

Under the Influence: Thinking through Rum

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Rum was indispensable in the fisheries and the fur trade, and as a naval ration. But its connection with the triangular trade was more direct still. Rum was an essential part of the cargo of the slave ship, particularly the colonial American slave ship. No slave trader could afford to dispense with a cargo of rum. It was profitable to spread a taste for liquor on the coast.

(Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*)

This passage from Eric Williams's classic study of the economics of slavery captures the ways a commodity produced primarily with slave labour implicates dispersed populations—fur traders, sailors, African chiefs, etc.—in colonialism's most oppressive and violent practices. As a commodity, rum can appear severed from its conditions of production, but its circulation through global markets transforms distant consumers and traders into beneficiaries of and practical apologists for exploitation.¹ William Cowper opined regarding slavery and the British diet,² "I pity them [the slaves] greatly but I must be mum, / For how could we do without sugar and rum?" (ll. 5-6). Cowper's poem exposes a psychology of acquiescence in which material conditions affect individual and communal worldview. Economic conditions cycle into cultural norms: "how could we do without ..."

Although scholars have devoted considerable attention to the significance of sugar,³ rum passes relatively unnoticed despite its availability as an image for the powerlessness Cowper describes. Rum is an intoxicant; it makes people drunk and drunk people are not fully in control of their actions and words. This apparent powerlessness, however, enjoins its opposite: the power to decide when to pay attention to the political ramifications of consumption, when and how to engage broader meanings for local or personal economic transactions. Despite its fraught history, rum

is usually glossed (over) as a realistic plot detail in literature referencing or set in the West Indies. Rum's presence on the scene anchors such novels in West Indian reality; the absence of rum would likely cause more comment. Reading practices, both in the world and the text, are deeply structured by the histories of colonialism. So, what might insisting on rum's broader rather than incidental significance reveal about those reading practices? Three postcolonial West Indian novels considered in this essay—Earl Lovelace's *While Gods Are Falling* (1965), George Lamming's *Water with Berries* (1971), and Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* (1962)—allow for both the glossing and the glossing over of rum, thus offering an opportunity to examine the contingencies of interpreting rum. Close examination of rum's role indicates the force with which “post”-colonial subjects resist fully understanding the degree to which personal experience might remain materially and historically shaped by colonization. Moreover, these readings propose that metropolitan and peripheral populations share a model of consumption that misrecognizes these effects.

As a literary figure, rum may have particular purchase during decolonization because economic weakness was a barrier to independence for the West Indian colonies.⁴ This weakness cycled into notions of West Indian culture and subjectivity as negotiations for self-government stalled. British control over the West Indian economy was particularly tight: London directed activity on the islands as surely in the 1950s as in the 1800s. According to contemporary evidence from Kathleen M. Stahl's 1951 study *The Metropolitan Organization of British Colonial Trade*, the sugar industry of which rum is a subset was still headquartered in England (32); like many industries, it is dominated by “family businesses, handed down in the same family for several generations, sometimes from their foundations up to the present day” (7). As decolonization was discussed in the 1960s and 1970s, Rogoziński reports that British officials “were convinced that the smaller colonies were too poor to survive as viable states” and thus planned to introduce self-government gradually (267). The British favored a federated government that would combine the resources of the many islands. Federation efforts failed because Jamaica and Trinidad, which were developing local resources (bauxite

and oil, respectively), “feared that their economies would be drained by the poorer islands of the eastern Caribbean” (Rogoziński 269). However, the failure of West Indian islands to achieve self-government was also seen as a national or regional tragic flaw. According to John Darwin, the fractious negotiations led the British government to conclude that “the British West Indies were a monument to colonial failure: poverty-stricken, politically backward, economically as well as politically fragmented, with a golden past and a leaden future” (217). The three West Indian novels this essay discusses were written under these conditions, about these conditions.

Following Tobias Döring’s work on “sugar-cane poetics,” I call the literary strategies discussed below “rum poetics.” In *Caribbean-English Passages* (2002), Döring elaborates a sugar-cane poetics from readings of eighteenth-century texts in which writers try to “domesticate” the Caribbean landscape with Eurocentric literary conventions of the georgic (55). These literary efforts to signify sugar cane into submission implicate geographically distant sites and subjects in the plantation as a “contested contact zone” (Döring 53). Similarly, rum is a moving point of contact linking the Atlantic world: Rum punch, for example, is as avidly consumed in Dickens’s novels as it is in early Caribbean travel writing. However, rum might be seen as an avatar for postcoloniality because rum is produced from the by-products of sugar-making. Wayne Curtis calls rum “the distilled essence of fermented industrial waste” (24; see also Smith), and while the postcolonial world is hardly “waste,” a sense of belatedness and remainders persists in the notion of “post,” even as the term is used to mark “beyond.” In rum poetics, colonization remains a material and psychological fact of all modern existence. As an intoxicant that is also historically a product of colonization, rum symbolizes the insistence with which this fact manifests itself, often against conscious desire or self-interest.

