Where does power originate, and how does it operate in imperial states? The relationships between individuals, states, and capital are by no means settled, particularly with regard to the nineteenth century. In the Middle Eastern context, questions about the operation of power in the late Ottoman Empire are bound up with issues of imperial decline and European domination. Many scholars of the Ottoman Empire have embraced a center-periphery model in which political and intellectual authority primarily emanated from Istanbul to the provinces. Other scholars have focused on the economic and political ruptures produced by the incursions of European capital and states in the Ottoman domains. However, scholars have not addressed the dynamics – and opportunities – created in areas where Ottoman authority overlapped with other imperial structures, whether formally or informally. Moreover, there has been little recognition that the Ottoman Empire experienced an antebellum “Gilded Age” explosion of wealth akin to that in Europe.

As a result, our understanding of the dynamics of capital and power in the late Ottoman Empire has remained centered on European capital and imperialism, particularly in thinking about the periphery. “Internal” accounts of the Ottoman polity, on the other hand, have focused on political and administrative dynamics. Both kinds of analysis privilege metropolitan actors. Without an adequate understanding of how political and economic power was acquired and wielded by “peripheral” actors, however, we are left without a satisfying explanation of how the empire worked as a whole. My dissertation, “Bandit Capitalism: Nineteenth Century Basra between Empires,” fills this gap through an analaysis of powerful local magnates and their manipulation of the edges between different political formations, modes of cultural legitimacy, and ecological zones. Through an examination of conflicts over land, I argue that these men – bandit capitalists – used cultural, political, and environmental resources to gain control over landed property in the context of a changing Ottoman land regime under threat of European imperialism. My research demonstrates that their control of land, and how they achieved it, affected Ottoman state modernization as well as the balance of economic and political power in post-Ottoman Iraq.

Basra, in what is now southern Iraq, was by the late nineteenth century an unquestioned part of the Ottoman Empire, governed by Ottoman laws and officials. The city, less than twenty miles from the Iranian border, was also an important site for British and especially British Indian diplomats and capital hoping to extend British dominance over the Gulf up the Tigris and Euphrates. On the other hand, as the most important commercial port on the Gulf, and the southernmost area of Ottoman control in the region, Basra also played an important role in Ottoman attempts to re-assert influence over the Arab principalities in the region. These attempts were grounded first in changes to Ottoman governance within the province, which included changes to the management of land. At the same time, scholars have shown that Basra continued to operate both economically and politically within a broader sphere encompassing southern Iran, parts of the Arabian peninsula, and Kuwait, though these networks were affected by the solification of international borders and the tightening of state controls. Particularly in the rich date land along the Shatt al-‘Arab, the continued existence of these broader networks meant large estates were owned by outsiders, especially Kuwaitis and people from Muhammerah (modern Khorramshahr in Iran). In a shifting legal-administrative and geopolitical context, these estates posed novel challenges and invited new forms of political-economic governance.

For the notables of Basra, many of whom were landed date merchants, tribal shaykhs, or both, the shifts in Ottoman land management after the partial implementation of the 1858 Land Reform Law in the 1870s, as well as the proximity of the international border with Iran and the political possibilities offered by the local representatives of the British Raj, enabled them to increase and consolidate political and economic resources. They did this within the contours of Ottoman state administration, but also outside it, creating personal “empires” which outlined novel geographies stretching into Iran, the Arabian peninsula, and as far as Macedonia. For the most part, these empires were rooted in the control of land, especially date groves on the Shatt al-‘Arab river from the Gulf to Qurna, north of Basra, and rice lands between Qurna and ‘Amara on the Tigris. The agricultural wealth of Basra province was rooted in the water-rich rice and date lands adjacent to the marshlands, at the time the largest in the world. Dates in particular were not only the largest export commodity from Iraq, but also provided over 80% of the world’s crop through the early twentieth century.

