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"SOI-DISANT COLUMBUSES": THE DISCOVERY OF DOMINICA'S BOILING LAKE AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN COLONIAL SOCIETIES

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the Main.
John Donne, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1623)

"My picture would be in the *Illustrated London News*,"
he explained, rather pathetically. "I have always
wanted to be in the *Illustrated London News*."
Elizabeth Peters, *The Mummy Case* (1985)

It may indeed be "a truth universally acknowledged" that "no man is an island, entire of itself." Nonetheless, the entirety upon itself that Donne assumes as a given in connection to islands may be true only as far as geography and geometry are concerned – or perhaps, in the case of the poet, as far as the pure idea, the literary conceit, goes. The truth is that given the pernicious history of European colonization around the world, no island has retained its entirety of itself for very long after being "discovered" by Europeans. One may thus wonder if Donne himself was quite unaware of the irony implicit in his verses. In 1596, more than a quarter century before he penned his famous lines, he had had his own brush with conquest and colonization. On that year, he had enlisted in the Earl of Essex's unsuccessful privateering expedition against Cadiz, and in 1597 he had sailed with Essex and Sir Walter Ralegh in the near-disastrous Islands Expedition, which had sought to intercept Spanish ships bringing gold and silver from South America as they sailed past the Azores.

The un-colonized island, like Donne's entire-of-itself-man, is a rare phenomenon. Discovery, whether of island or man, entangles the discovered in a complex web of relationships and connections – of power, of capital, of

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language, of culture – that forestalls self-containment. It means to move from self-containment to the ambivalent state of being "a piece of the continent, a part of the Main." The hierarchy of discovery may place the discoverer in an advantageous position, but it constitutes nonetheless a fleeting, unrepeatable moment, since once the surprise is surpassed, discoverer and discovered must turn to each other with an identical question – *now what?* The answer to that question, as far as islands around the world are concerned, has been a broad variety of colonialisms – as many, perhaps, as there have been islands to colonize. The processes that have become known as "colonization" are perplexingly complex, as they have emerged out of interactions between the colonizer and the colonized, each transformed by the other through peculiar symbioses, neither to remain the same. The colonization of islands, spaces where self-containment has often led to varied and idiosyncratic cultures, has produced myriad forms of colonialism that can hardly be subsumed by one singular term. The forms they take – and the changes they undergo in response to specific historical, political, economic, and social circumstances – are directly the result of the specificities of local conditions. They can best be understood, not by totalizing theories that essentialize a "colonial" experience and critique some apparently understandable and graspable notion of "colonialism," but by a detailed knowledge of the historical and material conditions responsible for specific phenomena at specific times.

A rich vein of colonial phenomena whose study yields significant glimpses into the various forms colonialism takes in the West Indies is found in the discoveries of Caribbean geological sites and phenomena that followed in the wake of Charles Darwin's momentous five-year scientific expedition of 1831-1836 – recounted in his *Journal of Researches into the Geology and Natural History of the Various Countries Visited by H.M.S. Beagle* (1839). Between 1839 and the first decade of the twentieth century – years during which natural history emerged as a scientific discipline – a number of scientific and pseudoscientific travelers, aided and abetted by the increased ease of travel fostered by new technologies and bankrolled by Victorian prosperity, descended upon the Caribbean islands in search of anthropological glimpses at native societies and the opportunity to gaze at and collect specimens of local flora and fauna. Their particular gaze on the Caribbean entered into the debate over colonial control of the islands' cultural, political, and economic development raging in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Among the targets of discovery in this period was Dominica's Boiling Lake, a site whose exposure to the larger world in 1875 became the focus of heated debate in the island between Euro-American "scientific" knowledge and local "lore." The Lake is the centerpiece of the Valley of Desolation, a rock-strewn, barren, rumbling valley of bubbling fumaroles and simmering pools of water nestled deep within the range of high forest-clad mountains of southern Dominica. The lake itself, fenced in by perpendicular banks of ash

and pumice sixty to a hundred feet high, extends about seventy yards across and one hundred and ten yards in length. It lies 2,300 feet above sea level, and its waters, heated to near two hundred degrees Farenheit, rise and fall to the pressure of escaping gases. It appears to the traveler, in the words of William Palgrave, one of its earliest European visitors, as "a gigantic seething cauldron, covered with rapid steam, through which, when the veil is for a moment blown apart by the mountain breeze, appears as a confused mass of tossing waves, crossing and clashing in every direction – a chaos of boiling water" (Palgrave 1877:372).

I would like to offer here – through a discussion of the discursive complexities of the discovery and exploration of the Boiling Lake – an example of the various ways in which the visits and resulting texts of the lake's discoverers enter the discourse of national formation in the Caribbean, seeking in many cases to reinscribe colonial and imperial categories threatened by emerging Creole elites and newly emancipated peasantries in the islands' postslavery economies. The rhetorical complexities of the narratives of discovery and exploration of the Boiling Lake opened a space where conflicting versions of history, clashing discourses, and contrasting disciplines conflated. The attempts of its discoverers to impose upon a specific Dominican space the cultural categories of Euro-American pseudoscientific discourse came up against a contestatory local discourse, resulting in a struggle to determine what negotiations were necessary for a particular narrative of the history of the lake's discovery to emerge.

The Boiling Lake was allegedly "discovered" – that is, first visited by white Europeans – in January 1875. Its "discoverers," Edmund Watt and Henry Nicholls, were young midlevel colonial officials in Dominica. Although only in their mid-twenties, they held the sort of positions unattainable for someone of their youth and inexperience except in colonial settings. Watt was a magistrate, and Nicholls, a recent graduate from the medical schools at the universities of Aberdeen and London, was superintendent of hospitals. As officials in the growing bureaucracy of the empire, they interpreted their mandate as representatives of the Crown as requiring their chronicling in great detail the natural and anthropological phenomena encompassed within their imperial gaze. Themselves avid readers of exploration narratives, and aware of the publicity value of such publications to help them out of a colonial backwater, they reported their feat widely in the scientific journal *Nature* and the more popular *Illustrated London News*, *The Times*, and *The Field*. They recounted the "strenuous hike" – as Dominican anthropologist Lennox Honychurch realistically describes it – "in the tones of dramatic Victorian adventure, similar to exploring the Congo or reaching the source of the Nile" (Honychurch 1991:62). Their zeal in spreading the tidings of their momentous achievement was such that by the time Hesketh Bell arrived in 1899 to

take up his post as Dominica's administrator, he acknowledged the lake to be "the chief 'sight' of Dominica" (Bell 1946:10).

My interest in "encounters" such as that of the Boiling Lake stems in part from the understanding that such discoveries serve to historicize the specificities of the various forms of colonialisms operating in the West Indies in the second half of the nineteenth century. In "The Historical Anthropology of Text," Neil L. Whitehead argues for the necessity of fully contextualizing the texts that result from "first contact situations" such as that of the discovery of the Boiling Lake, which constitute a "special class of historical event which is much rarer and more limited than its iconography in current debates would suggest" (Whitehead 1995:55). Methodologically, he proposes that, in addition to the study of the internal tropes through which these accounts have been constructed, we

> consider native social and cultural praxis, particularly as expressed in native tropes, of course retrospectively constructed from artefactual, textual and oral records. While the description of this native praxis is obviously an initial object of European textual description, native praxis is itself a necessary and viable context for the interpretation and analysis of European texts: quite literally, it is a *context* – it "goes with" the text. (Whitehead 1995:55)

My approach to the study of this particular encounter – as illustrative of the responses of colonial representations and practices as specific to particular social, political, and geographical circumstances – follows Whitehead as well as Nicholas Thomas's *Colonialism's Cultures* which argues for an understanding of a "pluralized field of colonial narratives, which are seen less as signs than as practices, or as signifying practices rather than elements of a code" (Thomas 1994:8-9). Thomas has based his notions on Pierre Bourdieu's analytic strategy, "which situates colonial representations and narratives in terms of agents, locations and periods" conducive to a vision of colonialisms rather than colonialism (Thomas 1994:9).