The logic of rum poetics can be illustrated through the implicit relationship between the two main definitions of *rum*. As a noun, *rum* means “a spirit distilled from various products of the sugar-cane (especially molasses and dunder), and prepared chiefly in the West Indies and Guyana”; as an adjective, it means “odd, strange, queer. Also, bad,

spurious.”⁵ The bland scientific description of rum as fermented sugar cane, together with the geographical reference, both marks and masks rum’s historical association with Caribbean slavery. The definition implies, with some truth, that rum is now just a commodity that circulates from its initial sites of production as part of a global economy. Although the locations of production may conjure memories of slave labour, these are distant connections, which are no longer relevant to producers or consumers. Even though the two meanings of *rum* are unrelated etymologically, the adjectival meaning of *rum* introduces the “odd” and the “strange” into the noun. The two meanings converge, suggesting that severing the “post” colonial commodity from its history is an act of representational legerdemain we might do well to examine, especially when dehistoricization encourages us to forget that disparate populations share the effects of prolonged, unequal economic exchange. Emphasizing this connection makes rum rum: the commodity emerges from the scenery to become a site of interpretation and contest.⁶

Rum poetics allows us to reinterpret the West Indian scene so that individual failures read as systemic problems, thus redistributing responsibility for the apparently self-destructive behavior of the new nations. Each novel places rum, a “cultural symbol” of the Caribbean (Smith 246), in scenes where male West Indian characters (mis)understand their experiences as connected to a long history of colonization in the Caribbean.⁷ Walter Castle, protagonist of Lovelace’s *While Gods Are Falling*, uses rum to analyze political conditions in Trinidad. In Wynter’s *The Hills of Hebron*, Dr. O’Malley, superintendent of a Jamaican asylum, and protagonist Moses Barton negotiate masculinity and race over tea-cups of rum. Late in Lamming’s *Water with Berries*, the actor Derek rapes a white female cast member on stage after drinking a “souvenir size” bottle of rum (237). In all three cases, excessive drinking has typical results, independent of the particular alcoholic consumed: a loss of self-control that exposes the drinker, endangers the safety of others, and frays the social fabric. Initially, these events show individual failure or weakness, but reinterpreting these moments through rum poetics marks them as an effect of extant and historical conditions governed by colonialism.

Lovelace's novel is the only one of the three to play deliberately with the two meanings of *rum* in order to create a political critique. Chapters alternate between Walter Castle in the present, where he has again been passed over for promotion in his low-level white-collar job, and his memories of the path that led him to his present career, spouse, and location. At the crux of his memories is rum, or rather a linguistic slip between the noun and the adjective which grounds a political analysis offered by a wise peasant, Mr. Reggie:

“This Party card can be rum,” Mr. Reggie said. “A strong drink to stimulate you to action. But you can become so drunk on it that you could believe that you could whip the world. But when the effect wears off . . . There is that time when the effect of the liquor wears off. You have to guard against that time, Soscie.”

“It's Mack,” Soscie said.

“Too many Macks,” Mr. Reggie said. “Too many Macks expecting something for nothing, expecting to have things the easy way. Too many Macks taking this Party card as something to wear in their button-hole.” (119)

Mr. Reggie strategically elides the adjective *rum* and the noun *rum*. Grammatically, the first sentence of the passage calls for the adjective: “rum” describes the Party Card. Instead of representing rectitude and truth, the Party Card is strange, possibly hiding something bad and spurious, and this word choice reflects Mr. Reggie's assessment of the sardonically named Party of National Importance. However, Mr. Reggie continues by revising the referent for *rum*; it is not the adjective but the noun, “a strong drink to stimulate you to action,” to which he refers. By invoking the noun form of *rum*, Mr. Reggie transforms the party's rhetoric into an attempt to intoxicate, not liberate, the men. Under the influence, he claims, men are fooled into actions that replicate their subjection as colonized subjects. For example, Mack believes the Party Card entitles him to economic advantage over those who are not Party members; a government official foils him by applying the same principle. For Mr. Reggie, Mack is a prototypically deluded postcolonial subject, not

an individual aberration: “Too many Macks,” he remarks. Soscie cannot see this point; his reaction, “It’s Mack,” indicates that he sees Mack in isolation rather than as part of a larger pattern.

Although Mr. Reggie does not directly attribute the “Mack” problem to the survival of “Western” values in the postcolonial state, his use of *rum* invites a dispersal of signification beyond local conditions. The fact that rum is there, available as a pungent metaphor for political dysfunction, results from colonization in the Caribbean Basin. Intoxication by rum figures the colonization of minds, as Ngugi Wa Thiong’o has famously put it, which extends beyond colonialism’s official endpoint and perpetuates neocolonial economic and cultural conditions. “Party Card” holders, Mr. Reggie implies, believe they can eradicate colonialism without thinking through its definitions of successful states and people. Rum, “a strong drink,” may promise “rights and privileges” long denied under colonial government (106), but Mr. Reggie warns that the effect will “wear off” (119) because these concepts have not been rethought in terms of Trinidad’s particular conditions.

