

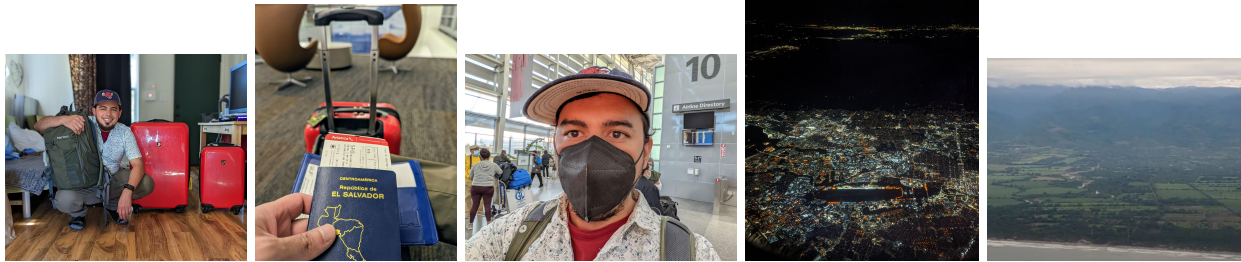
Please keep in mind that what was written below is less than half of the exploratory experiences I had. This is a very rough draft. I still have several sections to write and am working on intentional language/word choices. I will be publishing a complete story on a website I am developing. My apologies for not submitting something sooner; I returned home severely ill with COVID-19. The link below will give you access to Google Docs I am using to expand this draft. Thank you for reading and supporting me as I progress in my Ph.D. journey!

Link: [☰ DS Draft_2022 Tinker / CLAS Summer Research Grant: Final Report](#)

ABSTRACT

This visit's primary exploratory research objective was to learn more about the Nahuat Pipil Indigenous Resistance with the Sensunapán River and Hydroelectric Dams in Nahuizalco, Sonsonate, El Salvador. My goal was to learn how this environmental issue impacts their livelihoods and the environment in the region. I was able to accomplish more objectives than I had set for myself while staying with this community. I built rapport with community leaders, visited the capital to submit documents for the government to acknowledge indigenous people, met with professors and elders from other communities, visited the dams, and met with the Nahuat Pipil Tribal Council of Nahuizalco. I decided to expand my exploratory research goals to analyze how the new legal tender—Bitcoin—is impacting specific communities in the region; I was specifically interested in learning how the transformation of natural resources into electricity is being used to create virtual mines and how that is displacing and impacting communities. Communities have mixed views on the Bitcoin issue. I also visited a remote island near where Bitcoin City is supposed to be built. This island has an interesting story that needs to be studied further; it appears to be an anomaly. It has not been impacted by various violent events that have taken place in the country, and the ecological story of the region is fascinating. I also centered on water issues (these are rooted in extreme sedimented inequalities); gangs' environmental impact, and the current state of exception; finally, I explored my indigenous heritage and the displacement my family has experienced. This was my first time returning to El Salvador after my family was displaced into the US. I was too ambitious during this visit. I tried to explore too many topics during this visit. However, I wanted to ensure I took advantage of this opportunity. Now I have too many things to write about and too many projects to pursue. I think I pushed myself too far because I returned with COVID-19, and I was fatigued to the point I needed bed rest for more than two weeks after my return. Overall I think it was worth it. From what I know, I was the first in my Ph.D. program to make this trip to El Salvador, and now I have a long list of suggestions for other scholars interred in the region. My goal is to do everything I can to support scholars from Central America so they can conduct research in their own countries. Central America is not getting the attention it deserves on these topics—we can change this together!

