

## HOW A COLONY WAS CREATED BY THE FAILURE TO CREATE A COLONY: V.S. NAIPAUL'S *THE LOSS OF EL DORADO*

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**Abstract:** *Trying to elucidate the enigma of how a colony was created in the New World, V.S. Naipaul employs El Dorado as the dream behind the colonial narrative which fueled adventure and conquest. He focuses on two historical moments in which he selected as representative for the history of his native Trinidad. Engaging critically with the colonial material that he researched in the process of writing the book, Naipaul renders visible the paradox of how a colony was created in the New World by the failure to create a colony: that is, by an accumulation of historical mistakes, confusion, disorder, and terror.*

**Keywords:** *colonial history, genocide, slavery, torture*

### 1. Introduction

As he points out in the foreword to the book, Naipaul's idea when writing *The Loss of El Dorado* was to show “how a colony was created in the New World” (xviii). Here “colony” and “The New World” take on a specific meaning. The main problem when trying to approach Naipaul's non-fiction is that of interpretation. In order to do that, we can start from Michel Serres' observations on metalanguage, universal methods, and singularities in his *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time* (1995), having Bruno Latour as an interlocutor. Latour (1995: 92) remarks that what makes Serres' work difficult to read is that his metalanguage “comes always from the thing in question and not from the methodology used”. In response, Serres (1995: 91) contends that texts are singularities, and so “the best solutions are local, singular, specific, adapted, original, regional”. A true critic must perpetually invent the tools with which s/he works: “You have to invent a localised method for a localised problem. Each time you try to open a different lock, you have to forge a specific key, which is obviously unrecognisable and without equivalent in the marketplace of method” (idem: 92). This is what Naipaul did when writing the history of Trinidad: as a native of the place, he invented his own method for tackling the puzzle of how the colony was created. And this is also how this essay will proceed in analysing that history: searching for a key to understand Naipaul's concept of colony within his own writing.

### 2. Trinidad: the first moment

The invitation to write the history of Port-of-Spain, which Naipaul received from the American publisher Little, Brown & Co, must have offered him the perfect occasion for delving into a past which had become an obsession. It was his own

sense of being cut off from the past (xvii) that prompted him to investigate the enigma of Trinidad – which rested on a linguistic irony. Not, of course, on that foundational irony of the New World, of Columbus sailing in search of India and finding the West Indies, a misnomer for a geographical confusion, but of his birthplace, a country town called Chaguanas. The wonder that grew out of finding that Chaguanas, a name that the indentured Indians had appropriated and pronounced as “Chauhaan” (a Hindu caste name), was the name of the West Indian tribe of the Chaguanes, provided the incentive Naipaul needed to start his investigation. The Chaguanes had been massacred by the Spanish in retaliation for their rebellion. More than just an irony - it was a symbolic irony - surrounding a web of confusion: first, the New World natives being miscalled Indians, then, the real Indians, transported across the ocean and misplaced in the settlement belonging to the now wiped out West Indians.

Thus, the colony was founded on genocide, by wiping out a whole population, whose memory was only preserved in the mispronounced town name. For Naipaul, the foundational moment of a colony is a break-up in the organic link between man and land. The history of Trinidad will begin with the story of how the Chaguanes were swept in the whirlpool of history leading to their extinction. Naipaul recasts this story as the story of Walter Raleigh and his adventures in search of El Dorado.

