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"Gig Workers of the World, Unite!": Activist Encounters and Transnational Labor Organizing

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Informatics

by

Lucy Pei

Dissertation Committee:
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2025

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Writing a dissertation and doing a PhD is both a fun and a stressful thing to be doing with one's life. I am grateful to everyone who has been a part of this journey. I have been transformed by all the encounters listed here and many more that I have not listed. To my committee, Roderic Crooks, Kim Fortun, Melissa Mazmanian, Sal Zárate, and Aaron Trammell: each of you has been such an important model and mentor to me over the past years. Aaron, I am so grateful that you created an inviting space for an inexperienced first year to develop her intellectual curiosity (and another, wonderful space for learning new board games). Sal, I have learned so much from your generosity in mentorship and the environment you create for meeting every student where they are in your classes. Melissa, your care for the students in the department has made all the difference for me and I'm so grateful I also have been able to learn from you. Kim, I don't know where to start but I'm so grateful for all the questions and scaffolding and feedback and encouragement and curiosity and sharing of your own journey. I admire many things about you and most of all I admire how you treat freshmen and famous faculty with the same interest in what they can share. Roderic, thank you for taking me on as a student and for the mentorship and care in responding to and pushing my writing. The books you've shared with me and the discernment in helping me refine my ideas have been invaluable to me.

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This dissertation is dedicated to gig workers and gig worker activists who are fighting for themselves and for a time and space of livability, mutuality, reciprocity, dignity. To Carolina Hevia: cuídate y gracias por todo.

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"Tinder Will Know You Are A 6": Users' Perceptions of Algorithms on Tinder **Jan 2022**
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"Gig Workers of the World, Unite!": Activist Encounters and Transnational Labor Organizing

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Informatics

University of California, Irvine, 2025

Associate Professor Roderic Crooks, Chair

People around the world increasingly make or supplement their livelihoods through digitally mediated work arrangements, epitomized in rideshare companies like Uber in the US and food delivery companies like Rappi in Latin America. Such work arrangements have been widely criticized for their exploitative practices by activists, academics, and journalists. Even so, many vulnerable populations, such as undocumented migrant workers, have no other options for work and have continued to survive as gig workers. Workers have begun to organize to resist the conditions of their work on gig platforms. This dissertation responds to the question, *What does it take to make a global labor movement of digital platform workers?* To answer this, I argue scholars should attend ethnographically to the daily activities of gig worker activists in context and propose a notion of errand as method. My dissertation is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Ecuador, the US, online, and other networked locations in Latin America. Through my accompaniment with the Ecuadorian gig worker union *Frente de Trabajadores de Plataformas Digitales del Ecuador* (FRENAPP), I find that for gig workers to unite, they must overcome the temporariness that shapes their experience of temporality and mobility. For gig workers to unite under the model of unionization, activists must take on the work of giving such a concept traction against the diverse interpretations that gig workers have of their conditions and what should be done

about them, fighting an uphill battle in a context of anti-socialism and lack of accountability from the state. Finally, gig workers around the world unite to claim the global scale for their movement while still leaving room for diversity among the different organizations in coalition. This work allows for an understanding of labor organizing in the gigged workplace against backdrops of differential temporalities and mobilities, the work of making transnational connections and ideas meaningful, and the possibilities of scale making projects other than those advanced by global capital.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In April 2023, I was holding the flags of two app-based delivery union organizations, one from Ecuador and one from Colombia, standing in front of the San Francisco headquarters of the the company Uber, chanting alongside delegates from gig worker organizations and unions from 17 countries and four continents, chanting, "Gig workers of the world, unite!"

What does it mean to call on gig workers of the world to unite? What does it take to try to make this happen? My dissertation is a story of how some gig workers from various parts of the world have been trying to unite, against different odds.

Gig work is a popular way of referring to short-term work arrangements that are mediated by digital platforms and are denied traditional labor protections that are common in formal jobs in the Global North. The most emblematic form of gig worker in the US is the Uber driver. One downloads the Uber app and gets connected to customers who pay through the app for the ride. Although the laws are changing and strongly debated, currently in the US most Uber drivers are considered independent contractors and work without the usual protections of insurance or a minimum wage. The model of developing a digital platform to mediate temporary work arrangements, taking a cut of transactions while refusing responsibility for

workers as employees, has come to be known as "Uberization." Companies brand themselves as technology companies rather than companies offering whatever service they are offering, and often receive large sums of venture capital to be able to "disrupt" an industry and reach monopolistic scales with subsidized rates.

In Latin America, the most iconic gig worker is the motorcycle-based, insulated backpack-bearing food delivery worker, known in Spanish as *repartidores* and *repartidoras*. In Latin America, the publicly visible *repartidores/as*[1] are also prominently associated with the mass Venezuelan migration in the region. Since gig work is essentially a walk-on job that requires almost no qualifications or even legal status to begin working and earning much-needed income, many Venezuelans who have fled their country have been working on delivery apps in the region since around 2017, when the exodus from Venezuela began to peak.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, gig workers staged large public protests. In Latin America, these were often group rides where *repartidores/as* taped protest signs to their delivery backpacks and rode together while honking and chanting. Sometimes they attempted to deliver demands to the offices if the company had offices in the country at the time. The issues raised by workers centered on apps lowering pay, apps blocking workers unilaterally, the lack of COVID-19 protections, and the abandonment of people who were killed or injured in traffic accidents on the job. Some signs were addressed to consumers also, arguing that someone's life was not worth less than someone's food delivery order being on time.

My dissertation is based on fieldwork that takes place with the organizations that have formed after the moment of visible, mass protest during COVID-19. The focus is on the organization FRENAPP, which is a union composed mostly of delivery workers, but also of rideshare drivers and online gig workers, based in Ecuador. In this dissertation, I argue that attending ethnographically to the daily activities of gig worker activists in context and to

[1]The slash is to be somewhat gender inclusive. There's a lot of debate about how to make a gendered romance language more gender inclusive, and this is one way people at FRENAPP tend to do it.

their efforts to be part of a global movement of gig worker unions allows for an understanding of labor organizing in the gigged workplace against backdrops of differential temporalities and mobilities, the work of making transnational connections and ideas meaningful, and the possibilities of scale making projects other than those advanced by global capital.

1.1 Problematizing gig work

Gig work has been problematized in a variety of ways. A consumer-oriented way of considering what became gig work began with discussions of the "sharing economy," where digital platforms were understood as facilitating the efficient use and sharing of idle resources toward goals of sustainability and social cohesion (Light and Miskelly, 2019). In some parts of the Global South, the presence of popular gig platforms such as Uber in the country was understood as part of the modernity of a particular city, giving consumers the chance to make choices and gain access to greater convenience and continuity in their experience of cosmopolitan cities (Del Nido, 2022). Analysts from more macroeconomic perspectives have considered whether the business model of gig companies could be profitable long-term (Mwareya et al., 2022, e. g.). Although they have become household names, "disrupted" industries, gained many users and workers, raised huge amounts of venture capital, and generated hype around their actual or potential IPO valuations, many gig companies have yet to become profitable or have only occasionally made profits for their investors and shareholders. In the Global South, oftentimes gig work was discussed as a possible solution for under-and unemployment (Raval, 2020).

Early debates focused on workers considered whether and in what ways gig work might be beneficial to workers, as autonomy, flexibility, availability of work, and freedom from a human "boss" was stacked against algorithmic control, surveillance, low pay, and lack of labor guarantees (Wood et al., 2019, e. g.). For remote workers, additional concerns

included working in different time zones and experiences of social isolation. For location-based workers, a series of risks associated with being in the streets added to the challenges faced by workers.

Across modalities, scholars have illustrated the ways that workers must submit to algorithmic management rather than being able to be their own boss (Rosenblat, 2018). Workers are thoroughly surveilled by platforms and customers. The ratings given by customers often can lead to high-stakes punishments that unilaterally take away the ability of the worker to continue earning on the app (Irani and Silberman, 2013; Mosseri, 2022, e. g.). The features of apps are often gamified and include bonuses, multipliers, and punishments in rating to incentivize workers to sign on during hours of high demand (Christopher, 2021, e. g.). Some apps at some times have featured direct scheduling, where workers sign up for shifts during which they agree to be available on the app (though their pay is often still dependent on whether they receive orders) (Duus et al., 2023). While specific scheduling and time-based pricing schemes change constantly, the underlying constant is that companies take more or less directly coercive measures to control workers' availability. The flexibility promised by the applications is not an automatic feature of this arrangement of work, but rather is created by the practices of workers despite the controlling design of the applications (Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024).

Recognition of algorithmic control relates to another dominant problematization of gig work. Especially in the Global North, scholars have focused on the deliberate misclassification of workers as independent contractors and the failure to meet minimum wage, freedom of association, and other labor protections (Collier et al., 2017; Jarrahi et al., 2020, e. g.). In California, the passage of state assembly bill 5 (AB 5) in 2019 extended labor rights such as minimum wage laws, sick leave, and unemployment and workers' compensation benefits to gig workers (among other kinds of workers). In response, many gig platform companies refused to follow the law. In 2020, Uber, Lyft, Doordash, Instacart, and Postmates poured

unprecedented funds into a campaign to pass Proposition 22, a ballot initiative that exempted delivery and rideshare workers from AB 5 and provided instead a limited set of protections and benefits (Gedye, 2023). The California Gig Workers' Union, backed by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), then took the companies to court in an effort to overturn Proposition 22, arguing that the proposition was unconstitutional. Finally, in 2023, the California Supreme Court upheld the majority of Proposition 22. This outcome has meant that delivery and rideshare workers in California are not included under general labor protections, making litigation more difficult. However, activists and other supporting gig workers' rights continue to push for stronger legal protections and enforcement of the weakened protections that do exist. Scholarship and activism has concentrated on other regulatory initiatives, such as the Platform Workers Directive (PWD) of the EU and the "*Ley Rider*" of Spain (Wray, 2024; ridersxderechos, 2024). Classification was also a concern for unions and activists I worked with, especially those who were part of transnational networks. The concerns of people working on the apps daily were less about classification, especially given their temporary orientation to the work and to the country whose laws would be debated.

Not only do gig companies miscategorize workers and themselves to avoid paying taxes, following regulations, and paying for labor protections such as minimum wage, insurance, and workers compensation, they have forayed into providing high-interest, short-term loans, or credit for vehicles that workers must then work off to keep up with crushing interest rates (Dib, 2022; Li, 2022). Li (2022) focuses on the coercive conditions of people who work under debt schemes. In addition to economic exploitation, workers' emotional labor, the moral economy of tipping, and other acts outside of calculated economical rationality by participants such as customers and restaurant workers generate value that make this mode of work possible (Raval and Lalvani, 2022; Raval and Dourish, 2016). The important analysis carried out by workers themselves, as well as unionists, scholars, and journalists, lay out the exploitative conditions that make gig work possible and profitable for corporations, and has

set the ground for workers to strategize against these harmful conditions.

1.1.1 Resisting algorithmic control

Critical technology scholars have documented and theorized the emerging resistance to conditions of digital platform work. One key area of focus has been on the individual strategies of gig workers resisting algorithmic control on the job.

Individual strategies of coping with the temporal demands of gig work have been analyzed. Chen and Sun (2020) highlight mundane and opportunistic strategies of workers in China to cope with "temporal arbitrage," what they deem a new temporal order normalized by the platform economy. Common strategies include speeding, running red lights, and going the wrong way on one-way streets. These strategies are also commonly reported in news articles and by gig workers I talked to. Another strategy documented by Chen and Sun focused on ad hoc moments of solidarity where a delivery worker hands off their order to someone who is already in the elevator, with an expectation that they would do the same in a future situation. Then only one person has to take the time to ascend in the elevator for the final stage of the delivery. Duus et al. (2023) and Chen and Sun (2020) document similar patterns of leaving the city for periods of time to regain some measure of control over their temporal experiences of the apps. For Duus et al. (2023) in European cities, workers took breaks or traveled when they knew that most of their clients would be on holidays. For Chen and Sun (2020), workers left the city to return to their rural hometowns during periods of time when traffic laws were being strictly enforced in the city and returned to work when enforcement became more relaxed.

Shapiro (2018)'s ethnography and interview study with food delivery workers in Philadelphia, demonstrates the way that workers conduct "qualculation," refusing the purely quantitative "calculative rationalities" that are used by platform companies to manipulate workers despite

claims of flexibility. Mosseri (2022) focuses on the lens of visibility to document the ways that surveillance by the app is contested by drivers in New York City through "reputation auditing" and efforts to "caption" the output of the surveillance that is produced about them. Across lenses of temporality, calculative rationalities, and visibility, scholars have shown that oppressive conditions are not totalizing, and that gig workers find ways to individually resist algorithmic control and exercise agency in their work.

1.1.2 Organizing for better working conditions

Beyond individual resistance tactics, researchers have begun to study collective action by gig workers. Such studies have focused on factors within the workplace, and on the role of social media for collective action. Scholars have used and proposed frameworks to understand what might facilitate or hold back platform workers from organizing. Lei (2021) proposes the concept of "platform architecture," which differentiates "technological, legal, and organizational aspects of control and management in the labor process and the variable relationships between them" (p. 279). This allows her to explain the difference in overt resistance via protest among different business models of delivery workers in China. She argues that those who work without any formal contract and without interaction with any human managers are most likely to protest and consider their working conditions unjust because the dimensions of the platform architecture are mutually reinforcing. On the other hand, platform deliverers who work with managers that can override their complaints about the technological aspects of their work are far less likely to protest or engage in collective action on the basis of understanding their working conditions as unjust. Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) use a labor process framework to investigate the specific contradictions in work arrangement of food delivery workers in Italy and the UK that led to mobilizations and workplace solidarity and emphasize the need to include the degree of dependence on gig work in future investigations. While analysis of the conditions under which labor takes place

is crucial, I follow Wolanski (2019) in drawing out additional kinds of meaning-making and collaboration across stakeholders and allies outside of the immediate context where labor is done, as these can also be crucial to produce a cause for mobilization.

Within research about collective action against the poor working conditions of the gig economy, researchers in different regions have analyzed the roles and affordances of digital media in resistance. These studies have found that sociality via virtual spaces allows for collective complaints and the creation of grievances in isolating work (Glaser, 2020). Zhou and Pun (2022) argue that fostering worker solidarity depends on the digital communications' affordances for association, discourse, and mobilization. Bulut and Yeşilyurt (2023) show that in Turkey, social media facilitates both extraordinary and "ordinary" protest and resistance, in their riff on James Scott's "weapons of the weak" to characterize social media resistance as "weapons of the gig." Grohmann et al. (2023) find that for delivery workers in Brazil and the UK, communication has three distinct dimensions for delivery platform workers: communication at work, through social media, and in struggle. They argue that "communication from below" is crucial to worker organizing. These understandings of how social media and communications have facilitated collective struggle have drawn mainly on virtual research. I build on these findings as I bring substantial in-person ethnographic methodology to the question of how collective action takes place, and turn attention specifically to the transnational element of collective action.

Some studies have begun to analyze the transnational aspect of resistance in gig work. Woodcock proposes the framework of "digital workerism" to understand how three dynamics are "driving struggles in the platform economy: 1) the increasing connections between platform workers [...] 2) the lack of communication and negotiation from platforms [...] and 3) the internationalization of platforms, which has laid the basis for new transnational solidarity," (Woodcock, 2021, p. 3). Drawing on Italian *operaismo*, Woodcock (2021) presents digital workerism as:

> an argument about the role of technology within platform work. Rather than seeing the worker as an atomised figure who is unfortunate enough to end up working in this way (or indeed, no longer even a worker, if the bogus claims of self-employment are to be believed), workers are an active force that plays a driving role in the changing composition of class. (p. 20)

He advocates for worker inquiry, beginning with workers' experiences when theorizing about platform capitalism and combining research and organizing. Importantly, he advocates considering "how the resources and materials of the university can be put into the service of workers' movement" (ibid., p. 24). Woodcock analyzes these three dynamics in and across various in-person and online cases of platform work from the perspective of workers' experiences. He argues that since workers are recruited through common rhetoric and work for the same or similar platform companies across locations, their work experience facilitates international connections. Borghi and Murgia (2024) take trans-organizational and transnational alliances as the focus of their case study of gig worker organizing in Italy and the UK. They propose a typology of values-driven alliances and purpose-driven alliances, where the first describes alliances that are loosely based on long-term goals, and the latter describes alliances that focus on specific struggles. Their analysis reveals that although alignment in values can help bridge some of the common divides between union and nonunion (or less traditional union) actors in alliances, purpose-driven alliances are more effective in mobilizing collective action.

My dissertation builds on this large body of scholarship about gig work generally and the resistive practices and collective actions of gig workers in particular. I have learned about the exploitation faced by gig workers and the individual and collective actions that gig workers take to make their work life more bearable. This dissertation contributes an empirical focus on the experiences of activists in the context of Venezuelan migration and Ecuador's experience of sharply increasing political instability and narco-related violence as they mobilize

at different scales.

