

INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH MAPS STILL show the Colorado River running from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of California in northern Mexico, today the river no longer reaches the sea. While I conducted most of the fieldwork for this book in a Cuicapá village in the now-dry delta of the river in Mexico, I began my research upstream in the green mountains of the state of Colorado in the United States. This is where the river's headwaters rush up from under the hard earth and begin a 1,450-mile run. I started my journey there because I wanted to arrive at the end of the river with a sense of where it came from, and a sense of the history of how this quintessentially American river now fails to reach the sea.

From Colorado, I followed the river across the Glen Canyon and Hoover Dams, the first of the big dams to be built on the river. I followed the river to Lee's Ferry, where the annual flow of water is measured in order to be divided among the seven states and two countries that depend on it. I stopped in Las Vegas to examine the artificial waterfalls and light shows at the large casino-hotels. Then I traveled past golf courses and swimming pools and through the Grand Canyon and the lush Imperial Valley.

Finally, I drove across the US-Mexico border, where the wide empty fields of the Imperial Valley meet the tall barbed-wire fence that defines sections of the borderlands. Directly across the border the river's water trickles to a stream. This is the most unequal international border in the world, a geopolitical barrier that while seeking to stop people from going north also, as we shall see, prevents water from flowing south. Now, all that remains of the Colorado River is a dried-out riverbed, whose cracked and saline surface is a potent reminder of the river that once fanned out in the Mexican Colorado delta. Beyond the fence at the border lies the bustling city of Mexicali. In contrast to the wide fields and highways just north of the border, Mexicali emerges as a huddle of low, cramped build-

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ings and makeshift *tiendas* (stores). Rows of dental clinics offer reduced prices to medical tourists. Past the frenetic traffic, the smog, the roundabouts, and the urban density, the city splays out into huge expanses of factories, smoke billowing from bristling outcrops of towers.

With the river no longer available as my guide, I followed Route 5, the only tarred road that runs north–south between the Mexican states of Sonora and Baja California, connecting Mexicali to the interior of the Sonoran Desert. On this road, the traffic flows to and from the coastal town of San Felipe and beyond to Puerto Penasco. Buses run at all hours transporting workers from the nearby *colonias* to work in the factories, also known as *maquiladoras*.¹ In the winter, caravans of Americans pass on their way down to the coast, which has become a popular destination for those seeking to winter in warmer locales. Past the factories, the road winds through small *colonias* huddled close outside of Mexicali's city limits and congregated along drainage routes and passes into green farmlands where fields of cotton, onions, *nopales*, and wheat stretch out beneath the blue desert sky. Finally, the road narrows to a bumpy two-lane concrete path. It passes the invisible *línea de compactación* (line of compression), where irrigation ends and green fields converge with empty expanses of desert.

This is not the kind of desert that is decorated with saguaro cacti and splashes of blooming flowers. This is the most unvegetated zone of the Sonoran Desert. When traveling south through this desert, one sees on the left in the distance the black volcanic mountain named Cerro Prieto that juts conspicuously out of the flat desert, northwest of the Cerro Prieto Geothermal Field, the site of a large power plant complex. In the creation myths of the Cucapá people, the original inhabitants of the Colorado River delta, this mountain is the center of the earth and the source of the power of creation. The Cucapá chief, Don Madeleno, often recalled how the “white men” laughed at their myths, emphasizing that this mountain is now home to a multi-million-dollar electricity plant with four geothermal steam generators that light up the entire valley of Mexicali and parts of California. He pointed out that now no one denies the power that emanates from that place.

Finally, the road catches up with the cascading peaks of the Sierra Cucapá and winds around its rocky inclines. There, just beyond the shade of rocky peaks, sits the Cucapá village where I would spend a year living and carrying out the majority of my research. The village is flanked by the

Hardy River to the east and the Sierra Cucapá to the west. The Hardy River, a tributary of the Colorado and the only water from the river that still reaches the area, consists primarily of agricultural runoff from the Mexicali Valley. Local residents fish in the Hardy River, and in the summer children bathe and swim in its murky shallows. Past the village, the river moves on in a shallow rivulet, finally connecting with the mouth of the former Colorado River at the Gulf of California. Locals call that place, where the meager Hardy and gusts of groundwater meet the sea, *el zanjón*,² the fishing camp of the Cucapá people.

In this book, I examine how these people have experienced and responded to the disappearance of the river on the former delta and the attempts by the Mexican state to regulate the environmental crisis that followed. For generations local people relied on fishing as one of their primary means of subsistence, but in the last several decades this practice has been severely constrained by water scarcity and Mexican government restrictions. As a result of the 1944 water treaty between the United States and Mexico, 90 percent of the water in the Colorado is diverted before it reaches Mexico. The remaining 10 percent is increasingly being directed to the burgeoning manufacturing industry in Tijuana and Mexicali (Espeland 1998). Since 1993 the Cucapá people have been legally denied fishing rights in the delta under the Mexican Federal Environmental Protection Agency's fishing ban and the creation of a biosphere reserve.