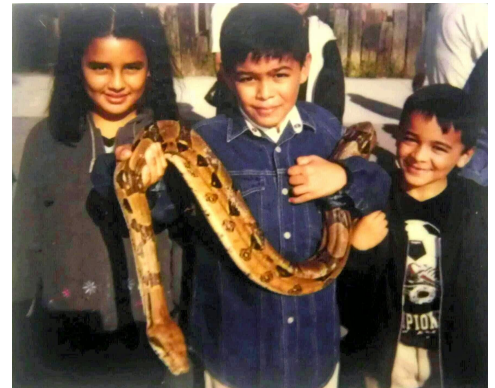
The Great Return



I arrived at the airport three hours earlier than I needed to. I was anxious to return to my motherland—El Salvador—for the first time since I was displaced from the country. Originally, my flight was scheduled for May 14, 2022. However, I decided to follow the advice one of my dear advisors shared with me. Postponing my departure to May 22, 2022, allowed me to wrap up most of my semester chores. I was thrilled to be able to return home.



I had envisioned this return since I left the country as a child. Half of me was left behind. Perhaps, what I attempted to explain to my parents during that time was culture shock and depression deeply rooted in the traumatic events I experienced in El Salvador and the transgenerational traumas I inherited. I would try to explain to my parents that my senses felt dull and disconnected from the universe. “No me sentia bien, me



sentia mal” (I didn’t feel good; I felt bad). But thanks to my resilience, resistance, and the support of many, I was able to find my way back to the motherland.



Regrese solo. I returned alone. I arrived in the US without speaking a word of English. I returned to El Salvador by myself after completing my first year in my Ph.D. program at Berkeley University in the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management. Unfortunately, due to the extreme inequalities of El Salvador, my parents could not finish their elementary school education. I continue to experience these severe forms of structural violence as I forge new paths for myself and others like me—I

hold multiple bachelor's degrees and a master's, and I am on my way to completing my Ph.D. I try to be as intentional as possible while moving forward with the new privileges I acquire to have the greatest positive impact possible. I like to share resources and bring attention to communities that are made marginalized. For my Ph.D. program, this includes addressing some of the brain drain issues countries in Central America experience.



I had to diplomatically maneuver some delicate situations to be able to conduct international research in El Salvador centering on environmental justice issues. Multiple peers and professors have mentioned that it is rare for a first-year student to conduct fieldwork, especially outside of the country. My self-advocacy and the support of many extraordinary individuals, including the Tinker / CLAS Summer Research Grant, helped me

achieve this. I successfully completed all of the exploratory research objectives I set for myself with the funding I received from CLAS. I also completed additional exploratory research objectives I set for myself at the end of the second semester of my Ph.D. program and expanded my knowledge of my cultural heritage—all of these can be pursued as potential projects for my dissertation. There are too many stories to tell and capture, so I will only highlight a few stories while focusing on my primary exploratory research objectives.

My primary objective was to learn more about the Nahuat Pipil Indigenous Resistance with the Sensunapán River and Hydroelectric Dams in Nahuizalco, Sonsonate, El Salvador. I was interested in learning more about how the construction of dams—including the construction of an eighth dam that was stopped by the community—impacts the livelihoods of indigenous communities in the region. My secondary objective was to explore how the country's adoption of a cryptocurrency—Bitcoin—as its legal tender is impacting communities in the region. I decided to look into this after writing a paper titled “Mining Victories of El Salvador Shifting into Fictitious Virtual Mines” in my political ecology graduate seminar. Of course, I was also interested in reconnecting with family members and learning more about my indigenous heritage. The map below captures the primary locations (i.e., Sonsonate, La Libertad, and La Unión) I visited for my exploratory research goals. I also spent considerable time in the capital, San Salvador, and my family's ancestral lands, Chalatenango. The sections below focus on some key themes and potential projects I can pursue in future visits; my goal is to pursue one or a combination of them for my dissertation.

