Stephens by arguing for "Hemispheric analyses of interactions between various black cultural forms" (69) or what she quite wonderfully dubs "American archipelagos of blackness" (64), Chude-Sokei by crediting Walrond with "representing the Caribbean and the Panama Canal as zones of unrivalled black

³ This later migration to the UK generates exciting possibilities for comparison between Walrond and another early twentieth-century West Indian writer who enjoyed both commercial and critical literary success but who has since been largely forgotten and neglected: Una Marson. Alison Donnell's work to rescue Marson and re-publish her oeuvre mirrors Parascandola's efforts with Walrond.

linguistic and cultural diversity” (88). However, in both cases and across the collection there is much less engagement—perhaps because of the very difficulty of the multi-lingual comparatist work both are arguing for—with Afro-Panamanian literature or literature from the wider Afro-Hispanic Caribbean in relation to Walrond’s.

Chude-Sokei’s invocation of Glissant’s concept of the “flash agent,” though, goes some way toward thinking Caribbean literary and cultural output under a pan-Caribbean theoretical frame. When Chude-Sokei harnesses Glissant’s theory of relationality to Walrond’s status as and representational focus on the “foreign negro,” we get a clear sense of why Walrond matters now, at a point when U.S. hegemony in global discourses of blackness has eroded and when, increasingly, blackness is analyzed in terms of difference in, if not against, unity. More than forty years earlier, Ramchand sensed this power of Walrond’s work to capture the “submarine unity” of the Caribbean (22). Though less travelled in the 1970 of Ramchand’s *Savacou* essay, that phrase and its theoretical import—the rhizomatic, mangrove-like quality of Caribbean people’s roots—are well-known to Caribbean writers, readers, and scholars because of Kamau Brathwaite’s landmark *Contradictory Omens* and Edouard Glissant’s citation and elaboration of the same in *Le Discours Antillais* and *Poétique de la Relation*.

Thus, Walrond’s writing anticipates the contradictory unity in diversity central to Caribbean cultural theory since the 1970s and, more recently, its importance to conceptualizations of Black Diaspora. It anticipates the international turn away from Harlem-centered accounts of early-twentieth century “New Negro” movements, as in Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani’s new edited collection of essays, *Escape From New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem*. And it also anticipates the challenge to the hegemony of U.S. blackness by today’s “foreign negro” writers: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s immigrant “non-American black” in her latest novel, *Americanah*, and Junot Díaz’s narrator’s doubly-signifying “Negro, please”—simultaneously African American vernacular and unrecognizable Dominican discourses of *lo negro*—in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. In all of these spheres—circum-Caribbean, Black Diasporic, African-American—Walrond truly was, as Ramchand puts it, “a prophet of a coming New World” (22).

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