WHERE THE RIVER ENDS: ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT AND CONTESTED IDENTITIES IN THE COLORADO DELTA

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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This dissertation examines how an indigenous group of Cucapá people in northern Mexico has experienced a trans-national water conflict at the end of the Colorado River. In particular, I explore the measures taken by some Cucapá people to maneuver through the complex structural 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.

My study begins with a focus on the particular confrontations and encounters engendered by the fishing conflict over the Colorado River. I move on to explore how different idioms of social classification have shaped the way that residents of the region have negotiated the dramatic economic, ecological and social transformations that have characterized life there over the last few decades. I analyze the way that identity is articulated and contested by various social actors through diverse forms of struggle and how social systems of ethnic, linguistic, and gender difference are invoked in conflicts over natural resources.

For example, I examine the particular ideology of indigeneity that has emerged in the context of a fishing dispute between the Mexican State and the Cucapá people. This ideology has conflated indigenous authenticity with environmental stewardship and fluency in the Cucapá language. Yet many Cucapá people have challenged these
assumptions and have constructed alternate views of their identity. As part of these contestations, I also examine the rise of narco-trafficking in the area as one economic alternative to fishing that is seen by some as a form of resistance to the policies of the governments of the United States and Mexico.

A central argument of this dissertation is that environmental disputes are not just struggles over natural resources, they often become a terrain on which other ideological and political conflicts play-out. The water conflict at the end of the Colorado River has been as much about who gets access to water and fishing rights as it has been about struggles over class hierarchy, language politics and what constitutes indigenous identity.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** .................................................................................................................. ii

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** .............................................................................................. iv

**LIST OF FIGURES** ......................................................................................................... xi

**INTRODUCTION** ........................................................................................................... 1

Down the River ................................................................................................................. 6
El Mayor ............................................................................................................................ 9
Research Problem ............................................................................................................ 11
Research Trajectory ......................................................................................................... 13
Research Setting .............................................................................................................. 17
Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 19
A Rivalry ........................................................................................................................... 21
Multiculturalism and the Current Political Terrain of Indigeneity .................................. 28
Layout of the Dissertation ............................................................................................... 31

**CHAPTER ONE. “Listen For When You Get There”: Topologies of Invisibility on the Colorado River** ....................................................................................................................... 35

The Mirage on the Map: the Makings of a River Without a Delta .................................. 37
As the Colorado River Flows Merrily Out to Sea .............................................................. 45
The Savagery of the Colorado ........................................................................................... 55
The Second River ............................................................................................................. 59
“Listen for When You Get There”: Redrawing the Map of the Colorado Delta .......... 64

**CHAPTER TWO. The Fishing Conflict and the Making and Unmaking of Indigenous Authenticity in the Colorado Delta** ........................................................................................................... 77

The Fishing Conflict: “We Will Fish Here Forever” ......................................................... 85
Where Does the River Become the Sea? Claiming a Place at the End of the Colorado River ................................................................................................................................. 89
Ambivalent Alliances: “They Seem to Care More about the Fish than the People” ....................................................................................................................... 96
“We fish by the Moon, Not By the Tides” ....................................................................... 100
Shifting Political Boundaries in the Colorado River Delta ............................................. 104
The View from Upstream ............................................................................................... 113

**CHAPTER THREE. “What Else Can I Do With a Boat and No Nets?”**
Non-trafficking and the Alternatives at Home .................................................................. 116

A Crystaline Landscape: Drugs and Everyday Life in El Mayor .................................. 124
Alternatives to Fishing ................................................................................................. 127
From Factories to Corridors: Navigating the Border Economy.......................... 131
The Colombianization of the Mexican Border.................................................. 135
Ideologies of Work in EL Mayor........................................................................ 138
Structures of Agency and Cultures of Poverty...................................................... 141
Lived Antinomies: Victims, Huevones and Revolutionaries............................... 144
“When I Wore My Alligator Boots”: Dignity and Banditry in the Narco-corridor.. 152.

CHAPTER FOUR. Who’s Who in El Mayor: Mexican Machismo and
a Woman’s Worth......................................................................................... 172
Cruz Forgets? One Man’s Amnesia as a Case of “Mexicanization”.................. 174
“We Believe that Women Are Worth More than Men”.................................... 181
Conflicting Gender Hierarchies........................................................................ 191
The Weight of Water: Leadership in El Mayor.................................................... 200
“Mejor Sola”.................................................................................................. 205
An Ethnographic Reversal: Views from El Mayor.............................................. 208

CHAPTER FIVE. “Spread Your Ass Cheeks” And other Things that
Should not be Said in Indigenous Languages.................................................. 215
The Cucapá Language....................................................................................... 218
What Is and Is Not Said in Cucapá................................................................. 222
“Do You Speak Your Language?” Language Capacity as a Criterion
for Participation............................................................................................... 232
What Should and Should Not Be Said in Indigenous Languages..................... 238
Unlearning Cucapá: Last Words........................................................................ 245

CONCLUSIONS......................................................................................... 250

WORKS CITED......................................................................................... 258
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Colorado River Basin ......................................................... 40
Figure 2. U.S.-Mexico Border Area Tribal Lands .................................. 42
Figure 3. Map of the Biosphere Reserve ............................................. 78
Figure 4. Annual Family Income in El Mayor ...................................... 134
INTRODUCTION

During the first months of my fieldwork in the small Cucapá settlement of El Mayor at the end of the Colorado River in northwest Mexico, there were no white lines to mark off the edges of the sides of route 5, the road that led to and from the village. This made driving through the desert at night extremely treacherous. Finally, in November of 2005 the municipality of Mexicali painted white lines on the side of the road. From El Mayor, we watched the trucks and 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.
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 from his friend in El
Mayor, 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 El
Mayor as well. Friends and family passed a print around. Don Madeleno, the Cacapá
chief, heard about the photo and asked for a copy. When I brought him the 5x6 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 towards local residents.

In the months that followed, I often found myself reminded of that line over the
dog. 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 inscribed the delta’s
landscape was that very road on which the dog was painted. Route 5, connecting the area
to Mexicali, was paved in 1951 as a result of the development of irrigated agriculture in
the Valle de Mexicali in the previous decades. It goes right past El Mayor on its way to
the tourist and fishing town of San Felipe, on the Sea of Cortéz. Most RV-ers making
their journeys down to San Felipe from California do not even know that El Mayor is
there. From the road, the latter looks like any desert slum and the huge RVs towing off-
road vehicles drive right past.
Another line about 15 miles north of El Mayor is more significant; it is the line that marks the end of legally irrigable land and separates those with the means to pursue agriculture north of that line and those without those means to the south. It is called the línea de compactación (line of compression). South of this line, where El Mayor is, 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 limit of irrigable lands in the Mexicali Valley.

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 this border, indigenous peoples in this region had territories, with relatively flexible boundaries with neighboring indigenous groups, that stretched into what today are two different national geographies. Before the international border was created, 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 villages were not taken into account when the border was drawn up. The treaties and agreements that set the international boundaries between the nation-states of the North American continent were negotiated and signed by the colonizers alone (Luna-Firebaugh 2002: 160).

These Cucapá villages were first split by the border by the Gadsden Purchase in 1853 that followed the United States-Mexican war of 1846-1848, which resulted in Mexico losing control of much of what is today the Southwestern United States.¹ At this time, however, the border did little to physically separate these groups or impede

¹ The Gadsden Purchase (known as Venta de La Mesilla in Mexico) is a region of what today is southern Arizona and New Mexico that was purchased by the United States from Mexico.
movement across the international line. In the late 1930s, the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) began reinforcing border controls on the American side of the border. Luna-Firebaugh (2002) argues that heightened border controls affected the Cucapá earlier than other tribes because they were located adjacent to a primary river crossing. Because control of the Colorado River was crucial to the United States government, the Cucapá were seriously affected by border controls at a much earlier date than the other border tribes (Luna-Firebaugh 2002: 167; Tisdale 1997).

Currently, most Cucapá 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 because most people in El Mayor do not have other forms of documentation such as birth certificates. As a result, many families were separated by the border and have very little contact with each other. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the younger generations are not learning the Cucapá language anymore. At festivals, young people from either side of the border cannot communicate with each other in Spanish and English.

As a result of the different experiences and socio-political relations created by the border, the disparity in the quality of life between the Cocopah in Arizona and the Cucapá in El Mayor is extreme. The tribe in the US was granted water rights to the Colorado River, has large agriculture tracts, and also runs a successful casino (Tisdale 1997). In 2006, tribal members on the US reservation were receiving portions of the monthly proceeds amounting to approximately US$ 700 a month. In El Mayor, there has long been hope that some of these proceeds might eventually reach them. However, a tribal member in the United States put the situation to me quite bluntly in an interview,
by explaining that any money sent to El Mayor would have to come directly out of the pockets of tribal members in Arizona. While the federal government requires that a certain portion of casino proceeds is donated to “community causes,” the Cucapá as non-US citizens are not eligible.

Therefore, the border replaced local territorial divisions and practices with a line that had few practical ties to the original inhabitants of the region. The border was derived from state bureaucratic structures, as opposed to the kinship and birthplace on which prior boundaries were based. Foucault (1995) writes of such lines when he describes the type of rationality that would provide the basis for the gradual bureaucratization of rule. He posits that this is the modern form of disciplinary rationality. Discipline is a technology of traces – the visible marks, inscriptions and imprints left. For Foucault, discipline works by division. By dividing wholes, it divides up space and movement into smaller and smaller fragments, subjecting each to intense and extensive scrutiny. It makes things that were not visible before observable and measurable by dividing constellations and assemblages into innumerable points of illumination. These actions specify surveillance and make it functional (Foucault 1995: 174).

While Foucault’s lines regulate, control and survey, however, the lines I have described in northwest 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 that trace different routes and boundaries on this landscape.

In this dissertation, one of my aims is to examine ethnographically these locally-constituted routes and boundaries as well as the conflicts and tensions they entail with the state-sponsored routes outlined above. In the pages that follow, 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 people in El Mayor. Most importantly, in this dissertation I will trace a line that no longer reaches the delta: the Colorado River.

Down the River

While maps still show the Colorado River running from the Rocky Mountains to the Sea of Cortéz, today the river no longer reaches the sea. I began my fieldwork in the lush and green rocky mountains of Colorado where the Colorado River’s headwaters rush up from under the hard earth and begin a 1,450 mile run. There, ranchers still suspiciously eye their neighbors’ water use, despite the automated system now in place to measure water allotments. 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. I followed the river to the green irrigated fields on the Cocopah reservation in Somerton, Arizona, visited the Cocopah tribal casino, and passed the signs of affluence (houses, golf-courses and irrigated fields) that I would soon learn were entirely missing in the lives of their relatives, the Cuca in Mexico. Finally, I drove across the US/Mexico border, where the river’s water trickles to a stream, the remaining drops whisked off by the Morelos Dam, the only dam on the Colorado in Mexico.

At the border, the wide empty fields of the Imperial Valley meet the tall barbed wire fence that separates sections of the US/Mexican borderlands. Beyond this fence, 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 buildings and makeshift tiendas (stores). Rows of dental clinics offer reduced prices to medical tourists. Past the frenetic traffic, the smog, the roundabouts, the urban density, the city then splays out into huge expanses of factories, with smoke billowing from a bristling of monolithic towers.

With the river no longer available as my guide, I followed route 5, a single tarred road which 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. In the winter, caravans of Americans pass on their way down to the coast, which has become a popular destination for snowbirds. Past the factories, the road winds through small

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2 Colonias are neighborhoods in Mexican municipalities that have no jurisdictional autonomy or representation. In the 1990s, colonias also became a common American English name for the slums that developed on both sides of the US-Mexican border due to the increase in low-skilled jobs created on both sides of the border as a result of the maquiladora industry (Hunton and Becker 2001). Unless specified, I do not use the term in this sense here.
colonias huddled close outside the city limits, congregated along drainage routes. The road passes into the green farmland of the Mexicali Valley 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, 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 un-vegetated zone of the Sonoran Desert. Indeed, it is a setting less appropriate for “Old West” movies than it is for movies about Kuwait or Iraq. The movie Jarhead, set during the 1991 Gulf War, was filmed on Cucapá land in 2004. In 2006, Resident Evil 3: Extinction, was also filmed on Cucapá territory to convey the stark, post-apocalyptic landscape in which the horror movie’s storyline was set.

When traveling through this desert, one sees on the left in the distance the black volcanic mountain named Cierro Prieto that juts conspicuously out of the flat desert. Cierro Prieto is the name of the volcano northwest of the Cerro Prieto Geothermal Field, the site of a large power plant complex. In Cucapá creation myths, 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, but now this site is home to a multi-million dollar electricity plant with four geothermal steam generators which light up the entire valley of Mexicali and parts of California. Don Madeleno pointed out that now no one denies the creative power that emanates from this site.

Finally, the road catches up with the cascading peaks of the Sierra Cucapá and winds around its rocky inclines. There, on the left of the Sierra, just beyond the shade of its rocky peaks, sits El Pueblo Cucapáh El Mayor, named for the holy peak of the
mountain it sits beneath. El Mayor 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 El Mayor, consists primarily of agricultural run off from the Mexicali Valley. Local residents fish in the Hardy River and eat or sell the fish they catch. In the summer, children bathe and swim in its murky shallows. Past El Mayor, the river moves on in a shallow rivulet, finally connecting with the mouth of the former Colorado River at the Sea of Cortéz. Locals call that place, where the meager Hardy and gusts of groundwater meet the sea, the zanjón, the fishing camp of the Cucapá. Since 1993, the zanjón has been part of a protected area and the site of contentious debate between the federal government and the Cucapá fishing cooperatives. I will examine this conflict in chapter two. For now, I will focus on El Mayor, to describe the site of 12 months of my research and to introduce some of the main local actors and some important themes.

El Mayor

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, 15 years

3 The spelling of the name Cucapá is alternately found in several variants: Cocopah, Cucapáh, Cucapá, Cucapá and Cocopa. James Crawford (1966) claims that Cocopah is the official spelling of the tribe that settled north of the border in the United States. This spelling was adopted by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and is found in legal documents along the Colorado River referring to both U.S and Mexican portions of this tribe. Several authors have claimed that Cucapá is the Mexican spelling (Bergman 2002). My interviews in El Mayor confirmed that this is the most commonly agreed upon form, which is why I have chosen to use this form. However, the common spelling used in American ethnographic and linguistic literature is Cocopa (Kelly 1977, Crawford 1966, 83, 89, Williams 1975). The Cucapá chief, Don Madeleno stressed that the accurate form was Kwapa Chapai (in Cucapá). Most people in El Mayor were not familiar with this form, which is why I have not adopted it here.
El Mayor is the home of the largest population of Cucapá people in Mexico with approximately 300 residents. Approximately 1,000 Cucapá tribal members live in Somerton, Arizona (in English called Cocopah), and several hundred more live in the Mexicali valley in the Mexican states of Sonora and Baja California. Before the 1980s, many of the Cucapá families that are currently located in El Mayor lived in scattered, semi-permanent homes along the banks of the Hardy River. After the El Niño 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 El Mayor as the site, largely because it is at a slightly higher elevation than other points along the river. The settlement is comprised of approximately 40 shanty-houses. Along the road, a series of more permanent buildings are located: 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 house) which now serves as junk storage.

The roads in El Mayor are made of loose, sandy gravel. Barbed wire fences roughly cordon off areas around the houses, but they are generally twisted down so that they can be stepped over, or they are spread apart to be squeezed through. Scattered throughout the backyards in El Mayor 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 out-houses that are made out of thin metal or plywood. Potable water is held in storage tanks outside the houses.

4 In the 1990s it was discovered that much of the building material donated by the government contained asbestos and most of the residents have since removed this material.
Approximately every 15 days, a truck comes from Agua Marina, a company in Mexicali, to sell potable water and re-fill these tanks.

The climate of the Colorado River Delta is characterized by extremes. In the 12 months I spent living in El Mayor, there were more than twice as many earthquakes as there were rainfalls. Temperatures between May and October are extremely high and winter nights are often very cold. In the broad Colorado River Delta basin, invisibly split by the San Andres Fault and ravaged by saline waters, there is very little evidence of the river that once fanned its delta across this land.

Research Problem

While residents of El Mayor relied on fishing as one of their primary means of subsistence for generations, in the last several decades fishing 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, ninety percent of the water in the Colorado is diverted before it reaches Mexico. The remaining ten percent that crosses the border is increasingly being directed to the burgeoning manufacturing industry in Tijuana and Mexicali. Since 1993, the Cucapá have been legally denied fishing rights in the delta under the Federal Environmental Protection Agency’s fishing ban and the creation of a biosphere reserve. While the Cucapá have continued to fish in the Sea of Cortéz at the zanjón, they are facing increasing pressure to stop from federal inspectors and the military. 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.
This conflict at the end of the Colorado River is not an isolated environmental phenomenon. It is indicative of worldwide crisis of water scarcity. A recent United Nation’s 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 bi-national water agreements (Shiva 2002; de Villiers 1999; Ward 2001; DuMars et al. 1984). The Colorado River is one of 200 river basins in the world which are currently shared by two or more sovereign states (Elhance 1999: 4). From the Rocky Mountains the river passes through seven states, two nations and, when there was enough water, it emptied into the Sea of Cortéz.

The environmental degradation of the delta is not simply the local result of the water intensive settlement of the American West. Recently the links between global warming and water scarcity have also come to public attention. While global warming more commonly evokes the specter of rising oceans submerging coastal cities, the diminished supplies of fresh water might prove a far more serious problem than slowly rising seas. In an article in the New York Times Magazine in October of 2007, Jon Gertner argued that the steady decrease in mountain snow pack (the loss of high-altitude winter snow that melts each spring) could have a catastrophic affect on the Colorado’s water supply to the American West, exacerbating current conflicts. The climatology literature on melting snow-pack supports these predictions (Barnett et al. 2004; Christensen et al. 2004; Hamlet et al. 2005).
In this dissertation, I analyze the measures taken in El Mayor to maneuver through the complex structural and political changes that residents have experienced over the last several decades as fishing, their main form of subsistence, has become both environmentally untenable and criminalized by the state. I examine the strategies that many Cucapá people employ to subsist and transform their lives under conditions of profound environmental and economic change as well as extreme power asymmetries. This dissertation examines how identity is articulated and contested through various forms of struggle. I focus on the means by which social systems of difference are produced through contestations over natural resources.

Research Trajectory

In the summer of 2005, I attended a water summit in Flagstaff, Arizona. It was an unusual event because it brought together scholars, water engineers and members of Arizona’s indigenous tribes. 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 elder and leader of Arizona’s Hopi tribe, 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 constructed” in different ways by different groups involved in the conflict. This was the relevant question upstream where I did two months of research on the river at the beginning of my fieldwork. 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 tribes, at least traditionally and often strategically, conceptualize it.\(^5\) To provide a simplified synopsis, 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 site where I would carry out the bulk of my fieldwork, however, the debate shifted onto entirely different grounds. In El Mayor, I found that people were hardly talking about water at all. Instead, the terms of crisis were around a lack of work. “There is no work in El Mayor” was a common comment among its 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.

\(^5\) This polarization is complicated on multiple levels. For example, Indian tribes such as the Gila River reservation in Arizona, have litigated - often successfully - to secure water rights and the implied authority to sell or trade those rights according to market values (Checchio and Colby 1993). During the water summit one elder from Gila River argued openly for water leasing among the tribes. It was interesting to see how his comments were dismissed in these sessions and a uniform “native” view of water as a commons was sustained over his occasional interjections.
Instead, the majority of people narrated the injustices of their own government which has placed restrictions on their fishing. Perhaps it did not seem surprising 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. Residents of El Mayor 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 which 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 dissertation explores two effects of these displacements. First, environmental marginalization often obscures and reinforces other kinds of inequalities such as gender, ethnic and class hierarchies. At the same time, environmental conflict can become the catalyst through which these inequalities become visible and contested.
Tree and boat in the former riverbed of the Colorado
Research Setting

When I first arrived in El Mayor, I had few connections among the people there or the other places where Cucapá families lived. Nonetheless, I quickly made some female friends who helped me with my Spanish over their chakira needlework. It was much more challenging to find ways of interacting with males in El Mayor. To make more contacts with men, I joined whatever work project I could find: participating in conservation talleres (workshops) and work programs on the river cutting tamarisk. Later, I realized the confusion my participation on these work projects created. When I did move in with a family in El Mayor, people assumed it was out of the same monetary desperation that led me to take these badly paying jobs in the first place. One Cucapá man, despite my explanations about my research project, asked a friend of mine why I wanted to live in El Mayor: “Is it because she can’t afford to live in Mexicali?”

After a month of driving in from Mexicali, socializing and attending meetings, I finally found a place to live in El Mayor. Ana María Martínez invited me to stay with her family after I met her at a four year-old’s birthday party. Ana is the daughter of the chief, Don Madeleno, and the mother of three children in their late teens: two twin 18-year-old daughters, one of whom was several months pregnant, and a 19-year-old son. She did not mention that her husband lived there too.

Cruz, Ana’s husband, who had a strong presence in the home (as he does in the pages that follow), was addicted to crystal methamphetamine (“cristal” 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 the first indication. When he came in the house, acting noticeably different, she would offer him food. He would refuse

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6 Chakira is the traditional style of beadwork, with shell or plastic beads, done in El Mayor.
(lack of appetite is a sure sign of use) 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. 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 cristal and was initially quite agitated by this element 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, he had slightly crossed eyes and when he was not high he spoke at a remarkable speed, so that it was difficult to know when he was speaking to me, much less what he might be saying as I was becoming accustomed to living in the Spanish language. I was also nervous about how erratic or dangerous his behavior might be.

My worries about Cruz subsided about a month after I moved into the Martínez home. He was embarrassed by his addiction and tried to hide it as much as possible, and despite his intense behavior his remarkable qualities as a person quickly became evident. He soon became one of my most valued guides and teachers, although I admit that I took him more seriously after he stopped using drugs.

It was not until January of 2006, six months after I arrived in the delta, that Cruz stopped using cristal. At the time, I was convinced that this was not a conscious decision on his part. Indeed, to me it seemed that he forgot about his drug addiction along with everything else about his life when he experienced what a Mexican doctor diagnosed as a
sudden attack of amnesia brought on by trauma. However, this interpretation of his sudden "loss of memory" was uniformly rejected by his friends and family. I will turn to this story in more detail in chapter four. After this date, Cruz appeared to stop using cristal entirely for the rest of the time I was in El Mayor.

Methodology

*When you interview my mother ask her if she doesn’t feel shame for abandoning her daughter at seven months pregnant like a damn dog.*

- Ruby

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, 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.

Arriving in Mexico in August of 2005, I stayed through June of 2006 and then returned again in November and December of 2006. In my time in El Mayor, I participated on fishing trips, government make-work programs, fishing meetings, meetings with the fishing cooperatives, 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: participating in tree planting, testing water quality, and counting birds and fish. I
volunteered too with a map-making project carried out by a bi-national 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 El Mayor, 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 in El Mayor, 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 in El Mayor. As I was much more familiar to local residents by then, the interactions were much easier.

My experiences with interviewing resonated with Briggs’ (1986) exploration of how the interviewees’ categorization of the interaction will profoundly influence what topics may be addressed and how information can be given. 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. 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 other’s and would often suggest that so-and-so might disagree on a given point. As Ruby’s comments in the epigraph of this section, and Pablo’s above indicates, the interviews also became proposed pathways through which messages could be relayed and through which interviewees asked questions of their own.

A Rivalry

2ri-val\ L rivalis meaning one having water rights to the same stream as another

~Websters 3rd International Dictionary, 1961

During the period I was conducting my research in 2005/2006, a central political division shaped the experience of living and doing research in El Mayor. The division fell along the lines of two families, or within one family, depending on one’s perspective. Don Madeleno, the Cucapá chief and his sister Doña Esperanza were distinctly alienated from each other during this time. The reasons for their alienation are various and somewhat obscure. In addition to long-standing personal conflicts between the two siblings, Doña Esperanza and Don Madeleno also had very separate projects in El Mayor that they came to feel were in competition with each other.

Don Madeleno was a highly respected leader. His immediate family was involved in the fishing conflict. His daughter, Adriana, was the president of the Cucapá fishing
cooperative in El Mayor in 2006 and one of the most politically-prominent residents. Doña Esperanza was the proprietor of the one room museum in El Mayor and a renowned artesana (artist/craftsperson). One of her daughters was the leader of a group of artesanas and another daughter was the nurse in the clinic. Doña Esperanza felt that Don Madeleno’s leadership and the division between their families meant that there was never enough support to fund the museum. When I arrived in El Mayor, the museum had no electricity and thus no lights to show the photos and displays.

A central source of tension between the two families was a land conflict over Cucapá territory. The Cucapá’s struggle for water follows in the wake of decades of struggle for the legal title to their lands. After the formation of the international border in 1853, the Cucapá who found themselves on the north side retained their lands after the border was drawn, but on the south 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 20th 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 Mexican Revolution (Gómez Estrada 1994).

After the revolution (1910-1920), Mexico became the first nation in the Americas in which an agrarian reform was systematically implemented by the state. Between the 1920s and the 1970s, millions of hectares of land were taken from the haciendas, Mexican and foreign-owned estates, and redistributed to peasants (Nugent and Joseph
The key institution through which the Mexican state implemented agrarian reform was the post-revolutionary ejido. An ejido is land that is communally run but owned by the state (Krauze 1997: 352). Under the Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934 to 1940), the Cucapá were granted an ejido in 1936 and worked and lived there on the cooperative farms owned by the government.

While the ejido system was advanced as a remedy for the social injustice of the past, ejidos were not always regarded as such by their recipients. As Nugent and Alonso (1994) describe in the case of Chihuahua, the early ejidos were regarded by peasants as state-run trophies intended to transform revolutionary peasants into supporters of the new state. They argue that their establishment bore echoes of the colonial period when the Spanish crown granted land to the colonists. Nugent and Alonso document how, for the Nampiquipan community in the 1920s, the ejido, far from offering a blueprint for progress, was instead recognized as yet another state-sponsored dispossession that would pave the way for other forms of state intervention in the production process and in the pueblo life, that was considered illegitimate.

Like other local groups who appealed to the revolutionary state to defend their rights against the claims of hacendados, the Cucapá also opposed attempts by the state to consolidate its power over the peasantry through the ejido. Thus, they ultimately rejected the ejido system. Kelly (1977) briefly documents how the system failed for the Cucapá people, citing poor direction on the part of Mexican officials and growing distrust and

7 There is a vast literature on the Mexican agrarian reform and much controversy over the ejidal system (Bartra 1985; Gledhill 1991; Hamilton 1982; Nugent and Alonso 1994; Sheridan 1988). Nugent and Joseph (1994) argue that this literature falls into two categories. They claim there is an optimistic view that agrarian reform functioned as a socially just set of brakes on the more insidious aspects of capitalist development in the countryside. The more critical view is that by co-opting popular demands and erecting an institutional structure through with the production process in agriculture was organized, the post-revolutionary state strengthened its own position at the service of capital and against peasants.
lack of interest among many Cucapá. In the 1940s, the Cucapá gradually left the ejido and worked as laborers and fishermen scattered through the delta (Gómez Estrada 1994; Kelly 1977:13). Several people in El Mayor also suggested that most of the Cucapá were bribed off of their ejido lands by Mexicans, giving away alcohol and buying at unfair prices. Currently, only a few Cucapá families live on the ejido, with Mexican families having moved into the other spots.

After years of fighting the Mexican Federal government, a fight which Don Madeleno led, in 1976 the Cucapá were finally given the rights to private ownership of their traditional land (Gómez Estrada 2000; Sanchez 2000). They were awarded 143,000 hectares (375, 500 acres), but this is land that is not irrigable or farmable. As a result of the exploitation of the river in the United States and the subsequent environmental degradation of the region these lands are all desert or salt (Bergman 2002: 147). However, because of internal division among the Cucapá, only some people were granted legal title to communal lands, Esperanza’s family included. Others, including Don Madeleno’s family, were excluded from the land titling.

One of the reasons for this exclusion is connected to the fact that Doña Esperanza, Don Madeleno’s rival, is closely associated with a group of Cucapá who do not live in El Mayor but have land rights on Cucapá territory. With the creation of ejidos in the 1930s, the local community had to appoint a *comisariado ejidal* recognized as the central authority by the government representing the community on agrarian issues. The Cucapá’s *comisario*, a woman named Constancia, lived outside of El Mayor in the colonia called La Puerta and was a political ally of Esperanza. After the 1970s, under a reformist Indianist orientation, the Mexican government organized at the federal level the
Consejo Supremo de los Pueblos Indígenas (Supreme Council of Indigenous Peoples) that was constituted by Jefes Supremos representing different indigenous communities from all over the country. These reforms re-introduced the authority figure of the “jefe tradicional” (traditional chief) who has powers overlapping those of the *comisariado* (or *comisario*) in charge of the ejido (see Garduño 2003). Among the Cucapá, the role of jefe tradicional was given to Don Madeleno.

Mario Rodríguez, a representative of the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), explained to me that the unequal distribution of land rights resulting from the 1976 titling was initially “an accident of counting,” which left some of the Cucapá population unaccounted for and that has never been corrected. Don Madeleno’s group has been fighting to re-allot land rights for years but the negotiations are still in slow progress. Mario explained that the delay was a result of a fissure between different levels of government, the *comisario*, the traditional chief and the assembly (who elects the *comisario*). The assembly was not elected through a democratic process but instead appointed and later re-grouped to include some non-Cucapá members. Mario suggested that the legal value of this title is questionable, since the land, while private, is communal and thus cannot be sold or even divided among individuals. Therefore, Mario thought that title to land was more “symbolic” than anything else.

The attitude of Esperanza’s daughter, Manuela, towards her own land rights exemplified the symbolic value that Mario referred to. Manuela occasionally brought up her land rights as if they were evidence of her superiority to the other group led by Don

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8 CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas) is the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous People. It is the federal organism in charge of coordinating, evaluating and developing programs for the implementation of indigenous rights “in conformity with article 2 of the Mexican constitution” (http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?id_seccion=89).
Madeleno. For example, one day she commented, “Madeleno’s family doesn’t even have land rights!” I asked if Thalia, Manuela’s 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 it is not just a symbolic fight over land title between the two factions. Their legal land title has allowed the other members to rent out sections of land for gravel extraction. Gravel extraction has become a lucrative business in the expanding border region, where it is used for building roads. In January 2006, it became clear that some of the land near the Laguna Salada was getting leased out to companies extracting gravel without the chief’s permission. This meant that the proceeds were being 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 in El Mayor 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. Among the youth there was, in fact, a general exasperation about the conflict. When I asked Esperanza’s 16-year-old granddaughter, if she thought there was a way to ease the tension between the two families, she said
decisively that she thought the government and NGOs should stop providing support of any kind to El Mayor. All of the fighting, from her perspective, was a result of jealousy about who was involved in what project and who was benefiting from the social support extended to the Cucapá. Many of the youth identified *envidia* (envy) as the central problem facing local residents. And for the youth, 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.

The divide between the two families was a constant source of concern for me during my fieldwork. Most local NGOs, government organizations, as well as historians and anthropologists have either worked with Don Madeleno’s family or with Doña Esperanza’s family, but not with both. An employee of one environmental NGO explained that they do not invite Doña Esperanza to participate in any of their projects because Don Madeleno has more of a following in El Mayor. They explained that, if she is involved, Madeleno will not participate and neither will his group. Others sided with Doña Esperanza due to claims of corruption in Don Madeleno’s leadership. One historian who had worked with Doña Esperanza and her family warned me that living with Don Madeleno’s family might cut me off from Doña Esperanza’s network. Sharing time and attention between the two families was anxiety-provoking and important. Ultimately, Ana’s and Cruz’ family was a good place to be positioned strategically. While María was the chief’s daughter, she was not especially involved politically in any of the major conflicts (about the museum, fishing, or land rights) and Cruz was friendly with Doña Esperanza’s daughter Manuela, who lived next door. The
Martínez family was very open to the fact that, as a researcher, I would need to talk to everyone, not just their friends and allies.

**Multiculturalism and the Current 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, resulting in a high level of cultural assimilation, government policies encouraging multiculturalism have in the last several decades begun requiring populations to identify as indigenous in order to grant them certain forms of support. In the first half of the 20th century, and largely due to the political impact of the revolution, national policies and class-based organizing in Mexico 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 mestizaje 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). Even the ideological movement of indigenismo, 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 post-independence 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 two, the shift from policies of indigenous assimilation to a program of multiculturalism in public discourses in Mexico and other Latin American countries during the 1980s and 1990s represented a significant change in the conditions under which indigenous groups articulate with the state.

The shift in indigenous policy can be understood as the result of political and ideological changes. Beginning in the 1980s, strong international pressure came to bear as various transnational social movements such 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 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). There were also internal motivations to shift to a multicultural agenda, as it allowed the state to provide favorable terms to certain indigenous groups and to reject the more radical demands of others (Hale 2002; Yashar 1998).

The shift to policies encouraging ethnic self-identification has 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 creating political parties in Bolivia and Ecuador. Successful indigenous and popular mobilizations in Bolivia in 2000 forced the government to cancel plans to allow the Bechtel Corporation to sell the country’s water to its citizens (Laurie et al. 2002). The Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994, protesting 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 (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 from outside indigenous communities. The criteria imposed vary minimally across Latin America. Article two of the Mexican constitution uses the following criteria to define indigenous people: they must be descendants of the people that 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 be fundamental (although, in practice, this last criterion is rarely emphasized).

As I discuss in chapter five, for many in El Mayor this shift in policy emphasis on preserving indigenous identities has been experienced 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 in El Mayor negotiate this contradiction by identifying with categories of indigeneity only unevenly and ambiguously, as I will show. Indigeneity and identity,
more broadly, are also authenticated and contested at the community level in complex ways that may not align with national criteria. As I show in chapter four, what constitutes "Cucapá identity" is also highly contested in El Mayor. 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.

In the chapters that follow, I examine how many Cucapá, 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 and identity. This dissertation, in other words, examines indigenous identity not as a pre-given entity but as a set of historically constituted practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning which emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle (de la Cadena and Starn 2007; Graham 2002; Gupta 1998; Li 2000; Miller 2003; Ramos 1994).

**Layout of the Dissertation**

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.

In chapter one, I explore 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 the residents of El Mayor 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 map-making project in El Mayor which 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 two, I analyze how the Cucapá fishing cooperatives’ arguments for fishing rights in the Colorado 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 through various projects and refused to support their environmental claims by imposing measures of authenticity to which the Cucapá do not fully conform.

In chapter three, I explore how residents of El Mayor maintain a minimum standard of living under the pressures of dramatic 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 narco-trafficking is seen by some people 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, the residents of El Mayor also engage in contentious debate over what constitutes Cucapá identity. In chapter four, I explore how local struggles over Cucapá identity are established and contested, especially in connection to gender relations. I focus on a particular view of gender which 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 in El Mayor and explore the way the ideology of gender that emerges from these narratives forms the basis for a wider cultural identification and symbolic resource.

In chapter five, I analyze the use of swear words by the younger generations of Cucapá speakers in El Mayor. 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 in El Mayor, indigenous identity is not located in their indigenous language but in an awareness of a shared history of the injustices of colonization and a continuing legacy of state indifference.

Throughout my fieldwork, I paid attention to the moments when the people I was interacting with identified a discourse as ideological or a political structure as oppressive. Therefore, the questions that guide this dissertation attend to these identifications. What does it mean when an environmental official states that the fishing conflict - a conflict in which rights to water and to fish on that water are legally at stake - is not about the environment but, rather, about social difference and authenticity? When a local narco-trafficker states that a set of 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 his entire village claims that this is not the result of amnesia, as a doctor diagnosed, but rather a symptom of changing gender relations?

These are the type of gestures and attitudes that 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), we achieve a vantage point from which to understand how people are experiencing their own lives and the structures through which they navigate their worlds.

I describe the most literal instantiation of this analytic move in chapter one. In the pages that follow, I show how elders push paper maps away when asked to identify places and, instead, locate places in historical legends. In doing so, they relocate the act of location in historical narrative and displace the act of location away from the paper maps brought in by NGOs, historians, and government officials. This move draws attention to the ideological aspects of map making; it points to how maps privilege literacy over orality, and the visual over the aural.
CHAPTER ONE

“Listen for When You Get There”: Topologies of Invisibility on the Colorado River

_We are here. We eat, we dance, we fish._  
_Here we are and we still live. No éramos, somos! (It’s not that we were, we are!)._

~Don Madeleno (Cucapá Chief, _jefe tradicional_)

Don Madeleno often repeated the refrain, “We’re still here.” The first time I heard this phrase I interpreted it as a triumphant declaration of survival. In this instance, Don Madeleno was narrating the history of the Cucapá people in the delta: war, conquest, disease, water scarcity, the criminalization of fishing and the rise of the narco-economy in the region. After everything his people had experienced they were still there in El Mayor carrying on with their lives.

I heard Don Madeleno use the phrase in this sense on many other occasions: in interviews, at festivals and in informal conversations. Because it was part of his personal narration I was struck when I first heard Don Madeleno use the phrase in a much more literal sense in the context of maps. Every so often I would bring Don Madeleno a map of the delta from books or archives to elicit his reactions to these representations of the land he knew so well. Every time I brought him a map we went through the same routine: he would look over the page slowly and meticulously and start pointing to all of the places it was missing. He would comment on whether or not the map showed El Mayor, the fishing grounds and the Sierra Cucapá. He would also bring up the places that were almost always missing - Las Pintas, Pozo de Coyote, and a dozen other sites important to Cucapá history. Then, Don Madeleno would irritatedly declare, while pointing at the absent places “Estamos aquí” (we are here). Once or twice he went on to emphasize his point by saying “Somos aquí” (we _are_ this plac
In this context, “we are here” took on a meaning which is central to the issues I want to explore in this chapter. What Don Madeleno meant in this instance was that while you would not know it from looking at any official map of the area, the Colorado Delta was a terrain rich with the traces of his peoples’ presence: their places, their stories, their history. In his use of “somos” aqui, he invoked an even stronger connection to place by drawing a distinction in Spanish between the two verbs for “to be:” *ser* and *estar*. Whereas *estar* is used to describe the current state of something and is almost always used to describe a location in space, *ser* is used to describe the nature and characteristics of something. By emphasizing “*somos aquí*” Don Madeleno was arguing that his people were not just occupying the delta, but that they were the delta.

This statement is not just a strategic invocation of the Cucapá people’s connection to delta, it’s also indicative of Don Madeleno’s personal experience of the changing landscape. Don Madeleno was born on February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1934, one year before the construction of the Boulder Dam, the first of the large dams on the river. His life has spanned exactly the timeframe in which the Colorado River has been siphoned off from the lower part of the delta where El Mayor is located. Since the first dam went in at Boulder (Hoover in 1935), about eighty dams and diversions have been built on the rivers of the Colorado watershed (Reisner 1993: 40). In the process, the flow of the Colorado to the delta and the Gulf was completely cut off.

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In this chapter I explore how maps, literature and media coverage collude in a representation of the Colorado River that erases the Colorado Delta and its inhabitants in Northern Mexico. I argue that the rhetoric around the construction of these dams, and in
particular the central concept of “beneficial use,” promoted a particular water logic which carries through to present day politics. While in later chapters I examine how residents of El Mayor experience the material effects of this water logic, in this chapter I examine how they experience the political and ideological erasure that results from this logic. In doing so I trace a landscape which has lain invisible in representations of the Colorado River. This is a landscape filled with the places people in El Mayor navigate on a daily basis (their homes, the river, el monte (the bush), as well as el zanjón (the fishing grounds)) as well as the places at a greater distance but still intimately connected to everyday routes in and out of El Mayor: Cierro Prieto, Colonia Carranza and el Valle de Guadalupe.

We also visit, if only in stories, places that no longer exist: colonias wiped out by floods, fishing grounds long evaporated as a result of the dams upstream, the Colorado River itself, now whisked off in canals along the border. And we visit the places that feature in legends and creation myths: where Coyote first shared water with the people, the mountain of the eagle where the spirits go after death, the mountain range that a giant carved into houses and windows. I conclude by analyzing a controversial map-making project in El Mayor which attempts to redraw the map of the Colorado Delta and the Cucapá territory. I examine the politics of this project, exploring the tension between how places are alternately located in maps and oral histories.

The Mirage on the Map: the Makings of a River Without a Delta

The idea that space is made meaningful is familiar to anthropology, which has long recognized that the experience of space is socially constructed. Recently, scholars of
land have pointed out that one of the more urgent questions concerning the politics of place making is the question of who has the power to make spaces and what is at stake in the process (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Gordillo 2004; Braun 2002). This is a particularly important consideration in the context of environmental disputes which construct places in specific ways. Constructions of place that focus on nature, regardless of whether or not this focus is in nature’s “defense” can participate in colonialist erasures of Native people from political geographies (Braun 2002). These erasures are often accomplished through powerful representations of place, which are used to legitimate specific institutional policies and practices (Carbaugh 2001; McElhinny 2006; Mühlhäusler and Peace 2006; Myerson and Ryden 1996). Maps, media coverage and educational materials on the Colorado River are a vivid example of exactly such strategic representations.

Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have emphasized that “the presumption that spaces are autonomous has enabled the power of topography to conceal successfully the topography of power” (8). Tsing (2000) has voiced a complementary concern by pointing out that the recent fascination with global flows and a rhetoric of globalization obscures the material and institutional components through which powerful and central sites are constructed (330). The dangers of both an assumption of autonomy and fluidity in spatial imaginaries is apparent in the case of the Colorado Delta. Here, a discourse of free trade, migration and movement has muted the very real friction that the border constitutes: the fact that the river barely makes it down across the border to Mexico, and that migrants are increasingly prevented from making it up across the border to the United States. Ironically, this very friction is facilitated by a parallel assumption of autonomy. The lands and people across the border are a foreign land, over and over again
represented as a blankness in maps from agencies in the United States and rarely mentioned in many of the major literary and historical works on the Colorado River.

Before exploring the places erased by powerful sites, and the geographies made invisible by the representations of global flows, we need to take a look at how those powerful sites and flows became constituted in the first place. Let’s return upstream to the Bureau of Reclamation (Boulder, Nevada) and the Cline Library’s archive on the Colorado Plateau (Flagstaff, Arizona) where I sifted through dozens of documents on the construction of the dams and the litigation over the Colorado River: water compacts, explorers’ accounts, treaties and educational as well as promotional pamphlets. The archival material I focus on here was published in the decades around the Boulder Canyon Project, which was completed in 1935 (later renamed the “Hoover Dam”). Most of these documents were produced in association with the Bureau of Reclamation, which is an agency under the US Department of the Interior. The Bureau of Reclamation oversees water resource management, specifically as it applies to the oversight and/or operation of numerous water diversion, and hydroelectric power generation projects it has built throughout the western United States since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹

¹ Established in 1902, the Bureau of Reclamation is best known for the dams, power plants, and canals it constructed in the 17 western states. These water projects led to homesteading and promoted the “economic development” of the West. Reclamation has constructed more than 600 dams and reservoirs including Hoover Dam on the Colorado River and Grand Coulee on the Columbia River. They are the largest wholesaler of water in the United States and the second largest producer of hydroelectric power (http://www.usbr.gov/main/about/). Of the multiple entries under “reclamation” in the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) the most relevant here are 2c. “The making (of land) fit for cultivation, 2d The action or process of reclaiming used or unusable objects or materials and 5. The action of claiming the return of something taken away; a claim for something.
Figure 1.1. Colorado River Basin

(Bureau of Reclamation 2007)
Because maps are the most obvious representations of land, I paid them particular attention. The two defining features of maps of the Colorado River are that they show the river running through land it no longer reaches and they almost always represent the river as the lone detail south of the border, running through a featureless and vacant landscape (see Figure 1 on page 40). The first characteristic, that these maps show the river where it no longer exists, denies the fact that the Colorado’s water is entirely appropriated for use either above the border in the US or in the Mexican border manufacturing or agricultural zone. The blankness represented south of the border, on the other hand, implies that it would not matter if the water did not reach there anyway since there is ostensibly no life in the area. Note that in Figure 1, all of the major dams, reservoirs, states and state lines are represented and that none are represented in Mexico. These features depoliticize the overuse of water upstream both by obscuring the extent of overuse as well as providing a potential justification for this water not reaching Mexico.

The consistency of these features in maps from the Boulder Dam Commission, the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Indian Affairs illustrates the extent to which the Bureau of Reclamation has defined the geography of the American West. Other agencies concerned with the distribution of water from the Colorado follow suit in their representation of the river. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published a map of Tribal Lands along the border that also showed conspicuously little detail below the border (see figure 2, on page 42 [Environmental Protection Agency 1998]). What is even more striking is to find the river represented as reaching the sea by an agency concerned with environmental degradation. The problem of trans-border ecosystem management is that Federal Environmental agencies have no jurisdiction
across international territories. However, as many environmentalists have pointed out, ecosystems do not obey borders and environmental problems, as a result, cannot be treated in national isolation (Kiy and Wirth 1998).

Figure 2. US-Mexico Border Area Tribal Lands

The material effects of these representations are that they underwrite decades of policy that effectively cut off the delta, both literally and graphically, from the rest of the river in the process of its development upstream (Fradkin 1981). As Bergman has argued (2002), since the Hoover Dam went on line on the Colorado River in 1935, the delta of the river has been a blind spot in the American imagination. This is ironic because the delta was one of the first places in North America that the Spanish explored. But it has remained the least known. While Spanish explorers came through in the mid 16th
Century, it was not until the westward expansion in the mid 19th Century that the region was settled by non-indigenous people.

The first written accounts of the Cucapá appear in the writings of early Spanish explorers and missionaries, including those of Alarcon and Diaz in 1540, Oñate in 1605, Kino in 1702, and Garces in 1776 (Alvarez de Williams 1975; Bendímez Patterson 1987). According to Kelly (1977), beyond these infrequent encounters with Europeans it was not until the establishment of a permanent American army post at Fort Yuma in 1852 that the Cucapá had significant interaction with Europeans. For the next 25 years river boats made regular trips from the mouth of the Colorado to Fort Yuma carrying supplies and several Cucapá men helped run the bats and barges (Kelly 1977: 9). River traffic came to an end after 1877 with the completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad into Yuma, Arizona and the Pacific Coast. However, the discovery of gold in California in 1849 continued western expansion as many migrants came through the area near the mouth of the Colorado River and the Grand Canyon region.

Maps are a particularly obvious case of how representations of place can be used as instruments of persuasion, and power, rather than simply as impartial tools of reference (Wood and Fels 1992). However, maps are not the only tools that experts use to represent the river in particular ways and for particular purposes. Engineers and ranchers in the United States draw on an expert discourse, colloquially identified as “waterspeak,” which represents the river in very particular ways. Waterspeak is famous along the Colorado River for its extensive and often opaque vocabulary. For example, a common unit of measurement for the river is an “acrefoot” which is 326,000 gallons (or approximately enough water to sustain a family of four for a year). Another common term is
“waterdebt” which refers to when one country or state has used more than its allotment of water (“waterdebt” is measured in “acrefeet”). There is also an immense vocabulary for different kinds of water rights such as, reserved, perfected, absolute, senior etc.

At a tribal water summit in Flagstaff, Arizona in August 2005 that brought together tribal members along the Colorado River in the United States, several people argued that waterspeak itself forms an exclusive discourse which controls access to the Colorado River. In the summit dialogue and in my private interviews with some of the attendees, it was repeatedly expressed that waterspeak constitutes a exclusive language only understandable to water engineers, lawyers and ranchers. Indeed, waterspeak is further legitimated by the legal framework through which the river is allotted, a framework known as the “law of the river” which is a massive collection of treaties, compacts and court decisions stipulating the conditions under which Colorado River water is distributed.

One of the most interesting and prevalent concepts found in the intricate vocabulary of waterspeak is the idea of “beneficial use.” Peter Culp, an environmental lawyer, argues that “beneficial use” is the unifying concept in the Law of the River (2000). According to the Bureau of Reclamation, “beneficial use” is the use of a reasonable amount of water necessary to accomplish the purpose of the appropriation, without waste. The uses that are considered beneficial according to the Colorado Compact are “water applied to domestic and agricultural uses” where domestic use “shall include the use of water for household, stock, municipal mining milling industrial and other like purposes” (quoted in Culp 2000: 14).
It is important to clarify how “waste” is used in this context. In most parts of the United States “wasting water” refers to using too much, or an unnecessary amount of water (for eg. golf courses, long showers etc.). On the Colorado River, however, “wasting water” refers to letting any drop escape human use. “Wasted water” is water not diverted out of the river and used (“total use” is another phrase often heard). Another important aspect of the concept of “beneficial use” is that an exclusive set of uses are delineated as counting as “beneficial.” Significantly, water used to maintain ecological habitats is not included in this definition and, indeed, it was not until recently that environmental groups have lobbied for environmental considerations to be stipulated with water allotments.

The core principles in the concept of “beneficial use” - “total use”, i.e. that no drop should go wasted, and “wasted” implying an implicit, exclusive set of uses that are “beneficial,” constitute an underlying logic that is reflected in the blank space we find in maps, emphasizing that water really would be wasted if it reached the barren land void of a civilization that could put that water to “beneficial use.” This logic can also be traced to the rhetoric around the construction of the very first dams on the river.

As the Colorado River flows merrily out to sea...

[In] no part of the wide world is there a place where Nature has provided so perfectly for a stupendous achievement by means of irrigation as in that place where the Colorado River flows uselessly past the international desert which Nature intended for its bride. Sometime the wedding of the waters will be celebrated, and the child of that union will be a new civilization.

—William Ellsworth Smythe (1900: 293-294)
When the preceding passage was written, the building of the great dams on the Colorado River was just beginning to be imagined but the idea that the river would be “useless” past the international border was clearly already firmly established. One of the ways the concept of “waste” was articulated in early literature on the Colorado River was through the idea that nature, left to its own devices, was inherently wasteful. For example, in “The Story of a Great Government Project for the Conquest of the Colorado River,” an information pamphlet published by the Boulder Dam Association in 1928, the Colorado River was characterized in the following way:

Today the Colorado, on the one hand, is an ever increasing flood menace and, on the other, a notorious waster of its precious cargo of water so desperately needed in that region through which it passes (Boulder Dam Association 1928).

The idea here that the river wastes its own water simply by letting it flow its course is replete throughout the literature on the dams. William Smythe, who was the chairman of the National Irrigation Congress in 1900 (quoted in the epigraph of this section), further develops the idea of nature’s wastefulness by way of an economic metaphor:

dark, deep water [flows] uselessly to the ocean past an empire that has waited for centuries to feel the thrill of its living touch. It is like a stream of golden dollars which spendthrift Nature pours into the sea (Smythe 1900: 288).

By suggesting that the river is “spendthrift,” someone who spends money extravagantly and wastefully, Smythe elaborates another important sense of “waste” by drawing on the analogy between water and money. Versions of this metaphor are still rampant in the west. A famous saying in the southwestern United States is that “in the west, water runs uphill towards money” and metaphors of water as “liquid gold” or as a “liquid asset” are strikingly naturalized among many residents of the Colorado’s watershed (see Liebert
2001 for a related analysis of German metaphors for water as money, and Strang 2004 for a case in the UK). Therefore, Smythe’s metaphor foregrounded the controversy on the river over whether water should be treated as a commodity, owned by individuals, or a commons, that communities have rights to (Reisner 1993; Shiva 2002; Worster 1992).

This passage from Smythe also emphasizes a sense of “waste” which is often elaborated directly in reference to Mexico. After the Colorado River treaty in 1944 many of the Southwestern States were resentful that 10% of the Colorado River was allotted to Mexico. The sentiment was that Washington had “given away” their water and that, furthermore, it would be wasted on Mexico. Therefore, the resentment was not simply over the fact that the river’s water would flow past the region that would so benefit from its eventual irrigation that it was considered “wasted,” but it was also the fact that it flowed into Mexico. Here Mexico is not just represented as a “foreign country” but also one whose population was, and is to this day, racialized as lazy and incompetent (see Hill 1998, and Chavez 2001, for other examples of how these stereotypes have been mobilized).

In 1949, as California and Arizona were feuding over water allotments, Western Construction News printed an article entitled “The Colorado is Flowing Merrily out to the sea, while Arizona and California play tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee.” The article expressed outrage at the negligence of these two states for becoming caught in a cycle of constant combat with each other. The authors also urged that in the “United States, threatened by an unfriendly world...harmony and unity are essential” (Server 1949: 2). The implication here was that the internal feuding of the states’ left the water resources vulnerable to “unfriendly” usurpation by Mexico.
It is noteworthy that “flowing out to sea” was how the water was imagined once it got to Mexico (instead of being used for agriculture, fishing etc). Furthermore, the idea that the river would carry on in its wastefulness “merrily” implies a character of ignorance which was often emphasized in portrayals of the river as inept and clueless in the early literature on the dams. In this rendition it was up to “man” (henceforth without quotations) to put nature to some use. The trope of man as an improver of wasteful nature is very frequent in the original propaganda for the construction of the major dams on the Colorado River. In David Woodbury’s “The Colorado Conquest” he establishes this way of viewing the dams on the river by the following set of comparisons:

When nature is disclosed at some magnificent task it is the habit of imaginative men to interfere and show her how to do the job a better way. Sometimes this impulse converts mountains into statues, at others it suggests a concrete lip to prevent Niagara falls from wearing itself away. On rare occasions such dreams succeed and nature is made an ally and a friend (Woodbury 1941: 5).

In this passage, we find again the image of nature as self-destructive without the intervention of man. Niagara Falls would “wear itself” away with out the human prosthetic of the lip and the Colorado River would waste itself all the way to the sea without the dams to hold it back.

The reference to nature as “her,” in the passage above, points to the ambivalently gendered dimension of this discourse on the river. When “nature” is represented as an abstraction in these texts it is often distinctly feminized (docile, merry, inept). This stands in contrast to another strain of this discourse which emphasizes the vicious, masculine, character of the river and in turn glorifies the magnitude of man’s success in its conquest (see Ortner 1974). This was most bluntly put in a promotional publication for the Boulder Canyon Project produced by the Colorado River Commission of the State of
California. This pamphlet explained that “The boulder canyon dam is being planned to command the meanest, most savage, wickedest river in the world” (2). Particularly in the planning for the Boulder Canyon Dam (later renamed the “Hoover”), which was the first major dam on the river, there are countless references to the Colorado River as a “national menace.” In an account of the Spanish Captain Hernando de Alarcon’s first voyage up the waters of the Gulf of California in 1540, the Bureau of Reclamation declared that “since that distant day when Alarcon first gazed upon the Colorado, this untamed river has been the natural enemy of man” (Bureau of Reclamation 1920: 5).

In some cases the “vicious” character of the river is endowed with further agency through implications that, beyond the unintentional havoc of nature, the river had malicious intentions. For example, Herbert Corey (1923), writing on behalf of the Boulder Dam Commission, described this maliciousness in relation to the plight of riverside inhabitants before the construction of the major dams as follows:

The frightened dwellers in the flat lands build levees frantically. Little, thin, weak levees of soft dirt, heaped up like mud pies. The river has accepted this restraint for a year or so, chuckling to itself (Corey 1923: 2).

The image of the river chuckling (or smiling) to itself while planning to wreak its havoc on unsuspecting river dwellers, clearly invoked in Corey’s account above, is another common image in the promotional literature for the dams. Woodbury (1941) describes how,

Fifteen generations of men and women were those others, who, without knowledge or resources, would not give up the fight. With high courage and endless patience they returned again and again and for four hundred years repeated their heartbreaking attempts to live by this vicious river which smiled until men trusted it and then turned and destroyed them (Woodbury 1941: 5).
The intentionally destructive nature of the river was often underscored in propaganda for the Boulder Dam through reference to its inherently corrupt moral character, often drawn in parallel to the “dirtiness” of the silt filled waters. In the same article quoted above, commissioned by the Boulder Dam Commission and “desirous of furnishing authentic information regarding this project” Herbert Corey elaborated on the moral inferiority of the river by claiming that,

It is a dirty river morally as well as physically. It seems to have the malign intelligence of a rogue elephant. Other rivers overflow their banks of course. But they have some sense of decency. The Colorado has none (Corey 1923: 2).

The specter of imperiled lives and property in the face of the malicious force of the river, which is implied in this passage, was also invoked in “The menace of the Colorado” written by Mulford Windsor 30 some years after the construction of the Hoover (1935) and only several years after the Glen Canyon Dam (1964). Windsor explains that the dams represent “the heart of humanity responding to a just call for succor. The safety of women and children is threatened: homes and towns and cities are in the path of destruction; an agricultural empire faces extinction” (Windsor 1969: 2). With the river representing a force as destructive and malevolent as this, the conquest of man over the river carried particular dramatic and heroic appeal. This heroism is aptly captured in Woodbury’s account.

For a hundred and fifty thousand centuries the Colorado River has been steadily cutting a gash in the American continent, splitting its way to the sea through mountain and desert and plain. Not even the granite backbone of the earth itself has been able to interrupt this river’s downward progress for so much as a single hour...Now, suddenly, the relentless action has halted. The whole great span of the river’s geological history has reached a dead end. In five little years the minute hand of man has reached into that open gash and stoppered it with a dam (Woodbury 1941: 3).
Here, again, we find the magnitude of the manly accomplishment of the dams highlighted. The reference to the river as a "national menace" also points to the national significance of the project of building the Boulder Dam. In addition to the frequent reference to the river as a "national" menace in the literature in support of the Boulder Dam Project there was also a common rhetorical tactic which compared the dam to other national monuments.

Illustration from Boulder Dam: a Book of Comparisons (Bureau of Reclamation 1937)
Herbert Corey's comparison is particularly evocative:

By comparison with the dam - the enormous stupendous cyclopean dam which is being planned by the United States Reclamation Service for the Boulder Canyon of the Colorado River - the pyramid of Cheops is a rockpile in the desert. The Panama canal shrinks. The Suez Canal is a mere trickle of water. The Assuan dam, which waters part of lower Egypt, is little more than a shovel and wheelbarrow affair. The Washington monument is a milepost. The Boulder Dam is for tomorrow. I am breathless. - (Corey 1923: 1)

These kinds of comparisons became part of the official rhetoric of the dams. Indeed, in 1937, the Bureau of Reclamation published "Boulder Dam: a Book of Comparisons," a picture book which compared the Boulder Dam with other national monuments around the world. Among other examples the book boasted that "two earth and rock replicas of the largest pyramid in Egypt could be built with all the material excavated to anchor the sides of the base of the Boulder dam" (see illustration on page 51).

The nationalism associated with the Hoover Dam can be attributed to the era of the Great Depression in which it was constructed. The Hoover was built under extreme temperatures, perilous conditions and by laborers who were paid at minimal wages. Families moved from far away for the work the dam offered, sleeping in barracks built against the cliffs up-stream from the site. The Hoover Dam was the pinnacle of an aggressive dam-building philosophy to which America ascribed during the late 1800s and early 1900s. In the early 20th century when dams were built mostly to power the mills of the Industrial Revolution, they were also considered symbols of power, innovation, and technical progress.

In this context, the Hoover Dam is an example of what David Nye (1994) has termed the "technological sublime." Nye argues that from the very beginning of
American history technology was referred to as a way of establishing American moral
and political superiority in the world. As Nye writes:

The sublime was inseparable from a peculiar double action of the
imagination by which the land was appropriated as a natural symbol of the
nation while, at the same time, it was being transformed into a man-made
landscape . . . The sublimity lay in realizing that man had directly
‘subjugated’ matter, and this realization was a collective experience (1994:
37).

By Nye’s account, the Hoover Dam can be understood as promoting a sense of
nationalism and initiating a sense of popular identification with the state by subjugating
the river in a collective enterprise.

The dam is a particularly spectacular example alongside those canals, railroads,
bridges, dams, skyscrapers and factories which were symbols of America’s modernity
and grandeur (see Barker [2005], for a similar case of techno-nationalism in the
Indonesian context). The sheer architectural garishness of these dams was a point of pride
for exactly this reason. In my tours of the Hoover and Glen Canyon Dam the guides of
both recited impressive figures contextualizing just how much concrete the construction
of the dams required. I learned, for instance, that there is enough concrete in the Hoover
Dam to pave a two-lane highway from San Francisco to New York and enough in the
Glen Canyon Dam to build a four-lane highway stretching from Phoenix, Arizona to
Chicago, Illinois.

Finally, the logical outcome of the national project to conquer the menace of the
Colorado was to tame the river. In Woodbury’s description of the river post conquest:

The river is docile now and does only what it is told to do. Its mighty
strength no longer consumes and destroys; it builds. It has turned a broad
wasteland of sand and sage into a garden; it is lighting and watering a new
civilization (Woodbury 1941: 3).
The world's biggest flag (255 x 505 ft) hoisted in celebration of the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay

(Photo courtesy of the Bureau of Reclamation, Department of the Interior)
The general metaphor here is that the havoc of the river and its destructive character is transformed by man into a useful and productive force to strengthen the economy. However, a more specific metaphor about citizenship also emerges in the context of the nationalistic discourse around the dam. For example in 1923, Corey wrote that “the boulder dam will be but the cutting edge of the plan which is ultimately to change the Colorado River from an outlaw into a hard-working member of a riverine society” (Corey 1923: 7). Therefore, the dam is more than a national monument, it is also the disciplining force that turns the river into a good citizen of the nation.

An examination of the various strains of this discourse reveals several unifying tropes. First the river, in its natural state, is so unwieldy and inept that it cannot do its own job - it is wasteful. The fierce, savage, conniving river must be tamed by man. The conquest of the Colorado River involves capturing the river, harnessing it and teaching it how to do its job a better way. When the river is conquered it is finally transformed from a morally corrupt savage outlaw, with no decency, into a hard-working citizen.

**The Savagery of the Colorado**

*Reclamation*

2. b. The action of reclaiming from barbarism.


After pulling together the various themes of this discourse, the parallel between the conquest of the river and the conquest of the American Indian is striking. All of the connotations of the word “savage” as it was used in the discourse of Native American conquest are apparent in the representations of the Colorado River: uncultivated, barbaric,
offensive, fierce and uncivilized (McGee 1901; Powell 1888). The “benevolent” aim of
the conquest of the river, like the conquest of the American Indian, was also to civilize,
tame, teach better manners and ultimately turn it into a productive citizen of the nation.

Therefore, one way of interpreting this discourse is by seeing the conquest of the
river as a metaphor for prior conquest. The river was as wild as the natives that lived on
its banks (see Gordillo and Leguizamón [2002], for a similar metaphor in the case of the
Pilcomayo River and the Toba Indians in Argentina/Paraguay). Captain Richard Pratt,
one of the founders of the American Indian residential school system, invokes this
metaphor in his famous phrase, “Kill the Indian, and Save the Man” (Bess 2000). This
phrase draws attention to the parallel in rhetoric on conquering the river and indigenous
people. While Pratt was speaking on the education of Native Americans, the idea that
“civilizing” the “savages” involved taming them, and eradicating something essential
about their character, was central. For both the Indians and the river, taming their wild
ways was crucial to teaching them to be productive citizens of the nation.

The Indians, like the river, are what stood in the way of civilization. In Roy
Harvey Pearce’s (1953) examination of the belief that the American Indian was an
exemplar of savagism, the opponent of civilization and civilized man and specifically of
the European settler in North America (particularly between 1609 to 1851), he explains
that,

Our civilization, in subduing the Indian, killed its own creature, the
savage…it has not been able entirely to kill the Indian, but having subdued
him, no longer needs or cares to. Still, it might be that there will always
be somebody who needs to be subdued…savages standing in the way of
civilization (Harvey Pearce 1953: 243-244).
Pearce suggests that civilization always requires its semiotic foil, in this case savagery, in order to establish itself. Native Americans have represented both a physical obstacle and a moral impediment to complete conquest and control of the continent. In the arid land of the American Southwest, the river also came to represent that which civilization would overcome. As Nye suggested in the quotation above, to the European settlers, the river represented the “subjugated matter” in the same way that the Indians represented the force to be subdued in order for modern civilization to be realized.

By tracing the notion of “beneficial use” back to some of the seminal thoughts on the river we have followed this notion through to an implicit metaphor that relates the conquest of the river to the conquest of the native tribes that populated its banks. But the concept of “beneficial use” also relates more directly to the relationship of the tribes in the west to the Colorado River because it has been a central conceptual device in limiting the water rights of the Native tribes that historically inhabited the watershed.

The fact that this parallel between the savagery of the river and the savagery of the Native Americans that lived on its banks is so clear in this literature makes it all the more conspicuous that the discourses on the river rarely give mention to the prior inhabitants of the rivers banks who had managed to live by the savage, destructive, havoc of the river. The Cucapá, for instance, moved across the delta, fished and farmed according to the flooding of the river for centuries before the building of the dams on the Colorado River (Columbi 2008). But after the compacts and the “Law of the River” was established, their access to the river was severely limited.
The principal of “first in time, first in right” which underwrites the seniority of water rights on the river should theoretically have resulted in the tribes having the most senior water rights to the Colorado because they had been there the longest. But the legal allocations of water under the 1922 compact constituted only “paper rights,” or water allocations that exist only on paper, they are not backed by any real water access to the tribes until it was proved that these allocations could be put to “beneficial use.” This severely limited the extent to which tribes could access their water because it implemented a set of conditions under which the water could be used. In cases where there wasn’t a sufficient infrastructure in place to put the water to “beneficial use,” tribes would not have “wet” water rights. Holders of “paper rights” (also referred to as “reserved” or “conditional” rights) are also required to prove “due diligence,” which means being able to demonstrate to the water court that they are making efforts toward constructing the facilities (e.g., ditch, reservoir, etc.) to apply the water right within a reasonable time.

In 1963 Supreme Court decision Arizona v. California, along with determining the Colorado River rights of Arizona, Nevada and California, also quantified federal reserved rights of the five Indian reservations along the lower Colorado River: Chemehuevi, Cocopah, Colorado River, Fort Mohave and Quechan (Fort Yuma). Therefore, while five native reservations in the United States were granted “reserved rights” of approximately 900,000 af of water in total (Checchio and Colby 1993), many Native tribes in the United States, including the Walapai and Havasupai in Arizona, were
not granted rights to the river. None of the tribes in Mexico were granted rights to the 10% of the Colorado River allotted to the Mexican Federal government.

The Second River

The results of the conquest of the river, the taming and ordering of its flows, was that every single drop of the river was eventually allocated and controlled. The Colorado River now boasts the superlative of being the most litigated river in the world. The Law of the River has produced a virtual river and it is this second river that determines access to the Colorado River. Commenting on this abstraction Bergman writes,

It is a separate river, a textual river, a river of words that stretches back over a century in time. First we created a language that defined and controlled the river, and then that language transformed the river into a simulacrum of itself, a vast plumbing system (Bergman 2002: 21).

In this way, the Law of the River provides one particularly sinister example of what anthropologists have called "second nature" to refer to the ensemble of social institutions which regulate the exchange of commodities, including the nature(s) produced by humans (Escobar 1999; McDermott 2005).

The material effects of this assemblage on the Colorado water shed, and especially the delta, have been dramatic. For millions of years the delta received the entire flow from the river. Before the dams the delta consisted of more than 2 million acres of wetlands where the river flowed toward the Sea of Cortéz. The delta was the nexus of a complex ecological web that provided subsistence for the residents of the

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In the years since the 1963 court decision, native Tribes on the river have continued to increase their presence with regard to the Colorado River. At this time 10 tribes have claimed or "reserved" water rights including: the Chemehuevi Indian Tribe; the Cocopah Indian Tribe, the Colorado River Indian Tribe, the Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, the Jicarilla Apache Tribe, the Navajo Nation, the Northern Ute Tribe, the Quechan Indian Tribe of the Fort Yuma Reservation, the Southern Ute Indian Tribe and the Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribe.
region and habitat for wildlife and marine fisheries in the Gulf. It also formed a critical
link in the Pacific Flyway for birds flying north from Central America. Now, as a result
of the exploitation of the river in the United States, the Colorado River has one of the
highest rates of species extinction and endangerment on the continent (Bergman 2002:
29). In fact, the joke along the river is that there are only two species on the rivers’ entire
watershed that are not endangered: engineers and lawyers (Bergman 2002: 163).

Therefore, it is evident that the concept of “beneficial use,” as it is woven through
these archival materials, has allowed for certain discursive and material occlusions. The
principal things that get erased are indigenous people and the environment. This is
partially accomplished by the way the idea of beneficial use is taken up in certain
representations of the environment: the river, represented as a malicious savage, and the
delta, represented as a barren land. This case provides an example of how verbal and
graphic descriptions of land and place vary according to peoples’ position in a political
dispute (Carbaugh 1996; McElhinny 2006) and descriptions of place also vary according
to their location in prior political geographies. The delta also provides an example of
how places are differently constructed according to their relationship to other sites.

Gordillo (2004) has argued that places are always produced in tension with other
geographies (3). Indeed, the way the Colorado Delta was imagined in early 20th century
representations can be seen in revealing contrast to representations of another site on the
Colorado River several hundred miles up stream. At the same time that the Colorado
Delta was being erased from the American imagination, the Grand Canyon was being
hailed as a national icon.
In *How the Canyon became Grand* Stephen Pyne (1999) describes how the Grand Canyon was found, then disappeared from Western archives for another 250 years. Pyne shows how geologists helped construct the Grand Canyon as a monument, much like the Hoover Dam, to challenge built monuments in Europe. Unlike the Hoover Dam, however, the Grand Canyon, which already existed in the physical environment, was constructed through ideas, words, images and experiences. Therefore, instead of tracing a geological history of the canyon through faults, rivers, and mass wasting, Pyne examines another set of processes: “geopolitical upheavals and the swell of empire, the flow of art, literature, science, and philosophy, the chisel of mind against matter” (xxi). Pyne shows how these were the processes that determined the shape of Canyon’s meaning and distinguished the Canyon from among hundreds of other competing landscapes.

The Grand Canyon was one of the earliest of what became North America’s “natural wonders” to be visited (along with Yellowstone, Yosemite, etc) when Spanish conquistadors came to the south Rim in 1540. Furthermore, the Colorado was mapped long before the Lawrence, Columbia and Mississippi. The Colorado River appeared on European maps by the mid 16th century, dominating North America on the Gastald map of 1546. But interestingly, as Pyne points out, there is “no indication of a great orroyo along the river’s inland channel” (1999: 6). Pyne argues, therefore, that while the Canyon was one of the first natural wonders to be visited and mapped, it was also one of the last of the wonders to be celebrated (4). According to Pyne, the Grand Canyon was not so much revealed as created.

More than once the Canyon was missed entirely or seen and dismissed. Then, with the suddenness of a summer storm, American society in the mid-nineteenth century mustered the capacity and the will to match its
discovered opportunity and transformed land into place and place into symbol (Pyne 1999: xiii).

Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century the canyon was transformed from a scene “as alien to western civilization as the plains of Mars or the craters of Mercury” to an “exemplar of geology, an epitome of historicism, a talisman of landscape art, and an icon of American nationalism” (Pyne 1999: 38). As a final testament to its transformation, in 1903 President Roosevelt took the train on the newly constructed railroad along the rim and said it was one of the “great sites every American should see.” In roughly 40 years (1869 – 1882) the canyon had become “Grand” (Pyne 1999: 38). Interestingly, the Grand Canyon and the Hoover Dam are both sometimes referred to as the 8th wonder of the world, in comparison to the Seven Wonders of the World, the widely-known list of seven remarkable constructions of classical antiquity.

The monumental importance that the Grand Canyon came to represent in the American landscape came to public attention in the 1950s and 1960s when the Canyon was named as the site of the last of the great dam projects on the Colorado. In 1968, public opposition defeated proposals to build Marble and Bridge Canyon dams, which would have inundated much of the Grand Canyon between the Hoover and Glen Canyon dams. David Brower, a champion of the early environmental movement in the United States, and the Sierra Club mounted a huge national campaign against the Grand Canyon Dams. One of the most memorable moments of this campaign was when David Brower took out a full-page ad in the New York Times, in June 1966, that asked, “Should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?” The major public outcry that ensued succeeded in stopping the construction of the dams.
Meanwhile, the delta of the river lay relatively forgotten during the construction of all the major dams on the Colorado. Because there was very little consultation with Mexico on the construction of the dams, the archival record in the United States only ever mentions the delta in passing. And, not surprisingly, there is no parallel to the promotional and educational literature examined here in archival records in Mexico.

Today, the delta covers less than one tenth of its original area, expanding across 150,000 acres south of Mexicali, and north of the Gulf of California. Much of what comprised the delta's upper reaches has been converted to irrigated farmland, while the formerly vegetated lower reaches of the delta, where El Mayor is located, are now mud or salt flats.

It has only been within the last eight years that an environmental movement in the delta has started protesting the damage done by water scarcity. Both the US and Mexican governments have been sued, and are still facing litigation over these suits. The Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity, along with other US national environmental and animal welfare organizations including the Sonora Institute filed suit on June 28, 2000, in the U.S District Court for the District of Columbia. Also among the plaintiffs were four environmental groups in Mexico, including the Asociación Ecológica de Usuarios del Río Hardy y Colorado (AEURHYC - Ecological Association of Users of the Hardy and Colorado Rivers). The lawsuit demanded that the Bureau of Reclamation consult with the US Fish and Wildlife Services on the status of wildlife in Mexico’s delta and the effects of river management on those species (Bergman 2002). The plaintiffs argued that the Endangered Species Act had been violated with respect to protected species in the Colorado River Delta. In 2001, the Sustainable Water Project
Tour, organized by Living Rivers (an environmental group in the United States), brought the issue of the delta to the basin’s seven states with a rally cry, “One Percent for the Delta!” More than 130 groups representing twelve million people from the United States and Mexico joined the campaign. Despite the publicity this project gained the delta, in March 2003, a federal court finally rejected the claims of the lawsuit filed in 2000, finding that under the terms of the Treaty of 1944 and the Law of the River, the Department of the Interior has no discretion to release additional water to Mexico.

As I examine in detail in chapter two, while the environmental movement in the delta has made the ecology of the region more visible, it has erased indigenous populations in its own ways by consistently portraying the Cucapá in El Mayor as one more endangered species needing to be defended. The human geography of the delta, the places navigated on a daily basis and the significance of these places for local residents, was therefore, a topic I was particularly interested in pursuing when I reached the Colorado Delta to begin my ethnographic fieldwork.

“Listen for when you get there”: redrawing the map of the Colorado Delta

NGO worker (at a map-making meeting): “What is the most important place on Cucapá land?”
Pepé (raises his hand with a wry smile): Mi casa

After conducting archival research upstream on the river, compiling maps and documents and attending meetings at water summits and the Bureau of Reclamation, I finally arrived in the delta of the river, in El Mayor, with a set of questions. What is the alternate landscape that residents of the delta know? How do they experience the material effects of the discursive erasures accomplished from a perspective upstream? I quickly
came to learn that in El Mayor, people don’t see their landscape as a dead, or featureless, land at the base of the River. Instead, it is a land filled with places that tell a history of the Cucapá people – places that cannot be found on any map drawn up by the Bureau of Reclamation. These were the places that I wanted to learn about and document.

My principal method for approaching these questions was to bring people maps, as I had done with Don Madeleno, and ask them about the places that were not represented on them. To my surprise, however, unlike Don Madeleno, the majority of elders I went to with my maps refused to engage with them at all. Esperanza, a 74-year-old woman with whom I was particularly close, was especially uncomfortable with my solicitations for her to identify places on the maps. One day I brought her a map of the Delta and asked her to show me where the mountain range she called “Las Pintas” was located. It was a place she had described already on several occasions. However, when I unfolded the map of the delta and asked her to point to Las Pintas she refused to even look at the map. She gently pushed it away, looked out past the road south to the desert, and launched into the following story.

There was a giant once named mat-kakáp. Every day the giant would traverse the land of the delta. He started at Cierro Prieto (the site of the creation myth where Sipa and Komat emerged from the water), then he walked around the Laguna Salada (an old fishing grounds now completely dry), Tres Pozos and all the way up to the north to the Canyon of Guadalupe. After that, he would pass up around what is now Yuma, Arizona going around crossing the high desert and the Colorado River, then down below the Sierra Cucapá, south to Las Pintas, repeating this same journey every day.

Every day he would pass a Cucapá child playing below Las Pintas, and he would watch her. He kept passing and carried a little stick with him with a ball on the end and he would hit the mountains with it as he went. In one of these journeys he kidnapped the Cucapá child and hid her in the canyon of Guadalupe. Years passed in which the giant wandered the Colorado
Delta collecting food for the child. And as he wandered he continued to hit the mountains with his stick.

That’s how the mountains look the way they do, shaped like houses with windows. Have you seen this in the morning when the light comes in? This is how Las Pintas were made. This is how he made the doors, the windows, las ramadas (shelters). You see how beautiful they look in la mañanita (early morning) as the sun rises and enters. The giant, yes, mat-kakap, that means “he who cuts the earth,” like an engineer that cuts the earth.

And the child stayed with him and grew older and then the child became fat as the giant continued dando vueltas. Every day he traveled his route around la sierra (the mountains). And then the giant died, he was lost that way (se perdió así). But the parents searched for the child and finally found her in the cave ready to give birth. They brought her back to where Pascuala (Esperanza’s cousin) lived, near El Mayor, and they did a ceremony to help her give birth. She gave birth to twins who became little giants. As they got older the first giant did the father’s journey, around his route through the delta everyday until he got lost and died. Then the second child did the father’s journey until he also got lost and died. And that’s where the story ends.

Esperanza went on to describe how she had told one of her grandchildren this story and he didn’t believe her. “Then one day we were fishing in the Laguna Salada...and I said look there at the mountains. Look at how they are my child, like I told you. And se quedó clavado en el cerro” (his eyes locked on the mountain).

Felix Coto, an elder from the Cocopah reserve in Somerton, suggested that the story represented a vulnerability in the face of the power of the delta’s landscape. He said that it was the environment that killed the giant and the twins. The giant who helped shape the mountains was “lost” to them in the end. By Felix Coto’s interpretation this legend foreshadowed the current socio-economic situation in El Mayor, where a Delta that people like Don Madeleno feel connected to in an essential manner now has its residents entirely at its mercy.
Coto’s interpretation struck me as particularly interesting in relation to the comment that Esperanza made in her performance of this story about how the giant “cut the earth like an engineer.” On first hearing, this analogy it struck me as particularly opaque as it was unclear to me why Esperanza would associated engineers with “cutting the earth.” However, Coto’s interpretation of the story reminded me that in El Mayor engineers are associated, more than anything else, with the large dam constructions up river in the United States. Like the giants in the story, engineers in the United States have remade the delta in ways that have held its residents captive, like the kidnapped child, to the dramatic changes of the landscape.

What is particularly interesting about this story for our purposes here, however, is what Esperanza was doing with her story, rather than what she may have been relaying with it (Schegloff 1997; Sidnell 2000). It is noteworthy, for example, that Esperanza’s performance of the story itself unfolded in the context of the paper map I brought to her. Esperanza refused to locate Las Pintas on the map; instead she located it in a story and in a description of the places she knew I was already familiar with. She narrated the physical landscape in order to provide direction and context for the location, instead of tracing it on the paper. I found myself in similar situations with other elders from El Mayor when I attempted to get them to locate places on maps. They would motion the map away (or ignore it all together), look out into the desert and launch into a story about the place that I asked about.

One of the first days I brought a map to Barbarita, a Cucapá elder who lived with her son not far from El Mayor, I asked her to show me where Hutpa Niuaha was, a place Barbarita had already told me many stories about. She had fished in Hutpa Niuaha with
her husband, when he was still alive, and with her sister. She was tremendously nostalgic about this place. However, like Esperanza, Barbarita ignored the map and instead told a story about how one day coyote went wandering in the desert.

He was wandering below Wishpa (the mountain where Cucapá souls go after death), in the desert out past Las Pintas and eventually he became very thirsty under the hot sun. And so it was to his great delight that he happened upon a beautiful spring in the middle of the desert. The water was cold and fresh and clear. It was “better than the water that comes from the *garrafón*” (drinking water bought from trucks). Then Coyote decided to share the water with the Cucapá people. He took them to the spring.

Barbarita explained that, that is why they call the spring *Hutpa Niuaha*, glossed as *Agua del Coyote* (Coyote’s water). She specified here that “It’s not *Pozo de Agua* (spring of water), as the Mexicans say.” Instead they use the name that gives credit to the original discoverer who showed the spring to the people in El Mayor. The fact that Coyote shared the water with the people was a significant element of this story. Coyote is an enduring figure often featured in Native American oral traditions (Bunte 1980, 2002; Bright 1993; Malotki and Lomatuway’ma 1985). Coyote is often portrayed as a trickster, a wanderer and a survivor (Carroll 1981; Levi-Strauss 1963; McDermott 1994). In some appearance, as in Barbarita’s story, Coyote also takes on the role of hero (Segal 2000). Don Madeleno added on another occasion after recounting the same story, “I don’t ever kill the Coyote, even if one comes prowling near my house.”

The literature on language and place is useful in delineating the ways in which understandings of the Colorado River delta are locally articulated in these examples (Basso 1996; Bender and Winer 2001; Frake 1996a, 1996b; Feld 1990; Sidnell 1997). Basso’s *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996) is particularly relevant to the interactions I describe here. Basso analyzes Western Apache place names from the greater Cibecue
region in a community quite close to the Cucapá in Northern Arizona. He demonstrates how places linked to traditional stories about historical events are used to illuminate the consequences of immoral conduct. In contrast to the view of proper names as having meaning solely in their capacity to refer, Basso argues that the use of place names in interaction has particular values and uses (76). Apache constructions of place reach deeply into other cultural spheres, including conceptions of wisdom, notions of morality, politeness and tact in forms of spoken discourse and certain conventional ways of imagining and interpreting Apache tribal past.

The use of place names that Basso describes is similar to the case I explore here because it shows how deeply contextualized places and place names are within wider systems of local meaning as well as culturally specific communicative routines. Basso shows that place names are not simply labels for physical locations but also deeply embedded in systems of cross-generational communication which underscore conceptions of morality and history. As is true of historical discourse and legends more generally, history is closely associated with a detailed system of place names that is known, by and large only to the residents of this community (Briggs 1988). The place-names Basso describes, which are compact sentences such as “Widows Pause For Breath” and “Men Stand Above Here And There,” condense the moral message of the associated narrative and focus this lesson on a unique location.

The stories linked to places that Basso analyzes are different from the set I examine here in the emergent quality of the performance - the way in which the elders display the available communicative resources for an audience and within a particular context (Bauman 1977; Romero et al. 1990). In the cases I describe the emergent quality
of the performance results from my bringing a map and asking for a site to be located on it. The resulting dislocation of the performance from the community or context in which these stories would otherwise be told limits a full analysis of how these stories might be performed in other contexts and for audiences other than myself. However, the set of performances I witnessed through these interactions is revealing in other ways. The communicative routines that emerged provide a telling set of examples of how paper maps locate places in ways that are not always commensurable with other ways of understanding place.

