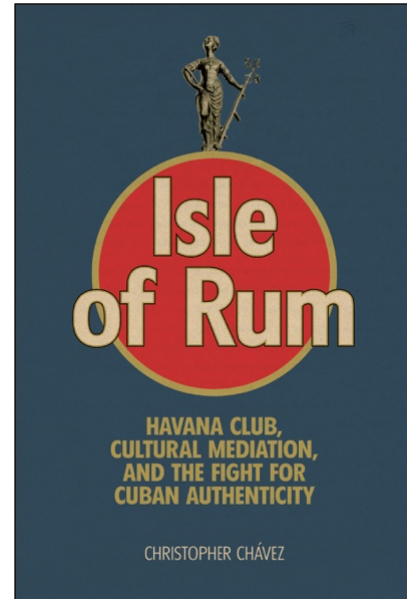


Christopher Chávez, **Isle of Rum: Havana Club, Cultural Mediation, and the Fight for Cuban Authenticity** (1st ed.), New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024, 190 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover).

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The Cuba Libre, most often encountered in bars, appears to serve as a symbol of the enduring foreign influence on Cuba and the country's reliance on establishments shaped by outside forces. Cuba's state-led yet streamlined economy—anchored in sugar, rum, tobacco, and tourism—demonstrates how politics, culture, and the economy remain deeply intertwined with histories of power and colonial entanglement. In **Isle of Rum: Havana Club, Cultural Mediation, and the Fight for Cuban Authenticity**, author Christopher Chávez examines the Havana Club rum brand to reveal how cultural intermediaries, primarily from Western nations, mediate between the Cuban state and international consumers, constructing global perceptions of Cuban authenticity for commercial purposes. Chávez's analysis exposes the deeper, complex historical and political threads of Cuban rum that the global market prefers to frame only as surface-level or distorted culture that they insist is authentic.



Chávez structures his argument across six chapters. Chapter 1 analyzes how M&C Saatchi's ad campaigns negotiated socialist and capitalist languages. Chapter 2 examines Havana Cultura as a state-led cultural initiative that compromised with capitalist logics. Chapter 3 contrasts two rum brands that took divergent paths, reflecting Cuba's fraught history of foreign influence. Chapter 4 considers how museums construct narratives to serve marketing purposes. Chapter 5 critiques the racial misrepresentations in rum advertising, rooted in White supremacy and commodification. Chapter 6 concludes by showing how commercial quests for authenticity in rum remain both elusive and deceptive.

The Havana Club rum brand is a joint venture between Corporación Cuba Ron, the Cuban state's rum producer, and Pernod Ricard, a global spirits company based in Paris. Its marketing and advertising strategies chart the appropriation of Cuban authenticity and its shifting meanings over time. Chávez traces this trajectory by moving between contemporary political and economic conditions and the legacies of colonial history, revealing a continuous story of exploitation—perpetuated by changing foreign actors and evolving methods.

The history of Cuban rum is inseparable from sugarcane production, the transatlantic slave trade, and the dominance of foreign powers, first Spain and later the United States. Initially emerging as a byproduct of sugar during Spanish colonial rule, rum (alongside tobacco) expanded under U.S. political

and economic influence. For more than five centuries, Cuba's "monocrop economy" (p. 6) fostered structural dependence and unsustainability, merely shifting from one foreign actor to another. Although Cuba achieved political sovereignty with the 1959 Revolution, its state-led, static economy—shaped by centuries of external control—has struggled to overcome this dependency. U.S. sanctions pushed Cuba into reliance on the Soviet Union until its collapse, and today global corporations continue that legacy of entanglement through unlikely collaborations that blend socialist frameworks with capitalist imperatives.

Chávez identifies advertising as a key site of ideological negotiation. The joint venture between Cuba's state-run rum producer and a global marketing firm demonstrates this tension, as Havana Club's advertisements combine socialist and capitalist narratives to construct Cuban authenticity for international markets. M&C Saatchi, the brand's advertising agency, London-based, pursued this paradoxical blend in its 2010 campaign, *Nothing Compares to Havana* (p. 46), which promoted socialist ideals of happiness independent of material wealth—suggesting that the revolutionary spirit could linger in rum, and that drinking it could evoke an idealized socialist experience through a commodified product. Later campaigns shifted toward more product-centered and individualistic appeals. The 2015 campaign, *You Just Know When It's from the Heart*, emphasized traditional rum-making practices, presenting rum as "a passion for all Cubans" (p. 42). By 2018, the *Cuba Made Me* campaign turned its focus to young urban Afro-Cuban drinkers, with M&C Saatchi's press release describing Cuban youth as "uniquely shaped by Havana, its culture, and its streets" (p. 43). Taken together, these campaigns chart a progression from revolutionary ideals to heritage and tradition, and finally to youth culture, reflecting how authenticity is continually redefined to suit shifting market demands.

