

Book Review

Where the River Ends: Contested Indigeneity in the Mexican Colorado Delta. By Shaylih Muehlmann. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. 220 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. Paper \$23.95.

On the cover of Shaylih Muehlmann's book, *Where the River Ends*, is a photograph of an abandoned fishing boat lying in a dry riverbed. The haunting image has become iconic for the Colorado River, whose waters no longer reach the sea.

But Muehlmann's book is not about the (lost) river per se. Rather, it is about the people who have traditionally called the river's delta home—the Cucapá people. The book details how the diversion of the Colorado River, negotiated by state actors without public input, has disrupted not only the river's ecology, but also the social, economic, and political structure of the people living within its basin, particularly those at the delta.

Complicating matters, the Cucapá people are also faced with issues around contested identity that have an impact on their rights to fish. State authorities no longer consider the Cucapá people "Indigenous enough" to receive access to preferred fishing rights, on the grounds of loss of traditional language. Although many Cucapá people continue to fish, these acts are now deemed "illegal" by the state, which speaks to wider issues of "authenticity" and "politics of calculation" in the context of Indigeneity. This book details how the changing political and ecological landscape has made the Cucapá, in essence, strangers (and fugitives) in their own land.

Although the context of the book is *loss*—loss of water, loss of family structure, loss of livelihood, and loss of identity—Muehlmann shows how individuals in the Cucapá community are resilient in the face of adversity. The late Cucapá chief, Don Madelona, captured this resilience when he said, "We are here. We eat, we dance, we fish. Here we are

and we still live” (p. 25). Through compelling narrative and intimate vignettes, with figures such as Don Madelona, Muehlmann dispels boundaries of victims and victors, and she supplants them with complex realities of a changing world. Although some cases are more hopeful than others, all are candid. Woven within the rich ethnography is insightful analysis about wider issues of identity politics, gender roles, environmental justice, and Indigeneity.

Her chapters lead the reader on a journey, down the river and into the homes of the Cucapá people. As Muehlmann describes, the “chapters are loosely thematized around how the idioms of ethnicity, nationalism, class, gender and language have shaped the way that locals have negotiated the dramatic structural, ecological, and discursive transformations that have characterized life there over the last few decades” (p. 17). In the first chapter, Muehlmann shows the characteristics of how the river is drawn and discursively produced. In Chapter 2, she highlights the making and unmaking of “Indigenous authenticity,” which relates directly to fishing access (and ultimately, conflict). In Chapter 3, Muehlmann discusses changing labor markets and the conflicts that Indigenous communities face when the environment, economy, and political world changes around them. In this context—and throughout—she provides a compassionate and evenhanded account of how marginalized communities are dealing with issues such as narcotrafficking and drug abuse. In Chapter 4, Muehlmann documents changing gender roles in the communities and provides counternarratives to the classic machismo cultures. Chapter 5 looks at Indigenous politics through the lens of changing linguistic patterns, particularly how the youth’s creation of new swear words challenge colonial interpretations of authenticity.

In the end, this book is about much more than the Colorado River. Rather, it is about the struggles of the communities whose world has changed around them, how communities connect with and construct place, and how these constructions are wrought with power dynamics and asymmetries. In sum, Muehlmann offers a thought-provoking, well-written, and important ethnography. This book is recommended particularly for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students, and for the interested public. It is supplemented with helpful and clear figures and maps.

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