Mr. Reggie implies that “the effect of the liquor” of racist Western values is inevitably, historically, there: it cannot be undone “the easy way” by declaring the end of colonial power. Suspiciously, the Party of National Importance claims the opposite: “Gone is our colonial past” (106). The Party’s image for the nation of Trinidad is the bow and arrow, a deliberate attempt to return to pre-colonial origins: “The bow and arrow was used by our Carib ancestors. . . . by our African and Indian ancestors on the mother continents. . . . Today, we use the bow and arrow as our symbol to slay colonialism and ignorance, to slay immorality in public affairs and narrow-mindedness” (107). The emphasis on “ancestors” and “the mother continents” ironically displays the impossibility of a unifying return to pre-colonial conditions. The Caribs were practically exterminated, and African and Indian people arrived in Trinidad as part of the colonial labor force. Published just after Trinidad and Tobago were granted independence from Britain in 1962, *While Gods Are Falling* dismisses this rhetoric as a dangerous idealism that merely reverses the terms applied by colonizing Europeans.

The novel advocates a movement beyond a nostalgic desire for a pre-colonial past as the basis for a nation. In this, it fictionalizes the ideas Frantz Fanon puts forth in “On National Culture.” Assertions of pre-colonial purity, Fanon writes, “rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture” (170) because they reverse the colonizer’s assertion that a barbaric native culture requires their enlightened intervention. But in the opening of the essay, Fanon suggests that this reversal erases important knowledge:

We must rid ourselves of the habit, now that we are in the thick of the fight, of minimizing the action of our fathers or of feigning incomprehension when considering their silence and passivity. They fought as well as they could, with the arms that they possessed then; and if the echoes of their struggles have not resounded in the international arena, we must realize that the reason for this silence lies less in their lack of heroism than in the fundamentally different international situation of our time. (167)

Fanon calls for a reinterpretation of the recent colonial past as a resource for nation-building. “Silence and passivity” may be deemed “heroism” under the particular historical conditions faced by “our fathers.”⁸

Walter Castle combines Fanon and Mr. Reggie’s ideas by thinking through rum to create a resisting West Indian consumer. He begins, as Mr. Reggie does, with desire: “The root of our problems” as human beings, Walter claims, is that “We want” (101). But Walter wonders whether his wants—currently materialized as the desire to be promoted—are in his own best interests, or whether his desire for upward mobility, respectability, and wealth actually derives from inherited colonial values. To illustrate his argument, he describes the peasants in his rural hometown of Nuggle:

“You know, I wonder what’s really important in this life.”

“Living,” the woman [Walter’s wife Stephanie] says.

“Yes, and what is living? The people at Nuggle work hard all week and when they get paid on Saturdays, they go to the rum

shop, or go and gamble under the old house by Mack. They don't seem to think about doing anything else. And when it's Christmas they want to have their houses stocked with rum, and they want rum for Carnival . . . There is something in that. There must be some significance in that." (102 ellipses original)

Castle seeks revelation from his peasant origins, replicating the strategies used to create a "native" West Indian politics and art.⁹ He refuses to read this scene as confirmation of racial stereotypes; instead, he sees "significance" in "work[ing] hard" and then choosing to drink rum and to gamble during leisure time. According to Walter, the rum-drinking people of Nuggle are consciously resisting a middle-class model of appropriate consumption. Walter uses his reading to counter what his wife Stephanie calls "the world as it is" (103). In her terms, "living" is defined by "money," "improving," and "success" (102–3).¹⁰ She thinks Walter has a case of sour grapes: "because you didn't get the promotion, you're trying to say that position is not important? From one extreme, you want to move to another?" (104). Yet that vague "something" in the passage above forces the debate beyond Stephanie's (mis)reading of Walter's argument as a naïve celebration of country living. It opens a rum space, an "odd, strange" space in which the exploitative labor practices historically associated with rum may be reimagined as grass-roots economic resistance. The word *something* may signify that Castle has not fully articulated his ideas, but it also requires that rum's meaning be interpreted rather than presumed. Rum may signify alternate uses of the legacy of colonialism as well as the process by which alternate readings disappear in favor of those that continue the social, economic, and political disadvantage of Trinidadians. Although there is an element of desperation in Castle's interpretation of drunkenness as critique, his compassion for efforts to "[fight] as well as they could, with the arms that they possessed then" (Fanon 167) exposes material conditions that ground a punishing discourse of racism.

