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**Indigenous Networks in the Colorado Basin**

In 2014, for the first time in nearly two decades, water from the Colorado River spilled (dribbled really) into the Gulf of Cortez. This noteworthy event was due to an abundant year of rain and snow melt in the northern Rockies; in most years, communities along the river soak up the flow to irrigate crops, provide hydroelectric power, and secure water for the cities that depend on it for everything from lawn watering to industrial processes.

As Natale A. Zappia’s *Traders and Raiders: The Indigenous World of the Colorado Basin, 1540-1859* reveals, it was always so, for the Colorado River basin underwrote American Indian communities in an entire region for at least half a millennium. *Traders and Raiders* focuses on a shorter period—that of immediate pre-contact and then contact between Spanish and then American explorers, traders, and colonists from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

Beginning long before Europeans were even aware of the Western Hemisphere, the Colorado River Basin drew migrants and settlers. While some stayed longer and others moved on quickly, they created a dynamic world of trade and political interchange that stretched eastward from coastal California to central New Mexico, incorporating people living from northern Sonora to the southern borders of Utah and Colorado. Speaking twenty different languages, Mojaves, Hualapais, Cahuillas, Quechans, and other lineage groups were drawn to the free-flowing water of the Colorado Basin as it cut a wandering path through an otherwise arid and inhospitable terrain.

The river itself was the focus of American Indian life in what Zappia labels as “the interior world,” guaranteeing sustenance and forming the focus of political and economic life in the region. The best locations on the river were fought over constantly and, as Zappia convincingly shows, one
could measure the structure of power at any time by noting the position of peoples aligned from best to worst access along its banks. It was from these positions along the Colorado River that autochthonous people constructed a trading network that drew shell-beads, baskets, and dozens of other commodities into the riparian nexus.

Focusing on this region, *Traders and Raiders* begins with the network’s creation during a period of climatic change that straddled the late Medieval Climate Optimum and the early Neoglacial Age. Centered on the Colorado River and Lake Cahuilla until it evaporated at the end of the fifteenth century, this network brought dozens of indigenous groups together at the same time that it fostered growing competition for political control of the strategic region. Taking advantage of the destabilizing effects of Neoglacial desiccation, by the late seventeenth century the Quechan alliance had emerged as the most aggressive power in this interior world. Increasingly dependent on prestige trade goods, especially shell-beads produced since the twelfth century in Chumash Channel Island communities, Quechan leaders battled to secure and maintain control over the trade routes that were the cement binding together the twenty distinct peoples who made the interior world their home. By 1781, the Quechan alliance had grown powerful enough to expel the Spanish traders and missionaries who had filtered into the region since 1540.

The foreigners may have been driven out, but the long drawn-out Spanish *entrada* left an indelible mark on the interior world. One of the most important changes came with the arrival of Spanish horses. Mirroring the experiences of indigenous people living on the Plains and adjacent regions of central Indian America, horses disrupted established trade and, more significantly, political relationships in the interior world. This change ushered in a new era dominated by an increasingly important raiding and trading economy centered on horses and captives.

This new trading-and-raiding economy ultimately changed the face of this region, elevating those, like the Yokuts, Mohaves, and Utes, who quickly forged a new equestrian way of life and pushed traditional trade in prestige and everyday goods into the background. Raiders brought horses, sheep, and cattle stolen from Spanish and outlying indigenous settlements into the trading network, but they also brought women and child captives into an expanding slave market. This new world of violence, theft, and enslavement disrupted established trade and power relationships in the interior world, catapulting people such as the Maricopa, who raided for livestock and slaves in Sonora, to the forefront of interior society. Thus began a decade-long rivalry between the Maricopa newcomers and the long-established Quechan alliance for political and economic control over the interior world.

It was in this contentious political and economic situation that thousands of fortune-seeking outsiders trekked in their search for glory and adventure after gold was discovered at Sutter’s Mill in 1848. This massive influx of nonindigenous outsiders disrupted the region in new ways and, during the 1850s, brought Anglo settlers and a sectionally divided US government into the already tense region. Unaware or unconcerned about the complicated and interlocking trading and raiding alliances and conflicts that defined the interior region, these new outsiders cut through existing political and economic relationships, bringing new tensions to an already destabilized region. By 1857, the unending incursions and disruptions broke the complicated and tenuous accords that had kept Quechans and Mariposans as more or less peaceful competitors and drove the two sides to war. Fought over the following two years, the Mojave War spelled an end to indigenous autonomy in the region.

Autonomy did not mean disappearance and dismemberment, however, and *Traders and Raiders* ends with an account of the perseverance of
indigenous people and their leaders in the face of the annexation of their interior world by American and Mexican states. Legal contests over land and water rights punctuated the decades following annexation and, as Zappia notes, continue to this day.

*Traders and Raiders* joins a growing shelf of books that has recast the narrative of interior American Indian history and brought about a serious reconsideration of the impact of outsiders on indigenous worlds. Next to the works of Pekka Hämäläinen, Brian DeLay, James Brooks, Juliana Barr, Ned Blackhawk, and Cynthia Radding, *Traders and Raiders* rests in very good company.

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