Briggs (1986) explores the methodological and other problems that occur when interviewers non-reflexively impose their own communicative norms on speakers whose communicative expectations stem from other traditions. By introducing these two-dimensional maps as modes for eliciting place names I was doing just that - assuming that a shared communicative routine would emerge with the elders in the way that it had with Don Madeleno. Fortunately, Esperanza’s redirection of the communicative event allowed for her own “communicative routines to work their way into the interview situation” (Briggs 1986: 28).

I began to better understand these communicative routines, and the discomfort I encountered around paper maps, when an NGO conducting a participatory map-making project of the delta began working in El Mayor. The project “Mapeo Comunitario” was meant to design and implement techniques for community mapping, to “promote conservation, understanding and respect” for the indigenous lands of the Sonoran Desert (Sonoran Institute 2006). The initiative followed in a recent trend of community mapping which attempts to use “community” created maps as political and development tools.
(Chapin et al. 2005; Chase Smith et al. 2003; Herlihy and Knapp 2003). The technique has been influenced by what Nancy Peluso (1995) has termed “counter mapping” in the Indonesian context and is often hailed as a way to encourage recognition of political and natural boundaries drawn before conquest and not represented on conventional maps.

As a result of my interest in place making I was enthusiastic about this project and volunteered on every level of its initial planning. The project seemed to have particular political potential for El Mayor because of the ongoing struggle over the fishing grounds at the mouth of the river. Whether these grounds were actually “traditional” was commonly disputed in fishing meetings with government officials. Part of the problem with the Cucapá’s legal claims to the fishing area was that the Cucapá didn’t have the kind of documentation nor expert knowledge that would establish their long-term occupation of the area. There have been other cases when indigenous land claims have been legitimized by community constructed maps (Chapin et al. 2005). While the NGO conducting the project hesitated to admit the potential political uses, and instead focused on the cultural recovery potential, in the context of the charged fishing season in 2006 the advantages of making such a map seemed clear both to myself and members of the fishing cooperative. A map would provide additional documentation on which to base legal claim to the contested fishing grounds.

For these reasons I was disappointed when many of the elders did not want to participate after attending the first meeting for the map-making project. When I asked Esperanza why she was not interested in going to more meetings, she explained that she thought the project was a good idea but she did not want to be involved. One of her reasons for this was that she was illiterate. She explained that she found the power point
presentations and the maps displayed as central foci at these meetings to be very exclusive. She felt embarrassed by these kinds of representations because she could not follow them the way the younger people could.

The contrast between the ways the mapping project was hoping to “map” traditional land and the way these locations were identified by Esperanza reveals some of the distinctly local ways that the delta’s landscape is invoked in El Mayor. Basso quotes one of his informants commenting that while “white men need paper maps, we have maps in our minds” (1996: 43). While Esperanza had cultivated less of a sense of authority in opposition to the paper and power point which saturated the map making meetings, her dismissal of the paper map in exchange for a beautifully rendered aural account resonates with this statement. For Esperanza, it was not just illiteracy in the technologies of place-making that made the map-making project a poor fit for her. The project wasn’t accounting for a sensibility of place that Esperanza was fluent in. For Esperanza, locating places was an aural/oral, as opposed to visual, process (see also Feld 1990).

While Basso’s work helps illustrate the very local ways that people construe their land and render it intelligible, it also foregrounds a set of problems that arise for making sense of just such local renderings. Basso’s work has been critiqued both for overlooking the role of power relations and history in making sense of place (Gordillo 2004: 4) as well as failing to fully contextualize local ways of place making within ongoing disputes about native land claims in the United States (McElhinny 2006).

An account of local place-making in El Mayor raises the question of how to make the local ways of making space intelligible to the decade-long legal battle to secure rights to the Cucapá’s traditional fishing grounds at the mouth of the Colorado River. The
stories that elders told about places in the delta and their dismissal of maps also has practical implications for counter-mapping projects. If the political potential of maps rests on representing local senses of place, and local senses of place cannot be straightforwardly translated to paper maps, then the political efficacy of map-making projects is necessarily compromised.

In Bunte and Franklin’s (1992) “You Can't Get There From Here: Southern Paiute Testimony as Intercultural Communication,” the authors explore the ways that cultural differences in thinking and speaking about topography and directions can have concrete implications for land conflicts. The article examines deposition and trial testimony in order to understand the cultural, linguistic and communicative style dimensions of the problems that arose during a land claim dispute. In the course of the trial, specific linguistic and cultural aspects of San Juan Paiute concepts of location and direction led to interpretation difficulties and mutual misunderstandings (20). One of the Paiute elders who acted as witness was not accustomed to conceiving of a land area through the schematic framework of maps, with their totalizing bird’s-eye perspective and decontextualized distances and cardinal directions. Instead he used direction from his own point of view, the view of one who experiences a terrain directly (26).

Bunte and Franklin (1992) describe how, with their help, the Paiute lawyers worked with the elders and the court to find a mutually intelligible set of terms through which to communicate about the land area in question. On one level, Bunte and Franklin do what Basso’s work has been critiqued for neglecting to do; they place Paiute ways of thinking about space in the context of contemporary land conflicts and show some of the tensions that arise when these spatial imaginaries come into interaction with non-native
institutions. However, in the case I describe, it is questionable whether a process of translation or an achievement of “mutual intelligibility” may be enough to effectively incorporate and do justice to local renderings of place.

The more fundamental incommensurability between aural renderings of place and visual representations leaves us with a more sinister conundrum. Paper maps become another way of colonizing local landscapes and transforming them into two dimensional, silent objects. They may correct conventional maps by representing places that were absent before, but in the process, the stories are silenced. The stories that Barbarita, Esperanza, Don Madeleno and many other elders in El Mayor told problematize attempts to encode local knowledge about place in conventional maps.

I raised these concerns at a meeting with the advisors of the map-making project in May of 2006. The meeting took place at the casino on the Cocopah reservation in the United States and was attended by the director of the project and some of the elders from the reservation. I suggested that there might be a way to work in this sensibility, verbal descriptions of place, into the final representation, with the idea that it might also accommodate the elders. While the director was fairly dismissive of my suggestion, one of the elders, Felix Coto, approached me after the meeting. He told a story about a time when he was a child traveling with his father on the reservation. It was a pitch-black night and he was scared because they could not see where they were. His father comforted him by explaining that they would know when they arrived at where they were going by listening to the wind in the trees and by listening to the river. “That’s how you tell,” he said, “you listen for when you get there.”
While Felix’s story did not provide an explicit answer to the question of how to accommodate the elders in El Mayor, I think what Felix Coto was affirming was that if we wanted to know where the places were we really would have to listen to the stories. Felix’s story also emphasized the distinction between looking and listening for places. Felix Coto’s mention of listening to the river reminded me of how frequently people in El Mayor and Somerton, Arizona recollected with nostalgia the roar of the Colorado River. Therefore, Felix’s story also seemed to suggest that we could listen for the places that are not on the landscape anymore as well. When we look at maps of the Southwestern United States and Mexico, we see the river. But in El Mayor, all one has to do is listen to know that the river is not there anymore.
“Cocopah Mountain, Mexico” (1913)
(Photo Courtesy of the Colorado River Plateau Archives, Northern Arizona University)

Same mountain range in 2006 (notice the salt deposits on the right)
CHAPTER TWO

The Fishing Conflict and the Making and Unmaking of Indigenous Authenticity in the Colorado River Delta

Si has bebido agua del Colorado, una gran historia corre por tus venas.
(If you have drunk of the Colorado River, a great history runs through your veins).

(Mexican proverb)

Andrés Rivioli, is a smooth talking, fast thinking lawyer who has handled the Cucapá’s fishing conflict with the federal government since 1999. His office was crowded with a group of eight Cucapá fishermen and women on a sweltering summer afternoon in Mexicali. The lawyer began the meeting by denouncing the Mexican government for denying the Cucapá access to their ancestral fishing grounds at the end of the Colorado River. He said that by criminalizing their fishing, the Cucapá’s primary subsistence activity, the government was effectively committing “cultural genocide” on its own people. The lawyer was referring to the federal biosphere reserve that was created in 1993 to protect the struggling eco-system in this region. The Mexican Colorado River Delta has suffered increasingly devastating effects of reduced flows from the river since the construction of the major dams upstream in the United States in the mid 20th century. And since the creation of the biosphere reserve, the Cucapá have been denied access to their traditional fishing grounds, now cordoned off within the limits of the protected area. While the Cucapá have been granted legal permits to fish farther upstream, there are very few fish in the areas they have legal access to.

Rivioli, the lawyer, is a large, broad-shouldered, big-headed man with a slightly overbearing countenance. He had a talent for these impassioned speeches about the Cucapás’ situation. He took any opportunity to relay his message, performing in
Figure 3. Map of La Reserva de la Biosfera Alto Golfo de California (the Biosphere Reserve)

(Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas 2007)
meetings, for reporters and in private conversations with the fishing cooperative’s members. He is an effective advocate. On an earlier occasion I had asked him for a private interview and since then he had sometimes treated group meetings, where I intended only to observe, as venues to further elaborate his professional opinion - sometimes stopping to ask if I had questions. In this meeting I was particularly uncomfortable with his attention because the Cucapá chief, Don Madeleno, sat beside me, waiting to show the lawyer a document of some sort and get on with his day’s business.

Don Madeleno’s manner contrasts strikingly with Rivioli’s. At 74, he has a gentle character, is soft spoken and moves slowly, becoming frailer with age. He kept trying to redirect the lawyer’s attention by lifting the document he brought, or trying to cut in when the lawyer took a breath, but Rivioli was unstoppable in his rant: he was in performance mode. While Don Madeleno was repeatedly unsuccessful in interrupting him, a series of other distractions formed the percussion to the lawyer’s lecture – his secretary interrupted him with a fax or his cell phone rang with business of an apartment rental (one of the side projects his office seems to keep busy with).

The lawyer’s diatribe was a familiar opening to his meetings with the fishing cooperative. Unlike previous meetings, however, on this occasion the lawyer moved on from detailing the litany of injustices suffered by the Cucapá to propose some of the reasons that the Mexican government has been able to prohibit the Cucapá’s fishing in the first place. He suggested that the reason fishing restrictions have continued despite a decade of protest, a constitutional promise and pressure from the National Commission of
Human Rights is because the Cucapá are not adequately performing their indigeneity. In addition to advising that they wear traditional grass skirts and go back to living in *cachanilla* huts, he told the group that they had to speak their indigenous language if they wanted their government to take them seriously as Indians.\(^3\) "How is the government even supposed to know you’re Indians?" he concluded, pointing to one of the women, "You dress and speak like Mexicans!"

I glanced around the room at the circle of people, mostly women, he was referring to. They looked shamed by his remarks. The lawyer’s accusation was particularly striking because that day the fishing women were not clad in their usual mud-caked jeans and long-sleeved shirts, the standard wear during the fishing season to protect against the blistering sun and muddy inclines. Instead, they wore floral blouses and looked clean and carefully put-together: an effort, no doubt, intended for their trip into town and to show respect for the lawyer.

This incident with the fishing cooperative’s lawyer foreshadowed what I came to learn was a more general critique of the legitimacy of Cucapá claims to an indigenous identity. The conflict over the Cucapá’s rights to fish corvina (*Cynoscion xanthulus*, Mexican salt water sea bass) in the government-protected ecological reserve was a debate in which these issues were particularly salient.

In a departure from the past, when Native groups throughout the Americas were denied certain rights if they resisted cultural and linguistic assimilation (Díaz Polanco 1997), in the last several decades identifying as indigenous has become an important means of legitimating claims to natural resources (Chapin et al 2005; Conklin 1997;)

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\(^3\) *Cachanilla* is a wild, local plant that was used to make huts by the original inhabitants of the area.
In chapter five, I examine how the Cucapá’s linguistic practices have been negotiated through this political paradigm. In this chapter, I examine how the Cucapá’s fishing conflict with the Mexican federal government has been shaped by these same political circumstances.

It is often taken as intuitive that the relationship between neoliberalism and multiculturalism is fundamentally antagonistic. This is especially the case where political policies espousing economic liberalism as a means of promoting economic development coincided with the rise of indigenous movements which often challenged the neoliberal state such as the case of the Zapatista movement in Mexico (Ramírez Paredes 2002). The assumption of fundamental antagonism is also due to the fact that scholars who have explored the ideological effects of neoliberalism have often focused on the particular notion of the individual it propagates, as opposed to the notion of the group or of “cultures” (Ellison 2006; Ferguson 2006, 2007; Inoue 2006). However, recent work, especially in Latin America has challenged this focus (Hale 2005, 2006; Martinez Novo 2006; Sieder 2002; Speed 2005). Speed (2005) argues, for example, that one of the distinctions of neoliberalism from early forms of liberalism is precisely that the emphasis on the individual is reduced. The need for multiculturalism in the neoliberal period is related to the minimization of the state and the impulse toward the self-regulation of different sectors of society. Speed cautions that if we continue to see the neoliberal state as advancing individualism it is easy to interpret all group rights as anti-neoliberal.

Therefore, increasingly theorists have noted that multicultural policies form part of the larger neo-liberal project in Mexico and beyond (Hale 2002, 2005; Speed 2005; Sieder 2002; Postero 2001; Povenelli 2002). The simultaneous introduction of neoliberal
reforms and multicultural policies in many Latin American states has been explained in various ways. Some scholars have argued that multicultural policies were implemented to overcome a crisis of legitimacy or were introduced in response to international pressures (Sieder 2002; Stephen 1995; de la Peña 2005; Jackson and Warren 2005) or to avoid ethnic conflict (Yashar 1998). Others have explained the introduction of multicultural policies in neoliberal regimes as a form of cooptation (Stephen 1997) and some, more optimistically, as a deeper change reflecting democratization (Hernández Castillo 2001).

Other scholars have argued that multiculturalism is more fundamental to the project of neoliberalism in Latin America (Hale’s term “neoliberal multiculturalism” was, indeed, intended to signal this). Rachel Sieder (2002) argues that Mexico’s neoliberal government has embraced multicultural policies because they are a way to recalibrate mechanisms of control within the context of neoliberalism. For example, as indigenous groups have started asserting more independence, the state has been able to intervene in new ways, under the banner of human rights and multiculturalism (see also Hale 2002, 2005).

Martinez Novo (2006) provides an example of these recalibrations from Baja California where she argues that state institutions do not perceive the national projects of economic liberalization and ethnic projects of cultural recognition as contradictory. Instead of repressing indigenous identity or interpreting it as a challenge to their interests, government officials and the members of the Chamber of Commerce sought to support a particular understanding of Indianness that they perceived as akin to their goals. For example, Martinez Novo (2006) describes how tourism and other economic interests such
as commercial agriculture for export benefit from the reinforcement of Indian identification by keeping indigenous day labor cheap (see Heller [2003], for an example of the commodification of language and identity in the French Canadian context).

This chapter argues that the environmental movement in Mexico, in the way that it has dovetailed with multicultural discourses, has also been a critical platform for neoliberal interventions because it imposes particular constraints on how environmental rights and resources should be distributed. The official recognition of indigenous rights and cultural difference has imposed new forms of governmentality by constituting how cultural difference should be defined in the first place.

Recent work in anthropology has examined how environmental discourses can be exclusive: favoring the interests of some groups over others (Brosius 1999; McElhinny 2006; Zerner 2000). Anthropologists and other scholars have also drawn attention to the ways in which environmental discourses both incorporate and erase indigenous subjects by assuming a “natural” relationship between indigeneity and environmental sustainability (Bamford 2002; Braun 2002; Chapin 2004). Since the 1980s, indigenous people have been key symbols and sometimes key participants in the development of a trans-national environmental ideology and discourse which has promoted an image of the “ecologically noble savage.” These Western environmental ideologies have discursively located authenticity and purity in indigenous peoples. The discourse presents indigenous people as dwelling according to nature, outside of modernity and resistant to global capitalism. Environmentalists have used these discourses as leverage for their own projects (Brysk 2000; Conklin and Graham 1995; Graham 2002) and NGOs and indigenous groups have sometimes benefited from the unlikely alliances forged between
indigenous people and dissimilar groups (Brosius 1997; Conklin 1997; Greenough and Tsing 2003).

In the Colorado Delta, however, essentializing discourses about indigenous people popularized in environmental discourses have resulted in an ambivalence among NGO workers, government officials and the local public about how to situate the Cucapá people in the local environmental crisis. This ambivalence manifests in two incommensurate portrayals of the Cucapá (both of which allude to a notion of authenticity): a romanticized version derived directly from mainstream environmental discourses, and a “corrupted” version which results when the romanticized portrayal proves contradictory and untenable. The romanticized version, often produced by conservation NGOs, portrays the Cucapá as “guardians of the river” and highly capable natural conservationists who “worship” the nature at risk of disappearing. At its worst, this view imports a series of related stereotypes about indigenous people along the lines of what the lawyer described in the opening vignette (for example that “real” Indians speak indigenous languages, live in mud huts and wear traditional clothing). While the romanticized version sometimes presents the Cucapá as victims of environmental degradation, it more often portrays them with even less agency. In fact, as I will show in the following, extreme versions of this view of the Cucapá go so far as to describe them as yet one more endangered species that needs to be defended by Western conservation efforts.

When the Cucapá do not live up to these stereotypes, their perceived purity is defiled and a portrayal of their corruption emerges. Local NGO workers and government environmental officials working in the field were quick to point to the Cucapá’s
environmentally destructive practices: burning and dumping garbage, fishing endangered species, using tightly woven nets that catch baby fish. Often working closely with the Cucapá, environmentalists also saw the deprivation they go through: the domestic violence, drug addiction and poverty. The ambivalence towards the Cucapá’s role in the environmental crisis arises from what many local Mexicans and NGO workers perceived as a glaring contradiction between the place of indigenous people in a particular stream of environmental rhetoric and the reality in the field. At its worst, this portrayal of the Cucapá identifies them as the perpetrators of the environmental damage in the Delta rather than the victims.

In the following pages, I show how environmental discourses are, invoked and deployed by the different actors in the Colorado Delta. I focus my analysis on a series of fishing meetings, government documents, and NGO reports. I examine how the Cucapá’s arguments for fishing rights in the Colorado Delta have been facilitated and constrained within the terms of current environmental discourses which have imposed implicit measures of indigenous authenticity. I argue that environmental struggles do more than align pre-existing groups with and against each other. The struggles themselves have shaped the political boundaries of the Cucapá community by constituting what membership means and how alliances are formed.

The Fishing Conflict: “We Will Fish Here Forever”

I arrived at the end of the Colorado River in Northern Mexico in August of 2005 to begin my fieldwork in El Mayor. The corvina fishing season would not begin until

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4 A similar ambivalence is evident in portrayals of Inuit people in Canada’s ongoing controversies over seal hunting (Coates 1989, Wenzel 1978, 1991).
February of 2006. My introduction to the fishing issues that faced the Cucapá was a series of meetings over the course of those first six months. The meetings were with different governmental representatives, lawyers, human rights officials and NGOs. I was well briefed on the dynamics of this conflict from local newspaper coverage. The Cucapá's fishing cooperative's claims to their fishing grounds was one that hinged on a long-standing connection to place with an emphasis on indigenous identity and ancestral lands.

I started attending fishing meetings before I had a chance to become close with all the fisher people and gain their trust. At one of the first major meetings, I arrived early to make sure I could find the room in the Mexicali hotel where the meeting was held and to set up my recording devices. Then, the officials from the Commission for Indigenous Development (CDI), filed into the room and set up their laptops and projectors; then some of the Cucapá fishing families arrived, trailed by children running around the room and climbing onto the cookie table. I felt quite awkward being there despite the fact that the president of the fishing cooperative had given me permission to attend. It seemed to me that everyone was slightly suspicious of whose side I was on.

Just before the meeting was about to commence, the head delegate for CDI entered the room. He took one glance around the motley assemblage of people and then fixed his gaze on me, immediately recognizing the anomalous presence. He proceeded to walk directly over to where I was sitting and began questioning me. I introduced myself as an anthropology student doing research in El Mayor and he immediately asked who I was affiliated with. I explained that I was from the University of Toronto and that it was my own doctoral research, but he pressed on asking about my local affiliation, insisting
that I had one when I explained again that I was there independently. Finally, he asked for my passport, which I didn’t have on me, and proceeded to talk quickly and confrontationally about permissions and affiliations until, noticeably distressed, I explained that I was still getting used to speaking Spanish and that I did not understand everything he was saying. This seemed to comfort him and he left me alone, waving me off with his hand and walking away.

Shaken after this confrontation, I noticed with relief that the fishing women started smiling over at me and shaking their heads knowingly. After the meeting, I learned their interpretations of the incident as we sat around the table in Adriana’s kitchen eating beans and tortillas and drinking instant coffee while discussing the meeting. Adriana, who was the president of the fishing cooperative in El Mayor and the chief’s daughter, spoke more openly with me than she had before. “That was really clever how you said you couldn’t understand him Shaylih,” she said, misidentifying my communicative breakdown for strategy. She was very sympathetic that they had treated me so abrasively and explained that they did so because they did not want me there to witness “how they treated the Indians.” From that moment on, Adriana was quick to claim my presence as their guest at the fishing meetings. It was as if the delegate’s public display of outrage at my unannounced and undocumented presence was a defacto voucher for my trustworthiness to the fishers. More than anything else, they wanted a witness. This chapter is intended to fulfill that promise.

Since the construction of the major US dams on the Colorado River in the mid 20th century and the rapid growth of the American West, the Mexican Colorado River Delta has suffered increasingly devastating effects from reduced water flows. As a result
of the 1944 water treaty between the United States and Mexico and its subsequent amendments, ninety percent of the water in the Colorado is diverted before it reaches Mexico. The remaining ten percent that crosses the border is increasingly being directed to the burgeoning manufacturing industry in Tijuana and Mexicali. In 1993, the Mexican government created a biosphere reserve, an ecological protected area, in the delta in order to conserve the fragile eco-system in this region (decades of dam construction and water diversions in the United States have reduced the delta to a remnant system of small wetlands and brackish mudflats). Since the creation of the biosphere reserve, the Mexican Federal Ministry for Environmental Protection (PROFEPA) has denied the Cucapá access to their traditional fishing grounds at the mouth of the Colorado.\(^5\)

In the last several years, the fishing conflict has escalated in a series of intense negotiations among the Cucapá fishing cooperative, human rights lawyers, and federal and state environmental officials. In 2002, after nine years of conflict, Adriana González, president of the Cucapá fishing cooperative, made a complaint to the Human Rights Commission of Mexico. In the recommendation that resulted from the Commission’s investigation, the Council declared that the fishing restrictions were violating the Cucapá’s human rights (Waisman and Arroyo 2002). The report is one of the main avenues of appeal that residents of El Mayor have against the fishing restrictions. It recommended that a solution to the conflict be negotiated which would allow the Cucapá to continue to practice their traditional economic activity. This report is routinely cited by their lawyer and by the more politically active fisher men and women. It will also be the

\(^{5}\) PROFEPA, (Procuraduría Federal de Protección al Ambiente) is Mexico’s Environmental Protection Agency, which enforces Mexico’s federal environmental statutes, regulations and standards. It is one of the most visible agencies of SEMARNAT (Secretaría de Medio Ambiente Y Recursos Naturales), Mexico’s Secretariat of Environment and Natural Resources which devises federal environmental statutes and standards.
basis of further appeals to the International Human Rights Commission. Yet, nearly six years after the report’s issue, the Mexican government has yet to respond to its recommendations. Indeed, on my first day in the biosphere reserve at the beginning of the 2006 fishing season, there were twice as many environmental officials and marines trying to enforce restrictions as there were Cucapá trying to fish.

While the Human Rights recommendation was based on national and international law on indigenous rights to resources and the practice of “traditional customs,” local environmental officials have been able to bypass these legal stipulations by questioning the legitimacy of the Cucapá’s claims to an indigenous identity in the first place, much as the lawyer suggested in the opening vignette.

Where Does the River Become the Sea? Claiming a Place at the End of the Colorado River

The debate over the Cucapá’s fishing rights revolves around three key themes: whether the fishing grounds at stake were actually traditional, the extent to which fishing, and in particular fishing corvina, is a Cucapá custom; and whether the Cucapá’s fishing techniques are adequately indigenous in character. The last of these themes, a certain conception of how indigenous people should fish, has come to take primacy in the current legal dispute over the river.

The Cucapá fishing cooperative argues that they have a longstanding historical connection to the Colorado River Delta. Archeological and ethno-historical evidence suggests that ancestors of the Cucapá have had a presence in this area for thousands of
Indeed, the Cucapá are locally known as the “people of the river” as a result of their association with the Colorado. The controversial fishing camp at the center of the debate, locally known as the zanjón, is the location of their traditional grounds and is located off the shores of their ancestral land. After years of fighting the Mexican Federal government, the Cucapá were finally given legal rights to communal ownership of their land in 1976. They were awarded 143,000 hectares (375, 500 acres), but it is land that is not irrigable, or farmable; as a result of environmental degradation in the region, it is all desert or salt.

Environmental officials used the logic of the Cucapá’s “ancestral land tenancy” to argue against the Cucapá’s claims. They agreed with the premise that a longstanding connection to place should afford indigenous people certain rights but suggested that the zanjón is not exactly the Cucapá’s ancestral grounds. Several officials from PROFEPA told me in interviews that since “Cucapá” means “people of the river” this alone was proof that the zanjón was not ancestral because it is located where the river “meets the sea.” The Cucapá counter-argued that the only reason the corvina came to lay eggs in the zanjón was because of the fresh water, thus proving that it was the river, not the sea.

Other critics of the Cucapá’s claims argue that even if the zanjón is their traditional grounds, corvina is not their traditional fish because it is not a native species and only started to spawn in this area quite recently. Martha Rodríguez of Sonora’s Environment and Sustainability Development Commission (CEDES) argued that corvina did not start

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6 While both Cucapá people and Mexican state officials and NGO workers all agree that the Cucapá are indigenous to the Delta, the unit of time cited for their occupancy ranges depending on who is doing the estimation. Most government officials concede the 2,000 year figure which has archeological traces (Flores Navarro 2004), Alvarez de Williams (1974) claims that speakers of the Yuman dialect have resided in the Delta for 3,000 years (see also Alarcón-Caires 2002). The Cucapá fishing cooperative would sometimes argue that their ancestors were in the area 9,000 years ago.
coming up into the zanjón until after the El Niño floods in the 1990s. She claims that before that time there is no record of corvina migrating to the area.

However, according to Víctor Ortega, the director of the biosphere reserve, the primary reason the Cucapá’s case was rejected by the federal court was because the fishing techniques used by them were considered both un-sustainable and un-indigenous. He told me that if the Cucapá fished with spears or bows and arrows it would be a different story. The Cucapá, however, fish with very large nets in pangas, small boats with out-board motors. While no one took issue with this equipment in particular, since the Cucapá use smaller boats and nets than many of the surrounding fishing communities, Ortega believed that the fact they did not use canoes, for example, significantly undermined the Cucapá’s claims to “indigenous fishing rights.” He argued, furthermore, that they do not just fish to sustain their families; they sell the fish. The director explained that it would be fine if they were going to just fish to feed themselves as “Indians” would have done traditionally. Instead they sell the fish in nearby cities such as Ensenada and Mexicali or to fish buyers that come to El Mayor.

It may appear that Víctor Ortega was making an ecological argument against the environmental impact of Cucapá fishing in the reserve. This is, in fact, an argument that has often been used against the Cucapá. Article 49 of Mexico’s general law of ecological balance and environmental protection states that in “nuclear zones” (the centers) of protected areas it is prohibited to exploit any species. However, it also specifies that limited exploitation of these zones is permitted as long is it does not affect the overall “ecosystem balance.” There is ample scientific evidence that the Cucapá’s yields alone are not substantial enough to affect the ecological balance of the reserve. Several
investigations carried out by UNAM and el Centro de Investigación y Estudios Superiores de Ensenada have shown that the Cucapá’s yields account for less than 3% of the total extraction in the zone, with the rest of the extraction from Mexican fishing cooperatives (Alarcón-Cháires 2001). Indeed, when I pressed him on this issue, Ortega agreed that he did not think the issue was the number of fish extracted (though this was clearly the legal matter from the environmental standpoint). He went on to say that it would be different if they were going to fish quite a bit and then salt the fish (he motioned to me at this point and suggested “like the way they do in Canada with salmon”) and then eat it later, in the winter for example. Ortega’s concern was not environmental, but social: he did not think the Cucapá qualified as having differential rights.

While Victor Ortega expresses a purist version of the discourse on indigenous people existing completely outside of capitalism, recent strains of environmental activism take as their point of departure that human beings are fundamentally economic creatures. Organizations like Conservation International (CI) have implemented programs which attempt to incorporate indigenous people into economic markets through programs of sustainable entrepreneurship and eco-tourism projects (Bamford 2002; Cohen 2006; Zerner 2000). There have been a series of such projects initiated in El Mayor such as training guides to run boat tours of the river and developing projects with local artesanas (artists/craft-makers) to sell traditional crafts. Nonetheless, this more recent strain of conservation philosophy retains the fundamental ideology of indigenous people as resistant to global capitalism by specifying that their participation in the market is
sustainable. It continues to exclude indigenous groups from participating in local economic markets.

The particular argument against the Cucapá having differential fishing rights that Ortega expressed in my interview draws directly on recent environmental discourses, which portray indigenous people as resistant to, and existing outside of, capitalism and as natural allies of conservationists. By this logic, evidence that indigenous people do not conform to given stereotypes also functions to disqualify them as properly “indigenous” and exclude them from the constitutional guarantees of their right to livelihood and to practice their customs. This is not the way it is laid out in the Mexican constitution. Nowhere does it state that in order to receive differential rights indigenous people have to conform to expectations of being “natural conservationists.” 7 While this stipulation is not written in national law, however, it is powerfully underwritten by current global discourses on the environment and indigeneity. In fact, as many have argued, current discourses on eco-politics which invoke a particular incarnation of the “noble savage” were born in the transnational environmental movement (Conklin and Graham 1995; Ramos 1994). These authors have argued that mainstream environmentalism constructs the threat to the environment in a particular way, prescribing the role that certain actors should play, particularly indigenous people (Bamford 2002; Braun 2000; Brosius 1997, 1999; Escobar 1996, 1999).

For example, Braun (2002) has analyzed how a discourse of indigeneity dovetailed with environmental politics on Canada’s west coast in the 1980s and 1990s.

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7 Article two of the Mexican constitution uses the following criteria to define indigenous people: they must be descendants of the people that lived in the same actual territory at the beginning of colonization and preserve their own social, economic and cultural institutions. This article also specifies that the awareness of their indigenous identity should be a fundamental criterion.
He describes how environmental rhetoric in the campaign to save the rainforest on Clayoquot Sound made First Nations people visible, but only by incorporating them within the terms of anti-modern preservationist politics. This left the First Nations in British Columbia with limited options, since participating in the region’s resource economies means they risk losing what many non-natives consider authentic indigenous culture and as a result, their right to speak as indigenous peoples for their lands.

The discourse of the ecologically noble savage has become so powerful that legal conflicts for the Cucapá have sometimes played out as if those stereotypes were legal terms of recognition. The particular notion of indigeneity invoked in this strain of conservationism has not always been a feature of environmental discourses. Until recently, environmental advocacy focused solely on protecting flora and fauna; the presence of people tended to be seen as an obstacle to environmental preservation (Hecht and Cockburn 1990: 27). As environmental philosophy shifted to emphasize “sustainable development” rather than strict preservation, an ecological rationale for defending indigenous people emerged. Conklin and Graham (1995: 698) describe how during the 1980s environmentalist NGOs began to promote development models that made the promotion of local equity and the preservation of local cultures a central component of development planning. 8 It was at this time that “Indians – formerly seen as irrelevant to economic development – now were championed as the holders of important keys to rational development.” In this form the discourse of the ecologically noble savage has particular contemporary political appeal as it allows for the assumption that native

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8 Discourses on “endangered languages” also draw on this argument about the interrelations between environmental and cultural preservation. For an analysis of how discourses of biodiversity and linguistic diversity intersect see Maffi (2005) and Muehlmann (2007).
peoples’ views of nature, and ways of using natural resources, are consistent with the goals of Western conservationists.

Perhaps precisely because of the global cachet of current environmental discourses, the Human Rights Commission’s Report (Waisman and Arroyo 2002), which recommends the government support the Cucapá’s claims, appeals as much to a discourse of indigenous sustainability as it does to legal frameworks in its case in support of the Cucapá people. The commission’s recommendation cites article number 2 of the Mexican constitution which recognizes that Mexico is a pluri-cultural nation. It also cites the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries, which Mexico ratified in 1990. This convention states the obligation of governments to recognize, protect and respect the values and practices of indigenous people and, in particular, their spiritual and cultural relation to the land. After clearly stating PROFEPA’s breach of national and international law in denying the Cucapá rights to fish, however, the commission also takes pains to reinforce stereotypes of the Cucapá’s inherent environmental sustainability.

The cosmovision of the Cucapá finds its roots in relation to the river where they have lived since ancestral times, since forever (“ya que desde siempre”) the ecosystems of the Hardy and Colorado Rivers have permitted the conservation of this culture. The Cucapá are considered children of the river, their origin myth identifies them as born of water. This group considers whale, deer and rattlesnake as symbols of their lineage and totemic entities, with dances and songs that evoke different elements of nature, as if searching for a reciprocal communication with it (Waisman and Arroyo 2002).

The commission’s report carefully describes the Cucapá’s cultural and historical connection to the delta. The report makes an explicit link between the conservation of

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9 The International Labour Organization (ILO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations that deals with labour issues. The ILO hosts the International Labour Conference in Geneva every year in June. At the Conference, Conventions and Recommendations are crafted and adopted by majority decision.
the river and the conservation of the Cucapá culture, and construes this as a timeless relationship ("since forever"). It is noteworthy that the reference to the Cucapá people as "children of the river," above also resonates with infantilizing colonial stereotypes. The report goes on to specify that they still speak their native language even though Spanish is dominant. By focusing in detail on these romanticized and exaggerated portrayals of the Cucapá's reverence of nature, the report reinforces the slippage between constitutionally guaranteed rights and rights bestowed on the basis of adequate conformity to indigenous stereotypes.

Thus the category of indigeneity, instead of simply existing as a political identity framed in terms of a prior occupation of land, obtains its full political potency in the context of concerns over the expansion of global capitalism and its environmental destruction. It can be articulated as a political identity in response to the displacements of global capitalism. Akhil Gupta (1998: 179) argues that the category of "the indigenous," thus becomes an "alternative, eco-friendly, sustainable space outside or resistant to modernity."

Ambivalent Alliances: "They Seem to Care More about the Fish than the People"

Current environmental discourses not only constrain indigenous subjects, however; they also constrain a set of social relationships in which new alliances between environmentalists and indigenous people have formed. Anna Tsing (2003) points out that anthropologists are accustomed to the divergent perspectives of groups who, endowed with long-standing and well-formulated differences in identity and interests, battle each other over political issues. Indeed, recent work has shifted its focus to how
environmental discourses forge unlikely alliances between dissimilar groups: tribal people and trade unions, third world nationalists and first world research foundations, indigenous people and urban environmentalists (Baviskar 1995; Greenough and Tsing 2003; Tsing 1999, 2005; Brosius 1997).

The Cucapá’s long history of struggle with the Mexican and US governments over land and water represents a familiar disjunctive of interests, but the ecological damage to the delta has also brought about just such unexpected alliances. Mexican and US Environmental organizations and NGOs have supported the Cucapá through numerous eco-tourism and community projects including a geotourism project with National Geographic and the Sonoran Institute, and map making project with the Sonoran Institute (see chapter five), a Tamarisk project with the Local Water Users’ Association (see chapter three), numerous Chakira and artisania projects funded by the Commission of Indigenous Development. The local water users’ association has also funded beautification projects for the removal of garbage in El Mayor and the Hardy River (see chapter three). Many of these projects were seen with suspicion by residents of El Mayor, however, because they were often advanced as alternatives to fishing rather than supplements.

Local NGOs’ prioritization of the biosphere reserve over local livelihoods has not gone unnoticed by the Cucapá. NGOs often work under contract with local government agencies and the biosphere reserve, and this has undermined their legitimacy in the eyes of the Cucapá. In fact, Don Madaleno, the Cucapá chief, would often comment that environmentalists and government officials “seem to care more about the fish than the people.” Despite this perception, it was clear that many environmentalists in the area
were genuinely committed to improving the conditions of life in El Mayor. There were
dozens of initiatives to find alternative economic activities for the Cucapá. When I
started asking how these NGOs became involved in community development projects,
many environmentalists recalled something Don Madaleno had said at a water users’
association meeting. Don Madaleno related his comment like this: “They are so worried
about the endangered species of this region. I asked them: what about the human beings?
We are also endangered.” This idea, that the people too were an endangered species, had
a profound emotional effect on some of the environmentalists. Don Madaleno’s sense
that they cared more about the fish was strategically employed in his comment. With the
Cucapá people recast as part of the nature at risk, the environmentalists could care about
them in the same way they cared for the plants and the fish.

By moving one step beyond the idea of the local people as stewards and, in fact,
conflating the Cucapá people with the nature at risk of disappearing, official conservation
discourses make the Cucapá visible but only by being incorporated within the terms of a
preservationist politics. For example, Charles Bergman’s book “Red Delta: Fighting for
Life at the End of the Colorado River” (2002), which was co-published with the US
based NGO Defenders of Wildlife, devotes each chapter to a different endangered species
in the delta. One chapter is dedicated to the flat tailed horned lizard; another focuses on
the nearly extinct Yuma clapper tail. Towards the end of the book, Bergman also includes
a chapter about the Cucapá, awkwardly entitled, “We are not yet dead still.” The Cucapá
have a place in environmental discourses, but only in so far as they are represented as yet
one more endangered species that needs to be defended.
The paternalism inherent in the stereotypes circulated in such discourses was problematized when NGO workers and environmentalists were confronted with the reality of Cucapá fishing practices. At these times, NGO workers often responded like government environmental officials and agencies: turning from representing the Cucapá as keys to the amelioration of the environmental degradation to seeing them as responsible for it. NGO workers were particularly astounded by what they interpreted as a lack of foresight. As one NGO worker commented: “Don’t they realize that fishing these fish while they are with their eggs and using these nets will mean lower yields in the future?” Some saw the Cucapá as the cause of environmental degradation: dumping garbage in the desert near the Hardy River, illegally fishing in the reserve, using unsustainable fishing practices on the river with huge nets to catch the baby fish.

Mexicans in the area were also quick to point to the Cucapá as a central problem for river management in the area and frequently brought up the Cucapá’s environmentally destructive practices. One Mexican resident of the delta was particularly concerned about the number of smaller fish caught in the tightly spun fishing nets some would stretch across the river. He brought it upon himself to save the fish in the area and spent part of the 1980s removing nets to free the baby fish. Eventually, he went to prison for some months on account of thieving these nets. However, many local Mexicans shared his concerns and supported the lengths he went to in defense of local river trout and bass. At every meeting of the committee for the management of the Colorado and Hardy Rivers, government officials and non-indigenous locals would raise the issue of the Cucapá’s unsustainable fishing practices as a central problem that needed to be addressed.
In the case of the Cucapá, the alliances formed with environmental organizations are precarious and uneven. The discourses which have helped to foster these alliances rely on an essentializing argument that assumes that saving plants and animals will necessarily alleviate the social problems experienced by indigenous peoples. This particular discourse has contemporary political appeal as it allows for the assumption that native peoples’ view of nature, and ways of using natural resources, are consistent with the goals of Western conservationists. As scholars have recently pointed out however (Brosius 1999; Chapin 2002; Conklin and Graham 1995), and as the Cucapá’s situations confirms, while environmentalists’ primary goal is to promote natural resource management, indigenous peoples often seek self-determination and control over their own resources, a goal which does not necessarily align with the goals of conservation NGOs. It is precisely such a disjunction of interests that has led to an ambivalence among environmental officials about how to situate the Cucapá in the environmental crisis in the delta.

“We fish by the Moon, not by the Tides”

The Cucapá in El Mayor are not complacent about accusations of their environmentally destructive behaviour. Some Cucapá fishers expressed concern that their fishing practices were contributing to an environmentally unstable future. But most were quick to point out that the necessity of feeding their children out-weighed these considerations. Many of the Cucapá I interviewed also identified the fallacy in the argument that the impact of their fishing specifically would make a substantial impact. Fishing three percent of the total corvina extracted in the zanjón would not be the cause
of lower yields in the future, and their fishing practices were certainly not to blame for the parched and arid devastation of the delta. Cucaрап fishing cooperatives have approximately 40 boats that fish the zanjon in contrast to approximately 1,000 boats that frequent the area from surrounding fishing communities such as Santa Clara and San Felipe. Since the building of the dams in the US, the water that has reached Mexico has barely been sufficient to sustain the burgeoning border economy in cities such as Tijuana and Mexicali, much less the riverine species in the lower delta.

I was often struck by the amount of information Cucaрап fisher people had at their disposal about fishing politics in the area. The longer I stayed, I realized that this was not just true of the most politically and highly vocal fishers. Some of the shyest fishing people were also armed with an array of facts that supported their arguments for rights and exposed the injustice of government policies. One night, after a funeral in the neighbouring Kiliwa community, I sat eating hot elote around a fire with some of the other guests. It was almost three am and I asked a shy Cucaрап fishing man named Víctor who was sitting by the fire if he planned to drive back the three hours in order to make the high tide in the zanjon the next morning. He said he planned to do so. “We have to fish while we still can,” he said, and proceeded to launch into a discussion about the plans to impose a veda (prohibition) in May that would make it possible for officials to implement even more severe penalties for fishing on the grounds. While I had never heard Víctor speak a single word in a public arena, he began rehearsing the figures and facts with the same expertise as Adriana or cooperative’s lawyer.