1.2 Transnational labor activism

There have been various turns to the transnational in labor studies. Transnational labor activism here refers to "a form of labor activism in which various actors—both union and non-union—collaborate across borders or promote or oppose change within the international system or in other countries with the aim of improving working people's capacity to pursue their rights and interests," (Ford, 2024, p. 191). The term has been used alongside other terms interchangeably in labor studies scholarship, including "labor internationalism, union or labor transnationalism, international or transnational or cross-border solidarity or collaboration, cross-border alliances, global unionism," (Lévesque and Murray, 2010, p. 222, quoted in Ford, 2024). Gill (2009) traces a history of the notion of solidarity tied to the notion of the worker, beginning from its adoption as a central principle of the Congress of the First International in 1864. She defines solidarity as a horizontal, class-based relationship that extends beyond workers of one neighborhood or one nationality to other working people who may be total strangers, and it requires that these people recognize their common interest as workers under an exploitative, capitalist system. The importance of solidarity arises from a need to fight the social fragmentation created by the development of capitalism, through the establishment of relationships of trust and mutuality (Gill, 2009, p. 667). In this section I will summarize several key approaches and debates about the transnational in labor studies. In response to these, I argue for the strength of ethnography as a method and friction as a conceptual approach to studying transnational labor activism.

Munck (2009) argues that in the 1980s, a discernible research movement called "New International Labor Studies" began, which sought to de-exotify what was known at the time as the "developing world," and brought together labor scholars who were in the isolation of

area studies. By the 1990s, globalization was "in the air" and on the minds of both activists and academics (Cunningham, 1999). Transnational solidarity in social movements and labor movements became an important research topic (Edelman, 2001; Cunningham, 1999). Sociologists of labor as well as scholars in business schools, industrial and labor relations, and development studies theorized the potential for transnational labor movements to provide a "vital counterweight to unfettered global capitalism," (McCallum, 2013, p. 4) though their work largely did not provide empirical analysis of the actual workings of transnational labor organizing (Moody, 1997; Gordon and Turner, 2000; Munck and Waterman, 1999).

1.2.1 Mapping alliances

Research on transnational labor activism has been concerned with mapping the kinds of actors involved in alliances across borders, and their relationships. Ford (2024) proposes a framework that categorizes organizations involved in transnational activism. One on axis, she considers their location in the Global North, Global South, or as supranational actors. On another axis, she categorizes organizations as labor unions/ worker groups, labor networks or federations, and NGOs. This kind of categorization is helpful in understanding how alliances are nor are not being made across certain kinds of divides. However, a framework like this always obscures other kinds of differences that are not captured in its categorizations. For example, unions and worker groups are flattened in their size, political disposition, funding, institutional history, and militancy. Divisions such as citizenship status and minoritized identities are also left out of Global North and Global South as a binary. Despite these shortcomings, such a framework is able to unite different scholarship that has focused on one kind of organization or another, bringing together studies focused solely on unions and scholarship that foregrounds NGO campaigns into an ecological approach (Ford, 2024).

Mapping actors involved in transnational labor activism leads not only to decisions about

what kinds of organizational distinctions are categories. The relationship between different kinds of organizations is problematized. The hierarchical, nested, geographic scalar organization is one that is sometimes taken for granted, as it appears often at the national level. Then transnational labor activism would involve one further step of federation, as when national labor centers form umbrella groups like the ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation). However, scholars have also found that alliances directly focus on horizontal relationships, prioritizing the fostering of rank-and-file connections (Fox-Hodess, 2020). Anner and Evans (2004) argue that there is a "double divide" between unions and NGOs and between the Global North and South in alliances following a typical formation that includes Global South unions and Global North NGOs. This double divide adds further challenge to the formation and maintenance of alliances, as different accountabilities, priorities, strategies, and cultures must be navigated. For example, focus on work stoppage may contrast with efforts to launch consumer boycott campaigns or create fair trade certifications. Many accounts fail to account for the power differentials within networks, as actors from the Global North are more likely to initiate and control campaigns (Gill, 2009).

1.2.2 Role of the state

A central debate in transnational labor activism research has been about the role of the state and which kinds of entities are and should be targeted, with which kinds of strategies. The concept of transnational advocacy networks has been a core theory deployed by scholars of transnational labor activism, from early conceptualizations of counterhegemonic globalization (Evans, 2000) to more recent field-building efforts in the "New Global Labor Studies" (Brookes and McCallum, 2017). Responding to theorizations that interpreted the growing role of transnational actors and institutions as the diffusion of Western culture (Boli and Thomas, 1997, e. g.), international relations scholars Keck and Sikkink offer the concept of a transnational advocacy network to highlight mutual transformation and horizontal,

voluntary participation in a globalized civil society. They use the term to refer to "those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services" (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p. 65). Actors include "international and domestic NGOs, research and advocacy organizations; local social movements; foundations; the media; churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, intellectuals; parts of regional and international intergovernmental organizations; and parts of the executive and/or parliamentary branches of governments" as potential major actors in a transnational advocacy network (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p. 67). Keck and Sikkink highlight the "boomerang" pattern that characterizes the emergence of transnational advocacy networks. In other words, when local Global South actors cannot directly agitate for change with the state, they can participate in transnational advocacy networks. By participating in the networks, local actors can bypass local governments and draw on the support of international allies to pressure the state from outside positions. For example, a local organization can ally with a United Nations agency or large international NGO, which can then use international conventions, trade agreements, or transnational consumer boycotts to persuade local governments to change their policy and/or behavior.

Some scholars advocate for approaches that do not involve the state. McCallum (2013)'s account of a transnational movement for security guards argues that gains for labor are most practically made via the policy instrument of global framework agreements, signed between transnational corporations and global union federations. He asserts that in the context of union decline and globalized capital, rather than continuing to focus on rights at a national scale, transnational unionism should focus on "rulemaking," and "modifying the normative framework of employment regulation," (McCallum, 2013, p. 11). He calls this kind of struggle "governance struggles," and advises unions to focus on attaining "a degree of discipline and control over the business practices of transnational corporations and free trade pacts" by strengthening global union federations and seeking out more global framework agreements.

Other scholars have reinforced the importance of national governments and regulation at this scale. Seidman (2007)'s book *Beyond the Boycott: Labor Rights, Human Rights, and Transnational Activism* takes a closer look at the idea that consumer pressure on multinational companies to self-regulate is an effective strategy for labor. A dominant perspective at the time was (and to an extent, still is) that especially in countries in the Global South, there is little will and/or ability among national governments to protect the rights of workers. Having signed on to agreements due to national debt and facing competition from globally mobile capital, Global South governments continue to make concessions such as free trade zones and otherwise fail to enforce safe and livable working conditions. The strategy for many labor protection campaigns, especially anti-sweatshop campaigns, has been to circumvent attention to national governments and to instead focus on directly attempting to require corporations to behave with social responsibility (or having unions sign directly with corporations, as McCallum advocates). Seidman finds that transnational activism focused on (Global North) consumer boycotts might result in ratified principles and nonprofit monitoring of companies, but does not strengthen labor movements or protections in Global South countries where labor violations and the manufacturing of consumer products takes place. Seidman argues strongly for state-focused movements to guarantee the rights of workers, including by utilizing the global mobility of factory work to push companies to set up work in countries with firm enforcement of labor laws.

My work is in conversation with these prior studies of transnational labor activism. The global network of gig worker organizations discussed more in chapter four consists of alliances across the Global North and Global South. There are varied ways in which organizations self-consciously address these divisions. Some unions from the Global South refuse to take money from other entities, preferring to make sure that they remain completely independent in their fundraising and that they are not beholden to other interests, especially those in the Global North. Other unions see membership in alliances as a means to access resources, both in terms of funding and social capital. Regarding the role of the state, the transnational network

I interacted with generally focused on having labor rights recognized, demanding union recognition, and achieving collective bargaining as a long-term goal. However, strategies that were meant to appeal to the public, or directly to companies, were also deployed at different scales. The next section of this introduction discusses how ethnography of transnational social movements has demonstrated the important aspects of mobilization and advocacy that come to the fore with ethnographic attention, complementing more organizational and institutional analyses of social movements.

1.3 Transnational Social Movements

Edelman (2001) traces the paradigm shifts of social movement studies. He argues that major theories about social movements in the 1970s were concerned about "resource mobilization," which took an economistic approach to understand the tasks of mobilizing resources toward an interest or cause, and scholars sought to analyze resource availability and how they were mobilized toward certain causes and not others in a competition among organizations. These studies tended to interpret success as policy change and attended less to cultural or discursive changes. This approach was supplemented with consideration of the "political opportunity structure" in addition to resource availability and use, thus attending more to context (McAdam and Tarrow, 2018). Against these structural and macro-political traditions, scholars have argued for the importance of other considerations such as culture, identity, ideology, discourse, and framing processes (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008). Taking a structural and macro-political approach can provide certain insights into the workings of conventional movements which primarily seek to make policy change and remain within existing institutional relationships such as party politics, transnational governance bodies, and electoral democracy (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013). However, more radical and grassroots approaches are not sufficiently understood with these frameworks. Such efforts to "radically

unsettle existing power structures while bringing new sociopolitical relationships, subjectivities, and imaginations into being" may not be trying to change policy as a main goal, and hence cannot be measured only by their success to such a goal (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p. 6).

> In such a light, most movements follow a standard tragic narrative arc of emergence, cotestation, and demobilization ... that casts struggles for social transformation as plagued by socio-political entropy, always failing against the inevitability of their decline. (p. 19)

Rather than constraining the meanings of social movements to this arc, these kinds of efforts are best understood through ethnographic methods, which I discuss further in the methods section.

Kurik (2016) traces an anthropology of resistance and protest, with less of a focus on collective action and institutions, but rather a focus on subjectivity. Scott (1987)'s argument that oppressed people resist without open rebellion in quiet ways opened an avenue to discuss forms of resistance that did not fit in with organized revolution that sought to seize state power. Though their public transcripts might be compliant, hidden transcripts revealed that people Scott studied did not consent to their oppression. Scott argued that 'weapons of the weak' included practices such as slander and sabotage. Scholars have taken up Scott's arguments and also criticized the way his approach flattens subalterns. Foucauldian approaches to subjectivity and resistance took a different understanding of power. Rather than power as a possession, it was understood as procedures and techniques that are used toward "conducting the conduct of others" (Foucault, 2010, p. 4, quoted in Kurik, 2016, p. 54). Technologies of government and technologies of the self form two modes of subjectivation. Selves are able to "differ, transgress, mutate, and resist, though always in the presence of power," (Kurik, 2016, p. 54). Thus different subjectivity can be formed in counter-conduct. Ong (1988)'s

ethnography analyzes spirit possession among factory workers in Malaysia to identify how subjectivation under globalized factories could prompt different forms of resistance.

1.3.1 The transnational

Juris and Khasnabish (2013) conceptualize the transnational as "a space of encounter, action, and imagination, [and] also a space of subjectification," (p. 17). They further define the transnational as

> A scale that transcends, yet also incorporates, other levels of analysis, including local, regional, and national. Transnational thus reflects the multiscalar nature of much contemporary activism. The transnational is lived and imagined; it is a social space made and remade through the activity and conjuring of institutions, collectivities, and individuals beyond the territorial, juridical, economic, political, and sociocultural limits of a single nation-state. (p. 8)

This understanding of the transnational recognizes both concrete and discursive elements of activism and connection across nation-state borders. This is distinct from the way the concept of the "international" is used in social movement scholarship, which tends to focus on state-to-state or formal relationships such as in super-national governing bodies and organizations (Blackwell, 2023).

The transnational and globalization have been closely tied to the analytic of the network. Networks are deployed as an analytic that contrasts with hierarchical and centralized models of organization. Castells (2013) argues that the logic of domination in the information society is mirrored and counteracted by the shape that is taken by tech-forward social movements of the early 2000s. Networked counter-power was conceptualized by Hardt and Negri (2005) through the idea of the multitude, where common action could be taken while differences

were upheld. Harcourt and Escobar (2005) use the concept of meshwork to discuss both vertical and horizontal networking across various divides in their collection of studies of women's political mobilization and globalization. Blackwell (2023) builds on this concept to discuss how Indigenous women activists partake in "interweaving," by reading power differentials and navigating differences across different scales. These concepts that build on the idea of the network generally argue for a view beyond the primacy of national boundaries and nation-states as protagonists in analysis.

Internet technologies have been analyzed as powerful tools through which transnational organizing can spread. New kinds of coordination and connection are possible, as are certain kinds of participation and information circulation (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Juris, 2008). However, scholars have also debated slacktivism and surveillance as important ways that activism has changed with the saturation of internet-enabled technologies (Bajoghli, 2023).

1.4 Methods

George Marcus proposed that ethnography could investigate objects of study "that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation." Multi-sited ethnography "moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space." This allows researchers to "ethnographically construc[t] the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects" as well as "aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites," (Marcus, 1995, p. 96). Such a method which responds to globalization works well with the subject of my research.

Scholars have built on the concept of multi-sited ethnography to propose the concept of

networked ethnography (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013; Juris, 2008). Networked ethnography is "attuned to the complex place-based meanings, flows, and sensibilities that interact within momentary spaces of encounter" (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p. 5). Conducting a transnationally networked ethnography allows the ethnographer to "generate strategic insights related to the tensions, obstacles, and opportunities that emerge within networked paces of transnational encounter" (ibid). Juris and Khasnabish's collection of ethnographies of networked activism takes an approach they define as "insurgent." Despite its masculinist and militaristic connotations, they chose this term to emphasize provocation and destabilization instead of the creation of a singular new order. They seek to unsettle researcher-researched binaries through the lens of encounter, which centers "an ethic of openness and flexibility and a willingness to allow oneself to become personally transformed through the research process," (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p. 9). The researcher's transformation through encounter calls upon them to contribute to social change in their ethnography, beyond archiving, commenting, or dissecting movements that are studied.

Blackwell (2023) also builds on the concept of multi-sited ethnography for studies of globalization, transmigration, and transnational social movements. Her concept of scales of resistance "moves along scales of political organizing to illuminate the complex, cross-border, and transnational dialogues that are reshaping local ideals of justice as well as national and international policies," (p. 27). Her approach draws on activist accompaniment to shift the research agendas, subjects, and approaches from being controlled by researchers and accountable to their careers or funding. Rather, accompaniment "forces the ethnographer to ask how the research is both accountable to those communities and useful to them," (ibid., p. 28). A collaborative approach to networked, multi-sited ethnography "center[s] the activists themselves as the point of connection linking their lives, scales of organizing, and multiple sites of increasingly networked activism," (ibid., p. 27).

Edelman (2001), in reviewing the state of research about social movements, comments:

> The role of ethnography in the study of social movements has been significant but seldom theorized. Ethnographers—like historians who work with documentary or oral sources—may have privileged access to the lived experience of activists and nonactivists, as well as a window into the submerged organizing, informal networks, protest activities, ideological differences, public claims-making, fear and repression, and internal tensions, which are almost everywhere features of social movements. (p. 309-310)

Ethnographic engagement with social movements interrupts overly smooth and deterministic accounts that use social movements to say something that a scholar already knows or wants to say, untouched by the experiences of activists working on making movements. As Casas-Cortés et al. (2008) argue, an ethnographic approach allows for "focus on the meaning-making and cultural practices of collective action. This shifts the focus to the narratives and terms movement activists provide about themselves and their campaigns for justice, rather than answers to predetermined questions the social scientist brings to them," (p. 22). Aspects of social movements such as emotion, affect, and identity are important and should be attended to, rather than being bracketed out for 'rational' and economistic analyses of how social movements work.

For ethnographic methods with activists working on transnational movements, I am inspired by the work of Kim Fortun (2001) and Anna Tsing (2005). Tsing describes her fieldwork as "patchwork":

> I was unwilling to give up the ethnographic method, with its focus on the ethnographer's surprises rather than on a pre-formulated research plan. On the other hand, it is impossible to gain a full ethnographic appreciation of every social group that forms a connection in a global chain. My experiment was to work my way back and forth between the Meratus Mountains—where I had a long-term

> ethnographic background—and the places implicated in the chains I traced. My knowledge is variously ethnographic, journalistic, and archival, and it is formed in discrete patches. I search for odd connections rather than seamless generalizations, inclusive tables, or comparative grids. (p. x - xi)

Her methods allow ethnography designed for small communities to help us learn empirically about global connection. This requires focus on "zones of awkward engagement," "where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak." (Tsing, 2005, p. xi). My work has patched together the ethnographic surprises and the connections that I was able to follow between Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and the US.

One way to write an ethnography of a transnational labor organizing movement ("campaign," as unionists often say) is to present and evaluate strategies and policy instruments that were seen to have been effective in winning rights for workers (McCallum, 2013). This kind of evaluative approach is similar to the academic approach to come up with grand theories or explanatory models for why social movements may happen or have certain results, and to test and tweak others' grand theories. Edelman wryly points out that "some of the issues that continue to engross the grand theorists of contentious politics may appear misplaced or peculiarly devoid of cultural context," as these scholars do not engage directly with actually-occurring social movements, and especially those in the Global South (Edelman, 2001, p. 309). My intention aligns with the insurgent encounter approach to transnational social movements, which "does not search for universal laws or test already formulated theories. Rather it generates new concepts and analyses in the process of ethnographic engagement," (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013, p. 9).

I also follow Fortun's approach of using ethnography to move rather than to settle. Fortun's ethnography of advocacy after a global disaster keeps the multiplicity of meanings of disaster and advocacy open and lively rather than written as evaluative diagnosis.

> I wanted to provide readers a glimpse into the unrepresentatbly complex world system in which we live—pulling the "whole world" into an ethnographic field of vision to mark the limits of all ways of representing "the whole," but also to show how ethical moves in one locale resonate with those in other locales, with intended as well as unintended consequences—which transform the entire system, repositioning everyone within it. (p. 18).

