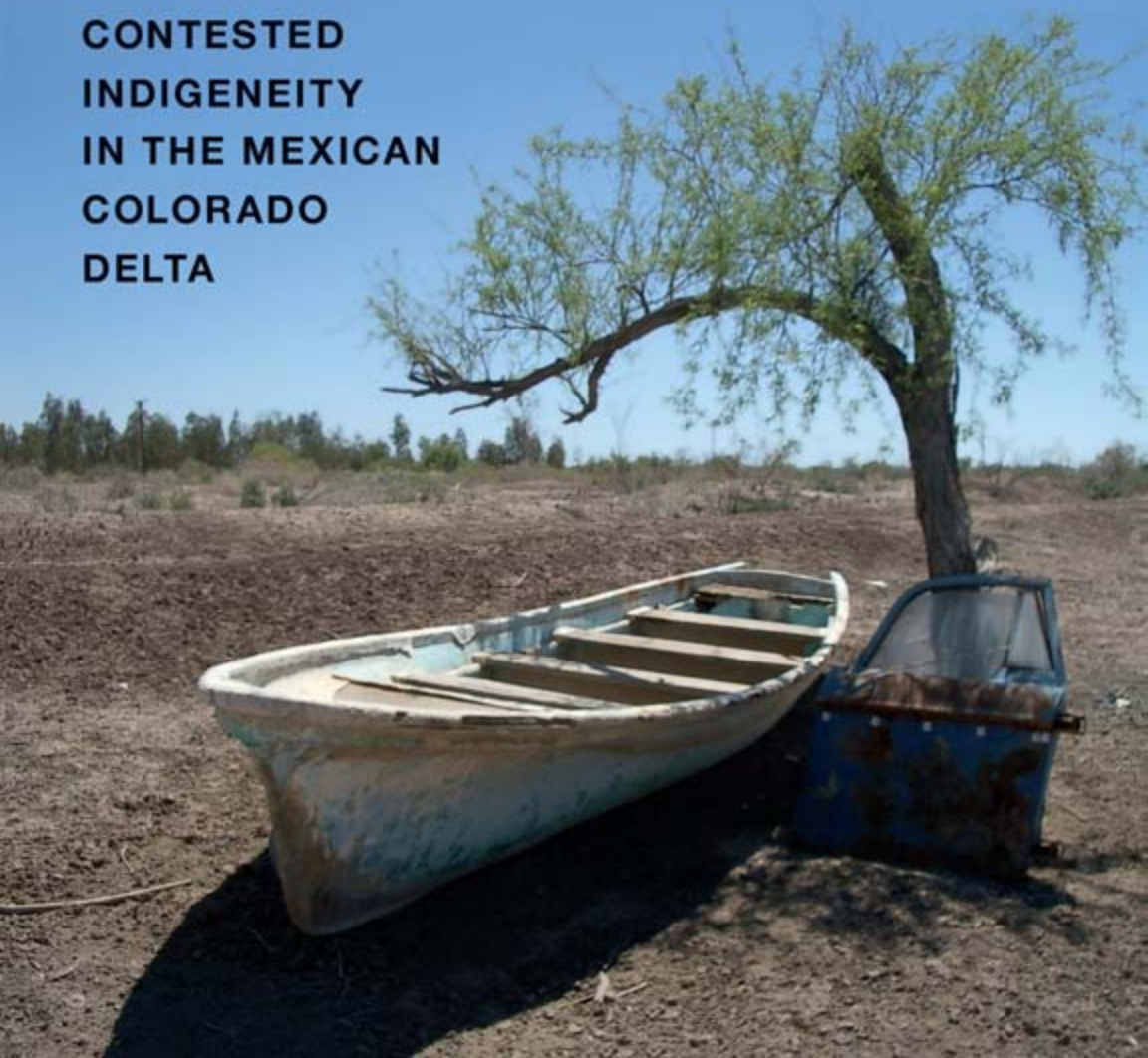


SHAYLIH MUEHLMANN

# Where the River Ends

CONTESTED  
INDIGENEITY  
IN THE MEXICAN  
COLORADO  
DELTA



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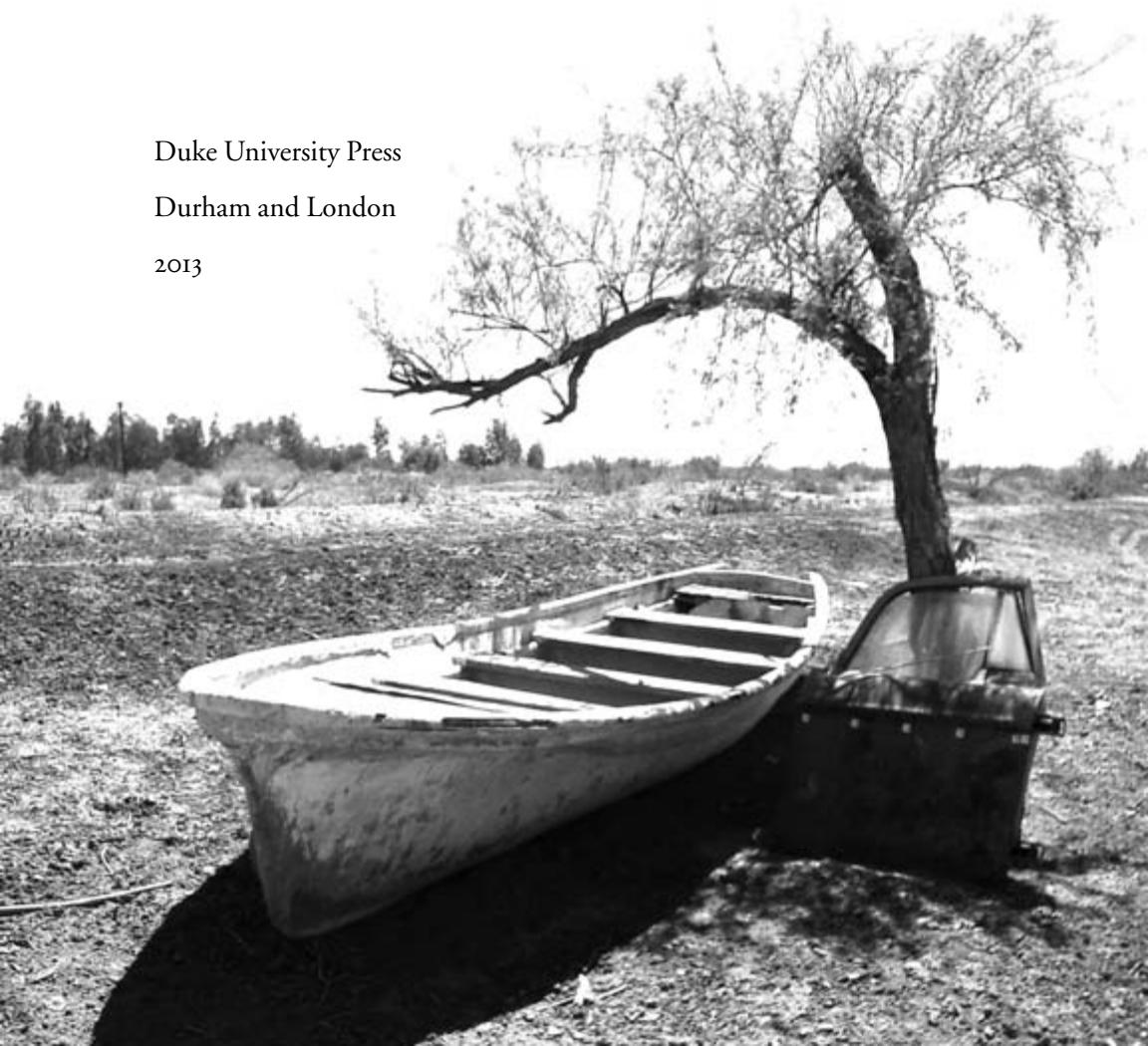


SHAYLIH MUEHLMANN

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CONTESTED INDIGENEITY IN THE  
MEXICAN COLORADO DELTA

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## INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Research Trajectory

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

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

structed in different ways by different groups involved in the conflict. This was the relevant question upstream, where I did two months of research. The controversy in the southwestern United States polarizes around the way engineers and ranchers conceptualize and talk about water and how the Colorado River's indigenous groups, at least traditionally and often strategically, conceptualize it.<sup>4</sup> 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 Cucapá village where I would carry out my fieldwork, however, the debate shifted onto entirely different grounds. I found that people were hardly talking about water at all. Instead, the terms of crisis were centered around a lack of work. “There is no work here” was a common comment among residents. When I would ask why there was no work, people tied the issue directly to the fact that the Colorado River no longer reached them and further understood this by noting that the United States had “stolen” most of this water. But this was not the way the conflict was articulated when I was not leading the conversation. Instead, the majority of people narrated the injustices carried out by the Mexican government by placing restrictions on their fishing. Perhaps it did not seem surprising to them that the United States would “steal” so much water. Instead, the outrage was felt around the fact that the Mexican government would not let its own people work. Therefore, local people pointed to another level on which the fishing conflict was playing out. Instead of situating the fishing conflict in a discourse of environmental crisis, they shifted the terms of the debate onto the conditions of poverty that made feeding their families the ultimate priority.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The Fieldsite

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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