Archaeological Ethnographies: analysing the relations between indigenous population and archaeological heritage in Tulum, Mexico.

Yael Dansac
EHESS - Paris, France
dansac.yael@ehess.fr

The indigenous peoples of Latin America share common ideas about archaeological sites. For a start, millenary objects and ruins form an integral part of the topography where they perform their daily activities. In the Mexican context, anthropologists such as Barabas (2003:18) have studied how indigenous communities represent their environment as a sacred cosmos where any object has the ability to be animated serving as a receptacle for the divinities, an beliefs dating from pre-Hispanic times.

With the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese conquerors other elements where annexed to this imaginary of the cosmos, including saints, virgins and the devil (Almere and González, 2000:24). Because of their category as spaces related to pre-Columbian societies, archaeological sites play an important role for indigenous people who visit them for ceremonies that included both catholic and native features. More recently their rituals have also included New Age type beliefs related to astrology, in which the pyramids and ruins are conceived as places to charge vital energy (Galinier and Molinié, 2006).

The present text explores the relations between a contemporary indigenous group, the Maya, and the archaeological site of Tulum, an ancient Mayan city located in the northeast of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico.[1] Our methodological approach is called Archaeological Ethnography: a recent field of study which proposes a space of dialogue that encourages multiple engagements and critiques centred on material culture, society and temporality.

[1] The information exposed in this paper is framed in our Ph.D. thesis about the conceptualisation and institutionalisation of Tulum archaeological site.

In order to expose the subject we divided the text into three main parts: first there is an introduction to the cultural, geographic and economic context where the archaeological site of Tulum is located, which is eminently touristic. Secondly, we will expose our theoretical basis and the objectives of the Archaeological Ethnography approach, justifying its application to our subject of research. Thirdly, we present the relations between contemporary local Mayas and the Tulum site using historic documents and ethnographic data.

1 In a universe of *Mayaness:* notes on Tulum's cultural and socio-economic context

The archaeological site of Tulum stands on a bluff facing east towards the Caribbean Sea. Located in a strategic location on the coastline, this Mayan city from the Post classic[2] served as a seaport that controlled maritime commerce along this section of the coast to actual Honduras, and it was stilled inhabited when the Spanish arrived to conquer the Yucatán Peninsula in 1527.

Nowadays the Tulum site stands three miles from Tulum town, and forms part of the Tulum National Park, an area of 1, 664, 000 acres where biodiversity is protected by the law. For two decades there has been a highway that connects Tulum town with other coastal towns on the north, like Akumal, Playa del Carmen and Cancún, making it accessible for visitors and attracting a large number of tourists. Just in 2013, the Tulum site received 1, 289, 000, 000 visitors being the third most visited site in Mexico after Teotihuacán and Chichén Itzá.

The cultural and economic dynamics of Tulum municipality are strongly dictated by the touristic project it takes part in, the Mayan[3] Riviera (figure 1). Launched in 1960 and supported by investors and government authorities, the Mayan Riviera project was

[2] In Mesoamerican chronology, the Post classic goes from 1200 to 1450 B.C.
[3] In the Yucatan Peninsula the name of *Maya* is attached to a myriad of elements, but in principle is the name of an indigenous language shared among several communities inhabiting from south Mexico to Honduras. Also, Maya is the name given by 19th century historians to the ancient civilization that used to live in that territory 1500 years ago (Magnoni et al., 2007: 356).

a three-step initiative[4] that aimed to develop the northeast coastline of the Yucatan Peninsula (Bartolomé, 2001), a territory with a significant presence of indigenous population that was considered as inhabited.

Geographically isolated from the centre during the centuries that preceded the Spanish Conquest, a portion of the Maya people of Yucatan took up the arms in the late 19th century proclaiming their independence from the Mexican Government, who decided in the early 20th century to divide the Peninsula into three States: Yucatán, Campeche and Quintana Roo, where the space called Mayan Riviera is located.

The Mayan Riviera can be adequately described as a *heterotopia*[5] (Foucault, 1984: 755-758) where luxurious resorts, Mayan archaeological sites and eco-archaeological theme parks[6] cohabit. With its image of utopic paradise, this space is charged with Hiperreality (Baudrillard, 1988: 166-184) whose purpose is to induce an experience that exceeds what is real.

