

The Amazon as golden kingdom reflected in a shining lagoon; the Amazon as underwater city inhabited by dolphins and anacondas with an eerie knack for showing up in the form of one's next-door neighbor. The following pair of chapters describes two marvelous cities that diverge, but also intertwine. My focus in the first of the two is the glittering realm of El Dorado, which I see as one of the first and most important giants to represent the Amazon. My focus in the second is the shape-shifting underwater city known as the Encante, to which Tô Pereira and his friend Raimundo introduced me.

“El Dorado” is the name that the Spaniards gave to the resplendent monarch whom natives in Quito began describing to them in the 1530s. The king was said to be so rich that his servants coated him each morning with a sort of golden talc, which he then washed off in his nightly bath. El Dorado soon came to designate not just the king, but also his fabulously wealthy city, known in some accounts as Manoa. This city often was said to stand beside a golden lake (the king’s natural bathtub), which also bore the name El Dorado. Sometimes king and city were supplanted by the glittering lake.¹

More than just a tale of fabulous riches, El Dorado became the concrete, if elusive, destination of a multitude of expeditions into a forbidding interior. Rumors of a realm so rich that even the roots of weeds appear caked with gold led explorers from Spain, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Portugal, France, and England to push their way into the vast, off-putting northern center of South America.² Many of the earliest forays focused on the lands of the Muisca, or Chibcha, Indians surrounding Lake Guatavita, not far from present-day Bogotá. In the 1540s and 1550s, an increasing number of expeditions made their way into the Solimões River region in search of the home of the gold-rich Omagua In-

dians. Later, toward the end of the sixteenth century, searches for the golden kingdom often centered on the area between the Orinoco and the Amazon Rivers, and on the fabled great salt lake of Parima, said to be in the hilly region between what is now Venezuela and the Brazilian state of Roraima. The legendary golden lake of Paititi (Patiti), in northern Peru, was another frequent destination.³

The Encante (a colloquial form of *Encanto*, which means “charm” or “enchantment” in both Spanish and Portuguese) provides a kind of mirror image of El Dorado. Situated not on land, but at the bottom of a lake or river (there are also Encantes in the woods, but they are less common), this is the Enchanted City that appears in Tô Pereira’s stories of aquatic beings who can assume human form. The Encante resembles El Dorado in its spectacular riches, its alluring mystery, and its persistent elusiveness. It is “just like” earthly cities, except for its fabulous wealth. Although it lies beneath the waters of a river, lake, or *igarapé* (a seasonal creek) with which storytellers are deeply familiar, it, like El Dorado, remains just out of reach.

And yet, its underwater location, its tantalizing proximity, and its intense mutability (it can pop up in one place, then appear in another, then return to the first) make the Encante very different from El Dorado. Despite its frequent association with a shining lake, El Dorado remains firmly anchored on dry land. Although descriptions of it are specific, its location is imprecisely defined. And the golden king El Dorado is human, not a snake or dolphin who has only assumed human form. Furthermore, while El Dorado represents a selective magnification of earthly wealth, the Encante is marvelously alien. It does not invite conquest, but instead affirms the limits of human definition and control.

In various visions of the Amazon, El Dorado, the golden dream, finds expression as an impulse toward fragmentation and containment of the natural world: the Amazon as Second Eden, as Hostile Wilderness, as Vanishing World. In the case of the Encante, the overriding sense of mutability that surrounds it takes form in present-day gold miners’ accounts of a living Gold and in tales of a disappearing lake recounted by descendants of African slaves.

Despite their often dramatic differences, stories of El Dorado and the Encante reveal undercurrents that cause them to periodically intertwine. The temporary elusiveness of El Dorado, for instance, becomes outright resistance as the city appears to jump from place to place upon a shifting map, much like the Encante can disappear and reappear moments

later in another spot. The elusive riches of the Encante may end up in the pockets of the plucky visitor who manages to reach it, just as El Dorado promises wealth to those who discover it. Differing accounts of each marvelous city reveal apparent contradictions that blur the boundaries between giant and shape-shifter, hinting at a legacy in which the two stories both clash and periodically converge.

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