In Lamming's novel rum poetics demonstrates how easily the analytical space Walter Castle opened may be co-opted when individu-

al actions are dissociated from broader socioeconomic conditions. As I have already noted, rum appears briefly in *Water with Berries* when Derek, rapes a female cast member on stage in front of an audience after drinking rum. Since the novel revises Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to wreak Caliban's vengeance in contemporary England,¹¹ the rape echoes Caliban's attempted assault on Miranda as revenge upon the colonizer Prospero (*The Tempest*, I.2.345–47). However, the detailed descriptions of Derek's confrontation with and interpretation of the rum bottle expose the consequences of one-dimensional analyses of the long-term effects of colonialism. Derek recognizes rum as a source of his dehumanization and emasculation as a colonized black subject, but he sees masculinity as an independent variable instead of part of a larger system of oppression figured by rum. Thus, his assertion of black masculinity leads to a recapitulation of the stereotypes of hyper-masculine, bestial black male identity rather than transformation.

The course of Derek's acting career mirrors the larger forces of discrimination that West Indian immigrants faced in the 1960s. Despite early success as the Moor in *Othello*, Derek has since been offered only poor roles; his current part, a corpse, is no exception. Moreover, his status as corpse is the ground upon which white actors build a successful theatrical "world." The discovery of the corpse by the ingénue occasions the action, and thus Derek's death gives the play life. This role exemplifies Derek's general condition in England, where nothing changes "except the timing of the body's fall from the bench" (237). Even in his role as a corpse, though, he must manage the signification of his black body, especially in the presence of "the girl" (237) who plays the ingénue. As Derek replays in memory a discussion with the director, he sketches a scene about the management of black masculinity as simultaneously dangerous and powerless. In the scene, Derek speaks first, confirming his position on the stage, and then the director considers permitting realism by allowing Derek to have his "eyes open" as would be normal for a corpse. Derek recalls, "my back is to the audience before the fall. Eyes open if you like. Better keep them closed for the girl's sake. It's the girl's début. She's just fresh from drama school. Eyes closed" (237). After the first two sentences, the free indirect style of narration frustrates definite

assignment of lines to speakers. Who has suggested that having his “eyes open” is too confrontational for a young white girl “fresh from drama school”? Is the final admonition a command from the director, or an acquiescent repetition from Derek? Either way, this recollection demonstrates both white English racism and the role white femininity plays as a rationale for racism.

This memory confirms the prejudice of the theatrical, and the broader, community against West Indians. In this context, rum’s function as an intoxicant multiplies to show the range of Derek’s oppression. While waiting for his call, Derek is obsessed with getting a drink to calm himself so he can play his part properly: “A thimble of liquor might have cooled his nerves” (235). He does not here specify a type of alcohol: he seeks an item he can use with predictable results. Rum is a drug that allows Derek to acquiesce to the racial *status quo* in England. “The little phial of rum” (235) Derek finds might be seen as an ironic continuation of a history of enslavement: a product the slaves make which planters then use to control them and to signify white dominance.¹² However, the description of the rum bottle, focalized through Derek’s consciousness, politicizes the reading:

It was the little bottle all right. . . . He took it up and gave it a look of applause. It was souvenir size, almost the shape of his thumb. He glanced at the little ditch of space that opened round his trouser leg; then looked at the miniature bottle again. It might have been a toy ship that had got sunk. It was a generous double in any pub; but he didn’t want to drink it now. It seemed a pity not to let it last. Souvenir size. Growing up from his hand like a swollen thumb. He was smiling. (237)

Rum cues memory, *souvenir* in French, encouraging a review of Derek’s history. The repeated reference to the thumb, one anthropological measure of man, evokes Derek’s dehumanized status as a West Indian man in England, in addition to suggesting a deformed humanity and crudely referencing stereotypes of black hypermasculinity. Instead of meeting the promise of “discovery” and “magic” (238), England has instead diminished Derek’s sense of self. Similarly, the comparison of the bottle

to a “toy ship” that has “got sunk” diminishes as it reverses allusions both to the voyages of English adventurers and the Middle Passage. The ship image also miniaturizes the classic ship-of-state metaphor to reflect Derek’s personal situation in the larger systems of colonization and immigration that have structured his experience in England.

Despite the multiple significations the rum bottle offers, Derek focuses on his personal experience of emasculation. He invests in a stable notion of masculinity without seeing its relationship to a colonial past and a postcolonial present. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon states, “for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white” (10). Fanon’s claim makes sense when we grant his assertion that putatively color-blind notions of the human, the manly, the civilized, and the modern are inherently white; thus, as he claims, “the black is not a man” under the conditions of colonialism (8). The narrative figures Derek’s sense of self as fully contingent on colonization—Derek sees his childhood “swimming through the neck of the bottle” (238)—but Derek ultimately limits his reading to its effects on his natural rights as a man. Further, the images of swollen thumbs and toy-sized ships suggest the distorted perspective colonization creates. Derek, however, oversimplifies his reading.

