

# A Study in Africana Existential Ontology: Rum as a Metaphor of Existence

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One would not normally think of ‘rum’, ‘ontology’ and ‘metaphor’ as capable of being linked in any plausible philosophical sense. Consequently, any effort to put them in any kind of analytical relationship would seem at best the manifestation of a blatant category mistake. It is my hope that the following essay will undermine the apparent theoretical and analytical implausibility that would seem to block any possible relationship among ‘rum’, ‘ontology’, and ‘metaphor.’ There is one preliminary task that must be pursued at this time. We must briefly focus on ontology in order to tame impressions of ontology as esoteric.

We can start with the following preliminary understanding of ontology: an ontology is the collection of entities a philosophy is committed to assert as actually existing, the entities that the philosophy must declare to inhabit reality, if the claims of the philosophy are to be true. Despite the diversity of views that have historically proliferated the philosophical landscape, we can nevertheless isolate at least three paradigms of ontology. The first paradigm is realism. According to realists, reality exists totally independently of the human mind, and possesses a structure determinately independent of linguistic practices and conceptual schemes. A second paradigm in ontology is idealism, the view that reality is mind dependent, for reality lacks existence independently of the human mind that perceives it; reality claims no definitive or autonomous existence independently of being mediated through structures of consciousness, linguistic practices or cultural conventions. Finally, a third position, constructionism, declares that the objects of everyday experience (chairs, tables, cars, trees, etc.) have a mind independent existence. However, constructivism does not recognize all entities as having an independent existence. For example, constructivists would not consider theoretical entities as mind independent. A constructivist ontological stance, however, acknowledges that certain classes of entities, socio-cultural entities, can be considered real precisely because they are the products of various social, cultural and historical practices, etc.

Most recently there has been extremely creative and intriguing work in ontology in Modern French Philosophy. Gilles Deleuze supports the notion of the univocity of Being which he defines as follows: ‘Being is said in a single and same sense of everything of which it is said, but that of

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which it is said differs: it is said of difference itself' (Deleuze, 1994: 36). In short, Deleuze courageously advocates an expansive conception of ontology, stating that '[p]hilosophy must be ontology, it cannot be anything else; but there is no ontology of essence, there is only an ontology of sense' (Deleuze, 1997: 191). Badiou similarly champions a rather intriguing notion of ontology. He tells us that ontology is mathematics because only mathematics thinks being.

There is also an opposite current in the study of ontology. This counter current with regard to ontology cultivates a strong suspicion of ontology because of the deep conviction that ontology conjures ontological essentialism, the view that there are essences, principles or cultural invariances that are pre-linguistic, meaning pre-conventional, and existing totally independently of human consciousness. Recently, Judith Butler has admirably described her work as dedicated to 'a problematizing suspension of the ontological' (1990: 5). And, in another context, she intimates that along with deconstruction and post-structuralism, her task is to conduct an 'interrogation of the construction and circulation of what counts as an ontological claim' (Butler, 1990: 5) Clearly, Butler's enemy is ontological essentialism, the belief that there are pre-linguistic forms of being that constitute identity such that identity is decisively beyond contestation.

The following essay represents a foray into the study of Africana existential ontology. It examines a general distinction between strong and weak ontologies; second, it focuses on existential ontologies, specifically situating this shift to existential ontologies within the context of the Heideggerian distinction between the ontic and the ontological; and finally, it offers an extended exploration of a representative case of an Africana existential ontology: the Caribbean ritual of rum drinking. The conclusion or, rather, thrust, of the essay is to recommend greater investigation of existential ontologies in order to counter the hegemonic project of globalizing the barren ontology of political liberalism. It should be noted that although there is a tendency to limit ontology to an investigating of the existence of objects, things and structures, etc., this essay's primary goal is to expand upon ontology understood in the existential sense, namely, focusing on ontology as modes of existence, ways of existing, or, rather, a study of how existence is lived and experienced in everyday life.

## I. Strong and weak ontologies

Stephen White has distinguished between strong and weak ontologies. 'Strong [ontologies] are those ontologies that claim to reflect for us "the way the world is", or how God's being stands to human being, or what human nature is. For strong ontologies, the whole question of passages from ontological truths to moral-political ones is relatively clear' (1997: 505). So, strong ontologies are foundational in that they court the idea of there being metaphysically transcendental grounds or universal truths to legislate politics and ethics.

Weak ontologies eschew the attraction of foundationalism and resist any infatuation with the existence of transcendental truths to underwrite politics and ethics. Rather, weak ontologies are interpretive-existential constructs. 'Weak ontologies are ... not rooted in a crystalline conviction of ultimate cognitive truth. Rather, ... they are interpretations of the world. They are contestable pictures with a validity claim that is two dimensional. [Weak] [o]ntologies provide a framework of meaning for basic existential realities such as natality, language, and finitude.... [They] might be characterized as the most basic frames we use both to access *and* construct ourselves and the world' (White, 1997: 506). Clearly, then, weak ontologies are metaphorical or analogical pictures human beings utilize to constitute the conditions of the possibility of self-fashioning and world-construction. Weak ontologies are best characterized as existential ontologies. Hence, the orientation of this essay is consistent with weak ontologies because of its focus on Africana ontology as concerned

with existential structures of human existence. Let us turn now to examine the more recent radical philosophical rethinking of ontology from the perspective of existential phenomenology.

### *Existential phenomenology: difference between the ontic and the ontological*

Heidegger's approach to ontology represents a radical displacing of traditional formal ontology. Indeed, Heidegger deplores the substance metaphysics of traditional Western philosophy, the tendency to think of Being as an entity. He rejects the tendency to think of Being as analogous to philosophical thinking about objects. For him, Being qua Being is not an entity, a substance, or a particular thing; nor is it an aggregate of particulars. Heidegger was equally against scientism, the tendency to describe Being as receptive to instrumental rationality but totally alien to values and meanings. Once again, this tendency imposed the vocabulary of materialism on Being itself. However, Being qua Being, according to Heidegger, claims ontological priority over particular beings; it is the background that facilitates the appearance of beings. This development required a new vocabulary to describe Being, new metaphors to facilitate the disclosure of Being. Heidegger's revolutionary turn calls for an existential phenomenological approach to the study of being. Investigations into being, according to this view, must be concrete, implying that any plausible approach to Being must begin with that being for whom its being is a question, the being who, in other words, asks questions about the meaning of Being; it follows that human beings must be the starting point for inquiry into Being. Accordingly, ontology for Heidegger becomes what he calls fundamental ontology, which roughly means that we can only understand Being through an understanding of human beings or what Heidegger calls *Dasein*. Heidegger maintains that an investigation of the basic existential modes of the being of human beings or human-being-in-the-world prepares 'the way for the problematic of fundamental ontology – the question of the meaning of Being in general' (1962: 227).

With Heidegger we have a revolutionary distinction between the ontic and the ontological. The ontic is restricted to the study of the nature of beings. The ontological, however, pertains to the ways of being or, rather, to the question of Being. The ontological is more closely connected to the existential understanding of being precisely because it is a hermeneutical understanding of the ontological structures of existence. And since we are told that the question of Being is best approached from the concrete standpoint of the human being, ontology becomes the study or interpretation of the plural meanings in which human beings exist, i.e., an inquiry into the problems of human existence.