While the Cucapá have continued to fish in the Gulf of California at the zanjón, they are facing increasing pressure to stop from federal inspectors and the Mexican military. As part of this conflict, the Cucapá's "authenticity" as an indigenous people has been repeatedly challenged by state officials. Like many indigenous groups in Mexico, the Cucapá people no longer speak their indigenous language (Cucapá) and are highly integrated into nonindigenous social networks. Despite pressure from the National Human Rights Commission, the government has maintained that the Cucapá's fishing practices, and their relationship to the territory in question, are not sufficiently "indigenous" to warrant preferred fishing rights. In the last several years, the situation has escalated in a series of intense negotiations among the Cucapá people, human rights lawyers, and federal and state environmental officials (Navarro Smith 2008; Navarro Smith, Tapia, and Garduño 2010).

In this book, I trace a path through a series of institutions and sites central to the water conflict at the end of the Colorado River: from the

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huge dams upstream in the United States to the dried-out riverbed of the Colorado delta, from the archives of the Bureau of Reclamation to the homes of Mexican and Cucapá fishermen in Baja California, from the president of the biosphere reserve's office in San Luis Río Colorado, to the disputed fishing grounds where Mexican marines and environmental officials often far outnumber illegal fishermen. In tracing this path I introduce a series of people and describe their everyday practices: environmental officials discussing multiculturalism, fishermen and fisherwomen strategizing the composition of their crews, NGO workers mapping traditional lands, neighbors gossiping about gender roles, indigenous fishermen forfeiting their nets in exchange for trafficking illegal drugs up the river, and scientists counting birds and fish. Combining analytic techniques from linguistic and political anthropology, I examine how local people use symbolic and material tools, including maps, indigenous swearwords, surveys, and traditional legends, as a means to negotiate dramatic environmental and structural change and to reflect on what this change means and who is responsible.

Research Trajectory

In the summer of 2005, I attended the Arizona Water Summit in Flagstaff, Arizona. It was an unusual event because it brought together scholars, water engineers, and members of Arizona's indigenous tribes.³ It was striking to witness the diversity of approaches to water management and conservation that emerged from this motley combination of people. Panels ranged from topics such as irrigation techniques, traditional ecological knowledge, water management, and policy approaches. After one well-attended panel on water resource management that was particularly laden with technical terminology, Vernon Masayesva, a respected Hopi elder and leader, approached the podium during the question period. He delicately took the microphone, fumbling to adjust it to his shorter stature, and then said firmly, "The thing you people don't understand is that we don't manage water; water manages us."

I set out thinking that I would examine the dispute over the last stretches of the Colorado River by analyzing precisely the juxtaposition that Vernon Masaysva was pointing out in his comment. I intended to look at how people were talking about water, how water was being discursively con-

structured in different ways by different groups involved in the conflict. This was the relevant question upstream, where I did two months of research. The controversy in the southwestern United States polarizes around the way engineers and ranchers conceptualize and talk about water and how the Colorado River's indigenous groups, at least traditionally and often strategically, conceptualize it.⁴ These debates were centered around whether water is sacred or a commodity, whether we “manage” water or water “manages” us, and who gets to decide these matters in the first place.

When I crossed the border and reached the Cucupá village where I would carry out my fieldwork, however, the debate shifted onto entirely different grounds. I found that people were hardly talking about water at all. Instead, the terms of crisis were centered around a lack of work. “There is no work here” was a common comment among residents. When I would ask why there was no work, people tied the issue directly to the fact that the Colorado River no longer reached them and further understood this by noting that the United States had “stolen” most of this water. But this was not the way the conflict was articulated when I was not leading the conversation. Instead, the majority of people narrated the injustices carried out by the Mexican government by placing restrictions on their fishing. Perhaps it did not seem surprising to them that the United States would “steal” so much water. Instead, the outrage was felt around the fact that the Mexican government would not let its own people work. Therefore, local people pointed to another level on which the fishing conflict was playing out. Instead of situating the fishing conflict in a discourse of environmental crisis, they shifted the terms of the debate onto the conditions of poverty that made feeding their families the ultimate priority.

This analytic move, refocusing attention from the environment to the social conditions of poverty, led me to my current research focus. Environmental conflicts are not just struggles over natural resources. They often become a terrain on which other ideological conflicts play out. The water conflict at the end of the Colorado River has been as much about struggles over class hierarchy, language politics, and what constitutes indigenous identity as it has been about who gets access to water and fishing rights. Debates about the conservation of the river have become a battleground for conflicts over how cultural difference should be recognized and what constitutes that difference in the first place.

This conflict at the end of the Colorado River is certainly not an isolated environmental phenomenon; it is indicative of a worldwide crisis of water

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scarcity. A recent United Nations report stated that water quality and management is the overriding problem of the twenty-first century (UNDP 2003). Indeed, stories of water shortages and conflicts in Israel, India, China, Bolivia, Canada, Mexico, and the United States have recently appeared in major newspapers, magazines, and academic journals across the globe. Conflicts have erupted over the building of dams, the privatization of public sector utilities, and binational water agreements (DuMars et al. 1984; Shiva 2002; de Villiers 1999; Ward 2001).