As several scholars point out (Córdoba y Ordóñez and García de Fuentes, 2003; Daltabuilt and Pi-Sunyer, 1990; Propin, 2002; Sánchez and Propin, 2003, Torres and Momsen, 2005), the implementation of the Mayan Riviera as a touristic development project had a direct impact on local indigenous communities. For example, fishing communities were relocated away from the coastline and into the land, and the increase in the price of services and properties brought about the reorganisation of the indigenous population which concentrated away from the touristic poles.

According to Juárez (2002: 37), the establishment of this new reality paved the way to the process called by contemporary Maya as *the Tourism Era*. One where, as several scholars explain **(**Castañeda, 1996; Hervik, 1998; Liard, 2010; Magnoni et al, 2007; Normark, 2004: 122), contemporary Mayas are dismissed and ancient Mayas are patronized and used as image, narrative and regional brand**.**

[4] On the different phases of construction of the Mayan Riviera project, see Buitrago et al. (2012).
[5] A space where different incompatible spaces are juxtaposed, and people find themselves in a rupture with their traditional time and behaviour.
[6] In the parks of Xcaret and Xel-Ha the tourist can visit the replica of a Mayan indigenous village, and the replica of a Mesoamerican ball game were pre-Hispanic dances are performed.

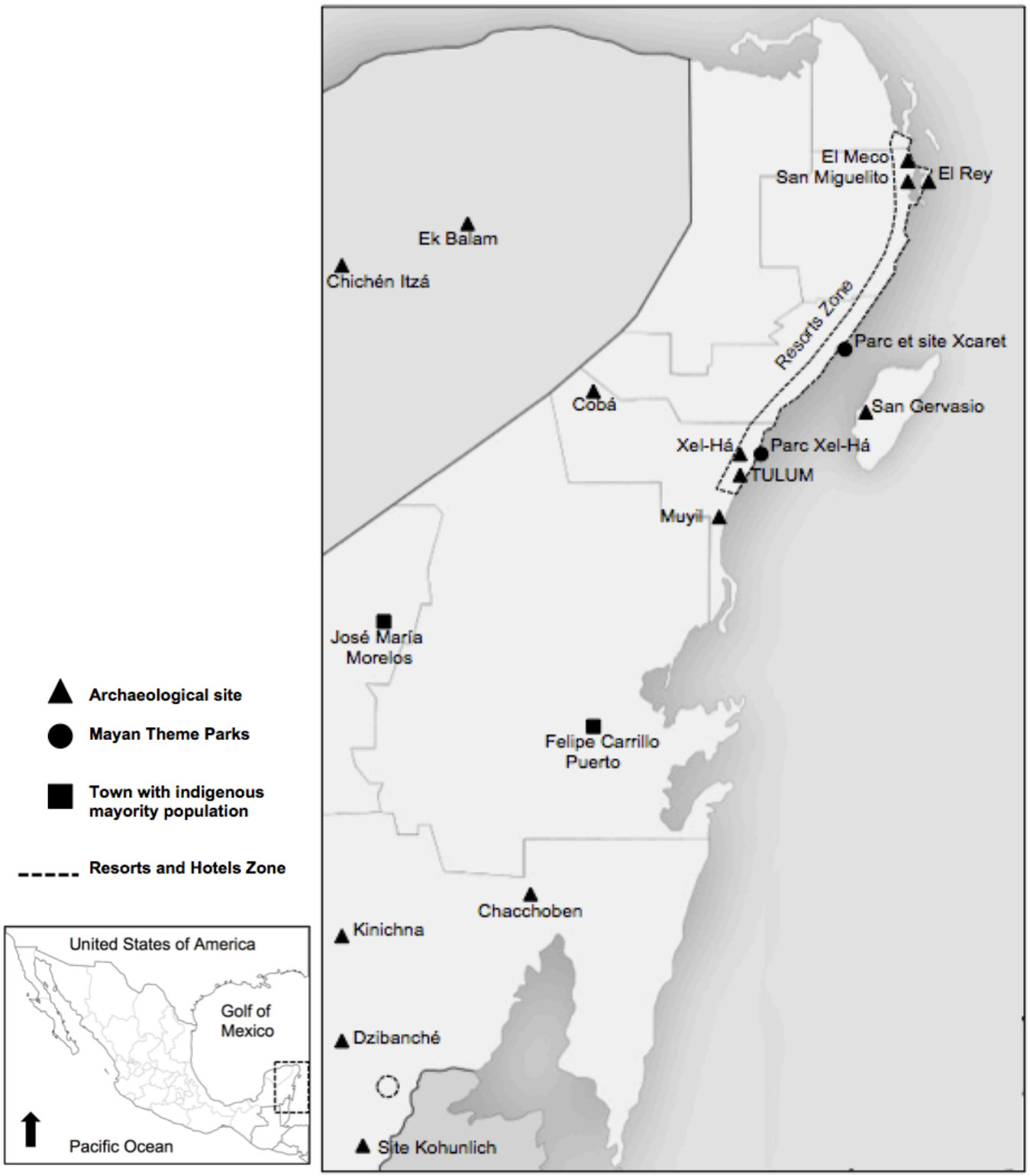

Figure 1. Localisation of archaeological sites, Mayan Theme Parks, towns with indigenous population and the Resort's Area on the Mayan Riviera, southeast Mexico.