If ontology in its new existential phenomenological guise studies or interprets human-being-in-the-world, it would seem then that the Heideggerian attempt to develop an analytic of existence would facilitate ontological drift, meaning that instead of pursuing a universal ontology, we can more constructively consider particular ontologies or specific ontologies that would be emergent from different styles of existence. Indeed, Levinas has registered his disapproval of Heidegger's emphasis on ontology. According to Levinas, despite his radical deconstruction of the philosophical tradition, Heidegger ironically is still imprisoned within this tradition to the extent that he privileges ontology over ethics. The Levinasian focus on ethics as first philosophy would seem to qualify as a more radical gesture to the idea of existential ontology by way of working through difference and otherness. It should be noted that Levinas's idea of ethics as first philosophy is his way of counteracting the violence of traditional metaphysics and epistemology. Traditional metaphysics privileges Sameness and identity and epistemology seemingly can only think the Other by reducing the Other to the logic and intelligibility of the categories of the Same. Levinas maintains that the Other can only be properly approached as the Other if our point of departure is ethics,

which is a matter of assuming responsibility for the Other. So, the move from formal ontology – hegemony – to fundamental ontology ends in existential ontology and heteronomy, namely, to the acknowledgment of there being different ontological structures of human existence, in other words, plural forms of being.

A more radicalized understanding of ontology is found in the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault, in his essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1984), referred to what he calls ‘the historical ontology of ourselves.’ He indicated that historical ontology would be the kind of study concerned with the ‘truth through which we constitute ourselves as objects of knowledge.’ Historical ontology would also assume the burden of studying power, which, according to Foucault, would be the ‘power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others.’ Finally, historical ontology would also study the ‘ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.’ Clearly it would be the kind of study that is existentially projected precisely because it concerns the various practices through which human beings constitute themselves as objects of knowledge, subjects of power, and moral agents.

This new understanding of ontology in the guise of existential ontology, the study of the plural forms of human existence, certainly conflicts with the project of the coloniality of being. The coloniality of being is the modern project by which the West seeks to promote its particular mode of being, its own parochial form of life, its myopic particularism to the status of universality. This ontological imperialism in the form of the Western colonialization of being unsettles ways of being not immediately supportive of the Western order of consciousness. But a fundamental problem with the project of ontological colonization is the obscuring of existential ontology. For the modern Western project, as exemplified in liberal political theory, has embraced a strong ontology that takes the form of the social application of formal ontology. The end result is an unacknowledged ontological nihilism regarding the ontology of everyday life. Modern political liberalism has extended to us ‘a picture of selves as essentially “possessive individualists” whose essential connection to others is constituted instrumentally in terms of self-interest’ (White, 1997: 508). Society is nothing but an aggregate of self-interested individuals who interact on the social plane of everyday life like material objects caught in the swirl of a mechanical choreography patterned to the rhythm of physical forces. The sacrifice of social particularity in exchange for abstract individualism robs individuals of the rich existential ontological standpoint that would better orient their being in the world. According to communitarian critics of liberalism, the self is not antecedent to the community but, rather, flourishes within the context of a community. The self is not unencumbered in the sense that each individual, in isolation, is free to frame, revise and pursue his or her own conception of the good life. Communitarians deny that the right is prior to the good and, hence, support the view of the self as encumbered; as individuals we become members of communities and it is from within these communities that we inherit traditions, language, culture and a conception of the good life (Mulhall and Swift, 1992). The liberal view of the self invites us to view individuals as creating values and conceptions of the good in the anonymity of public space.

The attempt to ground politics and ethics in transcendental fictions, and not metaphorical and analogical interpretive structures that are more conducive to the flourishing of robust conceptions of selfhood, is a repudiation of existential ontology. Indeed, it is this flight from concrete existence and the complicit notion of formal ontology that Fanon correctly observed as a danger to black existence:

In the [world-view] of a colonized people there is an impurity, a flaw that outlaws any ontological explanation. Someone may object that this is the case with every individual, but such an objection merely conceals a basic problem. Ontology – once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside – does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. (Fanon, 1976: 109–110)

## II. *Africana* existential ontology

*Africana* ontologies are not always appreciated as legitimate modes of existence with universal relevance in the sense of being capable of disclosing insights about human existence. This prejudice has struck many thinkers as an obvious truth, a truth emergent from the presupposition that *Africana* peoples remain imprisoned in an irrational and sensual mode of being and, hence, represent an existential particularity that locates them outside the boundary of philosophical reason. *Africana* peoples do not exemplify the universal nor can they be substituted for the universal; the logic of reason is alien to them. As Henke points out, even Lukács, who was receptive to the idea of ‘special’ or ‘particular’ ontologies, nevertheless privileged a linear developmental model of human existence such that certain forms of existence are considered ontologically deficient. Responding to the linear, progressive view of ontology modeled on a teleological actualization of the highest form of human existence, Henke writes:

The limitation of this view [is] immediately understandable: different ontological forms of human existence only exist as earlier, yet ‘underdeveloped,’ and – most importantly – culturally inferior stages in the historical progress of humanity and continue to survive in the underdeveloped regions of the world. While Lukács’ ontology of societal being concedes the existence of particular ontologies, he unfortunately binds them to ethnocentric notions of cultural inferiority and developmental backwardness. (Henke, 1997: 40)

Far from being backward, African ontologies are pregnant with novel insights that transcend traditional ontological parameters of existence. Indeed, although *Africana* ontologies are examples of particular ontologies, they can play a role in furthering a conception of universality as pluralism, a universality whose validity is dependent on infusion by particularities. It might very well be the case that ‘an authentic particularity has to be the first step towards the achievement of universality’ (Henke, 1997: 41). So, educating universality requires critical engagement with particularity and not the erasure of particularity.

Against the modernist tendency to separate the self from social particularity and house it in the opaqueness of an abstract transcendental universality, I want to make the case that *Africana* ontologies, namely *Africana* existential ontologies, are more inclined to support a poetics of existence. We should understand *Africana* ontologies as inclusive of the various structures of meanings, practices and beliefs that people of African descent utilize to orient their existence. These ontologies are accordingly to be found in the cosmologies, worldviews, and conceptual schemes of people of African descent. On this view of *Africana* ontologies, it is important to note that as existential ontologies, *Africana* ontologies do not present themselves as objectivist ontologies or naturalistic ontologies that seek to classify and catalogue the various kinds of things that constitute the alleged substances of being. Rather, *Africana* ontologies displace the orientation of traditional ontology, namely, the project of ontology grounded in an identity logic, a way of thinking that classifies and assigns things to determinate categories on the basis of objective essences. Furthermore, they are not realist in the sense of seeking to investigate an external physical reality that exists autonomously of human consciousness. They are focused on forms of life, which reveal the basic ways of being in the world or existing as shaped by the unique historical and cultural circumstances of existing individuals. Put differently, it is not a basic assumption of *Africana* ontologies that human beings encounter objects in the world in their crude starkness, but rather that these encounters are always under the conditions shaped by our projects and interests. Consequently, it would be accurate to describe *Africana* ontologies as intersubjective in that what is real is not what exists autonomously of human consciousness but, rather, what becomes real in so far as it interacts with

consciousness. For example, spirits and invisible forces populate the ontologies of certain Africana cultures, but these spirits and forces are conjured into being through the disclosing power of various cultural rituals.