The colony of Dominica had a complex early history. It had been one of several territories granted by Royal Decree to the Earl of Carlisle in 1627, but it was not successfully settled until the mid-eighteenth century, when French planters established sugar plantations on the island. Despite coming firmly under English control on 1805, it remained, until well into the twentieth century, French at heart. The peasantry, and to a certain extent the powerful colored Creole elite of small-scale planters and merchants, held adamantly to their French patois or *Kwéyol*, even though government schools (to which the peasantry had very limited access) taught only English (Eliot 1938:222). British influence, however, was manifest in the institutions, the administrative and legislative patterns, the political model, and the style of social life among the community of English settlers (Paravisini-Gebert

1996:3-4). This white community was small and generally not very wealthy. Landowners often allowed their overseers to run their estates, and the island lacked the society rooted in grand estate houses that characterized the white upper classes of Antigua and Jamaica.

The island had, in fact, never partaken of the legendary riches spawned by the plantation economy. The fertility of its soil was legendary, but the sugar plantation was already past its heyday when the price collapse of the 1880s virtually wiped it out. Dominica, moreover, had always been a relatively inefficient sugar producer. The planters' ill-fated decision to switch from coffee to sugar cultivation in the 1840s had come just a few decades before market prices began the irrevocable decline (see Trouillot 1988:56-57). The island's rugged terrain and poor infrastructure had kept the size of plantations small, and they could not compete with the larger, more technologically advanced plantations on other islands. The dependence on local overseers – many of them of mixed race – had contributed to the entrenchment of the powerful colored elite who exerted considerable influence on local government. The topography also made the black population much more independent; there had been, even before Emancipation, large settlements of free Blacks and Mulattoes who owned land or lived as squatters on abandoned or neglected estates. After the sugar industry's collapse, a number of potentially profitable cash crops were tried – cacao, vanilla, and spices, cassava for starch, rubber, Liberian coffee, limes, and most recently, bananas. Moreover, the colored elite dominated the Legislative Council; the Brown Privilege Bill of 1831 had ended political discrimination based on race, leading to a majority of colored members in the legislature by 1838 (Honychurch 1984:34). Throughout the nineteenth century the British colonial government attempted unsuccessfully to curb the influence of the colored elite by proposing changes that would give colonial officials more influence on government matters.

Henry Nicholls's career as a colonial official in Dominica developed against the background of these political tensions. An ambitious man who held appointed positions in the local legislative council until his death in 1929, Dr. Nicholls built his reputation (and a modest fortune) on his scientific endeavors. In 1891, his *Blue Book* report on the cure for yaws (which translated local curative practices into scientific discourse) added to the fame he had earned as the lake's discoverer. His experiments in the cultivation of lime at his estate at St. Aroment, it is claimed, set the foundation for the Dominican economy from the collapse of sugar exportation in 1885 until the late 1950s. (Nicholls worked with his mentor, Dr. John Imray, on adapting the Martiniquan process of extracting essential oil from the lime rind [Trouillot 1988:60].) When James Anthony Froude visited Dominica in the late 1880s, he described Nicholls as "the only man in the island of really superior attainments" (Froude 1888:164-65). The discovery of the Boiling Lake in 1875 was, for Nicholls, the beginning of a career as a colonial offi-

cial of scientific accomplishments. His initial reaction to the "discovery" however, was marked by awe rather than scientific restraint. His description of the "expedition" to the lake, published in the magazine *The Field* in June 1875 attempts to imbue the moment of arrival with all the wonder of grandiose achievement:

> Scrambling over the masses of sulphur we attained the summit and from thence beheld a most marvellous sight. We seemed to be upon the brink of an awful abyss, from whence were vomited up volumes of hot steam and suffocating vapours. Loud rumbling noises and peculiar bubbling sounds saluted our ears; noxious sulphureous gases filled our nostrils. Altogether the sound was so strange, so unexpected, so wonderful, that many minutes elapsed before we were able to speak to each other. We stood still and gazed on. After a time the wind veered and blew aside the vapours, when we saw at our feet a Boiling Lake! (Nicholls 1876:3)

Bernard Smith has suggested, in *European Vision and the South Pacific*, that "European control of the world required a landscape practice that could first survey and describe, then evoke an emotional engagement with the land that new settlers had alienated from its aboriginal inhabitants" (Smith 1985:9). In this his first description of the "view" of the lake – represented as being "at our feet" – Nicholls makes a fetish out of his "discovery," eroticizing it in a mimicry of surrender and signaling its first salvo as a tourist sight. Whether this fetishizing of the view will lead to the control that Nicholls's rhetoric takes for granted is another matter entirely. A discovered site, Thomas has argued, could be subsumed "to the form of a picture, and seeing a thing first as a representation and secondly as something beyond a representation created a peculiar sense of power on the side of the viewing colonist, which was of course not necessarily reflected in real control over the populations in any particular place" (Thomas 1994:112). Ironically, when placed in the context of Dominican society in 1875, Nicholls and Watt's will-to-discover might very well have been inspired by their perceived need to help firm up English control over a colony and a local population consistently slipping out of British grasp. Lennox Honychurch has argued convincingly in *The Dominica Story* (1984) that so successful was the local resistance that Dominica became the only West Indian island where British colonial control was successfully challenged in the nineteenth century (see Savory 1998:5-6).

Nicholls's rhetorical approach is above all a mimetic element that lays bare the language of its pretext, revealing its antecedents in a growing literature of geographical exploration and discovery. His bombastic dissemination of information about the discovery of the Boiling Lake, of which the article in *The Field* is but one example, fulfills two functions. It indicates to the reader how he/she ought to assess the importance of the achievement at hand, while equating the text generically with the contemporary accounts of geographical

discovery flooding the European book market. Nicholls, for example, appeals to the reader's sense of wonder – an almost de rigueur rhetorical response to a discovery. Stephen Greenblatt, writing about the literature of the exploration of South America, identifies wonder as the discoverer's stock response: "Wonder—thrilling, potentially dangerous, momentary immobilizing, charged at once with desire, ignorance, and fear—is the quintessential human response to what Descartes calls a 'first encounter'" (Greenblatt 1991:20).

Watt and Nicholls's "reports" responded to a mimetic impulse mediated by the popularity of the narratives on geographical and scientific exploration that had created a new breed of popular hero in Victorian England, the scientist-cum-explorer whose exploits were read widely in the pages of the *Illustrated London News* and other publications intended for the edification and entertainment of the British middle and upper classes. The fabulous expanses of terrain, the exotic locales and architecture, the wondrous tales of rituals and ceremonies, the unfamiliar peoples and races contributed to enhancing the nation and its Queen in the eyes of British subjects at home and abroad. As imperial propaganda, they served to justify conquest and colonization abroad, often providing the link between expatriate families throughout the Empire. As entertainment, they encouraged the illusion among the middle classes that they possessed valuable "knowledge" that they could share with a pretense of "culture" during elegant dinner parties.

