

Digital Transformations and Gig Economies in Everyday Precarity

2025 Tinker/CLACS Field Research Grant Report

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Abstract

With support from the 2025 Tinker / CLACS Field Research Grant, I conducted two weeks of fieldwork in El Salvador (August 2–16, 2025). While I have made annual visits since 2022 to build relationships and gather context, this trip marked my **first IRB-approved visit to initiate formal interviews and systematic data collection**. Focused on San Salvador, the fieldwork examined the socio-environmental health impacts of cryptocurrency development and broader digital transformations. I conducted four formal interviews, including one with an environmental activist and three with professors at the Universidad de El Salvador (UES), the country's oldest and most prestigious university.

I also explored the expanding gig and platform economies, using and interviewing Uber drivers 17 times and inDrive drivers 6 times, including my first-ever Uber motorcycle ride, and experimenting with Uber Eats and other delivery platforms. My field notes documented the remaking of San Salvador's historic district, the displacement of informal vendors, the influence of Chinese-backed urban development, and the perspectives of residents navigating these rapid changes.

The visit coincided with heightened political uncertainty, as El Salvador's legislature approved indefinite presidential reelection — a move widely seen as consolidating an official dictatorship. Despite this context, the trip produced meaningful collaborations, particularly with UES faculty, who invited me to co-develop a hybrid forum on digital transformations. These relationships are expanding into plans for joint publications with Salvadoran professors, and parallel efforts with colleagues in Oregon. This short-term visit, supported by Tinker/CLACS, therefore serves as a foundation for extended fieldwork and collaborative scholarship in 2026–27.

Arrival in a Changing Nation

I arrived in San Salvador on August 2nd, stepping into a nation amid both digital transformations and political shifts. Just days earlier, El Salvador's legislature had approved **indefinite presidential reelection and longer terms** ([NPR, July 31, 2025](#)), fueling concerns of entrenched authoritarianism.

Before arriving, I had been in conversation with [Pedro Cabezas](#), a new collaborator in the capital. Our discussions centered on the connections between El Salvador's Bitcoin experiment, its 2017 ban on metal mining, and shifting development priorities. Pedro introduced me to Dr. Paz at UES, who became a key academic partner during this trip.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian, January–August 2025. Left: View from Parque Nacional El Boquerón overlooking San Salvador, a city at the intersection of rapid digital transformation and political change. Right: View of San Salvador's skyline from inside Skydeck Millennium Tower, highlighting new urban development projects in the capital's center.

San Salvador: Development and Dispossession

The capital city reflected stark contrasts between modernization and precarity. In the historic district, I observed plazas being rebuilt with permeable paving and newly planted urban forests that appeared to be modeled after Chinese urban design—immediately reminding me of my recent visit to Guangzhou. Residents consistently linked these projects to Chinese financing, noting how the government has turned increasingly toward Beijing for cultural and infrastructural investment.

Just a few blocks away, El Mercado revealed the other side of development: precarious stalls, many run by what appeared to be predominantly Indigenous vendors, facing displacement under plans to demolish and modernize the market. These juxtapositions — global capital reshaping the city while local vendors confront erasure — highlight the contradictions at the heart of El Salvador's digital transition, what I theorize as the Cryptonocene: an era where unchecked digital and infrastructural modernization intensifies existing inequalities.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. El Centro Histórico, where redevelopment projects remake public plazas while nearby vendors face displacement.

Everyday Digital Economies

Modernization reshapes not only the built environment but also daily livelihoods. To understand the rise of gig economies, I immersed myself in urban transport and food delivery platforms. Over the course of two weeks, I used Uber 17 times and inDrive 6 times, including my first-ever Uber motorcycle ride, which I documented photographically.

Conversations with drivers underscored how the pandemic and the adoption of Bitcoin accelerated the decline of the taxi industry. Uber was described as stricter and more international, while inDrive offered local flexibility and negotiable fares. Several women drivers told me they preferred inDrive because of its perceived safety and autonomy.

I also tested UberEats and learned about PedidosYa, the delivery platform most commonly used by Salvadorans. These services reveal both the growth of the digital economy and its exclusions, particularly for older generations and historically marginalized groups. In this sense, the gig economy exemplifies the uneven terrain of the Cryptonocene — where access to digital tools shapes survival but also deepens divides.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. Left: Using inDrive, a locally popular ride-hailing app with negotiable fares. Right: First Uber motorcycle ride, illustrating the expansion of global gig platforms in

San Salvador. Together, these experiences reveal how Salvadorans navigate overlapping gig economies shaped by both local innovation and international corporations.