The Cuban government actively supports this negotiated cultural authenticity through its cultural diplomacy initiative, *Havana Cultura*, conceived by M&C Saatchi. The campaign was designed to develop and promote Cuban cultural products internationally, linking them directly to Havana Club rum in order to add "magic" and "flavor" to the brand (p. 47). By showcasing contemporary Cuban musicians, visual artists, and filmmakers, *Havana Cultura* positioned the rum as uniquely enriched by the island's cultural vitality. This hybrid strategy, involving both state officials and marketing executives, often resulted in the commodification of Cuban culture, particularly through music and visual art projects. Over time, however, the platform shifted from highlighting emerging Cuban talent to partnering with internationally recognized artists, signaling a turn toward more overtly commercial collaborations.

Chávez juxtaposes two rum families who diverged after the 1959 Revolution: the Arechabala and Bacardí families, both of Spanish origin dating back to the 19th century. The Arechabala family's rum business was absorbed into the Cuban state after the revolution, while Bacardí successfully reestablished itself in exile, continuing to grow as a global rum company headquartered in Florida. Bacardí later acquired the Arechabala family's rights to the Havana Club name, leading to an ongoing legal battle with the Cuban state. By tracing the different paths of Havana Club's competitor, Bacardí Ltd., the author illustrates the complex and contested relationship between Cuba and foreign actors. Both Bacardí and Havana Club claim Cuban authenticity, yet they leverage Cuban culture in divergent ways—resulting in what Goldman and Papsen (1996) describe as a "sign war" (p. 71), as Chávez notes. Bacardí defines Cuban authenticity not through land or territory but through "long-distance nationalism" (p. 69), rooted in the Cuban diaspora and nostalgia for pre-1959 Cuba. Havana Club, meanwhile, represents a hybrid formation—an unexpected

collaboration between socialism and capitalism—while Bacardí embodies capitalist logic tied to exile and memory. In the end, Havana Club's state-backed authenticity and Bacardí's diasporic authenticity highlight two competing but equally constructed narratives, revealing authenticity itself as a contested terrain of power and commerce.

Within the shifting and contested notions of Cuban authenticity, race emerges as a central theme in the visual language of rum advertising. The evolution of racial representation in Cuban rum marketing over the past 150 years reflects broader social, political, and economic transformations. In the late 19th century, early Bacardí advertisements published in Europe relied on overtly racist tropes, portraying Black figures as primitive or subservient to signify Cuba's exoticism and reinforce White superiority. During the Republican era, Havana Club's advertising presented an image of a genteel, White Cuba, largely excluding Afro-Cubans in an effort to "whiten" (p. 133) the product's image for elite consumers. After the 1959 Revolution, state-controlled advertising promoted a "raceless" (p. 130) Cuban identity, exemplified in campaigns such as Cristal beer, which depicted multiracial laborers as part of a unified national image. In the post-Special Period, as Havana Club reentered global markets through its partnership with Pernod Ricard, advertisements increasingly featured racially diverse and predominantly Afro-Cuban individuals—initially to convey cultural authenticity and later to capture urban youth markets with a subcultural edge. Yet, as Chávez argues, these contemporary portrayals, while seemingly more inclusive, ultimately commodify "Otherness" (p. 133), simplify Cuba's complex racial realities, reflect Western capitalist ideologies, and obscure the persistence of racial inequality on the island.

Chávez argues that "authenticity is a losing game" (p. 137), because in the marketplace authenticity is defined largely by what it is not—making it perpetually unattainable even as consumers long for it. In the case of rum, the "real" Cuba (p. 137) constructed by cultural brokers—marketing firms, advertising agencies, and even artists—becomes more appealing than lived Cuban realities. What emerges in these campaigns is not an authentic expression of culture shaped by ordinary people and their historical complexities but rather a carefully mediated identity produced through the paradoxical interplay of a socialist state and capitalist global corporations. This paradox is underscored by the contrast between Cuba's chronic shortages of basic necessities, such as food, and its export of sugar, rum, and tobacco—commodities that circulate globally as luxuries while remaining disconnected from the daily needs of Cuban people.

Isle of Rum demonstrates how Cuban authenticity is less a cultural essence than a commodity fashioned for Western consumption. In this sense, Chávez reveals rum marketing as a new form of neocolonialism, where Cuba's culture is appropriated, packaged, and sold back to global audiences under the guise of authenticity. Yet while Chávez convincingly exposes how external voices commodify Cuban culture, the analysis might have been strengthened by engaging with internal voices of resistance and the everyday narratives of Cubans themselves, particularly how rum figures in their cultural practices and lived experience in contemporary times.

Reference

Goldman, R., & Papson, S. (1996). *Sign wars: The cluttered landscape of advertising*. New York, NY: Guildford.