

Navigating the Sea of Alterity: Jean-Baptiste Labat's *Nouveau voyage aux îles*¹

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In 1694, after a voyage of several weeks on a ship sailing from La Rochelle, France, the Dominican priest Jean-Baptiste Labat arrived at the French colony of Martinique; some twenty-eight years later, he transformed his copiously detailed journals into a text that would become a veritable 18th-century bestseller. This remarkable memoir, published in the 1720s, carries the complete title, *Nouveau Voyage aux isles de l'Amérique. Contenant l'histoire naturelle de ces pays, l'origine, les mœurs, la religion & le gouvernement des habitans anciens et modernes; les guerres et les evenemens singuliers qui y sont arrivez pendant le séjour que l'auteur y a fait; le commerce et les manufactures qui y sont établies, & les moyens de les augmenter*. Replete with historical observations interspersed with ethnological, sociological, geographical, zoological, anthropological and gastronomical remarks (among others), this extraordinary text offers scholars a fascinatingly rich chronicle, both factual and, at times, fictional, of the author's life and adventures in the Caribbean during the last years of the greater seventeenth century, including Labat's myriad experiences as a spiritual and political leader on the island. Most entertaining, perhaps, are the missionary's meticulous observations of flora, fauna and feasting designed to pique the French reader's interest in this faraway island of delights, and explorations of the island's culinary and mixological cultures add much to the savory quality of Labat's prose.² Rather more complicated is

¹ I would like to thank Robert Train for his careful reading of this article, and for his very helpful suggestions for improvement. Portions of this study were presented at SE17 conferences in Williamsburg, Virginia (2004) and Brunswick, Maine (2005), and also as an invited lecture at Yale University.

² New intoxicants capturing the hearts of the French are described in chapters on tobacco, coffee and cocoa, where Labat chronicles the role these colonial exports have played in the construction of the French identity, with a particular emphasis on their poorly understood, often toxic nature.

Labat's account of the institution of slavery and his own attitudes toward that institution, which he records just as carefully, constructing an ostensibly more objective, "scientific" knowledge based on his experiences in this complex colonial early modern space. Most significant for the purposes of this study is Labat's highly detailed account of his interactions with a wide variety of individuals inhabiting the island, from white plantation owners to the population of native Caribs to Labat's own African slaves. To my mind, Labat's representation of his own encounters with and relationship to slaves, islanders and others in this Caribbean paradise reveals a considerable degree of ambivalence, as cultural theorist Homi Bhabha has characterized the term, and it is Labat's textual performance of this ambivalence that I will explore here.³ In so doing, I hope, first, to shed light upon Labat's contradictory reputation with regard to slavery; I will then expand the circle of Labat's "performance of ambivalence" to include the indigenous island population, the British, and others. In all cases, I will relate this theory of the performance of ambivalence to Homi Bhabha's notion of the Third Space.

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Of all the diverse facets of French colonialism, perhaps none is so complex, or so resistant to critical discussion, as the institution of slavery; in her recent book *The Libertine Colony*, Doris Garraway notes that "little scholarly attention [has] been devoted to the cultures of slavery of Old Regime France, and, in particular, the texts and literary representations produced about them,"⁴ even, surprisingly, in the area of post-colonial studies. In light of this, Jean-Baptiste Labat's *Voyage aux îles* offers a significant point of departure for a consideration of slavery in seventeenth-century Martinique. To my mind, Labat's *Voyage* reveals a significant tension between, on the one hand, the missionary's infamous acceptance and promotion of slaves as

³ Clearly, one must approach a text like Labat's with a significant degree of skepticism or distance, particularly as he is, for the most part, our sole source of information on the cultures he describes; as Christopher Miller has noted, "Few undertakings have proven more prone to ethical pitfalls than the description of other peoples" (*Theories of Africans*, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1990, 34). However, as Doris Garraway has noted, "The challenge in reading early colonial accounts is to see what they reveal, wittingly or unwittingly, about French attitudes toward the relation, or border, between the French and the [Other] at a specific time and place" (*The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2005, 34-35). Ethical considerations are certainly not elided in this approach.

⁴ Garraway, *op.cit.*, xi.

property to be used (and abused), and, on the other, his appreciation of the *nègres* as a potential source of knowledge and, more significantly, as Others to know, as representatives of a culture of interest from Labat's proto-anthropological perspective. A review of over fifty years of both scholarship and fictional interpretations of Labat's *Voyage* discloses an almost shockingly wide array of judgments of the missionary's attitude toward slaves and the institution of slavery in the New World. For some, Labat was a kind-hearted, benevolent and charitable priest who most often had his slaves' best interests at heart. Everild Young and Kjeld Helweg-Larsen laud Labat's compassion as he hears the confession of a young slave who has been bitten by a poisonous snake.⁵ Rachele Grotzky similarly foregrounds the "very humane side"⁶ of Father Labat, citing his "charité envers les malheureux esclaves," including his efforts to lessen the slaves' workload and his demand that his fellow Frenchmen respect their contributions⁷. Donald Schier calls Labat "completely unsentimental... [yet] good-hearted,"⁸ offering as evidence Labat's efforts to plead for a Catholic slave's freedom. Historian Joan Brace also makes specific references to Labat's "compassion,"⁹ noting that "Labat, unlike most of the people who kept slaves and made laws for them, seemed always to see them as human beings."¹⁰ Most recently, Garraway has referred to Labat's "unusually detailed descriptions of the slaves [which expose] their working conditions with a mix of pity and pride."¹¹ One particular chapter of Labat's text, located roughly halfway into the narrative and listed in the table of contents as, "Des esclaves noirs dont on se sert aux îles, du commerce de leur pays – Leur religion, leurs mœurs, leurs danses – Comment on les achète, comment on les traite, comment on les instruit,"¹² is often cited by Labat's admirers as evidence of

⁵ Everild Young, F.R.G.S., & Kjeld Helweg-Larsen. *The Pirates' Priest: The Life of Père Labat in the West Indies, 1693-1705* (London: Jarrolds Publishers Ltd., 1965), 37.

⁶ Rachele Grotzky, *Le Père J.-B. Labat (1663-1738). Un voyageur philosophe*, Dissertation (City University of New York, 1976), v.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁸ Donald S. Schier, "The Missionary and the Buccaneers: An Episode from Father Labat's *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de L'Amérique*," *The French Review* 3 (January 1944): 144.

⁹ Joan Brace, "From Chattel to Person: Martinique, 1635-1848," *Plantation Society*, II.1 (April 1983): 64.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ Garraway, *op.cit.*, 139.

¹² The title of the chapter is an interesting *mélange*: the *leur* is used to objectify or position the African as subaltern with respect to the *on*, the master. All citations from Labat's text will refer to a recent edition of the *Voyage* published by Michel

his benevolence. In it, Labat details the appropriate welcoming of new slaves to the island, prescribing rest, proper nourishment, frequent bathing, “une petite saignée,” and, most notably, a palm oil massage (227-228).