Interviews and Academic Collaborations

I conducted four formal interviews:

- One environmental activist, who spoke on land dispossession, ecological risks, and grassroots resistance.
- Three UES professors, including Dr. Paz, who provided insights into governance, Bitcoin, and social-environmental health.

These interviews developed into plans for collaboration. Dr. Paz introduced me to colleagues interested in joint publications, and together we began planning a hybrid forum on digital transformations to be co-hosted by UES and UC Berkeley. This forum will also connect with my Digital Ecologies working group at Berkeley, funded by CLACS, and is intended to grow into a CLACS Event Series Grant application for a larger mini-conference involving El Salvador and potentially Oregon.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian and collaborator, August 2025. Left: With Dr. Paz from Universidad de El Salvador, discussing future collaborations. Right: Quetzalcoatl sculpture at the Escuela de Artes, UES — a symbol of cultural heritage within the academic setting.”

Ethnographic Vignettes

Fieldwork often reveals truths not only through interviews and formal meetings, but also in fleeting, everyday encounters. During my time in San Salvador, I found that moments on the street, in homes, and in public spaces offered some of the most powerful insights into how Salvadorans are living through digital, political, and environmental transformations. These vignettes capture snapshots of that daily reality — scenes of precarity, resilience, and adaptation that give texture to broader debates about modernization and justice.

Street vendors chased by police

In San Salvador’s central market, I witnessed the sudden commotion of street vendors fleeing as a medium-sized cargo truck full of police officers pursued them through the streets. Vendors rushed to push their carts, spilling fruit and goods onto the pavement as they tried to escape, while the truck crept forward behind them. I had seen videos like this circulating on social media, where police violently chased vendors on foot, but experiencing it in person was profoundly different — the urgency, the fear, the sound of carts clattering across the pavement.

Instinctively, I reached for my phone to record the scene, but a friend firmly advised me against it, warning that another person who had done the same had faced government repercussions. This moment revealed not only the precarity of informal labor under redevelopment pressures, but also the climate of fear that shapes what can and cannot be safely documented in today's El Salvador.



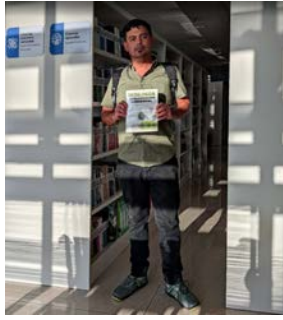
Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. Street vendors on the outskirts of El Mercado Central, where informal livelihoods are increasingly under pressure from redevelopment and policing.

Children and the national library

Just a few blocks away, a radically different scene unfolded in front of the new National Library of El Salvador. Salvadoran children splashed in the fountain to cool off, joined by their parents and community members — many of whom appeared to be street vendors — all seeking relief from the afternoon heat. Their laughter and joy briefly reclaimed the plaza, transforming it from a surveilled and contested space into one of collective respite.

Inside the library, my own positionality shaped how I engaged with the space. As a dual citizen of the U.S. and El Salvador, I was able to register for a Salvadoran library card — something only people born in El Salvador can access. When I used my UC Berkeley email during registration, the staff member processing my card looked up and said with a smile, “¡Qué milagro!” (“What a miracle”). The library felt like a comfortable place to work, though I am still unsure who primarily uses it; my observations suggested it was frequented more by tourists and wealthier Salvadorans. Yet it also holds potential as a space where people who might otherwise lack access to such resources could encounter diverse experiences.

Almost everyone I spoke with mentioned that the library itself, along with other major infrastructure projects, was funded by China. Reports confirm this: the ultra-modern \$54 million library was a diplomatic gift from Beijing, inaugurated in late 2023, with President Bukele praising it as the largest cultural investment in a century. Like other Chinese-funded projects in El Salvador — stadiums, water systems, and a pier expansion — the library embodies geopolitical ties reshaping the country's urban landscape. The juxtaposition between the formal prestige of the library and the informal uses of the plaza outside reflects broader divides in how Salvadorans experience modernization and development.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. Perspectives of the new National Library of El Salvador — a China-funded project reshaping San Salvador's cultural landscape: exterior at night, interior workspace, and view of the plaza from inside.

Doña Mary, a housekeeper and single mother

Inside the home where I stayed, I often shared conversations with Doña Mary, the housekeeper. A single mother who lost her husband during the pandemic, she reflected openly on the challenges of raising her children in a country that is rapidly digitizing yet unevenly supportive of working-class families.

