

**Folk and Popular Stories of Enchantment as  
Inspiration for Milton Hatoum's *Órfãos do Eldorado*  
and Responses to a Changing Amazon**

*Candace Slater*

Milton Hatoum's *Órfãos do Eldorado* (*Orphans of Eldorado*) uses the folk story of an enchanted river-bottom city—a tale widely familiar throughout much of the Amazon basin—as the lead-in and principal narrative thread uniting the chronicle of secrets, harsh betrayals, and tragic loss that stands as a portrait of one particularly powerful family and, by extension, of the Amazon region as a whole.<sup>1</sup> This 2008 novella by the Manaus-born author who has become one of Brazil's best-known contemporary writers was created specifically for the Canongate Myth Series—a project that the company's publicity materials describe as “a series of short novels in which ancient myths from myriad cultures are reimagined and rewritten by contemporary authors.”<sup>2</sup> The ambitious collection brings together contributors from different corners of the world—Hatoum, Margaret Atwood, Chinua Achebe, Tomás Eloy, and Natsuo Kirino, among others—in a format intended to pique the interest of an international reading public.

Although Canongate describes these mythic sources as “ancient” narratives ostensibly in need of renovation, I argue in the following pages that the folk and popular stories of enchanted beings and the rich, river-bottom cities they inhabit—the primary narrative bases for *Órfãos*—are every bit as vital and contemporary in their own way as the novella. By briefly identifying some of the principal differences and similarities between Hatoum's novella and his oral sources, I suggest the ways in which the author transforms the stories into a compelling personal vision even while these tales continue to offer their own collective commentaries on a shifting

present. While the cover of the English translation identifies the book as “a magical, modern retelling of the Amazon’s greatest legend,” the enchanted world of the *Encante* is actually less a uniform, unchanging story than it is a proliferation of recurring themes in constant flux. As such, both novella and stories illustrate the ongoing power of regionalism (and this region in particular) during a moment of massive globalization.

### Definitions of Myth and of Enchantment

Myths, which are often defined as stories that explain origins (how the rainbow found its way into the sky, how porcupines got quills, and so on) can also be understood as what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “a discourse on the given, the innate.” “Myths,” the much-quoted anthropologist who has studied Amazonian native cultures suggests, “address what must be taken for granted, the initial conditions with which humanity must cope and against which humanity must define itself by means of its power of conventions” (“Exchanging Perspectives” 478). The “*Encante*”—used as a colloquial form of the noun *encanto*, meaning “enchantment” and, by extension, “enchanted realm”—is both a material location and a cosmology rooted largely in Amerindian visions of the universe as composed of different sorts of natures, as opposed to multiple human cultures.<sup>5</sup> These visions have mingled over time with many other influences, specifically Christianity, scientific rationalism, and Umbanda (a mixture of spiritism with African-Brazilian religions), among others.

Enchantment in these stories turns out to be very different from that ambiance conjured up in the Broadway show tune “Some Enchanted Evening” or the appealing ads for tropical hotels that invite the traveler to “Come away to enchantment!”<sup>4</sup> While the *Encante* is inevitably rich and beautiful, it also often signals an alien, dangerous, and potentially irreversible state only hinted at in the Latin “cantare”, which can mean either to intone a familiar song or to chant in a bewitching way that casts a spell.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, while “disenchantment” in the modern world is apt to signal loss and disillusion—as in political philosopher Max Weber’s celebrated “disenchantment of the world”—its presence in the Amazonian stories often signals a liberating return to one’s original, readily recognizable form.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the tales are in line with colloquial Portuguese expressions such as “Você se desencantou?” (literally, “Have you disenchanting?”), a question typically addressed to a person who has been out of touch but who now suddenly reappears. Although to be disenchanting is, in many ways, to reclaim one’s true identity, this spell-breaking process is not easy. Indeed, in stories of enchanted nature it is highly likely to fail.

Amazonian stories of enchanted nature generally center on the actions of particular “Encantados” [Enchanted Beings] who inhabit the river-bottom city.<sup>7</sup> Though these beings are capable of taking on the *capa*—or outer layer—of either an animal (usually a snake or freshwater dolphin) or a human being (almost always a strikingly attractive white man or woman), they ultimately do not fit either category.<sup>8</sup> The Encantados are sometimes said to be older than time itself, and storytellers may describe them as the first thing that God created from a chaos that is still a part of their essential nature. “Ele [Deus] criou eles primeiro; por isso ficaram muito perto da natureza” (God created them first; and so they remain much nearer to nature), one older man explains.<sup>9</sup> Though some Encantados are the children of one human and one enchanted parent, the vast majority do not have human parents but rather belong to another, thoroughly ancient order of beings that can assume either animal or human form. For this reason, these Encantados are fated to remain immortal. Their obdurate immortality helps to explain their attraction to the decidedly mortal individuals whom they carry off to their home beneath the water.

Although the Encante is a singular noun, the river-bottom city’s constant movement leads many storytellers to speak of multiple enchanted realms: “Tem um Encante aqui perto da foz e outro mais longe na entrada do Paraná dos Velhos. O povo diz que tinha mais outro que aparecia perto das Águas Brancas, mas não sei, quase não fala desse hoje” (There is an Encante here near the river’s fork and another farther off at the entrance to Paraná dos Velhos. People say that there was another that used to appear near Águas Brancas, but I don’t know, they hardly speak of it today) one woman says.<sup>10</sup> In reality, these separate locations are manifestations of something larger and far more diffuse—namely, the existence of a sometimes creative, sometimes destructive force that springs up unannounced when people least expect it. Although this force inspires fear, its protean quality is also profoundly tantalizing, with the result that storytellers may speak of individual Encantados as possessing a literal magnetism concentrated in the eyes or emanating from their bodies as a whole.