In Mr. Reggie’s terms, Derek has taken “a strong drink” that makes him feel he “could whip the world.” And like Mack from *When Gods are Falling*, the limitations of his interpretation open him to reinscription by the very system he seeks to escape. Derek’s actions on ingesting the rum—the rape—assert his manhood in the most stereotypical, circumscribed way, for rum catapults Derek to another extreme of racist stereotype.¹³ The corpse comes to life and, from the perspective of the audience, enacts a racist fantasy in which all black men ultimately desire sexual intercourse with young white women. Even if, as Supriya Nair and others explain, the rape is meant as “an exorcism of colonial usurpation,” “the black man as rapist is hardly a radical breakthrough against . . . stereotyping” (67). The failure to respect rum dooms Derek to repeat Caliban’s assault on Miranda:

And it seemed to go on forever, as though there would be no end; as though there could be no end to this unholy wrath

which had erected the corpse from its bench. . . . Some hurricane had torn her pants away, as the body struggled to split open her sex. And the audience saw it, almost watched it, as though the girl's scream had manacled every witness to his seat, made impotent by their lack of warning before so uniquely brutal an assault. (241–42)

The notion of “forever” connects this rape to a cycle of violence, a post-colonial *agon* that repeats the struggle between colonizer and colonized. Images of a revived corpse or zombie, a hurricane, and manacles intensify the sense of guilt, danger, and violence built into England's relationship with the West Indies. Thus, Derek retrieves here not his rightful manhood but “the privilege of the beast” (242). The audience, now shown as being “manacled” to the same history as Derek, obediently raises from the cultural unconscious the notion of “some dragon of legend” (242) that must be expelled to save the nation. This allusion links St. George, an avatar for stalwart Englishness, to contemporary anti-immigration discourse typified by Enoch Powell's 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech.¹⁴ The audience's collective thought is “some monstrous shadow was spreading through the land” (242), which mythologizes the conflict rather than analyzing the historical and economic conditions that might occasion such violence. Thinking through rum's role in this scene reveals the intoxication of colonized minds, whether they have been literally drinking or not. Although Derek initially produces a critical reading of the “meaning” of rum, he fails to comprehend that the idea of assault as “a logical event in this process of ‘disalienation’” (Silva 173) is a legacy of colonialism. Moreover, the audience demonstrates its dutiful consumption of racist nationalism.

A similar scene of inevitable, mutual misreading occurs under the influence of rum in Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron*. In this novel, scenes in a lunatic asylum, in which Dr. O'Malley consumes rum while discoursing on the evils of colonialism, intervene between the first and second attempts of the protagonist, a preacher named Moses Barton, to establish God's kingdom in Jamaica. Barton becomes the favorite patient of Dr. O'Malley, and he learns a great deal about colonialism from O'Malley's

rants against the British. Under the influence of rum, however, each man's vision of social justice flounders on internalized stereotypes that work to maintain white British superiority.

The two men find themselves at the asylum because each has aspired beyond his subject position as "colonized"; each is thus seen as both dangerous and incompetent. O'Malley is an Irish version of V. S. Naipaul's mimic man, "the second son of a landed family," educated at Cambridge, and expected to have "a brilliant career" despite his Irishness (141). O'Malley's alcoholism results, according to the narrator's explanation, from his marriage to "an English girl from the minor aristocracy . . . his love-hate relationship with her and all that she stood for, and her sterling qualities of patience, consideration and self-discipline which aggravated his own lack of character, drove him to drink" (142). As in Lamming's novel, a white woman figures desired and resented whiteness for the colonized man. Although the narrative states that O'Malley's hatred of his wife arises from "all that she stood for," this insight is not consciously available to O'Malley. He appears within the text as a stereotypical Irish drunk whose political analysis turns out to be blarney, a mask for petty self-interest and revenge. He becomes more "fluent" and "passionate" as he drinks (142), and his plan to write "a manifesto against colonialism" degenerates into *ad feminam* invective: "he wouldn't be a drunk for the rest of his life, as his wife expected, as she wanted him to be, the bitch" (146). Although his characterization of British colonialism has rational and reasonable elements, they are undermined by O'Malley's apparently personal reasons for taking an anti-colonial position.

Rum further undermines O'Malley's materialist analysis of colonialism by demonstrating his inattention to material conditions. O'Malley drinks in colonialism's products as if their production and his consumption had no bearing on his situation. Rum or being drunk on rum is mentioned 10 times in as many pages, with a growing insistence that the beverage itself shapes O'Malley's discourse. First, the narrative emphasizes a specific type of rum: "The doctor was drinking white rum that morning" (144); "The doctor . . . sipped his white rum thoughtfully" (144); and "White rum always heightened O'Malley's feelings of perse-

cution" (144–145). Historically, white rum was more expensive to produce and, as a purer spirit, was consumed by wealthy whites. Drinking "white" rum confirms O'Malley's position as white and English-identified, part of the Jamaican settler elite, but it also exposes his difference from the "real" whites as well. Alienated and emasculated, he rages against "the island's white minority . . . educated black and brown 'natives'. . . all things Irish . . . the English" (145) while under the influence. The routine consumption of rum fuels O'Malley's anti-colonial ravings. As he speaks, the narrative notes, "He poured himself some more rum" (146), and later in his analysis, "He gently stirred the rum with a teaspoon" (147). He needs the rum to keep going: "The doctor stood up, crossed the room and took out another bottle of rum from the wall safe" (148). Although the doctor perceives rum simply as the cheapest and most available form of alcohol, the narrative suggests that an item ripe for the kind of materialist critique O'Malley favors sits right in front of him.

