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Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt examines the use of rum as a literary trope in her 2022 *Rum Histories: Drinking in Atlantic Literature and Culture*. She looks at Anglophone literature published from 1945 to 1973. While Nesbitt mostly considers literature in the form of novels and short story collections as well as scholarly discussions of the same works, she also briefly analyzes songs, documentaries, feature films, and memes. Overall, Nesbitt argues that rum symbolizes the continuation of colonial-era inequalities based on race, class, gender, and sexual identity in postcolonial and neocolonial relationships. Additionally, she shows that many scholars seem to have taken on a Victorian disdain for alcohol consumption. If they notice rum’s appearance in texts at all, they characterize it as a stereotypical representation of regional culture; an embarrassing sign of a character’s weakness; or a frivolous, inconsequential alcoholic “time-out.” Scenes where rum appear are thus disregarded as unworthy of academic analysis. However, Nesbitt posits that, whether a character can be said to have a drinking problem or is “just” engaging in a time-out moment, the symbolic use of rum, which she calls “rum poetics,” in these instances expresses real political, economic, and social concerns about continuing oppression and, at times, blindness to privilege that deserve to be given serious regard by reviewers.

In the introduction, Nesbitt establishes the importance of rum as a multivalent symbol in the Caribbean and the wider world. Distilled beverages were first used by colonizers to establish contact with indigenous peoples. Throughout the colonial period, rum fulfilled multiple roles: a trade good in exchange for enslaved Africans, a labor enhancement for laborers of various ethnicities, a way to keep said workers indebted to plantation owners, and a gateway into sexual exploitation. As such, the beverage shaped and reinforced hierarchies of power based on race, class, and gender. The mid-twentieth century saw major change in the region. Thanks to an increase of US American soldiers stationed there, the spread of tourism, and the expansion of multinational corporations to fill the void left by the withdrawal of colonial
powers, rum fueled a different type of economy predicated on alcoholic time-outs. However, this “new” economy continued to favor wealthy, often white, Western tourists, consumers, and business people over poorer and darker-skinned locals. In other words, just one drink speaks to political, economic, and social issues that span centuries and continents.[1]

Nesbitt examines several texts in chapter 1 that use “rum poetics” to speak to the exploitation of Caribbean peoples even as the colonial era wound down. One example is the calypso song “Rum and Coca Cola.” The Trinidadian Lord Invader (1943) intended his song to be a critique of US influence, specifically in the case of GIs who got local girls drunk and slept with them “late at night” for a “better price.”[2] The unequal relationship between the two countries can further be seen in the fact that the US musician Morey Amsterdam, on a 1943 USO tour in Trinidad, stole the song and copyrighted it in the United States in 1945. While many of the lyrics were similar, the new version, which was ultimately performed by the Andrews Sisters, was not explicitly about prostitution. Rather, it encouraged US men to visit Trinidad where they would be guaranteed “one real good fine time” while drinking rum and Coca Cola, drinks sold to them by local women earning “Yankee dollars.”[3] While not as overtly political, the song still hints at exploitative dynamics through both its theft as well as its use of an imperialistic tourist gaze.

Chapter 2 looks at male characters whose relationship with rum highlights their misgivings about the process of decolonization. In V. S. Naipaul’s Miguel Street (1955), the island of Trinidad trades British control for the rising neocolonial presence of the United States. However, in spite of what was billed as a new era of opportunities, the male characters are un- or underemployed. Bogart flees his island for British Guiana and Venezuela in search of work. Popo and his wife both do odd jobs to survive, but to heighten his sense of emasculation, hers involve “friendship” with “many men.” The frustrations of these characters can be seen in their relationship with rum. Popo, who used to abstain, begins abusing alcohol after his wife leaves him. Additionally, they cannot see past their own oppression and are thus blind to the exploitation of others. Throughout Miguel Street, there are very few female characters. Those that do exist are often just labeled, like Popo’s wife, rather than given a name. They are also demonized—their drinking is not considered a form of acceptable bonding but, rather, a sign of sexual and moral looseness that contributes to men's problems. In this text, rum as a symbol speaks to the dissatisfaction of male Caribbeans who find that neocolonialism is not as beneficial as they had hoped it would be.