Stories of the Encante and the Encantados can be found throughout much of not just the Brazilian Amazon but also neighboring sections of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Colombia. While their widespread nature does much to ensure their considerable variety, specific tales from a single locality may vary in accord with their tellers’ age, gender, social class, degree of formal education, and life experience. The same person may tell a story in diverse ways depending on the audience and setting, as well as his or her state of mind. And yet, despite this multiplicity, it is both possible and useful to single out some general characteristics of the narratives.

Although the stories I describe come from different places, many of my approximately 200 hours of recordings are from the small city of Parintins near the border of Amazonas with Pará and its surroundings—the area that

Hatoum later visited in preparation for his writing the novella set in a thinly-disguised “Vila Bela.”<sup>11</sup> While Parintins’s longstanding cattle and plantation economy—as well as its more recent tourist industry focused on the annual Boi-Bumbá folk festival—makes it more culturally and economically diverse than a number of more discernibly “indigenous” areas of the Amazon, it remains home to many tales of Encantados.<sup>12</sup> Despite the diminishing presence of these stories in urban areas, they persist on the margins of cities and above all in rural settlements on the *varzea* [floodplain], where their ability to incorporate modern influences such as references to new technologies, evangelical Protestantism, and shifting gender roles helps explain their ongoing vitality.

### *Órfãos do Eldorado*

*Órfãos* is first and foremost the story of a family whose dark secrets and internal conflicts suggest a larger, if similarly shadowy vision of the Amazon as a whole. The book’s narrator, Arminto Cordovil, is the heir to a fortune amassed by his openly unscrupulous immigrant grandfather, who grew rich during the rubber boom that largely defined the Amazon between 1850 and 1920—a period in which only coffee surpassed rubber as Brazil’s most valued export. Although Arminto’s father, Amando, has succeeded in expanding the family’s already existing fortune, he is an unhappy man who cannot forgive his only son for the death in childbirth of the boy’s mother. The book recounts how the lonely, rebellious Arminto—whose taste for Amerindian women and lack of interest in the family business infuriate his father—falls in love with a spellbinding orphan. The dark-eyed Dinaura, whose name signals her dual allegiance to the Earth and the Encante, displays an enigmatic sadness that only feeds Arminto’s already overwhelming physical attraction to her.

Dinaura’s existing ties to a seductive denizen of the Encante guarantees her inaccessibility to any human lover. Though Arminto initially dreams of marriage, the death of his father and consequent catastrophic shipwreck of his prize freighter *Eldorado* reinforce Dinaura’s decision to flee. In the course of the narrator’s ensuing search for her, he unearths a host of unsavory truths about his father’s outwardly exemplary life. Though he eventually succeeds in locating the now sick and elderly Dinaura by the shores of a blue-black lake that bears the same name as the shattered freighter, true love does not prevail. “Lá fora, a imensidão do lago e da floresta. E silêncio. Aquele lugar tão bonito, o Eldorado, era habitado pela solidão,” he says glumly (*Órfãos* 102) (Outside was the immensity of the lake and the forest. And silence. This place, so beautiful, Eldorado, was inhabited by solitude [*Orphans* 148]). Instead, the desolate Arminto is left

with haunting memories that suggest the Amazon's longstanding identity as a site of ruins. The book's rueful ending makes it clear that all of the region's residents remain, in some sense, orphans of the mythic Golden City that the colonial explorers sought with such unflagging—and generally disastrous—zeal.

Hatoum's use of a dreamlike language recapitulates the major themes present throughout almost all of his work: unresolvable family conflicts, the power of memory, and the sharp reality of loss. At the same time, he uses the specific idiom of the Encante to express what he sees as the enduring nature of the Amazon. The most important of the "mythic" ideas that he transforms into fiction are the all-consuming nature of desire; the theme of disintegration and ensuing ruin; the insistence upon secrets that produce a paralyzing silence; the brutality and betrayal characterizing human relationships (especially those that involve white and nonwhite, rich and poor); and the idea of stories themselves as a kind of luminous if fragile recompense for suffering.

The enchanted city of the novella provides a mirror of the characters' disproportionate yearnings for physical and emotional completion. Ultimately insatiable, these desires wreak destruction in the name of romantic love. In its all-consuming force, for instance, Arminto's obsessive hunger for Dinaura's moist lips and inconstant soul resembles that of the Encantados of the oral stories who fall in love with men and women whom they insist on whisking off to their home beneath the waters. Although this realm, like the gold- and silver-laden enchanted city of oral narratives, is unquestionably luxurious, it imprisons the persons snatched away from their earthly home. As a result, when Arminto promises Dinaura a life free from need and a security and status generally unattainable to orphans, there is no way she can accept. While he—like his father before him—remains faithful to his passion, his desires have more to do with his own needs than with any overwhelming love for the woman he insists on idealizing.

At the same time that the Encante of *Órfãos* serves as an emblem of impossible longing, it also conjures up the sort of maelstrom of disintegration and ruin common to Hatoum's earlier novels—above all, *Dois irmãos* (*The Brothers*), in which a pair of twins (one completely cerebral, the other wholly given to bodily pleasures) stands in for a collective head and heart that can find no common ground. To the extent that they allow themselves to yield to their baser instincts, the characters of *Órfãos* recall the Encantados. Although, for instance, Amando's name (the present participle of "amar" [to love]) suggests a warm and open nature, he is ruled by a steely need to impose his will. His apparently unshakable fidelity to his dead wife reveals a brutal flipside when he retaliates against the "safado" (scumbag) who has supposedly "mexeu com" (messed with) her (*Órfãos* 67; *Orphans* 92). His lynching of a man whose corpse is then riddled with bullets as it floats downriver is recounted by Amando with a gloating satisfaction. This

personal quest for vengeance intertwines with acts of political corruption that make his ostentatious deeds of charity a mere cover for his ongoing collusion with elected officials interested in little other than their own welfare.