Some Cucaрап fishers argued directly against charges of their “unsustainability” by describing how their fishing practices incorporated means to ensure the sustainability of
their fishing but that they were no longer able to implement these practices because of
government restrictions. In the past, fishing cycles were timed by the moon. “The moon
is our guide,” Don Madeleno explained. “The waters follow the moon and so we follow
the moon too.” Don Madaleno explained that when the moon is waning and waxing the
fish have left their eggs and it is safe to fish. When I asked Don Madeleno why the fish
do not have their eggs during these times he said definitively: “They know better.” At a
later occasion Doña Esperanza, the chief’s sister, explained that the fish do not have their
eggs when the moon is new because the moon is menstruating at this time. “That’s why it
hides behind the clouds - out of shame. The fish can see the blood, that’s why they don’t
have eggs.”

On the first day of the fishing season, Cruz, the father in the family with whom I
stayed in El Mayor, took a freshly caught corvina and beckoned me behind the house to
show me how to clean the skin, cut it open, and remove the innards to ready the fish for
cooking. Although his hand was swollen and bandaged at the time from pricking his hand
on the thorn out front and from the unforgiving effects of his advanced diabetes, he
maneuvered the huge fish with impressive dexterity and expertise. As he sliced the side
of the fish, large pockets of white gelatinous material slipped out of its side. Cruz held up
some of this substance on his knife for me to see more closely. “Eggs,” he proclaimed.
He then explained that the Secretary of the Environment and Natural resources
(SEMARNAT) does not take the rhythms of the moon into account when they make the
rules about when people can fish. Instead, they go strictly by the tides:

SEMARNAT makes the rules about when we can fish. Meanwhile, they
don’t know anything about this place, or fishing. They’ll tell us not to
fish, supposedly because the fish are with eggs. Then, they’ll tell us to fish
when they have eggs and we all know that if we fish them then we’ll kill many of the fish to come before they are even born.

Cruz said that they have to fish by these rules anyway. There are so many fewer fish in the river and so many fewer months when the fishing can be done that the Cucapá have to fish when they can and take any opportunity. Indeed, some families rely on the now only four-month long corvina fishing season to support them for the entire year. But Cruz emphasized that government management techniques which are supposed to protect the fish fail while also creating circumstances in which the Cucapá’s own management techniques cannot be implemented. Cruz explained that, ultimately, the Cucapá people prioritize feeding their children and making a living over managing the environmental damage resulting from excess and mismanagement upstream, or by badly planned local government policies.

Cruz’s explanation indicates that the stereotype of native people as natural conservationists forms a precarious foundation for indigenous rights advocacy because it misrepresents the realities of these peoples’ lives and priorities. The reduction of indigenous identity to a natural instinct for preservation also occludes other kinds of potential eco-political alliances. The links between indigenous people and otherwise marginalized, poor and disempowered populations have been made irrelevant by this discourse, despite the fact that these populations often suffer similar forms of environmental discrimination. Therefore while it is useful to look at the unexpected alliances that have formed and broken down between groups it is equally important to examine what kinds of potential alliances are obscured in the process.
As the 2006 fishing season approached, the tenor of the Cucapá’s fishing cooperative meetings changed dramatically. As the preparations for the season got underway, fishing cooperatives shifted their attention from the longstanding conflict with the biosphere reserve to a new set of monitoring techniques that the biosphere reserve was introducing. Meanwhile, El Mayor had become a hive of activity as people prepared for the season: boats were painted, nets were mended and fishing crews were negotiated. Environmental officials cruised through the Cucapá settlement, documenting equipment and verifying receipts. Boats and equipment were registered to individuals who were photographed with their gear and crew. Officials emphasized that permits could not be transferred and that boats could not be lent to others. They also explained that these new measures, by making the fishers more identifiable, were meant to help prevent people from illegally renting their permits.

To explain the new system, Adriana, the president of the fishing cooperative, held a meeting to discuss the changes. There was a larger turn-out than at previous meetings because the subject was not just the politics of the fishing conflict; it was also about getting practicalities in order, including permits signed and equipment borrowed. We all filed into the school. The teacher took the children out to play so fishers could use the classroom. Sitting around uncomfortably in miniature desks, the crowd shuffled government forms as Adriana began her announcements.
A government official documents a crew of fishermen with their boat
She explained that as a result of the more elaborate monitoring system, this year it was important to fish with as few Mexicans as possible. Adriana emphasized that it was important how they represent themselves as a community for the ongoing conflict. She then set out a series of rules: they should try to avoid taking non-Cucapá people onto the boats or hiring them in our crews; permits should not be rented to Mexicans; if people are sick they have to pass their permits on to other Cucapá.

When Adriana made these announcements the meeting room burst into discontented chatter. Some shouted out over the din of disquiet to Adriana at the front of the room, “What about my boyfriend? Do I have to marry him?” and “What about my sister-in-law? She has always fished with us!” Those people were referring to the fact that intermarriage with Mexicans is very common in the area. Some muttered amongst themselves: “Who’s going to clean the fish? We’re not going to!” One man in the crowd began accusing Adriana of hypocrisy. “Nobody takes Mexicans out there like you!” Adriana responded, “This is not what I want, it’s what the authorities want.” Adriana tried to pacify the disgruntlement by explaining, “We are in a fight. They are going to say, ‘they are reclaiming their rights and then just renting to Mexicans.’ They are not going to support that.”

The raucous discussion that ensued revealed that there is generally a great deal of cooperation between Cucapá fishers and non-indigenous locals, whom the Cucapá call “Mexicans,” during the fishing season. The Cucapá tend to fish with a wider network of Mexican families because their families extend into these networks. People wanted to fish with their in-laws, neighbors and friends and depended on this network. Like the majority

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10 Of course, Cucapá people are Mexican too and often identify as such, however in contexts where residents of El Mayor would make a distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous residents of the area “Mexican” was used to refer to individuals of non-indigenous descent.
of indigenous communities in Mexico, El Mayor is largely made up of a *mestizo* population.

The backlash to Adriana’s new stipulations also revealed a complex set of relationships of exploitation and cooperation between the Cucapá and Mexican fisher people. Some people explained that the reason so many Mexicans fished with the Cucapá was that the former would get greater yields than on their own because they did not have the permits to fish near the nuclear zone. Sometimes members of the Cucapá fishing cooperative with permits but no equipment would form crews with Mexicans that have boats and nets and the Cucapá would take a smaller cut of the profit. Other Cucapá who already had equipment said that their incentive for fishing with Mexicans is that it almost impossible to find helpers from El Mayor that were also Cucapá (with the exception of children). If a Cucapá person wanted to fish, he or she would be better off getting their own permit than working for a crew cleaning fish.

Donald Moore (1998) has drawn attention to a tendency in studies of environmental struggles to assume a monolithic “state” in opposition to an undifferentiated “community” (see also Cattaneo 2007, Garduño 2003). He emphasizes that environmental struggles do not just pit given “groups” against each other, but rather these struggles themselves shape the political boundaries of “state” by constituting how social boundaries are drawn. In the case of the Colorado River fishing conflict, the tendency to reify the Cucapá “community” is equally apparent. The conflict with the Mexican government and the discourse on the environment and indigeneity that has emerged has shaped the way boundaries between groups have been drawn and understandings of what community membership means. Membership has been defined to
exclude the network of mestizo families and obscure the heterogeneous composition of the community. In the case of current legal proceedings with the biosphere reserve, the Cucapá themselves are also excluded from full membership as measures of authenticity are imposed that ultimately disqualify them as sufficiently indigenous.

Charles Hale (2005) argues that this is the ultimate achievement of the neo-liberal incarnation of multiculturalism; it has restructured the political arena by driving a wedge between claiming cultural rights and claiming control over the resources necessary for those rights to be realized. Under the banner of environmental conservation, and through the discourse of the “ecologically noble savage,” state policies constrain indigenous subjects and shape the boundaries of communities. In the case of the Cucapá fishing conflict, we can see this principle in action. By encouraging multicultural policies instead of class-based political organizing, for instance, government policies radically constrain the possibilities of indigenous groups (much less others) of gaining control over the resources at stake by reserving the final judgment over what constitutes ethnic difference.

The implementation of a particular construction of difference resonates with Stuart Hall’s comments in the epigraph of this section. As opposed to the homogeneizing projects often associated with state treatments of indigenous peoples (Kearney 1991; Stephen 1996, 2002; Warren and Jackson 2005), the Mexican state has put difference to work in regulating the distribution of resources to indigenous populations. Asad (1993) has made a similar point in recognizing that “dominant power has worked best through differentiating and classifying practices...its ability to select (or construct) differences that serve its purposes has depended on its exploiting the dangers and opportunities contained in ambiguous situations (1993: 17).
Carmen Martinez Novo's (2006) work on indigenous migrant farm workers in San Quintín, Baja California provides an interesting parallel to the Cucapá case by showing how ethnic categories are mobilized under a neoliberal era. Martinez Novo describes how in San Quintín, certain state institutions such as the National Indigenous Institute, Department of Public Education and Department of Popular Culture encouraged day laborers to organize under ethnic banners. She argues that these ethnic labels created a justification to offer indigenous migrant workers lower wages and worse working conditions than meztisos (34). Martinez Novo documents how these organizations argued that indigenous people are used to living in cramped quarters, perceive child labor as an indigenous tradition and do not trust conventional medicine. Thus their poor working conditions and lack of access to services were said to replicate “traditional ways of life” (see also Briggs and Briggs 2003). Martinez Novo concludes that while scholars have highlighted how “flexible” capitalism transforms local power relations (Watts 1992; Dolan 2002), contract farming in San Quintín has on the contrary used traditional social relations arising from a colonial past to further subordinate indigenous populations.

The increasing use of discourses on multi-culturalism in neoliberal programs has been interpreted as one of the ways that neoliberal forms of governmentality “co-opt”, or “colonize” liberal discourses on social justice (Hale 2005; Inoue 2007; Povinelli 2002; Sieder 2002). With these analyses in mind, it is important to point out that while it may be “our” critique that is co-opted, it is not necessarily the Cucapá’s. It was not uniformly agreed among the Cucapá that they should have different rights to fish the zanjón in the first place. Those Cucapá who felt that they should not have different rights argued that the Mexican population in the area faced similar problems surviving in the decreased
economic opportunities of the delta, and they did not believe that the fact they had been fishing in the area for so much longer was sufficient rationale to deny them fishing rights. This was a particularly common opinion among Cucapá who had married with Mexicans and saw for themselves the kind of hardships that their in-laws faced in making a living. Perhaps they also saw the difficulties they would have fishing on their own without their in-laws’ help. Others seemed to hold this opinion based on purely egalitarian grounds.

Cruz, for example, believed strongly that the Cucapá were equal citizens of Mexico. He explained, “What bothers me about the people here is that they are always talking about us as if we are contra the Mexicans. But we are Mexicans too.” For Cruz, this meant that the Cucapá should be given the same opportunities as local Mexicans, should be treated with the same respect as well as being subject to the same environmental restrictions. He also emphasized that, after all, the Cucapá are also “Mexicans.”

Cruz, who was the founder of the cooperative that is now led by Adriana, let anyone into the cooperative when he was president, not just Cucapá people. At the time, they were fishing in the Laguna Salada, not just for corvina, but also shrimp, bass and catfish. Cruz reminisced that not everyone was happy with his open policy. Don Madeleno said he should not let Mexicans in so that there would be more shrimp for the Cucapá. But Cruz knew that the Laguna Salada would dry up, as the rest of the Colorado River had, so there was enough shrimp for everyone. Sure enough, the Laguna Salada dried up a few years later and all the shrimp that had not been caught were wasted in the desert.

These internal disagreements among Cucapá fisher men and women resonate with recent controversies over the indigenous movement in anthropology. In Adam Kuper’s
(2003) article, *The Return of the Native*, he questions the initial assumption in the indigenous rights movement that the descendants of the original inhabitants of a country should have privileged rights, or even exclusive rights, to natural resources. He argues that this ideology exploits the racist, European right-wing political philosophy that true citizenship is a matter of ties of blood and soil (Kuper 2002: 395; see also Cameron 2007). Suzman (2003), in a reply to Kuper’s article further articulates his critique by pointing out that people best placed to claim the privileges due to indigeneity - often those most fluent in reified, Western constructions of indigeneity and perhaps already in positions of power - are not necessarily those most in need of assistance.

Differential rights based on cultural difference, at their best, attempt to redress past wrongs as well as present inequalities. And those Cucapá fighting for these rights argue articulately that it is unjust to treat different groups in different positions of power as if they are equal. In fact, most Cucapá argue that they are not even treated as equals but rather explicitly discriminated against, often singled out by officials for breaking the same laws as many Mexican fisher people. While the Cucapá only own 30 of the approximately 1,000 boats that illegally fish the area they have been issued half of the actas (fines) for fishing in the reserve (Solis 2005). Solis, in her 2005 article in *El Mexicano*, a local newspaper, explained these disproportionate fines by suggesting that the government has concentrated on controlling the fishing of the Cucapá because they have systematically fought the restrictions, while local Mexicans have been less vocal. Adriana and the other fishing cooperative vocals have refuted this, citing several violent confrontations with the government and Mexican fishing cooperatives. Adriana and others believe that the government has often informed the other communities when they
are coming in to raid the fishing areas. At this time, the Cucapá fishers have
approximately 30 outstanding warrants for illegal fishing, including one for seven
kilograms of fish (Bricker 2006).

Other Cucapá fishers cite more qualitative evidence for the ways they are
discriminated against by the officials. Anna Lucia, a 26-year-old Cucapá fisher woman,
was detained on the river when she was five months pregnant and fishing for corvina.
The officials told her and her crew to get out of the waters. When she refused, explaining
that she was Cucapá and these were their ancestral fishing grounds, they pointed their
rifles at her belly and led her out at gunpoint. She says she is not scared to fish despite
this experience on the river. But she thought that they would never have treated a
Mexican with such cruelty. Anna Lucia’s experience also raises the question of how the
prominence of fishing women in the Cucapá cooperative may also influence the conflict.
For a group of entirely male Mexican officials clad in uniform and yielding guns, the
persistently defiant stance of Cucapá fishing women against their authority may be
particularly emasculating.

In this case, the focus on indigeneity in the Cucapá’s legal battles may well have
reinforced the very structures of discrimination that disadvantaged them as a group in the
first place. While often indistinguishable to officials by appearance alone, the permits
which have allotted them slightly different fishing rights make them instantly identifiable
on the river, and their claims to differential rights have deepened the racism and prejudice
they experience while only minimally improving their access to fishing.

As the local incarnation of discourses and policies on multiculturalism begin to
unravel and lose their strategic potency, however, we have also seen the potential for new
alliances. Yet these alliances are currently rendered irrelevant by particular environmental discourses, such as links between other disenfranchised Mexican fishing cooperatives that suffer similar forms of discrimination. Because the region is poor, and fishing is a central source of income for surrounding communities as well, local residents have protested as the biosphere reserve has tried to enforce the bans. Mexican fishermen have been furious over the prohibition as well.

The View from Upstream

As the conflict continues in the delta over whether the Cucapá should fish on the grounds of the reserve and how to protect the local flora and fauna from further depletion, water continues to be siphoned off by over a dozen dams upstream. As plans are underway to line “The All American Canal” in Arizona and California, a $210 million project expected to prevent billions of gallons of Colorado River water from seeping into Mexico, Mexican environmental officials continue to haggle with the Cucapá over the few dozen boats that fish the nuclear zone each year. Instead of focusing on increasing the river’s flow through negotiations with the United States, Mexican government policies construe “over-fishing” as a principal cause of environmental degradation in the area.

Current environmental discourses have framed the debate in the delta in terms which have shaped the boundaries of the groups in conflict, as well as aligning them with and against each other in specific ways. They have done so by drawing on essentializing discourses about indigeneity and the environment, popularized by the transnational environmental movement and other international actors. Controversy over the
sustainability of the Cucapá’s relationship to nature moves the debate onto grounds where external assessments of their indigenous authenticity have become increasingly implicated in the environmental conflict. In the process, the environmental degradation of the Colorado River Delta has been largely represented as a “local” ecological crisis.

This degradation, however, like most ecosystem abuses, is not organized locally, but is rather underwritten by a powerful bureaucracy and business community in both the United States and Mexico. The Cucapá have experienced the brunt of the environmental damage to the delta, while simultaneously being targeted as objects of intervention. This focus implicitly exonerates more powerful political actors and institutions.

This ethnographic case also serves to remind us that environmental conflicts are not just about “the environment.” Sometimes, they become the terrain on which other ideological conflicts playout. In the case of the Cucapá fishing dispute, debates about the conservation of the river have become a battleground for struggles over how cultural difference should be recognized and what constitutes that difference in the first place.

Meanwhile, as fishing restrictions and low yields have made it increasingly difficult for residents of El Mayor to make a living fishing, other economic alternatives are being sought out. In the following chapter, I describe how some in El Mayor have responded to the criminalization of their fishing practices by seeking more lucrative illegal subsistence activities. I chart the rise of the narco-economy in the Colorado Delta by examining its effect on the lives of local residents.
House in El Mayor: “Fish for Sale”
CHAPTER THREE

“What Else Can I Do With a Boat and No Nets?” Narco-trafficking and the Alternatives at Home

It was late August. Six of us worked by the side of the river cutting tamarisk in a work project for the local river users’ association. It was only 7 am but already 100 degrees—the sun had been up for two hours. We were covered from head to toe in clothing to protect us from the sun’s rays and we were soaked with sweat. Some of us had large clippers, the rest had machetes. The task was to take down the massive overgrowth of tamarisks on the east side of the Hardy River, the tributary of the Colorado that still reaches El Mayor. The tamarisk, or *pino salado* (salt cedar) is the “invasive, water sucking species” that plagues the banks of the Colorado from Wyoming to Mexico. It is a thick shrubby tree that was introduced to the southwest United States from Eurasia near the turn of the 20th century. It is now a dominant plant in the Colorado basin—in addition to pushing out other species, the pino salado can absorb up to 300 gallons of water a day.

We were cutting around the few mesquite trees in the midst of the tamarisks’ growth. At 11 am, with a pounding headache from the sun, I retreated to the meager shade beside the association’s truck. I could do this because I was a volunteer. The rest would be paid 100 pesos (about 10 US dollars) for eight hours of this work. So they continued on for another three hours in the blazing sun; ripping out roots, thrashing down the thick bracket, hauling the refuse into piles and finally setting it all on fire.

In one break as the others joined me to crouch in the shade to drink water, Miguel, a 21-year-old Cucapá man, described how he made his living. He worked odd jobs such as this one when they presented themselves: sometimes he worked piling stones,
sometimes building roads through the sierra, and in the fishing season he was a helper for those that have permissions to fish outside the nuclear zone of the reserve in the Sea of Cortez. It is almost impossible to find enough work to pay for the mere cost of living in the border region.  

For a while the conversation turned to rumors of the massive wages that can be made in the United States. But with the minimum wage on the border of Mexico set to 40 pesos a day (approximately four US dollars), the tamarisk cut is not a bad day’s work for around here. Nonetheless, people in the area agree that Mexican wages are not fair.

Ten months later, Miguel pulled up in a pick-up to our house in El Mayor. He stepped out of the truck in beige alligator boots, a wide belt with a metal buckle and a cowboy hat: a restrained version of the classic chero style associated with the narco trafficker.\(^2\) He came to sell, or in this case lend, a gram of coke to my 19-year-old friend Leticia, who had texted him on his new phone. He pulled up only a half an hour later. I was not surprised to learn of Miguel’s career change, not only because I had seen my share of people move in and out of trafficking or “burrowing,” but because I had also seen the relentless and frustrating lack of other forms of viable work.

This chapter examines how families in El Mayor maintain the minimum level of income necessary to sustain themselves in a context where the primary subsistence activity - fishing - has been criminalized. Lack of work is a predominant anxiety in El Mayor. Unemployment in the delta is a result of the economic transformations that have

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\(^1\) Mexico’s border region has a high cost of living relative to other parts of the country. In fact, the border communities of Tijuana, Ciudad Juarez, Reynosa, and Matamoros are among the most costly places to live in the country, with costs of living comparable to the United States.

\(^2\) Many who are affiliated with the “narco-world” are said to be cheros (from the word rancheros or “ranchers”), referring to those who dress in the clothing of northern rural Mexico. This is a significant term because of the associations between narcotraficantes and rural roots discussed later in this chapter (see also Edberg 2004).
taken place over the last few decades, both through extreme environmental changes on the Colorado River and the rapid industrialization of the border since NAFTA and the rise of the maquila industry. In this chapter, I describe the complex web of global forces within which this site is positioned: free trade agreements, drug trade networks, industrialization, and water scarcity. In order to understand how El Mayor is linked to these border processes and predicaments we need to take a closer look at the pull of the drug trade as an economic alternative.

The drug trade is an undeniable fact of life in the US-Mexico border region. Carlos Loret de Mola (2001) notes that while Mexico is the 5th largest oil producing country in the world, the Mexican drug trade is twice as large as the nation’s oil sales. Using the same data, Loret de Mola concluded that profits from the country’s drug cartels are three times larger than the combined profits of Mexico’s 500 largest companies. Indeed, the traces of the narco-economy are everywhere in the border region: in the gang violence in the border cities, the drug addiction in rural enclaves and colonias, the vibrant folklore popularized in the narco-corridos of Nortena music and the icons of Jesús Malverde, the patron saint of narcotraficantes, tucked beneath the shirts of residents.¹

The pre-eminence of the drug economy and its everyday effects in El Mayor presents a set of practical and ethical obstacles for writing this chapter. Writing about drug abuse and illegal activities, even as a specific symptom of social marginalization, presents problems for the politics of representation. I am particularly concerned about the possibility of incriminating those people who have shared their experiences with me.

³ The terms burrero (mule) and narcotraficante both refer to those who work smuggling illicit drugs, however, “narcotraficante” is also used to refer to those who sell drugs. The two terms have different connotations as burrero, is slightly more derogatory and highlights the low status of the smuggler whereas narcotraficante is more celebratory and highlights the social power associated with the role.
Throughout this dissertation, I have used pseudonyms to maintain peoples’ anonymity. In this chapter, I have taken additional care in obscuring identities by both renaming the individuals who have already appeared and at points merging or separating identities to further complicate possible attempts to identify individuals. The disadvantage in this method is that it obscures the trajectory of life histories and undermines the complexity of the individual characters who described and 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. I apologize to those individuals who wanted their real names to accompany their experiences. Ultimately, I have decided to protect their identities at the expense of not individually acknowledging the credit and recognition they are owed.

Avoiding individual incrimination does not side-step the larger problem of portraying El Mayor in a negative light by describing illicit activities in the first place. The effects of this portrayal, as it is manifest in local stereotypes, are already impacting its residents. The perceived involvement of residents of El Mayor in the narco-economy has weakened local and NGO support for the Cucapa in their legal conflict over fishing rights in the zanjón. Some officials and local Mexicans have claimed that Cucapa fishing cooperatives are only an elaborate cover up for their drug trafficking operations. Officials argued that granting the Cucapa fishing rights would be equivalent to granting them permission to traffic drugs. Accusations about the community’s involvement in the narco-
economy or the nature of drug addiction more generally are a way for NGOs in the area to justify the desire not to be involved with El Mayor. The idea that any money they might make from economic project or eco-tourism will only be misused by some Cucapá to support their drug addictions is a common sentiment in local water users’ association meetings and other contexts.

It is precisely such popular racist stereotypes that motivate the imperative to sanitize vulnerable groups in ethnographic writing (Bourgois 2003). As Laura Nader (1972) put it: “Don’t study the poor and powerless because everything you say about them will be used against them.” Nader’s comment exemplifies the academic response to the frustration of writing about the deprivation of the poor and powerless. But more recent work on poverty and violence has convincingly argued that to avoid writing about suffering and self-destruction denies its very existence and thus I agree with Bourgois that “sanitizing suffering and destruction” makes one complicit with oppression (1996: 12; see also Goldstein 2003). Sheper-Hughes (1992) 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” (27-28).

Nonetheless, the effect of the drug economy in El Mayor was not a subject I initially intended to pursue. During 2006, when I carried out the bulk of my fieldwork, nine journalists who were reporting stories about the drug trade and related violence were killed in Northern Mexico. The new dominance of Mexican cartels has caused a spike in violence along the 2,000-mile US-Mexico border, where rival cartels have come into increasing conflict with Mexican and US authorities. Indeed, according to some sources,
in 2006 Mexico was the second most dangerous country for the media after Iraq (Ho 2007). It was clear that the drug trade was a topic that was dangerous to pursue. But in thinking I could avoid the subject, I was underestimating how deeply the narco-economy affected the lives of people in this region. In the end, I scarcely had to ask: people came to me with these stories anyway. And the sheer pervasiveness of the narco-economy's effects on the lives of my informants in El Mayor is one of the reasons their stories need to be told.

Beyond El Mayor, the Colorado Delta stretches out in desert and salt flats where, some days, the only people to be seen for miles are military patrols on guard for drug traffickers. Trucks full of soldiers and armed lookouts are both a recurrent aspect of the landscape and a constant reminder of the narco presence and the resulting militarization of the region. These conditions also permeate the daily life of the residents of El Mayor. To avoid writing about this would belie the hope, and the suffering that the narco-economy brings to the residents of this region. As Cruz explained, the narco-economy in this region "has touched everyone somehow at sometime."

There is also significant clarification that can be accomplished by writing about this topic. For the most part, people within and without the community tend to exaggerate the extent and character of the involvement of people from El Mayor in the drug economy. There are rampant accusations that certain people are involved in the "Mexican Mafia" at a very high level. But through my observations and interviews I could confirm that people have low-level affiliations with the Mafia families. The role available to them is that of the burrero or pollero ("mules" in English or low wage transporters).
and it is a role in which they are significantly exploited. An additional, important clarification is that the drug economy has emerged, in part, as a supplement to fishing. In other words, fishing is not emerging as a "cover" for drug trafficking.

The Cucapá have become a target labor force for the Mexican mafia for the same geographic and economic reasons that other border tribes have; they are poor enough to take risks trafficking and are strategically located geographically en route in necessary trafficking corridors. They also know this land. Some from El Mayor also have permits to navigate stretches of the upper river and as a result are in a strategic position to traffic goods up the river as well.

It is important to note that the collusion of local indigenous people in the narco-economy is multi-directional and has also involved attempts by state agencies to recruit them in anti-smuggling operations. Just as smugglers have enlisted the tracking skills of tribal members, or forced them into cooperation, a recent article in the International Herald Tribune (Archibold 2007) chronicles the growing appreciation of US Federal employees for the skill of tracking among the Tohono O’odham in both the US and Mexico. The "Shadow Wolves," for example, are a US federal law enforcement unit of Indian officers that has operated since the early 1970s on the indigenous land straddling the Mexican border. One man I interviewed from El Mayor described his work as a military guide for the Mexican government. He described his assistance in tracking smugglers through the Sierra on Cucapá land and also claimed that others from El Mayor had also worked in this capacity, though no one else volunteered similar stories.

The concept of "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" (also known as TEK) is now a
common component to the projects of socially conscious conservation NGOs. The premise behind the concept is that indigenous people who have been living for generations in a particular environment develop intimate familiarity with it, render it culturally sensible or salient, and encode it linguistically (Krech 2005; Posey 2004; Sillitoe et al. 2002). The misuse of traditional knowledge in the management of natural resources, particularly by bureaucrats, has been a central concern among scholars of TEK (Menzies 2006). This work has criticized bureaucrats for either ignoring TEK or using a decontextualized, static form of it removed from its local context and traditions of use (Anderson 2007). Scholars of TEK have been criticized for essentializing these forms of knowledge (Anderson 2007), and for creating simplistic oppositions between them and Western science (Agrawal 1995; Dove 2005). However, less attention has been paid to how the commodification of traditional and indigenous knowledge has been taken up by other kinds of actors. The enlistment of Cucapá people into the projects of both the Mexican Mafia and the military exemplifies the diverse ways that their knowledge of the land and river is mobilized.

This chapter opens a window onto why some in El Mayor refuse, or are refused, work in the formal economy. Based on in-depth interviews of work histories, I argue that work in factories and tourist camps belies a powerful ideology of self-sufficiency and family management that has carried over from the organization of labor around the nuclear family in the context of fishing. This organizational arrangement lends itself, rather, to more illicit and independent economic activities, such as drug trafficking and smuggling. I argue, furthermore, that narco trafficking is seen by some as a form of
resistance to US and Mexican domination, albeit a multi-dimensional resistance shaped by the internal politics of El Mayor. For those who have taken this alternative, they have retained a sense of pride and defiance drawn from the cultural salience of the Northern Mexican persona of the narcotraficante.

A Crystalline Landscape: Drugs and Everyday Life in El Mayor

Esperanza draws slowly on her filter-less Delicado (a popular brand of cigarettes in Mexico) and shakes her head back and forth. “Muy cochino” (it’s filthy) she says, referring to the general state of things in El Mayor. She is sitting out in front of the one-room museum, which is located at the edge of El Mayor facing the road that runs north to Mexicali and south to the Sea of Cortez and San Felipe. The museum she guards features an array of photographs and beadwork, but it is almost impossible to make out these artifacts in the dark, windowless room with no electricity. Nonetheless, Esperanza sits in front of the building everyday on a bench beneath the Mesquite tree, beading chakira and waiting - in case someone arrives. From this vantage point, she watches everyone and everything that comes in and out of El Mayor.

Every few days, I sit with Esperanza for several hours, recording her eloquently performed stories, gossiping, and learning Cucapá. Our conversations are punctuated by every vehicle that comes or goes. She lifts her head from her beads, interrupting her own stories at every vehicle or body that passes. If she does not know who it is, she asks: “Who is that?” and then she will guess. If I did not sit down with her the day before then, she will catalogue the unidentified vehicles, sometimes enlisting my help: “Do you know who would have come through in a red truck with a missing hubcap?” But most of the
time these unidentified vehicles are understood through the framework she has already delimited. “The soldiers have arrived in that house to buy drugs” or “Look who just stopped in there with Daniela. They are going to buy drugs, you know. Pura drogas, puro drogadictos, andando cristalino (all drugs, all drug-addicts going around high on crystal).”

One day, Esperanza slowly, dramatically, extracted a faded newspaper clipping from her bag. She looked around to make sure no one was watching and passed it to me. It was a 1998 article from La Voz de la Frontera, a Mexicali newspaper. The headline read: “Soldiers confiscate 1,250 Kilos of Marijuana” and the article described the military confronting three boats on the Sea of Cortez and arresting several men, two of whom, names underlined, are from El Mayor. Esperanza shook her head again, “muy cochino.” She told me to take the clipping into town to make a copy – she has more such articles back in her house.

Esperanza is several years older than her brother, Don Madeleno. Over the course of their lifetimes, they have seen things change dramatically in El Mayor. They narrate these transformations in distinctly different manners. As I described in chapter one, Don Madeleno understands these changes in relation to the end of the river and the abuses of the Mexican government. For Esperanza, the trauma of these changes is manifest in the terrifying effects of drug addiction and trafficking in El Mayor. Esperanza fixates on the internal symptoms of marginalization and feels that the most serious problems facing El Mayor are illegal activity and drug addiction.

Methamphetamine, a psycho-stimulant popularly known as “crystal meth” and cristal in Spanish, is the drug that has had the most visible effect on El Mayor. This can
been partly accounted for by the recent surge in the drug’s availability in this area. Mexican methamphetamine production has been increasing dramatically in the past few years since the US government "cracked down" on domestic US production. The Los Angeles Times reported in 2006 that US authorities now estimate that 80% of the methamphetamine on US streets is controlled by Mexican drug traffickers, with most of the supply smuggled in from Mexico. Methamphetamine seizures at the US-Mexico border jumped 50% from 2003 through 2005, from 4,030 to 6,063 pounds. In Mexicali, several labs have been exposed after erupting in flames (Marosi 2006).

According to the American Psychiatric Manual (1996), methamphetamine accomplishes its effect by acting as a dopamine and adrenergic reuptake inhibitor which causes euphoria and excitement. Users often become obsessed with performing repetitive tasks such as cleaning, hand-washing, or assembling and disassembling objects. Withdrawal is characterized by hypersomnia and depression-like symptoms, often accompanied by anxiety and drug-craving.

In reality, the drug affects different people very differently. This variability was a source of fascination to Thalia, the 16-year-old girl who lived next door to the house where I stayed. She could imitate a handful of family, neighbors and friends smoking cristal. One day, she tried to explain how the drug worked: “It’s a high that hits you fast so you can see it take its effect almost immediately. It doesn’t affect them all in the same way.” She mimicked the sharp inhalation with fingers poised in the downward pinch of the light. Then she enacted the concentrated hold of smoke in the lungs and its euphoric release. She followed this demonstration by describing the various after effects. “Rosalina just sits staring into the space around her, she laughs too late, talks too slow.
Chicho talks and talks too fast, too much. When Cruz gets high, he goes all night in a frenzy of activity; he’ll take the broom and sweep the sand in the front of the house until dawn.” She stood up and imitated his frenzied hypnotic movements and the vacant look in his expression.

The expertise with which Thalia performed her inventory of effects, to the nervous laughter of myself and her mother, is only one of the everyday marks of the narco-economy in El Mayor. Substance abuse is a symptom of deeper dynamics of social marginalization and alienation. It is a response to poverty and segregation that is experienced by major sectors of any vulnerable population experiencing rapid structural change in the context of political and ideological oppression (cf. Bourgois 2003). Drug addiction and use in El Mayor, however, is not the principal focus of this chapter. I am more concerned about telling a story of how the narco-economy itself has emerged as an economic alternative to factory work and other income earning strategies in the formal economy.

Alternatives to Fishing

There have been dozens of government and non-governmental initiatives in El Mayor that set out to mitigate the effects of environmental degradation and economic displacement through temporary work projects, cultural initiatives, environmental management programs and other support for integration into the border economy. While some people in El Mayor have taken up jobs in factories, tourist camps and projects with NGOs, most have not.
Mario Rivas, a representative from the Commission of Indigenous Development (CDI) put the problem as follows: "There are so many NGOs proposing projects, or involved in some way or other in the development of El Mayor, that there are practically enough for every family to have its own NGO. So how is it possible that with all this funding and interest, these NGOs can't manage to do anything to improve the basic quality of life in this place?" The question of why the economic alternatives that are proposed by dozens of NGOs in the area are often unsuccessful is not something I can fully answer. However, while these projects and the organizations themselves are extremely heterogeneous, one project in particular is helpful in providing a sense of the dynamic at work here.

In 2005, the Colorado River and Hardy River Water Users' Association helped CDI implement a work project in El Mayor. It involved hiring local people to clear the garbage from the pueblo and nearby roads and riverbanks. Because there is no facility for garbage disposal in El Mayor, residents often burn or dump their garbage beside or behind their houses. Abandoned rusted out bedsprings, crippled car parts, old tires, broken appliances and burnt-out air conditioners are highly visible landmarks for visitors to the pueblo. Officials and NGO workers, the primary foreigners that visit El Mayor, cringe to see children playing in rubble. Furthermore, the potential environmental hazards of the prevalence of such waste and the impact on air quality from the fumes of garbage is a common concern in meetings of the local water users' association.

Half-way through the trash-collection project, however, the officials from both of the organizations involved noticed that the contracted workers from El Mayor were not completing the work quickly enough to fulfill the contracts. Edith, a representative from
the water users' association, described to me afterwards what happened after they made this discovery. By the time the representatives from the associations were supposed to pay the workers, the job still was not complete. Therefore, at a meeting for the project in Adriana's house in El Mayor, Edith explained to the workers that they would only be paid half of the promised wages then and the rest after the project was finished. The workers were outraged. They surrounded Adriana's house and would not let Edith, or the official from CDI, leave until they had been paid the promised wages. Edith was understandably shaken by this experience and since then has tried not to go into El Mayor when she can avoid it.

From the perspective of the government officials and NGO workers, this was the kind of behavior that was "typical" of the Cucapá. "They won't even clean up their own garbage if they're paid to do it!" commented one member of the water users' association. The frustrations around these work projects from the perspective of many NGO workers center around the general apathy they identify, as well as the political difficulties in working with the deeply divided community. NGOs tend to negotiate with a very small handful of local residents: especially, either Esperanza and her daughter Manuela or Esperanza's brother Don Madeleno (the chief) and his wife. Projects begin by consulting this small group of people to obtain permission and contacts. The result is that there is very little interaction with other residents of El Mayor. Guadalupe, the field officer from the water users association, was from a ranch very close by El Mayor and was already well known by community members from the time when he was a vaquero (ranch hand) in the area. But he felt that he really did not know anyone there. "They are too hard to get to know. There is little interest and so much suspicion."
The perspective of participants in these projects on why NGO work programs tended to be unsuccessful was quite different. As Cruz described in chapter two, there were dozens of initiatives in the region but very few of them ever materialized. They come in with promise of work and grand ideas, he said, but somehow the bulk of the money never reaches El Mayor. While NGO workers and representatives from government agencies often attributed failed projects to the divisions in El Mayor, or to lack of interest and participation, people in El Mayor attributed these failures to corruption in the government and NGOs themselves. According to this view, the money “disappears” before it can ever reach them.

The residents of El Mayor that I talked to tended to view NGO projects and workers as a homogenous entity, in a similar way to how they are homogenized by some NGO workers. Don Madeleno, for instance, expressed confusion on more than one occasion in regards to the links between NGOs, Government Agencies, and the officials of the environmental reserve that were in charge of enforcing fishing restrictions. The blurring of boundaries between the intentions of NGOs and those of the government was exacerbated by the kinds of projects that were routinely introduced in the area. The overriding focus of every initiative was to find “alternative” sources of income to help ease the Cucapá into the border economy as a way of replacing wages lost in fishing. Yet this goal blatantly contradicted the political project that most people in El Mayor were committed to in some form or other, which was to win back their rights to fish in their traditional grounds and, if necessary, to continue to fish in protest of restrictions. They wanted to fish, not to make crafts out of tamarisk or build eco-tourism camps for “gringos” on the river, as some of the projects proposed.
The fact that that many of these work projects fail and that many Cucapá are not interested in participating is often used as evidence of their "laziness" and as a sign of their complicity in the reproduction of the conditions of poverty in which they live. But as the stories from people in El Mayor will show, together with the influx of legal "alternatives", another more lucrative and prestigious economic alternative has sometimes quite literally come knocking on local doors.

**From Factories to Corridors: Navigating the Border Economy**

The US-Mexico border is characterized by high levels of poverty, migration, population flux and the proliferation of cross-border factories known as "maquilas" (or maquiladoras). In the past several decades, maquilas have become the prevalent organization of labor in Mexico among transnational corporations. They consist of administrative and technical operations located in the US (or in another home country) and assembly sites located in Mexico, where inexpensive labor can be found (Dwyer 1994). These corporations import duty-free parts to be assembled in Mexico and the finished product is re-exported to the US. The maquiladora sector was originally created with government support in 1965 to stimulate investment, encourage industrial development at the border, and create jobs for unemployed Mexicans affected by the termination of the Bracero (guest worker) program. With the implementation of NAFTA in 1994, which eliminated tariffs for trade to the US and Canada, the maquiladora sector grew markedly, with a 40% industrial growth in Mexicali alone.

Mexicali, the capital of Baja California, is the closest urban center to El Mayor (an
hour and a half drive) and typifies the kinds of cities that line the Mexican side of the border. It is a major urban border center with a population of approximately 850,000 and characterized by significant poverty in colonias, or slums, juxtaposed by visible wealth due to the dominant presence of maquila industries and the drug trade. During the 1990s, when the factories were starting to proliferate in the area, there were campaigns to recruit workers from ejidos and colonias outside of the city of Mexicali. At the time, dozens of people from El Mayor signed on to work in these factories, especially women who were specifically targeted by recruiters (Tiano 1994). When I conducted my fieldwork almost ten years later, there were only two women still working in the maquilas: they were Perla and Lupe, both single mothers with several children. They worked from 4 pm to 1 am four days a week in a factory which made medical masks. Perla told me she did not think the pay was good but she thought that it was, realistically, the best work she would be able to find.

When I interviewed people about their work histories, they often expressed how demoralizing working conditions in tourist camps, farms and factories were. There are a handful of tourist camps close to El Mayor that primarily cater to Mexican and American hunters and fishers during the holidays and weekends. They generally consist of camp-ground facilities. Campo Mosquedo also rents camping lodges and has a restaurant which is primarily staffed by residents of El Mayor. Often Cucapá people are also hired on as guides for hunting expeditions. Work in the tourist industry has become increasingly difficult to find, particularly because fishing and hunting has become less popular in the area as wildlife has become less abundant over the last few decades.
Manuela and Ana, the two women I was closest to in El Mayor, had both worked in the factories in the 1980s. Manuela worked in a factory that made technological parts for televisions. An eight-hour shift paid about 8 US dollars, which at the time seemed like a good wage (well over twice the minimum wage). But she found the working conditions unbearable. She mentioned the 15-minute break to eat, not being allowed to talk to her neighbor and not being allowed to chew gum. She also emphasized the constant surveillance of the factory floor to enforce these rules. She said that working there made her feel like “the most humiliated dog in the world.”