One tactic that Fortun uses in the text is the "folding of methodological accounting into what [she describes],"(Fortun, 2001, p. 21). The author's presence in the text, the affective struggles and uncertainty that is part of the way the ethnography is presented, has been very helpful for me in grappling with how to write ethnography in activist spaces.

1.4.1 Knowledge production

In Said (1978)'s discussion of Orientalism, he notes that knowledge production is inherently a power relation, where the knower produces knowledge "over" the group that is known. Many academic endeavors have been, with varying degrees of intentionality, in service to projects of colonialism, empire, and military expansion. Anthropologists have made efforts toward activist research and cultural critique to address the power relations in their research (Juris and Khasnabish, 2013). Scholars working with social movements recognize that such priorities can be competing, as when simplified and positivist writing can better contribute toward activist goals. On the other hand, positivist writing tends to produce analytic closure and erase the partiality and situatedness of all knowledges in favor of an authoritative tone that can convince people to join a cause (Haraway, 1991, e. g.). Ways of aligning to activist causes and performing partiality and interpretation rather than objective representation in writing have been approaches taken to address the production of knowledge "over" the groups studied. Efforts to "study up" (Nader, 1972) are another path

of addressing power in knowledge production. Such an approach is difficult to achieve because of the power involved in ethnographic access. It is important to produce knowledge about/over venture capitalists who back the platform companies and charitable foundations that sometimes fund efforts to improve working conditions. This is important future work to be done, especially for a researcher who has the relationships and credentials that might allow them to observe and have interviews as a trusted interlocutor.

Casas-Cortés et al. (2008) have argued that social movement research needs to recognize "social movements not simply as objects to be studied and understood, but as subjects or actors who are knowledge-producers in their own right," (p. 20). These activist knowledges and knowledge practices should be documented in their heterogeneity. The authors include "analyses, concepts, theories, imaginaries—including the very categories of collective identification and political analysis according to which they act" as important knowledges ethnographers should attend to (p. 28). They highlight "the generation of subjectivities/identities, discourses, common-sense, and projects of autonomy and livelihood" as practices which may produce such knowledges, in addition to more obvious research tools and methodologies that produce knowledge (ibid.). The categories of emic and etic concepts are disturbed as anthropologists engaging with activists encounter concepts originating in academia circulating among activists and being independently developed and deployed to analyze the conditions of activism (Cunningham, 1999). Recognizing knowledge production among activists leads to a kindred conclusion to Blackwell's about the position of a researcher as working *alongside* rather than *on* a group. Casas-Cortés et al. (2008) advocate not that social scientists erase the boundary between being a social scientist and an activist knowledge producer, but rather that scholars "maintai[n] a specificity of one's activities as a social scientist and mak[e] connections with other knowledge producers," (p. 50).

My engagement with gig worker activists saw the deployment and remixing of concepts and terms from academic analyses of algorithmic control and regulation of digital platforms.

The activists I worked with collaborated with other academics both before and while I was with them, carrying out research activities with different levels of independence and input to the research agenda and tools. They also did their own primary and secondary research. Activists wrote their own books, using knowledge production as a source of funding to help support the other activities of the organization. Knowledge production was recognized as a potential source of resources in an environment where resources were scarce and hustling for individual and organizational survival were necessary. Conflicts over academic extractivism were not only about who had the right to speak for whom, but also about who received research funding, and with what kind of stability they were funded for their knowledge production endeavors.

Beyond recognizing that activists have their own knowledge practices and are knowledge-producers in their own right, Hess (2023) considers situations where activists are themselves experts on the topics discussed, as in the case of migration activists. Holmes and Marcus (2008) argue that epistemic communities produce their own analytically sophisticated accounts of their experiences and "anthropologists are not needed to add 'critique,' moral injunction, or higher meaning to these accounts," (p. 84). In line with this, Hess (2023) argues that anthropologists do not need to "help others find their voice" (p. 211). Rather, anthropologists can contribute through "creating spaces and infrastructures of listening," (ibid.). The anthropologist as curator can support "co-articulating the differently situated knowledges and experiences on offer," (ibid.). By creating spaces of listening where the expertise of activists can be performed, anthropologists do not seek to speak for their interlocutors, but to support different kinds of listening to occur. The co-articulation Hess discusses allows for different knowledges and experiences to be "assembl[ed] under a common frame and problem," which "also creates new modes of comparing and sharing that in turn embrace a deeper understanding" of the issue at hand (p. 224). I am eager to make efforts toward "assemblage work" (Rabinow et al., 2008) in my ongoing work to create infrastructures of listening with the activists I have worked with in this dissertation. I do not anticipate that

this work will easy or comfortable, as there are always conflicts over who can speak for whom and how testimonies are received in relation to one another. Without harmony or a settled ground, there can still be opportunities for "unforeseen solidarities, subjectivities, and new perspectives," (Hess, 2023, p. 224).

1.4.2 Fieldwork

I ended up in Ecuador because I was interested in studying how projects under the banner of tech-for-good might be done in a way that perhaps would not be another reproduction of the same paternalistic approach that anthropologists of development had analyzed (Escobar, 2012; Ferguson, 1994). Some of my prior work had focused on resettled refugees in the US and tech access (Pei and Nardi, 2019; Pei and Crooks, 2020), and the afterlives of tech-for-good projects aimed at helping resettled refugees in Europe (Olgado and Pei, 2022). I wanted to continue my research with displaced people who were supposedly being helped by tech-for-good, and I had been following the developments of the "Venezuela Situation," as it is labeled by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as part of its "ongoing emergencies," UNHCR (2024).

I had learned about apps that members of the Venezuelan diaspora had designed and developed in support of their own compatriots (although they do not form a simple or flat "community"). My proposal had been to study the practice of ethics in tech-for-good done "by-and-for" displaced Venezuelans, as opposed to tech-for-good done by corporations or international development and humanitarian agencies. A professor I had worked with before, Marisol Wong-Villacres, had invited me to collaborate with her on research focused on migration and digital technology in Guayaquil, and so I went to Ecuador from August 2022 to November 2022 after having started zoom interviews in June 2022 and getting IRB approval in March 2022 (Protocol #1082).

Ultimately, the project I had set up did not lend itself to an extended ethnographic engagement. I conducted several interviews with people who had developed or attempted to develop applications that were meant to be in "by-and-for" Venezuelans. In one case, my interviewee explained to me that their own team was made up of people with business and legal training, but not technical training. They had worked out the kinds of contracts they could use to run a more equitable version of a delivery app that focused on Venezuelan businesses. They had raised some money among their acquaintances, and had hired someone to begin development on the app. However, the developer they hired took the money and only put the app design into basic templates, and the app was dysfunctional. While they were attempting to regroup from this setback, the main person behind the project had the opportunity to re-migrate to Miami. I was told that she was still hopeful that they could launch the app in the future, but there were no concrete plans to do so at the time of my interview.

In another case, there was an app that was already available on the Google Play store for use on Android mobile devices (though it was not yet approved for the App store for iPhones) called "*MueveApp*" (see Figure 1.1). The app was named "move" in Spanish, and shared a name with the organization that the creator had started. *Mueve* as a group had begun as a social collective among early members of the Venezuelan diaspora, who had immigrated before what was understood as crisis levels of migration started with the Constitutional Crisis in Venezuela in 2017 and continuation of Maduro's regime in 2018. At first they celebrated holidays and carried on Venezuelan traditions together. As the crisis became apparent in Ecuador, they decided they would form a registered civil society organization to support the people who had newly immigrated under dire conditions. Many members of *Mueve* were professionals, including legal and medical professionals. They began to host free or steeply discounted medical clinic events and legal advice events. At the time I interviewed them, they were hopeful about securing an office space in which they could have a discounted medical clinic with the volunteer support of Venezuelan doctors who were part of their network.



Figure 1.1: This is a screenshot of promotional materials for the *Mueve* app that was posted to Instagram. The post includes a screenshot of the app with a callout of the button with which one registers. The post invites the reader to view new enterprises and businesses in Guayaquil that have been recently registered in the MueveApp. They note they have over 100 businesses. The smaller text reminds the reader that they can request to register their business from any part of Ecuador to have their business appear the app. It is free and for the time that the person registering the business wishes to be featured. The final slogan says "Supporting economic reactivation."

The main leader of *Mueve* was a Venezuelan engineer named Andreu. He was working as a software developer as his day job while running *Mueve* and developing the *Mueve* app. During an interview over fried yuca bread in a mall food court, he told me that one day during the pandemic, he had the idea of an app that functioned like a directory that would allow Venezuelans to support each other's businesses more easily, and he sat down and coded up the app in one weekend. I was attempting to offer ways I could be helpful while studying the app and its use, but my attempts were met with his affirmations that the app was already highly rated in the app store and that people liked it. I also realized as we talked that he and others involved in *Mueve* often worked on the technology and on the coordination of events at home and at night after their day jobs, and generally were not keen on bringing in an ethnographer to their work. He did not really want suggestions of more work to make and maintain a passion project he was doing for free. I also tried to interview users who were members of *Mueve*, but their interest was far more to tell me about the accomplishments of the organization, rather than their actual use or nonuse of the app. Although I was not able to conduct an ethnography centered on the *Mueve* app, I helped to mentor a capstone project in an undergraduate course that Dr. Wong-Villacres was teaching at the time. Andreu had developed a board game called *Migrando* (see Figure 1.2) and was interested in how the game could be integrated with technology and eventually sold as a mobile game, with proceeds going to *Mueve* to support their efforts. The students integrated technology elements to the game as their capstone project.

My interest in the possibility of tech-for-good done otherwise led me to FRENAPP, a union of digital platform workers that self-described as being run through a mobile app. I met Carolina Hevia, a leader of the union and its Secretary of Legal Defense, on Zoom for the first time in August 2022. Carolina is a Venezuelan migrant who had first moved to Colombia and became a delivery worker for the platform company *Rappi*. She began organizing protests and led the formation of a union called UNIDAPP during the COVID-19 pandemic in Colombia. The union was formed with support from the Solidarity Center, which also



Figure 1.2: This is the boardgame that Andreu designed. It is about the Venezuelan migration and follows a monopoly-like style where one rolls dice, and depending on the space where the player lands, something happens. It incorporates trivia about different countries in Latin America, such as how countries have different words to a hangover. One detail that highlights the anti-socialist perspective of many people who left Venezuela: one of the most unfortunate things to happen to a player is 'expropriation,' where the player loses all of their money. This event used to be called 'socialism' but was toned down to 'expropriation' after feedback was received. I went along with the students to test out the game. We played it at a shelter for migrants in Guayaquil.

provided UNIDAPP with a mobile app of the same name through which to run the union. Due to threats and persecution by the company, Carolina re-migrated to Ecuador, where she worked with other (primarily Venezuelan) delivery worker organizers to start a sister union, FRENAPP, with a version of the same union app provided by Solidarity Center. Carolina continues to lead UNIDAPP remotely in her role as general secretary of the union. The story of Carolina, UNIDAPP, and FRENAPP is given in more detail in a subsequent section at the end of the introduction and throughout the dissertation.

I worked with FRENAPP both in-person in Quito and online (while I was in different cities in Ecuador) during this first fieldwork period. During December 2022 and January 2023, I continued fieldwork remotely. I was fortunate to receive a NSF Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant in 2023 to support continued fieldwork. During spring 2023, I went to Colombia for three weeks to meet members of UNIDAPP and their collaborators. I spent March and April 2023 working closely with FRENAPP in Quito, and attended the first International Congress of Gig Workers in Los Angeles in April 2023. After that I continued my ethnographic engagement remotely from April 2023 to August 2024, and then returned to Ecuador for follow up fieldwork in August and September 2024. I also made a brief trip to Peru in May 2024 to connect with the new union of gig workers who had contacted Carolina for support in forming their union while I was working with her. In total I have conducted about 9 months of intensive in-person fieldwork and 8 months of virtual fieldwork of varying levels of intensity. At times during these remote periods, I was daily participating in zoom meetings, WhatsApp conversations, events, interviews, and collaborative writing projects, while at other times, contact and collaboration was much more sparse. See Table 1.1 for a simplified timeline of the fieldwork.

Researchers in different fields have documented the extractive potential of their interactions with interlocutors, a topic which is discussed further in the subsequent section. When I met Carolina, she was very cautious about being taken advantage of by academics, since she had

Month and year	Research activity
March 2022	IRB Approval
June 2022	Preliminary Zoom interviews focused on Venezuelan organizations
August 2022 - November 2022	In-person fieldwork in Ecuador; August 2022 was when I began to work with FRENAPP
December 2022 - January 2023	Remote fieldwork
February 2023	Fieldwork in Colombia
March - April 2023	Fieldwork in Ecuador and briefly in Colombia
April 2023	International Congress of Gig Workers in Los Angeles, USA
May 2023 - April 2024	Remote fieldwork of varying intensities
May 2024	Brief fieldwork in Peru
June - July 2024	Remote fieldwork
August - September 2024	Fieldwork in Ecuador

Table 1.1: Simplified fieldwork timeline

just had a negative experience of finding out that her academic collaborator had been paid a high sum of money for research that Carolina had shared with her. Despite this she was willing to take me in to work with her on her daily union organizing tasks, upon seeing that I was a student and that I was willing to do work that would benefit her cause rather than just asking her for information that I could then publish about for financial gain. Of course, I still benefit from my position as a researcher in ways that my interlocutors cannot because they are not affiliated to a university and have not benefited from the privileges that have made it possible for me to become a PhD student.

During my fieldwork I carried out a variety of tasks that could be bucketed under the concept of being an "activist's assistant." On a typical day, I might start by going to Carolina's home office out of which she conducts daily activities to keep FRENAPP (and UNIDAPP, from a distance) existing (see Figure 1.3). During my first stint of fieldwork, the FRENAPP office was her bedroom, and during my second stint of fieldwork, it was a separate room in her house. On the computer, we worked on things like applying for grants from foundations, creating and responding to social media posts, creating a website for FRENAPP that included



Figure 1.3: This is the home office out of which Carolina worked. I often went there to support computer-based tasks that she was working on.

links to all of the media coverage of their protests, hosting Zoom meetings for workers, attending Zoom meetings hosted by researchers and nonprofits, compiling evidence of slander being posted to hurt the reputation of the union online, searching for evidence online that the platform companies had not properly paid taxes, compiling reports to foundations, and creating flyers to hand out to workers.

Outside of the office, I accompanied Carolina while running various errands. We went to the bank many times to pay for things with great difficulty. We went to the police station quite frequently for tasks such as handing in evidence for Carolina and FRENAPP's ongoing legal cases, asking for protection from people who were sending Carolina death threats (which was denied), and filing complaints on behalf of other delivery workers (see Figure 1.4). We went to public meetings with the Ecuadorian National Assembly about issues of migration and the regulation of platform work. Along with other members of FRENAPP, we handed out flyers to workers who were waiting near malls for delivery orders (see Figure 1.5). We had



Figure 1.4: In this photo, I had gone with Carolina to a local police station to request protection while handing out flyers in an area where Carolina had been receiving threats. No one answered for the longest time but Carolina was very persistent in knocking. Finally, an officer did come to the window. However, he told us that they only provided protection for cases of domestic abuse and they would not be able to accompany us in handing out flyers. We tried to get there before dark to avoid the risk of being out at night, but the thin air and steep hills of Quito foiled our efforts at power walking.



Figure 1.5: We were handing out flyers outside a mall where delivery workers were known to wait for orders.

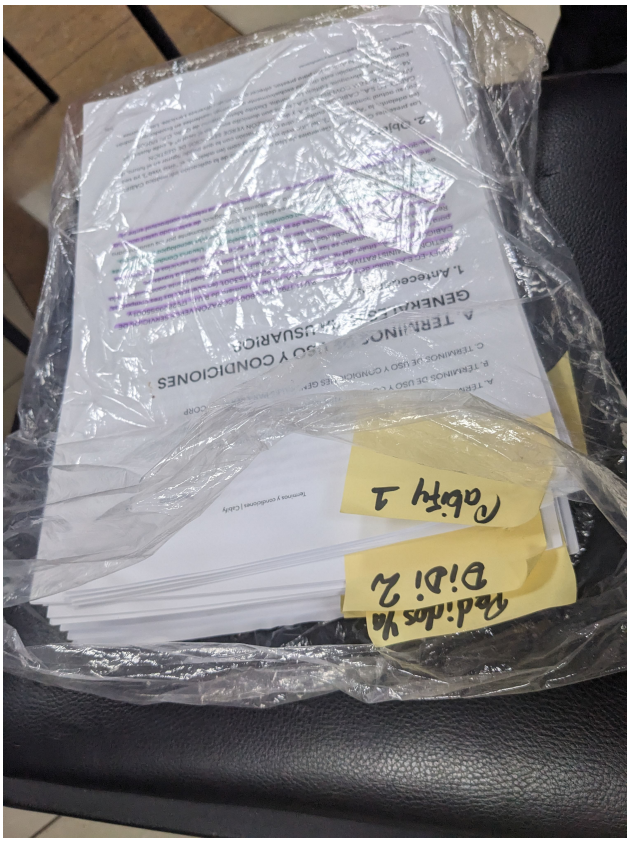


Figure 1.6: Carolina had the terms and conditions of the top gig companies operating in Ecuador printed out and then highlighted the portions that she wanted to bring to the attention of the lawyers at the Ombud's office. We had to put the papers in a plastic bag since it was raining, as it often is, in Quito that day.