Amando's furious reaction to his son's sexual adventures with the Amerindian maid who lures him into her sleeping hammock offers yet another proof of the older man's inability to love. His denunciation of his son's supposedly bestial nature is not just hostile but distinctly curious given the routine nature of such goings-on in much of the Amazon. When Domingas, the maid in *Dois irmãos*, becomes pregnant by one of the titular twins, for instance, her employers do not bat an eye. Amando, in contrast, is beside himself with anger—a reaction that suggests Boto-like sexual desires that are explained by later revelations that Dinaura is either his former mistress or his daughter (and therefore Arminto's half-sister). While this jumble of competing emotions makes the son a more interesting character than his unrelievedly villainous father, it also exposes the *coeur de vil*, or vile and brutal heart that characterizes the Cordovils and the larger social and economic network within which they move.<sup>13</sup> Compounding this irony, the failed son whose name suggests deceit (the “minto” [I lie] in the name “Arminto”) turns out to be the only one in the whole book willing to seek out the truth.

The presence of the Encante throughout the novella also helps Hatoum bolster his central idea of the titular Eldorado as not just a locus of spectacular riches (the fabled home of a king so rich as to be coated each dawn in a fine gold powder bathed away at day's end) but a place of secrets. Tantalizing in some regards, the characters' conspicuous silences are also an ongoing source of suffering and isolation. Although such secrets are at the heart of all of Hatoum's novels—the narrator's mother in *Dois irmãos*, for instance, goes to her grave without revealing the identity of her son's father—*Órfãos* returns time and again to the idea of what cannot be said. While Amando's best friend Estiliano, or Stelios (the name of the Greek Orthodox patron saint of needy children), eventually reveals Dinaura's true identity to Arminto, he takes care to avoid confronting the friend whom he knows in his heart to be a fraud. Dinaura, in contrast, appears unable to ever free herself either from the painful secrets that eat away at her or from the actual illness—leprosy—that the book hints may afflict her. “A doença que Dinaura escondia?” asks the narrator. “Imaginei a beleza destruída, pensei no silêncio dos nossos encontros” (*Órfãos* 101) (Was that the sickness Dinaura was hiding? I imagined her beauty destroyed, and thought about the silence of our meetings [*Orphans* 146]).

The Encante of the traditional stories on which Hatoum draws provides not just a font of secrets but a path to the denunciation of social ills. The book's beginning sentences describe the loud lamentations of an Amerindian woman who the maid, Florita, explains has been seduced by an Encantado

and now longs to join her lover “num mundo melhor, sem tanto sofrimento, desgraça” (*Órfãos* 11) (in a better world, without so much suffering and misfortune [*Orphans* 2]). Although the considerably less romantic truth eventually emerges—the woman’s husband and children have died of a fever and she prefers to end her life alone at the river bottom rather than prolonging her existence in a town full of uncomprehending strangers—the Encante still remains a kind of reverse mirror. Despite the underwater city’s identity as a kind of marvelous jail, the reader can understand how the Amazonian poor might prefer it to a world in which young girls are sold to the highest bidder and small-time criminals are whipped and stoned before being strung up from the nearest tree.

The single most striking incarnation of brutishness is almost certainly the boatman Dionísio Cão (a macabre blend of the Greek god of carnal pleasures along with the Devil in his guise as a *cão*, or dog). While this Amazonian embodiment of Dionysus stands apart for his shameless rape of an Amerindian child sold to him by her father, disregard for human life—especially when the humans in question are darker-skinned and female—is rampant in the novella. The idea of the Encante as an escape from human cruelty (the Encantados kidnap women but at least provide them with five-star accommodations) allows Hatoum to highlight the violence and perennial betrayal that is the lot of the region’s poor. “O que eu sei é que todo mundo me enganou,” (*Órfãos* 90) (All I know is that everybody tricked me [*Orphans* 128]), Florita says at one point to Arminto when he asks if she thinks that he has been deceived in the sale of his beloved family home.

Finally, the Encante serves Hatoum as a ceaseless font of stories that lighten the air of sadness that hangs heavy over the natural world with its “costelas de areia branca e estirões de praia em contraste com a água escura” (*Órfãos* 101) (ribs of white sand and stretches of beach contrasting with the dark water [*Orphans* 146]) in a landscape in which the cries of birds augment rather than alleviate the eerie silence. In *Órfãos*, as elsewhere in Hatoum’s work, words offer something for the speaker to hold onto in the face of death and disappearance—indeed, they are often the only source of surety and consolation amidst an avalanche of loss. The tales that the characters recount with alternating anger and resignation momentarily soften and ennoble what otherwise would simply be a long parade of folly and defeat. “A gente não respira no que fala? Contar ou cantar não apaga a nossa dor?” (*Órfãos* 103) (Don’t we breathe through what we speak? Don’t storytelling and singing blot out our pain? [*Orphans* 150]), demands Arminto at the novella’s close.

The traits summarized above—the Encante as a seat of destructive desire, as an invitation and an alternative to ruin, as an unfathomable secret, as a counterpoint to terrible realities, and as a ceaseless source of narratives—are only some of the many elements of the enchanted realm depicted in the oral stories. They are, however, the ones that Hatoum has

carefully singled out from among a wide array of elements to create a literary vision distinguished by its violence and tragic grandeur.