We should also note that the idea of Africana ontologies does not presuppose any essentialist view of African people and cultures sharing universal essences, whether these essences be conceived as biological or cultural. Instead of embracing complacent and disabling views premised on uninspiring essentialism, the thrust of Africana ontologies is to acknowledge a family resemblance among the various elements constituting these ontologies. Africana ontologies are existential ontologies that reveal the coming into being, the claiming of self-consciousness, the affirmation of subjectivity and creative human agency by African peoples. Here, I will discuss rum/rum drinking as an ontology of life. This task is going to be Africana in orientation to the extent that it is grounded in the diasporic context of Afro-Caribbean tradition, one of the three traditions – the other two being the African and the African American traditions – constituting the Africana complex of thought and philosophy. Again, reference to an ontology of life, in this context, refers to the utilization of metaphors to interpret ontological structures of black existence.

### III. Rum as metaphor and as an ontology of life

Before launching into a discussion of the idea of rum as an ontology of life, I want to erect a critical background from which to explore this topic. This task is necessary precisely because insights into Caribbean ontology are to be found in the constellations of actions and activities constitutive of the day-to-day-existence of Caribbean subjects. First, I want to make it absolutely clear that, in focusing on rum in Caribbean culture, I am not reducing philosophy to the mere description of culture. Indeed, I have no interest in cataloguing or documenting ideas, attitudes and beliefs about rum drinking in Caribbean culture. Rather, my concerns are philosophical in the sense of existential philosophy, a philosophy concerned with the dynamics of human existence, for, in so focusing on rum as metaphor, I am concerned to establish that philosophy in the Caribbean context can take the form of a historicity. And I understand historicity, in this context, as meaning critically focusing on the condition/situation of Caribbean existence. This historicist orientation, to the extent that it can reveal insights about human existence – pursuing the universal through the dialectical embrace of the particular – affirms Caribbean culture as its own point of departure. Hence, culture serves as a text from which philosophical insights become transparent in the presence of critical methods of interpretation. So treating Caribbean culture as text is consistent with Paget Henry's contention that Caribbean philosophy is intertextually embedded in the various discursive practices emergent from the Caribbean mode of existence. This conception of philosophy is, in turn, consistent with Tsenay Serequeberhan's contention that 'philosophy is inherently and in its very nature a hermeneutics of the existentiality of human existence' (1994: 117–118).

Existential ontology in the Caribbean is an issue addressed by Holger Henke in his declared goal 'to uncover some of the ontologically relevant intellectual modes of existence and emotional registers in which Caribbean people act' (1997: 39). The immediate challenge in response to the task of investigating modes of Caribbean existence and the focus on rum is that the focus on rum would seemingly legitimize the crude stereotype of the Caribbean as a place fanatically seduced by the infantile exuberance of hedonistic pleasure. This challenge is as easily dismissed as it is raised. The focus on rum is not a derogatory move to think the Caribbean outside the discursive space of legitimate philosophical reflection and analysis. Rather, this focus is, in itself, a significant manifestation of the uniqueness of Caribbean existence. Henke maintains that, with regard to the Caribbean,



The celebrative mode is the only one which – at least temporarily – succeeds to unequivocally establish an all-inclusive, unifying framework in which individual difference does not demarcate limits of possibility, but rather becomes a link facilitating communication and communion on an equal basis and the consequential breakdown of cultural/racial barriers. (Henke, 1997: 45)

Henke adds,

It is therefore the celebrative mode of cultural life in the Caribbean which [...] enables its peoples, delimits the confined spheres of their respective everyday existences, and creates spaces of opportunity, self-realization and authentication. (1997: 46)

I wish to initiate this discussion by introducing the idea that my approach to rum and its relation to Caribbean existence is informed by the perspective of viewing rum as an ‘interpretive horizon’ (Alcoff, 2006: 102). This notion of ‘interpretive horizon,’ which I am borrowing from Linda Alcoff, confers on rum the status of serving as a basis from and through which Caribbean peoples can obtain knowledge about themselves and the socio-cultural world.

The close relation between rum and slavery, and even the current social and psychological cost of the abuse of rum, certainly would seem to qualify rum to be, if anything, in violation of the very thrust of life and survival. However, despite these unfortunate liabilities, we should not be too quick to denounce rum as the demon drink without working through the complex history of rum in the modern world, as well as its complex integration into the existence of Caribbean peoples (Coulombe, 2004; Williams, 2005). Hence, instead of locating the phenomenon of rum within an identity logic and then denouncing discursive efforts to thematize and place rum within cultural space, it would be more productive to appeal to the dialectics of rum and, consequently, refrain from judging its potentially negative effects or consequences as defective. Rather, its contradictions should be seen as providing the opportunity to think outside the restrictive binary opposition of having to judge rum as being either completely good or bad but not as both good and bad.

The idea of rum as metaphor has been undeservingly underdeveloped. It has, however, proven quite resourceful in facilitating the structuring of novel ideas. Alain Locke, in challenging the idea that black Americans constituted a ‘Nation within a Nation,’ used rum as a metaphor to capture the role of blacks within American society. Locke appropriated the rum metaphor to claim that the best way to think of the African presence within American society is to see it as analogous to ‘rum in the punch, that although far from being the bulk ingredient, still dominates the mixture’ (Locke, 1939: 523). So, just as rum dominates the taste of punch despite not being the main ingredient, African Americans, although not the dominate group within American society, either in terms of size or political power, has had a profound effect in shaping diverse aspects of American culture. African American culture is to American society what rum is to punch.

My goal here is not to offer an ethnographic study of rum in the sense of providing a descriptive spectatorial report based upon the transparent observations of the use of rum by Caribbean peoples. Rather, the goal is to provide an existential phenomenological glimpse into the conditions of sociality, as well as the conditions of Caribbean subject formation. For example, to the extent that colonialism and slavery condemned Caribbean subjects to a zone of nonbeing, understanding how Caribbean subjects forged creative subjectivities in the midst of such wretched conditions of existence is of immense philosophical significance. Rum as metaphor can shed considerable light on this phenomenon.

From another perspective, my effort in this essay is to call attention to the broader significance of rum within the existential space of Caribbean society. To this extent, I think that it is highly

appropriate to frame the proceeding discussion in terms of the 'existential ensemble' (von Eckartsberg, 1979) of rum. The phrase 'existential ensemble,' as used by Rolf von Eckartsberg, concerns the fact that individuals are born into families, families are parts of communities, that is, larger collectives of extended family and friends. Finally, communities are parts of collectives, comprising generationally extended relations, which are societies. In referring to the 'existential ensemble' of rum, the idea is to situate rum drinking within the broader context of the various practices, rituals, institutions, and beliefs that constitute the everyday existence of a culture. Rum, hence, is not limited only to one sphere of activity but is existentially connected to the ensemble of activities characteristic of a web of cultural undertakings. Indeed, at the risk of exaggeration, it would seem that due to the infusion of rum in the activities of certain cultures, it is possible and, indeed, appropriate to talk in terms of there being rum cultures, not in the sense of these cultures sharing some identifiable essence but, rather, of there being a family resemblance among these cultures with regard to the ubiquitous status of rum.