While work on Ottoman Iraq has often focused on Baghdad, a few scholars have tackled the history of Basra. Using Arabic chronicles and British sources, Hala Fattah has argued that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Basra formed part of a larger regional trade network anchored by free-trade ports and interior cities, though she contends this was dismantled by increasing British commercial penetration by the beginning of the twentieth century. Burcu Kurt, relying largely on Ottoman government records, endorses a more classic center-periphery argument about Basra under the Committee of Union and Progress (the Young Turks), between 1908 and 1914. She argues that the political and social dynamics of Basra in this period were determined by the reactions of local notables to the dictates and desires of the central Ottoman state. Talib al-Gharib, on the other hand, has recently used local court records to argue that economic and social power in nineteenth-century Basra were rooted in the commodification of land after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 through the breaking up of large estates accumulated through prior service to Ottoman authorities. Partly because of their reliance on almost entirely separate bodies of sources, these works offer three quite different depictions of economic and social life in nineteenth-century Basra, in addition to portraying state, society, and economy as discrete objects of analysis.

Scholars working on other parts of the Ottoman lands have studied center-periphery dynamics, at times in conjunction with the dynamics of European capital. Works like Dina Khoury’s *State and Provincial Society*, and more recenty, Nora Barakat’s “An Empty Land?” address what it meant to be Ottoman in the periphery. Beshara Doumani’s work on Palestine and Jens Hanssen’s work on Beirut have demonstrated how the incorporation of parts of the Ottoman Empire into the world economy was focused and given meaning by the structures of local government and society. Nearby, Fahad Ahmad Bishara’s *A Sea of Debt* argues that debt and other obligations connected individuals and communities across the Indian Ocean and the Gulf, and that imperial legal and administrative geographies were shaped and even determined by these existing relationships. Building on this scholarship, my dissertation focuses on land as an integral part of Ottoman administration and local capital networks, which were also intertwined. In attending to the specific geographies within which each capitalist moved, and in focusing on local rather than European capital, my work offers an alternative to the province-Istanbul-Europe triangle that characterizes much work on the so-called periphery.

My dissertation focuses on five bandit capitalists, and thus on five modes of negotiating the “edges” which characterized the material and cultural life of nineteenth-century Basra. All of these men were referred to as “bandits” or “almost bandits” – sometimes “outlaws” – by Ottoman officials and British observers, but they were certainly not average roadside thieves. These Gilded Age capitalists navigated different kinds of land, as well as a variety of social and political positions, to acquire and manage agricultural property in a post-Land Code context. The first chapter focuses on the shaykhs of the Al Bu Muhammad and Bani Lam tribal confederations, who dominated the competition for leases of rice-growing land on the Iranian border, where both tribes lived. Their often violent competition over these lands produced new kinds of anxiety for officials stymied in their attempts to redistribute leases by the use of cross-border networks of influence to disguise transactions and keep land within the shaykhly families. One of the ways the Ottoman state attempted to prevent this kind of fraud was the introduction of a legal requirement that tax farmers produce guarantors when given leases. The second chapter focuses on ‘Abd al-Qadir Khudayrizade, an ‘Amarah merchant who used his role as a frequent guarantor to forge and legally solidify rural financial networks that helped him gain control of Basra’s grain exports. These financial networks developed within the constraints of the Ottoman legal framework around land administration, but also spurred the creation of new legal categories to mitigate the threat of these actors. At the same time, shaykhs and merchants took full advantage of the porous border with Iran, the nebulous threat of British imperialism, and the cultural resources offered by tribal society to vie for advantage against one another and in conversation with Ottoman officials. Taken together, these two chapters demonstrate how rural elites forged cross-border networks which used existing cultural and social resources alongside new legal and administrative frameworks in the competition over land.