### The Encante of the Oral Stories

While it is Hatoum's obligation as a novelist to assemble and breathe life into his own Encante, it is worth returning to his oral sources with an eye to those aspects of the oral tales that he has chosen to ignore or dramatically transform. Sometimes he mixes together aspects of the stories that have unquestionable lyrical appeal but that would be hard to find in a traditional story. (Traditional storytellers, for instance, would be highly unlikely to claim that Dinaura was a *cobra sucuri* (an anaconda) or that people had been bewitched by a Jurupari described as "deus do Mal" (*Órfãos* 35) (the god of Evil [*Orphans* 39]).<sup>14</sup> Even when present-day storytellers utilize a number of the elements that he appropriates for his own purposes in *Órfãos*, these often form a sharply different constellation. The oral narratives' recurrent descriptions of constant motion, their obsession with appearances, their insistence on the Encantados' essential ambiguity, and their vision of the underwater city as not so much a counterpoint to human failings as a potential source of joy and healing make them notably different from the novella. These same traits allow the stories to serve as a forum for debate about the relationship between human and nonhuman nature in the present, thereby ensuring the contemporary quality of this seemingly highly traditional form.

The specter of loss and dis-integration that hangs over Hatoum's Encante in the guise of Dinaura's growing estrangement from the hopelessly impassioned Arminto is by no means absent from the oral narratives. Nonetheless, an obsession with loss is less central to these stories than is a fascination with unceasing motion. The Encante's frequent appearances and disappearances, its capacity for dizzying proliferation, and its paradoxically enduring ephemerality make it impossible to see it, or the Amazon, as fixed. A partial mirror of Amazonian geography—in which the river regularly carts off large chunks of land only to deposit them elsewhere—the Encante is an emblem of ongoing metamorphosis. If the land itself is so prone to change, then why would the enchanted city and its inhabitants *not* be equally or yet more unstable than the world that they embody?

While some storytellers see this essential instability as inspiring unease or outright trepidation, others treat it as a positive aspect that protects the city from those who would exploit it for their own purposes. No matter how rich and powerful a person may be, he or she cannot pin down the Encantados or abscond with the gleaming treasures that inevitably turn into heaps of seaweed in the hands of would-be thieves. As a result, even when

the literally and figuratively slippery nature of the Encantados is cause for heartbreak, the Encante holds out the possibility of resistance to the usual human hierarchies. In this sense, the river-bottom city represents not simply a refuge from the world's ills but also, and above all, a different order of being—a place not subject to human regimens and values, and a way of seeing that transcends or belies a purely human point of view. This notion of the Encante as a place apart *from* and alternative *to* human visions is particularly clear in one description of an encounter with the Encantados that I recorded in the small city of Faro, less than a day's journey by boat from Parintins:

Ele usava o tauari feito um pajé. Não era pajé, mas usava ele de todo jeito.

Assim que, uma noite, ele estava no meio do lago, deitado na rede, fumando, quando aparecem três homens—roupa branca, chapéu branco, pele branca—numa canoa bem comprida.

Noite de lua cheia, a água bem brilhosa, e aquela canoa que vinha chegando sem o menor barulho, não se ouvia nada.

Pois bem, aqueles homens era encantados, eram Botos, todos três. Então, pararam a canoa no meio do rio, olharam muito tempo para ele. Gente branca, dava para ele ver tudinho.

“Não vamos mexer com ele porque ele está fumando tauari,” um dos homens disse para os outros. Aí, foram embora naquela canoa comprida, comprida. Eles eram Encantados e a canoa era uma cobra, viu?

Aí, foram embora, não se viu deles mais nada. Meu padraço acho tudo aquilo tão bonito que esqueceu de ter medo. (Man, age 49, Faro. Carpenter and brick-maker, three years of formal schooling, 30 July 1993)

(He [the speaker's stepfather] smoked *tauari* [a kind of tree bark with hallucinogenic properties] like a *pajé* [a type of shamanic healer]. He wasn't a *pajé*, but he smoked it all the same.

So then, it happens that one night he was lying in the middle of [an island in the middle of] the lake, lying in his hammock, smoking, when three men appeared—white clothes, white hat, white skin—in a very long canoe.

Full moon, the water shining in the light, and that canoe drawing ever nearer without the slightest noise, there wasn't a sound to be heard.

Well then, those men were Encantados, they were Dolphins, all three. So, the canoe halted in mid-river, and they looked at him for a long time. White people, he could see absolutely everything.

“Let's not mess with him because he is smoking *tauari*,” one of the Dolphin-men said to the others. So then, off they went in that long, long

canoe. They were Encantados and that canoe was a snake in the form of a boat, you see?

So then they vanished, nothing more was ever seen of them. My stepfather thought it all so lovely that he forgot to be afraid.)

A second major difference between the oral narratives and the novella resides in the former's profound concern for questions of outward appearances. Traditional storytellers' preoccupation with the tension between the way that something looks and its often very different inner nature has relatively little place in *Órfãos*, which is much more interested in the uneasy overlap between the human and the natural world embodied by the Encantados.

The world of Amazonian native peoples is in no way absent from Hatoum's novella—witness the book's introductory evocation of the Indian woman in crimson face-paint who points to the rainbow arched like a great snake above the river. Time and again, the author emphasizes the gap between the world of these Amerindians or Amerindian descendants and those of a white (or at least, whiter) immigrant elite. He also offers numerous descriptions of a natural world that the latter rarely revere but rather seek to subjugate.

However, at the same time that Hatoum's social concerns find expression in his evocations of a happier, more just Encante, the book—in contrast to the oral tradition—is not particularly concerned with anything that one might call a cosmology. While the Encantados of the oral stories may resemble the enchanted beings of *Órfãos* in their identity as “bichos,” or fearsome animals who force themselves upon humans, the former are also often living enigmas that challenge the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. These enigmatic entities inhabit a watery world whose physical existence is a possibility or an article of faith for many storytellers—and, as such, a stark contrast to the Encante of Hatoum's novel, which is above all a metaphor for an Amazon that still has not found a productive way to mingle natives and newcomers in the multicultural present that is its primary concern.