Massage notwithstanding, however, the Africans are and remain slaves, and Labat’s own report also spares no detail of the harsh conditions and execrable punishments he himself is capable of inflicting. Thus, critics who have focused on these passages of Labat’s text offer a portrait of *le bon père* that is diametrically opposed to that just presented. For them, if Labat’s categorical promotion of the institution of slavery were not enough to condemn him, the missionary’s meticulously gruesome account of one particularly horrifying incident is beyond reprehensible. In this story, Labat himself not only punishes a slave who refuses to abandon practices of his African religion with *three hundred* lashes, he also subjects the slave to a “medicinal” preparation of hot pepper sauce and lemon juice on his lacerated back to guard against infection.¹³ This grisly narration is all the more shocking to the modern reader in that it comes to us from Labat’s own pen, and it is not surprising that the incident has been incorporated into fictional accounts of Labat’s life, including a short story entitled, “For More than Their Souls” by noted *dix-septième* James Gaines.¹⁴ In her historical novel, *Le père Labat viendra te prendre*, Aurélia Montel cites Labat’s insistence that slaves are “insensibles à la douleur”¹⁵ as evidence that he has thoroughly bought into Aristotle’s “thèses esclavagistes.”¹⁶ For Montel,

Lebris (Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Voyage aux isles. Chronique aventureuse des Caraïbes, 1693-1705*. Edition établie et présentée par Michel Le Bris. Paris: Editions Phébus, 1993); page numbers will be noted parenthetically in the text of this article.

¹³ According to Garraway, the irony here lies in the fact that Labat borrows this technique from the Caribs, “whose rituals of scarification tested the body’s resistance to pain. What Labat refers to as a pimentade was in fact described by seventeenth-century ethnographers as a rite of passage marking important moments in the lives of Carib men such as their initiation as soldiers and the birth of a child. Pierced all over with the sharp teeth of a fish known as an *agouti*, the men were then treated with a searing solution of fermented peppers, which intensified the pain of their wounds while also preventing infection” (Garraway, *op.cit.*, 170).

¹⁴ James Gaines. “For More than Their Souls.” *Riverside Currents: A Collection of Poetry and Stories*, ed. Betty L. B. Marcum, iUniverse.com, 2001, 87-111.

¹⁵ Aurélia Montel, *Le Père Labat viendra te prendre...* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1996), 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 33. For Aristotle’s theory of slavery, see Book I, chapters iii-vii of the *Politics* and Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle essentially asserts that slavery is natural, that some individuals are naturally slaves, “marked out for subjection” and unable to rule themselves.

Labat's opprobrious treatment of his own slaves caused a legend to spring up around the missionary's life story, a legend in which Labat himself plays the role of *sorcier*.¹⁷ In his scathing analysis of the *Code noir*, "le texte juridique le plus monstrueux qu'aient produit les Temps modernes,"¹⁸ Louis Sala-Molins similarly retells Labat's story, with cuttingly ironic references to "le bon père" and "le saint homme" which do more, by their irony, to condemn the Dominican priest than any overt reproach or censure.

What, then, are we to make of this text that has, over time, prompted such a wide range of critical responses from a number of perspectives? What can a study of Labat's *Voyage* offer to the contemporary discussion of colonialism and historical considerations of race and servitude? These are questions I ask myself with no small amount of trepidation. For, by offering a reading of what I have referred to as Labat's "ambivalence," I certainly run the risk of appearing to condone Labat's position on slavery, or of seeming to excuse his behavior as a simple product of his time.¹⁹ This, most assuredly, is not my intent, and I would like to make that very clear. Yet it seems to me that only by venturing into that gray area, by interrogating a model in which Labat might be seen as at once *esclavagiste* and somehow Other, by trying to see beyond the Manichean separation of good and evil in Labat's text and others like it, that we can begin to account for the profound social transformation that ultimately resulted in the abolition of slavery. To my mind, Jean-Baptiste Labat, a fervent and inveterate supporter of the institution of slavery, nevertheless inscribes in his text his own performance of ambivalence, subtly blurring the distinctions between black and white, between slave and master, between Other and self. Labat *is* an inveterate *esclavagiste*, yet he is *also*, perhaps unwittingly, Other, as he moves into the space of hybridity which characterizes the colonial encounter.

Acknowledgement of Labat's ambivalence is certainly not unique to this study, although it most often appears in the context of the tension between Christian missionary ideals and the practices of colonialism and slavery. Grotsky claims that, to Labat's credit, "l'ambiguïté de la position ambivalente de chrétien et d'esclavagiste ne lui échappe pas."²⁰ Sue Peabody, whose recent work on the history of slavery in France and the French

¹⁷ Ibid., 178.

¹⁸ Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir, ou le calvaire de Canaan* (Paris: PUF, 1987), 9.

¹⁹ Garraway similarly notes that, "In his journal, Labat engaged the slave population with a deeply personal and ambivalent narrative. The author both confessed the beauty he saw in slaves and their cultures and described in the first person the purchase of slaves and his own unabashed violence toward them" (Garraway, *op.cit.*, 165).

²⁰ Grotsky, *op.cit.*, 271.

colonies focuses at length on this tension, notes that, “For Catholic clergy, the primary concern was that slaves be allowed to live their lives consistent with Catholic teaching, not that they escape their condition as chattel.”²¹ She adds,

In the socially stratified societies of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the church hierarchy saw no inconsistency in the promotion of slavery... Missionaries expected slaves and others to bear their station in life and enjoy their salvation in the hereafter. Slavery was justified as a means by which Africans and Amerindians would be brought into the fold.²²

However, while this tension certainly played a considerable role in Labat’s own attitudes and ambivalence, it constitutes only one facet of what is, in fact, a cultural encounter that goes well beyond the limits of the missionary/pagan dialectic, both with regard to the slaves and to the Caribs. In his introductory remarks to a recent edition of Labat’s *Voyage*, Michel Le Bris alludes to the multifaceted nature of Labat’s relationship with his slaves, who are, at one moment, a source of income, at another, property, beings to care for, and at yet another, fascinating sources of reflection: “Et pourtant ils le fascinent, quoiqu’il puisse prétendre.”²³ Labat ventures to the island of Martinique precisely because he is fascinated by that which is different, and one might ask if fascination with difference leads to the construction of the self as Other. Doris Garraway has eloquently demonstrated how, in the process of inscribing his adventures in the text, Labat represents his own “‘indigenization,’ or process of becoming ‘native’ to the colonial environment.”²⁴ She describes in detail the process by which the plantation became the locus within which new Caribbean cultures were “forged in the presence of difference.”²⁵ Labat’s own “naturalization” can be seen as a microcosm of this overarching process, a process I believe we can study in depth using the theoretical model of the Third Space elaborated by Homi Bhabha.

A response to the writings of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha’s model attempts to account for the on-going performance of cultural identity by theorizing encounters with difference and the ways in which such

²¹ Sue Peabody, “‘A Dangerous Zeal’: Catholic Missions to Slaves in the French Antilles, 1635-1800.” *French Historical Studies* 25.1 (2002): 60.

²² Ibid.

²³ Michel Lebris, “Un sacré bonhomme,” introductory essay to Labat, *op.cit.*, 11.

²⁴ Garraway, *op.cit.*, 132.

²⁵ This expression comes from Garraway’s doctoral thesis: Doris Lorraine Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Ethnographies of Creolization in the French Caribbean, 1617-1797* (Dissertation, Duke University, 2000), 32.

encounters can create, not an amalgam or simple hybrid identity (I am myself, plus that which I take from you), but rather a Third Space, a space in which contradictions must co-exist and confront each other through what Bhabha calls the “splitting of the self.”²⁶ That is, “The enunciative process introduces a split in the performative present of cultural identification; a split between the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies, in the political present.”²⁷ In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha asserts that “all cultural statements or systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation.”²⁸ The Third Space is a productive one, a locus of exploration; rather than reproduce binary paradigms, it embraces complexity and contradiction, difference and debate. Identity, for Bhabha, is hardly a fixed notion; to the contrary, it is a performance, in that, “Each time the encounter with identity occurs at the point at which something exceeds the frame of the image, it eludes the eye, evacuates the self as site of identity and autonomy and – most important – leaves a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance.”²⁹ In this space, the complexities and contradictions of the self do not altogether disappear, but the stability of the self is disrupted, its repeatability is challenged by negotiations with the liminal.