She explained that the government provides each student with a tablet or laptop to keep until the end of high school, along with uniforms and some school supplies. The program, she noted, was initiated by the previous administration and later expanded under the current government. While this policy is celebrated nationally as a sign of progress, her experience highlighted its limits. Devices alone do not guarantee equitable education; families still struggle with internet access, hidden costs, and the social challenges children face in the classroom.

Her own story illustrated these realities. After her husband died of COVID-19, one of her children was deeply affected, carrying grief into the classroom. Instead of receiving support, he was bullied by a teacher until the situation became unbearable, forcing her to transfer him to another school. The combination of trauma, loss, and inadequate institutional response revealed how fragile educational opportunities remain for families already living at the margins.

Through her reflections, I became acutely aware of the contradictions in El Salvador's digital transformation. Programs that distribute laptops and tablets symbolize inclusion, but they cannot address the deeper social and emotional inequities that shape children's lives. For Doña Mary, education remains one of her greatest hopes. Still, her story underscored that digital access alone cannot undo the structural barriers — of poverty, gendered labor, and grief — that define everyday survival for many Salvadorans.



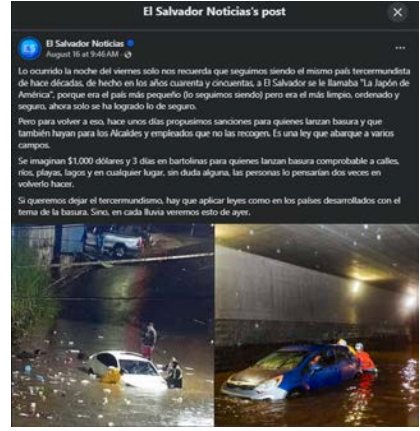
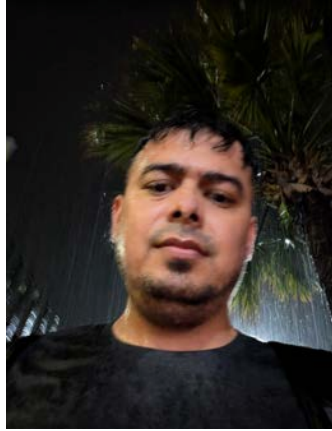
Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. Left: Selfie with Doña Mary, whose reflections on education and digital divides shaped this vignette. Center: Technology programming for youth advertised inside the National Library of El Salvador. Right: Advertisement from Skydeck Millennium Tower promoting a space of art, culture, and technology with an entry fee of \$10 — nearly the equivalent of a day's minimum wage (\$13.50). Together, these images trace a spectrum from household struggles to institutional promises to elite aspirations, illustrating the uneven terrain of El Salvador's digital transformation.

Flash flooding and gig work

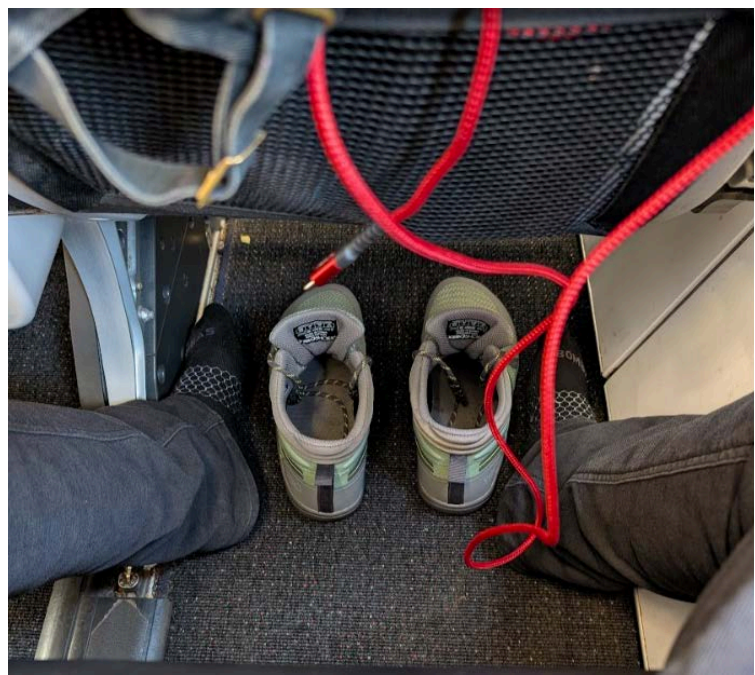
The night before I flew back to the Bay Area, San Salvador was hit by a torrential downpour that quickly turned into a flash flood. I tried calling an Uber, but drivers repeatedly canceled. Later, I learned it was because they did not want to enter the pickup zone in my area, which had already begun to flood. At one point, I rushed through the rain toward the street, hoping to make it to a car before it was canceled. I opened the door, confirmed the driver, and he canceled on me in that exact moment. I was briefly charged for the ride and had to dispute the fee, something drivers explained can occasionally happen on the app.