Manuela explained that the fact that the majority of people from El Mayor stopped working at the factories, or were fired, was because they were unable to tolerate these humiliating working conditions. They were jobs where they had little personal responsibility and had to follow strict rules. Accounts of working conditions in the factories from people in El Mayor complement the literature on factory life in the border zone. To keep production high and costs low, maquiladoras have been documented to have harsh working environments, which include low wages, forced overtime, and illegal working conditions for minors (Carrillo 1990; Contreras Montellano 2000; Iglesias Priet 1997; Kopinak 1999; Seligson 1981). Interestingly, many people in El Mayor had a story about rejecting intolerable working conditions in the factories, but these stories tended to highlight subjective notions of dignity, rather than the poor wages or unsafe working conditions. Hostile Mexican and often American supervisors were a common feature of these stories.

As a result, work in the Mexicali factories is currently not seen as a viable
economic alternative for people in El Mayor. Nonetheless, lack of work at the local level is often identified as a major problem by residents. Since the 1997 creation of the biosphere reserve, increasing restrictions on fishing have significantly eroded the principal form of subsistence in El Mayor. Pepe, a 39-year-old man who has fished since he was 6, explained that as the fishing season has shrunk to three or four months a year some people have tried to make the money last for the rest of the year because there is very little supplementary income. But the money does not last.

According to data from the National Indigenous Institute from 2002, the volume of fish caught annually by the Comunal de Producción Pesquera Cucapá (the fishing cooperative) is 7.8 tons per boat. Since the cooperative operates 32 boats, the total catch is 250 tons in the season. In economic terms, 250 tones at $6,000.00 per ton, represents 1,500,00.00 pesos. Divided by 12 months and 32 boats, this is 3,906.25 pesos per month, per boat (about 400 US dollars split unevenly by a crew of three or four people). This estimate does not calculate the high cost of overhead. Gas for one fishing trip alone is 50 US dollars. According to statistics gathered in 2005, the annual income of the average family in El Mayor, as represented in Figure 4, is less than 20,000 pesos which is $2,000 US (the data is based on a sample of 35 families, Source: Pronatura, 2005).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANNUAL INCOME ($ Mexican pesos)¹</th>
<th>NUMBER OF HOMES</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF HOMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 20,000</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20,001-40,000</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40,001-60,000</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60,001-80,000</td>
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<td>80,001-100,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt; 100,000</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 4: Annual Family Income in El Mayor
These monthly wages are not sufficient to support a family. It costs approximately 400 US dollars a month for food for a family of five in El Mayor. On average, families spend close to 40 US dollars a month on drinking water and water for other domestic uses and approximately 20 US dollars on electricity. Pepe explains that people try to supplement their income in various ways: construction, selling scrap metal, government work projects. The narco-economy has emerged as a supplement to the shrinking fishing season and increasing difficulties fishing corvina. The reason so many people end up in narco trafficking, according to Pepe, is because these other alternatives simply do not pay enough to support a family.

**The Colombianization of the Mexican Border**

In recent years, the escalation of drug-related violence and corruption in Mexico has frequently featured in local and international news hailing the “Colombianization” of Mexico (O’Neil 2007; Roig-Franzia and Forero 2007; Walden 2007). The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) estimates that 65 percent of all narcotics smuggled into the US now enter from Mexico (Harmon 2005). While the Colombian cartels still control most of the production of cocaine and heroin, the more profitable part of the trade - transport to the US and distribution there - has come under the control of various Mexican cartels (Harmon 2005). As a result, Mexican drug lords are in control of what the U.N. estimates is a $142 billion a year business in cocaine, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, and other illicit drugs. According to the Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, as much as 90 percent of the cocaine sold in the US in 2004 was smuggled through Mexican territory. Mexico is also the second largest
supplier of heroin, the largest foreign source of marijuana, and the largest producer of
methamphetamine for the US market (ibid 2006).

Given their proximity to the US, the "borderlands" of Northern Mexico are a
center for narco-activity, run primarily by cartels located in the border cities of Tijuana,
Ciudad Juárez and Nogales. The indigenous groups that exist in this area, in particular,
have been negatively affected by the escalation of the trafficking of narcotics and its
production. Perramond (2004) has documented how some Raramuri (known as
Tarahumara in English) who inhabit the Sierra Madre Occidental range that runs between
the states of Sonora and Chihuahua are involved in small-scale marijuana production and
are often forced into production ventures by traffickers in the region. There is a similar
incidence of involvement among the Papago (or Tohono O'odham in the US), whose tribal
land stretches 76 miles along the US-Mexican border. Most of the illicit goods that pass
over this land goes through dry river channels packed on domesticated livestock or carried
by migrant couriers. Cucapá land is similarly located in geographic coincidence with the
narco routes - stretching across the desert corridor between San Felipe and Mexicali: the
principal throughway from the sea of Cortez to the border.

Drug shipments reach this area by being flown from Colombia to Mexico in small
planes or, in the case of marijuana and methamphetamine, by being produced locally.
Then they are shipped into the United States by boat, private vehicles, or in commercial
trucks crossing the border. There is a permanent military checkpoint at the junction with
Ensenada Road, just north of the Sea of Cortez, which makes it difficult to cross the
desert corridor by land vehicle alone. Planes are the other option traffickers rely on. They
land in the white expanse of the Sonoran desert and from there they disembark and risk the rest heading north on route 5 above the checkpoint. The winding roads that connect the sparsely populated settlements through this part of the desert are gouged with diagonal ditches to prevent easy landings. Another option for traffickers is to take the goods on boats up the river to avoid the security check-point and disembark upstream.

In El Mayor, smuggling has become an economic alternative that pays relatively good wages (though not in the long term, from my assessment, when risks of imprisonment are factored in), and allows people to maintain some dignity by making them feel they are in charge of their own operation. Hence, the narco-economy presents an apparent alternative to the social marginalization that many in El Mayor experience, especially because it allows people to reproduce economic networks through the family and also often utilizes the very same equipment as fishing (such as boats and out-board motors).

In tandem with the rise of narcotrafficking, a cultural persona of the narcotraficante has also emerged (Edberg 2004). The social salience of the narcotraficante indexes a historical border persona recognizable in revolutionary heroes such as Pancho Villa, a popular lower class military leader of the Mexican revolution, as well as legendary outlaws such as Joaquin Murrieta, who was an infamous bandit in Baja California and Sonora. The narcotraficante, like these historical figures, is ideologically located in a particular structure of poverty and social stratification. Edberg argues (2004) that the persona is positioned vis-à-vis the economic conditions of the border where long-term structural configurations of power are organized around a central tension: US versus
Mexico, elite versus non-elite, and periphery versus centre. In recent years, as border restrictions have tightened and immigration laws have been restricted, the antagonism on the border has increased as protests and an increase in illegal crossings have proliferated (Negron 2007).

Despite the social salience and perceived economic viability of narcotrafficking, how people in El Mayor view these activities is extremely contested. Schneider and Schneider (2005), in their work on the Sicilian mafia, argue that there is an all too common tendency to criminalize entire populations believed to be engaged in illegal activities. To counter such stereotypes of Sicily, they trace the contrasting values and practices associated with the mafia and anti-mafia forms among the Sicilian population. Similarly, in order to outline the differentiated forms of engagement with the narco-economy in this region, in the following sections I explore how the various ideologies of work in El Mayor situate work in the narco-economy and shape the forms of agency it comes to express.

**Ideologies of Work in El Mayor**

I began tracing ideologies of work in El Mayor in November of 2005, only several months into my fieldwork, when the Cucapá tribe hosted a festival and invited the other Cucapá communities and other tribes in Baja California and Sonora. Several hundred people attended the day and night of eating, singing and dancing. There were also a handful of municipal officials, journalists and other media personalities. A local and fairly well known radio show host named Raúl Law tracked me down and asked me to do an interview about my experiences doing research with the Cucapá. At first, I adamantly
refused. I was irritated and embarrassed by the fact that, with so many Cucapá present, the media would single out the foreigner in order to learn about “Cucapá culture.” I was equally filled with panic at the thought of a live interview in my still very nervous Spanish. But, Ana, the mother of the family I was staying with, urged me to do the interview, excited at the prospect that I would be on the radio, and I finally relented.

Raúl began by asking questions about my research and my experiences living in El Mayor. The bulk of the interview focused on my assessment of the social injustice the Cucapá have experienced in relation to the Colorado River and their fishing rights. I felt tense all along during all of this as I was acutely aware that the very people I was describing could easily listen to my analysis the very next day, when the interview aired on Raúl’s show. Then, Raúl concluded the interview by suggesting that perhaps the problem for the Cucapá was not racism or environmental marginalization, as I had argued, but rather, quite simply, that the Cucapá people were “lazy.” “People say,” he indicated cautiously, “that the Cucapá are simply lazy and would prefer not to work than to work. What is your opinion on this?”

I did not hesitate to provide a classic anthropological critique of “the culture of poverty” explanation, a view that I had become quite accustomed to from my interactions with Mexican officials and non-Cucapá neighbors. I said that I thought the people who said such things were simply wrong and were blaming the victims for a problem that was much larger that anything that the Cucapá could control on their own. Both Raúl and I were satisfied with my answer and I felt confident that I had defended the Cucapá and escaped the interview without offending anyone whose opinion I particularly cared about.
The day after the interview aired, a few people in El Mayor who had listened to it commented on it. They were pleased that I had drawn attention to many of the problems in El Mayor. But there was one thing that several people thought I was simply wrong about. “How could you say that the people here aren’t lazy? Look at this place!” When pressed to elaborate, they explained that the people in El Mayor were lazy because when the maquiladora buses come through to take people to work graveyard shifts in the factories in Mexicali only a handful go, preferring instead to suffer in their own poverty or join in illegal activities. I tried to counter this by suggesting that maybe terrible working conditions and negligible wages, instead of laziness, were the reasons people do not go to work in the factories, on the farms, or in the tourist camps. I added that I certainly would not go. Then, several pointed out that I am fairly lazy myself, since, as Ruby, the daughter in the family where I stayed, put it, I mostly “just sit around writing in my notebook and recording things.”

This experience introduced me to the dominant local narratives that revolve around the problem of work in El Mayor. These discourses align roughly with classic scholarly debates around structure and agency in sociology and anthropology by alternating between explanations which emphasize individual responsibility, on the one hand, and the social structural constraints around access to work, on the other. Officials and some Cucapá take on a series of racialized responses to the Cucapá’s resistance or failure to integrate into the legal economy, describing the Cucapá’s failure to “adapt” and get jobs in the border industries through an idiom of ingrained poverty, deprivation, and inherent “laziness.” The competing discourse shared by many other Cucapá is that the interlocking structural forces compounded by ethnic, economic and environmental
marginalization severely limit their options and that their choices are constrained by these circumstances.

My own nascent analysis of the poverty experienced in El Mayor, expressed in my radio interview with Raúl, insisted that the “self-destructive” lifestyle that drives people into the drug economy needs to be contextualized in a history of hostile ethnic relations and structural economic dislocation (cf. Bourgois 2003). My friends in El Mayor, however, continually reminded me that their own responsibility for their choices needed equal attention. By drawing attention to the interface between structural oppression and individual action, I started to track the way these tensions were lived out and described by the individuals who shared their stories with me.

Structures of Agency and Cultures of Poverty

The relationship between structure and agency is part of a central conceptual debate in anthropology. In its simplest expression, it poses the question of whether social structures determine an individual's behavior or whether human agency creates these structures. Most contemporary theorists attempt to strike a balance between the two positions and the most notable attempts at reconciling these views are designed to resolve or dissolve that opposition. The concept of “structuration” (Giddens 1986) and various articulations of practice theory (Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1988; Ortner 1984) are attempts to move beyond the duality inherent in the structure-agency dilemma. By these accounts, practice creates structures and these structures shape agency. Yet many of these perspectives have invariably met the critique that they fail to transcend this dichotomy (Connell 1987; Smith 1999; McElhinny 2003), Bourdieu’s notion of habitus has been
especially susceptible to this critique because of its structuralist overtones (King 2000; Schatzki 1997). Thus, the difficulty of theoretically navigating the dilemma in a way that neither reduces it to a structure, on one hand, or a causal theory on the other has persisted for social theorists.

Neither those approaches which have attempted to resolve the dualism between structure and agency or sidestep the opposition on other grounds are particularly helpful in sorting through the way versions of these discourses might actually get taken up by the people that we study. The tension between these views of social action is part of the way people understand the conflicted position they inhabit in El Mayor. My position, in this regard, is that it is important to examine ethnographically how people on the ground relate to both aspects of the dichotomy, rather than resolving it at an abstract level. In El Mayor, talk about poverty, drug trafficking and violence is articulated through both “perspectives” by different groups. The tension between these views of sociality are part of the way people understand the conflicted positions they occupy in El Mayor in relation to wider changes. Some would argue that their predicament was a direct result of various forms of discrimination and others would argue that the incidence of drug trafficking and poverty more generally was a self-inflicted reproduction of poverty. Those most involved in the narco-economy articulated their own agency in direct reference to the structural constraints that shaped it. They drew on the tension between structure and agency to highlight their practices as forms of resistance. I also found that people would argue with each other and myself over the character of their agency, constantly negotiating the quality of their subjectivity: that is, whether they were victims, huevones (lazy asses), or revolutionaries.
Soldiers stop in El Mayor for water
Lived Antinomies: Victims, Huevones and Revolutionaries

Emmanuel, a Cucapá man in his late forties, argued that the excuses people gave for why there was so much involvement in drugs were generally off the mark. Quoting many others I had spoken to and with whom I was generally sympathetic, I suggested that the prominence of narco related activities could be accounted for by the lack of formal work in the region. Emmanuel responded as follows:

There are ways to work in the region but the narco-economy is easier. It’s fast because we are on the border. There is a lot of work here. They say there is none but, pardon the expression, they’re huevones (lazy asses). You can make 1,500 dollars in one night transporting drugs. The minimum wage in this region is 5 dollars a day.

Emmanuel gave an economic rationale for why individuals choose to work in trafficking. His understanding of the reasons some people in El Mayor were drawn into working as drug mules or burreros was by no means the dominant local discourse, but it was similar to the stories people told about how residents were responsible for their involvement in the narco-economy because there are always other options for legitimate work.

Manuela had a particularly developed version of this opinion. She felt that economically things had changed for the better since the Colorado River ceased to reach them. She argued that daily life was much more difficult when they depended on the river for their subsistence. In contrast to the romanticized and idyllic invocations of the past by some Cucapá, who emphasize that there were so many fish in the river that they would jump right into your boat and that ducks clouded the sky, Manuela remembered her childhood as an impoverished time when the prospect of finding food on the table was precariously tied to the whims of the river. Sometimes, there were simply no fish to
catch and they would eat bean tortillas day after day. She described how she would
rummage through garbage in the tourist camps for scraps with her siblings. Now Manuela
receives a small but steady government stipend for her mother and herself to keep El
Mayor’s museum open. She believes that she has adapted to the new circumstances in a
way that is ultimately better. Manuela also pointed out her sister, who is El Mayor’s
nurse, as another example of someone who has successfully adapted. Manuela claims
that the problem exists for those people who are still trying to survive off a river which
no longer exists.

Some people resented Manuela’s attitude, as well as the government stipend
which they claimed allowed her to make such an egregious generalization. This line of
reasoning particularly frustrated 19-year-old Isabella. Her own narration of her
experience being lured into trafficking helps throw into relief the sense of limited options
available to those in situations like her own.

Isabella would often come to me when she was in trouble. She is a vivacious
young woman, ambitious and full of enthusiasm for the world. She did not like El Mayor;
she had never fit in there and had few friends. She spent most of her time trying to find
her way out. This involved a series of dangerous strategies to secure her own finances.
She worked in a glass factory in Mexicali for a month but was eventually let go.
Occasionally she would clean houses. During my time in El Mayor, Isabella also had a
more informal array of strategies to supplement her income.

What got her in the most trouble was a racket she had worked out with a few
different boyfriends. At one time, she had two men simultaneously convinced that she
was pregnant and she demanded money from both for doctors’ appointments or cell credit
(so that she could keep in touch). And when things would sometimes come undone, she came to me. There was plenty of opportunity for trouble: real pregnancy for instance, or one alleged father having an unfortunate conversation with the other. Sometimes they would even ask for documentation of the pregnancy. When I suggested that it might be easier to just get regular work, Isabella explained that it was simply too difficult to find steady work.

Isabella: They don’t give you work because you don’t have this or that, you don’t have primary or secondary school. So people go to what’s easier. Partially, it’s for lack of education that they don’t give us work.
SM: Is there discrimination?
Isabella: Yes. A lot. People don’t accept what we are.
SM: What are you?
Isabella: Cucapá! They know that we live in El Mayor. We have to submit credentials. People say we’re rats, drug addicts, drunks. There are people who talk like this. That’s the way they are. That’s the way they were born and the way they’ll die. When we used to go to secondary school on the bus to Durango, they would say to me “Qué india ratera. Qué pinché puta india. Los indios no valen nada” (what a rat of an Indian, what a damn Indian whore, the Indians are worthless).”

Isabella explained that it was bad enough for the men in El Mayor to find work — for women it was almost impossible. “There is not as much work. There are more opportunities for men than women to work. Here, women can only work in the factories.”

So when Isabella came to me one evening in a panic, explaining that she desperately needed to talk about something, I assumed that perhaps she was actually pregnant — a scare she had brought me only several weeks before. But she said she had another problem, worse than the last. She begged me not to get mad at her before explaining that she had a package she had to take to Mexicali. They would come after
her if she did not get it in tonight. She had had it for a while and had been so scared. She had changed her mind and did not want to go through with it anymore.

She explained that the friends who offered her the job said they would pay her 200 US dollars for a simple delivery. She thought it was a lot of money at first, but now she thought it was not worth it. She was too scared and did not want to go. But she knew that the reality was that not going through with it was more dangerous than making the delivery. They were calling her cell phone and threatening her. They would come to the house if she did not take the package to them.

It occurred to me at this point that Isabella had come to me hoping that I would either convince her not to go through with the delivery or that I would offer her a ride. I was disturbed that she had assumed that my willingness to clandestinely provide her with pregnancy tests might indicate a similar willingness to smuggle out drugs. I was also angry that she was putting me in such an impossible situation. I could not help her but from that point on I knew I would be complicit in any harm that might befall her.

So she planned that she would go to Mexicali with the man who was there to buy fish from her mother. He would be taking it into the city to sell later that night. We were waiting for the fish outside of her uncle’s house; he would bring them from the zanjón. The plan was that she would go back with the fish buyer. She would put the package in with her sanitary napkins and ask him to drive slowly, so that they would be less likely to be pulled over. She started to calm down, confident with her new plan. I went back to the house as they waited to make their fish deal. Time passed and hours later when Isabella returned, she said it was over - she had completed her task.
The next day she was on to the next thing: she had given the money she had earned to her mother. I could not get her to revisit the episode; it was no longer interesting to her. Her mother, who had figured out what was happening, did not want to talk about it either. But several weeks later, when I started talking about how I was planning to write a chapter on drug trafficking in my dissertation, Isabella took me aside and told me she wanted to record her story for my chapter too.

Isabella: I've worked cleaning houses, crossing drugs, a lot of things. I had to cross (cruzar) drugs out of necessity. There are moments when you can't find money and you become desperate because you want to find money to help your family. And this moment arrived for me. I had to find work, I had to do something because I thought I had to support my home. And when they wouldn't give me work where I wanted it, I had to put myself to work in what I could.

SM: Why? Was your family having problems?
Isabella: Yes, lots of problems.
SM: What kind?
Isabella: My parents were leaving. My brother left the house, came back, had a baby. My sister too. Then, my brother spent two months in the jail. They caught my brother in the zanjón for doing things he shouldn't have, well, supposedly. He says he wasn't doing anything. We'll leave it there.

SM: How did you get this work?
Isabella: I got it from people; I know that you already know. I asked for it. For this, you have to be really serious and not say anything to anyone.
SM: What did you have to do?
Isabella: Nothing, just take the stuff and deliver it secretly and not be nervous. That's the first thing that you have to do, not get nervous.
SM: When did you realize that it was a dangerous thing?
Isabella: For a child like me, not knowing what problems I was getting into. At first, it seemed easy to do but when the days and months were passing when you can't always get it in [to Mexicali], I started to feel scared.

SM: Why did you have it so long?
Isabella: You are left thinking, with whom can I go? Who will do me the favor? And you start thinking: why am I doing this? Is it too dangerous? I could lose someone. I could lose my family.
Isabella's experiences underscore the tremendous pressure she was put under by her employers. At 19, she was vulnerable and particularly susceptible to their efforts to bring her on board, a point she emphasizes by referring to herself as "a child" (an emphasis she also made to excuse her behavior).

Isabella explained her own reasoning for accepting the risks and incentives of working as a burrera explicitly through an idiom of necessity and family obligation. Her awareness of her vulnerability placed her firmly within structures of gender and ethnic discrimination. Lack of education, discrimination and an economy that provided few opportunities, especially for women, were the structural forces through which Isabella understood how "the moment arrived" for her when becoming a burrera was her only option.

It is important to note that she explains her decision to work as a burrera in reference to a series of circumstances which, while vaguely articulated, make clear that she was not in control. She ascribes these circumstances to certain kinds of structural constraints which ultimately led to her decision was to "put herself to work." In the recording of this interview, she emphasizes this point by adding a finality and defiance to her tone. This seemed to suggest that it was actually in spite of the structural constraints that she took this work instead of simply as a result of these circumstances.

In her study of women and the drug trade, Del Olmo (1990) finds that women's work tends to be marginalized even within the production and trade of illegal drugs. She also argues that women tend to be at greater risk of exposure because their work often takes place within the home, where the police are most likely to search. In El Mayor, the gender division of labor that Del Olmo describes is less pronounced (which as I explain
in chapter four is arguably true for the division of labor more generally). Nonetheless, the figure of the narcotraficante often represents a form of specifically male gendered power. Edburg (2004: 270) points out that female narco traffickers, who are increasingly featured in the northern Mexican folklore, fit into the formula of power achieved “outside the rules” as a form of rebellion against “traditional values.” While this is true to a certain extent in El Mayor, the cachet of the narcotraficante is still more accessible to men because of the machismo inherent to representations of violence in the region. Isabella’s narrative, nonetheless, displays some of the triumphalism that is associated with the macho power of the narcotraficante.

It was this element of triumphalism that was, for me, one of the most puzzling aspects of narcotrafficking’s appeal. For many of those involved, it seemed to represent an alternative to the exploitation and alienation they experienced in the legal market. While the economic rationale is, at least on appearance, an understandable draw, the risk, instability and danger involved seem to far outweigh the benefits. Even more puzzling is the extent to which the narco world is valorized in this way even despite the lawlessness and violence brought on by the narco-economy.

After voicing his criticisms of people choosing to work in the narco-economy, Emmanuel qualified that he "was not a saint" and went on to describe his own involvement and eventual disenchantment working for the Mafia after he was ripped off on one of his runs.

I was supposed to make $5,000 dollars on one day, but the bosses took most of it. The bosses don’t do anything. They send a helper that sends a helper that sends a helper. You never even meet the boss or see him, so he never gets caught; only the helpers get caught. So I earned $1,500 after
making $5,000 dollars. They told me $5,000, then gave $1,500. I had to cross to L.A.

Emmanuel’s frustration over the risk he took for ultimately insufficient compensation highlights the routine exploitation of lower level participants in the drug trade. The opacity of the Mafia’s upper echelons to which Emmanuel also refers further limits accountability of the burreros’ employers.

Ana also relayed the incredible anxieties she experienced when her son was working with the Mafia. She recalled the horror and misery she felt when Javier was in jail serving a sentence for trafficking up the river on his boat. All the time that Javier was serving his sentence, Ana had to raise weekly funds to bribe his guards so that they would not beat him. She would get some money from the bosses (they liked to take care of their own to a certain extent). The rest she would raise herself. She felt that the bosses had betrayed Javier by not only letting him take the fall for the operation but by failing to take care of him while he carried out his sentence.

Perramond (2004) has pointed out that trafficking in Mexico involves a large amount of specialization and separation of sectors. The largest and most powerful operators vertically integrate so that the wave of violence resulting from the current "war on drugs" hits the bottom of the industry. Thus, the drug trade from this perspective victimizes those people from El Mayor who are involved as much as the factory or the fishing restrictions victimize them.

The element of exploitation that characterizes involvement in Mexico’s drug trade complicates both Emmanuel’s explanation based on “lazy” economic opportunism, as well as the resistance to structural oppression that Isabella describes. Neither one of these
explanations taken on its own fully accounts for the draw of the narco-economy. The 
horror of the drug cartels, Javier’s experiences trying to survive his prison sentence, 
Emmanuel’s accounts of exploitation by his bosses, Isabella’s terror at threats from her 
suppliers and Ana’s agony at knowing her son was suffering in jail were only some of the 
experiences endured from filling the most vulnerable role in the narco-economy. In this 
light, narco trafficking is not an escape from subordination at all but rather a particularly 
dangerous instantiation of broader relations of subordination and marginalization.

The phenomenon is more understandable, however, when contextualized within a 
larger cultural tradition and a history of antagonism on the border (Akers Chacón and 
Davis 2006; Dunn 1996; Bacon 2004; Heyman 1999; Pagan 2004). Work in the narco-
economy is for many local people a powerful resource for resisting oppressions of 
Mexican and American rule in the border zone. This symbolic resource is best 
characterized by the persona of the narcotraficante.

“When I Wore My Alligator Boots:” Dignity and Banditry in the Narco Corridor

“America is the boss of Mexico in everything, except for drugs”

- Pepe

The relationship between the role of the narcotraficante and the history of 
antagonism on the border is articulated in the phenomenon of the “narco corrido,” a genre 
of folk song extremely popular in Northern Mexico and in El Mayor. Narco corridos tell 
the history of men and women working in the drug business on the border. They narrate 
the adventures of clever smugglers, wealthy godfathers, blundering border guards or
murdered traitors. Decades of profitable commerce and official protection, as well as the expansion of the drug market and the number of traffickers, were the background that inspired some corrido norteño composers to record the modern history of drug trafficking.

The songs are popular among the large rural working-class populations on the border, although their popularity has extended to other parts of Latin America and the United States. They are commonly heard playing from radios in El Mayor. Scholars of Mexican folklore trace the origins of the narco corrido to the Spanish romance ballads brought over by soldiers during the conquest. Paredes (1993) has argued that the genre of early corridos developed as the obverse of an emerging and racist body of Texas folklore portraying Mexicans as cruel, thieving and racially degenerate. He argues that a large part of the narco corrido audience is made up of rural people who are associated with poverty and “Indian-ness.”

Edberg (2004) argues that the narco corrido portrays outlaw heroes in a stance against global industry and US power. The figure is set against the domination of US industry which is represented by the predominantly US-owned and operated maquiladora sector and increasingly by the presence of the American Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), border patrols, and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) along the border.

Corridos arose from a common and generally favorable disposition toward individuals who disregarded the imposed legalities of a border. In this respect, smugglers, illegal immigrants and outlaws have been represented by these popular images as an outgrowth of a shared social situation. Ramírez (1990: 72) describes the relationship
between the hero and the world around him or her as the “confrontation between the hero and hostile Anglo-American forces.” These are the social connotations from which much of the prestige associated with being a narcotrafficker emanates.

It was Javier’s experience adjusting to life, as a former narcotraficante, that first drew my attention to the prestige and cultural capital associated with this role. When Javier got out of jail he vowed he would not get involved with the Mafia again. After what seemed to be a somewhat traumatizing sentence in prison, he realized now that it was far too dangerous a job to be worthwhile. Over the year that I was there after he decided to extricate himself from the business, he struggled constantly with his decision.

Once out of jail, Javier began fishing for shrimp at a meager wage with his cuñado (brother in-law) in San Felipe. Only several months after this transition, his girlfriend Angelina, also from El Mayor, left him. This was the first of many hardships that Javier would interpret as the result of his fallen prestige. One night soon after, when I was visiting Javier and his sister Berenice in San Felipe, Javier, crying into his beer, explained that all the girls want to date narcotraficantes. Narcotraficantes have money and power and allure. He felt that, as a poor fisherman, he would never find another girlfriend.

Despite all that Javier felt he had lost, he still had his alligator skin boots. On several occasions, he reiterated the importance of the alligator skin boots for legitimating his past working with the Mafia. He said that while you may see people dressed as cheros (from ranchero, with cowboy hats and wide metal belt buckles), the alligator skin boots are how you know if they are really narcotraficantes. His boots cost more than 200 dollars - people in the area cannot purchase such things unless they are narcotraficantes.
The dress, which references the classic rancher look, is one of the ways this persona indexes a rural past.

The chero dress reflects northern rural Mexico and portrays a tough survivor of the rural sierra. The association between ranchero dress and narco trafficking is more than stylistic. Bowden and Aguilar (1998) trace the links between narcotrafficking and rural roots, arguing that NAFTA has driven many legitimate Mexican farmers out of business, and many have turned to drug cultivation and trade. Indeed, NAFTA has destroyed hundreds of thousands of agricultural jobs in Mexico. An influx of imports has lowered the prices for Mexican corn, for example, by more than 70% since 1994 (Oxfam 2003). Furthermore, overall inequality has increased in Mexico since the introduction of free trade. Between 1984 and 1994, the absolute income of the wealthiest 10% increased by 20.8% whereas the income of the poorest 10% declined by 23.2% (Russell 1997).

The associations of narcotrafficantes with displaced rancheros, or the rural poor, in Northern Mexico draw attention to some of the ways that drug trafficking intersects with a history of US domination on the border. Because the majority of the drugs consumed in the United States are smuggled through Mexico, this region is the main battleground of the US “war on drugs.” In the illicit drug industry, most of the value of those drugs (as much as 90 percent) is added after they enter the United States. The irony in this fact - that it is the US prohibition of drugs, rather than the Mexican supply of drugs, that creates economic opportunities for drug traffickers - is part of what makes the role of the narcotraficante a paradoxical and subversive site for confrontation with US dominance. Cruz, who had worked with the police force for several years in the 1980s, was particularly eloquent about US responsibility in the success of Mexico’s drug economy.
One day, I was talking to an American about how Clinton was pressuring Mexico to control the drugs - speaking badly of the police, of Mexico. I said to the American: “All the drugs that come from these places, from Colombia and Mexico, where are they going? Who is the biggest consumer of drugs? America. The drugs that these countries are producing aren’t for their personal use, they’re for the biggest consumer in the world: the United States.” The voice of Clinton was throwing dirt at Mexico, saying that it’s Mexico’s fault that there are so much drugs in the US. I said to the American, he was *echando caca* (talking shit) about Mexico, and who consumes these drugs? Your people.

Cruz went on to point out the irony in the fact that while Mexicans and Mexican businesses are otherwise unwelcome in the United States, the drug economy defies trade restrictions and immigration laws. “It’s the number one economy for Mexico with the US. There are no other businesses. You can’t sell fruit or sell other things across the border, you can’t even cross the border. So they are going to sell drugs.”

As Cruz’ anecdote and Pepe’s comment at the beginning of this section indicate, the narco-economy is sometimes portrayed as an explicit, even nationalistic response to US power over Mexico. The history of US-Mexican relations has produced a marked antipathy on the part of Mexicans for the US. Paredes (2003) argues that this antipathy emerged with the annexation of two-fifths of the Mexican nation to the United States in 1848, and repeated US economic and military incursions into Mexico since then which undercut proclamations of respect for national sovereignty (Paredes 2003). The recent and escalating tensions on the border as a result of heightened security protocols by the US (Akers Chacón and Davi 2006; Payan 2006; Staudt and Coronado 2003), drug wars (Bowden 1998; Juffer 2006) and economic displacements since NAFTA (Bacon 2004; Carrillo 1990; Pagan 2004) have only heightened the antagonism on the border.

In El Mayor, the discourse against US power adds a particular complexity to local
narratives of resistance through the narco-economy. The repressive forces that people experience on a daily level are linked to the Mexican state (fishing regulations, military outposts and blockades). The most ubiquitous signs of state force in the region, however, are the US border patrol and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the most obvious association with exploitation and worker displacement are the US owned maquiladoras. It is in this dimension, therefore, that the view of drug-trafficking as a form of resistance to US domination blends with the view that this practice also challenges attempts by the Mexican government to regulate their lives.

The heroic character of the narcotraficante and the role's association with the rural poor is further indexed by the fact that Mexico's drug dealers have a patron saint. His name is Jesús Malverde and the legend of his adventures takes place at the beginning of the 20th century in the northwestern state of Sinaloa. Malverde stole from the rich and distributed to the poor before breathing his last on a gallows in 1909. In Culiacan, the capital of Sinaloa, Malverde now has a chapel dedicated to him, with a bust in front of the virgin of Guadalupe. Powers are ascribed to this revered patron of marijuana growers and cocaine smugglers, who has since gained a considerable following in the United States and Colombia for similar reasons.

Significantly, Jesús Malverde is more than just a “Narco Saint.” He is recognized by many across Mexico and the United States as a protector and defender of the poor. Jesús Malverde is the “Generous One” or “The Angel of the Poor.” Indeed, Malverde’s legend arose during the reign of Mexico’s longest running dictator, Porfirio Díaz (who ruled from 1876 to 1880 and from 1884 to 1911). This period, known as the Porfiriato,
was marked by the influx of foreigners in Mexico, a time of progress for the richest
Mexicans but a time of poverty and despair for the lowest classes. In El Mayor, the
handful of self-identified narcotraficantes wear pendants of Jesús Malverde, whom they
claim protects them on their travels. He is also a heroic character for adolescents in El
Mayor, who often own his icon in some form.

Edberg points out that in many respects the narcotraficante, as represented in
narco corridos, follows the pattern of “social banditry” described by Hobsbawm (1969).
Hobsbawm argues that social bandits “are peasant outlaws whom the lord and the state
regard as criminals, but who remain with, and are considered by their people as heroes, as
champions, avengers, fighters for justice…” (1969: 17). Like Hobsbawm’s social bandit or
"noble robber," the narco trafficker starts from a personal experience of injustice which
leads him or her to outlawry and the righting of wrongs.4

This trajectory is often traced in people’s descriptions of how they entered the
drug economy. Isabella, in her interview above, was quite clear that when they would not
give her work, she would get work herself. Pepe was particularly explicit in this regard.
He explained that it was the year that officials from PROFEPA confiscated the equivalent
of $1,000 worth of nets, when he was trying to fish corvina, that he began trafficking.
Pepe recounted the exchange he had with officials that day in the zanjón. He said to them:
"Who is going to support my family if you take away my nets? Are you going to
support my family?" In this case then, the turn to narcotrafficking was a response to the

4 While gangs and drug traffickers are also often seen as helping their communities (see Goldstein 2003) in
El Mayor the close familial connections among residents makes it harder to construe narcotraficantes as
“giving to the poor” as much as simply supporting large family networks.
outrage of being denied the right to work, of being denied the capacity to feed one's family. "What else was I supposed to do with a boat and no nets?" The suggestion that he would get a job in a factory or washing dishes in a tourist camp was equally infuriating. He explained that the wages would barely support his family. But there was more to it than that. These legal alternatives were what the government had been telling his family to do instead of fishing for years. A job in a tourist camp or a factory would be the ultimate surrender.

While Hobsbawm's social bandit helps highlight a certain dimension of how the narcotraficante represents an oppositional resistance, this analytic lens also reduces the kinds of agency described to a nascent politics, conceptualized in terms of a potential revolutionary impulse. By this view, Pepe's and Isabella's agency is displaced onto the persona of the narcotraficante which indexes the revolutionary heroes and critiques the encroachment of industrial capitalism. The problem with applying Hobsbawm's social bandit to the kind of resistance described by Pepe, Isabella and others is that it simplifies the structures of domination and subordination experienced in El Mayor as well as the kinds of resistance they give rise to.

In particular, this explanation fails to account for where the revolutionary impulse false short and for the contradictory way that forms of self-identified resistance come to reproduce, rather than subvert, systems of power. The role that the narcotraficante takes on in the narratives I have described is more similar to cultural representations by marginalized people in other parts of the world, through which illegal practices are romanticized in response to experiences of alienation. Fleisher (1998) describes how
youth gang leaders are mythologized in Kansas City, Anderson (1992) documents a young man’s use of drugs in Philadelphia as a redress of the humiliation experienced in the mainstream world, Bourgois (2003) elaborates on the links between selling crack and gaining respect in Harlem, and Goldstein (2002) describes how in a Brazilian Favela gangs offer a place of belonging and a sense of identity that low-paying jobs do not provide.

The contribution of cultural performance theorists to debates over poverty, structure and agency has been to show how through practices of opposition individuals sometimes augment the hegemonic structures which marginalize them in the first place (Bourgois 2003; Foley 1994; Willis 1981). Willis (1981) shows how working-class kids followed the shop floor culture of their fathers which glorified manual labor and proudly resisted the urban school’s ideals of bourgeois mentality. This counter-school culture simultaneously relegated “the lads” to school-failure and ultimately working-class jobs. Foley (1994) shows how Mexicano high school students in North Town, Texas, reproduce hierarchies of class and race by resisting the dominant Anglo-American rituals of capitalist consumption and communicative performance. Similarly, Bourgois (2003) shows how street culture’s resistance to social marginalization is the “contradictory key to its destructive impetus” (17).

What these authors point out is that forms of resistance in these cases are ironically self-destructive because they ultimately reproduce the forms of hegemony that they purportedly challenge. In much the same way, those residents of El Mayor that end up drug trafficking, while resisting the border industry, become just as exploited by working conditions in the drug economy. The problem with the idea that the self-
The forms of resistance found among the narcotraffickers that we have met in this chapter are more dynamic and multi-dimensional than they appear at first glance. Pepe
and Isabella, in their choices to join the narco-economy, are doing something more nuanced than opposing domination. As Ortner (1995: 177) argues in her review of ethnographies of resistance, we need to recognize that resistors are more than simply producing a re-action. Rather, “they have their own politics.” Indeed, in El Mayor trafficking appears to take its shape not just in relation to the oppressive American or Mexican presence but also in relation to the internal dynamics of the group.

This became clear on the day before the fishing season began, when officials came to implement a new set of monitoring techniques. As I described in chapter two, the officials were clear that their intention with these regulations was to monitor who was fishing when and to dissuade the illegal renting of permits. Adriana, the president of the fishing cooperative, and the daughter of the traditional chief Don Madeleno, was equally clear in her meeting with the fishing cooperative that the official’s intentions were actually to make it even more difficult for them to fish in general. Her approach to the introduction of the monitoring techniques was to have things run as smoothly as possible on the day that officials came to register the boats. Adriana, along with the more active members of the cooperative, had already decided that they would fish anyway, regardless of the measures put in place. She urged her cooperative to have their boats painted and their receipts ready to hand over.

Pepe, on the other hand, understood the increased restrictions on fishing as being about the threat of drug trafficking as opposed to the illegal renting of permits or the use of boats beyond fishing seasons and times. He explained that what these restrictions were really about was tightening their grip around the illegal drug trafficking in El Mayor.
He interpreted the registering of equipment, numbering of boats and the inspections as measures to control and undermine these activities.

In Taussig’s (2004) account of the process whereby Afro-Colombian gold miners are drawn into the world of cocaine production on Colombia’s Pacific Coast, he describes an implementation of surveillance quite similar to Pepe’s interpretation of the new equipment regulations in El Mayor. Taussig documents how one of the changes that shipbuilders experienced in this region was that they had to submit minutely detailed plans of every boat that was to be built, and then wait half a year for approval. The idea was that if boarded by naval patrols searching for drugs, the navy could measure off every centimeter in search of false bulkheads (2004: 223).

Pepe and his brother, Rafael, who were both long-time fishermen who had in the last several years started making illegal shipments with their boats, were clearly irritated with Adriana’s approach. Rafael proceeded to paint not just his number on the boat, but a lewd caricature of someone bending over. At first, I assumed their irreverence was directed at the officials, whose strict and thorough inspections of peoples’ boats was creating a palpable tension as they made their rounds from house to house. As Adriana closed in on the boat, however, making her way from one busy crew to the next, it became clear that it was her reaction they were anticipating as opposed to the officials’. When she ordered them to hide the painted figure behind a pile of fishing nets, they obeyed sheepishly.
Pepe and Rafael prepare their boat for registration
Despite the tremendous work Adriana did for the fishing cooperative, there was an often expressed opinion outside her closest circle that she was using the system for her own recognition, fame and personal well-being or to support her immediate family alone. Some said she did not really care about El Mayor. There was a sense in which her literacy with forms of negotiation with the government, as well as the perceived benefits that followed, disqualified her as one of them.

The resentment that people expressed towards Adriana was not unlike that expressed towards Manuela, the legal director of the museum her mother Esperanza tended, who was also quoted above commenting on how living conditions had improved since the river stopped reaching them. Some in El Mayor pointed out that Manuela was critical of local involvement in the narco-economy because, with her government stipend, she could afford to be. It is noteworthy that those people who were most critical of the narco-economy were also most fully integrated in the legal economy (with the exception of Emmanuel who also admitted to crossing drugs at one point in his youth).

Manuela, like Adriana, was also well versed in methods of interaction with the government. She knew how to write a grant proposal to procure funds for art projects or to go to indigenous gatherings; she was a liaison with NGOs who worked in the region and knew how to make a formal complaint to the Human Rights Commission. These characteristics which set Adriana and Manuela (as well as others) apart were one of the ways that internal differentiation was manifest in El Mayor. While this differentiation is not always visible to outsiders, it is revealing of the social configurations within which people are acting and the different perspectives from which people understand their social
and economic situation as a group.