How does this complex theoretical model translate to the context of colonialization? Bhabha suggests that, when examining colonial discourse, “the point of intervention should shift from ready recognition of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification*.”³⁰ Moreover, while Bhabha’s model has been used primarily to account for processes involved in the cultural identification of the colonized or subaltern, Bhabha himself has made it clear that the process is very similar for the *colonizer*. In an interview with W. J. T. Mitchell, Bhabha states that,

...even the oppressor is being constituted through splitting. The split doesn’t fall at the same point in colonized and colonizer, it doesn’t bear the same political weight or constitute the same effect, but both are dealing with that process... That which is given is retranscribed and transvalued. So that the Christian missionary has to relocate his doctrinal position. A phrase that was ... doctrinally secure becomes retranslated in the colonial enunciation,

²⁶ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36.

²⁷ Op.cit., 34.

²⁸ Op.cit., 37.

²⁹ Op.cit., 49.

³⁰ Op.cit., 67

and opens up another site for the negotiation of authority, both symbolic and social.³¹

Bhabha thus calls upon readers of colonial discourse to go beyond the categorization of such discourse as black or white, good or bad, and to interrogate that gray area into which figures of authority and subalterns enter in the space of colonialism. In both the case of the slave, who has no choice, and that of the oppressor who actually chooses to relocate himself to a space of difference, the conjugal proximity of and dynamic relationship between two or more radically different and constantly evolving cultures constitutes implicitly and inevitably an engagement – overt or unseen, willing or unwilling – with the Third Space. Labat’s posting to Martinique is just such an engagement. And it is only by moving away from the static binaries (Labat as benevolent missionary versus Labat as evil slaveholder), by interrogating his own writing, that we can pinpoint specific examples of the “productive ambivalence” (Bhabha’s term) of Labat’s colonial discourse; it is only by a close reading of Labat’s abundant representations of his encounters with the Other, be he African, Carib, or the enemy British, that we can more accurately delineate the missionary’s complex navigation of the seas of alterity.

Labat’s text contains myriad examples of encounters with the Other which inscribe and embody the missionary’s performance of his own ambivalence, most prominent among them his interactions with the island’s slave population. Again, I am not interested here in offering a compendium of all the horrors and stereotypes of slavery that Labat includes in his text (though they are abundant), nor am I interested in cataloguing examples of Labat’s compassion (which are notably far less abundant, though they exist).³² I am specifically interested in textual moments in which Labat, through his choice of words, choice of examples, or explicit comparisons, enters the Third Space and, in so doing, allows himself to engage with the Other in culturally constructive albeit “productively ambivalent” ways.

³¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, “Translator Translated. Interview with Cultural Theorist Homi Bhabha,” *Artforum* 33.7 (March 1995): 80-84 or <http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/bhabha/interview.html>.

³² I do, however, acknowledge my own discomfort, both as an individual and as a literary critic, with the fact that the post-colonial world has yet to come to terms with its ethical obligations to the past. Doris Garraway asks, “Why do we study texts that degrade our humanity?” and I agree with her ultimate response: “Only by exploring and re-reading the libertine colony will scholars, writers, and living communities be able to recognize and contest its varied legacies in the present” (*The Libertine Colony* (2005), 297).

At a very basic level, Jean-Baptiste Labat was, at heart, a scholar, and his journey to the island of Martinique was predicated upon a desire for knowledge, for a diversity of knowledge, to which, he clearly recognized, his African slaves could amply contribute. In spite of his protestations that the study of local inhabitants and customs represented “une grande perte de temps” (51), Labat’s voluminous and entertaining voyage belies his ostensible resistance to observation and examination of, and engagement with, the Other, a project that begins the moment he steps foot on the island: “J’avais une extrême envie d’interroger nos nègres sur quantité de choses que je voyais et dont je souhaitais d’être instruit” (45). This desire is contraried, at first, by Labat’s own lack of linguistic proficiency in *their* language, a language he devalues as imperfect: “...mais il fallait me priver de ce plaisir, parce que c’étaient des nègres nouveaux qui ne parlaient qu’un langage corrompu, que je n’entendais alors presque point” (45). In spite of his dismissive tone – clearly, an example of a negative stance toward linguistic creolization and cultural hybridity – it is interesting to note that Labat recognizes that he himself shares in the burden of the effort in this potential exchange. Moreover, his attempts to communicate are not entirely frustrated by this ‘langage corrompu’ – Labat *does* pose a question about the likelihood of encountering snakes en route, and he *does* receive an answer, “Tenir mouche” (46), which he manages to interpret thanks to some knowledge of Spanish (*tener mucho*). Labat later studies the Arada language in order not only to be informed about the slaves’ conversations and activities (225) – an essential component of his exertion of authority over them –, but also, he claims, to understand and learn from their sense of humor: “J’ai souvent été surpris des défauts qu’ils avaient remarqués, et de la manière dont ils s’en moquaient, ce qui m’obligea à apprendre la langue des Aradas” (233).³³

³³ During their frequent outings together, slaves offer Labat a window on the natural world: “Etant un jour dans le bois, j’entendis une grenouille qui criait de toutes ses forces; les nègres que j’avais avec moi me dirent qu’assurément elle était poursuivie par un serpent” (102). Labat values (and covets) local medicinal remedies, not only those of his slaves but also of the Caribs, touting local cures for venereal disease over those imposed by French-trained physicians: “ces remèdes, qui sont plus doux, moins chers, et plus assurés, ne devraient-ils pas être préférés à ceux de nos chirurgiens d’Europe?” (276). In the case of snake bites, Labat is more skeptical of the slaves’ remedies. When confronted with a particularly bad case, the slaves make every effort to kill the offending beast: “On espérait que le serpent étant mort, le vénéin agirait avec moins de force sur celui qui avait été mordu. J’en demandai la raison, qu’on ne put me dire. J’appris seulement qu’ils prétendaient avoir une longue expérience de ce qu’ils me disaient, fondée sur la sympathie, je ne sais s’ils connaissaient cette vertu” (57-58). Labat’s doubts about this notion are

Labat's willingness to engage with difference, an engagement that furthers the epistemological project of the Dominican missionary, is but one aspect of the variety of moments detailed by Labat, moments that serve, in Bhabha's model, as "processual acts," acts that are part of an overarching cultural process of self-fashioning grounded in "'emergent' moments of social identification or cultural enunciation."³⁴ Encounters between Labat and his slaves are not all unidirectional: you work, I reap the benefits; you offer knowledge, I learn – often, they entail the sharing of a space of commonality, and Labat there finds himself in a new and complex relationship with his subalterns. Simple tasks like killing a snake in the chicken coop become shared projects in the face of danger: "Je... saluai [le serpent] d'un coup de fusil qui lui mit la tête en morceaux, après quoi mon nègre le tira dans la cour..." (99). A similar confrontation with a conger eel becomes the site of enunciation of mutual concern, where "je" and an Other become 'nous':

J'ouvris par malheur la nasse où était le congre, le nègre du curé m'en avertit quand il n'était plus temps; le congre sorti de la nasse sautait comme un enragé et s'élança sur moi deux ou trois fois. Le nègre vint à mon secours, il voulait tuer le congre d'un coup de bâton, il le manqua et le poisson s'étant jeté à une de ses jambes, s'y attacha. Je pris aussitôt le couteau que le nègre avait à sa ceinture, et ayant saisi le congre auprès de sa tête, je la lui coupai et délivrai ainsi le nègre. Nous ne laissâmes pas de manger le congre (175).

clear: *on espérait, ils prétendaient, je ne sais...* Yet when the victim does recover, Labat is forced to reconsider his judgment, but this time his desire for knowledge is thwarted by the secrecy of the healer: "il s'excusa de me dire le nom de toutes les herbes qui entraient dans la composition de son remède, parce que ce secret lui faisait gagner sa vie, il ne voulait pas le rendre public" (58). Interestingly, it is the slave who holds the power to guard his precious knowledge from the inquiring missionary. Moreover, a lack of respect for the slaves' superior knowledge can have devastating consequences: when the English attack the lower island of Guadeloupe and one of their slaves deserts in order to convey news of the invaders' projects to the French defense troops, he is not believed, and the island is nearly lost as a consequence (396). Occasionally, inattention to the slaves' knowledge can be fatal: when a fellow priest refuses the assistance of a slave to guide him across turbulent rivers, the man drowns. Labat himself is more often than not careful to defer to his slaves' superior knowledge, seemingly ready to learn from and respect the contributions of the Other in his willingness to engage actively on an intellectual and practical level, to allow his own beliefs to be challenged or altered by alternative beliefs.

³⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *op.cit.*

A similar phenomenon may be seen in Labat's narration of less life-threatening endeavors. In establishing a home for himself on the island, Labat calls upon a neighbor for assistance:

J'écrivis en même temps à M. Michel pour le prier de commander les nègres que les habitants avaient promis de me fournir pour aider aux charpentiers à transporter ma maison où je la voulais mettre. Il eut l'honnêteté de venir le jour suivant avec un bon nombre de nègres. Les charpentiers mirent ma maison sur des rouleaux, et, à force de bras, on la posa dans le lieu que j'avais marqué... (93).

In the metonymical “à force de bras” and the blurring of the pronoun “on,” we see again a shared space in which neither one nor the other is entirely Other. In such cases, social hierarchy, born of conflict and violence, does not disappear in the communal Third Space, yet relationships are altered in paradoxically creative or constructive ways; with unity of purpose comes the breaching, albeit momentary, of the barrier of difference.

Hunting excursions offer another excellent example of the blurring of cultural distinctions in a common task. Setting off with four slaves and a young créole *raffineur* to shoot *diablotons*,³⁵ a tasty and nourishing fowl, Labat's description of the trip itself is indicative of a momentary suspension of difference: “Nous marchâmes tout le long et au fond de notre rivière jusqu'à ce que nous trouvâmes un endroit moins escarpé que le reste, où nous montâmes les uns après les autres en nous aidant, ou plutôt en montant sur les épaules de ceux qui demeureraient en bas, que nous tirâmes ensuite à nous avec des lianes, aussi bien que nos chiens” (180). One finds here an interesting pronomial insistence on the group as a whole, “nous.” Simultaneously, however, Labat sustains a performance of difference by contrasting items of consumption: while he brings himself a good bottle of Madeira and some bread, the group's baskets of provisions contain, “...de l'eau-de-vie et de la farine pour nos nègres” (180). The narration of the hunt itself again eliminates markers of difference as Labat speaks in terms of “chaque chasseur” (181) rather than of black and white. This time, the common effort is inscribed under the pronoun “on” which refers to Labat himself, the *raffineur*, and the *nègres*:

On enfonce aussitôt la gaulette dans le trou jusqu'à ce qu'on rencontre l'oiseau, qui, dès qu'il la sent, la prend avec le bec et la serre et se laisse plutôt entraîner dehors que de lâcher prise... On le prend alors par la tête,

³⁵ Matt Senior, U Minnesota-Morris has discovered that, “The history of menageries book mentions ‘diabls de la mer’ in the 17th century, which are *Foulques noirs* in modern French –various species of Coot in English” (personal communication). A photo is available at: <http://photos.oiseaux.net/photo23.html>

on lui tord le cou et le chasseur l'attache à une corde, ou liane, qu'il a autour du corps en guise de ceinture. Nous nous rassemblâmes sur le midi (181-2).

In describing the success of the hunt, Labat again insists on their different levels of proficiency, but to his own great disadvantage: “Les quatre nègres avaient cent trente-huit diables, Albert en avait quarante-trois, et moi dix-sept. Nous en mangeâmes chacun deux et partîmes chargés du reste de notre gibier” (182). In spite of an effort to maintain difference via culinary markers – Madeira/eau-de-vie, pain/farine – in the end, this difference, too, is elided in the communal consumption of the “devil birds.”

As mentioned above, Labat's *Voyage* is particularly remarkable thanks to its author's all-consuming research into the island's culinary and mixological creations: food and drink were, for Labat, windows onto the various cultures found in the Caribbean. Much could be said about Labat's insistence on food as a marker of cultural difference. For example, having commented, in another context, on “la diversité des goûts”³⁶ (121), Labat often insists that that which suits the *nègres'* consumption habits is not for him, referring to the “nègres, dont les provisions ordinaires ne nous auraient pas accommodés” (138). However, everyone consumes crabs in abundance: slaves, to make up for the protein-insufficient diet offered by their masters, and whites, because they can cook them in a variety of ways (157).³⁷ The slaves also share in the Caribbean tradition of *le boucan*, a kind of buccaneer barbecue – that is, when their masters are not such pigs as to polish off an entire *cochon boucané* on their own (241). Labat even goes so far as to alter, in light of his slave's displeasure, his habit of drinking hot water, which the slave claims is ridiculous: “mais à la fin, il prit la liberté de me dire que M. Reynau” – who always drinks hot water – “était fol, et moi aussi... [J]e vis qu'il avait raison, et au lieu d'eau chaude, je recommençai à prendre du chocolat” (281-282).

³⁶ “Lorsqu'ils vont à la guerre, en festin, ou en quelque visite de conséquence, leurs femmes ont soin de leur faire des moustaches et plusieurs raies noires sur le visage et sur le corps avec du jus de pomme de génipa. Ces marques durent neuf jours... Rien à mon sens n'est plus désagréable, et rien au leur n'est plus gallant et mieux entendu: telle est la diversité des goûts” (121).

³⁷ “On peut dire que ces animaux sont une vraie manne pour le pays. Les Caraïbes ne vivent presque d'autre chose. Les nègres s'en nourrissent au lieu de viande salée, que leurs maîtres négligent souvent de leur donner, ou parce qu'elle est rare, ou parce qu'elle est chère. Les blancs ne les négligent pas, et on voit, par les différentes manières de les accommoder que je viens de rapporter, qu'on en sert sur toutes sortes de tables” (157).

Even more significant than the consumption of the beverage *chocolat* is Labat's account of the wide variety of alcohol-related opportunities on the island, and, in particular, Labat's intimate firsthand knowledge of those opportunities, born of his singular efforts to seek out and know Others on the island. In seventeenth-century Martinique, alcoholic beverages served at once as pretexts for sociability, and as tools of colonial conquest.³⁸ Jean-Baptiste Labat's *Voyage aux îles* illustrates both sides of this argument; again, it is a contradictory and sometimes creative space of alterity, a space of altered states in every sense of the term. Roland Barthes has suggested that, "Se nourrir est une conduite qui se développe au delà de sa proper fin"³⁹ – and I would posit that we could easily include drinking in this formulation. What Labat's *Voyage* seems to suggest is that perhaps, by drinking together, individuals can indeed engage in that Third Space of productive ambivalence⁴⁰ and, through the mind-altering properties of alcohol, truly alter mind-sets as well. Ultimately, social drinking in Labat's chronicle not only alters (in a physiological sense) the minds of those who imbibe; at the same time, it challenges the very notion of alterity itself, thereby putting into question the premises upon which colonial conquest is based. The result is a very different kind of mind alteration, and one which I find to be a fruitful metaphor for much of the second half of this study, which will focus more specifically on Labat's drinking partners in the Caribbean.