Chapter 3 focuses on white women who drink to cope with the oppressive men in their lives and, in doing so, unwittingly contribute to their own continued subjugation as well as that of others. Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea is set during the Victorian era, shortly after England’s Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, and was written during the period of Caribbean decolonization (1966). The struggles with sexism, racism, and classism present in both periods contribute to the notion that settler colonialism leaves a long shadow. Antoinette Cosway drinks to cope with the economic troubles her Jamaican Creole family has faced since emancipation as well as her abusive husband. But Antoinette’s drunken withdrawal actually weakens her social position. Her husband takes her money, arguing she cannot be trusted with it, and, among other issues, disregards her economic- and gender-based complaints, saying that she is nothing more than a mentally unstable drunkard. Much like their male counterparts discussed in chapter 1, in spite of their legitimate problems, women like Antoinette do not see their own privilege, especially in comparison with poorer, nonwhite ones. She imbibes with a servant, her Black nurse, but does not want to hear Christophine’s insistence that, as “a rich white
girl,” Antoinette could solve all her own problems by just fleeing her husband, while Christophine cannot quite as easily leave her employer. This book uses rum to show characters coping with the changes, as well as the continuation of gender, ethnic, and class-based inequalities, resulting from the abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean.

Nesbitt examines the use of libations in chapter 4 as explicitly political protests, as opposed to personal rebellions, as well as the failures of these acts. The texts focus on the unrealized promises of Caribbean independence as well as migration to the United Kingdom, at least for middle-class Black men. In George Lamming’s Water with Berries (1972), the actor and political activist Derek is from the fictional island of San Cristobal, but lives in England. Currently, he plays a corpse in The Tempest, a role which mirrors the dead-end jobs and discrimination he finds himself subjected to in a supposedly more advanced country. His frustration with his lack of opportunities peaks when he sees a souvenir-size rum bottle for tourists, symbolically filled with centuries of oppression, on the stage set. In the middle of the performance, he spontaneously uses it to rape a white woman in protest. This attempt at political resistance is a failure in many ways. Derek has raped an innocent individual to prove a point and has become an oppressor himself. Additionally, he has reinforced a stereotype held by the very people keeping him down—that Black men are sexual predators who threaten white women. Regardless, rum poetics shed light on the political activism of Caribbean men, as ineffective as it may be.

Chapter 5 once again lambastes scholars for failing to notice the importance of rum poetics. Nesbitt focuses on, among other authors, the work of Paule Marshall, who uses rum as a symbol to critique colonial and postcolonial oppression in her novels. In Praisesong for the Widow (1983), the main character, Avey, is a middle-class African American who goes on a cruise to help take her mind off the death of her husband. She gets off the ship in Grenada and then travels to the smaller island of Carriacou to witness the annual Big Drum/Beg Pardon, a West African-inspired confessional. Most scholars point out that she has a transformative experience there that allows her to connect with her African roots, and they focus on symbols like music or dance in this change.[4] However, in glossing over the novel’s rum poetics, they miss the fact that Avey remains more American than African and that, in spite of her ethnicity, she represents the self-righteous US tourist. Avey never really participates in the Beg Pardon; she is more of a spectator, a consumer, who is “sold” the experience by a rum-shop owner who sees her as a gullible tourist. Rum libations mark the beginning of the ceremony, but she does not take part in this communal consumption. Not only does she drink soda, but she also judges the local participants for their drunkenness and imagines herself on the airplane heading home, sipping a more “sophisticated” and, thus, Western, white wine. Avey, like scholars other than Nesbitt, fails to notice that when the residents of Carriacou use empty rum kegs as drums, they are drawing connections between West African roots, colonial-era slavery, present-day rituals, and the mixed blessings of neocolonial tourism.

Rum Histories is an exceptional book. In addition to the numerous insights discussed above, it fills a gap in the scholarly literature. While Latin Americanist and Caribbeanist anthropologists, historians, and journalists have contributed a great deal to alcohol studies in the last several decades,[5] this is less true in the field of literary/cultural studies.[6] As such, the book will appeal to historians of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Atlantic world as well as scholars of literature, cultural studies, and alcohol studies. With that said, there are a few minor flaws in the book. First, the distinction between the struggles experienced by characters in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 is murky. In other words, the personal complaints of characters like Popo or Antoinette Cosway are also polit-
ical, while the political issues that Derek struggles with are also immensely personal. It might have been useful to acknowledge how these categories were not completely distinct from one another. Additionally, this is a dense text—Nesbitt covers significant ground in a short 152 pages. Some readers, whether the average undergraduate or even an expert from another field, may be unfamiliar with the history of the region or most, if not all, of the literary and scholarly works discussed. It might have been helpful to provide more context about all three rather than jumping into the analysis before more carefully setting the stage. This is a technique that Deborah Toner, a scholar with training in both history and literature, employs successfully in Alcohol and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Mexico (2015).[7] These minor critiques aside, Rum Histories is an immensely worthwhile text that should spark reconsiderations of rum's history and the texts included therein.

Notes


[7]. Toner, Alcohol and Nationhood.
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