If the colony is founded on genocide, the New World is founded on a dream, which, appropriated and filtered through the cultural imaginary of two empires, turns into a collective fantasy: El Dorado. Naipaul (2010: 3) calls El Dorado “essentially a Spanish delusion” and uncovers the historical roots of this fantasy:

There had been a golden man, *el dorado*, the gilded one, in what is now Colombia; a chief who one year rolled in turpentine, was covered with gold dust and then dived into a lake. But the tribe of the golden man had been conquered a generation before Columbus came to the New World. It was an Indian memory that the Spaniards pursued; and the memory was confused with the legend, among jungle Indians, of the Peru the Spaniards had already conquered. (2010: 4)

Naipaul describes the circumstances of this transfer from myth to reality with a historian’s sense of detail: the large Spanish Empire, the slowness with which correspondence (and news) travelled from the New World to Spain, the King’s bankruptcy and greed, the discrepancy between the conquistadors’ expectations and the reality of the tropics, all of which made El Dorado both a mirage worth pursuing and the inexorable doom of all who pursued it. The quest for El Dorado is rendered as a typical European medieval enterprise, thriving on the ideas of the court, the knight, and the miraculous. It gives Antonio de Berrio, the first Spanish governor of Trinidad, space for imagining himself as one of “the heroes of antiquity” (Naipaul 2010: 12). Berrio had inherited the idea of the quest from another conquistador, Quesada, whose dream had been to be “the third marquis of the New World, after Cortés and Pizarro” (11). The failure to reach El Dorado does not act as a deterrent, but as an incentive. As Naipaul remarks, here is the second fantasy of the New World at work: “To be the first man on the earth, to see the first shoots of the first crop, to let off ‘the first gun that had been fired there since the creation of the world’: it is an aspect of what the El Dorado quest had become” (27).

El Dorado, refashioned by the Spanish from local Indian legend into a quest for honour and wealth, is taken up by yet another adventurer, coming from a

different empire: Sir Walter Raleigh. For him, El Dorado becomes a pretext for something larger, a vision of a different world. Naipaul notes that Raleigh “was planning an empire of Guiana in which Indian numbers and English skill would destroy the Spanish” (28). While “the Spaniards [...] remained individuals, committed to a holy war and an outdated code of chivalry”, “Raleigh could merge personal ambition into a greater cause”, as he “had an idea of society and association” (ibid.). Thus, while the Spanish were still living along the coordinates of the Dark Ages, England was pushing towards modernity: Naipaul calls Raleigh's vision “lucid, three-dimensional” (29).

There is an underlying tension in Naipaul's description of Raleigh and his adventures. He strains to be objective, yet he also sees him as the one responsible for the many deaths his adventure ended in. Naipaul dubs Raleigh “unskilled [...] and timorous” as an explorer and describes him rather paradoxically: “He longed for the new, but was nervous about the unknown” (49). Naipaul refrains from using any ideologically-tainted words, but makes it clear that Raleigh's is an imperialistic enterprise. In his discourse to the Indians, Raleigh uses freedom and liberation as concepts justifying conquest:

I made them understand that I was the servant of a Queene, who was the great casique of the North, and a virgine, and had more casiqui under her than there were trees in that land; that she was anemie of the Castellani in respect of their tyrannie and oppression, and that she delivered all such nations about her, as were by them oppressed, and having freed all the coast of the Northern world from their servitude, had sent me to free them also, and withall to defend the countrey of Guiana from their invasion and conquest. (2010: 45-46)

It is for the sake of this dream, of being received among the Indians “as a liberator” (2010: 53) that Raleigh starts on the Orinocco journey. The vision of empire requests sacrifices, and Raleigh is wont to comply. Naipaul supplies the full inventory of the victims left behind by Raleigh's dream:

Guanaguanare in chains in St. Joseph, ‘those poore souldiers’ at the Port of Spain landing place who had been ‘many yeeres without wine’, Berrio ‘stricken into a great melancholy’, those bodies among the prickly pear-plants at Cumana, the rotting men in the ships. The sixteen year old boy Raleigh had left behind in the jungle had already died; his English clothes, the Indians said, had astonished and maddened a tiger. And the Indians of St, Joseph; roused but unprotected, were presently to be repacified. (2010: 52-53)