The second part of the dissertation focuses on the date plantations of the Shatt al-‘Arab. Chapter three deals with Khaz‘al Khan, the shaykh of Muhammerah (modern Khorramshahr), on the Iranian side of the river. In addition to substantial properties on both sides of the border, Khaz‘al exercised influence over much of the population of Basra, dependents of his tribe. He also signed a protection deal with the British in 1902. Although the status of Muhammerah as part of Iran was firmly legally established only in the 1850s, and much of Khaz‘al’s wealth and influence relied on his Ottoman connections, he was able to use his status as a foreigner and the interests of the Ottoman, Iranian, and British states in the establishment and maintenance of international legal precedent, to maintain and even increase his land holdings and political influence in Basra. Chapter four focuses on shaykh Mubarak of Kuwait, who, though parallel in some ways to Khaz‘al, possessed both a more tenuous status as foreigner and a firmer commitment from the British. Mubarak relied heavily on his date income to maintain his status and independence vis-à-vis mercantile interests in Kuwait. As such, he used the competing interests of Ottoman and British officials in drawing him closer to draw them into conflicts over his properties in Basra. In doing so, he was able to stake his rule in Kuwait to his expanding economic interests in Basra. Taken together, these two chapters demonstrate how the Shatt al-‘Arab date plantations accelerated British involvement in the northern Gulf, as well as creating a new array of Ottoman jurisprudence around the meaning of foreignness and its implications for land as both a political and an economic object.

The last chapter focuses on Züheyrzade Ahmed, a Basra notable who spent most of his life in captivity in Istanbul, but was nonetheless able to use his connections in Basra and his experience of the changing modes of Ottoman administration to mount a large-scale fraud which, if successful, would have ended with most of the province as his private property. During the subsequent investigaton, which revealed bureaucratic and physical modes of domination, Ahmed used doubt and falsehood to undercut his accusers. In the process, he revealed how fraud, as a dominant mode of “almost-banditry,” played a fundamental role in shaping new geographies of modernity based in a place most considered a peripheral backwater.

In shaping the dissertation around the stories of individuals, I am taking cues from the work of scholars like Christine Philliou and Emma Rothschild who use biography as an analytical tool to explore how individuals and networks operate both within and alongside empires. The Ottoman Empire was extremely diverse, even after the territorial and ideological shrinkage of the nineteenth century. Rather than try to make claims about the empire as a whole based on an analysis of the center, my work uses biography as a microhistorical tool to illuminate the operation of political and economic power in a specific context, but one which can help us think broadly about issues like the emergence of capitalism in “edge” zones, and fraud as a legal/administrative mode in “modern” governance.

My dissertation is based primarily on a year of archival work conducted at the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Minister’s Ottoman Archive) and other collections in Istanbul. Currently, I am finishing up a further semester of archival work at several archives in the UK, primarily the British Library, as well as private collections in Abu Dhabi and Kuwait. My dissertation also incorporates published sources, largely local chronicles in Arabic and travel narratives in Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and English. I have completed the final chapter of my dissertation. During the remainder of the 2018-2019 academic year, I will finish my archive trips, which are mainly intended to collect material related to chapters three and four, and will draft those two chapters. At the time of the summer institute, and over the summer and fall of 2019, I will finish reading and analyzing material collected in Istanbul relevant to chapters one and two, and then draft those chapters. These chapters, and especially chapter 1, “What’s in a Name? *Nam-i Mustear* and the Conflict over Land Auctions in ‘Amarah” (tentative title) are what I hope to work on at the summer institute. The chapter will explore conflicts over *iltizam* auctions, and the use – and suspected use – of “false names” in acquiring leases, to gain insight into how political and economic conflict among rural elites both reflected and was reflected in new and emerging legal categories. The Ottoman Land Law of 1858 remains understudied, and this chapter will shed new light on the way it functioned as an “idiom of modernity” which created new opportunities for capitalists to acquire and dominate land. I am also interested, in this chapter, in how new frameworks of law and administration built suspicion and fraud – albeit inadvertently – into the management of land, helping to create a paradigm of capitalism as the preserve of powerful “bandits.”

My work reveals how bandit capitalism developed as a primary mode of economic and political life in late nineteenth-century Basra. In arguing for the integral nature of fraud and violence to the development of political and economic power structures in “edge” zones, it proposes different geographies of empire, ultimately contributing to debates about the development of the modern state in the “periphery.”