Who drinks on the island of Martinique at the end of the seventeenth century? The answer is simple: everyone – even a privileged group of pet hummingbirds! And when do they drink? Weekly if not daily, and as often and as well as possible. Labat himself makes ample provision for full participation in the rituals of pleasure-drinking before he and his fellow religious even board the ship for departure from La Rochelle: the supplies he requests for each priest on board include mattresses and blankets, a

³⁸ Dwight B. Heath, "A Decade of Development in the Anthropological Study of Alcohol Use: 1970-1980" in Mary Douglas, ed. *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drinking from Anthropology*. NY: Cambridge UP, 1987, 35.

³⁹ Roland Barthes, "Pour une psychosociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine," *Annales* 16 (1961), 985. This idea might easily be related to Norbert Elias's notion of "sociogenesis," according to which social, political and economic change shape the expression of taste, thereby changing food preferences. (Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott with some notes and corrections by the author. Originally published as *The History of Manners*, 1939, English translation with Basil Blackwell, Ltd. Revised edition; edited by Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 1994, reprinted 2000, 109.)

⁴⁰ See Bhabha, "The Other Question" 19, and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 36.

variety of clothing items, books, a chest, and, “de deux en deux, une petite canevette pour mettre des liqueurs pour le voyage” (21). Moreover, all of the ship’s inhabitants are, in Labat’s words, “bien pourvus de liqueurs” (26), and the captain even opens the ship’s reserve for the consumption of all of the passengers because, “il voulait que ces liqueurs fussent à la discrétion de tous ceux qui mangeaient à sa table” (27) – he literally opens the liquor cabinet and throws the key into the sea! The captain is often nearly as generous with the sailors; on the occasion of the Epiphany, “Monsieur de la Héronnière fit doubler la ration de vin à tout l’équipage et fit donner quinze ou vingt pots de son eau-de-vie à ses gens...” (31). (Notice that it is the sailors who drink *eau-de-vie*.) Labat similarly makes a gift of “un barillet d’environ six pots d’eau-de-vie” (29) to the ship’s officers on the occasion of his ceremonial ‘baptism’ at sea; notably, a writer on board who protests at being included in the ceremony and does not want to offer the proper libations is roundly chastised and dunked into a huge vat of water until he promises “quatre flacons d’eau-de-vie, sans quoi... on l’aurait baptisé jusqu’à la Martinique” (29).

From the beginning of the *Voyage*, then, Labat sets the standard for sociability through the conspicuous consumption of intoxicating beverages, and he will contribute even more significantly by his invention of a more effective still for the distillation of rum, a beverage which remains the basis of Martinican sociability to this day.⁴¹ Anthropologist Dwight B. Heath tells us that “drinking is essentially a social act,”⁴² emphasizing that alcohol is a strong promoter (or stimulant⁴³) of sociability. Moreover, as Lynn Martin has noted, in the early modern period, not only was alcohol “a necessary component of most people’s diets. People *drank* a significant proportion of their daily intake of calories”, but “[a]lcohol was also the ubiquitous social

⁴¹ Annie Hubert has stated that Labat *invented* rum; in fact, his contribution lies in his improvements of the methods by which *tafia* or *eau-de-vie* was made. (Annie Hubert, “Drinking in La Réunion: Between Living, Dying and Forgetting,” in *Drinking: Anthropological Approaches*. Igor and Valérie de Garine, eds., New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2001, 228.) Indeed, rum (*tafia*) existed in Martinique at the time of Labat’s predecessor, le père Du Tertre; see Jenifer Harvey Lang, ed., *Larousse gastronomique: The New American Edition of the World’s Greatest Culinary Encyclopedia*, New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1984, 905-906, or “Histoire du rhum,” <http://www.rhumdemartinique.com/histoire.asp>.

⁴² Heath, *op.cit.*, 46.

⁴³ This expression is that of Isabel Turmo González in “Drinking. An Almost Silent Language” in Garine & Garine, *op. cit.*, 130-1.

lubricant; every occasion called for a drink.”⁴⁴ Through the sharing and gifting of food and drink, human beings forge bonds,⁴⁵ strengthen ties, and even simply articulate their affiliations; as Aisha Khan has explained, “In all societies obtaining and sharing food contain symbolic messages about the way people construct and express their social relationships.”⁴⁶ Not surprisingly, one finds countless examples of such conviviality in Labat’s chronicle; every meal (especially the *boucan*, or Caribbean barbecue) is accompanied by wine or spirits of some kind, and more often than not, after their meals together, Labat’s friends send him ample alcoholic provisions, most often as a neighborly gesture: “il m’envoya deux de ces grosses bouteilles qu’on appelle des dames-jeannes, qui contenait chacune douze à treize pots, remplies de vin de Madère et une de vin de Canaries” (85). Alcohol is also invoked as a fortifying stimulant used to unify the troops before battle:

– Allons, Père, me dit [notre capitaine], faisons vite la prière et buvons trois coups!

Aussitôt dit, aussitôt fait; je fis la prière, on dit la Confiteor, je donnai l’absolution avec un mot d’exhortation, on apporta du vin et de l’eau-de-vie, et tout le monde, ventre à terre, laissa tirer monsieur l’anglais...” (450).⁴⁷

Throughout his years on the island of Martinique, and during all of his travels throughout the Caribbean, Labat would build countless relationships, in no small part thanks to the highly symbolic and ritualized vehicle of alcohol.

Yet Labat’s exploration of the “boissons ordinaires de ces îles” (92) extends his range of knowledge well beyond the familiar (and imported) *vin*

⁴⁴ A. Lynn Martin, “Old People, Alcohol and Identity in Europe, 1300-1700” in *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages*, ed. Peter Scholliers, Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001, 120.

⁴⁵ In his study of the evolution of food sharing, Pierre L. van den Berghe notes that, “Food is not only shared in all cultures, but is *ceremoniously* shared in ways which differ in detail but have the same basic meaning and function: to establish, express, and consolidate social ties. Pierre L. van den Berghe, “Ethnic Cuisine: Culture in Nature.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7.3 (July 1984), 390.

⁴⁶ Aisha Khan, “‘Juthaa’ in Trinidad: Food, Pollution, and Hierarchy in a Caribbean Diaspora Community,” *American Ethnologist* 21.2 (May 1994): 249.

⁴⁷ It must be noted that in this instance, Labat is traveling with the *flibustiers*, the pirates of the Caribbean, and the attack in question has as its goal the taking and pillaging of a British merchant vessel. Labat, let it be said, did not shy away from pirate activity in his travels, and this particular “coup” nets the pirates he is traveling with, among other things, “trois cent quatre-vingts pipes de vin de Madère” (452) – again, another example of Labat “consorting” with the Other.

de Madère and the locally distilled *eau-de-vie*. Ethnographer *avant la lettre*, Labat chronicles extensively intimate details of the lives of the various cultural entities on the island, with a striking accent on what Stephen Mennell and his colleagues have called “culinary cultures.”⁴⁸ Compiling a myriad of ethnoculinary observations, Labat further constructs a set of colonial knowledge, or data, within the social, cultural, and discursive space created by the conjuncture of colonialism and modernity: he traces the consumption of intoxicating beverages not only by the French colonizers and the Créole *habitants*, but also by Martinique’s native Caribs, the imported slave population, and even the British rivals of the French in nearby colonies. Perhaps not surprisingly, each of these groups has a beverage of choice (or of necessity, as the case may be): the more privileged French often drink expensive and imported wine;⁴⁹ the slaves drink *tafia* (or rum⁵⁰), and the Caribs, when not trading for *eau-de-vie*, create their own fermented beverages. Bonnie Duran has suggested that alcohol is a “poly-semantic cultural artifact” having profound resonance in hierarchical soci-

⁴⁸ According to Mennell *et al.*, “‘Culinary culture’ is a shorthand term for the ensemble of attitudes and tastes people bring to cooking and eating. Since ‘culture’ is understood in sociology and anthropology to mean all that is ‘learned, shared and transmitted’ among groups of human beings from generation to generation, it is not surprising that the idea of culinary culture has been associated with research of an historical-sociological kind aimed at explaining how different social groups – especially different societies or nation-states – came to *develop* different tastes and attitudes over time.” Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott & Anneke H. van Otterloo. *The Sociology of Food: Eating, Diet and Culture*, London: SAGE Publications, 1992, 20. Further development of this notion may be found in the introduction to *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington, KY: U Press of Kentucky, 2004), edited by Lucy M. Lang.