While water scarcity is increasingly a problem that is being felt across the world, it manifests itself in particular local meanings and struggles. In this book, I analyze the measures taken by a group of Cucapá people to maneuver through the complex structural and political changes they have experienced over the last several decades as fishing, their main form of subsistence, has become both environmentally untenable and criminalized by the state as a measure of environmental management. I examine the strategies that many local people employ to subsist and transform their lives under conditions of profound environmental and economic change as well as extreme power asymmetries. Therefore, this book explores the intersections between environmental conflict and the production of collective identities. I show how in the context of the water crisis in the Colorado delta, identity is articulated and contested through various forms of struggle, while at the same time social systems of difference are reproduced through contestations over natural resources.

A number of authors have come to explain how local processes of identity formation have been connected to broader systems of signification through the concept of “articulation” (Clifford 2001; García 2005; Li 2000; Nelson 1999; Yeh 2007). Drawn from Stuart Hall, this concept is used to denote a double meaning: the way that groups come to express and enunciate particular collective political identities and also how they manage to connect these expressions of identity to wider discourses and social forces.

My work is guided by this theoretical framework, but departs from it by attending specifically to situations in which articulations fail. That is, rather than focusing on when and where articulations do or do not happen, the ethnographic case I analyze here explores an instance where articulations are specifically unhinged from the historical conjunctions that might otherwise make them possible. Cucapá activists have so far been unable to connect their discourses to the wider discourses of the state

involving environmental sustainability and indigenous connection to the land. In other words, they have failed to successfully articulate their claims for traditional fishing rights with the state because, despite their efforts, they are not seen as indigenous enough.

My analysis also differs from recent ethnographic interest in articulation in relation to the double meaning that Hall emphasizes. “To articulate” means “to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate” as well as to connect (Hall’s example is the way a trailer connects to a truck [1996: 53]). In this book I focus as much on the first sense of the term (as enunciation and expression) as I do on the arguably more political moment in which a connection to a wider context can take place. I am equally interested in exploring the processes by which certain discourses and expressions are rendered inarticulate—the process that often makes the unhings possible in the first place. For example, I examine contradictions that emerge around gender ideologies as they are expressed in a local context, and I analyze the tensions in expressions of gendered indigenous identities. Additionally, in examining how the Cucapá’s authenticity is often judged based on fluency in an indigenous language most people no longer speak, I analyze the way they are constructed as culturally inarticulate by outsiders. That is, I focus precisely on an instance where *not* being understood, as a result of speaking an exotic and inscrutable indigenous language, would be the expression of identity ironically capable of articulating with wider contexts of language politics. Thus in this book I am interested in the failure of articulation in both senses of the term.

The Fieldsite

The village where I lived in 2005–2006 is the home of the largest population of Cucapá people in Mexico with approximately two hundred residents. Approximately one thousand Cucapá (Cocopah) tribal members live in Somerton, Arizona, and several hundred more live in the Mexicali Valley in the Mexican states of Sonora and Baja California. There are, of course, conceptual difficulties with identifying a group under such an ethnic label (the difficulties of which are a central topic of this book). I use the term “Cucapá” because it is the way that people routinely self-identify. Cucapá people are Mexican citizens as well and often identify as such. However, in contexts where people would make a distinction between

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indigenous and nonindigenous residents of the area they use the word “Mexican” to refer to individuals of nonindigenous descent.⁵

Before the 1980s, many of the Cucapá families that are currently located in Baja California lived in scattered, semi-permanent homes along the banks of the Hardy River. After major floods in the late 1970s and early 1980s destroyed most of these homes, the government donated materials to rebuild the houses that were damaged and designated the current village as the site, largely because it is at a slightly higher elevation than other points along the river. The settlement comprises approximately forty houses,⁶ a small medical clinic, a primary and secondary school, a dilapidated building bearing the sign “Cucapá museum” (which contains a display case full of beadwork), and a small and long-abandoned *caseta de policía* (police booth), which now serves as junk storage.

The roads in the village are made of loose, sandy gravel. Barbed-wire fences roughly cordon off areas around people’s homes, but they are generally twisted down so that they can be stepped over or spread apart to be squeezed through. Scattered throughout the backyards one can see stripped bed frames, used as chairs or piled with blankets, holes dug out with garbage loosely piled within them, or metal barrels where the garbage is burned. Most homes have outhouses that are made out of thin metal or plywood. Potable water is held in storage tanks outside the houses. Approximately every fifteen days, a truck comes from Mexicali to sell potable water and refill these tanks.

The climate of the Colorado River delta is characterized by extremes. In my first twelve months there, there were more than twice as many earthquakes as there were rainfalls. Temperatures between May and October are extremely high, often over 110 degrees Fahrenheit, and winter nights are often very cold, reaching the low 30s. In the broad delta basin, invisibly split by the San Andrés Fault and ravaged by saline waters, there is very little evidence of the river that once fanned its delta across this land.

During my ethnographic research I stayed with the Martínez family. The mother, Ana María Martínez, invited me to stay with them not long after we met. Ana is the daughter of the chief, Don Madeleno, and was married to Cruz Antonio Martínez, with whom she had three children in their late teens: twin eighteen-year-old daughters (one of whom was several months pregnant) and a nineteen-year-old son.