Like O'Malley, Moses Barton has an ambivalent relationship with white male power; he seeks to usurp colonial authority by establishing a separatist religious group isolated from colonial administrative control. Barton's apocalyptic visions of a world renewed are deemed "lunacy" (131) after he attempts to fly to heaven, promising to "return with a fleet of golden chariots driven by white angels, dressed in tunics with gold buttons" (127). On the one hand, the court commits Moses Barton because his attempt to remake the world alarms the authorities. On the other, the court's judgment may be unintentionally accurate since Barton's visions show that he has internalized a Christianity designed to maintain white dominance. His apocalypse still relies on "white angels" to save the black faithful. Further, their outfits are quasi-military "tunics with gold buttons," alluding at once to the authoritarian roots of the vision and to the dream of relief from economic deprivation ("gold buttons").

While Barton refuses to drink rum with O'Malley, he metaphorically drinks from the same cup because he believes a simple refusal of colonial conditions is possible. Barton's plan to create God's kingdom in the Cockpit country of Jamaica strongly resembles colonial administrative practice:

The doctor was drinking white rum that morning. For the sake of protocol he drank out of a teacup. The Prophet sat in a canvas chair opposite him. Moses did not drink. He invariably refused the doctor's offer of a "cup of tea." He wanted to keep alert, to learn all he could from this white man whose mind seemed to encompass the world. Moses was always astonished at the number of words the doctor had stored away inside his head. With half those words, the Prophet thought, he could hypnotize the whole island into doing his bidding. So, while the doctor talked, Moses noted words that seemed weighty and valuable, and later, in bed, repeated them over and over to himself. (144)

In refusing the tea/rum, Barton disavows both the official "protocol" of white superiority and the special terms offered by O'Malley. The two men meet over "tea," a pre-eminent symbol of British civility and routine, and the hierarchies of authority and race—doctor/patient, white/black—nominally persist. The substitution of tea for rum, however, signals that O'Malley is not fully invested in the system; for a price—Barton's acquiescence to his shell game of signifiers—O'Malley will relax conventional racial discrimination. Barton, only nominally consenting to this arrangement, sober and "alert," believes he is fully in control. If he acts like a subservient black man, he does so for his own reasons. Further, he is the recipient of privileged information, "secrets about the 'white man'" (145), that Barton believes O'Malley never intended to divulge.

Barton sees O'Malley as his dupe, but he is as duped as the doctor. Barton willingly consumes the doctor's rum-soaked information because it confirms his desires; he feels "only exultation that the 'white man' was not as superhuman as he made himself out to be, was not as invincible as he, Moses, had been made to believe" (145). He transforms O'Malley's lectures on "their common condition" as "colonials" (143) into ammunition for a new religious venture, confirming that his "spiritual shackles" are as intact as O'Malley's. Barton never considers the possibility that O'Malley's diagnosis of his condition as "paranoia" induced by British colonization (142) may be partially accurate: Why

believe a drunk, racist Irishman? Barton does not see his desire to “hypnotize” (142) the island with words as, at least in part, symptomatic of a desire to replicate colonial hierarchies with himself at the head. When O’Malley connects “this God of theirs [the British]” to the political situation in Jamaica, Barton only hears one thing: “the concept of man creating God in his own image” (148) as a tool by which to manipulate the faithful. Although Barton reshapes political analysis into religious revelation, sublimating his will to power into the call of God, he plans to use this English “lie” to forward his vision. The practical roots of his desires are visible in the comical juxtaposition of the worldly and the spiritual. He learns about colonial administration; he will use this information to assure that his own project can proceed undisturbed. To wit, “the Lord had shown to Moses a way in which he could obtain from the government the legal right to the land which he would call Hebron” (153). By translating practical knowledge of colonial institutions into divine providence, Barton avoids understanding his implication in these systems and fools himself into believing that Hebron’s social order is “post”colonial. Barton suppresses any reasonable connection O’Malley makes between his religious obsession and socioeconomic conditions in Jamaica, just as O’Malley is unable to see his investment in whiteness. Like those swayed by Party rhetoric in Lovelace’s novel, O’Malley and Barton share “spiritual shackles” united in the figure of rum as intoxicant and commodity.