EL Salvador

Exploratory Visit & Bitcoin



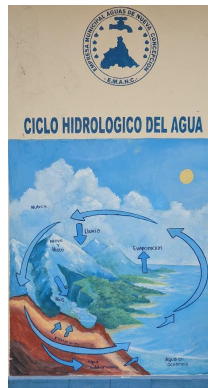
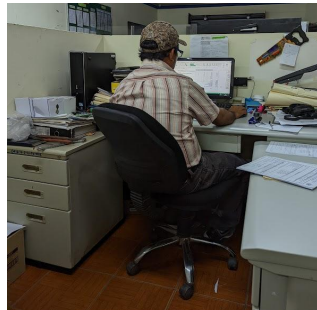
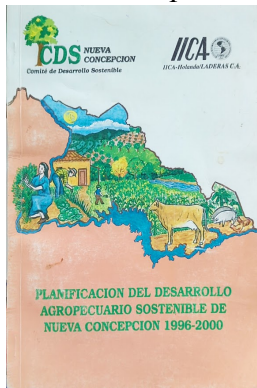
Water

Brief Background

The smallest country in Central America—El Salvador—was the first country in the world that prohibited all mining of gold and other metals¹ in an effort to protect the environment and water resources (Broad, 2021). The country possesses an abundance of natural resources—arable land, tropical forests, minerals, geothermal power, access to the Pacific Ocean, year-round access to solar and wind energy, biomass energy production etc. (Toron et al., 2020). However, everyone does not have equal access to these resources. The majority of the citizens continue to suffer due to extreme inequalities rooted in colonialist extraction, the mismanagement of resources, and neoliberal foreign investors (Booth et al., 2020). For example, it is estimated that 90 percent of the water is unsuitable for drinking (Brigida, 2021; Gies, 2018). I was able to personally experience this unequal access to water during my explanatory visit.

¹ Unlikely allies united forces to accomplish this victory in 2017.

Nueva Concepcion



While staying with my maternal uncle Herber in Nueva Concepcion, Chalatenango, El Salvador, I had constant access to clean water. This was not always the case. I arrived in the town with memories of how I used to suck on a water spigot to attempt to pull some water to quench my thirst. Thanks to the support and encouragement of my grandparents and the remittances my parents sent from the US, my uncle was the first in my extended family to complete a college education—I was able to witness the initial stages of his academic journey while living with my grandparents. I used to hear vague stories of how my uncle was involved with the process that improved the water quality in the town, but I did not realize how invested he was in the entire process.



Here I am with my uncle at my maternal grandparents' home. My family was forced out of their ancestral lands in Nueva Trinidad during the Civil war, which is one of the places that experienced the most violence during the civil war. My grandparents taught me to thrive through adversity resiliently. They were able to purchase this home, earning money as street vendors selling lottery tickets. I was born in this house during the end of the civil war. There are stories of my grandfather running with me in his arms to shield me from bullets shortly after I was born.

My uncle is esteemed and respected by everyone; he is known for having improved the water in the town. The water pressure is constant throughout the year, and the quality is tested monthly and treated daily. I had an opportunity to shadow and volunteer with him and the water company he works for—he mapped out the entire water and sewage lines in the town, implemented some strategies to save water, and even designed their logo. This was not part of my original plan. Initially, I joined him during his work trips because I wanted to take advantage of all the opportunities I could to get out of the house. During my first outing, I realized I had to be more intentional with this opportunity. My conversations with him centered on water and traditional ecological knowledge. Unfortunately, I did not have an opportunity to complete a recorded interview discussing how the water issues changed in the town. However, he has agreed to

complete this interview during a future visit. Also, I learned that “los nacimientos de agua” (the town’s water banks) lack the environmental protection they deserve and that the city needs a sewage treatment plant. During the long informative conversations I had with my uncle, I learned that about 3% to 5% of the people of El Salvador have access to clean drinking water in their homes. My uncle mentioned how a European organization funded some water developmental projects and how only 3 of the locations selected in the entire country were able to develop a sustainable model. I could explore this further, along with how contaminated water with pesticides leads to premature deaths linked to kidney failure.