Frederick Smith's important text *Caribbean Rum; A Social and Economic History* (Smith 2005) is an interpretative study of rum in that, among other things, he seeks to disclose the meaning and significance of rum in the Caribbean:

This book ... examines the social and sacred uses of rum and identifies the forces that shaped [rum] drinking in the Caribbean. While the enormous amounts of rum available in the Caribbean contributed to a climate of excessive drinking, levels of alcohol consumption varied among different social groups. The different drinking patterns reflect more than simply access to rum.... While nearly everyone in the Caribbean drank, the differing levels of alcohol use by various social groups highlight the ways in which drinking became a means to confront anxiety. (Smith, 2005: xiv)

Smith's project is also ground breaking precisely because it adopts a thorough interdisciplinary perspective that not only builds on his interpretation of rum in the Caribbean, but also provides multiple perspectives from which to appreciate the meaning and significance of rum as a potent social force and cultural symbol. Hence, Smith extends his studies beyond the narrow traditional economic studies of rum:

As an interdisciplinary study of [rum] and drinking in the Caribbean, this book is ... intended for social and economic historians of the Atlantic world, as well as historical anthropologists interested in colonialism, culture contact, the African diaspora, slavery, and plantation life. (Smith, 2005: xiv)

As is to be expected, Smith does not include philosophers in the multiple audiences to whom the book is geared. Here I seek to establish the relevance of philosophy to the history of rum in the Caribbean. The philosophical relevance functions to counter the potential pathologizing of rum as an agent of escapism from daily life in the Caribbean. Indeed, Smith seemingly suggests some close relation between rum and existential flight from daily reality. He maintains that 'rum's social meaning and economic value arose from its ability to provide a temporary respite from the challenges of everyday life in the region' (Smith, 2005: 1). I will discuss this issue in greater detail later.

Another reason why Smith's text is paradigmatic is that it dethrones sugar's dominance in the commodity approach to the study of Caribbean history and society. Indeed, Smith maintains that rum offers more opportunities for studying the social and cultural meaning of commodities. Normally, the study of commodities is limited to economic, political and technological considerations. Smith displaces this theoretical stasis by probing the immateriality of rum, namely, the role of rum in serving as a mediating structure in Caribbean society:



The study of rum offers ... possibilities to discuss political-economic and social trends in the Atlantic world, but provides a special opportunity to explore the meaning of commodities in the societies that produced them. (Smith, 2005: 2)

Smith expands on the resourcefulness of the study of rum in disclosing the dense realities of Caribbean existence. He underscores rum's role in shaping the very identities of Caribbean peoples. Indeed, based upon his description of the infusion of rum drinking in the daily lives of peoples, it would not be an exaggeration to view rum as contributing to the formation of a distinctive Caribbean subjectivity. Smith (2005: 233) writes:

Since the seventeenth century rum has provided multiple social outlets and temporary escape from the worries of Caribbean life. As a result, rum has been elevated to the level of a cultural symbol, and it has helped define the identities of the Caribbean people, as well as overseas Caribbean migrants in Europe and North America.

Again, this focus on rum, or, at least the rum metaphor, debunks the idea that the Caribbean 'is a theatre in which word, deed, religious idealism, belief, morality, custom, the very foundations of humanity itself, rotted under slavery, sugar and the plantation system' (Rohlehr, 1974: 91). The social world emergent from the ritual of rum drinking was made possible partly because of the new life injected into religion, social belief systems, and customs constituting the Caribbean existential space. Before proceeding further, it is important to briefly clarify my understanding of metaphor in the staging of rum as the basis for fashioning an ontology of life.

Metaphor facilitates semantic improvisation precisely because it sustains the organic growth of language and, by extension, thinking; it also accommodates the original framing of things instead of validating complacent dependence upon static linguistic structures that can unnecessarily constrain thinking. Furthermore, metaphor accommodates the original theoretical or analogical framing of a subject, it enables us to integrate a subject within our reigning conceptual system, and, finally, metaphor provides a way of viewing relations between two different domains, meaning that metaphor sustains cognitive traveling between various domains of cognition. Kenneth Burke calls attention to this dominant use of metaphor. He maintains that '[I]anguage develops by metaphorical extension, in borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible' (Burke, 1969: 506).

### *Rum and Caribbean historiography*

The rum trope is not necessarily another positivistic concept claiming to name the fundamental empirical reality of Caribbean society, nor is it motivated by a conventional positivistic historical sensibility that seeks to determinately describe a wretched Caribbean reality.

My contention is that focusing on rum provides an alternative way of understanding Caribbean existence beyond the constricting discursive space of positivistic history. Here, I will discuss two thinkers who have variously addressed the limitation of the conventional historical approach.

The view of rum as an ontology of life is an attempt to transcend the limitations of a 'reductionist historiography that imprisons [the Caribbean] in its [alleged] deprivations' (Mackey, 1993: 169). Put differently, my strategy is to use the rum metaphor to transcend the representational limitations of historical realism. At this time, I will offer a brief discussion of Wilson Harris's challenge to the theoretical stasis of reductionist historiography. Furthermore, Harris's position also serves as an example of what the rum metaphor can accomplish regarding the disclosure of insights about human existence in the Caribbean.

### *Wilson Harris and imagination*

Wilson Harris argues for a teleological suspension of empiricist and positivist reductionist historiography. However, he favors a more substantive role for the arts of the imagination in interpreting and understanding Caribbean reality. This insight of Harris is succinctly captured by Henke, in his study of Caribbean ontology. He writes:

Most existentialist ontologies have in common a considerable degree of skepticism about positivist claims that human existence is an objectifiable empirical phenomenon. While it is important to keep in mind that it is to a large extent determined by material things of everyday life, it seems equally important to recognize that human existence is also open to the inexhaustible possibilities and choices that human will, transcendental faculties and liminal experiences can ... provide it with. (Henke, 1997: 42)

Instead of collapsing under the burden of a reductionist historiography that imprisons the Caribbean in deprivations of rootlessness, historylessness, and voicelessness, Harris urges Caribbean thinkers to impose figurative meaning on the seemingly wretched empirical reality of the Caribbean. He recommends that they search for new root metaphors to interpret the Caribbean reality, since he believes that there are ontologies of life emergent from 'a figurative meaning beyond the real or apparently real world' (Harris, 1995: 18). However, these ontologies of life, which can liberate the Caribbean from imprisonment in its deprivations, are possible only if Caribbean thinkers acknowledge the void between conventional historiography and the arts of the imagination. Continuing writing history in the tradition of conventional positivistic history entails emphasizing exploitation and deprivation. Imaginative illiteracy results from this cognitive inertia and fosters existential stasis that can generate a paralysis both of praxis and consciousness. Harris is insistent that the Caribbean need not be imprisoned in cognitive structures of conventional history that produce existential inertia. Indeed, he believes that 'a philosophy of history may well lie buried in the arts of the imagination' (*ibid.*). Again, the irony of the Caribbean situation, however, is that historians of the Caribbean remain captivated by the inertia of a conventional historiography that supports historical stasis. Harris scolds Caribbean historians for being obsessed with irreconcilables, the cataloguing of injustices, the tautology of fact, and deprivation. He rejects this 'documentary stasis' and proceeds to critically expose the theoretical poverty of those historians writing in the Caribbean:

What is bitterly ironic ... is that present day historians ... militant and critical of imperialism as they are, have fallen victim, in another sense, to the very imperialism they appear to denounce. They have no criteria for arts of the originality springing out of an age of limbo and the history they write is without an inner time. (Harris, 1995: 22)

Harris does not favor a revisionist historiography tasked with making Caribbean history more palatable, hence deemphasizing the brutality so deeply embedded in the dramatic space of Caribbean existence. Rather, Harris desires a liberation from narrative bondage through the utilization of alternative metaphorical structuring of Caribbean history and existence. Indeed, his persistent claim that the imagination can offer resources for imposing figurative meaning on empirical reality directly connects with the idea of rum as an ontology of life. The idea of rum as metaphor can disclose alternative ways of interpreting and understanding the dense reality of Caribbean history and society. So, for example, we need not interpret this reality strictly from the perspective of the Caribbean being a production zone for commodities demanded by trading partners. There is similarly no need to view the history and culture of Caribbean societies in the manner suggested by Naipaul, who writes: 'The

history of the islands can never be satisfactorily told. Brutality is not the only difficulty. History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies' (1962: 29). Again, the rum metaphor provides an analytical framework grounded in the folk culture of the Caribbean, a framework not constrained by the demands of 'objectivist' history.

Harris's obvious involvement with metaphor is made clear when he states that although new historians of the Caribbean have sought to debunk imperialism, they have overlooked the possibilities provided by 'the complex metaphorical gateway' of various aspects of Caribbean existence. Harris uses the limbo dance as a prime example of a practice pregnant with imaginative and metaphorical possibilities for imposing figurative meaning on Caribbean history. He suggests that the limbo dance can serve as an ontology of life, as well as a metaphor for life, precisely because it is a gateway between Africa and the Caribbean:

First of all the limbo dance becomes the human gateway which dislocates ... a uniform chain of miles across the Atlantic. This dislocation or interior space serves therefore as a corrective to a uniform cloak or documentary stasis of imperialism. The journey across the Atlantic for the forebears of West Indian man involved a new kind of space – inarticulate as this 'spatial' character was at the time – and not simply an unbroken schedule of miles in a log book. Once we perceive this inner corrective to historical documentary and protest literature which sees the West Indies as utterly deprived, or gutted by exploitation, we begin to participate in the genuine possibilities of original change available to a people severely disadvantaged ... at a certain point in time. (Harris, 1995: 21)

If we consider Harris's critique to be on target, then it is also correct to suggest that the rum metaphor, like the limbo metaphor, provides figurative meaning beyond the stasis of documentary history. The rum metaphor provides a novel conceptual structure for alternatively interpreting Caribbean history as being other than the exhausted remains of imperialism.

Even if we were to approach the idea of rum as an ontology of life, following Harris's emphasis on the arts of the imagination, there is much more that must be said by way of establishing the role of rum as metaphor. Indeed, Clifford Geertz's use of Ryle's distinction between a thin description and a thick description of behavior is relevant to this discussion of rum as metaphor. Again, assuming that a thin description would focus on rum as commodity, a thick description would focus on rum as pregnant with cultural and social significance; hence, a thick description underscores the role of rum in the daily lives of Caribbean subjects.

### *Rum metaphor as a thick description*

Geertz, in his essay 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretation of Culture,' maintains that the concept of culture is essentially a semiotic one. Put differently, the conception of culture is really about meaning or significance. While expanding upon the idea of culture as being about meaning, Geertz approvingly quotes Max Weber and builds upon his view:

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz, 1973: 5)

Geertz develops the idea of culture as interpretive or meaning oriented, and as being amenable to a method of explication. However, he does not appeal to the experimental methodology of the natural science; rather, he utilizes Ryle's notion of a thick description. Ryle discusses the hypothetical condition of two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eye. In the first case, the

movement of the eyelid is an involuntary twitch and in the second a conspiratorial signal to a friend. From a purely descriptive, phenomenalist observation or a thin description, the two events are identical. However, from the perspective of meaning, namely the significance of the physical motion, an obvious difference emerges. What makes the wink a meaningful significant action is the fact of there being a motivation to communicate, an intention to communicate by the boy moving his eyelid. The boy's moving of his eyelid is meaningful against a background of social and cultural rituals, structures and beliefs. According to Geertz, the crucial difference between one event being a nervous twitch and the other being a wink, a meaningful piece of behavior reinforced by an intention to communicate, can be given in terms of a thick description. Indeed, Geertz claims that ethnographic descriptions are thick descriptions and that the object of ethnography is

a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches [and] winks ... are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not ... *as a cultural category* ... in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids. (1973: 7)

My main interest in discussing Geertz is to underscore that a similar thick description of rum, within the context of Caribbean culture, yields insights about the defining role rum plays in Caribbean culture, insights emergent from the perspective of rum drinking as a meaningful activity, one of immense cultural significance. Put differently, a thick description of rum should reveal the existence of a cultural rum world in which its participants engage in intentional behavior constituted by a manifold of rituals, structures, and beliefs. Rum is not merely another commodity-product that played a major role in the development of the New World economy. A thick description of rum should establish that rum was more than just another traded alcoholic beverage; it was of major cultural significance precisely because of its role in shaping the existential landscape of Caribbean society. For example, pouring rum on the floor is not wasting good rum but, rather, is a highly meaningful cultural act signaling respect for the ancestors and the intra-generational continuity of life. The idea of a thick description of rum also supports the view of rum drinking as a model of creolization due to the blending of different cultural practices and beliefs connected to rum drinking.

### *Rum and creolization*

Traditional approaches to discussions of creolization are taken primarily from linguistics, and the dominant metaphorical structure through which creolization is constructed and understood is by means of the mixing of languages, the cross-fertilization of syntax and vocabulary. Another equally powerful traditional metaphorical structuring of creolization is based on the idea of cultural interaction, where cultures mutually borrow and exchange religious beliefs, musical styles, styles of dressing, and culinary practices, among other things. From a theoretical perspective, creolization designates impurity, transculturation, heteronomy, pluralism, hybridity and mixture. Since efforts to model creolization are attempts to find metaphorical models to capture the logic of the flux, complexity and unpredictability of the encounter that takes place between cultures, it is appropriate to construe theorizing creolization as responses to the challenges posed by difference and otherness. Unlike attempts to marginalize, assimilate or conquer difference and otherness, the motives behind creolization are to affirm, embrace and appreciate difference and the Other. Creolization, at the risk of exaggeration, is a heterology, a theory of the Other. Hence, it does not seek unity of sameness but, rather, a unity of differences, a condition in which it is possible for difference and otherness to co-exist with sameness. Creolization forges horizontal relations of equality of

differences and not hierarchical relations of unreconcilable differences. It is precisely because of these remarkable traits that creolization infuses the core of Caribbean existence. Henke states that

Probably the most profound ontological observation that can be made about Caribbean existence is that – at the collective level – it defies all attempts to impose a unifying order. Perhaps nowhere else in the world do so many different people, value systems and logics cohabit in such a limited space. Its people originated from many different geographic regions ... who arrived there at different times in the history of the region and were combined under different economic and political circumstances. Clearly, the Caribbean is a synergetic ‘multispace.’ (Henke, 1997: 43)

It is my contention that rum drinking can serve as a paradigm of a creole practice precisely because rum drinking can be used to metaphorically represent the mixing of cultural traditions in the history of Caribbean society. What I am suggesting is that rum, like language, religion, etc., can be used to model creolization for the purpose of understanding the dense existential ontological reality of the Caribbean. Here, I will utilize Braithwaite’s conception of creolization as the basis for articulating rum drinking as a creole cultural space.