During my fieldwork, several dynamics in this family and in the village profoundly shaped the experience of living there and doing research. One

was the effect of drug addiction on the household where I was staying, and the other was a rivalry between two of the prominent families in the village. Ana's husband, who had a strong presence in the home (as he does in the pages that follow), was addicted to crystal methamphetamine (*crystal* in Spanish) the first four months I was living with them. This was something that I came to realize somewhat belatedly. Ana's impatience with him was my first indication of what was going on. When he came in the house acting noticeably different, she would offer him food. He would refuse and she would keep offering. I later learned that he always denied his use to her and, indignant at his dishonesty, she would punish him by drawing inordinate attention to the drugs' effects, for lack of appetite is a sure sign of use. During these times, she would cast knowing glances across the table in my direction. She did not want me to think she was fooled. But of course, it was I who had been unaware, and thus I came to understand the cause of his erratic behavior.

I was completely unfamiliar with the nature or effects of crystal and was initially quite agitated by this aspect of my living situation. My first few weeks in Ana's house were incredibly stressful because of the presence of Cruz, whose manner I found very disconcerting. As a result of a case of strabismus (a condition that results in crossed eyes), it was difficult to know when he was speaking to me, which was compounded by the fact that he often spoke at a remarkable, drug-induced speed. I was originally concerned about how erratic or dangerous his behavior might be. My worries about Cruz subsided not long after getting to know him better. He was embarrassed by his addiction and tried to hide it as much as possible, and despite his sometimes unpredictable behavior, his remarkable qualities as a person quickly became evident.

While Cruz's addiction slowly splintered the ties among Ana and their family, another division had an equally unsettling effect on research conditions in the village more generally. During my fieldwork a rivalry between two of the most prominent Cucapá elders was a constant source of tension. Don Madeleno, the Cucapá chief, and his sister Doña Esperanza were distinctly alienated from each other during this time. In addition to long-standing personal conflicts, a central tension between Doña Esperanza's and Don Madeleno's families was a land conflict over Cucapá territory.

The Cucapá's struggle for water follows decades of struggle for the legal title to their lands. After the formation of the international border in 1853, the Cucapá who found themselves in the United States retained their

lands. But on the Mexican side people were incorporated into the hacienda system, whereby large tracts of land were titled to landowners who were given rights to the labor of its inhabitants. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Colorado River Land Company, a US land syndicate operated out of Los Angeles, acquired most of the land in the Colorado delta (also known as the Mexicali Valley). The land was worked by tenant farmers, most of whom were Chinese immigrants, as well as local Mexicans and some Cucapá families. This land was then appropriated by the Mexican state during the agrarian reform that followed the 1910–1920 Mexican Revolution (Dwyer 2008; Gómez Estrada 1994).

In 1936, under the Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas (ruled 1934–1940), the Cucapá people were granted an ejido, land communally run by local people but owned by the state (Krauze 1997: 352).⁷ Kelly (1977) documents how the ejido system failed for the Cucapá people, citing poor direction on the part of Mexican officials and growing distrust and lack of interest among many Cucapá. In the 1940s, those Cucapá people living on the ejido gradually left work as laborers and fisherman (Gómez Estrada 1994; Kelly 1977: 13). Several Cucapá people also suggested that many of the residents were bribed off their ejido lands by nonindigenous local people. Currently, only a few Cucapá families live on the ejido, which is about twenty miles north of the village to which most families have moved.

After years of demanding land from the Mexican federal government, a fight led by Don Madeleno, in 1976 the Cucapá were finally given the rights to communal ownership of 143,000 hectares (375,500 acres) of their traditional land (Gómez Estrada 2000; Sánchez 2000). But due to the environmental degradation the region has been through, this land is not irrigable or farmable. Furthermore, ultimately some people, such as Don Madeleno's family, were excluded from the lands granted in legal title. One reason for this exclusion was a fissure between different levels of government that was created when traditional chiefs were recognized by the Mexican government after reforms in the 1970s. This created two official leadership positions with overlapping powers: the *comisariado ejidal* (or *comisario*), the existing authority on agrarian issues, and the traditional chief, representing the indigenous group more generally.⁸

Doña Esperanza, Don Madeleno's rival, is closely associated with the comisario, and she and her family have legal land rights to traditional territory. Meanwhile, Don Madeleno and his supporters have been fighting to reallocate land rights for years, but the negotiations are progressing

slowly. A representative of the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI)⁹ whom I interviewed suggested that despite the conflict the issue of land rights has created, the legal value of this title is questionable, since the land is communal and thus cannot be sold or even divided among individuals. Therefore, he thought that title to land involving those 143,000 hectares was more “symbolic” than anything else.

The attitude of Esperanza’s daughter, Manuela, toward her own land rights exemplified the “symbolic” value that the representative from CDI referred to. She occasionally brought up her land rights as if they were evidence of her superiority to the other rival group. For example, one day she commented, “Madeleno’s family doesn’t even have land rights!” I asked if Thalia, Manuela’s sixteen-year-old daughter, had legal land rights, and Thalia promptly responded that she did not because she was underage but also that she did not want them. When I asked her why, she said, “Because they’re good for nothing but fighting over!” Since her mother protested Thalia’s answer, I pressed Manuela on what they were good for in her opinion. After hesitating, she finally repeated, laughing, “Well, they’re good for fighting over!”