Nahuizalco



I arrived to Nahuizalco, Sonsonate, on June 4th with body aches and flu-like symptoms. I began to feel ill a few days before my departure. I tested my uncle and myself for COVID-19 since we were the only ones feeling those symptoms. Fortunately, we tested negative. I shared this information with my contact in Nahuizalco, Tata Pedro, and I was encouraged to move forward with my visit.



Negative COVID test



This was the first time I met Tata Pedro in person. Initially, I was anxious because doing something like this in El Salvador can be potentially dangerous. Our communications were

initiated thanks to Nana Haydee, the director of El Centro Cultural Techantit. I began to volunteer with this Los Angeles-based organization in December 2021. Techantit has been working with Salvadoran indigenous communities in and out of El Salvador since 1999. Tata Pedro is the leading member of the Nahuat Pipil Tribal Council of Nahuizalco, which Techantit supports. Tata Pedro welcomed my family and me with open arms when we arrived in Nahuizalco.



I spent my first night in a hostel because Tata Pedro had not finished arranging the place I was going to sleep at. After my family left, Tata Pedro took me to a bakery to buy some “pan dulce” to eat with his family.



Before I visited El Salvador, while volunteering with Techantit, I noticed that Tata Pedro had technical issues connecting to our virtual meetings. I found out that he did not have access to a laptop to join the meetings. I told Nana Haydee that I would help them resolve this issue. Eventually, I was informed that I was awarded some funds for my exploratory visit from CLAS, so I decided to use a large portion of the funds to buy Tata Pedro a brand-new laptop

with accident protection insurance coverage for three years. It took me about three days to set everything up on the laptop for Tata Pedro to be able to collaborate with people around the world. In fact, a few days after I delivered the laptop, I provided technical assistance for him to attend a global indigenous conference. I also gave \$200 to Tata Pedro and his family for letting me stay with them. Initially, I had planned to stay with Tata Pedro for three weeks, but I decided to leave a week earlier due to the health hazards I encountered. I also realized that I needed more time for other exploratory objectives I set for myself.





The day I relocated to Tata Pedro's house, he asked me to clean out the shed I would be staying in; I am not sure if this was a test to see how committed I was. Eventually, his wife intervened and told him I should not be cleaning that space, especially because I felt ill. The space was cluttered with moldy clothes, chemicals, and various materials for home businesses—all of the surfaces were covered with a thick layer of dust. My symptoms worsened as soon as I was



exposed to the space. Tata Pedro's wife offered me a chair to rest for the day. Tata Pedro offered cough syrup. I was still exposed to various health hazards (e.g., chemicals, gasoline, mold, dust, the risk of a potential break-in, etc.) after Tata Pedro invited me to move in. I politely decided to accept his invitation to continue to build rapport. His wife offered other options (i.e., staying at the hostel or another family member's home), but Tata Pedro insisted I stay with him. In my video diary, I gave myself a two weeks limit or three weeks max to stay with them due to the health risks. I appreciated how Tata Pedro's wife advocated for me to use a couch to elevate the old dirty mattress that would be set on a dusty floor. I am sure this helped my sleep and my illness. I tried to thank her by helping her with household chores like washing dishes. I continued to support the women with household chores throughout my entire time there. Towards the end of my stay, after helping Tata Pedro's sons relocate their home business, I had an opportunity to interact with all of the women of the house alone. I offered to help them as they completed a request for their sewing business. They opened up about their personal struggles and what they did to cope and manage their health, including using Traditional Ecological Knowledge for medical remedies.