The texts most closely linked to Nicholls and Watt's adventure were those published between 1873 and 1875 by and about Lieutenant Verney Lovett Cameron (1844-1894) following his 3,000-mile walk across Africa from Zanzibar on the Indian Ocean to Benguela, on the Atlantic coast (later collected in his *Across Africa*, 1877). In 1872, Cameron had been commissioned by the Royal Geographical Society to lead an expedition to locate and bring aid to the missionary/explorer David Livingstone (1813-1873), thought to be lost in eastern Africa. Livingstone's adventures had been one of the most closely followed and richly reported of all exploration narratives of the latter half of the nineteenth century, and this intense focus turned towards Cameron as his expedition, shortly after leaving Zanzibar, met Livingstone's servants bearing his body and continued on to Lake Tanganyika to recover the late explorer's papers.

Cameron's expedition had gone on to establish the lake's outlet at the Lukuga River and trace the Congo-Zambezi watershed, reaching the African west coast in 1875. The Lieutenant, unabashedly entrepreneurial, exploited his fame and dashing good looks to further his career as an explorer. Upon his return to England he hit the lecture circuit with élan, followed his exploits with his best-selling book, *Across Africa*, and for the rest of his short life was associated with commercial projects in Africa, among them the Cape to Cairo railway partially built by Cecil Rhodes and the African-Asian railway from Tripoli, Libya, to Karachi [now Pakistan].

Dominican writer F. Sterns-Fadelle, in a pamphlet grandly entitled *The Boiling Lake of Dominica: A Historical and Descriptive Account of a Unique Phenomenon* (1902), speaks of his own contribution to the discovery of the lake in 1875 as having consisted of lending Watt, an intimate friend from boyhood, his copies of Cameron's descriptions of his African expedition. Having read Cameron, Watt, who "had always been given to indulge in the roving propensities which were to him as an instinct," was inspired "with an enormous zeal to imitate his pedestrian prototype" in footing it across the island (Sterns-Fadelle 1902:4). Watt's first Cameron-inspired transisland trek was a cheery catastrophe. Abandoned by his guides, he loses his way in the mountains – an abandonment that Sterns-Fadelle compares, not without a trace of pompous irony, to Emanuel Gomez's abandonment of Ferdinand Magellan on his voyage of discovery through the South American Straits. Search parties are sent out in fruitless pursuit, and Watt emerges from the deep tropical wilderness a week later, "a wild figure, clad in foul rags, with matted hair, bronzed and sunken cheeks and hungry eyes" (Sterns-Fadelle 1902:5). His reports on his wanderings among the sulphur-crusted boulders of the Grande Soufrière and of his intimations of the presence of "some important and unknown volcanic center in that region," would lead to a second expedition during which the Watt-Nicholls party would reach the lake itself.

I want to return to Sterns-Fadelle's report of Watt's admiration and imitation of Cameron's texts as directly conducive to the Boiling Lake expedition, because it points to a most vital gap between their tale of the lake's discovery and its rhetorical models. The discovery of the lake is an enterprise mediated by the narratives of the achievements of travelers trekking across vast continents (Africa, Asia, South America) in quest of natural wonders, which in turn lead to the appropriation of vast expanses of land and the incorporation of myriad peoples into the expanding British Empire.

The discovery of the Boiling Lake, by contrast, is an island-bound enterprise that does not lend itself to hyperbolic epic treatment without a slight tinge of irony, given the noncontinental dimensions of the terrain to be traversed. Dominica is, after all, a small island some thirty-five miles long and fifteen miles wide at its broadest expanse. It is not a land mass, despite the thickness of its forests and difficult topography, that can hide its geological treasures from the truly committed explorer for very long. In this finite island terrain, Cameron's continental expedition must be reduced to Watt and Nicholls's "strenuous island hike." Watt and Nicholls may write grandiosely about their achievement without self-irony, but more objective observers such as Sterns-Fadelle cannot. The latter will write of the discovery of the lake as an expedition "which marks an epoch in the history of Dominica," but cannot refrain from showering good-humored irony on his friend Watt, who is credited with surviving his earlier ordeal to write "a thrilling narrative" of his earlier adventures and sufferings as he "painfully" wended "his

weary way through the four or five square miles covering the area of the sulphur beds" (Sterns-Fadelle 1902:7, 6).

If irony and parody are Stern-Fadelle's strategies to account for the rhetorical gap between Nicholls and Watt's narratives and an enterprise that lacks heroic proportions, the so-called discoverers will predictably seek to confer importance on their feat by turning to the native peasant population as ignorant, superstitious, unscientific mirrors to their comparative bravery and intrepidity. "Discourses of conquest," Nicholas Thomas has observed, "often seem to operate through denigrated stereotypes, through types of 'others' such as the savage or lazy native" as they do in most accounts of the discovery of Dominica's Boiling Lake (Thomas 1994:124).

Charles William Day, writing about Dominica in his *Five Years' Residence in the West Indies* (1852) before the "discovery" of the Boiling Lake, already posited the white European would-be discoverer in a superior relationship to the native (peasant or Creole bourgeois alike), possessors of a lesser kind of knowledge, or of no knowledge at all. Claiming that two-thirds of the island territory has never been explored (revealing thus his own ignorance of extensive eighteenth-century surveys and maps by the likes of Rigobert Bonne, Jacques-Nicolas Bellin, Thomas Jefferys, and Emanuel and Thomas Bowen), Day alludes to the natives' lack of courage for exploration (i.e., enterprise) and intimates his belief that discovery is a European prerogative:

> No one here has spirit enough to organize an expedition into the interior, out of the beaten track. Vague rumours occasionally come down from erratic negroes: but to the civilized world – if the term be not misapplied in toto to the white population out here – the interior of Dominica is as much a terra incognita as the sources of the White Nile in Africa ... A very fine, extensive lake is said to exist in the interior of Dominica but no white man has, as yet, seen it. Any race of whites might readily populate the mountainous regions of these islands; and a very good way, too, it would be of gradually superseding the necessity for the negro. (Day 1852:239)

Day is writing at a time when geographical exploration had become the Empire's chief weapon for expansion and economic development. His critique of the Dominicans' lack of enterprise fits into a well-developed rhetoric of justification of continued colonization that requires the presentation of the natives (regardless of race or class) as lesser beings whom it is quite fit to dispossess. Lacking in all the attributes needed for supremacy – the result of ethnic, racial, cultural, technological, and economic inferiority – they are not equipped to value and exploit the land and resources they possess. His anticipation of forthcoming discovery "by white [British] men," as these geological features are already known to "erratic negroes," outlines a series of discursive strategies that we will find oft-repeated in the many accounts of travels to the Boiling Lake that follow in the wake its "discovery." Bravery will be

the province of Whites; cowardice that of the natives. True knowledge, as an attribute of white civilization, must eventually replace the native's "erratic" notions. Discovery and exploration must lead to white colonization, and thus to the replacement of the native (whether that means substitution of natives by Whites or the replacement of the native in his "proper" subordinate space, he does not make clear).