What was most interesting about the differing perspectives on the fishing inspections was that each version seemed to identify what the real threat to the government was. Adriana and her followers insisted that their form of protest was always to fish anyway, to fish forever. Pepe and Isabella, in contrast, took on a more ironic stance. For instance, when Pepe comments "What else can I do with a boat and no nets?" he is not making a literal statement about his powerlessness at the mercy of his oppressor but rather he describes his own ironic refusal to comply. Similarly, Isabella emphasizes that her foray into trafficking was how she ultimately put herself to work. Both seem to slyly point to the complicity that either their employers or the government officials had in the illegal activities with which they involved themselves. Furthermore, what Pepe seemed to be arguing, threatening even, was that if they were not allowed to fish they would do the one thing that the government might consider even worse than fishing, indeed what both the Mexican and US government had declared war against: trafficking drugs.

On the surface, it appears that it was those people in the illegal economy who highlighted the structural aspects of their entrance to the narco-economy. Isabella talked about the racism that indigenous people experience when trying to get legal work, and the lack of opportunities for women. Pepe linked his entrance into the narco-economy with the crack-down on fishing restrictions which were indicative of wider economic and ecological changes. But on closer examination it is evident that these discourses did not highlight structural determinants in order to obscure their own responsibility as
individuals or to absolve themselves of the illegality of their acts. To the contrary, both Pepe and Isabella described the wider economic changes and history of racism to underscore their own agency in spite of these wider forces.

Therefore, it was precisely the tension between discourses focusing on structural determinants of the rise of the narco-economy and discourses focusing on the agency of individuals who went to work in the narco-economy that allow for Pepe, Isabella and others to articulate their own resistance to the cycles of subordination and marginalization through which they navigate, on a daily basis, in order to survive in the changing economic and ecological conditions of the Colorado Delta.

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In “My Cocaine Museum,” Taussig (2004) imagines a cocaine museum that becomes a vantage point from which to explore the lives of Afro-Colombian gold miners drawn into the world of cocaine production on Colombia’s Pacific Coast. The museum is modeled on the Gold museum in Colombia’s central bank, and is a parody of the museum’s failure to acknowledge the African slaves who, for nearly four hundred years, mined for the country’s wealth. He points out that the gold museum was also silent about the fact that it is no longer gold that determines the political economy of Colombia, but rather, cocaine.

From Taussig’s make-believe vantage point, I am reminded of Esperanza sitting, on guard, in front of her own museum. Others in El Mayor may tell you that their “community museum” hides many things. It hides the rivalry between Esperanza and her brother Madeleno and the divisions between their families. It hides the fact that only some of the women’s beadwork is represented in its display cases. It also conceals the
fact that government funding to support local artesanas and land rights are unevenly distributed amongst those in El Mayor. But as long as Esperanza keeps her place and continues her own narrations under the mesquite tree, she also reveals the history of narco-activity in this region.

When we took trips out into the desert to visit different sites, Esperanza’s familiarity with the landscape also served as a reminder of why residents’ knowledge of the area is so useful for those wishing to navigate the region. Esperanza scoured the desert floor with the same intensity with which she attended to the traffic in El Mayor. She immediately recognized every stone that was rare or out of place. She collected armloads of sticks and rubber and glass. “This stick looks like a snake,” she would say, or “here is a hole in the rock where we used to grind grain.” We would keep walking, the desert floor crunching under our feet as we broke the salty crust of the surface. Esperanza would keep talking the whole way. “It’s so much uglier now than it was. All the salt, so little water, and the roads have been erased. We used to go here and there in my son’s pick-up, but now the roads have been erased.”

I cannot help but notice that her brother, Don Madeleno, roams this desert in exactly the same way. They both search the sand for scraps, clues, and reminders of how things used to be. The desert that looks vacant and homogenous to me will hold their fascination for hours. Esperanza, like her brother Madeleno, reads the traces in the desert like a clearly written text. “Here they had a fire,” she says, holding up an old piece of charcoal, “and cooked fish” she adds, holding up a deteriorated scrap of what looks like a fish bone.
It is precisely the kind of navigational competence and familiarity that Doña Esperanza and Don Madeleno have with this land that has become commodified by the region’s powerful drug economy. The familiarity with the region that many residents of the area possess is put up for sale in many contexts. NGOs create projects for the youth in El Mayor to map the land, tourist initiatives enlist tour guides, hunters hire companions to lead them through el monte, and the Cucapá have for generations navigated and fished the area’s most abundant corvina routes to sell their yields to markets in Tijuana and Mexicali.

An assumption that scholars of traditional ecological knowledge have by now been thoroughly criticized for is that “cultural” knowledge about the land and the environment invariably translates into knowledge that is more sustainable or into “kinder and gentler ways of behaving towards the natural world” (Kech 2005; 82 see also Agrawal 1995; Dove 2000). With this in mind, it is ironic that in El Mayor there has been so little interest on the part of government environmental agencies in incorporating Cucapá knowledge about the tides and fishing into their management plans. As Cruz’ incisive critique of SEMERNAT’s regulations in chapter two suggests, environmental protocols imposed may well criminalize more “sustainable” fishing practices. Instead, government officials and members of the Mexican Mafia have monopolized “local knowledge” for containing or assisting in the drug trade.

The use of local knowledge about the land to aid in drug smuggling or in routing out drug smugglers may well be seen as a counter-example to romanticized stereotypes of indigenous knowledge and ecological sustainability. However, not all conservationists working in the area were critical of the participation of residents of El Mayor in the
illegal sectors of the informal economy. One Mexican-American conservationist believed that the narco-economy, in particular, had environmental benefits by preventing development and discouraging hunting in the area. He told me:

It's so beautiful to see the army and the narcos together, interacting in the same area. It's just a fascinating dynamic, how the landscape reacts to that. Because, let's say you're in this beautiful landscape of grasslands and oaks, and you know, there is deer and mil dear and wild turkeys and it's a great hunting season but then the army is there to confiscate all the weapons. The army is there to restrict access to the area. And on top of that, the narcos are there and the local communities know that they are there for a reason. So it's kind of a reserve by itself. It's a great benefit to the landscape, to the conservation, and to the wildlife having those two sectors interacting.

The conservationist's claim that the military and the narcos created a "reserve by itself" is indicative of how powerful and impenetrable the interaction of the two sectors' presence are in the border region.

The traces of this presence are also made visible as I walk with Esperanza through the delta. Suddenly, Esperanza stops still in her stride and points to fresh footprints in the sand that wind out into the desert. Then, she shows me the tracks from where the soldiers have gone. She explains that the soldiers wait in the mountains because of the shipments that pass through here. We stand for a moment looking out beyond the tracks to the sierra Esperanza points to. Then we turn around and head back to El Mayor.
Sign lies discarded from the museum in El Mayor: "Centro Cultural Cucapa"
CHAPTER FOUR

Who's Who in El Mayor: Mexican Machismo and a Woman’s Worth

"Are we Mexicans?" Cruz asked. "No, we're Indians." Ana said firmly. "We're Cucapá." It was at this point in the conversation that I started listening from the sleeping area late one night. Ana and Cruz, the mother and father in the house where I was staying, had just returned from Mexicali where they had been visiting Cruz’ mother in the hospital.

At first, I thought Cruz was joking with his question about whether they were “Mexicans,” or that he was really drunk or high and that was why he was not making sense. But as I listened to the conversation unfold through the plywood wall separating us, I slowly began to understand what was happening. "This is your son," Ana said, referring to Luz who was asleep on the couch. “And you have two daughters and 12 brothers and sisters.” The conversation continued in this unusual manner, with Ana explaining to Cruz what should be obvious to him. It seemed that Cruz could not remember anything. Ana and Cruz talked late into the night and eventually I drifted back to sleep.

I was hesitant to leave the sleeping area the next morning. I could hear that Cruz’ sister had just arrived and he was apologetically explaining that he did not recognize her. Her two-year old son was pushing the door open to the room where I was sleeping, so I could not hide any longer. I came out of the room slowly, careful to pay more attention to Cruz’ nephew because I wanted to delay meeting Cruz’ eyes. A gringa suddenly emerging from his own home could only confuse him more. I could tell immediately when I looked at him and said "Buenos dias Cruz," as I always did, that he did not
recognize me. Ana motioned me to the table and mechanically passed me a cup of hot water. I distracted myself by carefully stirring instant coffee into the water, concentrating on the crystals dissolving into a dark swirl. Meanwhile, Ana explained what was going on: after leaving the hospital the night before Cruz had broken down crying and after he recovered his composure, he could not remember anything: his name, who Ana was, or where they were going. Nothing. Cruz interjected that he had found my contact card in his wallet and Ana had explained that I was staying with them. Several minutes later, Berenice, Cruz and Ana’s daughter, emerged from the sleeping room as well: another round of introductions.

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In chapter two, I explored the way that a particular notion of indigeneity is often imposed on residents of El Mayor by the state, NGOs and international organizations. However, these categories are also authenticated, contested and imposed at a much more local level in complex ways. In addition to negotiating the terms of authenticity imposed on them, the residents of El Mayor also engage in contentious debate over what constitutes Cucapá identity. This chapter explores how these more local, “internal” struggles over Cucapá identity are established and contested, especially in connection to gender relations. I focus on a particular view of gender often articulated in opposition to Mexican machismo. My analysis begins with an ethnographic account of Cruz Antonio’s illness which developed after his wife, Ana, left him for a local Mexican, leaving a wake of gossip, ultimately about gender and family, in her path. I argue that the narratives that emerged around Cruz’ illustrate how gender roles are locally produced and contested.
There are several features of social life among the Cucapá that make gender a topic of special interest. For example, women take on the predominant roles of leadership on almost every level of political organization. Women hold the majority of fishing permits, they are more politically active, and they are far more vocal in meetings (in fact it was not unusual to find men standing by walls holding children and babies as their wives participated in public debate). In El Mayor, these characteristics, among others we shall explore, are construed as evidence of women’s power and value. As Don Madaleno, the Cucapá chief explained to me in an interview, “In this culture women are more intelligent than men. They are more valuable.”

In the following pages, I explore this gender dynamic by tracing two interlocking contradictions that emerged during my fieldwork. Starting with an analysis of Cruz’ adamant insistence that he had lost his memory against his family and neighbors’ own interpretations about his condition, I follow the conflicting historical narratives on the establishment of women’s primacy in the social and political sphere in El Mayor. I explore the dynamic of Cucapá women’s political roles and the way the ideology of gender that emerges from these processes forms the basis for a wider cultural identification and symbolic resource.

Cruz Forgets? One Man’s Amnesia as a Case of “Mexicanization”

Cruz kept flipping through the photo album I gave the family for Christmas. He did not recognize Ruby, his pregnant daughter, in the pictures. She went in to Mexicali with them the night before and stayed to take care of her sick mother-in-law. I had taken photos of her displaying her 7-month-large belly for the camera. He also did not
recognize his friends, the house, the baby photos. He just kept flipping through the pages over and over again.

Slowly the news of Cruz’ condition reached other parts of El Mayor. I walked with Berenice, who was in shock, to the homes of his brothers and sisters to ask them to come to the house. One by one, they filed into the house and Cruz kept asking "Who are you?" and Ana would explain. His sister sat outside the house crying for a long time. He did not remember them. From the neighbor’s house where I sat later on I heard him say, "Where can I wash my face?" Meanwhile, Ana, who was living with her new partner, Juan, outside of El Mayor was paralyzed by Cruz’ episode. She had gone with Cruz to visit his mother in the hospital the day before and had yet to return to Juan’s house since then. She said she was afraid to leave him again in such a strange psychological state. She had never seen him like this before.

I drove Cruz to the doctor later that day. Ana and Luz came as well. We were all quiet, except for Cruz. "It's so beautiful here!" he repeated as we drove past the Sierra Cucapá and through the ranches and desert on the way to Ejido Durango. Later in the drive, he pointed to my wrist. "That's a nice bracelet," he said. "Thanks," I said, "You gave it to me for Christmas." He did not remember. Ana defused the awkward moment that followed by correcting my Spanish (I used the verb dar for "to give" instead of regalar, "to give a gift"). As we drove along this road, the only road that leads from El Mayor, people driving by honked at us as they always did. Cruz waved back, confused, but happy to discover he had so many friends.

When we arrived at the doctor's office and explained the situation, the receptionist took out an empty chart and started asking questions. "What's your full name?" "How old are you?" She kept directing these questions to Cruz after we had just explained that he
did not remember anything. "I don't know," he kept saying. Finally we sat down and let Ana answer the rest of the questions. As we waited, Cruz explained that I should not worry, that he felt perfectly fine physically and that he was not crazy. I assured him that I did not think he was crazy and I pointed out that his personality had not changed at all; he was just as friendly and polite as usual. He asked if it was true that he was always like this - that this was his normal personality. I explained that he was acting very much like himself, other than not being able to remember anything. And he was behaving much the way he would on an average day. He ended up striking a conversation with a perfect stranger as we left. He explained that he had "amnesia" (laboring to pronounce the doctor's diagnosis). He was acting so normal, in fact, that several phrases into his conversation, the man asked what he did for a living! "I don't know!" Cruz said. "Oh, right," said the man, embarrassed for having asked.

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A week after Cruz fell ill, I ran into his comadre, Gina, at a gas station on the way into Mexicali. Gina lived in Mexicali and, along with her husband, had been friends with Ana and Cruz for 20 years. "You're so naive, Shaylih," Gina laughed, after I presented my account of Cruz' amnesia and the events that had transpired since her last visit. "He's just playing with you, it's not real. He's manipulating everyone." Her reaction fell directly in line with what I had been hearing in El Mayor. After several days of utter confusion, friends and neighbors had settled into agreement about what was going on with Cruz. His condition was a mental block; he was so overwhelmed by the shame of his wife's recent betrayal and her abandonment of him, in addition to the myriad other problems in his life, that he did not want to remember who he was, or who anyone else was for that matter. While his illness displayed all the symptoms of what would be
diagnosed as general amnesia in a biomedical model, his family and neighbors in El Mayor understood his illness as an inability to come to terms with his wife’s independence: her freedom to forge her own destiny and choose whether to stay with her husband or leave him for a new life. His illness was interpreted as a sign of mexicanization: a lapse into machismo.

I insisted to Gina that Cruz was not feigning his condition in much the way I had been trying to defend his account to people in El Mayor over the last few days. I explained that I had taken a course in cognitive psychology in school and that Cruz was displaying the exact symptoms of general amnesia. The doctor in Durango had even explained that the recent stress in his life as a result of the divorce, coupled with the sudden illness of his mother, had created the classic conditions that could produce a case of amnesia. Furthermore, in the days that followed his selective memory loss followed a textbook pattern. He remembered all general information, but had forgotten most of his personal history. In fact, he kept remarking at how strange it was that he knew he was able to speak Cucapá, Spanish and some English; that he knew that GMC stood for “General Motors Company;” that he knew the words of the songs on the radio, but that he could not recognize his own children.

I explained to Gina that he would have to be a genius to replicate the symptoms of such a specific form of amnesia so accurately. “He is a genius,” Gina assured me. “This is well within the range of his capabilities.” Gina continued, “Listen Shaylih, you have your books and everything you’ve learned in school, but I have my experience, and I know Cruz. This is not a medical issue; it’s like a tradition, it is a different culture. Men
are different here, they're not like men in Canada. They’re *machistas.*" By calling Cruz a “machista” (commonly translated to “macho man” in English), Gina was invoking one of the most widely known cultural types associated with Mexico. Gutmann (1997), in his portrait of the working class Mexican men from the Colonia Santo Domingo in Mexico City, traces the stereotype of the Macho man and how this stereotype has become ubiquitously linked to a "typically Mexican" macho. He argues that the Mexican man is always represented as the lower class man and forms an undifferentiated, wholly pervasive category of the hard-drinking sexist (see also Limón 1994).

I recognized the role I was playing. I was refusing to accept a local interpretation of Cruz’ illness and indignantly imposing a biomedical account of his behavior. I was surprised to find myself taking on such a clichéd, and ethnocentric, attitude. But the situation was different, I told myself. I would have been happy to accept a more romantic interpretation – perhaps that he was the victim of witchcraft, or possessed by spirits. Instead, I was being asked to accept that my friend was propagating an incredibly disturbing lie about himself that was causing significant anguish among his family and friends.

Gina’s invocation of “machismo” reminded me of Cruz’ response when Ana first left the house and moved in with Juan over a month before the onset of his “illness.” Cruz spent days vacillating between states of anger and drunkenness, and then more days scarcely present in the daily household routine (when the family assumed that he was off high on crista). When he finally calmed down he came back to the house and went through a period of grand displays of coolness. He sat at the table with his sombrero
tipped over his sunglasses, languidly dangling unlit cigarettes from his mouth. He changed his outfits often, testing different colored sombreros against his chakira headband and long black trench coat. I took pictures, surely only fueling his elaborately self-absorbed displays.

Despite his newfound coolness, Cruz’ attitude seemed to improve quickly. "I’m not angry at anyone. It’s not anyone’s fault," he said when supportive friends and neighbors would drop chastising comments about Ana’s departure. Then he would launch into a speech, directed at me, about how Mexican men are machos. "They run around on their women but when a woman does the same to them, they can’t handle it. They snap." This speech had become a standard in Cruz’ repertoire. "Cucapá men are not like that. I’m not like that. I don’t blame Ana. I want her to be happy, but I’m not convinced that Juan will take care of her."

His self-reflection on the situation negotiated a tension between portraying himself as a man that respected his partner’s freedom and independence (the way a Cucapá man should, according to his narratives) and a more paternalistic attitude that seemed to question Ana’s ability to use her freedom to choose a path for herself wisely. Over and over again, Cruz emphasized both her right to do as she pleased and her incapacity to know what the right decision for herself would be.

Cruz’ separation from Ana became a springboard for general reflection on their 24-year relationship. Sometimes he would delve into elaborate, romanticized accounts of how he and Ana first became a couple.
Cruz in the 1980s hanging out with some Mexican friends
How she fell in love with him despite the disapproval of her family and how he took her all over northwestern Mexico in the cab of his truck (at the time he was working as a truck driver). He reminisced about how he built her a house that was the envy of all of El Mayor because it was one of the first with cement rather than dirt floors.

At other times, his accounts would turn to more negative portrayals of their time together. At such times, he would emphasize that she dominated him and he suffered physical abuse at her hands. “There is a reason you won’t find any baseball bats in this house.” This was the line he would use to open the story of the night Ana beat him with a bat and left him lying naked on the front stoop overnight. “I never hit Ana,” he would repeat, to highlight the contrast between himself and Ana’s violent character in these accounts. “I’m not like a Mexican man. She doesn’t know how men are. All she knows is me.”

It was as if Cruz’ narrations of the differences between the way a Cucapá and Mexican man would behave in his situation foreshadowed his friends’ and family’s future interpretation of the way he was, in fact, behaving. In effect, the local interpretation was that Cruz’ illness was an expression of the structural maladjustment of being a macho man in a culture where a woman could do as she willed.

“*We Believe that Women are Worth More than Men*”

The word for “woman” in Cucapá is *Niway xawat*. It means “heart of fire.”

- Don Madeleno

In a meeting with the local Water Users’ Association in February of 2006, a hot topic was a problem that had developed with the tamarisk removal project. The project’s
objective was to remove the overgrowth of tamarisk (Pino Salado), a water sucking plant, from the Hardy River in order to foster habitat for other species of plants. The project depended on the labor of Cucapá men from El Mayor. However, because the fishing season was now in full swing, no one from El Mayor could be convinced to take a significantly lower wage for cutting tamarisk.

After this shortfall in labor had been described in detail, a woman from the United States working as a volunteer stood up and suggested that if the men were off fishing, the Water Users’ Association should hire Cucapá women and children to work on the project instead. The volunteer went on to make the point that it was ridiculous to assume that only men in El Mayor would be interested or capable of working on the tamarisk project. She described a similar project she worked on with a Native Reservation in Canada where the female population was ignored as a potential workforce.

Those attending the meeting quickly became convinced of her suggestion as a potential solution as well as a socially progressive direction to move the project. At this point, Ana, who was the only Cucapá attending the meeting, awkwardly broke the news that residents of El Mayor were a step ahead on this point. Women were also out fishing corvina. Since Cucapá women are often the heads of their crews they would be even less likely to forfeit a tide to the tamarisk project.

The majority of residents in El Mayor expressed the view that Cucapá women, unlike Mexican women, do everything that men do and more. They also emphasized that men take on many of the responsibilities that are often women’s in Mexican society. Men were especially quick to point out that they could make tortillas, that men could
bead *chakira* with equal expertise as women, and that men shared in the childrearing duties of women.

When I asked about leadership roles and why the chief, Don Madeleno, was a man rather than a woman, several people responded that he was voted in by popular opinion because of his wisdom and charisma but that it could easily be a woman in his place. Indeed, the comisario or ejidal leader who was appointed by a council of Cucapá was a woman named Constancia.

One day after driving into Carranza, a colonia forty minutes from El Mayor, with Don Madeleno and Doña Berta Martínez, Ana’s parents, the three of us stopped at a small Chinese restaurant owned by the members of a Mexican family that were old friends of the Martínez family. I had met the owners with Ana only a week before. When Ana and I visited, she decided not to tell Lupita, who came to greet us, that she and Cruz had split up and that she was now with someone else. She answered Lupita’s routine questions as if everything was the same as usual, steering the conversation towards her children: Ruby’s pregnancy and the scandalous fact that Pancho, Ruby’s 15-year-old partner, was not working or making much effort to find work. When we left, Ana guiltily confided that she had avoided the subject of her recent divorce because she just could not bear to face any more scorn for her decision to leave Cruz.¹

Doña Berta, in contrast, had taken her daughter’s recent divorce as her favorite subject of conversation. She had never approved of Cruz and was eager to spread the

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¹ In El Mayor the standard practice was to refer to couples living together as “married.” Very few people were married legally. Don Madeleno explained that the Cucapá tend to wait 20 or 30 years into a relationship before participating in traditional marriage ceremonies and festivities to celebrate a partnership. He contrasted this to Mexican custom in which “People get married, have their celebration, and then hope that it lasts.” The general trend of staying legally unmarried also reflects economic conditions in which most people cannot afford the marriage licenses and festivities.
news that Ana’s opinion of him had finally come in line with her own. One of the first things Doña Berta said to Lupita after they made their initial small talk was that Ana and Cruz were no longer together. Lupita was offended that Ana had not said anything and kept bringing the conversation back to her omission. “Why didn’t she say anything?” I suggested that she was embarrassed. Doña Berta nodded in agreement and launched into a description of everything that had happened, painting a very negative portrayal of Cruz, his drug addiction, his violent behavior. She went on to extol the virtues of Juan, Ana’s new husband.

When Lupita disappeared into the kitchen, I took the opportunity to follow up on my questions about women’s roles in El Mayor. I asked: “Is it hard for a woman in El Mayor to change her life the way Ana did?” Doña Berta began a long account of how she too had left her first husband in her late teens. He was an alcoholic who had treated her very badly. When she gathered the courage, she “escaped” to the United States to live with relatives, recover from his abuse and hide from him. While it was difficult, especially with her young children, Doña Berta emphasized that things were nonetheless better for Cucapá women then and that it was easier for her to make this change than it had been for Ana. In the “old days,” a woman could always leave a situation in which she suffered. She talked about Cruz’ drug use and the suffering he put Ana through. But in El Mayor, they were judgmental and un-accepting of Ana’s decision to leave him. She said that the difference was that nowadays many people in El Mayor are becoming mestizada: mixing with Mexicans and their culture.

I was interested in the way Doña Berta’s account of gender roles in El Mayor was explicitly opposed to stereotypes of Mexican men and women. This was underscored by
her interpretation of deviations from Cucapá gender roles as evidence of Mexicanization. She explained that Ana’s choices were not accepted in El Mayor because of a shift to “Mexican” gender expectations. She also described Cruz’ episode, and his possessiveness of Ana, as another example of this shift. In Doña Berta’s account of her daughter’s divorce, the distribution of these gendered/ethnic qualities was particularly complex since Cruz, whom she portrayed as being domineering and abusive, was Cucapá and Juan, whom Doña Berta approved of overall, was Mexican. I tried to interrogate this tension by asking whether Doña Berta worried about Ana being in a relationship with a Mexican man. She responded that Juan actually had indigenous blood; he had distant relatives of Yaqui descent, and as a result he was more respectful of Ana’s individuality than he would be as a full-blooded Mexican.

In Doña Berta’s account, Cruz, who was Cucapá, displayed the classic Mexican macho’s characteristics as a result of a partial cultural assimilation. Juan, on the other hand, despite being a Mexican, was seen as escaping the stereotype of the macho as a result of a biological connection to indigenous descent. Doña Berta’s resolution of a potential contradiction in her preference in son-in-laws, however, deviated from standard accounts of gender in El Mayor on one important point.

Generally, when people in El Mayor elaborate on the power associated with gender roles, they make a distinction between “Cucapá” and “Mexican” views of women, rather than alluding to a broader contrast between “indigenous” and “Mexican” views. Most of the people I talked to were clear that it was not a characteristic of their indigeneity that they had different views of gender roles but more a specific characteristic of their Cucapá identity. Gender roles were not seen as something they had in common
with other indigenous groups. Therefore, while the powerful role of women in El Mayor was often articulated against Mexican stereotypes, as we have seen above, most people thought that this was a view of gender that was particular to "Cucapá culture."

Ethnographic work has shown that colonialism did not affect all groups in the same ways. Some examples have shown that women did not experience a lowered status as a result of colonial rule, such as was the case with Trobriand women (Weiner 1976, 1988). Other authors have argued that colonization and capitalist penetration resulted in the sharpening of gender oppression of women. For example, Etienne (1980) documents how the relatively egalitarian Baule in Western Africa re-assigned men more responsibility in yam and cloth production in ways that ultimately created an asymmetrical dependence of women on men. Similarly, Leacock argues that the Montagnais-Naskapi Native Americans of the Labrador peninsula of Canada was a very gender-equal society before their contact with Western colonial powers (Leacock 1977, 1980).

The popular narrative in El Mayor is that since colonization, but particularly in the last several decades of contact with Mexicans, gender inequality has deepened the oppression that women experience. Doña Berta was particularly explicit that Cucapá women were better off before the "mixing" with Mexican culture began. Women in El Mayor often made reference to how restricted Mexican women were in terms of what was appropriate for them to do, especially on their own. I began interviewing Mexican women connected to families in El Mayor in colonias nearby to get a sense of whether they shared this perspective on the contrast between Cucapá and Mexican women’s freedoms.
Ana’s comadre, a Mexican woman named Gina, was particularly vocal about what it meant to be a woman in Mexico. She said:

Men here [in Mexico] are used to having a woman who takes care of the children, raises them, does everything. The man is free. He can go all over the place and when he arrives at the house he needs his clothes clean, the food ready, the children care for. Women in Mexico have to do everything at the same time. The Mexican woman suffers a lot.

I asked, “Is it the same with Cucapá men and women?” Gina replied: “In some ways Cucapá men are worse but Ana never had to ask permission to go someplace.² I did. And if he says ‘don’t go,’ I don’t go.” Ana was listening and intervened: “Juan is not the boss of me and I’m not the boss of him. Tomorrow, I’m going with you [referring to me] to the fishing meeting. I’m not going to ask for permission.” Gina added: “You want to know something? My comadre is more courageous than myself.”

I found Gina’s portrayal of herself to be slightly out of sync with my impression of her. She struck me as an extremely strong woman, and by outward appearances she was dominant in her relationship with her husband, Pepe, who was a soft-spoken, meek-mannered man who rarely participated in conversations in which Gina was taking part. In fact, Gina would often refer to him critically in the third person (as in the interview above, for which he was present). Pepe would never defend himself. Gina was articulate, opinionated, authoritative and clearly the one who decided when they would come to visit El Mayor and how long they would stay. She also ran her own business, a styling salon (with the help of her daughters) in Mexicali. When I delineated all of these facts to her as counter-evidence to her self-described submission, Gina insisted that whatever

² While she does not expand on this point here Gina often elaborated the stereotype of Cucapá men as lazy and particularly prone to substance abuse.
dominance she may appear to have, she had to ask permission for everything she did and her husband would never permit her to go anywhere alone.

The trope of independent mobility, to go where and when one wanted without having to ask permission of one’s husband, rose again and again in the context of talk about gender roles in El Mayor. Above anything else, mobility was what seemed to mark Cucapá women’s independence and power. The restraints that a “typical Mexican man” was seen to put on this mobility was made very clear in Ana’s characterization of her new partner, Juan. Unlike her mother, Doña Berta’s, opinion of Juan, Ana associated him directly with the classic Mexican macho. In private, she laughed off her mother’s elaboration of belief in regards to Juan’s distant Yaqui connections. The ultimate expression of Juan’s macho nature, in Ana’s view, came one day when we took a trip into the city to buy propane for the stove. It was an impromptu decision to leave, and Juan was working construction at the time so he was not aware of our departure. When we came back, he was upset that Ana had not left a note saying where she went. He was worried about her.

Ana was absolutely furious at Juan’s gentle reprimand. For weeks after the incident, she would bring it up as evidence of how controlling, domineering and macho he was. She argued that he would never be able to accept her independence as a Cucapá woman and she was equally adamant that she would never compromise her independence on his account.

The challenge this mobility wages against “Mexican” gender roles also imbues women’s independence with a set of negative associations among Mexicans close to El Mayor. Gina, discussing her own feeling of immobility in the interview quoted above,
made a comment indicative of the association between being out alone and being morally
decided. She said to me:

I want to be like you, and go out and about meeting people. You don’t
care what people say or think about you! Me, no. I have my spouse and
my children. I would like to learn more about the people, talk more to
people. I’m not afraid to talk to people.

Gina makes it clear that it is not her fear of talking to people that prevents her from going
out and meeting them. Instead, it is that she cares about how she is perceived, especially
because she has a family her actions affect. Gina’s emphasis on not being afraid is
interesting here because people in El Mayor explained Mexican women’s lack of
independence in terms of the “fear” they feel. María Sevilla, a middle-class woman and
wife of a Mexican fisherman who was the owner of a construction company close to El
Mayor, was often mentioned as an example. People in El Mayor claimed that they knew
María could drive. Sometimes you would see her driving with her husband and children
in the car. However, you never saw her go anywhere by herself because, like a “typical
Mexican woman” she was afraid to do so.

María Sevilla, in an interview, elaborated a different rationale for why traveling
alone as a woman was not a good idea. María had a particularly strong set of negative
associations with the mobility of Cucapá women.

Cucapá women are always running around all over the place but it’s not
about independence. I’m a feminist, but Cucapá women take feminism
too far. It shows a lack of respect for your husband.

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3 While in this example Gina is opposing her own perceived immobility with my mobility, rather than a
Cucapá woman’s, her comments are nonetheless revealing of the general associations between moral
compromise and being out alone as a woman.

4 María was the only person who used the word “feminista” (feminist) in these interviews.
The idea that it is morally compromising to be out by oneself without the supervision of a male took on a particularly negative connotation through the association between being alone and prostituting oneself. Eventually María’s criticism of women from El Mayor digressed into a series of accusations about particular women going to Mazatlan (a bar on the highway synonymous with prostitution: *anda en Mazatlan*).

The trope of female mobility in El Mayor provides an interesting contrast to Anna Tsing’s (1993) analysis of Meratus women’s stories of travel. Among the Meratus, a group of shifting cultivators indigenous to Indonesia, subsistence practices require that they frequently move to establish new garden plots. Men also frequently travel to maintain political contact with other Meratus groups. Tsing explains that because travel and regional experience are important in constituting authoritative Meratus subjects, a Meratus woman must turn gender assumptions about travel around in order to show herself as a subject of knowledge and experience (1993: 225). Set against a backdrop where women are endangered by travel because of its association with male sexual aggression, many women spoke of being “not brave enough” to travel. Therefore, in the stories that Meratus women tell, the courage to travel outside the community becomes the courage to question local standards of male privilege. Tsing argues that these stories therefore disrupt local conventions of women’s fear and silence and usurp men’s exclusionary rights to bravery (227).

In El Mayor, women’s mobility can be seen to disrupt similar local conventions of men’s exclusive rights to independent travel. Mexican women’s immobility is also often explained through the idea that they are fearful. However, unlike the narrative travels of Meratus women, María and Gina’s comments indicate how Cucapá women’s challenges
to the exclusivity of male independence are re-cast by Mexican women into concerns over sexuality and, in particular, fidelity. Instead of Cucapá women being seen as risking the advances of aggressive males by traveling alone, they are seen by Mexicans in the area as deliberately involving themselves in promiscuous behavior.

Conflicting Gender Hierarchies

“Shaylih, you’re never going to find a Mexican husband if you can’t learn to make a proper tortilla!” Luz teased as he held up one of my signature not-quite-circular tortillas from the stack on the table. It was one of those invocations of Mexican identity that was not oppositional to Cucapá identity. Luz was including himself and everyone else we knew in El Mayor in his comment about “Mexicans.” Most people in El Mayor only drew a distinction between “Mexicans” and “Cucapás” in particularly politicized moments or in explicit distinctions in discussions about cultural difference. In everyday talk, and in contrast to myself as a “gringa,” they were all Mexicans. Nonetheless, I took Luz’ familiar jibe as an opening to explore stereotypes about the differences between Cucapá and Mexican men. “But what about a Cucapá husband?” I asked, “You all make tortillas too, right? So it wouldn’t be a problem.” Luz had on several occasions mentioned that he could make tortillas, which he thought gave his critiques of my own difficulties in the task more legitimacy. But I had never actually seen him make tortillas. In fact, besides Pancho, Ruby’s 15-year-old partner, I had never seen a man in El Mayor make tortillas.

5 For this reason the clarification that Ana made to Cruz about being Cucapá, not Mexican, quoted in the opening of this chapter, was particularly striking when overheard from the sleeping room the night that Cruz and Ana came back from Mexicali.
Despite claims that men are equally as capable as women are of carrying out domestic duties, they are not considered equally responsible for domestic work. While Cucapá men may bead, cook and take care of the children, they were very rarely the primary person to do so in a household. This inconsistency between stereotypes about Cucapá women's freedom and the flexibility of the division of labor and how this labor is actually distributed is one of a series of tensions that emerge from explicit portrayals of Cucapá women's freedom and superiority. Despite the impression that Cucapá women "take feminism too far," as María put it, by demanding a degree of independence that some outsiders feel is inappropriate, and despite the fact that it is immediately evident that women have strong leadership roles, the traces of gender inequality run rampant across the social landscape of El Mayor.

Gender difference does not necessarily indicate inequality (Scott 1988). However, in El Mayor, the expectations around women's domestic duties are reflected in a number of contexts in which women are negatively evaluated, in the way that men are not, for not taking primary responsibility for this work. The scorn that Ana experienced after leaving Cruz, for instance, was partially articulated through accusations of her negligent parenting. Even though her children were grown up with partners of their own, her 18-year-old daughter Ruby was pregnant, and grandmothers have significant parenting obligations when their daughters have children at a young age. Ruby was furious that Ana left and was vocal in feeling that Ana had abandoned her. Ruby, and her friends and family, did not expect Cruz to be of any help, both because it was not considered his role and because he was a drug addict.
In a parallel expression of women's role of primary caregiver, there is a very strong stigma on women who use drugs which is not equally shared by male drug users. Ileana, a 26-year-old woman who was married with one 8-year-old daughter, was a clear example of this double standard. Both Ileana and her husband were known to be regular users of cristal, but it was Ileana who experienced the social sanctions of their shared addiction. Many people in El Mayor, both men and women, deliberately ostracized Ileana, often citing her addiction while having a child as the rationale. Her husband was never subject to these same criticisms.

One of the more disturbing manifestations of the tensions between how women were portrayed and their lived experience came in the form of domestic violence and its effects on women. Especially in the fishing season, when cash is more abundant and as a result so is alcohol and drug abuse, there was a distinct rise in domestic violence. On several occasions, Lillian, Cruz' cousin, came to stay in our house with her children after her husband had attacked her in a fit of jealousy. Other sporadic and temporary relocations after such incidents marked the path of similar violent outbursts.

On the whole, the level of violence in El Mayor was quite alarming and, to a certain extent, naturalized. One day I found myself confiding to Manuela about my own ambivalent feelings toward my grandfather. I explained to her in a tone of confidence that I had difficulty forgiving him for his violent behavior towards my father as a child. Manuela reacted unmoved to this confession. She said bluntly, “My mother beat me all the time when I was a kid.” She proceeded to describe how she also hit Thalia when she was young. She justified these disciplinary techniques by describing Thalia as a terror of a toddler and young child.
Manuela also suggested, in other conversations about physical abuse in El Mayor, that it was my privileged middle-class upbringing, which left me unprepared to assimilate the regular displays of violence I witnessed there. To me, one of the most unsettling aspects of this violence was an ethical stance among people in El Mayor that insisted that one must always “defend one’s family.” What this meant was that if Luz became entangled in a fistfight out in front of the house late one night, Berenice or Cruz would blindly jump in to defend him even if the origins of the dispute were completely unknown to them.

One morning, as the news of a brawl the night before circulated around El Mayor, I passed 16-year-old Thalia out in front of her house looking dejected. She explained that she had not got into any trouble the night before. For weeks, she and her mother had been battling over her teenage shenanigans: drinking and doing drugs, sneaking off to San Felipe with friends. I was well informed by Manuela, Thalia’s mother, about her frustrations with Thalia. But Thalia explained indignantly that the night before she had not drank at all. And when the brawl broke out between some of her cousins and some other kids from El Mayor she had not been involved. She sat in the back of the pickup and waited for the scene to calm. When Manuela heard the news about this fight the next day, she was incensed and heavily reprimanded Thalia for not jumping in to defend her family.

Some people in El Mayor pointed out to me that the kinds of domestic violence I was observing were often experienced by both men and women. They resolved the tension between beliefs in the society’s value of women and the domestic violence they experience by claiming that this violence was actually distributed evenly across genders.
It was true that on several occasions I noticed Pancho away from the house a night or two, only later to learn that a violent outburst from Ruby was the cause. In social contexts where men are more clearly dominant, violence against women takes on an entirely different quality than violence against men. In these cases women’s experiences of domestic violence is intensified by their subordinate position in relation to men (Alcalde 2007: 20; McClusky 2001). In a societal context where women are more vulnerable and more economically dependent on men, male violence against women is more oppressive than violence against men by women, especially in contexts where there has been a long historical legacy of gender oppression (Levinson 1989).

In El Mayor, where women’s dependence and vulnerability is, at least ostensibly, “inverted,” (that is women and men here would not argue that women are more dependent or vulnerable) the issue of domestic violence raises questions about how to interpret spousal abuse against conflicting gender hierarchies. When people pointed out that women beat men too it was both a way of re-affirming local narratives of women’s power, and a means of pointing out that domestic violence takes on different meanings where gender-power dynamics are culturally specific. They were also suggesting that violence against women was more visible to me than violence against men by women because of my own cultural biases.

Another puzzling tension emerges out the self-conscious portrayals of women’s equality in that most of the early ethnographic accounts of the Cucapá (Kelly 1977; Gifford 1933; Gómez Estrada 2000; Sanchez 2000) describe the division of labor as gendered in a very rigid manner. Kelly (1977) and Gifford (1933) portrayed men as hunters and fishermen and women as foragers and domestic caretakers. Women are also
documented to have been more involved in chakira beadwork (Gómez Estrada 2000; Sanchez 2000). Sanchez (2000) records Esperanza’s narratives on the early days of her fishing with her daughter as the first women to do so in the Laguna Salada in the 1970s.

These descriptions of traditional divisions of labor directly contradicted what the majority of people I spoke to in El Mayor claimed to be true, both currently and historically. For example, Don Madeleno claimed that both women and men traditionally fished and hunted. When I asked him why these ethnographies did not mention women’s fishing and hunting, he gave two possible explanations for this alleged inaccuracy. First, he suggested that none of these scholars spent any significant time doing research in El Mayor and so they may well simply not have noticed the extent of women’s involvement in these practices. He also pointed out that most of the significant anthropological work in El Mayor had been carried out by male ethnographers, implying that their gender bias may have been responsible for this omission.\(^6\)

There were several indications that current views of gender in El Mayor that highlight the power of women may well have developed more recently as a form of boundary marking against stereotypes of “Mexican culture.” While most people I talked to agreed that Cucapa women had always fished, Manuela and Esperanza adamantly claimed to have been the first Cucapa women to fish the Laguna Salada in the 1970s. They were aware that this claim would be controversial. “You’ll see, you ask anyone around here and they’ll tell you I’m lying, that women have always fished, but my mother was the first woman to fish and she took me with her.” Indeed, many others explicitly contradicted Manuela and Esperanza’s claims, drawing on the dominant

\(^6\) It is noteworthy that the kind of gender bias Don Madeleno suggests may have been manifest in these ethnographies has been discussed in anthropology as well (Keesing 1985; Weiner 1976).
narrative that Cucapá women had always fished. They said that Doña Esperanza and Manuela were just trying to take credit for the Cucapá’s progressive views on women’s roles. Doña Esperanza and Manuela claimed, in contrast, that others were trying to deny them the recognition that they were owed.