⁴⁹ The “boisson-totem,” according to Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Wine is what Igor de Garine has termed a “prestige food” in 17th-century Martinique (Igor de Garine, “Food, Tradition & Prestige.” *Food, Man, and Society*. Ed. Dwain N. Walcher, Norman Kretchmer, and Henry L. Barnett. NY & London: Plenum Press, 1976, 155).

⁵⁰ The English word “rum” dates from 1688 and may be an abbreviated form of “rumbullion” or “rumbustion,” meaning “great tumult,” an allusion to the effects of the drink. The word *rhum* comes into existence in French only in 1768, a version of an earlier word, “rome” based on the English “rum.” Most *eau-de-vie* sold under the name of “rhum” today is a form of *tafia*. Dwight B. Heath tells us that in the seventeenth century, rum was used as a remedy for intestinal parasites as well as to give vigor; brandy and grappa were considered “energizing.” (Dwight B. Heath, *Drinking Occasions: Comparative Perspectives on Alcohol and Culture*. Philadelphia / E. Sussex: Brunner/Mazel, 2000, 147-148.)

eties;⁵¹ Heath has noted the ways in which a variety of alcoholic beverages can take on “diacritical symbolic functions as a new way to define status” and can therefore be “strategically used by elites to differentiate themselves.”⁵² At first read, this observation certainly holds true in seveneenth-century Martinique.

More significantly, however, as was the case in so many New World colonies, distilled spirits are clearly manipulated by those in power in Martinique as a tool of colonial conquest, and Labat guilelessly records his own offerings of *eau-de-vie* or *tafia* to the Caribs and to his own slaves as a means of guaranteeing their loyalty and also maintaining their roles as dependent, disempowered objects of his colonialist discourse. Labat is often the one responsible for giving his slaves significant quantities of alcohol on week-ends: “Je payais assez souvent le violon, et je leur faisais donner quelques pots d’eau-de-vie pour se divertir tous ensemble” (232); he is shocked and extremely critical, however, when, under the influence, the slaves dance the lascivious, sexually charged *calenda*, “le plus souvent avec de l’eau-de-vie dans la tête” (231) and contemplate revolt.⁵³ Similarly, Labat regularly trades *eau-de-vie* with the Caribs for native objects he himself covets (he is particularly fond of a hammock obtained in this way⁵⁴), and he also offers as a gift copious amounts of alcohol to the native peoples on the various islands he visits in his quest for engagement with Others of the region. Yet Labat rails against the extreme violence which, he says, often results from the Caribs’ frequent intoxication:

Quoiqu’ils aient toujours leur couteau à la main, il est rare qu’ils s’en frappent, à moins qu’ils ne soient ivres. Dans ces moments ils sont dangereux, car ils s’en souviennent d’avoir reçu quelque injure d’un autre qui sera présent et qui fera la débauche avec eux, l’un d’eux se lèvera et viendra galammant par derrière lui fendre la tête d’un coup de bâton ou lui donner quelques coups de couteau (125-6).

⁵¹ Bonnie Duran, “Indigenous Versus Colonial Discourse: Alcohol and American Indian Identity” in Elizabeth S. Bird, ed., *Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Popular Culture*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press/HarperCollins, 1996, 115.

⁵² Heath, *Drinking Occasions*, 185.

⁵³ Heath and others commonly refer to this kind of activity as “despair drinking.” (Heath, *Drinking Occasions*, 184.) Labat also claims that the slaves “aiment le jeu, la danse, le vin, l’eau-de-vie, et leur complexion chaude les rend fort adonnés aux femmes” (230).

⁵⁴ He also trades for bows and poisoned arrows (133), baskets (133), the services of a guide (*passim.*), etc.

Later, when describing the *vins* (or communal assemblies) of the Caribs, Labat elaborates on this theme, recounting in detail the murderous rage of the drunken populace: “Il est rare qu’il se passe aucun de ces vins sans qu’il s’y commette quelque homicide” (265). Labat’s role in the subjection (and subjectification) of these two distinct groups—slaves and island people—through the insidious commodity of alcohol parallels that of many of his peers,⁵⁵ as distilled spirits proved to be an effective means of conquering the social, physical, and cultural space of the subaltern in the colonial setting.⁵⁶ Equally significant, Labat’s discourse itself acts to perform inescapable social categories that distinguish the French colonizer from the indigenous or slave colonized, operating to keep the latter in the position of disempowered subaltern.⁵⁷

Thus far, then, it seems that choice of beverage correlates highly with social class and cultural group in seventeenth-century Martinique, and to a great extent, this is true. Labat himself perpetuates this hierarchy on numerous occasions, distinguishing his own potable needs from those of his slaves, for example. We have already seen evidence of this during the

⁵⁵ For an account of this practice in the British colonies, see Frederick H. Smith, “Alcohol, Slavery, and African Cultural Continuity in the British Caribbean,” in Garine & Garine, eds., *Drinking*, 219. For additional examples from the French colonies, see R. C. Dailey, “The Role of Alcohol among North American Indian Tribes as Reported in *The Jesuit Relations*,” in Mac Marshall, ed. *Beliefs, Behaviors, and Alcoholic Beverages: A Cross-Cultural Survey*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1979, 116-127.

⁵⁶ See Gilbert Quintero, “Making the Indian: Colonial Knowledge, Alcohol, and Native Americans.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25.4 (2001): 58.

⁵⁷ As Willy Jansen has pointed out, “Food defines ‘us’ and at the same time differentiates ‘us’ from ‘them.’ Through food, status is negotiated and social boundaries are drawn. Food is a tool in making or breaking social hierarchies.” (Willy Jansen, “French Bread and Algerian Wine: Conflicting Identities in French Algeria” in Scholliers, ed., *op.cit.*, 202.) Writing about the British Caribbean, Frederick H. Smith notes that, “The preoccupation of early writers with the drinking behaviours of various social classes reveals that alcohol was an active symbol used to define group identity. British Caribbean society recognized that the types of alcohol used, the preparation of the drink, and the volume of consumption helped distinguish the drinker’s social class. Thus, a wealthy planter drinking expensive Madeira wine mixed with exotic spices could separate himself from the poor white servant tilting back a cup of homemade potato wine. The African slave too brought to the British Caribbean concepts about the socially defining uses of alcohol based on class differences. José Curto (1996: 60) pointed out that in the Kongo lower classes consumed millet beer while palm wine was reserved for the ruling elite.” (Smith, *op.cit.*, 219-220.)

hunting trip described above, where Labat brings for himself, “une bonne bouteille de vin de Madère et du pain,” but “de l’eau-de-vie et de la farine pour nos nègres” (180). Yet, is there room in the culinary and mixological domain for actual engagement with the Other? Yes, indeed, for, contrary to what one might expect, Labat does not restrict his own alcohol consumption to convivial meals with members of his own social unit – other priests, various *habitants*, French-born pirates and the like. And while much of Labat’s data serve, superficially at least, to construct oppositions between colonizer and colonized, between masters and subalterns, it is nonetheless clear that in his writings on mixology, Labat simply cannot keep himself from exploring questions of *mixité*.