2 Theoretical bases and the Archaeological Ethnography approach

Mayan archaeological sites such as Tulum, Chichén Itzá or Uxmal, among others, have a significant importance as ritual spaces for contemporary Mayas, regional symbols for the *mestizo* [7] population, and a catalyst for the Economic sector. Exposed in governmental campaigns as part of the Maya World "where the Maya live in harmony at an environment of incredible biodiversity",[8] Mayan archaeological sites have called the attention of several anthropologists who have carried out studies that can be referred to as Archaeological Ethnographies.

The first example is the research carried out by Quetzil Castañeda (1996, 2008) in the site of Chichén Itzá, where he manages an ethnographic school that studies the engagements between local authorities and local Mayan communities with the site. Another study was brought by Armstrong-Fumero (2011), who explored the nomenclatures and conceptualisations that Mayan people give to pre-Hispanic objects. Finally we mention Lisa Breglia's *Monumental Ambivalence* (2006), which presents the results of a doctoral research on the governmental treatment and public presentation of Mayan archaeological sites in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Tracing the origin of this kind of studies back to its origin, we consider that the nationalist discourse crisis, which occurred between 1970 and 1980, increased the recognition of several claims over the material past.[9] For us, this was related to the recognition of an *epistemic violence*[10] in the archaeological discourse. Another reason was the emergence of the field known as the *Epistemology of scientific knowledge*, notably embraced by authors such as Bourdieu, Latour and Knorr-Cetina who questioned the idea of objective knowledge.

On the other hand, the interest for studying the social implications of archaeological practices through an ethnographic approach was suggested by Louis

[7] Person of combined European and Native American descent.
[8] Maya World or *Mundo Maya* is a touristic program that includes several states of southeast Mexico.
[9] See Gnecco (2009).
[10] This term is strongly related to Foucault (1980: 81-82) notion of "subjugated knowledge", which names the corpus of knowledge that has been disqualified for being below the required level of scientific nature.

Dupree in 1955 (Edgesworth, 2006: 1-4). He noted that archaeologists could make anthropological observations on their excavation sites in order to explore how their work impacts the local communities.

Nowadays, archaeological heritage is understood as an intersection between materiality and immateriality where the object itself embodies the contested past. Thanks to the recent ethnic and identity movement, it's broadly accepted that the discourse on past civilizations has an impact on the ways social groups represent themselves and the others.

Anthropologists and archaeologist have tried to engage actively in this recent discussion. As a result, several sub-disciplines such as Public Archaeology (Shackel, 2004), Archaeological Heritage Management (Smith, 2004) and Archaeological Ethnography (Hamilakis, 2011) have emerged. Today there are graduate programs, research groups and specific university departments dedicated to these new interdisciplinary fields,[11] whose common ground is the interest in the relations between society and archaeological vestiges.

According to Lynn Meskell (2005: 82), Archaeological Ethnography is a mixed practice that gathers Archaeology with Sociocultural Anthropology in order to understand how the value of the past is calibrated across a wide social spectrum. Based on her experiences in South Africa, Meskell (2007) claims that archaeology should serve society providing a more equitable production of the past. Castañeda (2008) exposed similar requests, as he calls Ethnographic Archaeology the "approach that draws on distinct concerns within ethnography and archaeology in the present" (Castañeda, 2008:1).

Archaeological Ethnography overcomes the border of an ethnographic practice in the article of Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos (2009: 67), where the authors describe it as a highly contested and fertile cross-disciplinary as well as transcultural and politically loaded space, which serves for multiple conversations, engagements and critiques centred on materiality and temporality, as our research in Tulum site exemplifies.

[11] An example is the *Ethnography of Archaeology* research group within the Institute of Archaeology in the University College London.

