I am currently a 3rd year doctoral student in Native American Studies at UC Davis, and my dissertation work focuses on contemporary Native American poetry. Studying indigenous literary and social movements in Chiapas, Mexico will surely enhance my ability to analyze and understand the importance of contemporary indigenous poetry both within and outside of university settings. In Chiapas, I will have the unique opportunity to experience first-hand the links between Mayan communities and Mayan literatures. As a scholar in Native American Studies, investigating the relationship between community and poetry is absolutely essential, for in an indigenous cultural context, poets and singers have long been respected members of society, shaping and creating histories and knowledge in the ways that only poets can. I am excited about visiting the Center for Indigenous Literature, Art, and Languages in San Cristobal de las Casas, where I will participate in conversations with and learn from those very Mayan poets and writers who are improving the lives of their peoples every day through the power of the written and spoken word. I am a poet myself, and my first poetry collection, Other Suns, was recently published by Swan Scythe Press (2011). As a scholar with a deep responsibility to the earth and to increasing social equality, it is important for me to learn how to use my own poetry to help communities, and I know of no better way to learn how to do this than to dialogue in-person with Native creative writers invested in improving the lives of their peoples.

The field of scholars working on indigenous poetry is, around the world, very small in comparison with fiction and other areas of Native literature. I have been lucky enough to study with one of world’s experts on the subject: summer abroad course instructor Inés Hernandez-Avila. Dr. Hernandez-Avila is my mentor, dissertation chair, and former committee member for my Master’s Thesis in Creative Writing (2008). While I have worked with her extensively in the past, I believe that studying with her in Chiapas will be very different from past experiences. She has taught me that scholarship does not begin and end in the classroom—its true source of energy is out there in the everyday lives of Native communities. I am certain that studying abroad will ensure that my future projects and research (dissertation and beyond) are grounded in the real world and real people’s experiences, as opposed to mere theoretical abstractions.

Lastly, studying abroad in Mexico this summer will improve my teaching abilities. By the time I arrive in Mexico, I will have completed 11 quarters as an Associate Instructor for NAS 5: Introduction to Native American Literatures at UC Davis. As I plan for my future career as a professor, I know that I will surely call upon my experiences amongst indigenous literary communities in Chiapas as I discuss Native poetry in the classroom. No longer will I merely teach my students theories about how the power of literature can heal a community in the wake of violence. Instead, I will have seen, touched, tasted, and felt that power by working with these poems in their rightful cultural context—that is, utterly alive and beating in the hearts of the Mayan people today, in the past, and in the days to come.