Rum Histories: Drinking in Atlantic Literature and Culture. Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2022.

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In a recent advert for The Kraken Rum, a Caribbean black spiced rum owned and distributed by the U.S. alcoholic drinks multinational Proximo Spirits, the mythical squid-like monster from which the rum takes its name is shown attacking a nineteenth-century trading ship carrying produce from the Caribbean. The CGI-heavy ad tacks closely to the usual clichéd associations surrounding Caribbean rum. It tells the story of how the Kraken was "stained ink-black" by its attack on the ship and its cargo of alcohol and spices. Despite claims by the ad-makers to historical accuracy, the depiction of the ship's crew is more reminiscent of a seventeenth-century pirate gang than of late nineteenth-century traders. Indeed, there is a strong whiff of Disney's blockbuster franchise *Pirates of the Caribbean* to the ad's visuals.

None of this is particularly remarkable, of course. Proximo Spirits are far from the only drinks company to mobilize popular tropes linking the Caribbean, rum-drinking, and piracy in their efforts to boost sales of their product. There seems little reason to dwell too long on this thirty-second piece of promotional material; it is not as if the ad can tell us anything about the history and significance of rum production in the Caribbean or its imbrication in the transatlantic trade networks out of which the modern world-economy emerged. And yet, as Jennifer Poulos Nesbitt shows in *Rum Histories*, it would be a mistake not to take even such seemingly trivial representations of rum seriously since – to borrow the play-on-words central to Nesbitt's critique – rum's own rum history is never far from the surface whenever the drink features in cultural production. Such is the case with the Kraken Rum ad, which, despite its stylized vacuity, cannot help but summon the specter of slavery in promoting a product that first originated as, in Nesbitt's words, "a lubricant for the plantation system" (6). The image of the kraken arising from the depths of the ocean to attack a European trading vessel might be read as a kind of return of the repressed: insofar as the history of rum is inseparable from the history of the Atlantic Ocean as a graveyard for those enslaved Africans lost or murdered at sea during the Middle Passage, the kraken's destruction of the ship manifests a displaced (post)colonial anxiety over that history. The point is underscored by the advert's inadvertent racialization of the sea-beast through the staining "ink-black" of its tentacles by the smashed cargo.

If this sounds like "overreading," then it is very much in the spirit of Nesbitt's excellent study, which calls for precisely such overreading as a means to foreground the complex symbolic economy

of a product (rum) and practice (rum-drinking) that is too often taken at face-value when represented in literary or other cultural works (31, 35). Focusing on Anglophone Atlantic literature from the post-1945 period, Nesbitt shows how rum functions as "an economical image for capturing, condensing, and disseminating the anxieties of living with the systemic legacies of colonialism as a 'post-' colonial subject in relation to other 'post-' colonial subjects" (31). *Rum Histories* proposes a "rum poetics," an analytical optic that "capitalizes on the dual meaning of rum as 'strange,' its materiality as a product of imperialism, and its participation in shared understandings of alcohol use" (4). Scenes involving rum, writes Nesbitt, "display a collective intoxification by colonial ideologies as well as the anxieties and panics engendered by a collective failure to move into a desired postcolonial state, in both senses of the word" (5). The literary presence of rum, in short, indexes the paradoxes of a postcolonial present still haunted by the legacies of colonialism.

Nesbitt teases out the complexities and contradictions surrounding rum's representation through a series of comparative close readings. In a wide-ranging opening chapter, she surveys the signification of rum in novels, songs, and historical studies from across the Americas and the UK, including Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, Hal Underhill's *Jamaica White*, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Barry Unsworth's *Sugar and Rum*, and the calypso "Rum and Coca-Cola." The associations drawn in colonial discourse between the Caribbean, rum, alcoholic disinhibition, and eroticized violence, Nesbitt argues, positioned the region in an ahistorical timelessness, forever caught in an "alcoholic time-out" (35). From here she turns to the unlikely pairing of V. S. Naipaul and Hunter S. Thompson, who both launched their literary careers from the Caribbean and view leaving the region as a necessary escape from a perpetual alcoholic time-out. Both Naipaul's *Miguel Street* (written 1955, published 1959) and Thompson's *The Rum Diary* (written 1959, published 1998) evoke their Caribbean settings – Trinidad and Puerto Rico, respectively – at moments of socio-economic transition. In each case, the depiction of rum and rum-drinking functions to mediate the impact of these transitionary moments, particularly as regards the way Naipaul's and Thompson's narrators negotiate their masculinity in situations of neocolonial domination.

The next chapter turns to Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Sylvia Townsend Warner's *The Flint Anchor* (1954) to examine the intersection of gender and racial oppression in the context of nineteenth-century British imperialism. Reading these novels together in terms of their depictions of female drunkenness, claims Nesbitt, allows us to discern a "reparative network of exchange among white women, enslaved Africans, and working-class women" (80). In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, rum is presented as central to Rochester's imposition of colonial-patriarchal control over Antoinette, but in its connection to two other beverages in the novel – an Obeah love potion and gin – rum also becomes a connective optic enabling the joint recognition of the economic subjection of Black and working-class

people. In *The Flint Anchor*, meanwhile, rum appears at strategic moments to "index the events of a provincial domestic plot to the concerns of empire," correlating working-class oppression and racial domination (88). Nesbitt concludes this chapter by turning to two, more recent women writers – Rosanne Kanhai and Tiphanie Yanique – to explore the limits of such reparative efforts.

The two chapters that follow focus exclusively on works produced by Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic authors, analysing the figure of libations as marking a "lost potential for political change – political change that could have produced an alternative and perhaps more ideally postcolonial present, but did not" (103). Covering novels by Earl Lovelace, Sylvia Wynter, George Lamming, Paule Marshall, Michelle Cliff, and Diana McCaulay, Nesbitt makes a compelling case for the significance of rum both as a literary device that condenses the paradoxes of postcolonial subjectivity and, metacritically, as an analytical optic capable of subverting blinkered or white-washed interpretative frameworks.

Throughout this engaging study, Nesbitt shows time and again how references to rum in cultural texts should never be taken only at face-value; they are typically freighted with the weight of colonial history and the contradictions of the neocolonial present. While the significance of sugar in literature and culture has received copious attention from literary critics and historians, rum has been less well served. *Rum Histories* certainly rectifies this critical aporia, marking a hugely valuable contribution to commodity histories, postcolonial studies, and Caribbean literature.