It would be easy to set aside Day's dismissal of the "negroes'" incapacity for enterprise as stemming from racialized presuppositions that are part and parcel of colonial thought. From this perspective, there would be no role for the black "native" (if the term is adequate to refer to populations made "native" by forced migration and enslavement), except as cheap labor, in the economic and social development of colonized territories for which geographical exploration was such a cornerstone. The negro, Day claims, "will ever be a bad peasant; and nature has unfitted him for anything higher in the social scale" (Day 1852:239). The fact, however, is that Day is writing, at best, with very little understanding of Dominica or, at worst, with a conscious intention of distorting the truth about the realities of island conditions. Of previous geographical exploration by the French colonizers who preceded the British in Dominica he seems to know nothing. Of the prosperous, economically and politically powerful Creole elite (most of them colored) he has nothing to say in this context, except perhaps inasmuch as they are the "whites" only partially deserving of the title of "civilized." The independent-minded peasantry, which from his perspective is superfluous – except to the degree that their labor was required for the renewal of the plantation economy after Emancipation – must have appeared to him as a considerable threat to colonial control. The truth was that in Dominica, Creole and expatriate lack of enterprise in populating the interior – the result, for the most part, of the obstacles to expansion posed by the often impenetrable mountainous terrain – had left it open to black peasant ownership.

In Dominica, whose mountainous terrain and poor infrastructure had made it a site marginal to the large sugar plantation model that dominated the region's economy, local mulatto families had secured a foothold in the medium-scale plantation economy that set the standards for production on the island. As a result, it possessed a fairly entrenched Creole middle class. In any case, by the time of Day's visit, those among the more recent English settlers (medical officers, government officials, vicars, and tutors) who ventured into plantation agriculture (as did Dr. Nicholls and his mentor, John Imray) did so with varying degrees of moderate success, primarily because of unstable access to potential workers. As Rolph Trouillot has observed in *Peasants and Capital*, in late nineteenth-century Dominica, "the contradiction between property relations on the one hand and labor and distribution relations on the other was obvious: planters owned the land, but sharecroppers could exploit the low supply of labor to impose distribution conditions more favorable to themselves"

(Trouillot 1988:86). The presence of large settlements of free Blacks and Mulattoes who owned land or lived as squatters in abandoned estates had produced an independent-minded peasantry, which included a substantial population of Caribs, who had a virtual free rein in the interior of the island and were accustomed to negotiating the terms of their employment and the parameters of their acceptance or rejection of foreign and local power with greater freedom than their counterparts in neighboring islands. This was not a group of "natives" – Creole, black, or Carib, peasant or bourgeois – likely to accept the passive role imposed on them by these narratives of discovery without an attempt at inserting their own versions of events into the tale.

Nicholls's original account of their "discovery" becomes the mediating text for subsequent essays on visits to the site, and this narrative, as published in *The Field* in 1875, seeks to place the local peasantry in the position of an audience so intellectually and courageously (because racially) inferior as to reflect the white discoverer's feat in its proper, superior light. Nicholls acknowledges no irony in describing how he had sent two peasants as an advance party to open a track through "the primeval forest" – they do so with such assurance of the most expedient route to the lake as to take the group there almost directly – but disparages as superstitious the very knowledge of the local terrain that makes it possible for the group to find the lake by the morning of the second day. Given the relatively modest distance traversed, and the apparent certainty of imminent arrival, the "expedition" is more akin to a party of tourists led by experienced guides.

William Palgrave, who accompanied Nicholls on his third "expedition" to the lake in 1877, juggles some torturous rhetoric in dismissing the possibility of previous native/local awareness of the lake's existence, only to acknowledge that Watt and Nicholls's 1875 feat was somewhere between a "task of verification" and a "discovery." The ascent to the lake, he concludes, "though more than once attempted, had for seventy years at least remained unaccomplished":

> Tradition only, speaking through an old French description of the island, told of a large and active "soufrière," nestled amid the highest ranges. … But for a century or thereabouts not only had no European succeeded in penetrating to this reported wonder; no negro charcoal-burner, however familiar with the "bush," had pushed his rovings to the brink of the soufrière; the Caribs ... knew nothing, or at any rate had nothing to say, of the lonely region that towered above their abodes. The strong smell of sulphur, that when the wind happened to be from the southeast, reached the town of Roseau itself, though at a distance of fourteen or fifteen miles in a straight line, alone gave witness how huge must be the dimensions, how constant the activity of the soufrière whence it proceeded. (Palgrave 1877:367)

This curious passage, which speaks with such authority about the native's ignorance and silence, unveils the assumption that knowledge can only be claimed by the existence of a text. Palgrave falls easily into the fallacy of assuming that a lack of literacy on the part of the native peasant population precludes the possibility of knowledge. The assumption had marked colonial thought since the earliest writings of the Spanish conquistadores, who privileged the mastery of writing as "an unmistakably superior representational technology":

> The unlettered peoples of the New World could not bring the strangers into focus; conceptual inadequacy severely impeded, indeed virtually precluded, an accurate perception of the other. The culture that possessed writing could accurately represent to itself (and hence strategically manipulate) the culture without writing, but the reverse was not true. (Greenblatt 1991:11)

Drawing upon Tzvetan Todorov's work on the rhetoric of the conquest of America, Greenblatt wonders if there indeed is "a 'technology' of symbolism as capable of evolution as the technology of tools," and whether this indeed means that "societies possessing writing are more advanced than societies without writing" (Todorov 1984:80). The assumption has entered the rhetoric of discovery as a given, providing an a priori rationale for establishing and describing relationships between discoverers/colonists and natives. In the writings of latter-day discoverers, such as Nicholls's, the "absence of writing" on which these cultural hierarchies were built is conflated with the absence of literacy, as if they were identical phenomena and resulted in identical incapacities for self-representation.

The Dominican peasantry these discoverers encountered in 1875, however, did not live in a society marked by the absence of writing. They may have been illiterate in a literate society, but they had a working command of three languages (French, *Kwèyol* or local patois, and English) and a rhetorical tradition (which they shared with the local Creole elite) that had mastered parody, irony, mockery, and humor as ways of negotiating the subtleties of colonial rule. These negotiating strategies required a nuanced understanding of the colonizer's ways that allowed for veiled scorn and strategically deployed sarcasm. Long experienced in navigating colonial relations across three languages and in using irony and derision as weapons, they were well versed in the verbal artillery required to conduct a ritual of power plays. Faced with English colonial supremacy, the native Dominicans, peasant and bourgeois alike, struck back by mocking Whites.

With these rhetorical complexities as background, it is perhaps easier to understand the temptation to "silence" the Dominican peasant in the narrative of the discovery and exploration of the lake or to find a discourse the local population, peasant as well as bourgeois, did not command – that of science. The strategy seems twofold: either the native has nothing to say for himself about the existence of the lake, or what he has to say is mere folklore

that never rises to the category of science. Given the professionalization of science that had marked nineteenth-century Europe, "true knowledge" about the Boiling Lake was only possible through the writing of scientific or pseudoscientific texts. The development of scientific methodology in the century before had created a hierarchy of discourses that separated the information accessible to the common man from that available to the specialist. Bruno Latour, in *The Pasteurization of France*, uses the history of the laboratory to show how the creation of a space designed for isolated experimentation separated scientific knowledge from commonplace experience (Latour 1988).