Without considering rum poetics, O’Malley and Barton appear to have individual problems: O’Malley is a drunk, and Barton’s later crucifixion appears the result of megalomania. If, instead, rum signifies a cultural and economic system, colonialism, ingrained in the psyches of the two characters, their efforts to change Jamaica (and Ireland) are derailed by their desire to usurp rather than to exceed the position of the colonizer. This legacy frustrates the good in O’Malley’s attempt to connect with Barton and in Barton’s desire for an autonomous black community, leaving an uncomfortable sense that some potential for social justice and cross-cultural understanding has been spirited away.

At the ends of all three novels, the lesson of rum poetics seems to be incorporated into tentative steps toward a future that cannot presume to

forget the past. Lamming's *Water with Berries* is, perhaps, the least hopeful: after Derek commits rape and Teeton commits murder, "they were all waiting for the trials to begin" (249), foreshadowing a long argument about the implications of past actions. In *The Hills of Hebron*, Barton's widow Miss Gatha cradles her grandchild, the product of a rape her son committed. The arrival of the child corresponds with the arrival of rain to drought-ridden Hebron. Miss Gatha sees that the baby is "perfect," but she wonders to her companion Kate whether "The sins of the fathers, then, had not been visited on the children?" (315). The interrogatory punctuation challenges the declarative syntax, thus leaving "the fabric of her forebodings" (315) intact even as tears mark her apparent belief that this child—never definitively gendered—signals a different future for Hebron. Walter Castle, of Lovelace's *While Gods Are Falling*, has, however, transformed his rum poetics into "something" of significance. As the novel closes, Castle and his wife are walking to a community "meeting" that extends Castle's earlier success mobilizing his block to get a young man released from jail (253). Although the characters are only shown approaching the meeting, the narrator does endorse their belief that it is a "fine night" for a meeting (253, 255). The prose also drops into second-person narration for the final section the novel, inviting "you" as readers to consider what role to play.

To conclude with a reference to "you" as the reader is, perhaps, apropos to the question posed at the beginning of the essay: What would it mean to insist on broader rather than incidental significance for rum's presence? What are the politics of making, or of having the ability to make, a choice? For these novels do address the long-term economic and social effects of colonialism without reference to rum. Both Lovelace and Wynter describe the grinding poverty of people in Trinidad and Jamaica; Lamming insists on that discrimination affects the careers of both Derek and Teeton. Thematically, the role of neocolonialism is obvious. Rum poetics suggests that conscious recognition of neocolonial socioeconomic conditions is insufficient because colonial ideologies have been internalized as notions of the self and the world. In these novels, male characters who fail to inflect the Western notion of "man" with the particular economic conditions in the West Indies also fail to

create social change. Such an insight is crucial for novels that address broader concerns of self-government in the West Indies through an assessment of West Indian men as viable leaders. Walter Castle seeks an alternative way to contribute to Trinidad's future when typical institutional structures fail him. In Lamming's novel, the West Indian characters living in England are planning a coup in San Cristobal, Lamming's invented Caribbean island. Moses Barton creates a separatist black society in Jamaica's hill country. In Castle's case, focusing on rum as part of a system leads him to invest in group action and to resist the role of leader as it is traditionally defined. By contrast, glossing over the systems figured by rum endangers Barton's and Teeton's/Derek's projects.

The implications of these (mis)readings reverberate outward as well. Rum poetics inhibits the individualization or localization of these characters by providing a point of contact unrestricted by geography. Products like rum have circulated and continue to circulate globally using systems that benefit Anglo-European nations and hurt postcolonies. The broad mobility of commodities like rum distributes and fragments distinctions between "here" and "there," "us" and "them." Rum poetics enables a broader, "sociodiagnostic" (Fanon 11) reading of the postcolonial human condition, a reading that recognizes that colonization operates globally, connecting geographically dispersed people through unconscious as well as conscious structures.

Rum's aesthetic potency derives from its status as an intoxicant originally produced by slave labor on plantations, a commodity that connects past and present external conditions (history, economics) to internal ones (the mind, consciousness). For all that, rum poetics remains a rum business. After all, choosing to see the "odd" or "strange" latent in the everyday appearance of rum does not overturn the easier, realistic gloss: rum is just there because novels are set in or associated with the West Indies. Rather, these readings tense this gloss up by suggesting another turn to the screw. This material turn intimates that socioeconomic position shapes behavior and perception more than even conscious reckoning allows.¹⁵ Rum poetics inserts transnational relationships into individual consumption, potentially weighting isolated local decisions with ethical significance. Rum poetics asks, then, how we

can do without critical analyses that attend to the historical particularity of commodities in the postcolonial world.