Although not all storytellers articulate the same idea of the Encante—and indeed a single person may entertain competing notions—the tales as a whole reveal an ongoing concern for humans' ability to navigate their way through a world that is home to a multitude of life forms. This concern makes the accounts not simply marvelous stories but also, and above all, living cosmologies. While storytellers express alarm at the Encantados' complete lack of concern for their impact on individual lives, these creatures' ambiguous nature is yet more fearsome in its threat to human ideas about the world's stability. Neither fully animal nor fully human, their tenacious in-between-ness provides a generally unwelcome reminder that what looks deeply familiar may be a mirage.

The Encantados also raise doubts about the concreteness of the larger world of nature. Although most dolphins and anacondas turn out to be exactly what they seem to be, the Encantados' propensity for taking on the form of river creatures spurs unease about these creatures as a whole. These doubts undermine individual men and women's faith in appearances, making it difficult to believe in the stability of their surroundings. Yet more troubling, the Encantados' ability not simply to shift their outward shape but to assume the form of a friend or spouse may make it hard for storytellers to trust the people to whom they are closest. Not only may one or another of these persons turn out to be an enchanted double, but an Encantado may go so far as to impersonate the storyteller.

The essential mutability of the world may take on a metaphoric dimension in stories in which the underwater city becomes an obvious emblem of the Amazon's relentlessly protean nature. "O Encante é uma maneira de falar de tudo que não pára de mudar" (The Encante is a way of talking about everything that never stops moving), says a university student who dreams of becoming a radio announcer.<sup>15</sup> Storytellers are also likely, however, to see the Encantados as one particularly obvious proof of the concrete (as opposed to metaphorical) existence of a nature that does not revolve around human beings.<sup>16</sup> Indigenous conceptions of a universe divided into discrete layers and multiple life forms remain apparent in stories of enchanted beings that intrude upon a human world whose values, base assumptions, and very essence are profoundly different from those of the Encante. While these separate life forms may overlap, they can never truly fuse.

As a result, although male Encantados (usually in the guise of human men rather than snakes or dolphins) may go so far as to impregnate women who then bear half-human, half-enchanted children, these unions are rare.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, despite the popularity of the theme of the Boto's Child among an urban, nonindigenous public apt to regard tales of river dolphins as amusing cover-ups for sexual adventures, there is little to laugh at in folk stories where enchanted offspring are usually born deformed and left to die. The few enchanted children who do survive in these tales invariably take refuge in the depths from which only a tiny percentage emerges. The story of the Cobra Norato recounts how one of these hybrid beings succeeds in becoming disenchanting—meaning, in this case, fully human.

This celebrated tale, which continues to be recounted throughout much of the Brazilian (as opposed to Peruvian or Ecuadorean) Amazon, suggests that, for most storytellers, the Encante is far more than the conveniently privileged counterpoint to the sorrowful world that appears in Hatoum's *Órfãos*.<sup>18</sup> In many of these tales, which may reveal intriguing differences between indigenous and nonindigenous storytellers, Cobra Norato leaves his wondrous realm, his riches, and his superhuman powers because he is sick of his twin sister's cruel habit of capsizing river boats and gobbling down

their passengers and cargo. In so doing, he casts aside immortality in favor of a human life that will allow him to experience the joys of friends and a human family who will continue his legacy of compassion.

The disenchanting Cobra will also experience death. The story's emphasis on the mortality essential to definitions of what it means to be human make this and other accounts of the Encante far more than a series of watery fairy tales. Not just one more glittering kingdom, the river-bottom city is in some ways a present-day aquatic version of the Tupi-Guarani Indians' *Terra sem Mal* or Land without Evil (or Death), which prompted numerous messianic movements in Brazil's early colonial period.<sup>19</sup> The fact, however, that the Encantados' privileged status often does not seem to make them happy suggests the more complex nature of the Encante as a whole. Though these beings are enviably rich, some storytellers insist that they are ruled by instinct and therefore far less free than even the poorest human beings.

The sumptuous appearance of the Encante often masks the sterility characterizing its residents, who, while full of sexual energy, appear largely unable to procreate. Although the Encantados may have offspring with human beings, they do not appear to have children with each other, and I have never heard the slightest mention of families whose existence would imply successive generations over time.

**Candace Slater:** Então, o Boto gosta de mexer com as mulheres, verdade?

**Older Woman:** Ah, meu Deus, como gosta! A minha avó teve que fugir dele, credo! Até teve que se esconder dele durante muito tempo.

**CS:** Mas aqueles Botos não gostam das Botas? Todo mundo diz que as mulheres do Encante são muito lindas.

**Older Woman:** São, e olhe, essas Botas vão atrás dos homens daqui! Agora, o Boto é quem mais persegue a gente, né? Parece que ele enlouquece com o cheiro das mulheres daqui. Aquele cheiro da menstruação, né? [signaling fertility] Por isso a mulher que está menstruada não pode ir na beira, viu? Agora, acho que o desejo dele é também falta de novidade. Eles têm uma vida muito bonita, mas é sempre a mesma coisa.

**CS:** Mas eu pensei que o Encante mudava a todo hora.

**Older Woman:** O Encante, sim, o Encante muda, ele vai de lugar em lugar. Mas o Encantado, não, o Encantado fica naquela vida de comer e dançar. O Boto não envelhece, só que ele se transforma em homem e a Bota em mulher. Mas depois volta ao normal dele, ele não muda, não . . . [here she searches for the word] não evolui.