3 Relations between indigenous population and archaeological heritage in Tulum

The lack of official socio-economic data on Tulum village indigenous population prevents us from having a clear dimension of its size. Some reports[12] state that in 2010 there were 9,216 inhabitants speaking Maya inhabiting in Tulum, a municipality of 28, 263 persons. According to a study published by INEGI (2005) 55% of the economically active indigenous population works in commercial activities, transport and services, and only 25% are engaged in agriculture and livestock.

The Mayan community of Tulum village is gathered around the Mayan Church, a building where Mayan priests carry out religious ceremonies featuring catholic and pre-Hispanic elements. Every year in March Tulum's Mayas celebrate the cult of the Holy Cross there. According to Campo (2014), this centre holds the reproduction of the cultural identity of Tulum's Mayan community facing the economic reconfiguration resulting from the Mayan Riviera project.[13]

Mayan identity in Tulum's indigenous population is marked by four different phases: the pre-Hispanic period, the Caste War in the 19th century, the chewing gum industry of the early 20th century, and the tourism era of the late 20th century. According to Campo (2014), the first notes on the Mayan people where the testimonies and notes left by the Spanish conquerors and later, by the bishops who arrived to converted them. Later, in the 20th century several historians where interested in exploring the Caste War leaving information about particular religious beliefs as the cult to the "Talking Cross", which survives to this day in Tulum as the cult to the Holy Cross.

Like in the rest of Mexico, in Yucatán's Peninsula archaeological sites the performance of indigenous ceremonies is forbidden. The authorities claim this type of events can lead to irreparable damage to pre-Hispanic structures. This warning was largely contested in 2012, when several Maya groups wanted to visit Chichén Itzá and Tulum in order to celebrate the rituals for the beginning of their 14th Baktun, claimed by the Media as the *New Mayan Era*.

[12]http://www.microrregiones.gob.mx/catloc/LocdeMun.aspx?tipo=clave&campo=loc&ent=23&mun=009
[13] Balam (2010) argues that Tourism has been a catalyst for promoting the conservation of an indigenous identity among Tulum's Mayas.

The history of Tulum site after the Spanish arrival was reconstructed by archaeologists Paul Sullivan (1991) and Guillermo Goñi (1999) who used two main sources: historical documents dating from the 16th to the 19th century, and the testimonies from contemporary Mayas who cherished their traditional knowledge on the site as a sacred space.

Centring the discussion on Sullivan's (1991) research, he explains that while in 17th century Spaniards controlled the north of Yucatán's Peninsula by instituting Haciendas, the south and its tropical forest remained almost unexplored. In fact, numerous Mayas that resisted to working on the Haciendas ran away to the forest and continued to use abandoned cities, such as Tulum, for their rites.

During the Caste War (1847-1901), the Tulum site played an important role as the epicentre of the army movement. In Santa Cruz Tulum, a village next to the ruins, lived María Uicab, who was a historical figure leading a part of the rebellion.

Once the war was over several American explorers approached the Tulum site by sea, but did not land their ship because of the warning about the hostility of the local Mayas. It was only in 1913 that archaeologist Sylvanus Morley and his expedition started the excavation of Tulum, a task they continued for two decades. Thinking that foreigners where not allied with the Mexican Government, local Mayas allowed the archaeologists to work as they continued to celebrate their religious cults in several pyramids.

As Sullivan (1991) explains, in the 30s and the 40s it was normal to see Mayan pilgrims arriving from the entire Peninsula to the Tulum site in order to leave flowers, candles and copal. But with the instauration of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in 1939, all the archaeological sites in the country were proclaimed as property of the Nation, and a legal frame was established in order to regulate their use, scientific study and presentation to the public.[14]

[14] Mexican State politics on Archaeological Heritage are well analysed in the Ph.D. dissertation of Daniel Kreutzer (2014), and the article of Mexican Archaeologist Enrique Nalda (2003)

The Tulum site was not the exception. A guard was established in order to prevent the Maya pilgrims of entering, and later a group of Mexican archaeologists continued the work left by Morley.

The Archaeological Ethnography carried out in Tulum in 2014 allowed us to observed Tulum's Mayas in the Mayan Riviera socio-economic context. It also gave us the opportunity to explore the role of the Tulum site on their actual religious beliefs and celebrations. For this purpose we interviewed twenty persons over 35 years old, mostly housewives, employees and Mayan priests from the local Mayan Church.