Figure 1.7: This is a photo from when we attended a protest at the Constitutional Court to protect the Yasuní rainforest from petroleum extraction.

meetings with academics and lawyers and foundation members and politicians who wanted to collaborate and support the cause (see Figure 1.6). We met with the Ombudsman's office in Ecuador to ask for labor inspections to be conducted of the platform companies which were clearly breaking existing labor laws. I helped FRENAPP run union school events that were sponsored by foundations and other organizations supporting labor rights in the region. We went to protests to support other causes, including the Anheuser-Busch employees who were owed unpaid salaries, and the protests to protect the Yasuní rainforest from petroleum extraction (see Figure 1.7).

Running errands as a method has allowed me to direct ethnographic attention to the unglamorous work of care that keeps a union organization running (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). I have followed along and witnessed and experienced the positive affects that come with care: the gratitude of people whose complaints are finally heard and taken seriously, the relief of someone who has received some good news about their case, the recognition of someone when they see you show up to a protest. There are also many negative affects that have come with the care work of errands (Murphy, 2015): the frustration of being turned down yet again, the exhaustion and boredom of waiting in line for hours at the bank without being allowed to scroll on your phone to pass the time, the anger and rejection of the insults from someone to whom you tried to give a flyer.

Between errands, I spent casual time with Carolina and other members and friends of FRENAPP. We shopped around for a broom to celebrate witches for International Women's day, had barbecues, and analyzed the latest music videos released by Shakira after her breakup. During my final field trip in 2024, I had a few meetings in Quito on behalf of FRENAPP while Carolina was living in Guayaquil and working as a trainer and coordinator at the banana workers' union, ASTAC. While in Guayaquil, I accompanied her to some of her new work events and also worked with her on FRENAPP tasks on her days off and after work.

Both in Quito and while I was remote, I worked on translations of many of the materials that had been created by FRENAPP such as social media posts, presentations, and flyers, from Spanish to English. Another activity that spanned remote and in-person work was the writing of a book about app-based delivery workers and drivers. I supported FRENAPP on this project by interviewing gig worker labor organizing leaders in other countries, and these interviews form part of the basis for the book. These interviews and further conversations also inform part of my dissertation data.

In April 2023, I participated in the first International Gig Workers' Congress in California on behalf of FRENAPP, as no one in the organization could get a visa to go to the US. The four-day congress was mostly hosted at the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) local 721 in Los Angeles and featured representatives from organizations of primarily delivery and rideshare gig workers in 17 countries and four continents. There were a few people who mostly worked on delivery or rideshare and more people who represented national-level unions or local branches of transnational union organizations such as the Solidarity Center. The congress featured panels with members of the represented organizations, and guest appearances from workers representing casualized baristas at big US chains organizing (Starbucks and Peets) and precarious warehouse work at Amazon. On most days of the congress there was also direct action in the form of protests at the Argentine consulate and the Constitutional Court in Los Angeles. The third day of the congress was held in San

Francisco, and featured protests at the airport and protests at Uber's headquarters. The congress ended with a set of resolutions that were voted upon to orient the goals of the congress's ongoing work. I have continued to mediate relations between FRENAPP and the California Gig Workers' Union, which is affiliated with the SEIU local 721. The Congress is discussed in greater detail in the fourth chapter of the dissertation.

This deep involvement in the day-to-day work of organizing allowed me to both contribute usefully to the cause as well as to gain a thorough and embodied understanding of the material and discursive everyday of organizing. I separately interviewed other gig worker organizers, other stakeholders in FRENAPP and UNIDAPP, participated occasionally in gig work organizing in California, and participated in academic events around gig work and labor organizing in Ecuador and the Latin American region. As Marcus (1995) describes, "strategies of quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships are thus at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research," (p 97).

I analyzed the documents produced by FRENAPP, including the ones I translated and the ones I helped write. My WhatsApp history contains many reports, news articles, and memes about platform work that were sent to me or sent to groups by FRENAPP members, and these form part of my data as well. I stayed somewhat up to date with news about gig work regulation in various countries involved in the coalition, and reviewed policy documents and company documents related to digital platform work. Additionally, I kept somewhat up to date about the Venezuelan migration and displacement situation and the UNHCR and government responses to the migration.

1.4.3 The writer and her writing

In my dissertation proposal, I asked, what could I write that might make use of this unique opportunity to write a dissertation? Over the course of being a PhD student I have learned

to write defensively to pass peer review in informatics spaces. I have managed to write convincingly enough to get committees of fellowships and grants to award me research money. But my dissertation doesn't have to jump through any of those hoops in particular. This is a chance to say something I want to say, to be less defensive, to take time to think things through, to not be trying to say what I believe someone holding purse-strings wants to hear. This goal turned out to be quite paralyzing. I have agonized over what kind of worthwhile thing I could say, that might lessen the exploitative relationship of research, that might do justice to the time that activists shared with me, that might feel true, that might move in a direction of liberation for people differently oppressed by the way the world works, that might be helpful, that might not be repetitive, that might be interesting, that might be an original contribution, that might be impressive, that might help me get a job now that I'm graduating and staring into the abyss of unemployment, that might make any kind of difference.

Who am I to be telling a story about gig worker activists in Ecuador? Fortun (2001) writes:

> Reflexivity calls for the ethnographer to position herself. Recursivity positions her within processes she affects without controlling, within competing calls for response. Reflexivity asks what constitutes the ethnographer as a speaking subject. Recursivity asks what interrupts her and demands a reply. (p. 23)

I have positioned myself as a student, and as someone who has learned about gig worker activism by spending time as an activist's assistant, running errands. I was positioned by others by my appearance, language skills, and nationality. My parents immigrated to the US from Taiwan. I was born and raised in suburban New Jersey and became reasonably fluent in Spanish because it was my favorite class in school. People who met me in Ecuador seemed generally unfazed that Carolina or other members of FRENAPP were followed by a quiet, Chinese-looking female taking notes. People asked me if I had family in Ecuador, since there

are many Chinese immigrants in Ecuador. Sometimes people asked me about life in the US after finding out that I was actually a "chinita gringa." Sometimes people reacted with a sort of appreciation that someone from somewhere else was listening to their concerns. I was usually introduced as a researcher and sometimes also as a friend or as an international coordinator for FRENAPP. Sometimes people were surprised that I could speak Spanish fluently. I could understand most of what people said to me, and could express myself clearly. On occasion, something said with an unfamiliar accent of Spanish was repeated to me by Carolina, or regional and slang words were explained to me. Working in Spanish added to the feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm that come with doing fieldwork and with the dispersion of expertise and also the erratic pace of activism.

Who am I to be telling a story about gig worker activists in Ecuador? I am not from Ecuador or Venezuela and I have never worked as a gig worker. I have also not had to experience the kind of financial precarity that my activist interlocutors overwhelmingly experienced. I grew up as a racialized child of immigrants in the US, born with a US passport that has conferred enormous privileges upon me. I have faced the irreconcilable gulf between the position of my activist interlocutors and my own position, and I have, clumsily and at times incorrectly, tried to address this gulf. I have spent time being as useful as possible to them. Nonetheless, I have benefitted from my engagement with activists in ways that reify the gulf between us, allowing me to stay a student and even to graduate into a set of possibilities that are closed off to them. I am not speaking for activists; they have been speaking for themselves. I am trying to write a dissertation. I'm still trying to figure myself out as a speaking subject, trying to make sense of what might compel me to speak, and to what exactly I can respond.

I had an idea of some ways I would try and try not to write. Roderic Crooks has argued that the value of ever more descriptions by academies of abjection and oppression caused by data-driven technologies perhaps accrues not to those being oppressed but to those doing the describing (Crooks, 2022). "We already know who will be harmed by data-intensive

computation incorporated into public service because they have already told us they are being harmed." He echoes Katherine McKittrick's assertion that "description is not liberation," (McKittrick, 2021, p. 44). Indeed, platform workers and activists I engaged with have already eloquently and thoroughly documented the exploitation they face daily. Academic and journalistic writing about the injustice experienced by workers has proliferated in recent years (Guest, 2021; Rosenblat, 2018; Graham et al., 2020, e. g.). Like Tsing, I worried, "activist accounts of corporate rip-offs of indigenous people were becoming so common that perhaps my story would be superfluous—and easy to dismiss," (Tsing, 2005, p. xi).

In line with concerns about repeating stories of people's pain, I have been thinking about what kind of "critique" I might participate in. Responding quite militaristically to the use of social construction concepts from science studies to deny climate change and fuel conspiracy theories, Latour (2004) proposed that rather than "critiquing" or "deconstructing" matters of fact with the trick of revealing a fetish that only the critic can see, matters of fact should be staged as "matters of concern," as entangled gatherings which add instead of subtract reality. Tsing was also disheartened that those trying to make a change in the trajectory of globalizing capitalism and empire were more or less mocked by critical scholars who already knew that only more empire and more discipline could be produced by NGOs, by activists tainted by their privilege. She asks, "Might it be possible to use other scholarly skills, including the ability to tell a story that both acknowledges imperial power and leaves room for possibility?" (Tsing, 2005, p. 267).

Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) takes the opening made by moving from fact to concern and takes a further step, one from concern to care. Using Latour's example of making SUVs into a matter of concern, Puig de la Bellacasa shows that care would not lead a scholar to stage SUVs in a manner to scold breathlessly angry "fundamentalist" environmentalists. Matters of care are like matters of concern in that they are not about being the Zeus alone in the desert who is always right and is never tricked by any fetish. But further than matters

of concern, matters of care require that we stage something like SUVs in a manner that would ask "questions about who will do the work of care, as well as how to do it and for whom," (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 92). Staging SUVs with care would give "attention and worry for those who can be harmed by an assemblage but whose voices are less valued, as are their concerns and need for care," (ibid.). Adding this ethico-political obligation to the way that we stage things when we write is not about good feelings (Murphy, 2015) but is rather about an "ethico-political commitment to neglected things." In this dissertation, I have tried to stage the matter of gig worker activism in a manner that highlights who does the work of care, how, and for whom, without equating care with good feelings.

Importantly, "the commitment to care can be a speculative effort to think how things could be different," (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011, p. 100). This is what I wanted to do, this speculative effort to think how things could be different. Fortun (2012) proposes that ethnography can be experimental, open-ended, with surprises, as opposed to being a test to confirm what we know. She draws on Marcus and Fischer (1986) to propose that "ethnography becomes a means to imagine social alternatives, disrupting conventions that have become naturalized and immune to change," (Fortun, 2001, p. 10). The openness I wanted to put into my writing was described by Harney and Moten (2013) as an openness that means the text isn't to be studied, but is an occasion for study:

> So, we enter into the social world of study, which is one in which you start to lose track of your debts and begin to see that the whole point is to lose track of them and just build them in a way that allows for everyone to feel that she or he can contribute or not contribute to being in a space. (p. 109)

They further elaborate on the point of coming up with and developing concepts. It is not about finding gaps and niches to fill, nor an entrepreneurial prospecting and coining of words and phrases that can rack up citations. It's not about claiming stakes, owning ideas and

what you owe your mother and your mentor.

> The concepts are ways to develop a mode of living together, a mode of being together that cannot be shared as a model but as an instance. So, I feel more like an 'idea thief' around this, as Guittari would say— I am hacking concepts and squatting terms as a way to help us do something. (ibid., p. 105).

This still feels more aspirational to me than something I have reached in my writing and analysis. But the dissertation could be more a beginning than an ending. I will keep trying to learn and think and write in a way that continues to rack up a debt that could never be paid back, that keeps mutuality, and I will keep feeding the relationships in whatever shapes they take.

I am trying to take heart in seeing the dissertation as a beginning. I have found it painful to make the exclusions that would separate signal from noise and would make a comprehensible story out of what I have experienced over the course of the ethnography. Explaining her approach to studying the ongoing disaster after the Bhopal explosion in 1984, Fortun (2001) writes,

> The confidence said to have come with knowing your material well has been forever forestalled. Instead of cohering with time, my expertise has been increasingly dispersed. Working within such dispersion has often been frustrating and has always been overwhelming. But it has been a way to learn about how things come to count as significant or not—through the tactics of participation-observation. In the process, simple critiques based on what dominant interpretations of the Bhopal case exclude have lost their force. The question is not whether interpretations exclude, but how and to what effect. (p. 6)

The exclusions all feel wrong, and the interdisciplinary field has been a challenging experience

of constant unmooredness. I have had to write this without any of the confidence someone with coherent expertise might possess.

Perhaps part of why it has been difficult to write is because I do not want to face my lack of expertise. A little over a year ago, in my proposal, I quoted:

> There's a kind of fear in the university around something like amateurism— immaturity, pre-maturity, not graduating, not being ready somehow— and the student represents that at certain moments. And supposedly our job with the student is to help them overcome this so they can get credits and graduate. Today it's sort of that moment that's more interesting to me, because that's a moment where your pre-maturity, your immaturity, your not-being-ready, is also a kind of openness to being affected by others, dispossessed and possessed by others. But, of course, in the university, what they're trying to do is get rid of that, so you can be a fully self-determined individual ready for work, or as Paolo Virno says, ready to display that you are ready for work. (Harney and Moten, 2013, p. 116).

It is time for me to graduate, time to display, at least to some people, that I am ready to work. But I have not managed to shake that amateurism, immaturity, pre-maturity, and I can only hope this will help me to stay open.

I'm not sure what I hoped would happen. Perhaps I believed that if I thought about it hard enough, some inspirational insight might come to me. There is much that is inspiring, hopeful, and worth celebrating in what I learned from the activists I worked with. The activists worked incredibly hard and persevered against extremely punishing circumstances and believed in the possibility that things could be better and they made things happen. They have already left a mark with the work they've done, from the publicized protests they organized to the moments they spent on the phone with someone after a traffic accident;

from the lawsuits they've filed to the training they gave to twenty people in a hotel room. The story I will tell is one of paying attention to the work activists do, because it matters, and it matters as scale-making projects, and it matters at various scales and to various people. But if I am honest with myself, I also just feel sad. Paying attention after the peak of visible protest also requires the ethnographer's participation in affects around loss: loss of momentum, loss of comrades, loss of a feeling of stronger community, grief for the things that could have been, for the friendships and the alliances that have fallen apart. It requires the ethnographer's grappling with whether her own optimism about academia is cruel, and whether she could or should recognize a relation of cruel optimism in some of the repeated and foiled efforts of her interlocutors (Berlant, 2011).

1.5 Background about FRENAPP

Glovo was one of the first delivery companies to work in Ecuador, in around 2018. Glovo started out having an office that was staffed, where sometimes delivery workers could interact with those who were permanent employees of the company and represented its administration. I was told that in the early days, high-performing delivery workers sometimes went out for drinks and got along with the staff who administered the app. By 2019, conflicts emerged, primarily around workers being blocked by the app and pay rates being lowered. A group of *repartidores* gathered at the Glovo offices to protest but were not met by the staff. These workers decided to form a WhatsApp group called "Glovers Ecuador," where they continued to discuss their working conditions, and found ways to support one another.

This group chat grew in importance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Delivery workers were lauded as heroes of the pandemic while being mistreated and abandoned by the platform companies. Most companies did not provide any personal protective equipment such as face masks, glovers, or hand sanitizer. Workers who fell sick were left without any options. If

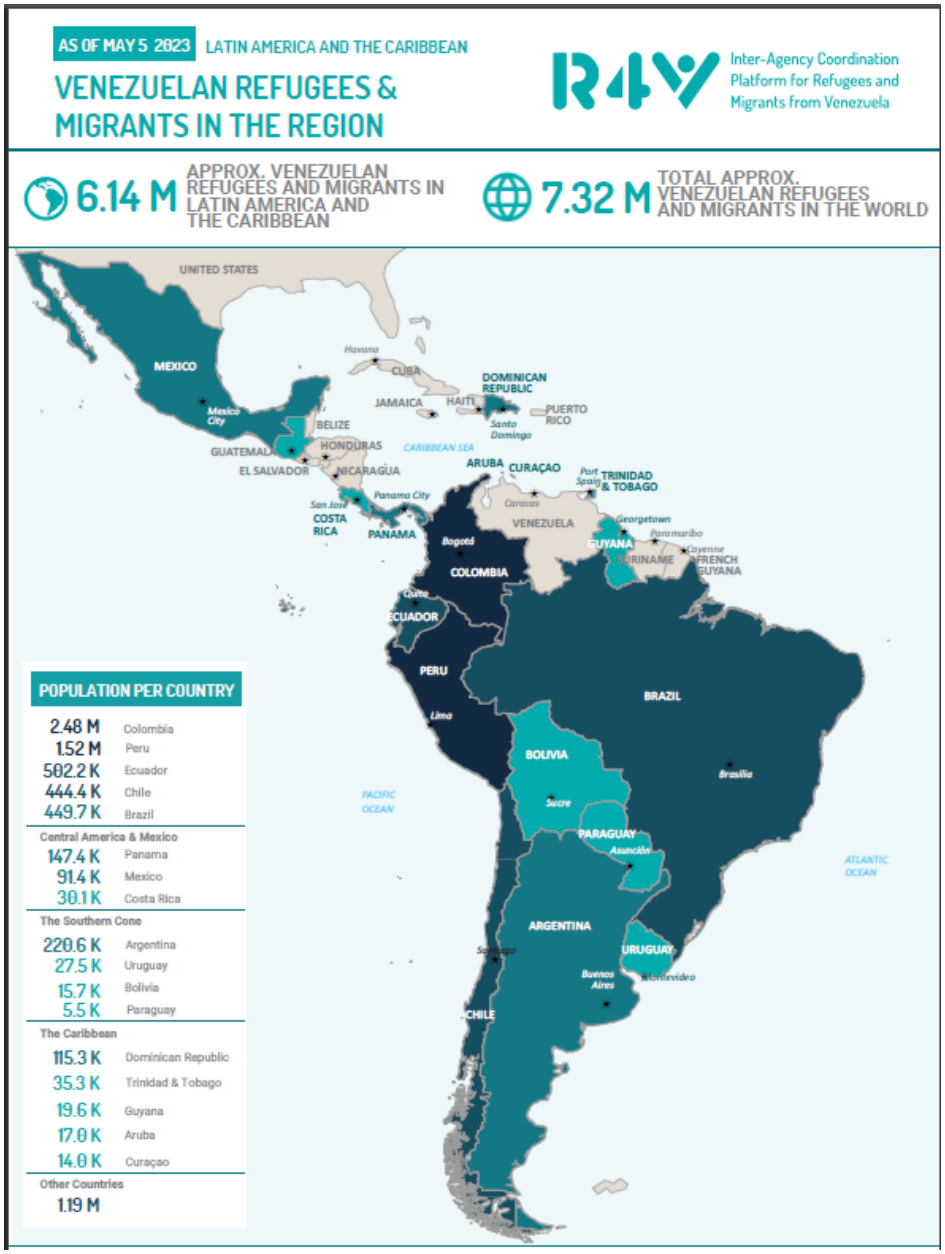


Figure 1.8: This is a screenshot from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations International Organization for Migrations' joint response to Venezuelan migration. It shows the concentration of Venezuelans in destination countries around Latin America.

they could physically work, then they might work while sick, risking further spreading the disease and making themselves sicker. Some people were so sick they could not work or wished not to spread the disease, which meant they had no income whatsoever. Companies also did not do anything to support workers who were robbed as part of general lawlessness increasing during lockdowns. As people deserted the streets, both convenience and fear of crime led those who did drive to disregard traffic laws. Without support from the companies, workers turned to each other. They kept each other updated about happenings and sought support through Glovers Ecuador. During the pandemic, Venezuelan migration was in a state of humanitarian crisis, with people in the streets without food or shelter, compounding with the conditions of the pandemic. While displaced Venezuelans were overwhelmingly concentrated in neighboring Colombia (see Figure 1.8), many migrated on to other countries in the region. Ecuador was a prominent destination due to the dollarized economy of the nation[2].