**CS:** Mas o ser humano muda.

**Older Woman:** Ah, como muda! [Here she laughs ruefully.] (Maria do Carmo Alves dos Santos, age 57, born Vila Amazonas, lives Manaus and Parintins. Laundress, no formal schooling, 3 August 2004)

(**Candace Slater:** So then, the Boto like to mess with women, right?)

**Older Woman:** My God, how he likes it! My grandmother had to flee him, I swear on the Cross! She even had to hide from him for a long time.

**CS:** But don't those Botos like the Botas? Everyone says that the women of the Encante are very pretty.

**Older Woman:** They are, and look, those Dolphin-women go chasing after the men from here! Now then, it's the Boto who does most of the pursuing, right? It seems that he goes crazy at the smell of human women. At that smell of menstrual blood [signaling fertility], right? For this reason a woman who has her period can't go to the riverbank, see? Now then, I also think that his desire has to do with the lack of anything new. They [the Encantados] have a very nice life, but it's always the same old thing.

**CS:** But I thought that the Encante was in constant motion.

**Older Woman:** The Encante, yes, the Encante changes, it moves from one place to another. But not the Encantado, no, the Encantado remains in that life of eating and dancing. The Boto doesn't grow old, it's just that he transforms himself into a man and the Bota into a woman. But they return to their normal appearance, they don't change, they don't evolve.

**CS:** But humans change.

**Older Woman:** Ah, how they change! [Here she laughs ruefully.]

The paradox of the Encantados' apparent fixity within an unceasing swirl of movement further suggests the stories' identity as commentaries upon life forms whose experience and bodily existence are different from that of human beings. In their concern for other, nonhuman varieties of existence, these tales are very different from *Órfãos*. Their concomitant insistence on the sameness that resides within constant, often violent motion as well as the limits of the rapture and well-being evident in a limitless string of evenings full of joyous music and gleaming trays heaped high with food is similarly unlike the novella, which is more concerned with a historical legacy that could and should be changed. Although these Encantados may have individual first names (Carlos, Doralice, Max, and so on) and personalities (some are shy, some stubborn, some hopelessly romantic as opposed to simply lustful), they, as embodiments of nature, do not consciously construct anything that will move forward in time.<sup>20</sup> Despite their formidable powers, their lives are, as the speaker quoted above suggests, largely repetitive, making the Encante incomplete to the human

eye. In short, while storytellers envy the Encantados' wealth and their general invulnerability to physical suffering, at least some see them as lonely. "Comem bem mas ficam tristes" (They eat well but they're still sad), one young woman says succinctly.<sup>21</sup> In this sense, these denizens of the deep are not unlike the personages in *Órfãos* who remain bereft of love and the respectful recognition of an individual identity that is—at least in theory—a human birthright.

While the Encante serves as a limited refuge from a violent world in Hatoum's novella, his book is primarily concerned with the defining contours of the here and now. Moreover, while its author treats his indigenous sources with respect, the Encante of *Órfãos* is ultimately an illusion that provides a modicum of consolation for the broken-hearted. In this sense, the novella is really very different from many of the oral stories on which it is ostensibly based. Although storytellers increasingly question the existence of the Encantados, their river-bottom kingdom remains a vital force in a good number of present-day narratives.

At the same time, while the Encante of these stories can be thoroughly malevolent, it is also often a source of healing and renewal. The same mysterious creatures that kidnap human beings or afflict them with sickness are capable of restoring those who suffer back to health and happiness. Despite the fact that many abductees disappear forever, those who manage to find their way back home from the Encante often do so newly imbued with the gift of music as well as previously unsuspected curative powers. "Pois é, meu avô não sabia tocar nada antes de andar pelo fundo, até cantava desafinado, mas quando voltou tocava rabeca numa maneira que o povo chorava de ouvir. Chamava ele para tudo que era festa nessas partes, que os Encantados podem estar muito malinos com a gente mas deixaram para ele este grande dom" (So then, my grandfather didn't know how to play an instrument before visiting the river bottom, he even sang off-tune, but when he returned he could play the *rabeca* [a rustic violin] in a way that people would cry when they heard him. They called on him to play at all sorts of festive gatherings in these parts, because the Encantados can be very mischievous with us humans but they gave him this great gift), one man explains.<sup>22</sup>

These gifts of the river bottom convert even those who were not healers of any sort before their underwater journey into instant members of a shamanic elite who mediate between the waters and the earth. While the healing performed by such shamans or quasi-shamans is deeply important in combating illnesses that resist modern medicine, these figures' ability to remind their fellow humans of the mystery and grandeur that surround them is equally important. Though well aware of the Encante's dangers, the returnees also have experienced firsthand the ecstasy associated with a world in which things appear familiar but are not the same as in the human realm.

The figures in Hatoum's novella who are most like real-world shamans are not healers or escapees from the depths but, rather, readers and writers of literary works—above all, poems that allow them temporarily to forget or rise above the legacy of exploitation that traditional stories associate with a Boto who is also a greedy White Man of the sort so prevalent in Amazonian history.<sup>23</sup> Although the novella's narrator loses everything—the woman he loves, his family's lands and money, and his own hope for a happy future—his haunting saga mesmerizes not just the smattering of visitors who stop by to listen to his tale but also a far-flung reading public. In the process, Arminto joins the larger company of storytellers that includes the old man who tells Hatoum's grandfather the tale that his bedazzled grandson will transform into a fiction half a century later.

### **The Place of *Órfãos do Eldorado* and Traditional Stories of Enchantment in Today's Amazon**

It would be strange not to encounter a multitude of differences between Hatoum's novella and present-day stories of enchantment. My goal here has been less to question the author's reworking of these narrative materials than to challenge all-too-common characterizations of myth as outmoded and unchanging. In the end, *Órfãos do Eldorado* and seemingly traditional stories of the Encante are both part of a much larger shift in today's representations of the Amazon. While images of a largely empty virgin rainforest commanded international attention from the early 1970s up into the present, visions of a mixed, more populated space increasingly coexist with these earlier images as espoused and partially refurbished in the mainstream media of today.