Felix Coto, a Cocopah elder from Somerton, Arizona, recalled the trajectory of shifting gender roles in El Mayor in much the same way as Doña Esperanza and Manuela. When I talked to him on the reserve in Arizona, he said that it was true what I had read in the history books: in the past, Cucapá women did not fish. He remembers when Manuela and Esperanza began fishing in the 1970s because he heard about it in Somerton. It was a scandal that women in El Mayor were fishing. Felix described that in Somerton, as well, there was a shift in power from the hands of men to the hands of women as a result of the rise in the “women’s movement” in the US. Women started running things, and to this day the men resent it. Felix explained that the Cocopah women in Somerton still have far less “power” than women in El Mayor and have always had very subordinate roles in the family. What Felix had always heard growing up was that wives are supposed to walk one pace behind their husbands. This was meant both metaphorically and literally; women really did walk one pace behind their husbands and many still do to this day.

Felix emphasized that something happened in El Mayor to make this shift in power more profound than in Somerton. He argued that the Cucapá in El Mayor had a “gender revolution” in the 1960s and 1970s. As fishing in the river resulted in decreasing yields and the Luguna Salada completely dried up as a result of the damming up stream, they had no form of livelihood. According to Felix, women at this time began taking on
more public roles than men, they began making more of the decisions in regards to leadership and they also began taking charge of fishing crews. Men on the other hand retreated from these roles and Felix suggested that now there are no powerful male figures in El Mayor, besides the chief, who at 74 had become frail with age. Felix then listed, in contrast, the women who run the fishing cooperatives and the museum: Hilda, Adriana, Esperanza and Manuela. Felix believes that Adriana, Don Madeleno’s daughter, will be the next chief.

Felix stressed that what is happening in El Mayor is really important and distinct from the gender dynamics in other southwestern tribes in the United States and in the northwest of Mexico. He said that Apache women are not supposed to speak publicly and Navajo women cannot either. He pointed out that Cocopah women in Somerton do not even point at men. Later that day, I went with Felix to visit Doña Esperanza in the museum. He wanted to ask her questions about his relatives and gave me permission to record their conversation. When we arrived, Doña Esperanza greeted him and in their opening exchange pointed at him. Felix turned to me and exclaimed: “See, she just pointed at me! Women don’t point like that at men traditionally. That’s totally new!” Doña Esperanza laughed and winked at me playfully as we settled down under the mesquite tree in front of the museum.

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7 In claiming that there were no “powerful” men in El Mayor, Felix was referring to the fact that men were less politically active than women. Political activity does not signal power in all social contexts (see Medicine 1987) but it was commonly invoked as a characteristic associated with power in El Mayor.
Women at a fishing meeting
The Weight of Water: Leadership in El Mayor

In general terms, it's possible to see a general apathy among the Cucapá who have difficulty uniting in a common front to resolve their problems. In reality there are few families interested in the solution of the problems they have, and the women are the driving force that has prevented further community disintegration in El Mayor.

~ Alarcón-Cháires, 2001 (Report for the National Commission of Human Rights)

"Is this one of those things where it looks like the women are in charge, but really they're representing the interests of their husbands?" I was standing on a dirt road in El Mayor talking to a newly hired NGO worker when he made this comment. He was going to be working on several projects in El Mayor and was there introducing himself to some of the residents. He arrived in the middle of frenzied preparations, meetings and organizing for the fishing season. He made the above comment as we stood in front of the house of Adriana, who is the president of the fishing cooperative, watching as a fishing meeting came to a close. We were in front of a table of women organizing forms for the next meeting. The NGO worker’s comment was a typical response to the political prominence of women in El Mayor. People were quick to assume that they were simply acting on behalf of their husbands.

Many scholars of Latin America have argued that when women enter the political arena they do so as an extension of their roles in the household (Brana-Shute 1980; de Barbieri and de Oliveira 1986; Mota 1980; Martin 1990; Schmink 1981). They enter through their roles as wives and mothers, legitimizing their struggle by claiming that they are not political but are driven by a mother’s love for her family. According to this body of scholarship, women’s place in Mexican politics is reserved for moments of historical
crisis: economic change and government repression (Martin 1990). Structural changes and economic crises contributed to the formation of many women’s political movements in other parts of Latin America in the 1970s such as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and similar groups in El Salvador and Guatemala. These groups came onto the political stage at moments of extreme crisis, when traditional male politics had proven inadequate (de Barbieri and de Oliveira 1986).

The domesticization of women’s political activity described by these scholars does not apply to the current view of women’s leadership in El Mayor. In El Mayor women are seen as inherently better suited for political involvement because of gender-specific attributes such as intelligence and skill in verbal contestation. However, this literature does resonate with Felix Coto’s description of how an economic crisis precipitated a shift in gender-power relations. Regardless of whether the fishing crisis was the political impetus for the current shape of gendered politics in El Mayor or whether women’s leadership has deeper historical roots, the current gender balance places women in a different position in relation to the water crisis than the position in which many women find themselves in other contexts in Mexico and around the world. Women and men in El Mayor have experienced the effects of water scarcity in profoundly different ways.

The literature on the mounting world water crisis has emphasized that women bear the “weight” of water scarcity (Bennett 1996, 2005; Coles 2005; Obando 2003). This is meant figuratively: it is the work of women in many cultural contexts that is most immediately affected by water scarcity as domestic work requires water for washing, bathing, cooking and cleaning. It is also meant literally as it is women who are often
responsible for carrying water from great distances. Commonly cited facts are that in rural areas of the "third world" women and young girls must walk an average of six miles every day to get enough water for their families. Furthermore, the water the women carry weighs an average of 20kg, the same as the average UK airport luggage allowance.

Women in El Mayor experience this "weight" under very different circumstances. In addition to being responsible for providing water for domestic purposes, Cucapá women bear the political burden of negotiating for their water rights and access to their traditional fishing grounds. When I asked why there were more women than men at fishing cooperative meetings, Ana initially suggested that it was because women held the fishing permits. She explained that women would therefore be the ones to negotiate better rights for these permits. The fact that women had more permits than men was puzzling in itself however, since there was no clear pattern of matrilocal exogamy which would result in women's husbands being Mexican and thus not qualified for their own permits. Ana went on to clarify that women had been more active in petitioning for permits from the government with the formation of fishing cooperatives in the 1970s so that even though men may have been technically qualified there were more women with permits. Ana, therefore seemed to suggest that it was women's assertiveness that led to the uneven distribution of permits.

Others explained the prominence of women in fishing politics through local gender stereotypes. Cruz suggested that women were more active because they were

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8 Since the fishing conflict began, with the creation of the biosphere reserve, it has been much more difficult to obtain permission for new permits. This has sustained the gender imbalance among holders.
clearly better suited for verbal contestation and were, quite simply, smarter than men. He had given the same rationale for why only women from El Mayor ever worked in the fábricas. He explained that it took a lot of detailed work and mental concentration. He gave the example of the factory where Manuela worked during the 1980s assembling parts for television sets. Cruz said that she had to work with really complicated electronic equipment, making all the colored dots add up for the color pictures on the screen. In Cruz’ opinion, that work was just too detailed and intellectually demanding for a man.

The prevalence of women’s leadership in El Mayor and the issue of what kind of autonomy or liberation is being carved out by and for women, raises questions within larger debates over the meaning of women’s rights in the context of class and racial oppression (Hernández 1998, 2002; Mohanty et al. 1991; Streicker 1995). In Mexico, there has been a tendency to see women’s rights and indigenous rights as opposed to each other. Colonialist and post-colonialist images of women often focus in on and exaggerate male dominance over women, as a way of rationalizing state interventions as benevolent. Hernández (2002) argues that women’s rights have been used both by feminist and non-feminist intellectuals and politicians as a way of opposing indigenous peoples’ demands for autonomy. Indigenous movements in Chiapas have promoted a strategy of establishing rebel indigenous regions which do not recognize the authority of the state and set up their own structures of conflict resolution. Some Mexican scholars have argued that these kinds of autonomy risk forging new forms of marginalization (Blanco 9

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9 Verbal assertiveness is not always a characteristic associated with powerful roles. Ochs Keenan (1974) shows how in a Malagasy speaking village in Madagascar women are seen as more direct for their verbal assertiveness but this is devalued in relation to men’s more “polite” indirect speech which is highly valued.
2001; Viqueira 2001). For example, until 1998, the Civil Code of Chiapas contained articles (165, 166) that specified that women were responsible for domestic work and could only work outside of the home if it did not interfere with their domestic responsibilities. The same code established that women needed their husband’s authorization to travel or work outside the home (Hernández 2002).

Hernández (2002) argues against the supposed opposition between indigenous and women’s rights by chronicling how in the past several decades the women’s movement in Mexico has gradually strengthened and gained force in indigenous communities. Migration, organizational experience, feminist NGOs and even official programs of development all influenced how indigenous men and women have restructured their relations within the domestic unit and the political sphere. Indigenous women have played an active role in peasant movements for the past few decades as well as during the revolution (Olcott 2005). Changes in the domestic economy also resulted in more women involved in the informal commerce of agriculture and the informal economy more generally (Nash 1993).

10 However, these movements forward have been concomitant with a terrifying rise in violence against women in, particularly in the border region of Mexico. Since 1993, almost 400 women and girls have been murdered and more than 70 remain missing in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua, Mexico (Amnesty International 2006). Similar cases of systematic violence against young, often indigenous women working in the factory zone of the border have been documented in Tijuana and Mexicali. This “femicide” has been met by a systematic failure to prevent and prosecute these crimes by local and international law enforcement (Alcalá and Escalante 2005; González 2002; Ortega 1999).

11 In addition to these more gradual changes, Hernández argues that it was with the public appearance of the EZLN, (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) in 1994 that indigenous women began to raise their voices in public spaces. They did so not only in support of the demands of their male companions and to represent their communities, but also to demand respect for their specific rights as women (100), calling for autonomy with a “woman’s voice” (Hernández 2002: 103). Articles 165 and 166 of the Chiapas Civil Code were modified in 1998 partly as a response to initiative presented to state representatives by members of the women’s movement of Chiapas (Hernández 2002).
Women's leadership in El Mayor is a particularly striking example of how the stereotype about the subjugation of indigenous women in Mexico is not generalizable. In contrast to other indigenous groups in Mexico that have been accused of making claims for the political autonomy of a people whose culture doesn't recognize "women's rights," the Cucapá's claims to indigenous autonomy in the fishing conflict are primarily voiced by women and underwritten by a powerful discourse on women's superiority. Therefore, while it is certainly true that new forms of autonomy may bring new forms of social marginalization, there is nothing about indigenous autonomies that necessarily opposes them to a recognition of women's rights.

"Mejor Sola"

*When you interview Ruby, ask her if she will ever speak to her mother again. Ask her if she still loves her mother.*

- Ana

In many social contexts with pronounced gender inequalities, an idiom of romantic love or "falling in love" with a man enables a subordinated woman to assert her individual needs while at the same following the principal of a male dominated household. For example, Bourgois (2002) argues that in traditional Puerto Rican households gender confrontations expressed themselves in romantic scenarios where elopement was an acceptable strategy for a woman to make an assertive life-cycle change, replacing the authority of her father with the authority of her husband. While Ana's life change may have looked like just such a strategy on the surface, Ana emphasized that she was not in love with Juan. To the contrary, she saw him as a
temporary safe haven from her life in El Mayor and a stepping-stone to a position of
economic self-reliance that would allow her to better support her children independently.

Nonetheless, Ana settled in with her new partner in his house a few miles from El Mayor. During the drama that surrounded her separation from Cruz, Ana often expressed
ambivalence about Juan. Ana’s financial planning was revealing about the way she
negotiated her relationships with Juan and the other men in her life. She was constantly
planning to increase her independence by saving enough money to buy her self-
sufficiency. She believed that control over her own money was the best way of assuring
that her husband and son-in-law could not control her or her children.

Throughout the year, Ana made barely enough money to support her family by
working as a cook in a nearby tourist camp. Her real financial planning began in the
fishing season when, on a good tide, she could come away with several hundred dollars.
Because Ana did not have her own boat or motor, she depended on Pedro, her nuero
(son-in-law, Berenice’s husband) to provide his equipment, and for the past five years he
had been working as the head of her fishing crew. He did this in exchange for access to
Ana’s fishing permit which allowed better access to the area close to the nuclear zone
where there were better yields. Ana also depended on Juan, her new husband, to help on
her crew because he offered to work for her at a ayudante’s (helper’s) wage.

Ana’s dependence on her husband and son-in-law was a constant source of
anxiety for her, not only because her reliance on them compromised her independence
but also because she deeply mistrusted them both when it came to her finances. For
example, she started suspecting that Pedro was finding ways of under-reporting how
much corvina was caught by her crew and selling the rest on his own. She reasoned that
there were all sorts of ways he could potentially do this while she was on the boat and he
in the truck, or vice versa. When Berenice and Pedro fought with each other she would
express her other suspicions: that Pedro was only with Berenice to use her for her
mother’s fishing permit. Soon she had her own son, Luz, working on the crew, trusting
him to watch over Pedro. Because Ana worked as a cook on weekends, when the tides
fell she had to send her crew out on their own. At these times, her suspicions shifted to
Juan her husband. She was agitated by the idea that he would know exactly how much
money she was making when Pedro apportioned the cut to send to her at the end of the
day. She quickly made arrangements for Pedro to give her the money directly without
going through Juan.

Ana’s ultimate goal was to buy her own motor and boat so she would not have to
depend on Juan or Pedro. However, when I last visited in late 2006, still months before
the fishing season, her plans were redirected at putting a down payment on her aunt’s
house on the side of the road where she could start a tienda. We spent countless hours
discussing the details of the arrangement: how she would get the initial money to invest,
how she would go about stocking and running the store. She was principally concerned
about finding a mode of employment for her daughter, Ruby, and Ruby’s husband,
Pancho, whom she imagined could live and work in the store. At the time, she was
supporting them all through her own work. She insisted that she could not tell Juan about
the store until it was almost finished. It was not that she was worried that he would
prevent her from going through with her plans. To the contrary, she said she could not
tell Juan about the store because then he would want to help her. “Better to do it alone,
right? It's for my children, it's not for Juan." Ana felt that she could only use Juan as a support to a certain point before it compromised her independence.

There has been significant discussion in anthropology about what constitutes powerful roles for women in cross cultural perspective, taking account of the fact that power looks different in different social contexts (Lancaster 1980; Medicine 1986; Sanday 1981). Ana, like other women in El Mayor, defined her rights as a woman around standards of individual freedom rather than group solidarity. While in many respects this looks like classic liberal feminism based on a notion of individual rights (symbolized in this case by economic independence as well as mobility), nonetheless it has important differences from classic liberal notions of women's rights. Interestingly, it was men in particular who stressed not that women are equal, but that they are "smarter," "more capable" and "more valuable" than men - a bio-cultural inequality that underwrites their superiority. This view did not seem to translate into the idea that men and women have different "rights," but it did result in a situation where men and women were seen to have different responsibilities; women's responsibilities, "naturally," far out number those of men. This imbalance in the amount of work women take on is one of the contradictory outcomes of the way women's roles in El Mayor are taken up.

An Ethnographic Reversal: Views from El Mayor

"The final goal ... is to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world." Malinowski (1922: 25)

The idea of a seamless "native point of view" has been with anthropology since its inception. The post-structuralist critique of mono-valence and the concomitant introduction of multi-vocal ethnographic techniques served to undermine the concept of
the singular native voice on a theoretical level (Bakhtin 1994; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Gordon and Behar 1995; Marcus and Fisher 1986), but perhaps did not sufficiently prepare me for the extent of discordance and contradiction I often encountered in the field. People in El Mayor, as in any other place, contradict each other constantly in mundane ways and often contradict themselves as well. But from the day that Cruz “lost his memory,” the degree of disagreement I encountered in El Mayor began to intensify, both in the account of what was happening to Cruz and in the issues that this incident came to express. It was as if Cruz’ illness came to embody the contradictory processes through which gender-power relationships are being defined and redefined in El Mayor.

During my fieldwork, the apparent contradictions in these narratives became a focus of intense inquiry. Like a dedicated journalist I set out to try to determine whether current gender dynamics had their roots in the fishing crisis or in deeper historical conditions. It is possible that Manuela and Esperanza's claims are not contradictory. Earlier women could have fished, they could have stopped (because of colonial/state interventions, or economic developments), and then women could have resumed these roles. However, it is significant that these narratives were presented as inherently contradictory. In general, the people I talked to told the story of a long history of fishing by both men and women and it was clear that this story provided a symbolic resource for underwriting current beliefs about the prominence and superiority of women in El Mayor. Esperanza’s family, who emphasized an account involving recent change in gender relations undermined the collective narrative of long-standing female dominance and by underscoring that others in El Mayor would say they were “lying” they also drew attention to their marginalization and feelings of alienation.
With more distance from the field I have come to see that what is at stake in the story that emerges here is not a simple reconstruction of the empirical historical past. It is not my intention here to absolve local contradictions by tracing a new account of how gender power shifts may relate to a history of fishing in the area. Instead, what emerges from the conflicting historical discourses in El Mayor is that gender has become the terrain on which difference and identity is worked out, despite the fact that it is being worked out in a way that is still rife with the contradictions that reflect the complexities of changing gender-power dynamics.

I was both disturbed and deeply fascinated by Cruz’ condition. He was one of my primary hosts and one of my most articulate educators. He was an exception among those I met in El Mayor because he made an effort to explain things to me explicitly, and he had a rare capacity to make generalizations about what it meant to live in El Mayor and be Cucapá. He took on this role quite consciously, at times criticizing others for not participating in my education as actively as he did. He once told me:

You know what I don’t like about the people here? You are here to learn about our culture. But they all come to the house and want to tell you gossip – chismes! They don’t tell you, as I do, about our customs, our words, our conocimientos (knowledge). They just want to talk gossip.

Cruz also took on the role of directly introducing me to people he thought would be able to help me. Generally, the way I met people in El Mayor was by sitting on porches, drinking coffee and attending events in which I was informally introduced to more people. With Cruz, however, if someone he thought was important whom I had not met came up in conversation, he would lead me right over to his or her house and introduce me on the spot.
I was reflecting on all this while sitting with Cruz in front of the house several
days after the incident when he first lost his memory. We both watched as a man he had
introduced me to only weeks before approached the house. I quickly filled Cruz in on the
details: “This man is your sister’s ex-husband. His name is Felix. He’s a good friend of
yours and he fished with you on your crew for years in the 80s.” There were countless
moments in the days that followed Cruz’ amnesia where I found myself describing to him
the very people whose lives and personalities he had narrated to me just weeks before.
This was the strange ethnographic reversal in which I found myself. Sometimes, I heard
myself describing word for word what his take on an issue was, not feeling compelled to
spell out how people disagreed with him the way I do in these pages. In only a few
months, Cruz seemed to be back to normal although there are still incidents around his
episode that he does not remember well.

Anthropological work on memory has critiqued psychological models of memory
as exclusively individual. Antz and Lambek (1996) argue that any invocation of memory
is part of an identity discourse and is closely linked to what people “think about memory,
what they remember and what they claim to remember” (Antz and Lambek 1996: xxi).
Lambek (1996) has stressed that memory is intersubjective, dialogical and better
understood as ongoing engagement than passive absorption and playback. Forgetting is
as much an active process in the comprisal of identity as is remembering (Terdiman
1993; Young 1996, 2005). Identity is not constituted by a fixed set of memories but
resides in the “dialectical, ceaseless activity of remembering and forgetting, assimilating
and discarding” (Antz and Lambek 1996: xxix).
Through Cruz' own narrations of both his memories and his forgettings, he negotiated with his friends and family over the complex subject positions available to him as a Cucapá man. His friends and family refused to locate his illness in a biomedical model. Instead, they understood his memory loss within a socio-political model, identifying gender-power maladjustment as the cause of his episode. In the process of this re-identification, they draw attention to a set of contradictory gender relationships. The complicated process whereby women (and men) are carving out a space for themselves is also a process whereby they are carving out a space for a distinct Cucapá identity.

This process, whereby particular gender roles have crystallized as representative of Cucapá identity, has mirrored in important ways the history of how Mexican masculinity has become fundamental to defining the Mexican nation. Some Mexican authors trace the origin of “machismo” through Freudian narratives explaining that the macho has its origins in the conquest (Paz 1961; Ramos 1951; Ramírez 1959). Hernán Cortés and his conquistadors arrived in Mexico and raped many indigenous women. From this act of violence the Mexican was born (Fuentes 1972), he who hates his Spanish father and despises his Indian mother, resulting in the quintessential oedipal complex.

Américo Paredes (2003) traces the concept of the macho to more recent historical origins, drawing connections between the advent of the notion of machismo and nationalism, racism, and international relations. Paredes shows, through an examination of Mexican folklore, that prior to the revolution the words “macho” and “machismo” were rarely used. It was not until the Mexican revolution that a particular version of the macho man came to prominence. He links the inception of machismo to the growing feeling of nationalism, accompanied by sentiments of distrust and inferiority toward the
United Sates (see also Irwin 2003). It was in this context that, Paredes argues, the Mexican male became associated with courage and linked to the concept of machismo which became a nationalist symbol of Mexico.

Gutmann (1996) argues that in the US the term “macho” has an explicit racist history, associated with negative character traits, not among men in general, but specifically among Mexican, Mexican American and Latin American men (see also Stern 1995). Contemporary, popular usage of the term, especially by journalists and often academics as well serves to rank men in a racial hierarchy (see Gilmore 1990). It is interesting to note that a similar process of stereotyping and hierarchy building has occurred in El Mayor. Fueled by feelings of distrust towards the Mexican state and dominant Mexican culture that has marginalized them, residents of El Mayor have forged a distinct gendered ethnic identity explicitly contrasted to machismo. As Stuart Hall writes,

When you know what everybody else is, then you are what they are not. Identity is always in that sense, structured representation which only achieves its positives through the narrow eye of the negative (1991: 21).

The gendered identities expressed in El Mayor are oppositional in much the way that Hall describes. Cucapá women and men are not what Mexican men and women are. And the extent to which Cucapá men and women are evaluated as authentic in their gendered identities is gauged in relation to their degree of dissimilarity to Mexican stereotypes of the independent macho man and the immobile submissive wife.

However, the eye of the negative in this case is not as narrow as Hall’s description implies. The nature of these gender roles, the historical trajectory of gender-power relations and the influence of mixing with “Mexican culture” all complicate local
interpretations of what ultimately authenticates gendered identities. Esperanza’s family traced a different historical trajectory than Don Madeleno’s, Doña Berta outlined a generational diffusion of women’s independence and Cruz adamantly declared himself an authentic Cucapá man in spite of almost everyone else’s assessment to the contrary.

While residents of El Mayor continue to negotiate how gender roles signify their identity in opposition to local perceptions of Mexican culture, state officials and policies increasingly judge their cultural autonomy through another idiom entirely. Government officials, military officers, and NGO workers isolate indigenous language capacity as a criterion for recognizing indigenous rights. In the following chapter I examine how people in El Mayor, youth in particular, respond to the imposition of this criterion.
CHAPTER FIVE

"Spread Your Ass Cheeks":
And other Things That Shouldn’t Get Said in Indigenous Languages

In this chapter I explore an instance of “survivor” words, the vocabulary that is the last to be forgotten as a language obsolesces. I describe the use of indigenous-language swearwords by the younger generation in El Mayor. 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 both a formal and an informal criterion for the recognition of indigenous rights. I argue that this ethnographic case can also be read as a critique of the notion of language as a cultural repository popularized in recent linguistic anthropological literature on language endangerment. For Cucapá youth, indigenous identity is not located in the Cucapá language but in an awareness of a shared history of the injustices of colonization and a continuing legacy of state indifference.

In El Mayor, where only a handful of elders still speak the Cucapá language and everyone else has shifted to Spanish, Cucapá youth have encountered the recent state-sponsored shift to multiculturalism as an interrogation of their claims to an indigenous identity. The notion of language that emerges in this political climate is familiar to anthropologists. Indigenous-language competence is elevated to a primary criterion for defining cultural difference through the assumption that there is a necessary relationship between language and culture. In the last few decades, work in anthropology has rejected just such encompassing models of culture as a coherent, bounded system (Clifford 1988; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Ortner 2000, 2006; Roseberry 1989). Parallel critiques in
linguistic anthropology have problematized understandings of language as closed systems that correspond to cultural groups and territories (Duchêne and Heller 2006; Hill 2002; Muehlmann and Duchêne 2007). Nonetheless, many linguistic anthropologists have continued to support claims that language and culture are inextricably related (Harrison 2007; Hill 2003; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Woodbury 1993). This language ideology has been reinvigorated in the scholarly and activist literature on language endangerment in the last several decades as indigenous languages have increasingly competed with, and been replaced by, more dominant languages all over the world. Campaigns to save endangered languages have been connected to efforts to rescue cultural heritage, knowledge, and practices (Crystal 2000; Maffi 2001; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Indeed, variations of the proposition “when a language dies, a culture dies” have served as rallying cries for these efforts.

Below I describe how Cucapá youth themselves critically engage with the assumption that their identity is located in their fluency in the Cucapá language by analyzing two sets of linguistic practices in which Cucapá swearwords are central. The first set involves boundary marking that distinguishes an insider group from outsiders. The second set of practices prompts a reexamination of the first by showing that boundary-marking practices can also function to appropriate and parody authority and, thus, subvert it. I describe how this latter set of linguistic practices emerges in a historical and political context in which indigenous people are continually called on to prove their authenticity under definitions imposed by the state. Cucapá swearwords function both to disavow the assertion that the Cucapá’s identity is located in their indigenous language and to critique linguistic competence as a condition of the group’s access to resources.
The appeal to indigenous people to conform to a particular construction of indigeneity is part of a broader political and historical trend in which international and national law has begun to recognize the rights of indigenous people while simultaneously imposing the criteria that allow for groups to qualify as indigenous people in the first place.

Until the 1980s and 1990s, public discourses in many parts of Latin America discouraged politicized indigenous identification and were directed at assimilation (Alonso 2004; Gordillo and Hirsch 2003). As we saw in chapter two, this began to change in the 1980s and 1990s, when Mexico began implementing neoliberal, multicultural policies and encouraging “cultural recovery” (Hale 2005; Sieder 2002). These policy changes radically transformed the way state actors interacted with indigenous communities, introducing a host of government programs, NGOs, and private foundations to those communities. In El Mayor, these changes have, in some cases, transpired within the span of a single lifetime and have been experienced as a profound contradiction. The very characteristics that, in the past, formed the basis of the Cucapá’s subordination - “backward” customs, a lack of fluency in Spanish, and isolation from modern conveniences - have now become the very characteristics that the state requires to recognize their rights.

One night at dusk, sitting on the flat bed of a truck smoking cigarettes with Cruz, I tried to engage him on the injustice people in El Mayor had experienced because of these processes. After centuries of discrimination on cultural grounds, resulting in economic and environmental marginalization and, eventually, a high level of cultural and linguistic assimilation, the government has now ostensibly changed its attitude toward indigenous
people. Whereas Cruz had feared punishment if he spoke his indigenous language in school, speaking Cucapá has now, just 40 years later, become an informal criterion for access to certain rights. I told Cruz that I saw this as the ultimate betrayal by the Mexican government. The state had discouraged Cucapá traditional ways of life in the first place and now dared to require these traditions to treat the Cucapá with dignity. Cruz responded blandly to my rant as he exhaled a cloud of smoke: “Yeah, well,” he said, “that’s the great contradiction. Now the government wants us to act like Indians.”

The Cucapá Language

As we have seen in previous chapters, the loss of the capacity to farm and fish in El Mayor has forced a rapid integration into the encroaching economic systems of the border region. The Cucapá went to work in factories; as farmhands; in construction, trucking, and building roads; selling scrap metal; and, most recently, in narcotrafficking. Along with the economic pressures these changes have brought, the Cucapá living in El Mayor have also faced a gradual process of cultural assimilation into Mexican society. As today’s elders were entering the Mexican workforce, they encountered a strong disincentive to speak Cucapá because of discrimination against “the Indians.” The Cucapá, as well many outside observers, perceive that their cultural traditions, including their indigenous language, are at risk of disappearing. In this sense, their sociolinguistic situation mirrors that of the many indigenous people around the world who are shifting to the economically and culturally dominant languages of their regions (Harrison 2007; Hill 1983; Kulick 1992; Mufwene 2001; Mühlhäusler 1996; Nettle and Romaine 2000).
During my fieldwork in 2005-2006 only 10 of the 300 people that lived in El Mayor were identified by the community as active speakers.¹ These ten people are between 60 and 80 years old. According to people I interviewed, there is a similar age-based distribution of language speakers in the other communities where Cucapá people live (Pozo de avisu, and a reservation in Somerton, AZ). There is a generation made up of these fluent speakers’ children whose linguistic competence is much harder to assess because they almost never speak Cucapá. Some of these people claim they don’t know any Cucapá, others claim they can understand but cannot speak or are embarrassed to speak. This variation can be accounted for in a variety of different ways depending on the particular sociolinguistic situation in which each individual was raised: whether Cucapá was spoken in their houses as children, whether their parents married Mexicans and whether their parents continued to make an effort to speak Cucapá as Spanish became the dominant language.

There are exceptions to this general socio-linguistic portrayal. For example, Doña Bertha and Don Madaleno are both Cucapá and speak Cucapá often when together. Their children seem to have a higher level of receptive competence than others of their same generation. Doña Bertha and Don Madaleno have also made a great effort to teach the language to their 9-year-old grandchild Aneth who can recite a list of phrases and words. But for the most part Doña Bertha and Don Madaleno follow the norm of speaking to their children and grandchildren in Spanish. There are also cases of the people in their mid 30s who have a higher competence as a result of being raised by their grandparents. This was the case for the 47-year-old father, Cruz, of the family with whom I stayed in El

Mayor. While it was clear from Cruz’s confident translation skills that he was highly capable in Cucapá, I never observed a situation where Cruz had a conversation in Cucapá which involved more than basic salutations.

These days, Cucapá is only spoken in El Mayor when primarily elders are present which for the most part takes place when relatives visit from Arizona or Pozo de Avisu or Somerton Arizona. It is rare, however, for elders to come together in company that does not include the younger generation. As one woman in her mid-sixties, Doña Katiana explains, she doesn’t get a chance to speak Cucapá because she has no one to speak to. This isolation of speakers is partially due to the high levels of assimilation with other indigenous and Mexican communities. It is also attributable to the deep divisions within the community (described in the Introduction and chapter four), which have polarized two of the major families, resulting in a situation where it is rare for these community members to interact all together, let alone in Cucapá, in any setting.

Residents of El Mayor offer a range of explanations for why their indigenous language is obsolescing. Some gave economic explanations, for example Felix, a fisherman in his late 30’s, explained that people in El Mayor don’t teach their children Cucapá because, “they see more benefits speaking Spanish or English than speaking Cucapá”. He explained that to get hired working in the farm or tourist camps you do not need Cucapá. He didn’t see any benefit in teaching a language to his children that won’t help them “advance” in the world. Doña Katiana, on the other hand, pointed to patterns of use, rather than economic dis-incentives, as a contributing factor to the loss of Cucapá. She explained that looking back she realizes that it was not possible for her children to learn to speak Cucapá because of the traditional social organization of the community
(the old ways) that persisted into their time. She remembers that it was customary for the elders to always do things separately from the younger generations. Her grandparents and parents would eat together and the children would then eat separately. When she had her own children, 11 in total, she followed this custom. As Spanish became the dominant language, these exclusive spaces where the elders spoke were the only opportunities for the young people to learn Cucapá. Without access to these spaces, the children could not learn.

In general, elders tended to take responsibility for the lack of language transmission to younger generations. Instead of claiming that the children did not want to learn or did not make an effort to learn Cucapá, most elders linked the lack of linguistic reproduction to the political and economic situation in which parents were too busy struggling to subsist or too involved in conflict with the government to teach their children. Adriana, Don Madaleno’s daughter, who has devoted the last 13 years of her life as an activist on behalf of Cucapá fisher people, often expressed a similar view. One afternoon, for instance, while Adriana waited in a court in Mexicali to receive a fishing permission, she commented to several journalists “we should be at home teaching our language and traditions to our children, instead we’re here yet another year arguing with lawyers about the right to feed them.”

Don Madaleno, the traditional chief of the Cucapá and one of the elders fluent in the language, made a similar argument for the political reasons for the Cucapá language’s obsolescence: “With all these fights, the fight for the land, for the water, and to fish, we don’t have time to focus on teaching the children how to speak Cucapá.” Historically, their lack of fluency in Spanish significantly disadvantaged the Cucapá in similar
conflicts over resources and rights. Indeed, Yolanda Sanchez (2000), a local historian of Mexicali, argues that the Cucapá lost a significant portion of their land claims during the revolution because negotiations were conducted entirely in Spanish and, at the time, the Cucapá were almost entirely monolingual in Cucapá. Sanchez attributes their lack of success in pursuing their claims to their inability to represent themselves legally or even fully understand the processes that were taking place.2

Whereas not speaking Spanish may have impeded their legal negotiations in the past, the Cucapá are now finding that a lack of fluency in their indigenous language and traditions is increasingly delegitimizing their current legal claims. In battles for fishing rights and access to work programs and in appeals for general access to resources and support from the government, the Cucapá’s claims are continually undermined on the basis of their purported lack of indigenous authenticity. One attack on Cucapá authenticity is leveled on the grounds of incompetence in their own indigenous language. Through an examination of the ways the youth of El Mayor still use the Cucapá language, I describe how they challenge this claim.

**What Is and Is Not Said in Cucapá**

Inspired by the literature on the loss of ecological knowledge that often coincides with language death, in particular, Jane H. Hill’s (2003) work on the ecological vocabulary of the nearby Tohono O’odham community, I originally hoped to do a miniature survey assessing which plants and animals were still known by their Cucapá

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2 Laura R. Graham (2002) provides a vivid example of how dominant political groups at times deliberately manipulate indigenous monolingualism to their benefit. Graham describes how, in a dispute over the demarcation of a Waiapi reserve in Brazil, officials barred the Indians’ translator from participating in a critical official meeting during the legal negotiations.
names. I was curious to know which words people still used, imagining that some ecological vocabulary had survived as a result of the persistence of activities in which it was indispensable (perhaps in fishing or in local medicinal practices). When people would tell me in interviews that they spoke only a few words of Cucapá, I would often try to elicit what those words were. This effort almost always met with little or no response. Put on the spot, people could not remember their vocabulary or felt embarrassed pronouncing the words. I would proceed by asking what kinds of words they thought they knew, and they would often say either “the basics” (*hello, how are you*, etc.) or “groserías” (swearwords). They would always refuse to tell me what bad words they knew.

Instead of persisting with this line of questioning, which was not proving very productive, I began listing Cucapá words and asking whether my interviewees recognized them and knew what they meant. This was a much more effective way of determining the vocabulary people still knew, and it was the only way of determining whether they knew groserías, and, if so, which ones. Through this line of questioning, I confirmed that groserías were, indeed, the Cucapá vocabulary that most people knew. In fact, the smaller one’s Cucapá vocabulary, the more likely it consisted of groserías. I also found an age-based correlation: The younger generation, both males and females between 14 and 30 years of age, was particularly familiar with the vocabulary.

Cucapá swearwords form an exclusive vocabulary in El Mayor. This was indicated in several ways during the course of my stay. Sometimes my teachers would explicitly say, “Don’t tell anyone this.” At other times it became clear in more expository ways that the vocabulary was not information that should be easily shared and that,
indeed, like all practices of solidarity, the use of Cucapá groserías negotiates a boundary that, as I demonstrate below, depends on the exclusivity of this vocabulary.

Discovering that an important linguistic practice involves a vocabulary that is, by its nature, exclusive presents specific ethical problems for describing this practice in an academic context. Some of the stories I relay in the following discussion and the vocabulary I describe were taught to me after I had been given formal consent to include this information in my research. It was clear from the way the vocabulary functioned socially, however, that publishing these words for an anonymous audience would betray a social contract. Accordingly, I provide English translations, instead of Cucapá words, to represent the way the words function in specific contexts. Because I do not intend a lexical analysis but, rather, an ethnography of a particular vocabulary in use, these translations do not significantly compromise the story I tell.

Learning Cucapá groserías myself and discovering how they are used was a complicated project. I formally began one day as I sat with a 16-year-old neighbor, Thalia, in her house working through her Cucapá word list. Her grandmother, Doña Esperanza, arrived and started correcting our pronunciation and helping us add new words. After practicing colors, kinship terms, and some practical phrases, Thalia wanted to practice and expand her list of groserías. At first, Doña Esperanza was slightly embarrassed or uncomfortable that I was hearing these words. Soon she began to find some amusement in my enthusiastic attempts to pronounce *dick* and *asshole* in Cucapá. I recalled, in Doña Esperanza’s shift from embarrassment to stifled laughter, that this was

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3 Thalia, at 16, knows more Cucapá words than her peers and her mother, she has a genuine interest in learning more, and she is often mentioned by other community members as the youth who is most competent in Cucapá.
not my first lesson with her involving words not listed in Crawford's (1989) Cucapá dictionary. Weeks earlier, I had recorded Doña Esperanza’s story about a witch, whose name derived from a phrase that translates “to spread your ass cheeks.” She translated the name after her performance of the story, under her breath and with a mischievous look, then quickly told me not to tell anyone. Doña Esperanza had the same air of mischief and secrecy on the afternoon that Thalia and I exchanged groserías. The next morning, I found the words *la gringa is a whore* (written in Spanish but with the Cucapá word for *whore*) affectionately etched into the layer of dust on my car’s back window.

Several weeks and many rehearsals of my new vocabulary later, Doña Esperanza and her daughter Manuela invited me to a meeting of estranged members of the community, relatives of theirs who identified with Doña Esperanza’s and Manuela’s political faction. The group was aligned with the Cucapá’s ejido leader, or *comisario*, rather than with Don Madaleno, the traditional leader, who was supported by another family. I was interested in attending because I had not met the comisario, nor had I met the members of Doña Esperanza’s family who lived outside of El Mayor in La Puerta and Pozo de Avisu. This section of the community felt marginalized for political reasons and by their spatial isolation from the larger Cucapá community in El Mayor.

As soon as the 11 women attending the meeting sat down, they launched into the litany of accusations and complaints about El Mayor and Don Madaleno that I had come to recognize as typical among Doña Esperanza’s circle. After several fairly biting comments about the other family, a woman named Lupita paused to scrutinize me. Manuela had already introduced me as a student, there to learn about Cucapá culture. Nonetheless, Lupita asked Manuela to confirm that I could be trusted not to take anything
back “to the other side.” She explained that on one occasion a journalist had published, word for word, what she had said about the other family, identifying her as the source. Manuela assured them that I was her friend and that they need not worry.

Nevertheless, Lupita still looked worried. After an uncomfortable pause, indicating Lupita’s sustained distrust, Manuela resumed her assurances, explaining that I was her neighbor (thankfully, she did not mention that I was living with Don Madaleno’s daughter), that sometimes I slept in her house, and that we spent time together every day. Finally, she leaned over and prodded me to tell the group what she had taught me thus far. She nudged me and asked me to say *whore* in Cucapá. To my surprise, no one reacted to her request. No one responded until I timidly produced the word, at which point everyone laughed uproariously. Then Manuela, looking proud, ordered me to say *dick*, *tits* and *ass* and, finally, *wet vagina* in Cucapá. All present laughed with surprise as I produced this vocabulary, and Manuela, also laughing, explained that she had had to teach me the words in Spanish, as well. After this embarrassing demonstration of my solidarity, the women resumed their discussion in a much easier manner and did not question my presence again.

In several ways, the role of swearwords in this encounter resonates with sociolinguistic work on slang and expletives. In this work, swearing has often been analyzed as a practice of solidarity. For example, Nicola Daly and colleagues (2004) analyze the sociopragmatic functions of *fuck* and its role as an indicator of membership in a specific community of practice. In the context they examine, swearing, which is associated with a working-class dialect, is a powerful in-group marker and represents a form of “covert prestige” (Labov 1972; Trudgill 1972). In such contexts, the negative
affect and strength associated with swearwords in standard settings are converted into positive attributes when the words are used between members of a community of practice. However, such an analysis is not entirely applicable to the above example, in which my performance of swearwords gained my entrance to the meeting. Although my knowledge of the Cucapá words identified me as an insider, my recital of the words also functioned to mark me as an outsider, to warn me that gaining the trust of the group required a public performance.

I was not the first outsider to be initiated into the exclusive world of Cucapá groserías. A story circulates among the area’s NGO crowd about a conservation workshop that was held by a local environmental NGO. During the workshop, one of the conservationists asked Osvaldo, the 29-year-old son of the chief, to teach them some basic Cucapá phrases. They wanted to know such expressions as “hello,” “how are you?” and “see you later” and assumed, as many do, that Osvaldo would know how to say these things in Cucapá. Reportedly, Osvaldo went along with the request and carefully spelled out the correct pronunciation for each phrase, painstakingly going over his lesson with the eager and grateful conservationists. Later that day, when the chief arrived, the conservationists had the opportunity to test out their new phrases, only to discover by the chief’s shocked expression that Osvaldo had taught them swearwords instead of friendly greetings and small talk.

