

INTRODUCTION

Noted historian David Levering Lewis cites a chance meeting between Harlem Renaissance enfant terrible Richard Bruce Nugent and writer Eric Walrond “in a London railway station in late 1929.” According to Lewis, that brief encounter “was about the last heard of [Walrond]” (234). Indeed, it is a common misconception among scholars of African American literature that when Walrond left North America in 1928 he simply stopped writing (or at least publishing), and the life that he led in Europe until his death in 1966 has been largely unknown. The purpose of this anthology is to dispel the belief that he did not publish after leaving America and to clear up some of the mystery of his European years. We have managed, in part, because of the generous cooperation of members of Walrond’s family, to put together the most important work in the almost forty years following his departure from America. The result is a diverse collection of fictional and nonfictional writings, which not only belie the myth of Walrond’s being nonproductive, but also greatly enrich the scope of black diasporic literature. The writings herein, often first published in the *Roundway Review*—the organ of the Roundway Hospital, a psychiatric facility in Wiltshire, England—where Walrond was “a voluntary patient” from May 11, 1952, to September 5, 1957, reinforce several of the themes from the writer’s earlier years, including alienation, the search for identity, “otherness,” racism, hybridity, and

imperialism, issues that still resonate today.¹ As Walrond's grandson Frank Stewart observes, "Walrond kept a unity and consistency to his repertoire after *Tropic Death*" (34). The publication of these works should help establish his place as one of the earliest and most significant anti-imperialist black writers who, among other things, espouses the vision of a global community made up of those with a "shared history of colonialism and European exploitation" (Stephens, *Black Empire* 2).

Walrond's European writings consist of fictional narratives, articles on race and other social issues, and an unfinished fifteen-part history of the Panama Canal ("The Second Battle"), likely a sequel to the long awaited but never published "The Big Ditch." Among the narratives is the lengthy "Success Story" (1954), set mainly in New York City, but encompassing the landscapes of Barbados, Panama, and British Guiana (now Guyana) as well. To be sure, not all the last fictions equal the achievements of the critically acclaimed *Tropic Death* (1926).² The best fiction, however, such as "Inciting to Riot" (1934), "Morning in Colon" (1940), "Two Sisters" (1953), "The Ice-man" (1953), "The Coolie's Wedding" (1953), "Bliss" (1953), "Success Story" (1954), and the previously unpublished "Shadow in the Sun" demonstrates that much of his creative power remained intact. Some of the nonfiction prose, including "Harlem" (1933), "White Man, What Now?" (1938), "On England" (1938), "The Men of the Cibao" (1945–46), and the previously unpublished "The Panama Scandal" also enhance his reputation. Walrond continued writing and, with fitful success, particularly in the pieces set in the Caribbean and New York, remained committed to his craft, ever mindful of his contractual obligations to the publishers Boni and Liveright, and the Guggenheim Foundation, as his correspondence to Henry Moe, secretary to the Foundation, and to Jack Conroy, the American novelist, attests.³

A Life: From British Guiana to Roundway

In his biographical sketch "From British Guiana to Roundway" (1952), Walrond called it a "big jump" from the various places he had lived to Wiltshire, England, and from the Broad Street Hospital, where he worked in New York as a telephone operator, to Roundway Hospital. Walrond goes on to say, "The jump, for a 'depression casualty' in the years following the Wall Street crash of 1929, is almost frightening. It is as though I'd entered a new world, a compact, almost self-contained community set in surroundings of rare beauty."

Making big jumps, however, was the essence of Walrond's life, which was always marked by being an outsider beginning with his birth on December 18, 1898, in Georgetown, British Guiana, to two Barbadian-born parents. Financial necessity, triggered by his father's abandonment of the family when he sought work in the Panama Canal Zone, drove the family to Barbados and Panama. In both places, he was again an outsider, a foreign-born "Mudhead" (a term denigrating the natives of British Guiana, which is below sea level) in Barbados and a *chombo* (a black West Indian, or, more vulgarly, a "nigger") in Panama. Seeking his fortune, Walrond migrated to the United States on June 30, 1918, where again he was an outsider. Despite the prejudice he encountered as a black and as a West Indian, a "monkey chaser" (Reid 113–16), Walrond experienced his greatest literary success in the United States as an author of numerous essays, reviews, and stories and as an editor of Marcus Garvey's *Negro World* (1921–23) and *Opportunity*, an organ of the National Urban League (1925–27). During his time with the latter journal, Walrond published his most significant work, the short story collection *Tropic Death*, one of the most important volumes of the Harlem Renaissance.