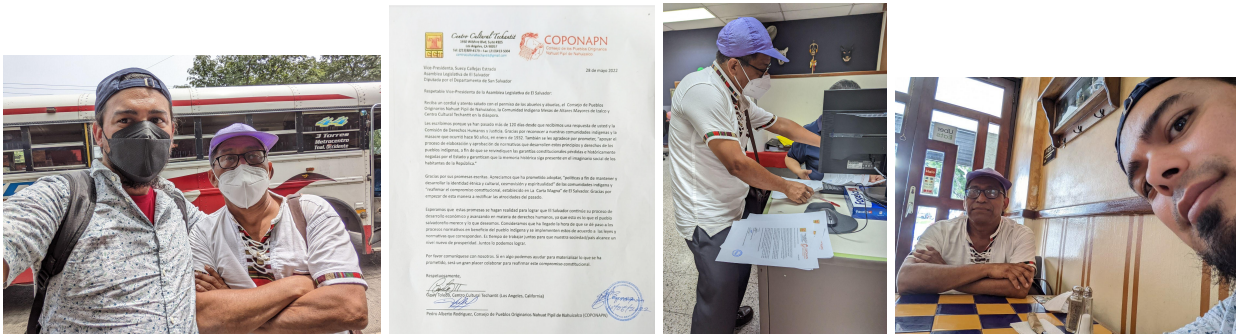


I also heard personal stories of how machismo culture affects their households, how they navigate this, and their thoughts on how this manifested differently in different sections of the country—certain regions suffer more from this, which is tied to the sedimented history of each region. They mentioned that Mayan communities tend to have more balanced roles. Much of what I heard reminded me of the book *Caliban and the Witch* by Silvia Federici. The women also mentioned that there are disappeared women in maquilapolis; supernatural excuses are made for these disappearances, but it sounds like human trafficking. I was told that Chinese companies are more prone to this type of abuse; they shared a lot of information on this topic. I would be willing to collaborate with someone to explore this further or share my contacts with them to study this human rights issue. The women also shared various health issues tied to water and poor hygiene. When my family drove into Nahuizalco to drop me off, I saw people hauling water. That and other observations made me realize that this region has severe water issues. I continued to observe this and how it impacted people differently during my two-week stay in the region.

Tata Pedro invited me to join a Tribal Council meeting the second day I arrived; I was able to meet with them twice. I was asked to share my input on specific issues during each meeting. I offered the knowledge I had available, and I helped in whatever way I could; this included helping the elderly complete some applications to receive humanitarian aid (e.g., food, medicine, etc.). I also helped the women prepare meals for the elders and everyone else present. Nana Haydee, Tata Pedro, and the council requested for me to help them deliver some documents to the government.



I visited San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, with Tata Pedro twice. During our first visit, we delivered two letters to the government one was for the Vice-President of the Legislative Assembly (I wrote the first draft of this letter), and another was for the Vice Minister of Culture. Both letters ask the government to honor their word by adopting policies to legally recognize El Salvador's indigenous communities. Colorism and discrimination against indigenous communities are openly noticeable in the country—Tata Pedro and I experienced this as we navigated different spaces. We encountered this while attempting to deliver the letter to the Vice Minister of Culture. They chose to be more strict with us. We were told that only one of us could enter the building while other individuals did not receive the same scrutiny. I waited by the entrance guarding all of our belongings as Tata Pedro entered the building to deliver the letter. While waiting, I made a bit of a risky move to see if I could shift the energy being used to treat us. I replied to a few of my contacts on WhatsApp while verbally speaking in English for them to hear me. The gamble paid off. They were much more polite while addressing Tata Pedro and me after that. We left feeling a sense of victory because the government accepted the letters after this second attempt. I treated Tata Pedro to eat at his favorite place. He chose a fancy cafe a lawyer had invited him to in the past.



Unfortunately, soon after we finished our meal, we were greeted by an unexpected adventure. We were supposed to get a car ride from Gerson, Tata Pedro's son, to avoid taking the bus back

during peak traffic. Gerson had just finished delivering a product order on behalf of his sewing company. A few minutes after getting into the car of Gerson’s cousin, we all had to get out to push it off a busy interstate. The car began to give issues during their previous stop and completely died after we got in. Everyone was concerned because being stranded in the capital at night can be very dangerous. We unsuccessfully attempted to jumpstart the car several times. Everyone began reaching out to their contacts because it started dark. Eventually, someone who was an hour away drove to tow the car in the middle of the night. Somehow we managed to get home unscathed after driving in the middle of a rainstorm and getting in a minor collision. We all celebrated our arrival and shared our stories in the dark. The lights literally went out when we arrived.