Members of Glovers Ecuador and their families cooked food and delivered it to those who were on the streets or who had lost their jobs and were without means for survival. Other acts of solidarity included pitching in funding to cover hospital costs for someone who had been in an accident or covering funeral costs of coworkers who died of COVID or traffic accidents. Glovers Ecuador was founded and led by a mix of Venezuelans and Ecuadorians, although as time went on, the proportion of Venezuelan workers grew to dominate in gig work. Yuli Ramierz, a Venezuelan lawyer who had been working full time on Glovo since the early days of their presence in Ecuador, was a prominent leader. She gave many interviews and interfaced with academics and journalists about the initiative, and was the face of Glovers Ecuador's participation in transnational protests.

[2]In addition to the opportunity to earn dollars, Ecuador was a common destination because it is relatively close to Venezuela for people who traveled by a combination of walking, buses, and hitchhiking. Ecuador, Venezuela, and Colombia also have a shared regional history that is symbolized in their similar flags, as they were one country at the time of independence and under the same viceroyalty under the Spanish empire. The extent to which the government and society welcomed Venezuelans varied over the years, but Ecuador was usually not the most hostile in terms of enforcing exclusive border policies.

Similar grassroots organizing was happening during the pandemic in Colombia, where most delivery workers were also Venezuelan migrants. The ease of access of delivery work has made it a major means of income for Venezuelans, both regularized and those without immigration papers. In October 2020, groups of delivery workers who had been staging protests and organizing mutual aid decided to form the Movimiento Nacional de Repartidores de Plataformas Digitales (MNRPD, loosely "National Movement of Delivery Workers of Digital Platforms" in English), in an effort to take a more sustained approach to organizing against dangerous working conditions, unjustified blocking of workers, and low pay. Carolina Hevia was one of the central organizers of MNRPD.

The Solidarity Center is the international nonprofit arm of the AFL-CIO, a US-based union federation. As the pandemic was unfolding, the staff at the Solidarity Center became interested in organizing delivery workers, who were highly visible as essential workers yet were facing obvious exploitation and lack of protection. The staff at the Solidarity Center contacted MNRPD and offered guidance in forming an official union. The union UNIDAPP was formed with the support of the Solidarity Center and affiliated with a Colombian union federation, the *Central Unitaria de Trabajadores* (CUT). The Solidarity Center also worked on providing UNIDAPP with a mobile app of the same name through which to run the union. Staff at the Solidarity Center I interviewed told me that they determined that delivery workers were on-the-go and did not have a common workplace, so they had sat down to brainstorm the functions of a union and figure out how to put them into an app. The development of the UNIDAPP application was done by a Mexican development company that was contracted by the Solidarity Center.

Due to threats and persecution by the company *Rappi*, Carolina re-migrated to Ecuador in 2021. She re-connected with Yuli, who she had met virtually during transnational strikes that were coordinated via social media. By 2021, many of the key organizers of Glovers Ecuador had been blocked from the app. Many were blocked because of their involvement



Figure 1.9: Reusing and remixing media from the days of Glovers Ecuador. The left screenshot is from a YouTube video of the large protest organized by Glovers Ecuador in August 2020, which is on FRENAPP's channel and is shown at events such as union schools. The bottom screenshot is from the digital newsletter that was posted to FRENAPP's website in June 2023. The photo is from a protest held by Glovers Ecuador in April 2020 at the Glovers office. At the time, Glovers had a known physical presence in the country. The right image is from the newsletter booklet that was printed by FRENAPP in 2023. The newsletter was handed out during field organizing efforts and nonprofit and educational events that FRENAPP attended. They also were delivered to the national assembly members during the debate of a law proposed to regulate delivery work.

in protests. The companies would block anyone who they could see was in the location of a protest. Some people were blocked because their ratings were not high enough, or because they canceled or turned down auto-accepted orders that required long distances for very little pay or traveling to dangerous areas. Other people were blocked for what they gathered were arbitrary causes, since they did not have any bad ratings and had taken protective measures during protests. People had to find other ways to make income and while some continued to support the group, the momentum had slowed considerably.

Carolina's move to Ecuador reinvigorated the movement. She connected with Yuli and the other members of Glovers Ecuador and explained the process she had gone through in Colombia with the Solidarity Center to form a union. She knew there was a branch of the Solidarity Center in Ecuador, and connected with them to get their guidance in the unionizing processes. They also provided a version of the union app. Thus FRENAPP was created in October 2021 as an industry-wide union. As an industry-wide union, they sought to create one union that united people regardless of which app they worked for, since industry-wide unions apply to people who have the same work position, rather than having to work for the same company. Most of the members of FRENAPP had also been organizing with Glovers Ecuador, and FRENAPP often reused and remixed media from the days of protests organized by Glovers Ecuador (see Figure 1.9). Some of the activists from Glovers Ecuador who signed on with FRENAPP were still working in delivery. Others signed on while waiting for their accounts to be unblocked, and were working different jobs in the meantime. FRENAPP worked on filing lawsuits to reinstate workers who were unjustly blocked or gain compensation for people who had suffered significant accidents on the job. They also worked with pro bono lawyers to file for compensation owed to families of people who had died on the job, which was a benefit that should be guaranteed by the constitution in Ecuador but was not being honored by the companies. FRENAPP began to stage protests again, sometimes in coordination with other countries. FRENAPP also collaborated with lawyers and lawmakers to support regulation of platforms that would improve working conditions.

Leaders of FRENAPP testified before the National Assembly of Ecuador during the process of debating potential regulation for gig work. Additional activities included carrying out training, field organizing to affiliate more workers, social media campaigns, collaboration with academics, and participation in transnational networks of gig workers.

1.6 Overview of chapters

The second chapter, "Temporariness, migration, and gig work," explores the differential temporalities and differential mobilities of gig worker activists, arguing that temporariness characterizes their experiences. These experiences stray from the notion of universal time-space compression under globalization. This chapter attends to power in how people are held in place, made to move, sped up and slowed down as they navigate gig work and attempt to organize. Border regimes and the design of gig work applications compound to impose temporariness and waiting time upon gig workers. Their own orientations to time and space are also characterized by temporariness. Despite this, gig worker became a strategic essence around which some people sought to mobilize.

The third chapter, "Organizing gig workers with FRENAPP," focuses on the work done by activists to make universal concepts meaningful locally, with friction as the central analytic. Gig worker activists attempted to resuscitate the viability of union organizing, in a context of dueling anti-socialism and anti-(unfettered)-capitalism[3]. Although other scholars have considered structural factors that might facilitate transnational connection among gig workers seeking to improve their working conditions, I argue that the work of activists to resituate words, reframe issues, and contest the moral meanings of practices is what allows a movement to become meaningful. This chapter is loosely based on a manuscript that was submitted to *New Media and Society* in May 2024, which has undergone a major revision

[3]Thanks to Kim Fortun for a version of this formulation at my prospectus defense

(August 2024) and a minor revision (submitted December 2024).

The fourth chapter, "Gig workers of the world," returns to the opening scene at the First International Gig Workers' Congress. This chapter is loosely based on a manuscript that was submitted to the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW) track of the journal *Proceedings of the Association of Computing Machinery on Human-Computer Interaction* (PACMHCI) in October 2024 and received a major revision decision in January 2025. This chapter is centered on understanding how gig worker activists come to understand, manage, and project the global scale of their movement-making efforts. I take the approach of an "ethnography of scale," highlighting the practices and artifacts that make the global scale concrete for activists. The chapter argues that projecting the global scale does not require taking a scalable approach, where scalability is understood as the ability to uniformly and indefinitely expand without changing the nature of the project or constituent parts. Rather, I argue that scale is enacted through mutually transforming engagements, through a process of proliferation.

The conclusion summarizes storylines from across the chapters and highlights contributions to discussions about temporality and mobility, transnational labor organizing, especially for nontraditional workers, and scale, coalition, and globalization. I also offer directions for future work and continued academic encounters with activists.

Chapter 2

Temporariness, migration, and gig work

I went to the FRENAPP office one day in October 2022. At the time it was also the place where many of the union's leaders lived. Carolina was at the police office to file a complaint. In the meantime, her housemate brought me to the circular table in the kitchen. She started making arepas for breakfast. A man was sitting at the table. He was also one of the union's secretaries. He showed me his phone, where he was practicing English on an app. He told me he was considering crossing the Darién[1], but he had heard horror stories about the danger. People got killed. People got robbed. People got injured. People lost limbs. People drowned. It was so much walking. So much trusting of the cartels. An investment. You had to sell everything you had to gather up the money to make the journey. $1,000 USD was the price that was discussed. He was thinking about going to Texas.

[1]The Darién gap is a section of jungle between Colombia and Panama that is not crossable by normal vehicles. Since many Venezuelans do not have passports or visas to be able to fly, traveling by land is a far more feasible way to reach US soil and apply for asylum. At the time the policy of the Biden administration allowed for Venezuelans to turn themselves in on US soil to apply for asylum, and they would not be made to experience the same kinds of illegalization as migrants from other countries. Cartels controlled the passage through this jungle and it was extremely dangerous.

Looking back at his English practice app, he asked me what the difference between "sinking" and "drowning" was in English. He told me that several of the union leaders had left already. The guys who had helped organize the earliest strikes, the guys who had signed with them to start the union in 2021. The guys who had given interviews to the newspapers. He had been texting with them until they reached the Colombian border, and then he hadn't heard from them. They must have reached the US by now. Maybe they had changed numbers and phones. When I went back in spring 2023, they told me he had left. He had sold everything he had here in Ecuador. He had sold his motorcycle that he used to do delivery work. He was going back to Venezuela first, and then planning to cross the Darién while they were still giving asylum to Venezuelans.

2.1 Introduction

The story of the FRENAPP leader who had left across the Darién illustrates the way temporariness overdetermined the lives of migrant gig workers. This chapter is about the structural conditions of border regimes and platform design, as well as the workers' own orientation to the work and the places they lived. These combined to make gig work possible in the way it was carried out by migrant workers in Ecuador. These conditions made gig worker organizing difficult and different from traditional workplace organizing, premised on a more stable relationship to a job and a place. In this chapter, I focus on the experiences of gig work and gig worker organizing through the lenses of temporality and mobility, both of which I argue are characterized by temporariness and impermanence.

Gig workers' lives are saturated with digital technologies which are commonly theorized to have the effect of time-space compression. My analysis of gig workers' experiences of temporality and mobility show that their app-mediated gig work and broader conditions of migration do not reflect time-space compression. As Doreen Massey and Sarah Sharma

argue, space and time have not compressed universally. Rather, experiences of time-space compression are differential and depend on power geometry and power chronography. Power geometry refers to the notion that "different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections" of time-space compression and globalization (Massey, 1994). Further, some people and some groups can initiate and control movement, while others are imprisoned by flows of globalization or "on the receiving end of it," (ibid.) This concept draws our attention to power in relation to mobility. Sharma (2014) builds on this theorization and emphasizes the temporal half of time-space compression, recognizing how power and "discourses about time maintain lines of temporal normalization that elevate certain practices and relationships to time while devaluing others," (p.15). Taken together, power geometry and power chronography guide us to analyze power relations that result in differential experiences of temporality and mobility. Sharma and Massey's analyses show that time-space compression applies only to elite groups like business travelers. This chapter illustrates how migrant gig workers have to calibrate their time and mobility to sustain the temporal and mobility infrastructure that allows for others to be fast and mobile.

I argue that the app's structure and the policies of border regimes have created time and space characterized by temporariness rather than compression. Mazmanian et al. (2015) have theorized the concept of a "temporal logic," or "a particular orientation to time that manifests in time-related social norms, moral judgments, daily practices, and technologies for scheduling and coordination," (p. 1453). They diagnose a dominant temporal logic of "circumscribed time," which is characterized by being "chunkable, single-purpose, linear, and ownable,"(Mazmanian et al., 2015, p. 1453). This temporal logic is part of the rhetoric that underlies advertisements for computing technologies and the design of scheduling tools. On the other hand, they find that US-based knowledge workers and professionals have conflicting lived temporal experiences. This "porous time" is "spectral, mosaic, rhythmic, and obligated," (ibid.). Orientations to time both imposed and elected by gig workers were

characterized by temporariness. Gig workers could not control future blocks of equivalent, swappable time that could be planned on a calendar interface as circumscribed time would have them do. Neither were they able to hold to rhythmic aspects of time like those whose orientation to time could be called porous time. Gig workers' future time was under the control of the apps, which would dictate exactly where and when they should be picking up orders, but would not give workers any advance knowledge about what those times and places would be. Without control of future time, gig workers had to wait well. Waiting well became an orientation to time, making the best of time that was imposed as waiting time. Gig workers could not swap around blocks of calendar time, but in addition to waiting well, they could decide if they should continue to wait or exit from what they were waiting for, whether it was another gig, another job, or another destination in their migration journey.

This chapter begins with a discussion of different kinds of temporariness experienced by gig workers: structural conditions that made migrant gig workers temporary, and workers' own temporary orientation to the place they lived and the job they did. Then I discuss how temporariness plays out in the waiting that migrant gig workers experience. Gig workers are made to wait in manifestations of power over them. Although the experience of being forced to wait is often frustrating and understood as wasted time, waiting also makes time and space for sociality that makes collective action possible. Next I discuss how the temporariness that structured the lives of gig workers relates to theorizations of precarity. This section explores the increasing insecurity in Ecuador that contributed to experiences of regression. The feeling of backward motion instead of progress is both a result and a cause of the temporariness in migrant gig workers' lives. There is a pervading sense that one cannot trust the continuity of mundane life even as one continues to try to survive. This is the backdrop against which gig workers are trying to take collective action.

2.2 Structurally temporary: migration and the multiplication of labor

Steam rose from the soup in front of me. I was seated at a long table at the restaurant of the hotel where FRENAPP was holding a union school event. The gathered gig workers and FRENAPP veterans were reminiscing about the early days of working on the apps. A young woman remembered that her parents had left Venezuela first. It was back when the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) agreements allowed Venezuelans to legally enter Ecuador with just their *cédula*, or national identity card, so they did not have to worry about the difficult process of getting a passport. She recalled that after her parents had worked on the apps for a while, they told their daughters to come and join this at-the-time lucrative work. Her grandma and younger half-uncle also came to pitch in with shifts on the existing delivery account, new accounts and housework that was needed to keep the app work going for as much time as possible. She would ride with her mom and run up to the doors to do the deliveries while her mom kept the engine running. This way they did not have to find proper parking or risk the moto getting stolen, keeping them efficient and on time, thereby keeping their ratings high. At first they were doing well, and were even able to save some money after sending remittances back to other family members still in Venezuela. The good old days ended when her mother's account, the most valuable because it had an almost perfect score and hence received more and better orders, was suddenly blocked. The first time this happened they were able to work it out and get the account back, but then it happened again, and their efforts to get reinstated were left unanswered. For everyone else, the pay rates and the flow of orders had already been declining. Her mom filed a lawsuit about the unfair termination, and in the meantime, used her savings to start a small restaurant. The family switched from helping out, keeping the account active, and also working on their own accounts, to helping out with the restaurant business.