Braithwaite, in his classic, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (1971), breaks with monolithic characterizations of Caribbean society as structured by rigidly enforced cultural barriers. Not content to settle for simplistic explanations rooted in the belief that culturally distinct group identity was maintained in the Caribbean because of the need for cultural purity, Braithwaite calls attention to the dominance of cultural mixing and exchange. He defines creolization as a ‘cultural action – material-psychological and spiritual-based upon the stimulus/response of individuals with the society to their environment and – as white/black, culturally discrete groups – to each other’ (1971: 296). The dynamism of Braithwaite’s conception of creolization underscores the importance of groups of individuals involved in tangled relations of critical negotiation within a physical environment and a socio-cultural reality.

Another important aspect of Braithwaite’s view is that he wisely emphasizes the fact that creolization takes place on diverse planes of human reality: material, psychological and spiritual. Consequently, Braithwaite dispels the notion of a plausible ‘disintegrationist concept of society’ (1968: 336). Creolization precludes the existence of hermetically sealed cultures. The process of creolization, he maintains, is a way of seeing the society, ‘not in terms of white and black, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole’ (1971: 307). Finally, Braithwaite adds an element of theoretical turbulence to his conception of creolization by calling attention to the asymmetry of the early stages of creolization. In *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, Braithwaite defines creolization as ‘a cultural process perceived as taking place within a continuum of space and time, but which ... may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation, which is the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another (in this case the enslaved/African to the European); and inter/culturation, which is an unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship proceeding from the yoke. The creolisation which results (and it is a process not product), becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society’ (1974: 5–6).

Braithwaite’s model of creolization provides a framework for the idea that rum can serve as a metaphor for creolization precisely because rum drinking seemed to have become a dominant socially significant ritual in Caribbean society by a process of cultural osmosis. The process by which rum came to function as an ontology of life was through the gradual, unconscious absorption of rum as a main element in the ritualistic structuring of all the common human experiences ranging from birth and marriage to death. European and African cultures were able to facilitate a creolization process emergent from the tradition of alcohol use and consumption in these respective

cultural spaces. Let us briefly examine how the idea of rum as a metaphor for creolization was manifested in Caribbean society.

We can start by first acknowledging the role of rum in generating a strategically shared space within Caribbean societies, as well as among Caribbean societies. It is not that rum literally eliminates differences, but rather, it serves as a metaphorical basis for negotiating or transcending internal differences of political, social and cultural power. It is over a bottle of rum that people belonging to different social and cultural spheres come together to participate in the ritual of drinking, a shared experience as well as a basis for further social interaction. In transcending differences of power connected to social status, a basis is provided for human connection and understanding across differences that would otherwise prohibit the possibility of mutual understanding. In short, then, rum allows for face-to-face encounters that facilitate the leveling of social distinctions.

Second, the rum ontology can function as an analytical construction to manage differences of language, history and cultural influences among the different societies of the Caribbean. As Ian Williams writes in his recent history of rum,

[R]um is the one common factor of a recognizable common Caribbean culture. The Dutch-, English-, French-, and Spanish-speaking islands have separate strands of culture, and even within the different language blocks, the islands are similar but distinct. On each island, the scars of slavery manifest themselves in different ways. But on all of them, islanders make, drink, and relish ... rum. (Williams, 2005: xv)

So, even if preserving cultural purity was the goal of the powerful elites, rum drinking facilitated a cultural mixing of people and ideas through a process of mutual, dialectical reciprocity. Once again, the creole theme is strengthened in light of the fusing of European and Arabic distilling technology; the exchange of different modes of socialization attached to alcohol consumption; and the cross-fertilization of European and African ideas about death, life and sex, etc.

### *Rum ethics*

We can also talk in terms of an ethics of rum. First we should note that rum drinking is often a communal affair. Rum drinking is really a social activity precisely because there is no privacy of rum in the sense that individualistic consumption of rum is not socially sanctioned. Here it would be helpful to clarify that rum drinking, as I understand it, should be seen as a collective ritual and that, as such, it requires communion with others. Of course, people do consume rum privately within moderation. But solitary drinking of rum, even if not in excess, does not qualify as the ritualistic social drinking of rum. Social drinking of rum is analogous to the collective practice of a religion. We would not consider an individual who engages in the solitary performance of the practices of a religion to be actually performing the collective rituals of the religion.

If the collective drinking of rum involves an ethics, consistent solitary drinking of rum, outside the context of an occasional after dinner drink, violates the communitarian ethics of rum. Furthermore, insistence on the private and isolated consumption of rum may be an indication of the weakness of the will, evidence of psychological or existential malfunctioning. Of course this should not be interpreted as implying that all are welcome to the fellowship of rum drinking. Just as the ritual of rum drinking does not sanction private consumption, an action that would be judged as selfish, an action indicative of a more deeply distorted moral character, there is also the matter that an individual can be excluded from the fellowship of rum drinking because he/she has breached social norms.



Furthermore, rum as an ontology of life makes possible the diagnosing of clinical problems rooted in social and cultural spheres. The abuse of rum may very well be considered the violation of a social ethics. This violation can in turn function as evidence to confirm that an individual is not appropriately ontologically synchronized. One is ontologically synchronized to the extent that he or she can constructively participate in a form of life and is able to resolve problems that emerge within the context of that form of life. The inability to resolve internal contradictions within a form of life or to find interpretive and narrative schemes to deal with problematic situations may lead an individual to seek comfort in the abuse of rum. The idea here is that an individual who is in the midst of a traumatic experience is confronted with an epistemological crisis. The conceptual schemes and narratives that once provided answers to problems can become ineffective. The trauma associated with the death of a loved one or the end of a love affair can plunge individuals into depths of despair. The excessive consumption of rum or the abuse of rum, particularly in traumatic situations, does not entail any sinister conclusion about rum but, rather, indicates a breakdown of the coping strategies of an individual. Since rum prevalence in Caribbean society was also intimately connected with the rich diversity of religious ideas in the Caribbean, I turn now to discuss rum through the lens of religion and transcendence.

This discussion is important because of the common tendency of some thinkers to be ‘suspicious of religious and transcendental experiences as sources of inspiration for the achievement of full human [agency] and considers religion as confining liberation to the realm of the ideal and spiritual, thereby perpetuating alienation’ (Henke, 1997: 41).