Like all of Hatoum's fiction, *Órfãos* provides an antidote to many earlier literary descriptions of a primeval Amazon in its insistence on the human presence within nature. The hostile forest that dominates many early twentieth-century "jungle novels" gives way here not just to the cities who provide the focus for *Dois irmãos* and *Relato de um certo oriente* but also to the lakes, woods, and rivers whose seeming vastness is tempered by the presence of simple homes with straw roofs, one of which is set apart by its veranda sporting a wooden trellis and adorned with a large tin container full of bromelias.<sup>24</sup> The presence in Hatoum's novels of both Amazonian natives and immigrants in search of a better future far from their original home reinforces the idea of a peopled space. This vision has been increasingly buttressed in recent years by sources as diverse as archaeological studies, ads for new sorts of "rainforest" products, and journalistic accounts of encounters with not-really-all-that-Stone-Age natives.

Shifting representations of the Amazon reflect in part a growing public sensitivity to the heterogeneous nature of a region whose now heavily urban population continues to grow. They also respond to an increasing number of government policies that seek to foster the development of the Brazilian Amazon without totally abandoning—or, at least, *appearing* to abandon—concerns for environmental preservation and indigenous rights. Politicians' eagerness not to alienate powerful national and international interests has led them to embrace depictions of an Amazon that has always been a home to humans—all the better when these representations are the work of actual Amazonians. As a result, while Hatoum's literary gifts unquestionably explain much of his growing success, the growth of a more generalized openness to the idea of a region that has long been a home to varied sorts of immigrants has further bolstered interest in his work. Research documenting the presence of pre-conquest populations that constructed major urban centers while leaving marks upon the river and the land, including the canal-like geo-glyphs that have garnered increasing media attention, have further favored the growing acceptance of visions beyond that of a fragile, if relentlessly primeval, Eden.<sup>25</sup>

These shifting ideas of the Amazon have also found their way into traditional stories of enchantment, which increasingly serve as evaluations of the present in relation to the past. Although tales of enchanted snakes and dolphins remain relatively easy to encounter in the Amazonian countryside, a growing number of their tellers raise pointed questions about the Encantados' role in a swiftly changing natural world. Likewise, while these stories can still be found on the periphery of the region's burgeoning cities, "folklore" units inserted into elementary and high school textbooks are in some cases replacing oral storytelling as a prime means of transmission. While old-style stories have by no means wholly vanished, present-day versions of these reveal a new importance as launching pads for extended discussions of the ways that the Amazon has changed, together with affirmations of its ongoing uniqueness within Brazil and the world. Though often laced with nostalgia for a fading past, the tales are a decidedly contemporary expression of concern for widespread environmental devastation that includes deforestation, pollution of the air and waters, species extinction, and the construction of enormous dams.

These environmental shifts were increasingly obvious in research in Parintins, on the outskirts of Manaus, and along the Solimões and Japurá rivers conducted in 2013. However, they were already present in some of the stories that I collected in the late 1980s and 1990s. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, stories that described the effects of changes in the land and rivers on both human beings and the Encantados had become common. A number of the storytellers spoke of the en-masse exit from their former homes of the Encantados, who, in response to the destruction visited upon them, wrought a terrible vengeance through their abandonment of humans

seeking cures for illness and the catastrophic disappearance of once-plentiful fish and game. They also increasingly lamented the loss of nature's riches to selfish and short-sighted humans. The stories reiterate *Órfãos'* condemnation of a dysfunctional political system that fails to protect the many treasures to which today's Amazon remains heir. Though the Encantados' nonhuman status has always made them dubious allies, their angry exodus in the face of widespread development all but ensures the further attenuation of a still-surviving native heritage that continues to set apart the region from many other corners of Brazil.

The massive social and economic changes in Brazil during the Workers' Party administrations of Luís Inácio da Silva (Lula) and Dilma Rouseff have only increased these stories' already-existing emphasis on loss and transformation. The tales of the 1980s and 1990s often portrayed the effects of environmental shifts on people's lives through descriptions of their grandparents' memories of times of abundant fish and game that were presided over by tutelary spirits who inhabited much the same world as the Encantados. In contrast, today's stories are more likely to be examinations of the tellers' own reactions to what they generally see as irrevocable environmental devastation. Increasingly, people use stories of the Encante to position themselves in relation to a world largely defined by new technologies and the ubiquitous presence of the mass media. Sometimes, the tales become a lament for what has been forever lost. On other occasions, they are best seen as attempts to incorporate new developments that result in modern-day amalgamations of cellphone-toting dolphins and an Encante equipped with computers that turn back into stingrays when the power fails.