However, Don Madeleno explained that the fight over land title between these two factions is not just “symbolic” but has exacerbated economic inequalities between members of the group. The legal land title has allowed the titled members to rent out sections of land for gravel extraction, an activity that has become a lucrative business in the border region, where it is used for building roads. Proceeds are shared among those with title but not among the rest of the people recognized as Cucapá in the region. Don Madeleno also explained that if laws change such that communal land could be sold, following the privatization trends that have sped up in the last decades in Mexico, this could be catastrophic for those without title.

For the most part, younger people did not directly involve themselves in the conflict between the two families. Although the divides were clearly visible on a social level, they did not affect what kinds of projects younger people worked on, or the composition of their fishing crews. In fact, the youth there felt a general sense of exasperation about the conflict and many expressed the opinion that the tension between the families was a result of jealousy about who was involved in what project and who was benefiting from the social support extended to the Cucapá people.

While issues over land title pitted families against each other, conflicts

over the river and fishing rights pit local people against the state. Particularly for younger generations, the fishing conflict seemed to unite them more easily across internal divides, creating a sense of shared, collective opposition against the federal imposition of fishing restrictions (see Navarro Smith 2008). For this reason the fishing conflict, as we shall see, has also become an important context in which local people have contested state ideologies of what constitutes indigenous identity.

Multiculturalism and the Political Terrain of Indigeneity

I completed this research during a unique political and historical moment for indigenous people in Mexico. After centuries of discrimination on the grounds of ethnic difference that resulted in high levels of cultural assimilation, government policies have in the last decades shifted to encourage multiculturalism. While previous state programs, implemented since the revolution, had identified indigenous groups in order to receive certain forms of support, the goal of these programs had always been eventual assimilation (Dawson 2004; de la Peña 2006). Therefore, the Cucapá people now share a political circumstance with many contemporary indigenous people around the world, who increasingly face both the older pressures to assimilate and, simultaneously, more recent pressures to perform otherness. These contradictory demands create paradoxes of recognition (Povinelli 2002) that have been documented elsewhere and yet manifest themselves differently among groups in distinct historical contexts (Cattelino 2008; Clifford 1988; Field 1999; Gordillo 2011; Gustafson 2009).

In Mexico during the first half of the twentieth century, and largely due to the political impact of the revolution, national policies and class-based organizing encouraged indigenous people to self-identify as *campesinos* or peasants (Jackson and Warren 2005). *Campesinos* constituted a political category meant to represent a distinct social class with common interests and grievances, related primarily to issues of land. They were seen as a key element in the struggle for land reform that would be the cornerstone of Mexico's social revolution (Boyer 2003). Nationalist ideologies of *mezizaje* that were popular during and after the revolution emphasized cultural and biological mixing as opposed to ethnic difference and further discouraged politicized indigenous identification (Alonso 2004; Jackson and Warren 2005; Knight 1990). Even the ideological movement of *indi-*

genismo within the Mexican state, which ostensibly celebrated multiculturalism as a government policy, maintained that the full extension of citizenship to indigenous peoples would ultimately come through assimilation (de la Peña 2005).

A crucial component of state formation in postindependence Latin America has been the capacity of governments to define what it means to be indigenous and to create the conditions for this specific political identity to emerge within the nation (de la Peña 2005: 718). As I discuss in detail in chapter 2, the shift from policies of indigenous assimilation to a program of multiculturalism in public discourses during the 1980s and 1990s represented a significant change in the conditions under which indigenous groups interact with the state.

This shift can be understood as the result of political and ideological changes. Beginning in the 1980s, strong international pressure came to bear as environmentalism and human rights advocacy gained momentum. The concept of “indigenous people” gained legitimacy in international law with the creation of the United Nations (UN) Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) in 1982, which created a space for grassroots movements to gain more direct access to the UN (de la Peña 2005; Gray 1996). In addition, under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, many Latin American states agreed to adopt neoliberal reforms, which resonated with discourses on diversity, community solidarity, and social capital (Sieder 2002).

It has generally been assumed by scholars and activists that neoliberalism and multiculturalism are divergent projects. This is partially due to neoliberalism’s notorious celebration of the economic individual as the quintessential autonomous subject (Kingfisher 2002; Peters 2001) and the related idea that the neoliberal program calls into question collective structures that might be obstacles to the logic of the pure market (Bourdieu 1998; D. Harvey 2005). Recently, however, a growing number of authors have drawn attention to how discourses and policies of multiculturalism in fact form part of the larger neoliberal project in Latin America and beyond (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Hale 2005; Martinez Novo 2006; Sieder 2002; Speed 2005). In this book, and especially in chapters 2 and 5, I draw on this body of work to analyze how the seemingly counterintuitive pairing of neoliberalism and multiculturalism in Mexico has created political conditions in which ethnic difference is foregrounded as a way of denying certain rights to marginalized groups who do not look or act “indigenous enough.”

The shift to policies encouraging ethnic self-identification has also benefited many indigenous communities in Latin America because it has created a political climate and the legal grounds to argue for territory and rights to natural resources. The indigenous movement has succeeded in forming political parties in Bolivia and Ecuador. Successful indigenous and popular mobilizations in Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2000 forced the government to cancel plans to allow the Bechtel Corporation to sell water to local people (Laurie, Andolina, and Radcliffe 2002). The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994, protesting the oppression of indigenous peoples in Chiapas and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, was able to force the government and Mexican public opinion to recognize the marginalization of indigenous communities in the country (N. Harvey 1998; Ramírez Paredes 2002). Furthermore, constitutional reforms have occurred across Latin America recognizing the multicultural character of these nations.