*Repacified*: a word with the same sinister implications as the phrase “resettlement to the East”. It took some time, Naipaul writes in the introduction, for the fate of the Indians to be decided, because imperial correspondence was slow, and “it could take two years for a letter from Trinidad to be read in Madrid” (xvii). It happened in 1625, eight years after Raleigh's Guiana expedition, presumably after only four letters had been exchanged between the imperial centre and one of its most remote outposts. The stretch of eight years that was granted to the Indians because of the slow-grinding imperial bureaucracy seems almost Kafkaesque. In his letter, the King writes to the governor of Trinidad about “a certain nation of Indians called Chaguanes [...] of such bad disposition that it was they who led the English when they captured the town” (xviii), giving him free rein to punish them. Soon, Naipaul writes “no one would know that there was once a people called

Chaguanes”. What is even more appalling than the massacre is the loss of memory related to their existence. The one letter mentioning the Chaguanes was discovered in the Spanish archives in 1897, more than two centuries after they had been “repacified”.

Thus, the colony starts with a dream that turns fantasy into reality. This dream operates a transfer from the creative chaos of the mind into everyday life, and thus it creates de-regulation. De-regulation culminates in a massacre and a loss/erasure of memory. The land is purged of its former inhabitants, ready for conquest. But the conquistadores too will fall prey to the deregulation instituted by fantasy. This is the first moment when Trinidad, as Naipaul remarks, is ‘touched’ by history. The second moment recapitulates the first, although from a different perspective.

### **3. The second moment: the torture of Louisa Calderon**

The story of Luisa Calderon begins with the last Spanish governor of Trinidad, Jose Maria Chacon, and the French Revolution. To the already existing imperial, racial, and cultural divisions in and around an island of colonists like Trinidad, the French Revolution added that of the friction between the republicans and the royalists. Many royalist French planters from the neighbouring islands relocated to Trinidad with their slaves. With the increasing French-speaking population, white, mulatto, and black, royalist and republican, Naipaul writes, “a composite French colony had been assembled in Trinidad, and it was a colony in a state of insurrection and anarchy” (2010: 119). Spain was at war with France, for the empire was adverse to the idea of revolution, while the French, although “divided among themselves”, put on a united front when it came to confronting the Spanish or the British. And the enemy kept changing: “The enemy was authority. Authority was England, the government in France, the French slave-owner, the white slave-owner. The enemy was rebellion, the dangerous Negro, the assertive free mulatto, the proselytising republican” (ibid.). Naipaul's dislike of revolutionaries comes to the surface in his characterisation of Victor Hugues:

In the Caribbean now was Victor Hugues, Robespierre's emissary of revolution, enemy of the English, a west Indian mulatto, but also a Frenchman, a man dramatically right for the role of anarchist and avenger: of poor family, a failed hairdresser, failed innkeeper, failed ship's master (2010: 120).

Naipaul analyses the effects of the French revolution as part of “the French absurdity: the slave revolt was not wholly a slave revolt, the race war was not wholly a race war”, because “all the local hatreds were entangled with the revolutionary politics of France” (2010: 123). His dislike of revolutions and revolutionaries springs from a disillusionment with ideology and ideologically-tainted discourses: “Paris supplied each side with the same simple vocabulary of revolution” (ibid.). Ideologies are simple, since they are reductive: the same word or concept can be used by conflicting parties to refer to opposite things. Writing about one of the failed South American revolutions, Naipaul notes that it was a prefiguration of all the revolutions to come: “borrowed words that never matched the society, the private theatre of disguises and false names that ended in blood and the heads spiked in public places” (164).

When Chacon surrendered Trinidad to the invading British troops led by Abercromby, the implication is that, due to the proliferating social, national and political divisions among its inhabitants, the island had become ungovernable. Indeed, the presence of the British soldiers “kept the French and everyone still; for the first time for years Chacon felt secure in Trinidad” (132). This is why Thomas Picton, the next governor, will rule with an iron fist, intending to crush all disobedience. In fact, as Naipaul notes, the first time Picton summoned the Port of Spain *cabildo*, he told them that “at the first sign of trouble he would hang them all” (142). The “system of impartial terror” by which Picton sought to maintain order, consisted mostly of hangings: hanging the German mercenaries who had deserted because they had not been paid, the runaway slaves, even a white soldier who had raped a free woman of colour.