### *Rum and religion*

Despite his unfortunate tendency to flirt with the trope of escapism, Frederick Smith insightfully underscores the role of alcohol, and later rum, in African religions. Rum assumed a dominant role in the religious practices of African slaves precisely because of the African slaves’ prior familiarity with alcohol and spirituality. Smith (2005: 99) writes:

More importantly, however, was alcohol’s unique ability to facilitate communication with the spiritual world. In Akan, Igbo, Kongo and Arada religions, as well as in the religions of many other West and West Central African groups, the physical and spiritual worlds are closely aligned. Ancestors and deities played an active role in the daily lives of the living. Through revelation and divination, devotees gained access to the messages of a spiritual world that guided them through life.

The tension in Smith’s thinking between rum drinking as escape and rum as a religious conduit of transcendence can be resolved by more closely associating rum with the religious lives of African slaves. Indeed, the existential implications of African cosmologies would have certainly necessitated an existence rich in religious significance for African slaves in the Caribbean. Ironically, the link between rum and religion is insightfully summarized by Smith. His conclusion is worth quoting in full:

Why did highly volatile rum operate in the same spiritual manner as traditional alcoholic beverages in Africa? The physiological effect of alcohol, especially a potent spirit like rum, altered consciousness and made it a vehicle for escape to the spiritual world. Moreover, since the seventeenth century, West and West Central Africans had welcomed rum as a sacred fluid and used it in place of indigenous alcoholic beverages. Many slaves, therefore, were already familiar with rum’s spiritual dimensions when they arrived in the Caribbean. The anxieties generated by the hostile social environment of the Caribbean sugar plantation motivated African slaves’ ongoing embrace of alcohol as a temporary means of escape to the spirit world

and, symbolically, to Africa. The use of rum in spiritual contexts by diverse ethnic groups in Africa and their representatives and descendants in the Caribbean also underscores the adaptability of the Afro-Atlantic community. Like the rise of Afro-Atlantic Christianity, rum becomes a unifying feature of the Afro-Atlantic world. Just as the consumption of slave-made Caribbean rum helped Africans in Africa make a symbolic connection to their brethren overseas, it also helped Caribbean slaves form a link to their African homelands. (Smith, 2005: 117)

Despite the tensions in Smith's position, rum, from a religious perspective, seems also to qualify as a metaphor of life precisely because of its almost 'universal' relevance to birth, life and death. Caribbean peoples drink rum to celebrate the birth of a child; they drink rum in celebration of life's joys, as well as to transcend the ordinary notions of space and time as they enjoy festivals of song and dance with the living; they also drink rum at funeral receptions; and, finally, they drink rum to conjure up the spirits of the ancestors. Hence, the power of rum to connect the circuit of being: the new-born, the living and the dead. We should note that despite the uses of other beverages for ritual purposes, rum claims more existential ontological relevance because of the role it plays within the circle of being as evident in Caribbean society. According to Williams, 'Unlike whiskey, tequila, cognac, gin, or vodka, rum is more than just a beverage, having spiritual as well as spirituous connotations. The "demon rum" of ... evangelists is also the preferred drink of the gods of Haitian Voodoo ceremonies, where it provides a potent and palatable alternative to holy water' (Williams, 2005: xvi). So, despite the significant role rum played in religion within the Caribbean, rum also facilitated appreciation for transcendent consciousness, namely for states of consciousness beyond everyday experience.

### *Rum as transcendence and transcendental*

There has been the tendency to pathologize rum drinking, construing it as a means by which individuals escape the unpleasant realities of their daily existence. On this view, rum becomes, in Marx's famous description of religion, *the opiate of the masses*. It is possible to steer a course between pathologizing, on the one hand, and romanticizing or nostalgia, on the other. Here, the point is that rum can be alternatively described in a manner that underscores its transcendent credentials without having to deny the possibility of its misuse as a form of escape from daily life. For both European colonists and transported Africans, the Caribbean was both a spatially as well as temporally alien environment. Unable to cope with the almost surrealist reality of an unfamiliar landscape and social universe of brutality and exploitation, rum provided the numbing effect of escape that eased the psychological and spiritual torture of the Caribbean reality. Smith flirts with this escapist theme in describing the Caribbean:

[C]olonists drank to cope with the many anxieties they encountered on the colonial Caribbean frontier, especially unfamiliar surroundings, boredom, loneliness, epidemic diseases, a coercive labor system, an imbalanced sex ration, and competing racial and class agendas. (Smith, 2005: 1)

Following the sociologist Peter Berger, I think that it is not an exaggeration to associate rum with the notion of the supernatural, precisely because of its extensive use in religious practices, to name only one such practice. But rum drinking is connected with transcendence outside the context of religious spaces. The everyday activity of rum drinking facilitates a transcendence of profane space and time, not necessarily for the purpose of escaping a wretched condition but, rather, for the purpose of creating human communion on a different plane of existence. Hence, rum drinking can be characterized as a signal of transcendence. Berger states: 'By signals of transcendence I mean

phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our “natural” reality but that appear to point beyond that reality. In other words, I am not using transcendence here in a technical philosophical sense but literally, as the transcending of the normal, everyday world that I earlier identified with the notion of the “supernatural” (1967: 53). Again, romanticizing rum drinking at the expense of acknowledging the harsh realities of Caribbean life would be misleading. Nevertheless, it is possible to view rum drinking not as escape but, rather, as a form of resistance to a harsh material reality.

Moreover, rum encourages certain existential epistemological insights about social reality. It seemingly possesses a seductive quality to induce altered states of consciousness, a spiritual intoxication, whereby individuals escape mundane everyday consciousness. In this rum-induced mystical state, one can witness a purity of experience, encounter experience beyond the differentiations provided by socio-cultural worlds, differentiations that have a tendency to masquerade as absolute and final. It should also be noted that drunkenness need not be interpreted as a manifestation of weakness of the will. In the context of the oppressive ideological worldview that powerful elites institutionalized to legitimize the degraded status of African peoples, as well as to justify a thoroughgoing Eurocentric conception of things, rum drinking provided Caribbean subjects with a mask and veil to engage in critiques of the status quo without the immediate threat of physical retaliation. Rum provided a cover for the expressions of certain truths that could not have been expressed as deliberate attacks on the status quo. Perhaps it would not be too much of an exaggeration to identify the existence of a rum language, a language of drunkenness, that can be analyzed along the line of Austin’s speech act theory. The language of the drunkard is not fact stating language in the sense of intended to state something that is either true or false. If, as Austin maintains, language is a sort of human action, then the drunkard does something in his use of language. The performative utterances of the drunkard are neither true nor false, but to the extent that this language is a form of action, it functions in a way to unsettle the otherwise dogmatic assumptions of the status quo. The intoxicated slave who pretends that he or she has the power of the master to confer status on others can in so doing lead others to question the unequal and abusive relationships between slaves and masters.

Finally, the effect of rum to induce altered states of consciousness is immediately consistent with the African practice of trance possession or possession by the gods. Being intoxicated by rum, as interpreted through the lens of trance possession, mocks the idea of the self-identical subject who determines meaning and obtains truth in the immediacy and full presence of self-consciousness. The act of ego displacement facilitates restructuring of the ego and, in so doing, exposes the myth of the permanency of the self-identical subject. Furthermore, transcendent consciousness exposes the illusionary dualisms of mind/matter, subject/object, and good/evil.