These successes, however, depend on performing indigenous identity according to a definition imposed on indigenous communities by nonindigenous actors. Article 2 of the Mexican constitution uses the following criteria to define indigenous people: they must be descendants of the people who lived in the same territory at the beginning of colonization, and they must preserve their own social, economic, and cultural institutions. The criteria also specify that indigenous people's awareness of their indigenous identity should also be considered (although, in practice, this last criterion is rarely emphasized).

Many Cucapá people I spoke with experience this shift in policy emphasis to preserving indigenous identities as a profound contradiction. After centuries of discrimination on the grounds of ethnic difference, government policies now encourage indigenous self-identification and, indeed, require the Cucapá to identify as "indigenous" in order for their claims for certain rights and resources to be seriously considered. People negotiate this contradiction by identifying with categories of indigeneity unevenly and ambiguously. Indigeneity and identity, more broadly, are also authenticated and contested at the community level in complex ways that may not align with national criteria. What constitutes "Cucapá identity" is also highly contested. Local articulations of identity develop a particular gender ideology in opposition to "Mexican machismo" and trace an ancestral inhabitation, and a history of fishing, on the river from before colonization.

Throughout this book, I examine how many Cucapá people, by realigning the ways they connect to the nation and their own unique historical and political circumstances, have come to identify themselves in a particular way that both engages and critiques national and international discourses on indigeneity. In other words, this book explores indigenous identity not as a preexisting entity but as a set of historically and politically constituted practices and idioms that emerge through processes of engagement and struggle (Baviskar 2005; de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Field 2008; Li 2000; Miller 2003; Niezen 2003).

Research Setting and Methodology

In your interviews you should ask the older people if the US ever asked if it was okay with us that they took all the water from the river up there. I bet they never asked.

—PABLO

The fieldwork on which this book is based primarily took place over twelve months in 2005 and 2006. While I focus on the events that transpired during this period, my narrative is also informed by subsequent and shorter fieldwork periods in the village as well as surrounding communities where I did research in northwestern Mexico in 2007, 2010, and 2011. In the first phase of my fieldwork in the United States, I interviewed ranchers, water engineers, and government officials. I stayed at a ranch in Colorado, toured the major dams and reservoirs, and interviewed guards and tour guides. As noted above, I also attended the Arizona Water Summit in Flagstaff, as well as a tribal water summit and interviewed tribal members and leaders from the Navajo, Cocopah, and Hopi nations. In the United States I also completed the bulk of my archival research. I visited the offices of the Bureau of Reclamation and the Colorado Plateau special archival collections at the University of Arizona, Flagstaff, and San Diego.

In the Colorado delta in Mexico, I participated on fishing trips, government make-work programs, fishing meetings, meetings with the fishing cooperatives, and meetings with their lawyer and conservation organizations. I attended scores of social gatherings, including birthday parties, funerals, and baptisms. I also volunteered for some of the local river

association's projects—planting trees, testing water quality, and counting birds and fish—and with a mapmaking project carried out by a binational NGO based in Tucson, Arizona. Finally, I also visited the archives at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California and the National Archives in Mexico City and attended the World Water Forum in Mexico City in March 2006.

After some initial and awkward attempts at conducting formal interviews in the village, I gave up on this method for the first few months of fieldwork. I found that people would give nervous and confused answers to basic questions. The technique of waiting for topics to come up naturally in conversation and expressing my curiosity in these contexts was more effective. I learned later that structured interviews were closely associated with interactions with government officials in relation to the registration and confiscation of fishing licenses as well as the monitoring of fishing more generally. This was perceived as a distinctly hostile genre of communication (see also Briggs 1986).

Five or six months into my stay, however, friends and neighbors started asking why I had not interviewed them yet. They knew I was interviewing officials and NGO workers, and it had come to signify the research I was “doing” in ways that my informal participation and presence in their daily lives did not. One day a man I did not know very well came to our house very early in the morning and yelled for me to come out, announcing, “I’ve come for my interview!” I took this incident as my cue to attempt interviews once again and began actively interviewing people. As I was much more familiar to local residents by then, the interactions were much easier.

Although I never found that interviews were particularly useful as a method of gathering information, they functioned as a way to remind people that I was doing research and as a way of engaging people with whom I would not otherwise have easy contact.¹⁰ My interviews also took on an unexpected role as a conduit for social information to move more generally. People were extremely interested in whether their answers were similar to others’ and would often suggest that so-and-so might disagree on a given point. As Pablo’s comments in the epigraph of this section indicates, the interviews also became proposed pathways through which interviewees asked questions of their own.

Because drug abuse and illegal activities are a feature of everyday life among many of the people I describe, I have taken care to obscure identi-

ties, both renaming the individuals and at points merging or separating identities to further complicate possible attempts to identify them (particularly in chapter 3). The disadvantage of this method is that it also obscures the trajectory of life histories and undermines the complexity of the individual characters who shared parts of their lives with me. The majority of people I talked to or interviewed explicitly on this subject felt that my concerns were highly exaggerated and volunteered to share their identities. “Come on, Shaylih, how many people do you seriously think are going to read this thing?” was a common response to my worries about anonymity. In other cases, people felt my anxieties were unfounded because they had already spent time in jail for the experiences they described.