What does the Other drink? On at least one occasion, Labat is not above sharing his own wine and food with two slaves who help him to escape in the dead of night from the home of some overzealous benefactors who believe Labat needs more time to recover from a particularly bad bout of *le mal de Siam*: “Le huitième jour, sur le soir, je commandai à deux nègres que j’avais amenés avec moi de notre habitation de tenir mon cheval prêt pour le lendemain, trois heures avant le jour, et d’acheter deux ou trois volailles rôties, *avec du pain et du vin pour eux et pour moi* et surtout de ne dire à personne que je voulais partir” (195-196, italics mine).

On the other hand – and purely in the interests of ethnography, no doubt! – Labat is also more than willing to do some exploratory drinking with the ostensible Other, and it is here that we surely find him venturing into what Bhabha would call the Third Space. The chapter of the *Voyage* which is perhaps most revelatory of this fact is entitled, “Des boissons ordinaires de ces îles,” and offers, in essence, an elaborate taxonomy of the mixological complexity of the islands, an extensive list of alcoholic beverages, including details of each drink’s origin, who drinks it and when, how it is made, and its general relation to the various cultures on and around the island. While this taxonomy, too, tends to maintain the hierarchical nature of island inebriation, one can point to several instances in which established social or cultural relationships founded on difference seem to undergo a kind of reconstruction that needs to be accounted for or dealt with, instances, once again, of productive ambivalence.

A significant example may be found in Labat’s description of the ubiquitous beverage known as *ouïcou*. Labat first tells us that, “L’ouïcou⁵⁸ est la boisson la plus ordinaire dont usent ceux qui n’ont point de vin” (94), a qualification which immediately sets Labat and many others of the privi-

⁵⁸ Labat writes *l’ouïcou* as well as *du ouïcou*, and uses *canaris* as both a singular and plural term.

leged class outside the realm of those who partake of this substance. However, he immediately follows this remark with, “Les Européens ont appris des sauvages à la faire” (94). The implication here is that some European inhabitants of the islands do not have access to imported wine; these poor souls have therefore leveled the playing field by learning to make their own means of intoxication, a knowledge shared by the island people. The third sentence of the paragraph relies on that usefully vague pronoun ‘on’ to further elide the distinction: “On sert pour cela de grands vases de terre grise que l’on fait dans le pays” (94; emphasis mine).⁵⁹ Furthermore, Labat explains, “Les sauvages, et à leur imitation les Européens, les appellent *canaris*” (94). If the cuisine of a society, as Lévi-Strauss’s work suggests, “is a language into which that society unconsciously translates its structures,”⁶⁰ the reverse is also true: language itself must transcribe cuisine and, in so doing, can alter the original culture itself. I would posit, in other words, that European adoption of the word *canari[s]*, is itself a kind of product of the Third Space, as it suggests a fundamental repositioning of self and culture in which difference, to some extent, disappears.

But there is more: Labat goes on to explain how to make *ouïcou*: one fills a *canari[s]* with water, two large, broken cassava melons, twelve *patates* cut into quarters, three or four measures of raw cane syrup, and twelve ripe, crushed bananas. One then corks the container, lets the mixture ferment three or four days, and finally skims the crust that forms on top: “[O]n se sert pour cela d’une écumoire ou d’une pièce dealebasse d’arbre” (94) – again, the choice of tool subtly suggests a hierarchical distinction based on the origins of the bartender. Rather revealingly, then, Labat adds, “La liqueur qui est dans les canaris ressemble pour lors à de la bière; elle est rougeâtre, forte, nourrissante, rafraîchissante, et elle enivre facilement” (94) – quite the observation for an individual who has not, as yet, admitted to partaking of the substance. Without overtly including himself in this ostensibly objective description (although he does admit to drinking *ouïcou* later in the text), Labat concludes this remarkably mixed paragraph by noting that, “Nos Français s’y accoutument aussi facilement qu’à la bière” (94), thereby singling out French consumption habits quite significantly.

Perhaps Labat was aware that his text had begun its own dangerously intoxicating mixological endeavor and unconsciously feared the potential

⁵⁹ One can relate Labat’s use of “on” to Homi Bhabha’s notion of “splitting.” (Bhabha, “The Other Question: Homi K. Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse.” *Screen* 24.6 (Nov.-Dec. 1983): 32-33.)

⁶⁰ See Mennell, Murcott & van Otterloo 9.

mixité that might result from this moment of ambivalence,⁶¹ because he very pointedly adds – immediately, in the next paragraph – “C’est la boisson favorite de nos sauvages; ils en font qui est terriblement forte, surtout quand ils veulent faire quelque festin; c’est avec cela qu’ils s’enivrent, et que se souvenant alors de leurs vieilles querelles ils se massacrent” (94). He goes on to compare this uncivilized use of *ouïcou* to that of the *habitants* and workers on the island, who consume the substance more genteelly, as a substitute for wine at meals. Again, Labat seems to move in and out of the Third Space throughout this development of the place and function of *ouïcou* in colonial society.

Labat goes on to explore (on the page, at least, and often, one senses, on the palate) a huge variety of beverages created by different groups on the island: *le maby*, which resembles *ouïcou*; the inclusion of oranges instead of melons and bananas makes it resemble a “vin clair... aussi agréable que le meilleur poiré que l’on boive en Normandie” (95); *la grappe*, made by the island’s slave population, a fact emphasized by Labat through his insistence on the pronoun *ils*; this distancing effort is undermined, however, by the concluding sentence of the paragraph, “J’ai bu assez souvent de cette grappe, et je m’en suis toujours bien trouvé” (95). And so on. Labat’s most comic intervention comes at the expense of the British, who have creolized their own alcohol consumption, favoring *le sang-gris*, *la limonade à l’anglaise*, and, significantly, *la ponche*, which is still ubiquitous in Martinique today. Labat ironically mocks the British twist to this otherwise delicious combination: “Souvent, au lieu d’eau, on y met du lait, et c’est la plus estimée. Comme il n’est pas permis de juger des goûts, chacun pourra porter tel jugement qu’il voudra de ce salmigondis” (97).⁶²

The chapter “Des boissons de ces îles” is located in the first quarter of what is essentially a chronological study of the islands, which suggests that Labat wasted no time in taking advantage of the island’s mixological diversity, a diversity that no doubt enhanced Labat’s desire to engage frequently with the Other.⁶³ However, if academic attention is paid to traditional,

⁶¹ Anne Freadman has explored culinary mixity as threat in “Eating Cultures,” *Consuming Culture: The Arts of the French Table*. Ed. John West-Sooby. Monash Romance Studies. Newark: U of Delaware Press, 2004, 158.

⁶² The capacity for culinary tastes to change is explored at length by Jaucourt in the *Encyclopédie*. See Jean-Claude Bonnet, “The Culinary System in the *Encyclopédie*,” in Robert Forster & Orest Ranum. *Food and Drink in History. Selections from the Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*. Vol.5. Trans. Elborg Forster and Patricia M. Ranum. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1979, 139-165.