The conversation then turned to the tales of those who were still working day-to-day on the apps. One man sighed and told us that all his buddies who he'd delivered alongside back in those days of Glovo were gone. They'd found new jobs or moved to different countries—back to Venezuela to try again, to the US, to Spain, to Chile. Ecuadorians he knew were also immigrating away in increasing numbers. He said that newcomers didn't know how things once were and did not want to fight. Especially when he talked to guys who had just come from Venezuela, he could hardly get them to complain much, let alone join the union. These guys who had arrived in 2022 had to cross by *trochas*, or illegal crossing points, now that the agreements that had allowed Venezuelans to come to Ecuador easily were defunct and getting a passport in order to even apply for a visa was a years-long ordeal that might never see a result. The recent arrivals were happy just to be paid in dollars, no matter how long they had to work before they made any positive money after paying back fees for rented accounts and rented motos.

The conversation at the lunch table demonstrates the way that migration regimes have created differently vulnerable workers willing to accept worsening exploitative conditions on the gig work apps. Recent works have highlighted the prevalence of migrant workers in the gig economy, especially the location-based gig economy (Altenried, 2024; Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024; Van Doorn and Vijay, 2024; Van Doorn et al., 2023). Altenried (2024) describes different 'generations' of workers who come in to take the job as conditions worsen over time after a platform company enters a new location. In Berlin, the 'first generation' of app-based delivery workers consisted of citizens who already did delivery work, as well as students who wished to earn supplemental income. These people, who had more options for different work opportunities, dominated initial participation in the more lucrative conditions of delivery work, when rates were subsidized by venture capital to attempt to achieve scale or even monopoly status in a new place. Then, conditions would worsen as such subsidizing is not sustainable and is only a short-term tactic for these kinds of companies. The 'second generation' of delivery workers would often be migrant workers, but those who had some

kind of status that allowed them to be more or less legally permitted to be doing this and a few other kinds of work. They complemented and eventually substituted the first generation. Conditions and income tended to further worsen, and then a 'third generation' of mostly undocumented migrants became the majority of workers, as migrants who had status would leave for comparatively better opportunities (Altenried, 2024). Although my data is not systematic, conversations with workers and activists aligned with this generational analysis of gig workers, as exemplified in the conversation at lunch.

Worsening conditions are met with people still willing to do the job because of the differential integration that is produced by border regimes (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Mezzadra and Neilson argue that although much attention is paid to the "division" of labor, border regimes create a "multiplication" of labor by making sure there are always people who are a little more desperate and willing to work for somewhat worse pay and under somewhat worse conditions. Workers are stratified through the states' provision of many different temporary and partial visa schemes. These are more pronounced in the Global North but South-South migration and internal migration lead to the same patterns of generational workers in Global South contexts I observed. Getting a gig job, especially the location-based gig jobs, becomes part of the "migration infrastructures." Migrants tell their family and acquaintances, who make the same journey and take up the same work in their destinations, as seen in the lunchtime conversation. These jobs integrate with regimes of border control, especially those seeking asylum, who spend long waits in ambiguous positions that allow some rights but not others. People's experiences of direct racism from a human boss and of doing jobs that earn less and have just as miserable working conditions are very fresh, making the worsened conditions of gig work still preferable.

Algorithmic control and app design allow for the extremely high turnover and the transitions between generations to happen: there is almost no training; there's language accessibility on the apps; the GPS is supposed to guide workers regardless of their familiarity with getting

around in the city; it's user-friendly (Altenried, 2024, e.g.). Semi-automated management allows for the company to accept almost everyone who tries to make an account.

The temporariness of gig work is evident in the popularization of the name "gig economy" or "gig work" to describe this kind of work, over other possible and still-used names like "digital platform work," "platform economy," "sharing economy," "on-demand economy,"digital piecework," "crowdwork," and "collaborative economy." Different names emphasize different features, with terms like "sharing economy" and "collaborative economy" putting a positive spin and "digital piecework" far less so (Stewart and Stanford, 2017). The term "gig" emphasizes the temporary nature of the job one does, with little knowledge of what will come next after the immediate task one is assigned. Abraham et al. (2021) trace the origin of the term "gig" to the music industry, noting that musicians who play a gig usually do not know where they will play next or with whom. Scholars have debated the emphasis on the novelty of temporary and informal aspects of gig work, since such conditions have been the norm in the Global South and only appeared as a newly threatening issue to people in the Global North after the 2008 financial crisis (Myhill et al., 2021). Temporary staffing also increased in the US far before the 2008 crash, and Van Doorn (2017) considers the 1979 US interest rate hike to be the more pivotal year. Novel or not, the kind of work categorized as gig work is temporary by definition and employers have designed the work to be able to be carried out by workers who do not have advance knowledge of if they'll have more work and when their next work will be after their immediate task. In addition to denying an employment relationship and not paying for any more than a single task at a time, companies frequently blocked workers unilaterally. Alongside this and poor and declining pay and conditions, companies demonstrated that they considered their workers to be temporary and easily replaceable. Platform companies base their viability not only on algorithmic control and attempts to manipulate legal codes, but also through constructing the workers as superfluous and fungible (Van Doorn, 2017).

2.3 Temporary orientations: a job in the meantime

In moments of frustration when recounting a particularly bad delivery, sometimes gig workers would say, it's only until I can get my certification transferred from Venezuela that I'm doing delivery; or it's only until I collect the $1000 to cross the Darién; or it's only until my passport gets issued so I can fly to Spain to seek asylum there; or it's only until the situation improves in Venezuela and we can go back to the life we had before. Sometimes people fantasized about getting a different, better job, and sometimes they really did find another way to make a living.

Research has consistently found that from the perspective of workers themselves, gig work is almost always understood as supplementary or temporary (Ravenelle, 2019). Those who do gig work full-time typically narrate the work as "something in the meantime." Myhill et al. (2021) conducted a study to evaluate whether gig work is a 'good' job. They found that gig work was considered temporary and not the basis of a career: "It is great for the meantime but I'm really looking for something permanent that I can build on," (p. 412). Newlands (2024) also finds that none of her interlocutors had a perception of their employment in gig work as something long-term. Rather, she argues that "workers' predominantly short-term temporal orientations" to the job helps them to cope with the demands of gig work, including physical, emotional, and identity considerations (p. 1264). Duus et al. (2023) similarly encounter the perception of gig work as temporary among the workers. Her research, which was mostly with students in the early days of app-based delivery work in Brussels, showed that these workers chose gig work in order to have flexibility and "avoid any commitment to a longer employment horizon resulting in the need to prioritize loyalty to an employer over other aspects of their lives," (p. 203). In one example, a worker did not wish to lie about his intention to quit after two months, which would have been necessary to get any other kind of job (Duus et al., 2023).

However, sometimes what is narrated and intended as temporary becomes protracted, long term, and seemingly permanent. While turnover is often high (Duus et al., 2023, e.g.), some people I met in Latin America had been doing gig work for five to seven years. The number was often even higher among rideshare drivers in the US, where apps like Uber and Lyft pioneered this form of work. Newlands (2024) finds among migrant gig workers in Sweden and Norway that "a lack of alternative options, increasing frustration with discriminatory local job markets and the generally unstable economic climate operate as gravitational forces binding migrant workers into gig work long-term," since many remain gig workers longer than they expected upon migration (p. 1274). Sharma (2014)'s research with taxi drivers also illustrates this temporary orientation to the work that they found themselves doing for longer than intended: "I always think it is temporary—I think all of us think it is temporary—but people end up doing this for thirty years," (p 59). The other drivers she interviewed also still hoped the job was temporary despite doing it for dozens of years. One in particular managed his time and location of driving to pick up business people, hoping to find a connection that might help him return to his original career in engineering. Gig workers I met who had been on the apps for five or more years did not come to see this as a permanent position either. Some people I met, like the taxi driver Sharma interviewed, believed they would return to a previous, more prestigious career. Many more had a goal of savings or immigration status that they believed would mark the end of their time as a gig worker.

One day in October 2022, a woman recounted to me her experience with gig work during the pandemic as we sat in the kitchen of the house she shared. She was a lawyer in Venezuela before she left around 2017 for Ecuador. At that time she was working 12 or 14 hours a day on the apps, and was obsessed with her perfect rating that allowed her to make many times more than the minimum wage in Ecuador and far more than she could have earned in Venezuela. One day at the end of a long day of deliveries, she saw herself in the wall-sized mirror in the lobby of an apartment building. She recalled bursting into tears, because she used to be so fashionably dressed in blazers and matching suits and heels as a lawyer, and

now she was wearing a shapeless yellow plastic poncho as her uniform and had helmet hair. She said that to pull herself together, she tried extra hard to nurture the imagination that the uniform she was wearing was a hero's costume, the ugly poncho a hero's cape. She said she kept telling herself she had to be strong to keep helping people who were too vulnerable to go out and get food for themselves.

This woman's story shows both disidentification with the job, especially compared to her lawyer career, and effort to reframe her current situation and embrace the job, at least during the crisis of the pandemic. Workers and scholars have pointed out that the narrative of delivery and other essential workers as heroes of the pandemic has served as a means for corporations and politicians "to launder their responsibility and to rationalize the coercive social order that compelled underpaid workers to surrender their bodies and health for corporate profits," (Vazquez, 2021). Rather than recognizing the role of financial coercion and institutional abandonment in uneven harms from COVID-19, death by COVID for an essential worker was reframed as a heroic death, a selfless sacrifice for society as "laborers whose work was deemed essential but whose lives were not," (Zárate, 2023). The narrative of essential workers and heroes is harmful and excuses responsible parties for their continued exploitation of workers. However, it also provided some comfort and identification when workers who had no other options took this position to heart and reframed their own situation. The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for people to claim more of an identity as a gig worker, as was speculated by Newlands (2024) when delivery was rebranded as "essential" work.

The pandemic helped some people embrace more of a *repartidor/a* identity, at least as an important and essential job in the meantime. While many of the people I met aligned with the literature's accounts of gig workers' temporary orientation and lack of identification with the role, there were also people who did identify with their *repartidor/a* job, even when they stopped doing delivery day-to-day. For some of these people, no longer being a *repartidor/a*

was not by their choice. Since the apps frequently unilaterally blocked workers and often did not give a specific reason, people didn't have a chance for the temporary job to become protracted. Some people who were blocked simply moved on. Others continued to identify as a *repartidor/a*, and sought to be reinstated. For example, Freddi, a union leader who had been organizing with FRENAPP since the COVID-19 pandemic, had been working as a security guard for the whole two and a half years I knew him during my fieldwork. He had been blocked for protesting and had filed a case of unjustified dismissal with support from lawyers who were doing pro-bono work to help gig workers through FRENAPP and through Glovers Ecuador in 2021. He still came to in-person events with his Pedidos Ya poncho. He continued to introduce himself as a *repartidor* and always mentioned the ongoing wait to hear the outcome of his case.

Gender played a role in the way people identified with the role of a *repartidor/a*. Freddi was not the only person I met who continued to identify as a *repartidor* after no longer working the job. Especially for people who were blocked and did not choose to leave the job, the *repartidor* job, read as masculine, was valued over other jobs they had recently held such as kitchen worker and janitor that were lower on their job status hierarchy and were considered more feminized work. The relationships built in organizing also kept some people identified with delivery work, even after they moved on to doing other temporary, non-career jobs like working as a security guard or cleaner or (low-level) office worker. Among a string of temporary, low-status jobs, the *repartidor/a* could be the most appealing identity. Some people who had moved to other jobs missed the camaraderie and 'flexible time' they had, though not enough to rent an account to keep working in that way.

For other people who had a more enduring identification with being a *repartidor/a*, leaving gig work as a day-to-day job was by their own choice. After the waning of the pandemic, some had found a more stable income in a regular job but continued to support union events when they could. For those who led unions, many times they could have possibly earned

more money overall by working long shifts in delivery, but they now needed to use the time to do organizing activities and found that an office job, even if leading to less money overall, left enough time and had the regularity to allow them to continue union activities. The temporary orientation to gig work did not always prevent workers from identifying with it and continuing to support labor organizing there. For some, being a *repartidor/a* was temporary as a source of income but longer lasting as an identity around which sociality and moral commitment to solidarity and justice were enacted concretely in the form of participating in the union.

Identifying or not as a gig worker and engaging in organizing and solidarity under that identity can be understood through the concept of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1993). Beginning with essentialism, it is helpful to think about naming and categorization. There is a separation (and recombination, and centering and marginalizing) goes into words, signs, and categories that are not proper names. Even proper names have to separate figure from ground, but category names allow for abstract meaning and meaning at a distance. To have language that can let one talk about a category of things rather than just the proper names of every particular thing around is perhaps to imply there could be an essence of the whole category one names. Spivak insists on an agnostic stance to essences in her interview with Ellen Rooney (Spivak, 1993). In her example, it could be a strategic move to draw on the idea that there is an essence, something irreducible, in the category of woman. It is often helpful to use this category to try to have political agency, to make statements in language that can be received and read and understood by other people. For Spivak, it is not so interesting or helpful to focus on proving that the essence of woman does or does not exist or what it is. And there is always risk in becoming too faithful to a category or naming or synecdoche that brings together some things and some people and some features and must exclude the rest. To be unfaithful to essences does not mean to be allergic to empiricism, Spivak reminds us. Carefully formed research objects to be studied empirically are not to be rejected on the grounds of essentialism. “The strategic use of an essence as a

mobilizing slogan or masterword like woman or worker or the name of a nation is, ideally, self-conscious for all mobilized. It is the impossible risk of a lasting strategy. Can there be such a thing?" (Spivak, 1993, p. 3). A lasting strategy for a lasting essence is risky business. With gig worker organizing, we see "gig (i.e. temporary) worker" or "migrant" strategically used as a mobilizing slogan. Certainly it is self-conscious when someone who is in fact no longer working as a gig worker continues to mobilize and continues their effort to organize other people doing gig work with the category of gig worker. Whether or not there is a true gig worker essence, there is an effort to make statements that other people can understand via this category. The essence of a category might or might not exist, and it might not be worth it to try to police its boundaries or verify its qualities. A category by which people organize or try to speak also does not have to be the position of the perfect oppressed subject. Haraway (1991) argues that attempts to claim the innocence of a category that is morally superior is not the project that will help us concentrate on the kinds of relating that let us live together better. She points to affinities and coalition instead of identity, to make connections that could approach a collective experience. Chapter four further discusses the ways that gig worker categories operate more as affinities that allow for coalitions that are inclusive of internal diversity.

2.4 A temporary stop on the migration journey

In addition to being made temporary by border regimes, many Venezuelans and Ecuadorians I met had plans to migrate or re-migrate to another place they considered more stable. Many of the Venezuelan gig workers I encountered considered their stay in Ecuador to be temporary. They also hoped to either return to (a recovered) Venezuela or migrate to countries in the Global North. For Venezuelans, the availability of the Darién gap path to the US was a constantly tempting possibility, making the emergency feeling of their stay in Ecuador feel

like it was possibly just a stage in a longer migration journey to a place with perceived higher earning power and less crime.

The dangers and possibility of crossing the Darién was different for differently embodied people. Women faced greater risks of sexual violence. People who were not able to walk long distances would be unlikely to make the journey. For many people, the aspiration and hope to go to the US as a place imagined as safe with high earning power (and the opposite of Maduro's socialist branding of the regime in Venezuela) could appear in other forms of hope and risk taking and management, like borrowing money at high interest rates to apply for visas with a high chance of rejection, or going sneaking back to Venezuela in a perhaps futile attempt to get a current passport.

Nonetheless, the idea of going was always on everyone's minds. People half-joked about it at any opportunity. One day in October 2022 I was helping out at a union school event at a hotel in downtown Quito. The start time printed on the invitation had come and gone, and the few who were already gathered began to chat and speculate about where the rest of the attendees were. "The rain always slows down the traffic in Quito," said one of our new arrivals. "Maybe they took a detour," offered another. Someone else chimed in: "Maybe they took a detour through the Darién." That drew some chuckles while we waited for the rest to arrive. While no one had skipped the union school because they had left through the Darién on that occasion, there were many people who would have come to previous iterations of a union school event who had taken the journey.

I met one of these people before he left, as described in the vignette that opened this chapter. As mentioned in the description of the generations of workers, some people who left Venezuela for Ecuador did so with access to legal entry and normal modes of transportation like buses and planes. Some had made plans to leave Venezuela while they still had things to sell for money, and were able to start with some kind of funds. Other people left Venezuela later or had less means to begin with. Savings had all evaporated with the hyperinflation of the

currency. Some people left by foot when borders were supposed to be closed or if they could not afford a bus. People risked extortion, sexual assault, robberies, and death whenever they took risky routes of migration by foot. They risked never seeing their loved ones again. These same risks were taken again when leaving for other destinations after people decided that they no longer wanted to stay in Ecuador. These decisions were difficult to take, but many had already made a harder decision to leave their homeland before, and so if they saw an opportunity to live with less danger or earn more, they were often willing to go. Whenever activists left, it became harder to sustain organizing activities. Although asking comrades to stay might help to strengthen the union or keep it alive, such a request would come at the cost of the comrade's own life project to move somewhere they believe to be stable and secure, somewhere with a future that can be worked toward. Such a request was always too much to ask: activists always supported one anothers' projects to migrate over any goals of the union. For gig worker organizations to continue their activities, the temporary orientation to the country compounded the challenges of the temporary orientation to the job.