Nonetheless, the pervasive nature of racist stereotypes that amplify the participation of poorer populations in illegal activities has led some authors to avoid writing about these experiences of vulnerable groups altogether (see Nader 1972). While this has been a common academic response to the frustration of writing about the deprivation of the poor, more recent work on poverty and violence has convincingly argued that to avoid writing about suffering denies its very existence. I therefore agree with Bourgois when he writes that “sanitizing suffering and destruction” makes one complicit with oppression (2002:12; see also Goldstein 2003). Scheper-Hughes (1992: 27–28) made this point eloquently when she wrote that “not to look, not to touch, not to record, can be the hostile act, the act of indifference and of turning away.”

Layout of the Book

In the chapters that follow, I analyze the ways contemporary invocations of identity, particularly in relation to the fishing conflict, shape the formation of political subjectivities as well as modes of livelihood. Starting from a focus on the particular confrontations and encounters engendered by the fishing conflict over the Colorado River, the chapters are loosely thematized around how the idioms of ethnicity, nationalism, class, gender, and language have shaped the way that locals have negotiated the dramatic structural, ecological, and discursive transformations that have characterized life there over the last few decades.

In chapter 1, I analyze how maps, literature, and media coverage collude in a representation of the Colorado River that erases the delta and its

inhabitants in northern Mexico and how people experience the material effects of these discursive occlusions. I also examine how the discursive constructions of the river legitimated radically unequal distribution of water rights. I continue by analyzing a controversial mapmaking project that attempts to redraw the map of the Colorado delta and the Cucapá territory. In particular, I focus on the politics of this project, exploring the tension between the way in which places are represented on maps and in oral histories.

In chapter 2, I analyze how the Cucapá fishing cooperatives' arguments for fishing rights in the delta have been facilitated and constrained within the terms of current environmental discourses. I examine how local environmental NGOs and government bodies have both aligned themselves with the Cucapá people through various projects and refused to support their environmental claims by imposing measures of authenticity to which the Cucapá do not fully conform.

Chapter 3 explores how people maintain a minimum standard of living under the pressures of structural and environmental changes and in a context in which their primary subsistence activity, fishing, has been criminalized. I examine the rise of narco-trafficking as one economic alternative produced by these constraints and argue, furthermore, that some people see narco-trafficking as a form of resistance to US and Mexican domination, albeit a multidimensional resistance shaped by internal politics.

In addition to negotiating the terms of authenticity imposed on them, local people also engage in contentious debate over what constitutes Cucapá identity. In chapter 4, I explore how local struggles over this identity are established and contested, especially in connection to gender relations. I focus on a particular view of gender that emphasizes women's power and is often articulated in opposition to Mexican machismo. I follow the conflicting historical narratives on the establishment of women's primacy in the social and political sphere and consider how the ideology of gender that emerges from these narratives forms the basis for a wider cultural identification and symbolic resource.

In chapter 5, I analyze the use of swearwords by the younger generations of Cucapá speakers. I argue that this vocabulary functions as a critique of, and a challenge to, the increasingly formalized imposition of indigenous language capacity as a measure of authenticity and as a formal and informal criterion for the recognition of indigenous rights. I examine how, for the youth, indigenous identity is located not in their indigenous language

but in an awareness of a shared history of the injustices of colonization and a continuing legacy of state indifference.

These chapters are also structured to reflect on certain methodological concerns that emerged during my research. Throughout my fieldwork, I paid attention to the moments when people identified a discourse as ideological or a political structure as oppressive, and the questions that guide each chapter attend to these identifications. For example, why would elders push paper maps away when asked to identify places and instead locate places in historical legends? What does it mean when an environmental official states that the fishing conflict is not about the environment but, rather, about social difference and authenticity? Why would a local drug smuggler argue that fishing regulations are not about fishing but, rather, about “the war on drugs”? And what can we learn from an instance when a man forgets everything about his personal history and the entire village claims that this is not the result of amnesia but a symptom of changing gender relations?

These sorts of gestures and attitudes form an implicit guide to my analysis. Of course, in the process of identifying what a process or event is “about,” social actors, in multiple levels of interpretation, privilege their own terms of debate and subjugate other voices. I am not arguing that those we study have a more privileged position from which to identify the “real” or that by paying attention to the kinds of gestures we will be pointed to “the truth.” Instead, I bring the analytic move itself into focus. This shifts attention to how certain interpretations become dominant, and what these interpretations highlight and erase. By observing how debates are moved onto another “terrain” (Mani 1998; McElhinny 2007), one achieves a vantage point from which to understand how people are experiencing their own lives and the structures through which they navigate their worlds.

The Lines That Follow

During the first months of my fieldwork, there were no white lines to mark the edges of the sides of Route 5, which led to and from the village. This made driving through the desert at night extremely treacherous. Finally, in November 2005 the municipality of Mexicali painted white lines on the side of the road. From the village, we watched the trucks and



FIGURE 1.1 Bisected dog. Photo by author.

workmen move down past us, tracing the edges of the road with their paint machines. Later that day, a rumor circulated that there was a disturbing sight to be seen a few miles north. I drove there with my camera and took this picture: a dead dog at the side of the road and a fresh white line of paint bisecting its still-warm carcass (see figure 1.1).