⁶³ Mary Douglas notes that, “Sampling a drink is sampling what is happening to a whole category of social life.” Mary Douglas, ed. “A Distinctive Anthropological

hierarchical colonial structures throughout the text, Labat's actual behavior essentially mediates much of the formal notion of hierarchy he purports to espouse.⁶⁴ As time goes on, it becomes clear that Labat is perfectly happy to mix – or to mix drinks – with a variety of island inhabitants. On the island of la Grenade, Labat shares an assortment of inebriants with a family “qui me fit bonne chère en gibier et en poisson, cassave fraîche, ouïcou et eau-de-vie, bien entendu que c'était celle que j'avais fait apporter avec quelques bouteilles de vin de Madère” (294). He also has a remarkable experience as a guest in the home of one of the rare Christian Caribs whom Labat calls La Rose. Encountering a storm on a boat trip to the cul-de-sac Français on the east coast of Martinique, Labat is pleased by the opportunity to explore more intimately various island customs, and in that he is not disappointed. Upon entering, he sees eight or nine Carib men crouching near a fire: “Ces messieurs nous avaient fait leurs civilités ordinaires sans changer de posture, en nous disant: «Bonjour, compère, toi tenir tafia»” (139), a salutation which foregrounds (and, indeed, celebrates) Labat's own conspicuous contribution to island culture.⁶⁵ However, Labat soon makes a critical cultural error: spotting “une belle natte” stretched out on the ground and assuming it constitutes the dining area, Labat decides to use it for his own repast of bread and cold meat. To his dismay, he is informed that there is a dead body under the mat and that the man's relatives are discomfited by his presence there. Essentially unperturbed, however, Labat makes up for his blunder as follows: “Le compère La Rose fit apporter une autre natte, qu'on étendit dans un autre endroit, nous nous y mîmes et continuâmes à notre aise et fîmes boire M. de la Rose et toute la compagnie, afin de réparer le scandale que nous leur avons donné en nous asseyant sur leur mort” (140). Later, Labat boldly asks if, “as a friend” (“comme amis du défunt”) he might view the body; La Rose accepts with pleasure, “surtout si nous buvions et faisons boire à sa santé” (140), a gesture toward the dead of which Labat heartily approves.⁶⁶

Perspective,” Introduction, *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drinking from Anthropology*. NY: Cambridge UP, 1987, 9.

⁶⁴ See Khan 251.

⁶⁵ Labat's traveling companion, M. Joyeux, is equally fêted as a beloved friend, as he is the generous source of the cane syrup they use to make *ouïcou*.

⁶⁶ A word of caution is in order here. Claude Grignon has suggested that commensality's most visible function is that of “social integration.” However, he also notes that “Commensality can approve and express discontinuities that separate human groups as well as negotiate those discontinuities by temporarily bringing together separated groups, even by confirming and reinforcing their opposition in the end.” Grignon further states that, “[T]ransgressing commensality plays upon oppositions

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One final set of examples will demonstrate the degree to which, having entered into a space that is eminently Other, and having (consciously or unconsciously) participated in the splitting of the self so essential to cultural identification, according to Homi Bhabha, Labat arrives at a point in which categories of difference are remarkably blurred. For Labat, the slaves and Caribs are Other yet like, as can be seen in the conclusion of Labat's account of the melancholy that afflicts many slaves, causing them to take on odd eating habits: "Cette mélancolie noire qui porte les nègres à manger de la terre, des cendres, de la chaux et autres choses de cette nature, est ordinaire aux sauvages [i.e. the Caribs]. Elle est encore très commune parmi nos créoles, et surtout aux filles qui ont du penchant pour le dernier sacrement" (109). Here, Labat sees very little difference in the emotional proclivities of slaves, Caribs, and white creoles; they all know what it is to be melancholy, and they all consume dirt to combat it, not together, of course, but in imitation one of the Other. Or, in this more telling example, which, while unrelated to habits of consumption, juxtaposes the very same populations in a remarkable way: speaking of the Caribs, Labat asserts,

Il n'y a point de peuple du monde qui soit plus jaloux de sa liberté, et qui ressent plus vivement et plus impatiemment les moindres attaques qu'on y voudrait donner. Aussi se moquent-ils de nous autres, quand ils voient que nous portons respect et que nous obéissons à nos supérieurs. Ils disent qu'il

between social groups and the borders which separate them. Ambivalence seems to be its essential characteristic. It is because it recognises these borders that it can temporarily and symbolically transgress them, providing an opportunity for establishing, in the neutralised and ritual parenthesis of a meal a relation of exchange." (Claude Grignon, "Commensality and Social Morphology: An Essay of Typology" in *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages*, ed. Peter Scholliers. Oxford & New York: Berg, 2001, 27-30.) Lucy M. Long develops related ideas in the first chapter of *Culinary Tourism* (*op.cit.*), yet she also acknowledges that, "Food, like any cultural product, is multivocal and polysemic, and new meanings can be recognized in new contexts" (35); tourism, as she notes, is also a form of negotiation. Going further (and supporting my assertions here), Anneke van Otterloo's empirical study of the culinary habits of the Dutch and of immigrants to the Netherlands suggests that barriers are in fact leveled when individuals of different social groups consume food and drink together. (Anneke H. Van Otterloo, "Foreign Immigrants and the Dutch at Table: 1945-1985. Bridging or Widening the Gap?" *The Netherlands Journal of Sociology / Sociologia Neerlandica*. 23.2 (1987): 126-143.) Mennell, summarizing Van Otterloo's work, posits, "Perhaps the table *can* demolish barriers between people" (Mennell *et al.*, *op.cit.*, 80).

faut que nous soyons *les esclaves* de ceux à qui nous obéissons, puisqu'ils se donnent la liberté de nous commander, et que nous sommes assez lâches pour exécuter leurs ordres" (267; italics mine).

The irony of this observation could hardly be lost on Labat who, again, is forced to contemplate himself as self (conquering missionary) and Other (slave) in the Third Space.

One last example will illustrate the degree to which Labat was capable of entertaining utterly contradictory notions about difference, particularly with reference to slavery and its dilemmas. Describing at length British colonizers' abysmal treatment of their slaves, detailing the unspeakable and gruesome punishments they inflicted on insubordinate Africans, and *approving* of this treatment in cases of possible revolt, Labat notes in the very same paragraph *and utterly without irony*, that "il est vrai que le désir de la liberté et de la vengeance est toujours le même chez tous les hommes..." (289).

Was Labat himself conflicted in his thoughts on slavery and its "necessity"? Certainly not, and he remained a proponent of slavery to the end. Did he consider himself absolutely and irrevocably Other, different – superior to – the various populations around him? Yes... and no. Doris Garraway suggests that Labat was, in fact, willing "to embrace difference and be changed by it;"⁶⁷ she also notes that "Labat was himself a model of the very kind of social mobility and confusion of categories that typified many subjects of his travel narrative."⁶⁸ Proximity breeds familiarity; commensality creates a space for sociability, a Third Space in which ambivalence is possible. Most importantly, a desire for knowledge, that is, a passion for constructing knowledge of the Other, propels us to seek cultural confrontations with hard to predict results. As we look back on Jean-Baptiste Labat's remarkable record of encounters with a veritable host of Others, we can, I would posit, find traces of a profound interest in, and interrogation of, alterity, "resistant traces," to cite Bhabha, of Labat's venturing into the Third Space and the transvaluing of epistemologies that results. Homi Bhabha has suggested that,

Without the postcolonial time-lag [of the Third Space] the discourse of modernity cannot, I believe, be written; with the *projective past* it can be inscribed as a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of

⁶⁷ Garraway, *The Libertine Colony* (2005), 135.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural differences (252).

One cannot help but wonder to what extent Jean-Baptiste Labat's performance of ambivalence – from his internal processing of the institution of slavery to his creative drinking habits – participated in that very constitution of modernity.