Sitting on Doña Katiana’s porch one evening, Cruz proudly told a similar story. One day, a pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses came knocking on doors in El Mayor, “teaching the word of God.” When they arrived at Cruz’s house, only his twin daughters, who were 16 at the time, were there to receive them. The Jehovah’s Witnesses asked if the girls
would teach them how to say something in Cucapá: They wanted to know how to ask for water. Instead, the girls taught them a phrase that literally means ass and vagina but more figuratively translates into tits and ass in English (that is, it is a phrase used to objectify sexuality by referring to pertinent body parts). The Jehovah's Witnesses thanked them and moved onto the next house, which was Manuela's (this was a poignant turn in the story, as Cruz told it, because Manuela is well known for her temper). Cruz continued:

Then they arrived with Manuela. (He begins imitating their high-pitched voices) Hello m'am, how are you? We'd like to talk to you, but we also speak Cucapá. Yeah? Yeah. We want to ask you for something. Let's see ... “Tits and ass” [in Cucapá] (We all laugh as Cruz trails off imitating Manuela's response as she shooed them from her doorstep) Go to hell you! You're asking for my ass! (more laughter)

These two anecdotes, like my experience at the meeting, suggest that Cucapá groserías perform a boundary-marking role, marking off a group of insiders from outsiders. The role of the swearwords in the two anecdotes about the conservation workshop and the Jehovah's Witnesses, is to force the outsiders to recognize themselves as such. When the conservationists realize they have been duped or when the Jehovah's Witnesses are chased off Manuela's porch, they are sent a distinct message that they are outsiders.

The anecdotes themselves, or the retelling of the way swearwords were used and the circulation of these stories, perform the inverse function. They mark off a group of insiders. A dozen similar stories circulate in El Mayor. When they are told, the groserías are always said in Cucapá and never translated into Spanish. When those present erupt in laughter, they indicate that they understand the words and, in the process, identify themselves as insiders.

Hill (1983) relays a similar version of boundary marking in a linguistic routine in Nuahatl, a Uto-Aztecan language of southern Mexico. She describes the rapid
abandonment of Nahuatl in some communities except in limited contexts such as cursing outsiders and toasting with pulque. Cursing outsiders takes the form of a challenge: A speaker demands, “Give me your sister.” A Nahuatl speaker will know that the proper response to such a challenge is, “No, but I will give you my brother,” whereas a Spanish speaker may merely believe he or she has been greeted and will reply, “Good morning” (Hill 1983: 266).

The three examples I have discussed—my own “initiation” at the meeting and the stories of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and of the conservationists—have important differences. The audience is constituted in different ways in the first and in the latter two examples. In the first example, my initiation, the audience was present when the utterances occurred; in the second two, the audiences are re-created as the incidents circulate as narratives (of course, the story about my initiation may well be circulating by now, too). Swearwords also perform slightly different functions in the three examples. In the case of my initiation at the meeting, my performance gained my access to the meeting, as I was eventually permitted to stay. In the other two examples, the performances ultimately restricted access; the witnesses were chased out of the yard, and the conservationists offended the chief rather than impressing him.

However, all three of these examples share a common element: a staged performance that subjects the outsider to the scrutiny of the group. This points to an important dimension of these interactions that cannot be accounted for as functioning at the level of boundary marking alone. Indeed, the symbolic work that swearwords accomplish needs to be understood as negotiating a more complex power dynamic than simply marking an in- from an out-group. To understand this dynamic it is necessary to
examine another set of linguistic practices in which it is the Cucapá, rather than reluctant or unknowing outsiders, who perform the swearwords.

As it became more clear to me that the persistence of swearwords was a social fact in El Mayor, rather than simply a product of the crowd I had fallen in with, I started approaching my friends and returning to my former interviewees to ask what they thought about this—why they thought these were the only words learned by the younger people. Sometimes people would respond, “It's because the young people are ‘groseros’ (rude).”

These comments bear a surface resemblance to the discourse of nostalgia that Hill (1998) found among older speakers of Mexicano (Nahuatl) in central Mexico. Hill describes this discourse as expressing nostalgia about days gone by and about a time when people spoke puro mexicano (pure Mexicano). Today, in contrast, the young people speak Spanish, and children come out of school groseros. Unlike Hill's case, however, in El Mayor the elders were hesitant to argue that speaking Cucapá was a pure cultural form and a vehicle for social forms of long ago. Their hesitance to make such claims has to do with one of the principal ways that language shift is understood. In general, elders accept responsibility for not teaching the young people Cucapá and explain this lapse as the result of la lucha (the struggle) they find themselves in to procure access to basic resources such as work, as Don Madaleno observed. A discourse of nostalgia around the past did exist, in that elders expressed that the old days were “better,” but it involved reminiscing about a time when fishing was good and residents of El Mayor could support their own families, rather than elaborating a linguistic ideology that grafted cultural purity onto linguistic form.
Furthermore, although elders would sometimes be dismissive of these kinds of linguistic interactions, calling the youth “groseros,” when I questioned them pointedly, the more common response was to tell more stories about similar encounters between youth and outsiders. Seventy-four-year-old Inez told me a story that proved particularly helpful in explaining how these practices are understood.

Sometimes you go out in the sierra or in the desert and the soldiers are there and they won’t let you pass. They stop you, pointing their guns at you on your own land and they ask you your business. At times like this the *chamacos* [kids] simply say “Soy Indio” in Spanish and then in Cucapá they say “go screw yourself!” to which the soldiers say “oh,” “pásale” (go ahead).

The form of this interaction initially places the Cucapá *chamacos* in the same position of vulnerability as the conservationists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the anthropologist in the previous set of examples. When the Indian meets the soldier (presumably on the lookout for drug smugglers in this heavily militarized border region of the Sonoran desert), he is asked to prove himself to the soldier, to justify his presence. As in the previous set of examples, cursing the authenticator is the substance of this performance.

Doña Inez ’s anecdote supplied a more general context for these utterances. It is a context in which indigenous people are continually called on to prove their authenticity. They are asked to perform their indigeneity, at great stakes, in a myriad of different contexts by different kinds of authenticators. What does it mean when telling an authenticator to “go screw yourself” passes as evidence? To understand this we need to look more closely at how language has come to represent indigeneity specifically through its non-denotational content, authenticating speakers on the level of form alone.
"Do You Speak Your Language?" Language Capacity as a Criterion for Participation

The Cucapá’s indigenous language capacity is one of a cluster of characteristics used for or against the group in different constitutional claims to land and fishing rights. As we saw in chapter two, a primary assumption about what constitutes authentic indigenous identity is that indigenous people are natural conservationists (Bamford 2002; Chapin 2004). The discourse of the ecologically noble savage assumes that the preservation of nature necessarily preserves indigenous cultures, and vice versa, because indigenous people are seen to have an essential relation to nature, just as they are assumed to have an essential relation to language (Muehlmann 2007). In chapter two, I explored how the Cucapá strategically engaged with the environmental movement by manipulating these assumptions (see also Conklin and Graham 1995). We also saw how environmental officials used the Cucapá’s failure to live up to specific characteristics of the “ecological Indian” to impede their access to fishing rights.

A set of authenticating measures determining who is and is not indigenous endures, despite indigenous groups’ constant resignifying of indigenousness. Ethnographic work on indigenous movements in Latin America has shown over and over again that the binary between indigenous and non-indigenous is never unproblematic. In describing the complexity of indigenous identification in regard to language, Jean E. Jackson and Kay B. Warren point out that “cases exist where pueblos do not speak their traditional language, others where non-indigenous populations do speak a traditional language and still other cases where people speaking a language feign total ignorance of it” (2005: 558). Alcida Ramos (1995: 268) even documents a case of one indigenous
group, the Pataxó of northeastern Brazil, who no longer speak their indigenous language, but, recognizing the importance of such signs of indigeneity for dominant society, have acquired the language of another indigenous group and strategically adopted it as their own.

The powerful assumption that the authenticity of indigenous identity is closely linked to the knowledge of one’s traditional indigenous language has resulted in some states requiring a person who has moved out of a community to still speak its language or be classified as formerly indigenous (Jackson and Warren 2005). Although actual linguistic practices are far too complex for such policies to be entirely enforceable, indigenous language competence continues to be a primary criterion by which institutional authorities define indigeneity. In El Mayor, indigenous language competence has been imposed as a criterion of authenticity in a variety of formal and informal ways: in restricting access to constitutional rights and to cultural projects and resources. During my time in El Mayor, Cucapá youths’ participation in a culture and conservation project vividly illustrated such authenticating practices at work.

As more attention has gone to finding alternate sources of income to illegal fishing, NGOs have proposed ecotourism projects, language revitalization projects, and cultural restoration projects. Participation in these projects requires a certain level of “cultural knowledge” and reflexivity. Language competency is often used as the indicator for such qualities. This became particularly evident during the preparations for a mapmaking project in El Mayor.

Santiago, the director of a program for “people, conservation, and nature” at a binational NGO, initiated a mapmaking project in the three main Cucapá communities,
Pozo de Avisu in Sonora, Somerton in Arizona, and El Mayor in Baja California. I volunteered to help with the preparations for this project before and during my fieldwork: attending meetings, taking notes, and consulting on various aspects of the planning. The project involved training a small team of youth from El Mayor, forming an advisory team of elders and carrying out interviews, then mapmaking with the support of trained cartographers. In a preliminary meeting, Santiago told me that the first criterion in the selection of youth participants should be fluency in Cucapá. I was surprised that he would impose this criterion, as he had been working with people in El Mayor for over ten years and I imagined had a better sense of the sociolinguistic dynamic. I explained that the fluency requirement would be unfair as none of the youth in El Mayor were fluent speakers of Cucapá.

Nonetheless, at the next meeting of the three communities, which took place in El Mayor in May 2006, Santiago announced that his selection of the team would be based on fluency in Cucapá. It was a disgruntled meeting, as the youth in the group had been unaware that there would be a selection process in the first place, much less one that would effectively exclude them all. One young man, who had been a part of all the preparations, stormed out of the meeting before it was over.

Later that night, long after Santiago had left El Mayor, several young women gathered around the front of our house, gossiping about the meeting, about Santiago’s brand new car, and about the injustice of the selection criteria. Thalia thought that it would be “almost impossible to find a young person here who speaks Cucapá.” As the conversation progressed, the group became more incensed about the whole issue. Here are some of the comments I recorded from that night:
Eva: It’s embarrassing not to be able to speak Cucapá because everyone who comes to El Mayor says: “Tell me how to say this in Cucapá” or, “tell me how to say that.” They think that we have to speak Cucapá because we are Indians. (She goes on to tell the same story Cruz told about the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Cucapá lesson.) It’s not fair—we should be able to work, the young people, even if we don’t speak Cucapá. Santiago is a crazy damn pelón (bald guy).

Lucía: Because we don’t speak Cucapá we shouldn’t get opportunities?

Eva: (directed at me) Why does he want us to speak Cucapá? Does he speak Cucapá?

Shaylih He thinks it would be better for the project, give a better sense of the land.

Eva: Well then instead of buying new cars he should buy us someone to teach us Cucapá!

Lucía: It doesn’t take out my Cucapáness, if I don’t speak it. I have Cucapá blood.

Shaylih: You think you’re still Cucapá, even if you don’t speak Cucapá?

Lucía: 100 percent.

In the end, Eva decided not to pursue the mapmaking project (she fell back on her previous plan to find a job in the factory where a handful of women from El Mayor worked and to entrust her newborn baby to the care of a neighbor during the day). She did not attend the following meeting in June 2006 that was held exclusively for the potential youth participants. Lucía, Victor, Osvaldo, Raul, Ivan, Thalia, and I went. Over beers and burritos at the tourist camp down the road, Santiago quizzed the group about why they wanted to be involved in the project (specifying, “besides the compensation”).

Osvaldo was the most vocal at the meeting; after several previous meetings; he seemed to have learned the style of rhetoric that Santiago was looking for. He started off hesitantly, saying that he thought it would be a good idea for outsiders to learn about all of the places in the area around El Mayor. Santiago encouraged him to continue, asking what benefit the project would have for El Mayor as a community. Osvaldo said it would probably be good for some of the Cucapá to learn about the places, too. Finally, after more cajoling from Santiago, Osvaldo said, “Oh yeah and our childrens’ children …” as
if remembering something that Santiago had said in the past. Santiago replied, “You’re learning, Osvaldo!” No one else seemed comfortable talking through the course of the meeting, but Osvaldo’s performance seemed to carry the group.  

Finally, the moment came when Santiago asked the group to describe their language competence. “Do you speak Cucapá?” he asked, addressing the whole group. Osvaldo continued in his role of leader and answered this question without hesitation. “We know the basics,” he said, “you know, ‘hello, how are you,’ ” which he directly translated into “go screw yourself” in Cucapá. After several other giddy exchanges of swearwords among members of the group, Santiago seemed to have heard enough. “OK, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, and, seeming to be satisfied precisely by his lack of comprehension, he moved on to make the final arrangements to begin the project.

In this interaction, as in Doña Inez’ anecdote about the chamacos meeting the soldiers in the desert, the Cucapá youth are asked to perform their indigeneity. The two interactions contrast meaningfully with the first set of examples I discussed because, in these instances, the Cucapá are subjected to the scrutiny and evaluation of outsiders. When proof of their authenticity is requested, Cucapá swearwords fulfill the request from the perspective of the authenticators while they simultaneously function as a refusal on the part of the Cucapá people who utter them.

In contrast, attempting to join the Cucapá in some manner, the conservationists, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the anthropologist were asked to perform these very words.

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4 In this instance, Osvaldo uses propositional content as a way of displaying his identity to outsiders, in contrast to linguistically displaying his identity at the level of form (as occurs through the use of swearwords). Graham (2002) calls these strategies of “rhetorical engagement” and argues that learning these rhetorics enables indigenous people to engage in broader discursive contexts as well as procure resources from outside of their communities.
In those instances, the Cucapá youth took on the role of the authenticators, not just for themselves in those moments but also for the audiences that will continue to hear the stories as they are repeated. In this set of examples the outsiders are subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of the Cucapá.

At the meeting I attended, I felt that I was being paraded out in front of an audience dressed up in an uncomfortable costume of words. I knew their meanings, but they still felt foreign and awkward, which contributed to my embarrassment. In retrospect, I wonder if the Cucapá youth I observed feel any differently when they are called on to perform their indigeneity. For these Cucapá youth, the condition for their authenticity is that they speak words that, at some level, are foreign to them. In mimicking the forms of the subordination they experience by subjecting outsiders to just such a performance, the Cucapá subvert their own subordination. This combination of appropriation and parody, or “mimesis” (Pemberton 1994; Siegel 1986; Taussig 1993) is, therefore, in fact, a gesture of resistance to the criteria by which they are able to access resources and lay claims to the state.

Therefore, more than simply marking an in- and an out-group, the use of Cucapá swearwords in the second set of interactions complicates the assumed hierarchies that these groups presuppose. In one sense, this second set expresses a classic gesture of resistance, constituting a “hidden transcript” (Scott 1992) or a “critique of power spoken behind the backs of the dominant” (Scott 1992: xii). By reversing roles, subverting their authenticators, and subjecting the outsiders to the very authenticating measures so often used against them, these youth also express an irony (see Gal 1995) fundamental to their experience of what it means to be indigenous.
In the case of the mapmaking project, the Cucapá youths’ use of swearwords was a critique of the assertion that their lack of fluency in Cucapá should deny them opportunities to work on cultural projects. It was a recognition of the injustice of the criterion and a defiant claim on the resources at stake.

**What Should and Should Not Be Said in Indigenous Languages**

Groserías figure centrally in these linguistic practices as more than a means to achieve the boundary marking and subversion I have argued they accomplish. Indeed, swearwords in these instances are fully intended in their most literal interpretation: as insults. That Cucapá groserías are featured in these practices, as opposed to Spanish ones, is also more than incidental. Cucapá swearwords derive much of their potency from manipulating expectations of what an indigenous language should express and by overturning expectations about the kind of knowledge indigenous people should have.

Hugh Brody (2000), the internationally recognized anthropologist, land-claims researcher, and policy adviser, claims that indigenous languages generally have no swearwords because anger is considered “childish” behavior and, as such, is scrupulously suppressed in indigenous communities. Although the popular assumption that indigenous languages do not feature obscenity is certainly not one that most linguists

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5 An array of eco-blogs have circulated and reenforced this assertion (see, e.g., http://porena.blogspot.com/; http://www.gnosticminx.blogspot.com/2007_05_01_archive.html; http://blog.fastcompany.com/archives/2006/08/14/innovation_and_complexity.html; http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2006/08/06.html). When I presented the previous section of this chapter at a conference, the first question I received from the audience was from a linguistic anthropologist who had worked with an indigenous group in Alaska. She prefaced her question by saying: “In the indigenous language I studied, there were no swearwords.” She went on to question whether the swearwords I had described were actually indigenous in origin, suggesting that perhaps they were an adaptation since colonization. I discuss the indigenous origin of Cucapá swearwords later in text. Here, it is noteworthy that the researcher should express such strong doubts that swearwords would exist in Cucapá in the first place.
would subscribe to, the linguistic anthropology literature on indigenous languages implicitly encourages it, if only by emphasizing more “elevated” aspects of such languages. Partly in reaction to legacies of assimilatory policy and the undervaluing of nondominant languages, linguistic anthropologists have focused on the positive knowledge that is “encoded” in indigenous languages (but see Garrett 2005 and Kulick 1995, 1998 for exceptions). Accordingly, the ecological, medical, and spiritual vocabularies found in indigenous languages have been celebrated and enthusiastically recorded (Harrison 2007; Hill 2003; Maffi 2001, 2005; Nettle and Romaine 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2003).

Ramos (1994: 78-80) has pointed out that these assumptions about indigenous knowledge and stereotypes about Indians conceal an intolerance and paternalism that can easily come to the fore when indigenous people betray these expectations. For this reason, precisely, reporting on the Cucapá’s linguistic practices is also politically precarious. By describing how these words function, do I unwittingly put forth a negative portrayal of the Cucapá? The possibility exists, given the context of much of the media and academic attention on language death—especially when conceptualized as a tragic, irrevocable loss of precious indigenous knowledge that could benefit all of humanity. Therefore, I hesitate to add my list of Cucapá expressions like “screw your mother” and “spread your ass cheeks” to the more idyllic archives of indigenous languages, such as the Hopi vocabulary, which can still imagine time in superior ways (Whorf 1964), or the O’odham words for the plants and animals integral to their cultural traditions (Hill 2003).

Similar discomfort at exacerbating negative stereotypes is evident in the burgeoning literature on the use of English swearwords by Aboriginal youth in Australia.
This work has examined the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people among those charged with “offensive behaviour” or “offensive language,” in areas with high indigenous populations and in those with low proportions of Aborigines in their population. David Brown and colleagues (2001) show through a sample of recorded crime statistics that indigenous people account for 15 times as many language offences as would be expected given their proportion in the community (see also Heilpern 1999).

Marcia Langton (1988) argues that this correlation can only be accounted for within the historical perspective of ongoing conflicts between the police and indigenous people (Brown et al. 2001; Cunneen 2001). She argues that swearing is a way for Aboriginal youth to exercise their own “legal method” by portraying the police and their legal culture as grotesque (Langton 1988). Although this literature has argued that swearing is designed precisely to challenge systems that are perceived as illegitimate and oppressive, it also contains a strongly paternalistic stream that argues that Aboriginal youth do not realize they are using culturally offensive linguistic forms. For example, Rob White (2002) contends that indigenous cultures’ perceptions of civility are so radically different from those of Western cultures that children are not penalized for their use of swearwords, which are so routinely used in everyday communication that they are, indeed, not even experienced as offensive. Thus, these culturally confused youngsters perceive themselves as being penalized for a “normal” communicational pattern that “in their cultural universe is … not experienced by them as ‘swearing’ ” (White 2002: 31).

These two tendencies, to deny that swearwords exist in indigenous languages or to argue that indigenous swearing in English is so naturalized that it is unidentifiable as swearing, reflect a deeper ambivalence about indigenous people. The ambivalence
indexes a dual stereotype of “the Indian”: on the one hand, as the noble savage inherently fluent in ecological wisdom and, on the other hand, as a violent and obscene substance abuser. White’s (2002) argument that English swearwords are not experienced as such by their speakers neutralizes the possibility that drawing attention to indigenous youth’s swearing might contribute to the latter stereotype. In the process, however, the argument undermines the strategic savvy of these speakers by disarming their linguistic practices of their powerful discursive effect.

The claims that indigenous languages have no swearwords or that swearing in such communities is too naturalized to be meaningful can be read as much as a prescription for what indigenous languages should express as an empirical assertion of what they do express. Evaluations of indigenous peoples’ swearing are filtered through expectations about what these people should and should not be saying, which, in turn, are constructed through a set of stereotypes about how they should behave, more generally.

Don Kulick (1995) identifies a parallel tendency in the portrayal of women’s speech in the literature on conflict talk and language and gender: Women are silent or speak submissively, with reference to rules of politeness (Lakoff 1975). Kulick (1998) critiques this tendency by exploring women’s speech in obscene public displays called “kroses,” which are sites of gender negotiations in Taiap, a Papuan language, and by showing how the vulgarity featured in these displays is ideologically opposed to the politeness of speech in men’s political oratories, which downplay tension and disagreement.

The sociolinguistic literature on gender and swearing is also useful for my analysis because it highlights how women’s swearing functions in a range of ways that,
against the backdrop of prevailing sociocultural norms and expectations, can provide a powerful identity resource for female speakers (de Klerk 1992, 1997; Gordon 1993; Ochs-Keenan 1974; Sutton 1995). This work has shown that swearing functions not only as a marker of identity but also as a means of negotiating and actively constituting that identity (Sutton 1995). In the case of the interactions I observed among the Cucapa, swearing functions not simply to transgress dominant censorships and the authority that enforces them but also to creatively respond to and subvert that authority (Woolard 1985).

Although the literature on obscenity is helpful for thinking through how swearwords may function as a strategic response, articulated from and constitutive of distinctly gendered or ethnic positions (see Weismantel 2001), I emphasize that the swearing central to this analysis is distinct from the everyday ways that obscenity is practiced among residents of El Mayor. When obscenity features in displays of anger, as insults, or in playful vulgarity among youth in El Mayor it is always expressed in Spanish, which is indeed the “native” language of the majority of residents in El Mayor.

For the youth, the use of Cucapa swearwords is less about engaging in the sociality of the obscene than about negotiating claims to indigeneity. In all of the ethnographic instances in which I heard Cucapa swearwords used, they were employed in response to a challenge to Cucapa authenticity or, as in the first set of examples I

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6 It is noteworthy that everyday practices of obscenity in El Mayor, as well as the specific practices of swearing I describe in this chapter, are not gendered in the ways that swearing is seen to be in much of the literature on language and gender. In El Mayor, men and women swear with similar prevalence and creativity. This may be related to the prominent role that women play in El Mayor in every realm of decision making and as major economic contributors to the household. As we saw in chapter 4, many people in El Mayor explained that the central role of women is one of the characteristics that differentiated them, as a group, from Mexicans more generally.
described, in a boundary-marking mode. All of the cases I observed, Cucapá swearwords were uttered in situations in which outsiders were present.

Nonetheless, the use of Cucapá swearwords in these limited contexts may well index both a sociality of the profane that is currently practiced in Spanish in El Mayor as well as one that may have been practiced when people were fluent and interacting in Cucapá. Although this chapter is concerned with what Cucapá swearwords do, as opposed to what they mean, during my interviews and informal conversations with elders in El Mayor, cross-cultural comparison of the meanings of swearwords was a running theme.

The central Cucapá phrase that I have analyzed in this discussion is one that I have translated into English as “screw you.” In Spanish, the semantic equivalent of “screw you” translates as “screw your mother” (chinga tu madre), reflecting the powerful role of the mother figure in Mexican culture. However, elders translated the literal meaning of the Cucapá expression as “screw your mother, your grandmother, and your grandfather.” In interviews, the elders who translated this phrase generally agreed that the literal meaning of the insult reflected the powerful institution of the extended family in Cucapá culture. This meaning was opposed to the individualism of US culture (in which the insult is to the individual) and to the powerful Mexican preoccupation around the role of the mother. The original meanings that the elders emphasized hint at the ways these swearwords may have formed a system of obscenity that predated the shift to Spanish.

Whereas elders explained that the literal meanings of the words were different than in Spanish, youth, significantly, translated these insults into their Spanish equivalents, glossing the words as local Mexican swearwords. Indeed, the youth were
unaware of the literal meanings in Cucapá. That the youth and elders translate the verb for sexual violation in Cucapá into *chingar* in Spanish is also significant because of the prevalence and flexibility of this word in Mexican Spanish and in daily practices of obscenity in EL Mayor.

The extensive use of the word *chingar* in Mexico is famously explored by Octavio Paz in “The Labyrinth of Solitude” (1961). Paz argues that the prevalence of the Spanish word *chingar* indicates that the “essential act of the macho - power - almost always reveals itself as a capacity for wounding, humiliating, annihilating” (1961: 82). Paz as well as others (Ramos 1962; Spielberg 1974) have argued that the principal theme of Mexican swearing involving the verb *chingar* is humiliation. However, José Limon (1994), unsettled by the delegitimizing effect this literature has on the Mexican working class, notes that the verb *chingar* also expresses an element of social violation. He describes it as a word often used when speaking of political and economic hardships.

That the Cucapá youth translated the swearwords they used into the Mexican verb *chingar* may indicate that, as it does for Limon’s working-class Mexicans, this linguistic practice represents an “oppositional break” (Limon 1994: 134) in the alienating socioeconomic conditions youth have found themselves in. When the Cucapá curse their authenticators, they simultaneously claim belonging to a group that has a specific historical relation to the nation-state. Swearwords act as a disavowal of the assertion that the Cucapá’s identity is located in their indigenous language and as a refusal to accept Cucapá fluency as a condition for access to resources.
Unlearning Cucapá: Last Words

Some people thought it was strange that I did not already know how to swear in Spanish when I arrived in El Mayor. They said that swearwords are usually the first kinds of words that foreigners learn when they come to the delta. I wondered about this generalization. Can it be true that, statistically, swearwords are the first words one learns in a foreign language (perhaps after hello and thank you)? Most people I talked to about this in El Mayor certainly seemed to think this is the case. I was interested in the assertion because it seemed that, in the case of the Cucapá language, swearwords were the last to be unlearned. The long-term implications of this trend struck me as particularly daunting. Twenty years from now, when the ten or so speakers in El Mayor have passed away, swearwords will be the only words spoken in Cucapá.

Paul B. Garrett (2005) argues that swearwords in bilingual settings can sometimes form a code-specific genre. He examines how young children in St. Lucia are socialized to “curse” in a creole language that under most circumstances they are discouraged from using. However, apart from Garrett’s (2005) case and Hill’s (1983) observation that cursing outsiders is one of the limited contexts in which the Nahuatl language is now used, little evidence suggests that swearwords are consistently the final words of dying languages. Interestingly, Kulick (1995) hints that the opposite process may be taking place in Melanesia. One of the many effects of missionization in Melanesia has been the eradication of obscene language in village life. Kulick points out that obscenity was one of the first speech varieties to become extinct when Kaluli villagers in the southern highlands adopted Christianity. Although this has yet to happen in the New Guinean village of Gapun, obscene language is associated in that village with “the ways of Satan”
(Kulick 1995: 536), and Kulick questions whether the rich array of obscenities he documented will survive.

Although the youth in El Mayor are still learning swearwords, I want to be clear that I am not arguing that the last vestiges of their indigeneity, therefore, reside in profanity. To the contrary, the strategic use of swearwords in the contexts I have described critiques the very idea that indigeneity resides in the Cucapá language. Like the elders, the youth believe that what makes them Cucapá is a connection to the land, to the river, and to a history of tension with the Mexican government. Of course, these signifiers involve their own forms of strategic essentialisms, but, crucially, they are not the linguistic essentialisms invoked by often well-meaning anthropologists, NGO workers, and government officials.

For the youth in El Mayor, groserías may well seem the only words they need to know in Cucapá. Doña Esperanza often reasoned that it is important for the children to learn Cucapá because “it’s good to be able to talk a language that outsiders don’t understand.” The outsiders that frequent El Mayor seem to agree. When the soldier meets the Indian in the desert, he does not care that he does not know what the Indian says to him. The foreign words prove to the soldier that the Indian belongs there, that he is Indian. In the mapmaking meeting, Santiago did not need to know what the youth were saying in Cucapá for him to be convinced of their competence. It was as if his not knowing what they were saying was evidence enough. To the soldier, to the lawyer, to the government official, to the conservationist, it is not the meaning of the words that matters. Indeed, in part, the very incomprehensibility of these words is what makes them so valuable.
I have argued that it is within this context of repeated appeals for proof of indigenous authenticity that one can understand the use of Cucapá swearwords in El Mayor. Cucapá swearwords gesture to the irony of these appeals in the context of the long history of injustice the Cucapá people have experienced—a history that has always implicated their indigeneity in terms that the state has set. The concept of “indigeneity” represents the historical insertion of the preconquest population in the construction of the modern nation-state (de Oliveira 1999). Ironically, the Mexican constitution requires self-identification for a group to be recognized as indigenous. Cucapá swearwords declare just such a self-recognition.

However, the Cucapá move one step further from the recognition demanded of them. When the Cucapá offer “go screw yourself” as evidence of their authenticity, they draw attention to the authenticators’ lack of access to the knowledge they would need to determine the fulfillment of their own criteria. This acknowledgment draws attention to the limits of the project of “legibility” in which indigenous identification is embedded. According to James C. Scott, the modern state attempts to make the populations it administers more “legible” “to create a terrain and a population with precisely those standardized characteristics which will be easiest to monitor, count, assess, and manage” (1998: 81). As the Cucapá youth’s swearing points out, however, although the use of language as a standard characteristic may render indigenous populations more visible to the state, it simultaneously perpetuates colonial imaginaries of the Indian as impenetrable and exotic.

Graham (2002) points out that the symbolic value attached to indigenous languages as emblems of authenticity gives these languages a special status among
signifiers because, in addition to communicating through content, they signal ethnicity at
the level of form in the same way as nonlinguistic forms such as bodily ornamentation or
traditional dress. In this case, from the point of view of outsiders, the referential content
does not matter, the form alone serves to authenticate the speakers. However, from the
point of view of the inside group, for which these interactions are also performed, the
propositional content is extremely important. The linguistic interactions examined here
are a particularly sophisticated use of this dual nature of indigenous language as a
semitic medium because swearwords play off the nondenotational significance of
indigenous language to outsiders while simultaneously drawing on the referential aspect
for the insiders. Whereas the acoustic form of the Cucapá swearwords signifies the
youths' authenticity to the outsiders, the content, which defies indigenous stereotypes,
would actually undermine their authenticity if these same audiences understood it.

To curse the unknowing outsider also expresses the Cucapá's acknowledgment
that they do not have control over the conditions of their own recognition. The Cucapá's
awareness of this fact forces us to ask questions about our role as anthropologists in
ratifying those very conditions. Although some will argue that the essentialisms
perpetuated by the ideology of language as the primary conduit for culture are strategic,
we have to ask ourselves how strategic this conception of language is when it does not
align with the views and realities of the local people we hope to advocate for. When
linguistic anthropologists insist that language is the "vehicle" of culture, and, indeed, that
"when a language dies, a culture dies," what are the political implications when entire
populations of indigenous people are learning the dominant languages in their given
political and economic situations? Indeed, linguistic anthropologists themselves predict
that in the next century 50 percent of minority languages will be lost (Krauss 1992; Maffi 2005). What will the ramifications of the insistence on the language–culture link be in 100 years, when the majority of indigenous people will not speak indigenous languages?

The use of Cucapá swearwords also indicates how academic and state appeals arguing for the recovery of cultural wealth may sound to indigenous people. These appeals argue that cultures are important to “save,” not just for the good of a specific community but also for the benefit of national patrimonies and, indeed, for all of humanity. From this perspective, it does not matter if saving the Cucapá language, for example, is a priority or even an interest in El Mayor, because it is in the interest of humanity, more generally. Neither is it relevant that people no longer speak Cucapá because of centuries of racism and marginalization that have come in the form of environmental injustice, suppressed livelihoods, and economic and social assimilation.

Turning back to the great contradiction to which Cruz referred so casually, how do the Cucapá make sense of the fact that, after centuries of repression and discrimination on the basis of their cultural difference, they are now being told that they should act like Indians? How do they respond to claims that their speaking Cucapá is not only what makes them who they are but is also inherently valuable to all of humanity? I think, by now, one can guess how they might respond.
CONCLUSIONS

As I drove out of El Mayor at the end of my fieldwork, following the river up from Mexico through California, Arizona and Colorado, the contrast upstream was striking. Just three hours north of El Mayor, in Palm Desert, California, luxury hotels have misting devices to keep their guests comfortable while they sit by the pool. The Marriot Hotel lobby's indoor lake and waterfalls take more than 50 million gallons to fill. This is where the water diverted from the Colorado River goes: golf courses, ranches, swimming pools, and thirsty cities such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas. The United States-Mexico border, like the Colorado River itself, bisects a region of dramatic inequalities.

This dissertation has explored some of the ways that the inequalities experienced in El Mayor are organized around central axes of social differentiation. Starting from a focus on the particular confrontations and encounters engendered by the fishing conflict over the Colorado River, I have explored the way that the idioms of ethnicity, class, gender and language have shaped the way that residents of El Mayor have negotiated the dramatic structural, ecological and discursive transformations that have characterized life there over the last few decades.

An important focus of this dissertation has been an attention to who decides and defines which differences are important and what the effects of these decisions are on the people in El Mayor. For example, I have examined how ethnicity and indigeneity in particular have become foregrounded as idioms of categorization which ultimately constrain access to resources. Chapter two explored how this foregrounding allowed environmental officials to ultimately deny indigenous fishing rights to the Cucapá because they did not align with the category of indigeneity in the way that it has been
defined. Chapter five examined the way that indigenous language competence has become a criterion for participation in cultural projects and revitalization programs.

It has now been well documented ethnographically world-wide that local understandings of what authenticates identity formations are extremely diverse (Warren and Jackson 2005). In chapter four, I have explored the ways that “being Cucapá” is linked to a particular gender ideology which is opposed to stereotypes of Mexican machismo. The point here is not that systems of identification are culturally relative, however. Rather, what we find is a case where, through certain confrontations with the state, NGOs and other actors identity formation takes place.

One of the ways that theorists have recently come to explain how idioms of identification have been calibrated to broader systems of signification is through the concept of “articulation” (Clifford 2001; Garcia 2005; Li 2000; Nelson 1999; Yeh 2007). Drawn from Stuart Hall1, the concept of articulation is used to denote the way that groups come to express particular collective political identities and manage to connect these identities to wider discourses and social forces at different historical conjunctures. Stuart Hall drew attention to the dual meaning of the term "articulation." Articulation is for him the process of rendering a collective identity, position, or set of interests explicit and, at the same time, is a conjoining of that position to definite political subjects (Hall 1996: 141). It is the formation of a collective “voice,” but always in a constructed and contingent sense (Clifford 2001: 478). While on the one hand, articulations are positively asserted, they are also limited and pre-figured by the fields of power (Li 2000: 152).

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1 Hall brings the concept of articulation from Gramsci (1986) and positions his own use of it in relation to the work of Althusser, Foucault and Lacan (1985).
Li (2000) and Clifford (2001) have suggested that the concept of “articulation” provides a framework for understanding how a collective identity and set of interests is rendered explicit and expressible and also how that identity is connected to specific political subject positions. Li (2000) suggests that this avoids the predicament of undermining political movements by reducing them to historical contingencies or strategic essentialisms. Dove (2006), in turn, has pointed out that the framework is one way to avoid debates over authenticity by shifting focus to the articulation of indigeneity (Dove 2006: 191). Clifford (2001) argues that it is a useful way of reformulating questions about the “invention of tradition,” by re-framing notions of identity as, on the one hand trans-historical essences or on the other, late capitalist commodities of multiculturalism (472).

Tania Li (2000) provides a particular full ethnographic account of the concept of articulation exploring how, at different historical and political conjunctures, some people come to identify themselves as indigenous while in other conjunctures other people do not choose that marker of identity. Li compares two different groups in central Sulawesi, Indonesia, contrasting their historical conjunctures to expose the conditions and processes which made particular articulations possible. She describes how the Lauje, a relatively isolated upland group living in scattered houses with no serious competitors for their hilly terrain, do not currently see themselves in the "indigenous slot" but nevertheless engage with routine, everyday forms of power. Li argues that the Lauje have not articulated collective positions framed as “indigenous” because they have not been exposed to overtly coercive dimensions of state power, nor to the threat of having land and livelihoods removed from them.
In the contrasting case the Lindu, a lowland coastal group, firmly produced an identity as “indigenous” in the context of their opposition to a hydro plan with a proposed dam and the threat of forced resettlement by the state. Through coalitions with NGOs who were able to use the environmental soundness of the Lindu's livelihood practices to argue against the dam, the hydro plans were eventually put on hold. With this comparison Li argues that the predominance of a particular frame at a particular time does not depend on essential differences between groups, but instead on the regimes of representation or "places of recognition" that pre-configure what can be found there, as well as processes of contestation and dialogue that take place on the ground (Li 2000: 154).

The notion of articulation has been particularly useful for explaining how certain subject positions are taken up in ways that resonate with wider political and ideological trends and become intelligible in relation to them. That is, the concept is powerful at explaining where these articulations of indigeneity are politically successful. However, scholars who have examined articulations have noted that there are always risks inherent to the different interests at play in any articulation which always threaten to lead to its unraveling (Li 2000:169). As Stuart Hall warned, this is a process “without guarantees” (1983). Candidates for indigenous positions who are found deficient according to the global environmental standards expected from them are particularly vulnerable to accusations of not being “authentic enough” (Li 1999; see also Ramos 1994). Global and local interests, in other words, are not always aligned so easily to create a common agenda with local actors (Conklin 1997; Conklin & Graham 1995; Bamford 2002; Braun 2002; Jackson & Warren 2005).
In this dissertation, I argue that it is important to look at when articulations of an identity fail or are not entirely successful. While one of the advantages of a focus on the politics of articulation is precisely that it allows for contingency, such that no identification is inevitable, it is nonetheless less explanatory in instances where some subject positions do not manage to connect to wider political historical trends. The Cucapá, in particular, were not able to take up the spots that are ostensibly made available for them by the state and NGOs in relation to their fishing rights. This is distinct from a situation where a group would not express a particular “indigenous” identification at all, such as the Lauje case that Li describes. In the Cucapá case, we have an example of how contested notions of indigeneity are unevenly aligned with local, national, and transnational discourses and policies or what Tsing (2007) has called “emergent channels of public attention” (50). For example, local expressions of identity fail to resonate with international environmental discourses on language and nature conservation, the indigenous movement as well as local and national stereotypes of gender inequality.

In chapter two, we saw how the fishing cooperative fails to get recognition for their claims to indigenous fishing rights because they are deemed not indigenous “enough.” Even more striking than failed and missed articulations of identity are those that are rejected; that is, when specific political positions are re-articulated in ways that challenge transnational systems of signification. For example, we saw that despite an influx of conservation NGOs and other work programs, some in El Mayor were drawn into the drug economy in the region because of the specific economic and symbolic opportunities it offered. In this case, “traditional ecological knowledge” was re-articulated with the drug trade instead of with conservation projects. In the process,
discourses on stewardship and conservation are de-centered in a way that challenges assumptions about indigenous knowledge as well as assumptions about the economic and political realities of the groups involved. Similarly, Cucapá youth criticize the notion that what makes them indigenous is their speaking Cucapá; instead, they connect their sense of identity to shared conditions of subordination. This move takes apart the articulation between the cultural identity of indigenous people with the symbolic element of language capacity.

The ways that people make sense of their historical situation and render it intelligible is not just a process of conjoining meaning with global signifiers. In El Mayor, the fields of power within which people positioned themselves were also relative to dynamics within the group. For example, while involvement in the narco-economy fails to resonate with wider discourses on indigeneity, it also unhinges those who participate in it from other local discourses about what it means to be Cucapá. In this case, some fishermen and women reject local ideas that the Cucapá will “fish forever” and instead adamantly relinquish their nets in exchange for trafficking goods up the river.

In chapter four, we also saw a case of a more local “dis-articulation” when Cruz’ efforts to express himself as an “authentic” Cucapá man were eventually dismissed as aligning with Mexican stereotypes instead of local gender expectations.

The dual meaning of Hall’s use of articulation is also relevant here, at least in the negative reading. The second sense of articulation emphasizes not just conjoining positions to definite political subjects but also the way that these positions are expressed and made comprehensible and accessible to an audience. In chapter one, we saw how Cucapá elders’ lack of literacy with maps made their own knowledge about place
untranslatable in the context of the map-making project. I argued that their modes of understanding place were muted by the technologies and practices taken up by the project. In chapter five, we saw how the Cucapá, in being a primarily Spanish speaking population, are also rendered “inarticulate” in a way that resonates with work looking at the construction of inarticulateness in subordinate groups (Bourdieu 1977; Hill 1995; Young 1983). This work sees inarticulateness as an institutional and situational artifact bound up with issues of power rather than as a neutral description (McElhinny 2001). By not speaking their own language, that is, the language which would make them authentic subjects, monolingual Spanish speaking Cucapá people are rendered radically inarticulate.

One of the most important insights that local re-articulations suggest is that sometimes the way that social and ethnic difference is defined and ascribed to residents of El Mayor is arbitrary and careless. Like the line that municipal workers painted over the dog on the side of the road, categories imposed to organize difference in Baja California do not pay attention to the social landscape they bisect. They slash through local meanings, local boundaries, local idioms of identification. More importantly, state identifications slash through local priorities and necessities and they do so unapologetically.

By the same token, people in El Mayor have also challenged those lines and configurations. They have done so by subverting and reformulating hegemonic discourses about what it means to be Cucapá, what it means to be indigenous, and what it means to be poor in Mexico today. Some have bypassed local development planning and “fish anyway” despite regulations. Some have further confronted their criminalization by
entering the narco-economy. In doing so, residents of El Mayor do not simply critique the lines that both categorize them and constrain their modes of livelihood, but they also redraw these categories and they do so, just like the state or its municipal paint-workers, unapologetically.
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258


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