In general, the information gathered in the twenty interviews we made reveals that the Tulum site is perceived as a non-indigenous space, even though the informants see it as a pre-Hispanic place that was inhabited by their ancestors. The distance between contemporary Mayas and the Tulum site can be the result of the governmental interdiction to use the site to celebrate their cults, a edict that does not exist in other Latin American countries with indigenous population.[15]

In particular, the priest of the Mayan Church voiced his discontent with the Mexican government, which claims to defend the archaeological heritage but allows world-renowned artists such as Elton John to perform their concerts in Tulum and Chichen Itzá. According to him, Tulum was "theirs" but the Mexican archaeologists took it away.

Among local employees and housewives the Tulum site is the emblem of the entire Mayan Riviera. The problem is that the town does not benefit from it, and only Cancun's touristic operators profit by taking tourists directly from their hotels to the site without passing through town. It looks as if the importance of the site is intimately linked to an economic profit.

Almost every informant seems to conceive the Tulum site as a place that was visited by their parents and grandparents, which played an important role during the Caste War and was a symbol of resistance for the 19th century Mayan rebels.

[15] In Guatemala, Mayan population is allowed to celebrate their rites in archaeological sites, as happened in Tikal in 2012. Aymaras, quechuas and other South American indigenous groups also perform their rites in pre-Hispanic ruins.

4 Conclusions

As a space that has been used for several centuries, the Tulum archaeological site is an important symbol for the Mayas residing in the State of Quintana Roo. As we show in this text, until 1938 several generations of Maya used Tulum as a ritual centre where offers could be made to their gods.

According to the historic and ethnographic data we analysed, the first turn in the relation between the contemporary Mayas and the Tulum site is marked by the instauration of a legal frame that regulates the relations between society and archaeological heritage in Mexico. This process started with the instauration of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in 1939, but we considered changes were established until 1972, when the proclamation of the Federal Law of Monuments and Archaeological sites was launched regulating the activities on this last.

The second turn was brought about by the conformation of the Mayan Riviera as a touristic region, changing even the demographic distribution of the local Mayan communities. With the opening of the Tulum site, the tourist started to arrive to Tulum.

We think the third turn is currently happening, and can be understood as part of the indigenous re-vindication movements that are emerging all over Latin America and the rest of the world. Indigenous communities are proclaiming themselves as the true heirs of the pre-Hispanic archaeological sites, demanding the opportunity to take in charge the management of these places, as some aboriginal groups have done it in Australia.

Of course there is a long path before such a process can be achieved in Mexico. In a country where the archaeological heritage is still conceived as the Nation's property that unifies the population under a homogenous past, indigenous claims on the matter are generally ignored.

We consider that the Archaeological Ethnography approach can help us to understand the different claims on the material past, helping us to develop a more democratic archaeological heritage discourse, one that includes and respects every group on the society.

References

ALMERE K. and González, J. 2000. *Mesoamerican Mythology: a guide to the gods, heroes, rituals and beliefs of México and Central America*. E.U.: Oxford University Press.

ARMSTRONG-FUMERO, F. 2011. Words and things in Yucatán: post estructuralism and the everyday life of Mayan multiculturalism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17(1): 63-81.

BALAM, Y. 2010. *Tulum: Mayas y Turismo*. Chetumal: University of Quintana Roo.

BARABAS, A. Ed. 2003. Introducción: una mirada etnográfica sobre los territorios simbólicos indígenas. In *Diálogos con el territorio. Simbolizaciones sobre el espacio en las culturas indígenas de México*, pp.13-38. Mexico: INAH.

BARTOLOMÉ, M. 2001. El derecho a la autonomía de los mayas macehualob. *Alteridades* 11 (21): 97-110.

BAUDRILLARD, J. 1988. *Selected writings*, edited by Mark Poster. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

BREGLIA, L. 2006. *Monumental Ambivalence: the Politics of Heritage*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

BUITRAGO, D., Marín, G. and Fraga, J. 2012. El turismo como destino: pesca, conservación de la biodiversidad y desarrollo turístico en Xcalak, un pueblo costero del caribe mexicano. In G. Marín, García, A. and Daltabuilt M. (eds), *Turismo, globalización y sociedades locales en la península de Yucatán*, México, pp. 75-108. Tenerife: Pasos.

CAMPO, M. 2014. *Fiesta e Identidad en Tulum, Quintana Roo: La celebración de la Santa Cruz*. Master dissertation Querétaro: Univeristy of Querétaro.

CASTAÑEDA, Q. 1996. *In the Museum of Maya Culture: Touring Chichén Itzá*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

CASTAÑEDA, Q. 2008. 'The 'Ethnographic Turn' in Archaeology: Research Positioning and Reflexivity in Ethnographic Archaeologies, in Q. Castañeda and C.N. Matthews (eds), *Ethnographic archaeologies: reflections on Stakeholders and archaeological practices*, pp. 25-62. Plymouth: Altamira Press.