In the laboratory, Latour suggests, "unprecedented things were now to be expressed in written signs" (Latour 1988:85) that created a hierarchy of its own – formulas, equations, reports that constituted a separate discourse. Discovery in the laboratory as well as in the field followed by detailed explication of the features and uses of the phenomenon discovered was the mark of the true scientist. Hence the commodity value of the claim to discovery for Dr. Nicholls, who had, after all, been educated as a medical doctor in British universities that had trained many of the foremost British scientists and explorers of the day and that had followed his writings on the discovery of the lake with a number of serious scientific papers on various geological and botanical phenomena in the West Indies. Palgrave, a writer with scientific pretensions of his own, when forced to question the validity of Nicholls's claim, will turn a critical eye on the latter's own narrative of discovery, letting its own bombastic rhetoric – "they described [the lake] as by far surpassing in extent and grandeur anything yet known in the West Indies" – deflate itself when made to stand against his debunking of the enterprise as "confirmation" rather than "discovery" (Palgrave 1877:366). But he will still attempt to salvage Nicholls's claim to a discovery of scientific importance. His and Watt's discovery, "though difficult and even dangerous" of access, may not be "available to any ends" (i.e., not exploitable comercially), but still remains something "of curiosity, perhaps of science" (Palgrave 1877:367). The issue of whether knowledge about the lake constitutes science and of who possesses and controls that knowledge is central to this discussion. Hence my interest in the natives' unacknowledged knowledge. These narratives that silence the native or reduce his utterances to superstition or folklore prompt questions such as *How much did the native know? And when did he know it?*

Bernard Cohn, writing about the conquest of India – a continental conquest if there ever was one – describes the importance of securing and disseminating "official colonial knowledge" to sustaining the notion of Empire: "the conquest of India was a conquest of knowledge … the vast social world that was India had to be classified, categorized and bounded before it could be hierachized" (Cohn 1985:283-84). A similar colonial mandate motivates the many visitors to the Boiling Lake that followed in the wake of its discovery, but the scale of investigation is much narrower, as befits an island-

bound enterprise. So here I must return to Dominica's island condition and the likelihood of the peasantry not knowing about the existence of the lake before its discovery.

Nicholls acknowledges no prior information about the lake, other than the "intimations" in Watt's narrative of his rampage through the woods. Day speaks of "notions" put forth by "erratic negroes." Palgrave even denies the natives the title of guides, as it presupposes prior knowledge, preferring to refer to them as "the carriers of our provisions, hammocks, and so forth," claiming the existence of no track, except what "we" might make for ourselves (a "we" that does not include the silent bearers who are actually opening a path through the dense tropical forest with their cutlasses). Palgrave can, in the same breath, negate any prior knowledge on the part of the natives while chastising them for their silence and lack of imagination about the lake:

> I wish that I had some interesting legend to recount connected with the spot and for such we curiously inquired, but in vain, from our dusky attendants. No negro, no Carib tradition adds the wonders of imagination to those of fact; no story of past demi-god or devil, of nymph or neckar, assigns an origin or a history to the Lake ... the Boiling Lake has, for aught that we could discover, remained a mere natural phenomenon for Indians and Creoles no less than for Europeans; and when ... one of our attendants, turning back, addressed the vaporous gulf with a cabalistic "Salaam-Aleykum" picked up from some African cousin of Mohammedan origin, he gave the first and only expression of superstition aroused by the view. (Palgrave 1877:373, 374)

Palgrave's disappointed expectations of legends and myths betray his assumption that the Dominican peasant, as a premodern man, would have responded to the existence of a Boiling Lake through archaic, nonscientific modes of thought and "superstitious" rituals. His rather keen disappointment upon finding that the local peasantry has treated the lake as a "mere natural phenomenon" seems only to reduce the peasantry's own value as a phenomenon whose own myths and legends would contribute to the value of the lake's discovery.

Surprisingly, Hendrik De Leeuw, upon questioning his guide in the 1920s, finds that "many tales and legends have been hatched about this awe-inspiring place" (De Leeuw 1937:225). Natives, he explained, feared visiting the place, believing that "miserable and vengeful ghosts and evil spirits wander about, perpetrating dirty work and nasty tricks." Other "superstitious natives" would leave offerings of food at the lake to appease the mountain spirits and would warn visitors that they could be "sucked to the bottom of the cauldron by a sudden and irresistible force" as punishment "for presuming to disturb the peace of the spirits." Inquiries about spirits and ghostly apparitions left the guide shaking "like an aspen leaf," twitching about "like a parched pea."

Frederick Endlich, for example, writing for the *American Naturalist* in 1880, describes a minor volcanic eruption at the lake, presaged by a huge dark cloud hovering over Roseau and followed by a rain of fine particles of some gray, mineral-like material that covered all foliage and vegetation. He juxtaposes in his description the "apprehension" awakened in those believing the "mysterious legends as to volcanic activity on the island" with the "cool observers, among whom Dr. Nicholls of Roseau was prominent" (Endlich 1880:766). Describing his expedition to the lake he claims that as his group neared the "point of greatest chemical activity" they were deserted by their guides – adding that it was "not that their guidance was in the least valuable, but [that] we wanted them to carry specimens" (Endlich 1880:765). No persuasion or threat availed to make them follow, he claims, since they believed that the mountain was inhabited by evil spirits. A refusal to get nearer because of an awareness of possible dangers connected to the environment does not seem to occur to him. However, there is little in the tradition of Dominican folk *kònts* (tales) that would justify such fears relating to the Boiling Lake. Among the tales gathered by Gary Ray Smith in his comprehensive study of the Dominican oral tradition ("The Dominican Kònt: An Analysis of Folktales and Storytelling on a Caribbean Island," 1991), only one cautionary tale, "The Dangerous Forest," could be indirectly connected to the dangers lurking within a lake such as the Boiling Lake.

There is, however, a tongue-in-cheek nature to these tales of superstitious natives that forces the reader to wonder – particularly in the absence of any such "superstitions" surrounding the lake in Dominican folklore prior to the 1875 "discovery" – if they have been invented by the writers, or more likely, by savvy guides who understood the value of legend and superstition as commodities bound to make the exotic experience of visiting the lake more titillating to tourists. There is a performative aspect involved in the dramatic "Salaam Aleykum" of Palgrave's guide that suggests an impromptu response to the explorers' expectations of superstition and legend, an implicit understanding that the addition of those elements would increase the touristic value of the lake and bring more income to the village of Laudat, from which the guides were drawn. Are the explorers, one wonders, having their proverbial leg pulled? Have their guides, indeed, invented a tradition of myth and legend to satisfy the expectations of foreign visitors?

The possibility of an ironic reading based on the native's perception of the visitors' expectations – which they could have easily gleaned from the Europeans' inquiries – allows for a more nuanced analysis of these writings about the lake's discovery. Often in these texts, the native's fears (whether real or assumed by the writers) are countered by descriptions of the white visitors' coolness and fearlessness. American geologist Kenneth Earle, describing the "terrible spectacle" of the Boiling Lake in his "Geological Notes on the Island of Dominica," describes a small beach at the north end

of the lake as "accessible to photographers and other venturesome spirits – but not to negro guides!" (Earle 1928: 182). However, the local guides' "fearfulness" – if seen from their perspective – can be read as understandable caution. Most of the guides involved in the increasingly large number of visits to the Boiling Lake throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries belonged to the Rowle family of Laudat, many of whose members had witnessed or been the victims of all the fatal accidents that had taken place at that same beach to which they would not venture. When accounts of their "fearfulness" are read from their perspective, fear becomes acceptable caution and the visitors' "courage" turns into reckless arrogance.

In visitors' texts, the Dominican peasantry's easy familiarity with nature is the only knowledge they are easily granted. When abilities are acknowledged, they are physical rather than intellectual. Endlich has little to say in praise of the local guides, other than to commend their "climbing quality and endurance" (Endlich 1880:796). Likewise Stuart Elliott who, writing in 1951, in awe at his guide's remarkable climbing ability, resorts to comparisons with animals: "His soles were a half inch thick with callouses and were as tough as a tapir's hide; and his toes, unwarped by any artificiality, were broad and straight and widely spread. When he stepped on a slippery rock, his toes curled around the edge and gripped almost like the clutch of a bird" (Elliott 1951:443). A. Hyatt Verrill, in *The Book of the West Indies*, credits the natives' superior understanding of the physical conditions that makes access to the lake safe (he relies on their knowledge of when they would be safe from poisonous gases) but falls into delighted surprise when he sees how cleverly the men use the lake's boiling waters and hot steam to prepare their food "in Nature's stove" (Verrill 1917:23). Familiarity is expected, ingenuity is not.