But Picton was caught between the anvil and the hammer, between Britain's dream of turning Trinidad into a colony of free settlers, a base for South American trade, and the reality of the slave island. He turned into another slave owner on the island plantation of Trinidad. As administering a plantation and maintaining order among the slave population was not what he was trained to do, Picton resorted to the advice offered by Begorrat, a French plantation owner appointed Chief Magistrate in difficult times: the poisoning of black slaves by other black slaves. While revolts against whites seem understandable, the poisonings require a clarification which is not given in Naipaul's account. They appear unnatural, and so do the punishments administered by the whites to the black murderers. Naipaul describes a kind of modern, bureaucratic terror. Not an unleashing of passion, an enjoyment of gore, but consciously instilled fear, used to maintain or regain control. In light of this new understanding of terror, we can also attempt to understand the motives behind the poisonings: on the one hand, the desire to rob the white men of their most precious possessions (land was cheap in Trinidad, but slave labor was expensive); on the other, an attempt to conquer the most natural fear in man, the fear of death. Thisbe, one of the black poisoners, will gladly suffer the most atrocious pains during torture and endure a humiliating death, yet she will never betray her husband.

From a site of chaos that ends in terror (the genocide of the Chaguanes), the colony changed into a site of terror which attempts to re-instate order. After a long period of being “exempt from history” (110), history seems to take revenge by producing monsters. This is in fact the condition of the colony: not just periphery, not only the site of profound historical sleep, but a locus of extremes: coma followed by hyperactivity. The Industrial Revolution which changed Europe also affected Trinidad. Terror, the heritage of a feudal military aristocracy, turns into a terrible machine on account of the lawlessness, or rather the overdetermination of legality – nobody knows for sure if the laws valid in Trinidad are Spanish or British, while most administration is carried out in the spirit of the French laws from the other slave islands in the Caribbean. One would almost think that Kafka wrote the chilling “In the Penal Colony” after reading Naipaul's account of the different kinds of torture inflicted on the criminals in Trinidad. First, just to be jailed could turn into a torture: “The heat was one of the punishments in the jail, where there were [...] cells known as *cachots brulants*. The temperature in these [...] rooms was never less than 100 degrees; prisoners there, chained flat on boards, quickly wasted away and became demented” (172).

Naipaul begins his account of Louisa Calderon's torture with what he calls “a joke” for the slave society:

The Negro cook-girl burnt the Sunday callaloo, a slimy vegetable dish. Her French mistress ordered a professional whipping a quatre piquettes; it was the 'four-poster' method favoured by the French. The cook-girl was stripped, spreadeagled face down on the ground, her wrists and ankles tied to four stakes. Her mistress stood by, smoking a cigar. At every lash the girl cried out, 'Aie, aie, madame! Ca ka brule dos moue! That burn my back!' 'Eh, bien, ma fille,' her mistress replied, 'pour chi ou brule calalou moue? What for you burn my callaloo?' (2010: 178)

The disparity between the mildness of the offence and the cruelty of the punishment increases the horror. But this is part of the terror machine: like in Kafka, the punishment is not designed to fit the offence, it becomes a thing of its own, whose function is to keep the machine going by emphasising its beauty. A beauty revealed only to those who operate the machine. William Fullarton, sent as First Commissioner to Trinidad when rumours about Pictor's reign of terror reach London, receives a written complaint from a disgruntled executioner. Naipaul reproduces it: from the methodical enumeration of the executioner's unpaid commissions, we get a glimpse at how the terror machine was working: one prisoner was hanged, burned and had his head cut off (we don't know in what order), a dozen or so men had their ears clipped off, either publicly in the market or in the jail-yard, while others were only flogged (2010: 212). There is something eerie about the list; it is not just the horror of the punishments, but also the horror of the familiar which starts haunting the reader. Firstly, there is torture as writing on the body, and then it is the re-inscription of torture on paper as historical testimony, physical torture turning into mental torture for Fullarton.