Even those contemporary stories meant to be primarily humorous may have a meditative dimension. Although the young storyteller here laughs in delight at the idea of a Dolphin with a Blackberry, his tone turns more serious when he wonders out loud whether his children will retain a sense of mystery:

Eu, quando criança, ainda achava toda uma maravilha ver o rio de noite, as luzes na distância feito os olhos cintilantes da Cobra Grande. Até acreditava no Encante, ficava na beira escutando, escutando, querendo ouvir aquela música que dizem que vem do fundo. Hoje, não, o rio de noite não tem mais aquelas luzinhas—os bares ficam iluminados até altas horas da noite e não há nem um pingão de silêncio. Os mais velhos dizem que os Encantados já foram embora para o Rio Negro e não adianta ficar lá querendo ouvir a música do fundo. Eu, para lhe dizer a verdade, acho triste. Aliás, acho que os Encantados de hoje andam todos de Nike; fazem parte da propaganda para atrair turista para o Boi-Bumbá. (Man, age 22, born in Uaicurapá, lives in Parintins. University student, 14 June 2013)

(When I was a child, I thought it marvelous to see the river at night, the lights in the distance looking like the sparkling eyes of the Anaconda. I even believed in the Encante; I would stay there on riverbank listening, just listening, wanting to hear that music that people said was from the river bottom. Today, no, the river doesn't have those little lights upon the water at night anymore—the bars stay lit up until late at night and there isn't so much as a drop of silence. The older people say that the Encantados have all left for the Negro River and that it serves no purpose to remain there hoping to hear the music of the river bottom. To tell you the truth, I find it sad. What's more, today's Encantados all drink Coca-Cola and wear Nikes; it's part of the advertising campaign to attract tourists to the Boi-Bumbá.)

While Hatoum's novella does not picture Nike-wearing Encantados, it does address an educated international public concerned about the roots of ongoing problems that affect the Amazon, Brazil, and a larger world. In this sense, it is of a piece with the oral stories, which speak to a primarily local and regional population about the place in people's lives of a nature whose role and definition have become increasingly unclear. Tales of wondrous events, these stories are above all shifting cosmologies that question what it means to be human in a world that is undergoing massive political, social, and environment change.

## Notes

1. Milton Hatoum, *Órfãos do Eldorado*; English translation *Orphans of Eldorado*, trans. John Gledson. For a series of articles and reviews of the book and of Hatoum's other works, see [www.miltonhatoum.com.br](http://www.miltonhatoum.com.br).
2. The series actually begins with a study of myth—Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*. A full list of the collection is available at [www.themyths.co.uk](http://www.themyths.co.uk).
3. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro advances the idea of “multi-naturalism” as opposed to “multi-culturalism” in Amerindian thought in his “Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation.”
4. “Some Enchanted Evening,” from the 1949 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, was one of the most popular tunes of all time.
5. According to the *OED*, the etymology of the word enchantment is derived from the French *enchante(r)*, which in turn was derived from the Latin *incantare*, the very makeup of which brings together the Latin *-in*, meaning upon, with *-cantare* meaning to sing. The connection between enchantment and song (or chant) finds a conceptual link in the Old English noun *galdor*, which signifies not only “song” but also “spell” and “enchantment,” with traces of the related verb *galan* surviving in the present-day “nightingale.”
6. Weber actually borrowed the term from the late nineteenth-century artist, historian, and philosopher Friedrich Schiller, but it quickly became identified with his deeply ambivalent vision of a rapidly changing world. For a helpful overview of

- disenchantment's place at the end of the twenty-first century and a critique of its account of a "unidirectional and universalizing tendency of modernity" (11), see Jenkins.
7. Key sources for an understanding of the Encante include Galvão, Gow, Maués, Guss, and Slater, *Dance of the Dolphin*.
  8. Enchanted dolphins are inevitably of the species *Inia geoffrensis*—the large, reddish-colored, and largely solitary animals whose unfused spinal vertebrae allow them to turn their necks and dive for fish near shore, where they often come into contact with fishermen. They are almost never the smaller, more Flipper-like *Sotalia* or *tucuxim* that swim in groups toward the center of the river.
  9. Geraldo Rocha Cavalcanti, age 67, born Parintins. Mechanic and other odd jobs, schooling unknown, 8 July 1992.
  10. Isabel Vieira de Resende, age 47, born Remanso, lives Parintins. Housework, four years of schooling, 3 August 1992.
  11. Hatoum cites the work of Betty Mindlin, Robin M. Wright, and Candace Slater as primary sources for the novella. He also mentions Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *A inconstância da alma indígena*. (Hatoum, *Órfãos*, 107.)
  12. For a description of the Boi-Bumbá that also serves as a good cultural introduction to Parintins, see Maria Laura Viveiros de Castro.
  13. José Pedro Cordovil was the original founder of Parintins (then known as Tupinambarana) in 1796. The fictional Arminto is intended to appear as an heir to Cordovil, who showed up with an abundance of slaves and hired hands in his quest to wrest riches from the land and river.
  14. Anacondas are far more likely to be symbols of brute force than of witchery (something generally left to botos, who are masters of spells or *feiticos*). A Jurupari is more of a forest monster than an evil deity, and its presence is more common in other sorts of Amerindian myths than in the most common tales of the Encante.
  15. Antonia Santos Cordeiro, age 20, born Barreirinha, lives Parintins. Student, 15 June 2013.
  16. See Lima.
  17. Some particularly interesting examples appear in Roe, *The Cosmic Zygote*.
  18. Several interesting versions of the story appear in Chernela. The relative absence of the Norato narrative in other Amazonian countries invites research.
  19. For an introduction to the Land without Evil, see Clastres.
  20. Despite the fact that Cobra Norato often has both a name (Unurato or Honorato) and a very particular temperament in indigenous stories, the names and personalities in a number of the stories from Parintins simultaneously suggest the influence of the native figures known as *caboclos*, meaning "Amerindian forest spirits" in Umbanda.
  21. Woman, age 22, born Tracajá, lives Parintins. Store clerk and part-time student, 28 June 1992.
  22. Manoel Arruda Filho, age 32, Santa Isabel. Carpenter and radio repairman, five years of schooling, 14 September 2000.
  23. There is an ample bibliography on the Dolphin as White Man. See, for starters, Gregor; Ireland; Roe, "The Josho Nahuanbo Are All Wet and Undercooked"; and Slater, *Dance of the Dolphin*, 202–32.
  24. The description from *Órfãos* to which I allude is on p. 102.
  25. See Slater, "Visions of the Amazon."

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