Frederick Ober, an American naturalist who visited the lake in 1879, is the first visitor who grants the Dominicans a voice, thus breaking the peasants' customary silence in these narratives. Proud of being "the first American to look upon [the lake] and the first of any nationality to take a photograph," he is also the first to include in his account extended instances of reported speech (Ober 1904:333). In his *Camps in the Caribbees* (1886), he describes the "mountaineers" who lead him into the forest in search of rare species of birds, as "bronzed as to complexion, and very much mixed up as to ancestry ..., faithful, honest, untiringly zealous in serving, and as woodsmen ... unsurpassed" (Ober 1886:67).

Perhaps Ober's more democratic American perspective explains the vivid presence of the Dominican peasant in his writings, although this presence is not without condescension or an understanding that their evident superiority in nature is nonetheless class-bound. His guide to the lake, a Laudat man known as Zizi (Jean Baptiste Rowle, Watt and Nicholls's guide, who some years later died by falling into the lake), was the "embodiment of all the servingman's virtues," and had moreover "an overwhelming regard for the white

man – the white man whom he could respect – who, he said, was next to the Bon Dieu. 'White man he next to God; I thank ze Bon Dieu eef I can speks ze Eengleesh'" (Ober 1904:333-34).

Ober opens the narrative of his visit to the lake in 1877 by questioning the possibility of its remaining undiscovered and unknown until so recently: "It seems incredible that in an island with scarce one hundred miles of coast line, and containing only three hundred square miles, there could exist not only a lake of boiling water, detonating frequently with loud reports, but a large area of volcanic activity, without any human being being aware of the fact through several centuries" (Ober 1904:336). He, moreover, allows one of his "boys," Joseph Rowle, to tell the story of Watt's clueless ramble in some approximation of his own words:

> "M'sieu Watt he walk, walk, walk, pour tree day: he lose hees clo's, hees pants cut off; he make nozing pour manger but root; he have no knife, no nozing; hees guide was town neegah ... ; zey was town neegah, sah, and leab him and loss him. Bien, he come to black man's ajoupa in wood, an' ze black man sink he jombie an' he run; when he come back wiz some more men for look for jombie M'sieu Watt he make coople of sign – for he have loss hees voice and was not to spek – an 'zey deescovair heem." (Ober 1886:67-68)

Figure 1. Joseph Rowle and family, Laudat, Dominica, circa 1890 (courtesy of the American Museum of Natural History).

This version of Watt's "Lost in the Woods" episode underscores the foolishness and credulity of young Watt as he embarks on his nearly disastrous ramble through the dense Dominican tropical forest. Seen from the native peasant's perspective, it would be sheer madness to venture into the forest trusting to town people unfamiliar with the terrain, with no knife or cutlass of his own to cut through the bush, and with no ability or knowledge to secure anything to eat but roots. When he emerges from the forest, traumatized and unrecognizable as a man, he resembles someone who has gone to the other side, who has endured a sort of death, a *jombie*. And in an inversion of the norm in narratives of discovery, Watt "goes native" (i.e., he is silenced and needs to communicate by "coople of sign") and the natives must "deescovair" or recognize him. Ober may have been charmed by Rowle's quaintness of language and expression into including this first-person narrative into his account, without realizing that it represents an almost revolutionary stance. From questioning the possibility of the lake having remained undiscovered until 1875 to ridiculing Watt, his account reveals a peasant in full command of his rational powers, ready to "read" Watt's behavior in a critical light, expressing his own superior understanding of what was required to avoid such an unnecessary adventure.

Similarly, in an 1880 letter to the Royal Geographic Society, G.B. Blanc, the island's Surveyor General, inserts into his description of a recent eruption at Dominica's Grand Soufrière his second-hand account of the report of a team of villagers from Laudat. Here, the villagers' report is appropriated into a scientific account published in one of the premier forums for such information in the world. Their narrative reverts to the benefit of the surveyor general – to whose reputation as a scientist it contributes – while the peasants themselves remain outside the scope of scientific discourse:

> this morning the people of Laudat ... *observed* that the ridge which divides the watershed of the central branches of the Roseau Rives from the northern branch of the Point Mulatre River has almost disappeared … *I sent a party of experienced woodmen* to ascertain the extent of the country destroyed, and *they reported* that after passing the middle branch of the head-waters of the Roseau River, the path ... was completely obliterated ... They were obliged to follow the middle branch up, wading knee-deep in the soft, sandy ash thrown out by the convulsion ... From the ridge, which had considerably fallen in height, away to the east as far as the deep valley of the Point Mulatre below the Boiling Lake, was a bare, barren mass of debris; not, *they say*, a standing tree or leaf to be seen ... Whether the lake as a lake existed or not *they could not tell*, as they did not get within a mile of it. (Blanc 1880:62, my emphasis)

These accounts, however, are exceptions among the many narratives that reduce the native to the role of a silent bearer, a strategy that would be easy to attribute to a racist impulse or monolingual arrogance that seeks to impose scientific discourse over superstitious ramblings as the means to assert the social and economic hierarchies of colonial societies. But in Dominica in 1875, social and economic categories were not so simply defined in terms of black and white/English vs. native, as the island had a strong French-derived mulatto elite whose recognition of English authority was never unproblematic. For Watt and Nicholls, as minor colonial officials, this "discovery" represented an opportunity to distinguish themselves among those readers in England who could further their careers. It is not that their discovery of the Boiling Lake could necessarily lead to territorial expansion or to profitable exploitation, but that Nicholls, particularly, recognized the potential career advantages of a publicity campaign centered on his discovery of the lake and consequently, on his emerging reputation as a scientist. In this he was quite successful – he would go on to "discover" the cure for yaws from watching native healing practices – and was eventually knighted for his services to the island.

These career-enhancing factors – coupled with Watt and Nicholls's conqueror-like arrogance in naming the mountains surrounding the lake after themselves (we have, as a result, Morne Nicholls and Morne Watts) – were given additional snob value when in 1901 a young Englishman, Wilfrid Meysey Clive, a cousin to the Earl of Denbigh and a descendant of Clive of India, died of asphyxiation by lethal gases during his visit to the lake. Clive was setting up his camera on the very spot from which Ober had taken the first photograph of the lake in 1877 when one of his two guides (a man named Wiley) was overcome by the fumes and toppled into the water. Clive dispatched the second guide to Laudat for help but was himself stricken by the gases and died before the rescue party arrived. Ober, writing after his second visit to the Boiling Lake in 1903, describes the pathetic scene in the language of romantic tragedy:

> Through the wild forest which we had traversed so light-heartedly, over the rough trail beneath the giant trees, amid the dense tropic growth, the relief party made their return march by night, lighted by torches of gum wood, and bearing their ghastly burdens on hammocks between them. Years before a similar party had borne to Laudat poor old Zizi, my guide and friend, another victim of the Lake, who had scalded to death in its waters. (Ober 1904:340-41)