CÓRDOBA Y ORDÓÑEZ, J. and García de Fuentes A. 2003. Turismo, globalización y medio ambiente en el Caribe mexicano. *Investigaciones Geográficas. Boletín del Instituto de Geografía* 52: 117-136.

DALTABUILT, M. and Pi-Sunyer O. 1990. Tourism Development in Quintana Roo, Mexico. *Cultural Survival* 14 (1): 9-13.

EDGEWORTH, M. Ed. 2006. *Ethnographies of Archaeological Practice: cultural encounters, material transformations*. Oxford: Altamira Press.

FOUCAULT, M. 1984. Des espaces autres. In *Dits et écrits: 1954-1988*, pp. 752-762. Paris: Gallimard.

FOUCAULT, M. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews & other writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Harvester Press.

GALINIER, J. and A. Molinié. 2006. *Les Néo-Indiens. Une réligion du III^e millénaire*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

GNECCO, C. 2009. Caminos de la arqueología: de la violencia epistémica a la racionalidad. *Boletín del museo paraense Emílio Goeldi Ciências Humanas* 4(1)15-26.

GOÑI, G. 1999. *De cómo los mayas perdieron Tulum*. Mexico: National Institute of Anthropology and History.

HAMILAKIS, Y. 2011. Archaeological Ethnography: a Multitemporal meeting ground for archaeology and anthropology. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40: 399-414.

HAMILAKIS, Y. and A. Anagnostopoulos. 2009. What is Archaeological Ethnography. *Public Archaeology: Archaeological Ethnographies* 8(2-3): 65-87.

HERVIK, P. 1998. The Mysterious Maya of National Geographic. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 4 (1): 166-197.

INEGI. 2005. *La población hablante de lengua indígena de Quintana Roo*. México, INEGI.

JUÁREZ, A. M. 2002. Ongoing Struggles: Mayas and Immigrants in Tourist Era Tulum. *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 7 (1): 36-67.

KREUTZER, D. 2014. *"The Ruins and Us go Together": The Neoliberal Challenge to Archaeological Heritage and Patrimony in Mexico*. Ph.D. Dissertation in Philosophy of Anthropology. Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

LIARD, J. 2010. *S'affirmer Lacandon, devenir patrimoine. Les guides mayas de Bonampak (Chiapas, Mexique).* Paris: IHEAL, CREDAL, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle.

MAGNONI, Aline, Traci Ardren and Scott Hutson. 2007. "Tourism in the Mundo Maya: Inventions and (Mis) Representations of Maya Identities and Heritage". *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 3 (3): 353-383.

MESKELL, L. 2005. Archaeological Ethnography: Conversations around Kruger National Park. *Archaeologies* 1(1): 81-100.

MESKELL, L. 2007. Falling Walls and Mending Fences: Archaeological Ethnography in the Limpopo. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33(2): 383:400.

NALDA, E. 2003. "*Mexico's archaeological heritage: a convergence and confrontation of interests".* In N. Brodie and K. Walker (eds), *Illicit Antiquities: The Theft of Culture and the Extinction of Archaeology*, pp. 205-227. London: Routledge.

NORMARK, J. 2004. Discontinuous Maya Identities. Culture and Ethnicity in Mayanist Discourse. In F. Fahlander et T. Oestigaard (eds), *Material Culture and Other Things: Post-disciplinary Studies in the 21st Century*, pp. 109-160.

PROPIN, E. 2002. La estructura regional del turismo en México. *Eria* 59: 386-394.

SÁNCHEZ, A. and Propin, E. 2003. Dependencias regionales del Turismo en la Isla de Cozumel, México. *Cuadernos de turismo* 11: 169-180.

SHACKEL, P. 2004. Introduction: Working with Communities. Heritage Development and Applied Anthropology, In P. Shackel and E. Chambers (eds), *Places in Mind. Public Archaeology as Applied Anthropology*, pp. 1-18. London: Routledge.

SMITH, L. 2004. *Archaeological Theory and the Politics of Cultural Heritage*. London: Routledge.

SULLIVAN, P. 1991. *Unfinished Conversations: Mayas and Foreigners Between Two Wars*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

TORRES, R. and Momsen, J. 2005. Planned Tourism Development in Quintana Roo, Mexico: Engine for Regional Development or Prescription for Inequitable Growth. *Current Issues in Tourism* 8 (4): 259-285.