The concept of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) has helped me think about living in extended crisis. It is a compelling analytic because it does not assume that people are duped or are evil. Yet, it is also a difficult concept to work with, because I also do not wish to accuse people of being attached to a bad life or to presume I know what is best for them.

> A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially. (p. 1)

A fantasy of the good life, of upward mobility to a stable, middle-class life, is the object of desire that thwarts flourishing in many of Berlant's literary and film examples. Another is the fantasy of normative intimacy, an approximation of reciprocity, a "mirage of solidity and stability," a desire to feel comfort. Working underpaid and unprotected on gig platforms might be a kind of bad life that people are tied to because it supports their attachment to a fantasy of the good life. Repeated migrations in the hope of upward mobility or a Global North life might also be attachments that thwart flourishing. Whether the optimism of migration is cruel depends on if the migration ends up thwarting the life project of the people who migrate. Those who end up deeply traumatized or who do not make it through the Darién or other migration route alive may find that their optimism was indeed cruel. Those who spent all of their savings on a failed visa application and now must pay off steep debt may also have found their optimism to be cruel. For others who reported back that their journey did indeed lead to more safety and more earning power, despite other ongoing challenges of migration, the optimism that lead them to migrate was helpful for their life project.

2.5 Being made to wait

One day I went to keep Carolina company while she waited for a couple of hours in line at a migration office of the Ministry of the Interior. She was going to try to extend her temporary visa. As we stood in line, she showed me photos of family members scattered around the world and told me stories about the last times they'd been together. When she finally got called up, she was told she could get a one-month extension, and then she'd have to come back to apply for a renewal again.

Much of the time I spent accompanying activists was taken up with waiting, both waiting that occupied us physically standing in queues and waiting that occupied us mentally with

uncertainty and stress. This section is focused on theories about waiting and the experiences of migrant workers being made to wait. Power over migrants is exercised through making them wait. Katharyne Mitchell observed a temporal 're-turn' in migration research, noting that "much of this work manifests the power of the state to manage and control the temporalities of migration, whether through border control, detainment, or 'softer' forms of coercion and consent." (Mitchell, 2023, p. 179). Many studies demonstrate the ways that state policies control migrants' mobility by manipulating their time, holding people not only spatially in detainment but also temporally in a state of limbo and waiting (Hyndman and Giles, 2011; Jacobsen et al., 2021, e.g.). Khosravi (2018) theorizes the activities of the state in waiting, delaying, and circulating as forms of "time stealing." These practices extract the time of migrants and racialize them as less worthy.

Jacobsen et al. (2021) turn analytic attention to irregular migration, and the ways that legal temporalities produce experiences of waiting for caught up in processes of illegalization and irregularization, including those seeking asylum. They argue that waiting is "itself productive, and contributes to the production of migrant 'illegality' or 'irregularity,'"(p 2). Being made to wait and having one's mobility made illegitimate is part of how the multiplication of labor through border regimes plays out. Being made illegitimate means that rights that other people enjoy may not be applied to those who are migrants. Waiting in temporary status or waiting without status pairs with accepting work arrangements that one would not be willing to endure long-term but might be worth it in the meantime while waiting for the promise of a more stable status and life.

Value is also drawn from detaining and delegitimizing migrants (Tadiar, 2012). Hyndman and Giles (2011) argue that states in the Global North try to exonerate themselves from responsibility to asylum seekers and distance themselves from conditions of war and poverty that are the other side of their "high standard of living" with policies and rhetoric that keep asylum seekers in the Global South. They legitimize the feminized, "passive" waiting

in camps in neighboring Global South as "real" refugees who might actually deserve a legal path to life in the Global North if they continue to wait. On the other hand, they delegitimize asylum seekers who agentially seek to enter the spatial borders of the Global North as masculinized threats, deserving of detainment and deportation. The protracted and indefinite wait in refugee camps becomes an indirect detainment for those who stay in camps. These direct and indirect conditions of forced waiting are a way that the Global North seeks to externalize and defer responsibility, comparable to carbon credits that provide some moral cover for continued unjust uses of resources (Hyndman and Giles, 2011).

Beyond migration, waiting is often theorized as a way of asserting power over others. Janeja and Bandak (2018) emphasize the importance of the "politics of waiting", where scholars can engage with the "structural and institutional conditions that compel people to wait. Waiting has been, and is increasingly used as, an instrument to elicit particular forms of subjectivities, or as a weapon to make existence intolerable for certain groups," (p. 3). Being a gig worker, only "employed" for minutes at a time in extremely temporary jobs, meant that the time between gigs was filled with waiting. Platforms both tap into the waiting of border regimes and further control the time of gig workers, making them wait for work. Gig workers I encountered had to cope with harsh weather, boredom, and low income while waiting for another order to come in on the app. Usually they were not paid for the time they spent waiting, though payment schemes have changed frequently over time and have varied by location, as previous studies have captured (Altenried, 2024; Chen and Sun, 2020; Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024; Duus et al., 2023). They also experienced having their time wasted when restaurants were not ready with the food at the point they reported to the apps, and when the apps micromanaged their spatial and temporal presence in ways that maximized profit and did not match the actual spatial and temporal conditions of the city in real life[2].

[2] Duus et al. (2023) theorize this as a misalignment between the "data double" of workers and virtual management "in real time" versus the actual space and and time of the city.

While delivery workers were forced to wait, customers were inculcated with the belief that they should expect instantaneous service. They were enticed away from platforms' competitors with promises of less and less waiting. Deliverers had to rush, facing dangerous traffic conditions on threat of bad ratings that would leave them with less orders, fines, or even blocked. Chen and Sun (2020) refer to this stratified value of time of customers compared to deliverers as the labor politics of time. Customers' experience of minimized waiting and instantaneous service represent the dominant temporal order for which the apps are designed. On the other hand, delivery workers' time is fragmented, caught between waiting and rushing. The temporality of fragmented waiting for migrant workers is a compounded experience, combined with waiting long-term for legal status: "These long delivery waits are further shaped by the very border regime which is embodied by couriers. Their assigned migrants status also extracts time and value from their waiting," (Diz and Casas-Cortés, 2024, p. 7). Platforms exercise power over gig workers by controlling their time and making them wait and rush, even if workers often do not have specific shifts or need to ask managers for permission for time off.

Time and value was also extracted when the state and platforms made activists wait. FRENAPP's attempt to register as a union in 2021 was rejected by the Ministry of Labor. The government has made FRENAPP wait on appeals and the time of the delay has added further challenges for FRENAPP's organizing. Many gig workers who had originally signed had moved on to different kinds of work or left the country. This made it even harder to register, as now trustworthy union leaders (who might stay for a while) had to be found, relationships built, and knowledge transferred before the next attempt.

FRENAPP contested their rejected registration through the Constitutional Court of Ecuador. The wait for constitutional court cases was long. They had witnessed the successful contestation of ASTAC (*Asociación Sindical de Trabajadores Agrícolas y Campesinos*) as a *sindicato por rama* or industry-wide union, meaning that workers of different "companies" (haciendas,

farms, companies, brands, etc.) could form one union on the basis of doing the same kind of work. This kind of unionization is a response after companies subcontracted and divided their plantations so that each unit only had less than 30 people, the minimum number of people required by Ecuadorian law to register a union. ASTAC first tried to register in 2007 and it was not until 2021 that the favorable sentence was announced (noa, 2021). The government continued to delay subsequent steps such as recognizing the leaders of ASTAC, thereby slowing and preventing some of the actions they should be able to take as a recognized union. A similar story of delay and waiting was often shared through the network of gig worker organizations of which FRENAPP was a part. The Argentine union SiTraRepA had been trying to register for four years. The Ministry would delay in responding, then reject the registration over a minor detail. They would then delay again to respond to the new, corrected registration, and then find something else to correct. Individual lawsuits to get reinstated after unjustified blocking or to claim workers comp after injury or death were also subjected to long waiting periods.

The activists' and union's involvement with legislation processes involved waiting and adapting to the time of others. Participation in the debates about legislation required dropping whatever else was in one's schedule, since they were announced short notice and those who might participate had no say in when they would be scheduled. I changed my flight several times to try to be able to accompany FRENAPP in attending the National Assembly hearings about the proposed legislation to regulate delivery work and informal street selling. However the meeting was repeatedly delayed with minimal notice, and finally I was unable to further delay my return to the US.

Activists also had to adjust themselves to fit into the temporalities of funders, experiencing long periods of waiting and stressful periods of rushing. Activists had to wait for grant application cycles to open and had to patiently develop relationships with funders who did not have open calls for proposals. This waiting was interspersed with frantic productivity to

keep up with schedules set by the funders. In some cases, the timeline was accelerated by the activists themselves so that they could receive desperately needed funding in return for submitting deliverables and reports of their work. Those foundatians allied with activists still had control over their time, exerting power over them even as their funding made some of the work possible.

2.6 Possibilities in waiting

Although waiting has been shown to steal time, produce submissive subjectivities (Auyero, 2012), and otherwise assert power over people, there can also be positive political projects in waiting. One pair of Venezuelan activists who had worked together in Colombia before one of them moved to Ecuador reminisced about their days laying under trees in a park in a rich neighborhood in Bogotá, waiting for orders. They recalled how fit they were when they worked by bicycle on Bogotá's steep hills at 2,600 meters elevation, racing to make their deliveries on time. They remembered these days fondly and called out the names of people who had moved on to different countries, gone back to Venezuela, or that they'd otherwise lost touch with. Back then the pay on Rappi was totally decent compared to the jobs they had before, and the feeling of safety in Bogota was also good, especially compared to Caracas. (One of them remembered she turned to gig work after being fired from a horrible micro sweatshop sewing lingerie where they were paid extremely badly and then all of the Venezuelan workers were fired after a conflict between a Venezuelan and a Colombian coworker.) These public spaces of waiting became places for building solidarity and sociality, as others have observed (Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020, e.g.).

Janeja and Bandak (2018) refer to the poetics of waiting to talk about "possible existential openings which might be able to emerge from temporal relations of uncertain outcome," (p. 16). Jeffrey (2008) describes a similar scholarly orientation to waiting:

> Waiting must be understood not as the capacity to ride out the passage of time or as the absence of action, but rather as an active, conscious, materialized practice in which people forge new political strategies, in which time and space often become the objects of reflection, and in which historical inequalities manifest themselves in new ways. (p. 957)

In his work, the waiting of unemployed young men in India was not empty time but rather time where people gathered and began to overtly protest their conditions. Mitchell (2023) argues that people are able to "disrupt the normative temporal frameworks of modern state systems" and demonstrates temporalities of resistance in church sanctuary practices (p.180). Migrants and their allies also do this through activism to protest detainment and contest judgements about their cases.

Diz and Casas-Cortés (2024) argue that "delivery waiting does not imply inactivity, but assembles interdependent im/mobilities" (p. 5). Duus et al. (2023) document various tactics they saw for getting around "unwanted time," or excessive waiting that happened because of disconnects between the app's management of their data double and the worker's embodied experience: hacking the scheduling shift system, hacking the lack of information by being at a food hall and saying one received the food to see how far the destination would be, declining restaurants that have made one wait before, taking vacations when one knows business is bad, traveling in zones with high restaurant density instead of waiting where the app says, befriending restaurant staff, and working for a competitor at the same time. Both in the literature and among gig workers I met, flexibility that delivery workers experienced came through their own practices despite the app, rather than the app providing flexibility as was the marketing message (Duus et al., 2023).

In addition to minimizing waiting time and finding ways to reclaim value in those times for themselves, gig workers developed spatial knowledge about how to best wait. Diz and Casas-

Cortés (2024) claim that delivery workers' knowledge about where to take a break without signing out of the app by finding a zone without cell signal, where to wait for the most orders, or where to find shortcuts in the city are "geo-situated knowledges," "partial yet accurate knowledge coming out of lived experiences, [adapted] to the conditions of satellite-based algorithmic calculus of time-space metrics for delivery," (p. 16). Activists I met had similar knowledge about where *what kinds* of gig workers were waiting. This formed part of a mental map that might make field organizing more or less effective. Some groups typically waiting in certain places were known to be counter-organizing against the union. Some were known to be friendly with someone who used to organize with the union: they might be friends of someone who had already left or who no longer worked in gig work or who had no time to do union activities anymore, but would be more likely to sign something or accept a flyer or show up when invited to an event. Some were known to be freshly arrived from Venezuela, believed to be less likely to want to organize since they had just gotten there and they didn't know how "good" it used to be and they had no options, and their comparison point was Venezuela. Some were rumored to be connected to narco gangs, and were suspected to be hanging out waiting 'disguised' as deliveries to do crimes in certain neighborhoods. Knowledge of this map allowed for better chances when approaching waiting gig workers to try to talk to or recruit them. The sociality that came from waiting in common spaces built the trust that made collective action and mutual aid possible. Being made temporary and forced to wait was a means of extracting value from gig workers but also made room for resistance.

Waiting is often experienced as unwanted time, but waiting can also be time and space experienced in a meaningful way. Some activists who were considering leaving the country decided to stay longer or continue to wait until they had tied up some ends here, or seen through a legal process, or found someone to whom they could hand off their activist responsibilities. Those who stay are investing in a shared future and taking actions to create value toward it while in the midst of waiting for (re) migration to happen or not and negotiating

staying or leaving with their social/activist connections (Kwon, 2015; Gray, 2011). While being made to wait was a means of exerting power over gig workers and gig worker activists, they found ways to make wasted time meaningful and valuable. Gig workers hacked the apps' management processes to reclaim time for resting and earning more flexibly. The sociality from waiting became a basis for collective action. Relationships also made longer-term waiting more meaningful, as activists sought to complete or properly hand off responsibilities before undertaking their next migration journey.

Procupez (2015) describes 'endurance' as the temporal structure one experiences when something meant to be temporary becomes permanent. In her words, this is understood as "the temporal conundrum in which something posited as 'temporary' or finite actually becomes endless—or at least lasts so long that its transitory character becomes blurred," (p. 59). In her ethnography of people receiving housing assistance in Argentina, the fragmented housing assistance policies meant that people living in temporary subsidized housing did so for many years without any prospects to change their housing status. This parallels with people I met who wait endlessly for stable migration status or to find a stable job. The endless 'endurance' of Procupez's interlocutors' condition was changed when families mobilized to secure a promise of permanent housing from the city government. Although they continued to live in dire conditions in the same subsidized temporary housing, they now inhabited a different temporal structure, "one that conceives of a present situation in relation to a future one, where patience as a disposition might emerge," (p. 61). For the author, the new temporal structure transforms endurance into patience, a kind of waiting that is a collective undertaking, one that is an "affirmative engagement of working with others toward an envisioned objective," (p. 62). For some gig workers who chose to mobilize, their projects of collective action also turned time that felt like wasted time into something more meaningful.

2.7 Precarity, temp culture, regression, and insecurity

Waiting describes an experience of time that is out of the ordinary. Drawing on Bourdieu, Jeffrey (2008) describes the negative experience of waiting:

> Bourdieu argues that everyday life and work offers people the reassuring sense of being oriented towards an immediate set of forthcomings. But when people are catapulted out of their everyday lives, or when quotidian life radically alters for the worse, the sense of being caught up in a predictable and engaging set of activities that produce known forth-comings can break down and the present can come to weigh on the minds of the individual subject as a type of 'curse' or 'burden.' (p. 955)

Quotidian life was radically altered for the worse for Venezuelan migrants who had once experienced relative stability and safety and a sense of continuity and moving forward in their lives. Predictable, reassuring forthcomings are not a part of migrant gig workers' lives because of border regimes' uneven control of time. The unpredictability of gig work itself added to the way the present weighed on people's minds. Gig workers have taken up the rhetoric of precarity and precarization in their demands, identifying that temporariness in gig work takes away a form of predictable forthcoming that more stable employment might promise.

Precarity is a notion which began to circulate widely in the 1980s to refer to the reduction of welfare state provisions and introduction of flexible labor regimes through practices such as temporary contracts, outsourcing, free trade zones, and other changes from the traditions of relatively stable, full-time Fordist assembly line work (Han, 2018). These changes are highly linked to globalization and massive uptake of information and communication technologies. There has been debate about whether the notion of precarity is indexing a loss of middle-

class upward mobility that only existed in the Global North for some raced and gendered groups, and whether such a definition would be reproducing geographical hierarchies. Han (2018) argues that in the US and Europe, certain groups have long lived without access to stable factory jobs or welfare benefits. Rather than a geographical divide, Han draws on the definition and distinction made by Judith Butler in her development of the notion of the "ungrievable":

> Precariousness (as the vulnerability of embodied existence) and precarity (as social and political arrangements that differentially distribute precariousness) as a moral and political problem for those whose lives come to be seen as "ungrievable" or who inhabit those conditions of "unlivability..." (p. 338)

Berlant (2011) further describes this as a "temp culture":

> During the last twenty years of state shrinkage and temp culture both at work and in the institutions of intimacy, the work of (re)production has been shaped by the increasing demand for flexibility and the increasing expectation that in love as at work, one might well be only a temporary employee, without affective or material benefits reliably in the present or the future. (p. 185)

The condition of living without any notion of a secure future, of living at the end of the distribution of precariousness that subjects one to constant vulnerability, is not unique or new with gig work. Nonetheless, gig work has been emblematic of precarity in academic theorizations, and the language of precarity is also used directly in gig worker activists' advocacy. This section discusses how precarity is experienced as a feeling of going downhill or backwards at different scales. Scholars have pointed out that time (and an abstract notion of progress or improvement) do not just flow forward: "Temporalities of breakdown, maintenance, and repair upend linear and teleological histories of large technology platforms

by reminding us that time flows at many different paces and in many different directions at once, not all of them fast or— as conventionally understood—forward," (Jackson, 2016, p. 173). Jackson encourages us to attend to care and to properly value the maintenance and repair that addresses breakdown. In a different perspective that also goes against the grain of forward time and progress, Tsing (2015) reminds us to look for unscalable, undervalued moments of survival and life-making in landscapes of ruin.