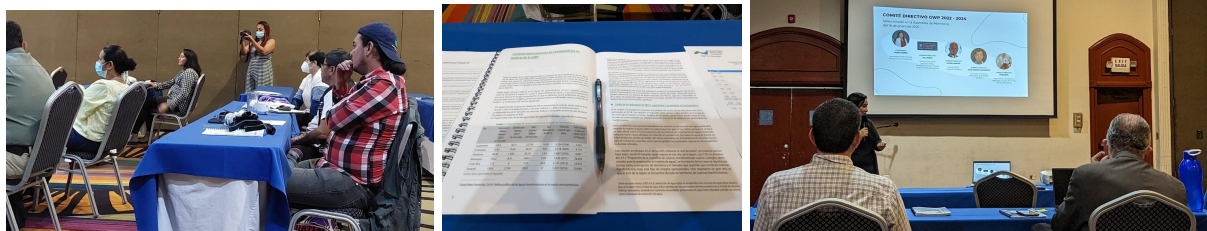
The second time I visited the capital with Tata Pedro, we went to the “Universidad de El Salvador or UES;” the largest and oldest university in the country. We woke up at 3 AM to take multiple buses to San Salvador. It was an extremely exhausting trip. However, it was well worth it. Thanks to this visit, I met a professor who works with indigenous communities and a Maya Chorti indigenous elder. After sharing some personal stories with Tata Pedro, he mentioned that my indigenous heritage is linked to the Maya Chorti community. After Tata Pedro shared that with me, I told him that I had a similar conclusion based on what I have read in different books, cultural practices my family has, our ancestral lands, and oral histories my family has shared—I was able to record some of these oral histories while spending some time with my great grandma during this visit. I had some interesting conversations with the Maya elder and the professor; they made themselves available to support me with my future pursuits. The professor invited me to a conference taking place this fall, and I have been communicating regularly with the Maya elder. During this trip to the capital, Tata Pedro and I also visited a government office to check the status of some submitted humanitarian aid applications. We successfully transferred the application process over to Tata Pedro—I was told that the indigenous elder in charge was incarcerated due to [El Salvador’s current state of exception](#). Everyone I spoke with mentioned the state of exception; many compared it to a witch hunt. Anyone who is believed to be



suspicious can be apprehended. I had a close encounter with this during this visit to the capital—towards the end of my trip my uncle, his son, and me were stopped and searched by the military. I was waiting for Tata Pedro’s friend to pick me up to spend a night with him at the capital. My uncle Herber invited Tata Pedro and me to attend a forum/conference centering on water issues El Salvador is facing. The conference was in the capital. I did not want to wake up at 3 AM again, so I chose to stay with Tata Pedro’s friend; I was able to meet him the other night we were stranded in the capital. I waited almost three hours to meet him close to the old presidential house. There were over twenty military personnel near the area, and they started to walk around where I was waiting. They got closer to me the longer I waited, and I noticed they found me to be suspicious. Eventually, Tata Pedro’s friend arrived, and I avoided a dangerous encounter with the military.



The Global Water Partnership hosted the forum. It was an extremely informative event. Professionals, scholars, and government officials who focus on these topics were present. What everyone presented confirmed some of the things I had read and conversations I had with various individuals. I openly shared that I was conducting an exploratory research visit from Berkeley and various individuals approached me seeking to collaborate. This extremely fruitful event allowed me to network with water leaders from around the country.