Notes

- 1 Rum's role as a barter item in the triangular trade is well known, but rum also figured internally in the economics of Caribbean plantations. Planters used rum to supplement the slave diet, to "ease the transition into Caribbean slavery," and to fortify slaves for dangerous tasks (Smith 103–4). After emancipation, planters often paid workers partially in rum (see Smith 175–76).
- 2 For a brief account of sugar and rum boycotts during the abolition debates, see "Sick with Excess of Sweetness."
- 3 Mintz opened sugar to cultural studies with his now-classic study *Sweetness and Power*. Recent scholarship includes Kutzinski, Sandiford, and Morton, in addition to numerous articles treating specific texts. For classic historical studies that mention rum as a subset of the sugar industry, see Sheridan and Dunn.
- 4 It is possible that texts of this period represent the apotheosis of rum poetics; later texts invoke it shorthand, as a fact of life requiring no explanation or judgment. For example, Lucy, of Kincaid's novel *Lucy*, thinks, "And I thought of all the people in the world I had known who went insane and died, and who drank too much rum and then died, and who were paupers and died, and I wondered if there were any artists among them. Who would have known?" (98). Here, *rum* is part of a chain of signification marking Antiguan subjects as disadvantaged; combined with insanity and poverty, rum limits human potential and marks the limitations of being from Antigua ("Who would have known?"). Likewise, Cliff, in *No Telephone to Heaven*, lists rum among many opiates Jamaicans use to cope with the hopelessness of their position: "Rum. Ganja. Mento. Ska. Reggae. Prayer. Singing. Jumping. Hymns. Full-immersion baptism. Nine Night" (17). However, Cliff's novel also demonstrates the continued vitality of rum poetics for internal and external social critique. Transvestite Jamaican Harry/Harriet laments that he is more welcome in the Caribbean "stage set" of a tourist bar than at "a rumshop in Matilda's corner" (121), thus underlining the exclusionary role gender plays in shaping Caribbean communal understanding of masculinity.
- 5 The *OED Online*, from which these definitions are taken, lists a number of other definitions of rum, including usage as a verb, but these are all obsolete.
- 6 Rum poetics also points to the operation of what Benítez-Rojo calls the "Caribbean machine" (8), or Plantation, in what otherwise appear to be individual encounters. Benítez-Rojo "insist[s] that Europeans finally controlled the construction, maintenance, technology, and proliferation of the plantation machines, especially those that produced sugar" (9), but that this machine now sustains itself. Thus, although the 1950s and 1960s are far removed from the original conditions of the plantation, its operations continue "unfolding and

bifurcating until it reaches all the seas and lands of the earth, while at the same time it inspires multidisciplinary maps of unexpected designs” (Benítez-Rojo 3). Rum poetics can alert us to the “unexpected designs” this machine makes in the postcolonial world.

- 7 This essay emphasizes masculinity as a site of contest and alludes generally to the damaging effects this ideology has on women. I have considered the insights rum poetics offers into postcolonial female subjectivity in another essay. For an exceptional exploration of gender and commodity chain analysis, see Ramamurthy.
- 8 Fanon’s remarks extend the assertion he makes in “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” in which assertions of a pre-colonial culture eventually retard national progress because they encourage neocolonial institutional forms (129).
- 9 Cudjoe develops the argument that the “democratic sentiment” of Caribbean literature seeks “to stress the surging activity of the masses from below who are catalytic” (269). Intellectual and political leaders need support from the peasantry to be seen as legitimate. Many political parties in the West Indies, for example, have roots in the trade union movements of the 1930s (see Rogoziński).
- 10 In this dialogue, Stephanie plays the role Mayotte Capécia plays for Fanon in Chapter 2 of *Black Skin*, that of the woman complicit with the values of “white” society against the humanity of the black man.
- 11 The title is a quotation from *The Tempest*, I.ii.334. The main plot concerns the efforts of a West Indian artist, Teeton, to free himself from the patronage of the Old Dowager, the widow of a Prospero-figure. For an assessment of the role of *The Tempest* in early postcolonial writing, see Nixon.
- 12 See Smith 157–67. Smith reports that planters distributed rum at significant celebrations and rituals, mirroring customary practice in African societies and thus signaling the planter as chief.
- 13 Lamming reflects on these stereotypes of Caribbean “manhood” in other works as well. As the Jamaican in *The Emigrants* reports, “the only thing that West Indians in de R. A. F. din’t want to prove, de only thing him feel no need to prove is his capability wid a bottle or a blonde” (64–65). The verbs *want* and *need* reverberate with stereotypes of black male sexuality: they did not “need” to prove their “capability” because that was assumed; they did not “want” to because their actions would confirm stereotype and possibly endanger their lives.
- 14 In his introduction to *Out of Place*, Ian Baucom summarizes the debates surrounding the definition of “British” and “English” citizenship as immigration from former colonies to England increased after World War II.
- 15 Vernon speaks of a “material turn” to food as “a site of disciplinary convergence” in recent scholarly work in history and literature because food histories might lead scholars to link “objects of consumption” with “histories of subjectivity,” thus moving toward a new discussion of ethical subjects and the political economy of food.

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