From another perspective, Holger Henke appeals to the idea of ‘ontological moments’ that are consistent with transcendent consciousness. With regard to rum, these ‘ontological moments’ are ‘particular locations in time and space in which “Caribbean-ness” reveals itself to the existent situated in such a moment.’ Rum drinking is one medium through which the complexity of Caribbeanness is revealed; rum sustains ‘ontological moments’ through which glimpses of Caribbean existence illuminate various social rituals.

### *Rum and cultural memory*

Far from being an innocent social indulgence, the ramifications of rum drinking assaulted the various barriers of differences within Caribbean society. Smith states that

[o]ver the long history of secular alcohol [rum] use, drinking became a means to release social pressure, circumvent authority, and challenge social-structural inequities, which occasionally made [rum] a powerful symbol of permanent escape through the overthrow of existing social order. (2005: 118)

Based upon Smith's insights, it is my contention that another significant aspect of rum drinking is the role of rum in sustaining memory for the early Africans in the Caribbean. In the absence of normal institutions that facilitate cultural memory, rum emerged as an effective medium for the cultivation and maintenance of memory among African slaves. Smith, in his study of Caribbean rum, underscores the role of rum in fostering memory among African slaves. He claims that 'the spiritual meanings slaves attached to drinking reflect the continuity of African cultural beliefs' (2005: 95).

So, even if efforts were made to erase the memory of African slaves, rum covertly served as a means for preserving memory. Indeed, rum drinking was not exploited for the purpose of forgetting but, rather, to remember. But the kind of memory that rum facilitated was not some mythical, romantic image of Africa. African slaves used rum to sustain the continuation of activities facilitated by the cultural utilization of alcohol in Africa:

As it did in Africa, alcohol helped foster slave spirituality and promote group identity. The construction of new drinking styles also strengthened resistance ideologies, which challenged European efforts to suppress African customs. Understanding of slave alcohol use provides a prism through which to view underlying principles that helped shape slave life and highlights the ways Africans and African slaves maintained cultural links across the Atlantic. (Smith, 2005: 95–96)

It should be pointed out that African slaves' attitude toward rum drinking was not one of moralization as was the case with the Christian notion concerning the corrupting influence of alcohol. Indeed, the potent existential significance of rum is directly related to the transported Africans' appreciation of the connection between alcohol and religion. Keeping alive the connection between alcohol and religion is part of the phenomenon of rum as a trope of memory for African slaves:

The evidence does show that, at the level of the lowest common denominator, African slaves in the Caribbean created drinking customs that embraced their shared West Central African beliefs about the spiritual meaning of alcohol. (Smith, 2005: 109)

Because of the already favorable attitudes toward alcohol, African slaves easily integrated rum drinking within their psychic lives. So integrated, rum drinking, in turn, amplified the collective memory of an African consciousness and mode of existence. Smith asserts that

[u]nder the harsh conditions of Caribbean slavery, slaves used rum to help maintain symbolic connection to Africa and the ancestral world. For those slaves who were not already familiar with rum in Africa, the ability to incorporate new varieties of alcohol into traditional forms of spirituality underscores the cultural adaptability of African slaves in a changing Afro-Atlantic social environment. (2005: 112)

It should also be noted that rum drinking not only facilitated memory and connection to Africa, but, in time, functioned both diachronically and synchronically; it not only connected the present with the past but also connected those in the present who share a contemporaneous presence but not a common spatial location. Rum drinking, hence, conquers the alienation and estrangement caused by temporal and spatial separation. Currently, Caribbean immigrants to North America use rum drinking to cope with the challenges of exile away from home. Smith (2005: 247) maintains that 'in the same way that African slaves in the Caribbean used alcohol to strengthen their symbolic attachment to their brethren in Africa, overseas followers of Haitian vodou and Cuban santería

pour libations and make offerings to loa and orishas, which enables them to bridge the gap to family, friends, and community at home.’

### *Rum and gender*

The idea of rum as an ontology of life is vulnerable to one possible criticism emerging from the observation that rum drinking tends to be an exclusively or predominantly male activity. It would seem to follow that to choose it as a metaphor of life is to embrace an activity that is unjustifiably patriarchal and sexist. However, rum drinking need not be seen as another male chauvinistic preserve that warrants immediate critique and rejection. Consistent with the division of gender roles characteristic of socialization, the male dominated nature of rum drinking can be explained in terms of the rites of passage. If we understand them as marking a new or significant stage in the life of an individual, then rum drinking can be understood as a rite of passage for young males. Such rites can be transitional in the sense of indicating that an individual takes on a new social role as in the transition from son to father or to husband. They are also incorporational in the sense of marking the transition from one stage of life to another, such as a boy entering manhood or entering the world of work. Rum drinking includes both senses of the rites of passage in that it is through the ritual of rum drinking that a boy becomes exposed to knowledge regarding both the responsibilities of being a husband and those of manhood. Indeed, the boy who enters manhood is qualified to participate in the ritual of rum drinking on the assumption that he can publicly display behavior appropriate to manhood.

Nevertheless, in seeking to describe rum drinking as a dominant factor in Caribbean society, it is not my intention to offer a normative critique of gender roles in Caribbean society. Nor is it my claim that rum drinking is the only practice that can serve as an existential ontology of Caribbean society. There are social practices, even if they are not in the vein of rum drinking, female-dominated that can also perform this function. Women have been dominant in the resolution of family conflicts, sustaining affective connections to the ancestors, and safeguarding ancestral memory. Surely it is possible to extract insights from these activities to forge an ontology of life.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude, what I have been suggesting in this essay is that rum drinking can serve as a metaphor through which we constitute and interpret human experience. Rum drinking provides opportunities for improvising, particularly the opportunity to exploit the flexibility and the play of language, to use language as a tool for political commentary. On the other hand, rum drinking also seems to be a collective activity that, instead of emphasizing individual affirmation, stresses connectivity with others and the importance of transcending the various barriers that block or compromise fruitful human interaction. Having said this much about rum drinking, I do not want to be interpreted as suggesting a cheap relativism that sanctions the idea that if there are many different existential ontologies, then no one existential ontology is better than another. At the same time, I fully appreciate the intimate epistemological implications of ontology and, in this context, it is indeed uncontested that ‘[f]rom an existentialist point of view the [Caribbean] will only be successful in defining and appreciating its epistemological idiosyncrasies if it [comes] to grips with its ontology’ (Henke, 1997: 55). Of course, one can raise the question of whether the social reality of human beings is characterized by a single fundamental ontology or whether existential ontologies are culturally specific. From the perspective of Africana philosophy, we need to reject the either/or logic of this question. We similarly need to reject imperial ontologies that would insist on the existence of a global ontology of human existence. Africana ontologies, such as those inspired by the blues or

rum, remind us about the importance of avoiding ontological blindness; but they also indicate to us how we can avoid such blindness by realizing the plurality of styles of human existence. No group has a monopoly on human existence or possesses the final and comprehensive way of being. If conflict and uncertainty are irreducible facts of human existence, then we must be ready to reevaluate, revise and remake our being-in-the-world and avoid mediocre and conventional ways of being that all too often threaten to mechanize or render opaque our being-in-the-world. Existential ontology hence needs to be more adequately foregrounded in our philosophical activities.

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