The generally favorable response of the critics to *Tropic Death* prompted Walrond's publisher, Boni and Liveright, to provide an advance for another book on the French involvement in the building of the Panama Canal. Walrond's success as an author may also be measured by three major awards he received in 1927–28: a Harmon Award in literature, a Zona Gale scholarship to attend the University of Wisconsin, and a Guggenheim Award (later renewed for an additional six months) to complete fiction on Caribbean life. After traveling to several countries in Central America and the Caribbean, he arrived in London in June 1929 and departed for France the next month ostensibly to complete his project on the canal and, as he wrote in a letter to Henry Moe, to "settle down to a siege of writing" (Apr. 2, 1929, Guggenheim files). He remained there off and on in Paris, Bandol, and Avignon until the summer of 1932 when he moved to London where he lived intermittently until 1939 (Fabre 138–39).

Time in France

When Walrond arrived in Paris in 1929, there was a small but established group of blacks already living there. About 200,000 African Americans had served in France during World War I, some staying and many more

returning to the United States and telling of the experience of living in a non-segregated society. Black artists in particular thought of France as a haven from U.S. racism. Those who stayed, for varying lengths of time, included musicians Louis Mitchell, Ada “Bricktop” Smith, and Josephine Baker and writers, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Walter White, Gwendolyn Bennett, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Alain Locke, J. A. Rogers, and Nella Larsen (Edwards 1–15; Stovall 25–129 *passim*). Walrond immediately fit into this circle. He enjoyed especially the Left Bank, saying that “[i]ts traditions and literary associations stimulate the best efforts in one. Here one can find variety or peace” (quoted in Bald 4). There were lively cafes in Montmartre and Montparnasse where African Americans and West Indians and Africans could revel. Life in these areas of Paris was “passionate, joyous, outrageous, dangerous, and at times tragic, but never dull” (Stovall 43). One club in particular was the lively Bal Nègre, described as “the French Harlem,” that Walrond reportedly frequented and where he was befriended by the artists Augusta Savage, Palmer Hayden, and Hale Woodruff (Fabre 83, 141). Walrond, in fact, may well be one of the card players in Hayden’s painting “Nous Quatre à Paris” (ca. 1928–30) (Leininger-Miller 84–85, 128). He also met playwright Shirley Graham, later to become the wife of W.E.B. Du Bois, offering her dubious advice on how to win a Guggenheim Award. She rewarded him by providing “niggerati gossip” from back home, and sending him money after she returned to North America (Horne 53–54).⁴ In addition, Walrond met up with the American literary couple Marjorie Worthington and Willie Seabrook who lived in France from 1930 to 1933. Walrond had known Seabrook, author of several popular “exotic” travel books, while living in America and had requested that he write him a recommendation for a Guggenheim fellowship.

The two most important connections Walrond made or reestablished, however, were with Countee Cullen and Nancy Cunard. In the spring of 1930 Walrond lived for a time with Cullen in an apartment they rented in Paris, about the same time as Cullen’s disastrous two-year marriage to Yolande Du Bois ended. Walrond had been close friends with Cullen (perhaps even lovers briefly) when they were in the United States and both worked for *Opportunity* magazine.⁵ He had favorably reviewed Cullen’s book *Color* in the *New Republic* (Mar. 31, 1926) while Cullen, in turn, dedicated one of his most famous poems, “Incident,” to the West Indian. It is entirely appropriate that what is perhaps Cullen’s most racialized poem is dedicated to Walrond, for as Blanche E. Ferguson points out, Walrond’s “militant outgoing

personality was a helpful contrast to Cullen's introspection" (120–21). In May 1931 Walrond also met shipping heiress Nancy Cunard who scandalized her wealthy socialite family with her radical politics and her interest in black causes. Walrond soon became a member of her entourage and, in all probability, one of her several black lovers (Chisholm 177). Cunard would be someone with whom he would remain in close contact for the remainder of his life.⁶

It is unfortunate that what little is written about Walrond's time in France focuses not on his work itself but more on his time spent in the social scene. Walrond did not, however, devote all of this time to revelry. First, as a member of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners headed by American novelist Theodore Dreiser, he became involved in the campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys (letter from Dreiser to Walrond, Jan. 6, 1932, in Walrond Papers).⁷ Second, upon his arrival in Europe, he immediately wrote several reviews that he published in a monthly London Socialist magazine, the *Clarion*. Two of these, reprinted in this anthology, focus on his Renaissance compatriots, Cullen and Claude McKay. Not surprisingly, his review of Cullen's volume *The Black Christ and Other Poems* (January 1930) praises "a young Negro poet of undisputed talent." Walrond especially admires the title poem depicting the lynching of a young black man.

The review of McKay's novel *Banjo* ("The Negro Renaissance," July 1929) is more mixed. Walrond opens the review by providing a brief overview of Harlem Renaissance authors, McKay in particular, for his British audience. Walrond had had an increasingly testy association with McKay. While he wrote favorably of the Jamaican's early work, their relationship gradually soured.⁸ This is evident in letters between the two when McKay was seeking assistance from Walrond in placing his work while the latter was working for *Opportunity* and also in a letter Walrond sent to Arthur Schomburg on December 24, 1925 (Schomburg file, Schomburg Center). In his review, Walrond maintained that McKay had been gone from the United States too long to be able to write authoritatively of black life in America in novels such as *Home to Harlem* (1928). In particular, he was of the opinion that the novelist was unable "to reproduce accurately the nuances of Negro speech." Walrond had long believed in the importance of capturing the language of those that he was writing of, whether the Caribbean natives in the stories of *Tropic Death* or in his later Roundway pieces. He was convinced, however, that in *Banjo*, set on the docks of Marseilles, France, McKay was on somewhat surer ground and was able to create black migrant lifelike characters.