After the Clive tragedy, Nicholls would insert the tale of the young man's death – rewritten as a heroic attempt to save his guide's life – as a requisite element in his own narrative of what had by then become "his" discovery, in acknowledgment that the death of this young aristocrat gave the enterprise the perfect martyr, one who through his connection to Clive of India would

enhance the importance and significance of the achievement. For a "native" narrative of Clive's death we have to wait until 1951, when Cyril Rowle, grandnephew to Ober's guide, Zizi, tells the story to Stuart E. Elliott, an American visitor. Cyril's "vivid story," which Stuart claims had been received directly from his grandfather, was that upon their arrival at the lake,

> an enormous bubble, which all but covered the entire lake, rose, swelled ... and broke into foam, releasing its gases into the air ... . Wiley fell where he stood, never to move again. Rowle, who happened to stoop down in a slight declivity where a rivulet sought the lake, escaped the worst of the gas cloud, but he felt a dreadful nausea. Clive scrambled down and stood beside him.
>
> From Rowle's account, Clive refused to believe that Wiley was dead. He tried to revive him with brandy, while Rowle pleaded with him to leave the spot before another bubble should come. However, Clive could not grasp the danger, and belittling the warning, he ordered Rowle to return to Laudat for medical aid. So bidden, Rowle left, and the last time he saw Clive alive, the Englishman was standing with his back against a bank, gazing down on Wiley. When, hours later, Rowle returned with the rescue party, Clive was still in the same position, looking down at the prostrate guide. Clive's eyes were open but saw nothing. He was dead, and so was Wiley. (Elliott 1951:476)

Rowle's account of Clive's death debunks the latter's heroism, so central to the narrative of English colonial expansion. Clive's efforts to save his guide – proof of British noblesse oblige and selfless heroism – emerge in this version as a foolish refusal to heed the warning of his experienced guide, a fatal inability to recognize that Wiley was beyond help, and an arrogant use of his authority as employer/white man to peremptorily send away his only hope for survival. It is "the Other's" version of history, perhaps as flawed as the one generally accepted as truth, but one which underscores the malleability of narrative to serve particular interests, such as those of the colonial officials, exemplified by Nicholls's dependence on the lake for relentless self-promotion.

Nicholls's "discovery" of the lake, the intense self-promotion that followed – and his success in making it serviceable to the advancement of his career and income – drew the fire of that very mulatto elite whose political and economic power rivaled that of the British authorities. There were manifest political tensions between Dominica's colonial bureaucracy and this Creole elite of French descent, two fairly distinct groups whose differences went beyond language and social patterns and spilled into the dominant political debates of the period (see Paravisini-Gebert 1999). The Creole elite dominated the Legislative Council and used its strength to counter the British administration at every possible turn. It was most successful in keeping out of the Council those among the recent English settlers they perceived as conservative in political, social, and racial matters, despite the power open to them as members of the colonial

administration. Such was the case with Nicholls, a conservative in all matters important to the Creole elite, who failed at numerous attempts at election despite a thriving medical practice and promotion to Chief Medical Officer.

Nicholls, in turn, was lionized by the expatriate community in Dominica and neighboring islands, coming to be known as the "Uncrowned King of Dominica" (Menzies 1926:203). To the annoyance of Dominica's Creole elite, British residents and visitors sung the praises of Sir Henry Nicholls for his "unremitting efforts and zeal for his Empire and Dominica" (De Leeuw 1937:226). Hendrik De Leeuw, visiting Dominica after Dr. Nicholls's death in 1926, wrote of Sir Henry as having arrived in Dominica "at a time when the planters again were going to rack and ruin, and the peasants, who were on the point of starvation, were abandoning their work to go to more prosperous neighboring islands" (De Leeuw 1937:219). De Leeuw's rewriting of history credited Dr. Nicholls with almost single-handedly restoring the Dominican economy through his introduction and encouragement of the cultivation of limes, the island's chief crop throughout most of the twentieth century. Quoting his English sources, he described Dr. Nicholls as "the Joshua who led the people of Dominica into the Promised Land" (De Leeuw 1937:219).

Nicholls's career, however, was emblematic of how, "even when colonizers surround themselves with the persuasive scenery of possession and rule, the gaps between projection and performance are frequently betrayed by the anxieties of their texts, which reveal the gestural character of efforts to govern, sanitize, convert and reform" (Thomas 1994:16). Nicholls was the poster boy for the successful colonial official: he had gathered honors in his profession, had been knighted, had run a moderately successful plantation where he conducted his botanical experiments, had been widely published in journals devoted to colonial medicine and science, had raised a prosperous large family after his marriage to the daughter of a rich Creole, he had been lionized by his peers for his accomplishments. Yet the recognition of his local society eluded him – it was, in fact, consistently and consciously denied in an act of sustained resistance to what he represented as a colonial officer of conservative notions.

Nowhere had this been clearer than in the Creole elite's response to the discovery of the lake. The editors of *The Dial*, the newspaper of the Creole/mulatto middle class, had greeted the news of the feat with undisguised scorn, repeatedly claiming that early map makers and local hunters had known of its existence for a century or more before Nicholls's visit. It is true enough that the Grand Soufrière area and the Valley of Desolation of which the lake is the centerpiece appear in earlier descriptions of the island, although whether they refer to the lake as a specific feature of that landscape is not always clear. Thomas Atwood's 1791 book, *The History of the Island of Dominica*, offers the following description of the Valley of Desolation in a tone of awe markedly different from the scientific/discovery rhetoric of almost a century later:

> These sulphureous mountains are certainly among the most wonderful phenomena of nature, and command our astonishment and admiration. To see vast tracks of land on fire, whose smoke, like clouds, stretched far around; brimstone in flames, like streams of water issuing from the sides of precipices; in the vallies large holes full of bituminous matter, boiling and bubbling like a cauldron; the earth trembling under the tread, and bursting out with loud explosions, are objects truly terrific to the beholders; who, on the spot, are struck with awe and admiration, on viewing such dreadful works of the Almighty, who causes them to exist, for purposes only known to him. (Atwood 1931:78)

Atwood's detailed description of the area surrounding the lake was cited often by Nicholls's political enemies as proof of the emptiness of his claim to have discovered the lake. Nicholls would also seek to validate his claim by alluding to a seventeenth-century legend related to "a Lake of Fire somewhere in Dominica's interior never visited by a white man" (De Leeuw 1937:220). According to this legend, there existed in the neighborhood of this Lake of Fire, at a distance of two or three hours from Roseau, a monstrous serpent with "a jewel the size of a carbuncle embedded in its head" that illuminated the forest for miles around. The legend is reported to have lured Nicholls and Watts into the forest, leaving the populace sitting on pins and needles for three days, until they emerged "with the startling news that they had discovered the legendary lake, a boiling one at that – and thus closed a romantic episode in the history of Dominica" (De Leeuw 1937:220).