Taking place roughly during the slave poisoning trials and executions, the torture of Louisa Calderon is a by-product of the authorities' exacerbated vigilance, an involuntary excess that will eventually destroy the terror machine. An adolescent girl, Louisa was accused of conspiring with her lover to steal the money of the man she had been serving for several years and whose wife she was to become shortly. At Picton's trial in London, several years later, there was little doubt that the accusation had been caused by jealousy, yet, in Trinidad, once the terror machine had been set in motion, innocence or guilt were superfluous concepts. Again, like in Kafka, justice is neither punitive, nor restorative; in the age of modern bureaucracy, justice turns into a machine which engages with and traffics desire, appropriates impulses, and generates emotional means of control. The only difference between Kafka's imagined machine and Naipaul's colonial terror machine lies in their respective complexity and simplicity. While Kafka imagines a kind of writing machine literally inscribing the punishment on the body – and killing the prisoner –, the torture instrument in Trinidad is, as Naipaul writes, "simple": "A pulley was fixed to the ceiling. Over the pulley passed a length of rope with a small noose at one end. Set in the floor directly below the pulley was a tapering wooden stake six inches high" (188). This instrument, the piquet, was "a military antiquity", which Picton, as the governor of colonial Trinidad, had revived: "the trussed soldier, suspended by his wrists from a rope, was hoisted up on a pulley and then lowered from time to time to rest the tip of his big toe, not more, on a blunt stake" (168).

Louisa's torture on the piquet, inflicted by Vallot, the jailer, lasts for almost an hour. Naipaul notes that "The eighteenth-century military punishment, from which this torture was derived, was never inflicted for more than fifteen minutes; it had lamed and ruptured many men" (190). The details of the repeated torture

include Luisa being left hanging by the left wrist, and then by her right, until she loses consciousness. For Vallot, this is merely a job being done. He tortures Luisa at Begorrat's request, but he also treats her with coffee in the morning, and an occasional cigar, as he was paid by her accuser to take care of her. This demonstrates distance and objectivity: Vallot does his job thoroughly and, at the same time, he notices Luisa's courage. He approves of her valour, but again from afar: he never asks why she had been sentenced to torture. He is just another cog in the machine.

What may appear surprising to the readers is Naipaul's seemingly ambiguous positioning. On the one hand, his simple and precise language, used to cover the horrendous details of Luisa's torture, and the gruesome punishments inflicted on the black slaves by the poisoning commission make the inhumanity of the colonial terror machine stand out. On the other, he describes the reaction of the English radicals, Picton's opponents, with a certain amount of ironical detachment. Naipaul's factual description of the punishments contrasts sharply with the humanitarian rhetoric of Picton's opponents. Here is how Naipaul presents the situation:

The heads of Thisbe and La Fortune were cut off and the bodies burned on a pile that had been prepared. The next day, Saturday, Thisbe's head was taken to Begorrat's estate at Diego Martin, just to the west of the city, and spiked on a pole. La Fortune's head was displayed at Luzette's estate in St. Anne's, just to the north. (2010: 193)

The sparse descriptions are, however, much more pictorial and effective than the effusive rhetoric used by an English lawyer to garner support for the Picton opposition:

*Sanguinary Punishments corrupts mankind. The Effect of Cruel Spectacles exhibited to the populace is the destruction of all tender emotions, it more frequently excites Disgust than terror. It creates Indifference rather than Dread. It operates on the lower orders as an Incentive to practices of Torture, etc., for the purpose of revenge* (2010: 193, emphasis in the original)

The sentiment may be right, but the concept and the language are all wrong. A terror machine is about to be fought off with the rhetoric of melodrama. Consequently, Naipaul regards Fullarton and all his efforts to expose and condemn Picton as ineffectual and ridiculous. He will succeed only because Picton, as Naipaul remarks, "had done the wrong job" in establishing order:

London didn't want another West Indian slave colony. They wanted Trinidad to be a colony of free settlers [...] Trinidad was of value as a British colony only because it was going to be the centre of British trade with South America. [...] Trade didn't need Negroes. It needed the independence of Spanish America. And independence required that revolution which Picton had given up. (2010: 199)

Therein lies the paradox of the modern terror machine: it is so well-organised that it defeats its purpose. In Kafka, the beauty of the machine exceeds its purpose: guilt is always beyond doubt, and the condemned man will only find out his sentence in the final minute before death, when the harrow has finished inscribing it on the body. Once the case against Picton is complete and Fullarton escapes with the

documents, it is all over: Picton himself turns into the former commander, whose ghost, melting under the chaos-generating sun of the tropics, is not sufficient to keep the machine going.

#### 4. Metahistory

Many critics have noted that *The Loss of El Dorado* is a history of the colonised, written exclusively by using material provided by colonists (Nixon 1995: 125). While this observation is factually true, it is nevertheless unjust, as it fails to take into account the circumstances surrounding the writing of this history, and Naipaul's subtle and complex use of irony. Naipaul belonged to a generation who had been raised as colonials. The efforts of this generation were aimed at finding ways to resist the colonisation of the mind: in his fiction as well as non-fiction, Naipaul uses introspection as a method for detecting the colonial fine-tuning, which lies at the basis of most of the failures of the colonised.

Naipaul's preoccupation was above all with investigating faulty patterns of thinking and acting, delving into and uncovering the hidden histories of colonisation, rather than with envisaging the post-colony. His deep pessimism sprung from his engagement with a past that consisted of mistakes, confusion, genocide, and terror. On the other hand, when engaging with the material provided by the colonists, Naipaul was never, as he was repeatedly accused, uncritical towards it. On the contrary: in chapter 6 of *A Way in the World*, the surgeon, Raleigh's main critic, makes a demonstration of textual analysis: going over Raleigh's account of his Guiana adventures, the surgeon explains what had made him suspect the underlying reasons for Raleigh's actions. We can read his careful textual analysis as Naipaul's own strategy of getting to the bottom of historical truth in *The Loss of El Dorado*. First, Naipaul's preference for working with written documents (Dhondy 2006: 20) is justified by the surgeon as follows: "I always prefer to work with a written statement. Unless you write things down, you miss a lot. Certain things that people say can reveal their meaning only if you can read them again and again. The words physically have to be in front of your eyes. It's the only way you can discover things" (Naipaul 2011: 165). He ends his justification with the injunction, quite natural for a surgeon, "Dissect them." This is exactly Naipaul's strategy of reaching the truth: thorough dissection of words and discourses. Careful analysis will show the surgeon all the gaps and ambiguities in Raleigh's narrative, and lead him to discover where Raleigh has strayed from reality into fantasy:

I have to read your book again and again. It's a slippery piece of work, if I can use that word. You slip about, you lose your footing. It's nice and easy and clear and brilliant for a number of pages, and then suddenly you feel you've not been paying attention. You feel you've missed something. So you go back. You've missed nothing. It's just that something's gone wrong with the writing. [...] So even if you're a careful reader you lose the drift of the narrative. It's not easy, noticing first of all that the writing has changed and then finding exactly where. But those are precisely the places you have to identify. Because those are the places where the writer decides to add things or to hide things. (Naipaul 2011: 165-6)

To add things or to hide things, that is the question. While history is made either by adding or by hiding things, the task of the historiographer is to carefully

remove the additions and find out the truth. It may sound like an impossible mission for somebody who has studied at the school of post-structuralism, yet Naipaul is what one might call an old-fashioned writer. No approach to his fiction or non-fiction, which disregards his lifelong commitment to what he saw as the truth, will manage to illuminate how it works. Naipaul himself stated repeatedly that he aimed at writing truthfully, and, in his memoir *Sir Vidia's Shadow: A Friendship across Five Continents*, Paul Theroux (1998: 17) quotes Naipaul as giving him the following advice on writing: "Don't prettify it", "The greatest writing is a disturbing vision offered from a position of strength – aspire to that", and "Tell the truth".