Ultimately, Walrond maintained that the power of the “bleak and sad” portrayal of black diasporic life by McKay was enough “to commend his book.”

Walrond, was, in fact, compared with McKay in an article written by French journalist Andre Levinson, “De Harlem à la Cannebière,” criticizing the episodic, ultimately pointless nature of *Banjo*. In contrast *Tropic Death* was praised for its accurate use of Caribbean Creole, lush descriptions, seriousness of purpose, and objective narrative style. Walrond was also interviewed by Jacques Lebar (“Avec Eric Walrond”) in the French language paper, *Lectures du Soir* (Jan. 14, 1933) where he sets forth the clearest expression of his writing philosophy: “My duty and my *raison d’être* is to give an accurate portrayal of my race, its history, its sufferings, its hopes and its rebellions. Therein lies a rich source of emotion and pain. It is there that I draw the essence of my work, and I will dedicate my energy as a writer to serving the black race.”⁹ This emphasis on black life is reiterated in an undated letter to African American poet Melvin Tolson from a chateau near Paris, where Walrond had gone in order to “secure a better perspective for the portrayal of Negro character in the Americas” (cited in Tolson, *The Harlem Group* 86).

Perhaps Walrond’s most significant writing during this time was published not in English, but in French and Spanish periodicals, enhancing the transnational character of his work. “Harlem,” published in *Lectures du Soir* (Feb. 4, 1933), a Parisian weekly newspaper, is a vivid piece written from Walrond’s memories of the black capital. The Harlem described is a lawless place filled with violence, alcohol, stolen merchandise, and lascivious women that is nonetheless exotic, exciting, and teeming with life. Initially seen as a paradise, it was corrupted by the encroachment of whites.¹⁰ “El Negro, Expulsado del Cabaret, Vuelve a Labrar la Tierra,” published in the communist, antifascist newspaper *Ahora* (Madrid), June 21, 1934, an indication of his increasingly Marxist perspective, is a much more sober text, examining post-Depression Harlem. Unlike the city in its heyday of the previous sketch, the Harlem portrayed here is one in which the economic bubble has burst. Unemployment and inflation have caused blacks to desert it, returning to their native homes in the South or the Antilles. Harlem is a bleak place symbolizing the false promises Walrond believed North America holds for blacks. He had clearly made up his mind never to live in America again. In a brief visit to New York in 1931, the last time he returned to the United States, “he experienced no thrill of homecoming,” indicating

that "[o]nly urgent business brought me back to this country" (*Amsterdam News* [New York], Sept. 9, 1931).

While Walrond, like many others, believed that France presented the black artist with opportunities unattainable in America, his own years in France were not without their troubles. This is corroborated by his friend Ethel Ray Nance (Williams), who recalled that he wrote her "quite some long letters telling me about his experiences in going to France and living on the Riviera, of accidents he's had and his life being very turbulent" (15). Walrond was also afflicted with bad health, which is confirmed by his former literary agent, Edna Worthley Underwood, who speaks of his having been hospitalized "for a long time" in the American Hospital in Paris (67). What put him there and for how long remains another of the many mysteries of Walrond's life, since hospital records for him are not available. But it may well have been psychological turmoil exacerbated by alcoholism, problems that had long plagued him and would continue to bedevil him in his later years.¹¹

Life in England

West Indians had been brought up to think of Britain as their homeland and to see themselves as British citizens. So it seems somewhat natural for Walrond to imagine he would gain acceptance in England. He was not the first West Indian émigré to think along these lines. McKay, for example, had written early verse extolling the virtues of the colonial motherland. However, major rioting against blacks in Cardiff, Liverpool, and other British cities in 1919, shortly after McKay's arrival, would quickly shatter his early idealism. Eventually, McKay would arrive at the conclusion "that prejudice against Negroes had become almost congenital among [the British]" (76).¹² Walrond, too, approached England with optimism, "reared on the belief that England was the one country where the black man was sure of getting a square deal" ("White Man, What Now?"). He would, however, eventually arrive at the same painful conclusion as McKay.

After settling in England in 1932, Walrond immediately plunged into the small black community living in London. He published several short stories in English (or West Indian) periodicals, including "Inciting to Riot" (*Evening Standard*, July 26, 1934; first published as "Sur les Chantiers de Panama" in *Lectures du Soir*, Jan. 7, 1933); "Tai Sing" (*Spectator*, Apr. 20, 1934); "Harlem Nights," *Star* (London) (Sept. 26, 1935); and "Morning in Colon" (*West*