The lake's "discovery" served as the focus of an intense political debate that did not abate until Nicholls's death and had less to do with the lake itself and more with the tensions between local native knowledge and its commodification abroad for the benefit of a white colonial elite bent on using scientific/discovery enterprises to enhance their status with both the colonial and colonized societies. In nineteenth-century Dominica the Creole merchant and planter class was forever ready with a contestatory discourse which used irony as its principal weapon, as we can see in the following passages, taken from a 1887 response to yet one more article by Nicholls flaunting the discovery. They convey not only the mulatto elite's case against Nicholls's claim of discovery (still going strong twelve years after the fact), but also the importance of the issues at stake in the *Dial*'s repeated attempts to discredit Nicholls:

> How Dr. Nicholls can claim to be the discoverer of the Boiling Lake of Dominica with Mr. Watt's "Lost in the Woods" still legible in the introduction to one of the Old Dominica Almanacs?, and how, with the Boiling Lake marked on an old map of the island, and with Dr. Clarke's [sic] reference to this "most wonderful phenomenon" in 1797, either of the two

> soi-disant Columbuses can unblushingly lay claim to having discovered the Boiling Lake is an enigma we do not pretend to solve. ("Windward News" 1887:2)[1]

The three documents cited here are of particular interest, not only because they support the Creole elite's contention that Nicholls's discovery of the lake represented an appropriation of knowledge already claimed by others, but because the sources were closely allied to the French-derived Creole elite and not to British colonial representatives, and could thus be claimed as local knowledge. Watt, he of the hysterical scramble through the woods, had grown up in Dominica and was connected to many Creole families. Hence the article's willingness to give him and his text, "Lost in the Woods,"[2] primacy as the preferred report on the discovery over Nicholls's own essay in *The Field*.

The claim to the lake's being marked on "an old map" could refer to any of a handful of extant maps displaying unnamed features that could be identified as the Boiling Lake: Archibald Campbell's "Sketch of the Coast" (1761), the earliest published map of the island by Emanuel Bowen (1745), the maps by LeRouge of the 1778 French survey of the island, and those by Thomas Jefferys (1775), Thomas Bowen (1778), Thompson (1814), the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (1835), and George Phillip & Son (1856). They offer evidence of fairly comprehensive surveys dating back to 1745, making it impossible to contend the assertion that Dr. Nicholls's "discovery" constituted the first visit to the area by native or European.

Of greater importance in the Creole elite's arsenal against Nicholls's claim is a book by James Clark, a physician who spent a number of years working in Dominica (1771-88, 1789-96, and 1804-18) researching the incidence and treatment for yellow fever, typhus fever, dysentery, malaria, dry belly-ache, cholera, and tetanus. In *A Treatise on the Yellow Fever as It Appeared in the Island of Dominica* (1797), Clark analyzes the hot baths at Soufrière and makes reference to the "most wonderful phenomenon" in the Valley of Desolation. As only one of two books written about Dominica in the eighteenth century, before the island was ceded to the English by the French – the other being Atwood's *History of the Island of Dominica* (1791) – Clark's account bears the additional authority of his outstanding reputation as a scientist. Being that Clark's work was the most comprehensive medical treatise on Dominica to that date, critics of Nicholls's questioned whether the newly appointed superintendent of hospitals could have been unaware of the book's existence or unfamiliar with its contents, particularly since a lengthy synopsis of the book had appeared in Clark's 1797 work. In 1880,

1. "Windward News," *Dominica Dial*, 7 May 1887, 2.
2. Watt's "Lost in the Woods" had appeared in a local publication, *The Dominica Almanac*.

reporting on a recent volcanic eruption in Dominica to the Royal Geographic Society, Mr. G.E. Blanc, Surveyor-General of the island and a member of the colonial elite, assured his readers that "the Boiling Lake was visited for the first time, in this generation, five years ago; but its existence was known of a century previously, as it is referred to in a work by one Dr. Clarke, F.R.S., dated 1777" (Blanc 1880:366).

To the evidence against Dr. Nicholls' claim, as outlined in the preceding, the editors of the *Dial* add a heavy dose of sarcasm and what amounts to public repudiation:

> But if Dr. Nicholls is able to prove himself the discoverer of the Boiling Lake then an ungrateful world should hasten to christen this lake *locus fervidus Columbi Nicholii*, in recognition of the talented explorer who about the same time tried hard to get our woodsmen to change the name of one of their familiar mountains to Morne Nicholls and if the real Dr. Nicholls would only drown himself in the phenomenon and not reappear, Phoenix-like, from his own bouillon, this part of the world would be saved much of that kind of fustian writing about this island with which the little doctor's article winds up. ("Windward News" 1887:2)[3]

The editors of the *Dial* would heap further scorn on Nicholls and Watts by reminding readers that the mountains they had named after themselves were quite appropriate in their shape as Morne Watts was "tall and thin" and Morne Nicholls was "short and squat." Compared to the sarcasm displayed by the *Dial*, the lightly sprinkled irony that flows over Sterns-Fadelle's description of Watt's and Nicholls's feat with manifest gusto in *The Boiling Lake of Dominica* (1902) must have been read as almost flattering. Writing twenty-eight years after the discovery, Sterns-Fadelle, a Creole of French descent, educated at the University of Paris, demonstrates the persistence of the campaign against Nicholls, which can only be explained as necessary to the continued struggle to disenfranchise the British colonials of which he was a salient representative. His feat of discovering the Boiling Lake – as later his claim to have discovered the cure for yaws – had left him vulnerable to persistent attacks through which the Creole elite sought continuously to rebuff the full extent of English control. The mulatto-controlled Dominican liberal press, through its ideological struggle, opened a contestatory space that was both political and proto-literary. The *Dial*'s main weapons to counter its opposition were wit, irony, and satire – deployed through impassioned argument and mordant commentary and inviting public participation through letters to the editor (see Paravisini-Gebert 1996).

Nicholls's appropriating gestures – the "discovery," the poetic raptures, the naming of mountains after himself – were easy targets for his enemies'

3. "Windward News," *Dominica Dial*, 7 May 1887, 2.

satire precisely because they were not his intended audience, which was "at home" in England. The contestatory role belonged to those "in place," in a position (as his English readers were not) of having access to the landscape and being able to measure the gap between the prose and the reality it purported to reflect. The gap was broad enough for Nicholls's credibility to be nullified and for his claim to discovery (i.e., possession, however abstract given the lake's untouchability) to be openly challenged, a challenge symbolic of the Creole elite's refusal to accept British control without a struggle.

Bolstering the Creole elite's relentless mockery of Nicholls is the belief that discoveries such as that of the Boiling Lake, whether they privilege scientific discourse or sentimental rapture at the island's natural wonders, usurp local knowledge through publication and dissemination abroad – and generally serve to reinforce colonial power relationships and racial hierarchies. In the case of nineteenth-century Dominica, however, a society with a wealthy and politically independent local elite and a savvy and moderately empowered peasant class, those attempts at colonial appropriation of knowledge through scientific enterprise or the traveler's gaze generate the discourse of resistance evident in the *Dial* and in the peasantry's counter-narratives of discovery, which allows the natives, who have long possessed the knowledge others claim to have unveiled, to use irony and parody to ridicule the colonizers' pretensions and destabilize their power.

It is fair to say that the efforts of the Dominican Creole elite to subvert and contest colonial control succeeded in many ways precisely because Dominica was a small island of relatively little importance in the Imperial scheme. Its colonial officials never had the advantage of a strong military establishment to uphold their pretense to power, nor were they able to sustain control without continuous negotiations with the well-established Creole elite bent on recovering its entirety-of-itself and a peasantry which, given the availability of abandoned estates, had to be coerced away from subsistence agriculture to work on estates. The type of colonialism that emerges in Dominica in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as a result, is more akin to a negotiated truce in which the hierarchies of colonial control become malleable and flexible. The perennial struggle for control manifested itself through myriad compromises and uneasy pacts that reflected the fluidity of colonial relations in a tiny outpost of the Empire. Of the many forms of imperialism possible, Dominica forged its own through continued adaptation to local events and circumstances – of which the discovery of the Boiling Lake is but one. Dominica's version of colonialism is drawn from its insularity. An island – a small island at that – it found its insularity to be its best defense.

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