The scene evoked outrage and a lot of talk from residents in the area. When the dog was finally pushed aside, the photograph that I had taken and subsequently printed out replaced the scene on the side of the road as a focus of indignation. The owner of a nearby construction company, who had heard about the photograph, wanted copies to give his political connections in the municipality so that the negligent workers might be rooted out and punished. The photograph circulated in the village as well, passed around by friends and family. Don Madeleno, the Cucapá chief, heard about the photo and asked for a copy. When I brought him the five-by-six-inch print, he held it up and said, “You see? This is what our government is like.” In a place where dogs are not particularly respected animals, it was notable to see how this image nonetheless came to symbolize for local people the negligence of the Mexican government in its disregard for life and flagrant disrespect toward them.

In the months that followed, I often found myself reminded of that line over the dead dog on the road. I thought back to it in reference to other lines that bisected the delta of the Colorado River in similar strokes of reckless inattention. One of the lines that inscribes the delta's landscape is about fifteen miles north of the village; it is the line that marks the end of legally irrigable land and separates those with the means to pursue agriculture, those north of that line, from those without the means, to the south. It is called the *línea de compactación*. South of this line, all water rights were suspended in 1970 in response to the increasing pressure that water scarcity was having on agriculture in the region. This marks the end of viable agricultural lands in the Mexicali Valley and the beginning of non-irrigable desert.

The most significant line slashing through the Colorado delta, however, is the international border between the United States and Mexico. Prior to the setting of the border, indigenous peoples in this region had territories (with relatively flexible boundaries between neighboring groups) that stretched into what today are two different national geographies. In those days, Cucapá villages extended into what are now California and Arizona in the United States and Sonora and Baja California in Mexico. These territories and the previous patterns of separations between settlements were certainly not taken into account when the border was drawn up. The treaties and agreements that set the international boundaries between the nation-states of North America were negotiated and signed by the colonizers alone (Firebaugh 2002: 160).

These Cucapá villages were first split by the border delineated in the 1853 Gadsden Purchase following the US-Mexican war (1846–1848), which resulted in Mexico losing control of much of what is today the southwestern United States.¹¹ At this time, however, the border did little to physically separate these groups or impede movement across the line. It was only in the late 1930s that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) began reinforcing border controls on the American side of the border. Luna Firebaugh (2002) argues that heightened border controls affected the Cucapá people earlier than other transborder groups because they were located adjacent to a primary river crossing and because control of the Colorado River was crucial to the US government (Firebaugh 2002: 167; see also Tisdale 1997).

Currently, most Cucapá people living on the Mexican side are not permitted to cross over into the United States at all. It is almost impossible for them to get visas, especially given that most people do not have other

forms of documentation, such as birth certificates. Many families that were separated by the border have very little contact with each other. As a result of the different experiences and sociopolitical relations created by the border, the disparity in the quality of life between the Cocopah people in Arizona and the Cucapá living in Mexico is extreme. The Cocopah in the United States were granted water rights to the Colorado River, have large agriculture tracts, and also run a successful museum and casino (Tisdale 1997).¹²

Therefore, the border replaced local territorial divisions and movements with a dividing line derived from state bureaucratic structures that had few practical ties to the original inhabitants of the region and that was opposed to the patterns of kinship and birthplace on which prior local boundaries were based. Foucault (1995) writes of such lines when he describes the type of rationality behind the bureaucratization of rule. He posits that these forms of markings and divisions are the modern form of disciplinary rationality. Discipline is a technology of traces—visible marks, inscriptions, and imprints. For Foucault, discipline works by division. By dividing wholes, it divides up space and movement into smaller and smaller fragments, subjecting each fragment to intense and extensive scrutiny. Disciplinary rationality takes things that are not visible and makes them observable and measurable by dividing constellations into innumerable points of illumination. These actions specify surveillance and make it functional (Foucault 1995: 174).

Whereas Foucault's lines regulate, control, and survey, however, the lines I have described in northwestern Mexico appear far more reckless. Instead of simply dividing and subjecting an object to scrutiny, they inscribe over and erase, ignoring previous spatial sensibilities and divisions. It is not so much that these lines break up wholes but that they vandalize them. From the ground, these lines appear to slash the landscape in gestures of disregard. The lines derived from state administrative structures and mechanisms such as irrigation laws, municipal paint crews, and federal international treaties, trod heavily over the daily practices of people who trace different routes and boundaries on this landscape.

In this book, one of my objectives is to examine ethnographically these locally constituted routes and boundaries as well as the conflicts and tensions they create with the state-sponsored routes outlined above. This will lead me to other, less publicly visible kinds of places and traces: the traces of drug trafficking through the desert, the notches on the roads to prevent

the landing of cargo planes, the tracks of soldiers trying to rout them out. I will also trace lines on maps and the routes crisscrossing the landscape in the historical legends told by elders. In the next chapter, I trace a line that bisects scores of maps of the region yet no longer reaches the delta or the Cucapá people: the Colorado River.