This is the key to interpreting *The Loss of El Dorado*: a careful, circumspect reading of historical documents, followed by the identification of the precise spots where the insertion of ideology alters the writing, where fact slips into fantasy. These places are marked by the sign of excess: as the surgeon confesses to Raleigh, what made him suspicious in the first place was the fact that he "gave too many names". One can almost imagine Naipaul in the archives of the British Library, poring over historical documents, making notes, going back to the text over and over again.

In the preface to the 2010 edition of his book, Naipaul is more specific about the circumstances surrounding the writing of *The Loss of El Dorado*. First, he confesses that the book should have never been written, as it had caused him "untold grief, and at the end there was no adequate recompense" (v). Having met with the publisher "in a kind of mutual misunderstanding", the author describes every stage of the research, writing, and publication of the book as an unexpected link in a chain of mysteries, discoveries, and confusion. Naipaul's sense of "the colonial absurdity" came, in fact, from confronting his colonial education with the results of his feverish – and tiresome – research:

It was comedy to attempt in the history class to write about a day in the life of an aboriginal village; and it was comedy because so little was known. The text books merely said that the aboriginal people 'sickened and died'. And that abstract idea had to suffice for us. The aborigines sickening and dying, slavery not leaving a great mark – this was how I thought I would deal with the absence of history. And as soon as I went to the documents this colonial absurdity fell to the ground. Slavery had been very real here. The jail [...] had been the site of matter-of-fact torture and floggings. (2010: v-vi)

"Sickened and died" was the real-life textual spot which covered a historical gap. In a way, the whole of *The Loss of El Dorado* is an inquiry into how the idea of natural death was rendered capable, by the workings of colonial ideology, of standing in for an unnatural one: the genocide of the Chaguanes, or the torture and the killing of the slaves. In real-life terms, the loss of El Dorado stands for the loss of colonial innocence, the moment of post-colonial awareness.

## 5. Conclusion

What *The Loss of El Dorado* makes visible is the paradox of how a colony was created in the New World by the failure to create a colony. By showing how the colony was created rather from slips of the tongue, dreams, fantasy, and a terror machine fuelled by desire and fear, Naipaul subverts the image of the white

coloniser acting as a model for the colonial. It is rather the colonial's own fears, emphasised by the disorder he has been forced to live in, which project the image of the white coloniser as an ideal. Colonisation is first and foremost of the mind: in the colony, both colonised and colonisers suffer from the same disease and fall prey either to their deregulated fantasy, or to the terror machine. For Naipaul, ideologists attempting to repair historical injustice solely by supporting an anti-colonisation discourse are no more than misguided romantics. One can only resist complicated historical creations – which act like machines, involving complex networks of social and political actors, the past, the present, landscape, geography, etc. – by analysing and revealing how they work. Or, as the surgeon puts it, by dissecting them.

The only serious critique that can be brought against Naipaul is perhaps his conceptualisation of Trinidad, and of the colony, as periphery. The centre-periphery binomial is just as flexible as the coloniser-colonised relation. The terms are interchangeable: for colonials, Europe was the centre. Yet, for the French historian Jules Michelet, who wrote an obscure natural history like *The Sea (La Mer)*, the Caribbean was one of the two geometrical centres of the world. Commenting on *The Sea*, Serres (1982: 32) notes that Michelet, using astronomic and geographical observation, identified the “two centres of the world, apexes at either side of it”, firstly, “at a certain point of the Caribbean, between Cuba and Florida”, and secondly, near Java. This is a fine paradox, almost Naipaulian in character: the colonial imagining Europe as the centre, and the European “scientifically” ascribing the centre to two exotic points on the equator. It is all a game of Self and Other, in the end.

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