It was far from ideal during a storm. From there, I walked underneath the downpour, drenched, watching the streets transform into rivers as the city flooded. The next morning, as I packed to leave, I learned that the storm had inundated nearly the entire country, with low-income and marginalized communities hit hardest.

This moment illustrated the fragility of infrastructure and platform-based labor in the face of climate extremes. Gig work stopped instantly, mobility was cut off, and entire neighborhoods were left vulnerable. The experience underscored how environmental precarity, technological systems, and social inequality converge — amplifying risks for those already living with the fewest resources, while leaving the narrative of digital modernization intact.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. Left: Waiting for an Uber in the pickup zone of a shopping mall before repeated cancellations. Center: Walking home under heavy rain after rides were canceled. Right: News coverage showing the extent of the flooding across El Salvador. Together, these images highlight how climate extremes disrupted both daily mobility and platform-based gig work.



Images from August 2025. Left: Screenshot of a social media post sent by a collaborator, reading: ‘El Salvador is like this...you see a person swimming in the flood, a D-max truck driving by without any issues, and behind it a Ferrari 812 GTS. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.’ Right: Photo of myself on the plane the following day, still trying to dry my soaked shoes. Together, these images capture how floods are narrated with irony in public discourse while continuing to affect daily life in deeply material ways.

Conclusion

Together, these vignettes reveal how Salvadorans experience the pressures and promises of rapid transformation. From informal vendors chased by police, to families navigating grief and

educational divides, to the spectacle of a China-funded library, to the disruptions of climate extremes, everyday life in San Salvador reflects the tensions of the Cryptocene. These glimpses into daily experience remind us that digital and infrastructural modernization cannot be understood in isolation; they are lived, resisted, and negotiated within the struggles of ordinary people.

Looking Forward

This two-week visit was only the starting point. Although I have made annual visits to El Salvador since 2022, this trip marked my first IRB-approved fieldwork to initiate formal interviews and systematic documentation. I was encouraged by Salvadoran colleagues to pursue a longer return visit to conduct extended interviews in key impacted regions. One of my goals is to co-author joint publications with UES faculty and to collaborate with researchers in Oregon, thereby linking local perspectives across regions shaped by digital economies and energy transitions.

My fieldwork observations, interviews, and conversations during this trip also informed other components of my research. They helped identify spatial patterns and infrastructures to prioritize in my geospatial analysis, surfaced media sources to incorporate into my sentiment content analysis, and pointed me toward future field sites and potential interviewees for extended visits. This iterative process ensures that my mixed-methods approach remains grounded in lived realities while scaling up to broader social and ecological patterns.

The path forward includes:

- **Digital Ecologies working group showcase at Berkeley in December 2025**, followed by a **CLACS Event Series Grant proposal (Spring 2026)**.
- **Hybrid forum with UES professors**, expanding into a transnational mini-conference, potentially with Oregon collaborators.
- **Fieldwork funding applications this coming semester** to support extended visits to El Salvador and Oregon in 2026–27.

As my dissertation intersects with delicate political dynamics, I am mindful of the need for tact and diplomacy. This project not only enhances my academic contributions but also shapes my long-term trajectory as a scholar committed to just, sustainable development, transnational collaboration, and community-engaged research.

Ultimately, this report offers **preliminary reflections from my first IRB-approved field visit**. These insights will guide deeper comparative fieldwork in 2026–27, where the questions, patterns, and collaborations initiated here will be expanded and developed into the core of my dissertation.



Photos by Deibi Sibrian, August 2025. Left: Roadside Hawk (*Rupornis magnirostris*) soaring above San Salvador's fragmented urban ecosystem. Right: On top of the Skydeck Millennium Tower with Torogoz wings, symbolizing identity and resilience. Together, these images reflect the interplay of ecological precarity and aspirations for transformation, pointing toward future directions of this research.

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