My stay with Tata Pedro and his family was highly productive. Although I was sick, I was able to accomplish more than the original objectives I set for myself. Everywhere I went throughout my stay I initiated conversations with people to discuss issues tied to water, the environment, food sovereignty, shifting cultural dynamics, the country’s state of exception, different types of displacement, and countermovements like cooperatives. I had various opportunities to discuss these issues and make observations while visiting some of the Nahuat Pipil communities in the region with Tata Pedro. While communing to see the dams in the Sensunapan



River with Tata Pedro, I shared a vision that came to mind when I was an undergrad student. I asked him if a center that focuses on indigenous sovereignty and rights exists in the country. His answer was no. This is a topic I discussed with Nana Haydee before leaving the US as well. I told Tata Pedro that one of my priorities is to help them figure out a way to fund this center for them to be able to

have access to modern tools (e.g., laptops) for them to be able to advocate for their rights. We also discussed purchasing some land for them to maintain it and establish a protected zone centering on ecotourism. He appreciated the ideas I shared with him. We agreed to continue this discussion with Nana Haydee and other Techantit members inside and outside of El Salvador. We arrived at the dam.



Tata Pedro chose a separate entry and exit point to avoid looking suspicious and a potential confrontation with the dam guards. He shared stories of how he and his ancestors used to access the river to fish, bathe, and to practice various cultural ceremonies. Now the river is enclosed with fences put up by national and international companies who sell electricity to neighboring countries. He shared several stories about how indigenous families were tricked into signing off their rights to their communal lands and how some were violently displaced. He also shared a story of how an “abuela” was able to regain access to her land thanks to the support of a lawyer. An environmental

and social impact assessment needs to be conducted to understand how the dams are impacting people in the region, the ecosystems and the beings that inhabit them, and the dispossession and enclosing that is taking place.



There are various water issues rooted in the mismanagement of resources and extreme social inequalities that can be traced in the sedimented histories of the region. I will expand on these topics while working on a complete report that fully captures my experiences during this exploratory visit. However, for now, since I am past the due date to submit this I will finalize this report by describing some of the observations and experiences I had that are connected to water access in Nahuaizalco. My current observations, conversations, and lived experiences in the region make me believe there is a high unequal water distribution. Tourists appear to be getting better access to water than the native communities in the region. During the two weeks I stayed with Tata Pedro and his family, he had to get up every morning around 3 AM to collect water for the day. I was told that a pipe had busted, which is why they did not have



constant access to water in their homes; I did not have an opportunity to explore this further.



However, I did notice that the fountain at the center of the plaza and the tourist sites had constant access to water. Why did people not have access to water while the streets flooded with rainwater during the middle of the winter? This poor access to water impacted daily activities like hygiene and cooking. The restroom was filthy. Flies would land on it, and they would fly around the house, including the kitchen area. I had constant stomach issues and experienced dehydration almost every day. I

think the people in the house drank coffee and soda during every meal to make up for the poor quality of water that was available to drink. Water stored in plastic bags was available to drink at their house, but the water was slimy, and it had a strong taste of plastic. I forced myself to drink one or two of those bags of water to attempt to get half a liter of water in my system daily. Showers were not an option.



My daily hygiene ritual included using a sock to wipe my body with soap and water before going to sleep. Everyone would anxiously check every morning



to see if the water was permanently back. I turned the faucet on one more time before leaving, and only a few drops of water came out. Not having access to water made it extremely difficult to focus throughout the day. My experiences here reminded me of the experiences I had as a child in Nueva Concepcion. I will expand this section further, but it is enough for the preliminary draft I am submitting for this report. This was an exhausting trip, but the experiences

and knowledge I gained are immeasurable. It was impossible to capture everything on one page. What I wrote is less than half of my exploratory research experiences. I still need to write about Bitcoin and how it impacts different communities in the region, deforestation tied to gang violence, my indigenous ancestral connections, and my expedition to a remote island in the Gulf of Fonseca. I have so much to write and content to produce after this visit.

I aim to continue writing and publishing some of these stories and present them during various conferences this year. Ideally, I would like to be funded again to continue to research I started. There are many paths I can follow for my dissertation, and I need more time and information to finalize those decisions.