In my dissertation, I analyze how a landscape of pre-Hispanic mounds, the accumulation of centuries of human and nonhuman habitation, became a zona arqueológica – the modern materialization of a single period of the archaeological record, investigated and bounded by scientific and bureaucratic criteria. As a result of this process, I ask about the other pasts taken for granted, or simply not studied, because of the prominence of that archaeological site. I center these questions on the Epiclassic (c. 350-1200 CE) urban center of El Tajín, Mexico, currently home to a number of indigenous Totonac communities.

Using a community-grounded counter-mapping methodology, I explore three historical processes relevant to the area’s Totonac residents that nevertheless remain undercovered in the literature because of a focus on the archaeological site: transformations in land use, changes in vanilla cultivation, and the effects of oil exploration in the region. Working back towards the archaeological site, I argue that these three processes helped to constitute modern El Tajín. In this analysis, government land surveyors, vanilla merchants, and foreign oil companies play foundational roles in the archaeological work of delimiting, managing, guarding, and reconstructing the pre-Hispanic past.

Shifting my focus to the present, I then take an ethnographic approach to the archaeological site as a workplace. While the site’s managers may have epistemological authority over the interpretation of the past, I take a political-economic focus that reveals that their ability to manage the site is limited by short-term contracts, payroll delays, and a lack of administrative support. Meanwhile, the site’s Totonac guards are more often able to carry out their political objectives, thanks to their long histories of labor at the site and organization as a union.

For heritage ethnography, my research demonstrates the importance of engaging archaeology and archaeologists as interlocutors, rather than just discourses and subject-positions to be criticized. For archaeologists interested in the politics of the discipline, my dissertation argues for a broadly political-economic focus complimenting current emphases on identity and representation. In both, I show the utility of an archaeological emphasis on the constitutive roles of material culture in social processes.