These scholars importantly remind us that we do not have to only value a forward, progress-oriented, teleological kind of temporality[3]. However, the feeling among gig worker organizers was undeniably bleak toward these feelings of backsliding and regression on a path to winning better working conditions or strengthening the union or stability or security or a good life (Berlant, 2011). As discussed earlier, in gig work generally, the working conditions and wages tend to start off fairly lucrative and then worsen over time (Altenried, 2024). This strategy of worsening pay and conditions over time was part of how platform corporations attempted to gain scale, dominance, or near-monopoly status in a new place. Increasing insecurity in Ecuador combined with platforms' designs to give a feeling of backward motion. For Venezuelans who left around the 2017 Constitutional Crisis and the 2018 re-election of Maduro, Ecuador was in a much better place when they first arrived. They started earning dollars and there weren't high levels of spectacular violence and crime in the news in Ecuador. Many narrated a sense of progress in the early days: going from having nothing to being able to rent a sparse accommodation, going from selling fruit on the side of the road and delivering by bicycle to buying a motorcycle and being able to send some money to people back in Venezuela. People were able to benefit from the immigration amnesty program that was rolled out in 2022 and 2023. However, by 2024, there were a series of English-language

[3]Ungprateeb Flynn (2021) shows how members of an institutionalized leftist movement in Brazil seek to exit from the "subjunctive grammar of transformation," and linear, teleological time, that was prescribed by the organization. Continuity of the movement was valued above all else, and the forward progress of time was seen as inevitably leading to a utopian future if the movement was kept alive. Ungprateeb Flynn argues that despite this emphasis on continuity and teleological time, the unexpected and unforeseen can still arise, and newer members try to assert the importance of the means and not only the ends of their movement, thus bringing a different temporal orientation to life.

news articles released analyzing how Ecuador had gone from an "island of peace" in Latin America to one of its most violent countries (Gonzalez, 2024; Roura et al., 2024, e.g.). Any sense of progress felt lost and many Venezuelans felt that they were witnessing a repeat of the beginning of the collapse they had experienced once already.

The emotional toll of feeling like one is going backwards in their anticipated life trajectories experienced by my interlocutors has also been documented in literature about migration. Annavarapu (2022) documents the devastation of rural migrant rideshare drivers in India who had to go back to their hometowns without achieving their aspirations. People had used up their savings during the lockdowns and could no longer achieve many things for which they had sacrificed and struggled. Kwon (2015)'s study of migrants in the "Korean Wind" illustrates the heartbreak of having risked and sacrificed so much of one's life to try to survive and keep up in liberalizing China. These people were left in despair after their migrating spouse betrayed the promise to continue sending remittances toward a shared future in China. At the scale of migration and a life project seeking stability, many people I encountered felt they were regressing and losing any progress they had made.

At the scale of activism, the sense of regression and of things worsening was also prevalent by the end of my fieldwork. Especially around the pandemic, foundations were funding projects to help organize gig workers. The foundations of German political parties on the left were especially prominent in Ecuador in the gig work space. By my last trip to the field, I was hearing from many different sources that as right-wing parties won in German elections, the foundations no longer had funding to support projects of gig workers. Grants of different sizes from the foundations once funded the space and food of union schools, transportation for field organizing, and one-off projects like the book and website which included compensation for activists' time. Alongside the departure of union leaders and old comrades and the frustration of waiting indefinitely on various legal and legislative cases, the feeling of backward motion was another difficult affective aspect for activists to overcome as

they continued to organize.

Although declining conditions on the apps and the loss of funding contributed to the feeling of backward motion, the increasnig insecurity most heavily overshadowed gig workers and organizers in Ecuador. Insecurity (*inseguridad*) was the word people most used to talk about the general sense of crime, danger, spectacular violence and narco-terrorism, and fear that pervaded in the background of whatever else people were doing. The increasing insecurity of Ecuador was acutely felt by everyone I spoke to. As I began my first trip to Ecuador in summer of 2022, I was already warned by the professor who hosted me that 'insecurity' was increasing. This referred to mostly concerns about robberies at the time, although murder rates had increased and prison massacres and riots were already happening. Things escalated. I recall in November 2022, after news broke that public places in Guayaquil were bombed and that in Esmeraldas decapitated people were hung in public, I decided not to take my scheduled flight back to Guayaquil. I went to the Chinese restaurant in Quito where I was at the time and the shop owner told me I should stay safe in Quito and eat her cooking, and that it was too dangerous to go to Guayaquil anymore, because Guayaquil was controlled by narcos. My academic colleagues told me they were shocked, that this was unprecedented. They said they weren't numb to this like people in Colombia and Mexico might be.

Spectacular moments of violence continued to happen. A presidential candidate was assassinated in broad daylight in summer 2023. We watched headlines coming out. More bombs, more mutilated bodies, more prison riots, assassination of prosecutors. We watched news anchors taken hostage on live TV. We read announcements of curfews and states of emergency from the government and open letters shared on WhatsApp groups that announced counter-curfews to be enforced by the well-known cartels. We watched the country pass parts of a referendum that gave the government more militarization and criminalization in

an attempt to assert "*la mano dura*[4]." We saw Duran, the city across the *aerovia* cable cars from Guayaquil, become the city with the highest murder rate in the world in 2023, a statistic that made it into the pages of the Economist (noa, 2024). We saw the list of cities with the highest murder rates in the world fill up with Ecuadorian coastal cities, with Manta, Guayaquil, Machala, and Portoviejo making it into the top ten according to statistics compiled by Brazilian nonprofit Igarapé (Lima, 2024).

Daily news of murders and assassinations were compounded by the country's energy crisis in creating a sense of regression. In 2024 rolling blackouts began under Noboa's administration. Droughts and mismanagement had led to erratic, frequent, long-lasting blackouts. I was crossing the street to come back from the same Chinese restaurant in Quito when the power went out unexpectedly, taking the traffic lights with it. Cars started honking to indicate they were going through the intersection and it quickly became fairly gridlocked. I was not very well prepared but I decided not to change my flights. People understandably had more things to worry about than trying to meet with me for an interview. Sometimes the blackouts took cell service and the internet out with them. People who had money were buying generators. I often camped out at a coffee shop with a generator and bought a coffee or snack every hour or so. I was told by my Venezuelan interlocutors that frequent blackouts were normal and were part of why they had left. But you can only get so far with a generator. And generators are expensive to buy, noisy and smelly to run. One Venezuelan who was not a gig worker but was chatting with us announced that he was going back to Venezuela that weekend after the first blackout of the season. He was earning below minimum wage at a restaurant, working over 10 hours a day. And now the power was going out, so he may as well go back to his stuff and the family home in Venezuela if it was more or less going to be

[4]This is the name ("iron fist") of the militarization policy in El Salvador that saw mass arrests, human rights violations, but also some decrease in crime and homicide rates. It does have a fair amount of popular support in the region, although obviously many also oppose it for ignoring human rights and failing to address root issues of poverty and government complicity. The Economist article also argues that this method will not work in Ecuador, where the violence is caused by transnational organized crime with huge amounts of resources, political connections, and experience in ensuring their businesses run.

unsafe, hard to earn reasonable money, and full of blackouts.

During my last week of fieldwork in Quito in fall 2024, arsons that were explained to me as part of narco public terrorism led to large fires in parks very close to the populated areas of the city. I had gone to interview someone at a coffee shop in a neighborhood less than a mile from one of the fires and was doing some work organizing field notes and transcribing afterwards. At one point the sun turned red and ash rained from the sky. People stood in their doorways and balconies to take photos of the scene. The blackouts were canceled that day. We felt the sky was expressing the general sense of despair and dread (Goldberg, 2021) at the moment. This was becoming ever more prominently a space and time of gore capitalism, or what Valencia (2018) defines as "relationships between legal and illegal economies and the rampant use of violence as a mode of capitalist necroempowerment and wealth accumulation," (p. 16). The ash rained on all of us there, but some people suffered far more than others.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the many ways temporariness shapes the everyday lives of gig workers and gig worker activists. The concepts of power geometry and power chronography invite us to attend to power relations that hold some people in place or force them to move while others experience desired mobility, and that make some wait and rush while others get to experience convenient speediness. Gig workers, without citizenship and without other options for dignified, safe, decently-paying employment, experience differential temporality and mobility that separates their experience from that of consumers of app convenience. The power geometry and chronography that produces convenience for consumers and profit for companies also produces exploitation, harm, and premature death for workers. The structure of apps requires dangerous rushing and income-sapping waiting, and the timing of work

during pandemic conditions. Border regimes make workers vulnerable and take away other options for work, while broader geopolitical conditions ensure a constant stream of workers willing to accept worsened conditions. Gig companies are built upon an temporary and replaceable workforce, and one way they demonstrate this is through the frequent, unilateral blocking of workers. These differential temporalities and mobilites make it difficult to sustain a union or any kind of resistive advocacy among gig workers, but some people continue to put their efforts toward improving this kind of work despite the challenges.

Workers' own temporary orientation to gig work and companies' temporary orientation to their (unrecognized) employees both contributed to the phenomenon of many gig worker activists being former gig workers by the time I met them. Workers have to give over so much of their time to waiting and working on the app for unsteady income. Those gig workers who were dedicated to organizing often decided to take a desk job or more stable job to be able to continue their activism. Many activists are blocked from various apps that operate in their areas. For many of the activists I met, their desire to see some kind of justice for their former selves and their comrades has led the role of gig worker activist to remain even as they no longer work day to day on platform apps.

This chapter makes space for grieving the violence that has taken hold in Ecuador while I was there. For my Venezuelan interlocutors, the feeling of regression is also a feeling of déjà vu after they watched violence and economic collapse overtake the possibility of leading any version of a normal life they could conceive of. As in any situation of upheaval that leads to mass displacement, people have different abilities and desires to flee or stay. For those who migrated, their mobility was not easy or guaranteed. The project of migration requires extreme risk, sacrifice, and skill. The need for survival via remittance money and hope for stability made migration the aspiration and chosen project, and gig work was a part of migration infrastructures that drew on the waiting time of displaced people. For many migrant gig workers I met in Ecuador, re-migration was their hope, a project which

would require collecting resources again, newly unfamiliar places, and fighting or accepting different standards in working and living. Getting out of Ecuador and figuring out a new place made for competing priorities among gig worker activism and general survival. Chapter four further discusses how mobility can be a means of making new alliances and renewing activist efforts, even as organizations are weakened by the departure of leaders. Even as temp culture increases demands for flexibility and shrinks expectations for reciprocity, migrant gig workers formed relationships and identities that outlasted the transactional and minimal gig time imposed on them and made efforts to organize and to unionize.

Chapter 3

Organizing gig workers with FRENAPP

Three red Rappi delivery backpacks sat stacked on top of each other near a patch of trees in the middle of a McDonald's parking lot. One man lounged in the fork of a tree trunk, and another was using his backpack as a pillow on which to rest his head. Several others sat and leaned on boulders in the shade, looking at their phones and waiting for orders.

Carolina, two other members of FRENAPP, and I got out of Iván's car. Iván had recently retired from working at the ILO and had been introduced to FRENAPP through a mutual acquaintance. He had started to help out at FRENAPP's events, and on this occasion, he had offered to drive around the suburb of Quito where he lived to hand out newsletters. We approached the waiting gig workers, with Carolina in the lead. As we handed out the newsletters, Carolina introduced us as members of FRENAPP. "We are a union of gig workers. Why do we need a union of gig workers? Because we need to fight for better conditions on the apps; because the apps are exploiting us and denying us our basic labor protections—"

One man sat up from where he was reclined and cut Carolina off mid-sentence. He declared that he was very happy working on the apps and made $32 working four hours in a day[1]. Carolina tried to continue her explanation of why a gig worker union was needed and what labor protections workers should be guaranteed, but the man continued to interrupt her. He demanded to know why he had not been invited to join the union. While Carolina tried to explain the process that went into forming the union several years ago, he interjected again: "Well, it's not like in your country here... we don't want to end up like Venezuela and scare away all the companies." Their already raised voices escalated a bit more as Carolina asked sharply, "What does my country have to do with anything? What are you accusing me of? We are an apolitical union..."

As we walked away, Carolina pursed her lips and told us, "The one who was yelling at me definitely rents delivery accounts to the other guys. You could see that the other guys wanted to listen to what I was saying. They must be the ones who actually work. They must be the irregular ones who are not able to get their own accounts, so they work for that asshole. He's taking advantage of these guys."

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is about organizing gig workers and the everyday of FRENAPP's existence as a union: how activists carried on in the face of crisis, insecurity, and loss of faith in the state, and their strategies for advocacy, recruitment, and holding the union together. With scenes from the everyday activities of FRENAPP, I show how global ideas were made meaningful locally through the work of localization that Anna Tsing has theorized as friction (Tsing, 2005). My analysis of FRENAPP's strategies contributes to discussions of the role of the

[1]If his claim is true, this was an indication that the "dynamic" pay on the apps was extremely dynamic, since this was many times higher than the abysmal rates in the screenshots that were shared on FRENAPP's WhatsApp groups.

state in labor organizing for non-standard work arrangements, showing the pragmatic and agnostic perspective of activists who make the best of available options in conditions of irregular immigration status and low trust in the state, while maintaining some attachment to practices of advocacy that adheres to the standard operations of international civil society.

Scholars have debated the role of the state in labor organizing (McCallum, 2013; Seidman, 2007; Keck and Sikkink, 1999). I found that FRENAPP's activists took an agnostic stance on the role of the state in labor organizing, and their everyday organizing activities included both mutual aid and state-oriented strategies of advocacy. Mutual aid included helping each other with daily issues, sharing ad hoc legal advice, pooling money for hospital expenses and funerals, recovering stolen items together, protecting each other from theft, and sharing advice on how to game the apps. These mutual aid activities were an important part of what the union did and gave the union legitimacy, especially among those who had seen or benefited from them. However, such mutual aid activities were not exclusive to FRENAPP. Many groups of gig workers who were not interested or actively hostile to union organizing and state regulation of gig work were also carrying out mutual aid on behalf of one another.

For their own part, FRENAPP's activists did not trust or expect the state to work, but they still participated in transnational networks that were focused on getting unions recognized by the state, getting ILO conventions respected, and passing laws to recognize the employment relationship between gig companies and workers. Participation in this type of advocacy opened access to financial, legal, and social resources. Activists also chose this kind of advocacy because they felt that this was how advocacy ought to happen, with an adversarial stance to companies, and with moral standing derived from supranational and humanitarian organizations like those of the United Nations. They did not necessarily believe that such a kind of advocacy was always going to be more effective than bargaining with companies to raise rates while giving in to doing other things the companies' way, especially in the short term. However, they tended to view themselves not only as people trying to get better pay

rates, but as defenders of human rights and part of an international community of people with a longer view for what was the morally right thing to do about gig work.

Their participation in transnational networks that were focused on the union model meant that activists worked hard to rehabilitate the idea of a union against a backdrop of strong anti-socialist sentiment after the collapsing of Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro and the polarizing administration of Rafael Correa in Ecuador. Showing the concept of friction in action, I demonstrate how the idea of a union could not easily gain traction without the deliberate work of activists to make the idea travel into the context of organizing diverse migrant gig workers. The diversity of gig workers meant that many were motivated to counter-organize against FRENAPP, sometimes with the help of companies who recognized FRENAPP as a threat. Resources from international union and labor organizations could become available to those who organized with a union model, but counter-organizations had financial support from companies that wanted to establish yellow unions that were amenable to the company's agenda. Companies also wanted to demonstrate worker opposition to regulation from the state.

The opening vignette shows some of the dynamics that underlie FRENAPP's efforts to organize gig workers under the model of a union. This chapter proceeds with a focus on various strategies that formed a part of FRENAPP's daily organizing activities, showing friction in action in the case of gig worker organizing. First, I discuss the work that went into rehabilitating the term sindicato (labor union) from its negative connotations. I elaborate on how activists dynamically reframed the cause of gig workers to take advantage of attention to various other global causes, thereby giving attention to the plight of gig workers and also giving those global causes traction locally. Next, I discuss how activists diagnosed and condemned the practice of subletting accounts. This practice was interpreted by activists as a problem that needed solving through regulation-oriented advocacy. Activists gave a name and problematized account subletting wherever they saw it, including in other countries.

This served to call out a new way that regulation would be responding to conditions on the ground, not only locally but also for gig workers everywhere in the same position. The next focus of the chapter is on how activists navigated the changing context of their organizing. First I discuss hostility and counter-organizing activists faced from those who were against unions, and the toll this took on the activists. Next I turn to discuss how activists navigated changing political opportunity structures, maintaining unionization as their primary model for organizing but making plans and taking smaller actions toward other approaches to organizing. This chapter concludes with more reflection on unionization as a model for collective action among gig workers.

3.2 Resituating the *sindicato*

FRENAPP's activists made a conscious decision to follow a strategy of organizing under the concept of unionization. While the term *sindicato* exists across Latin America, regional history has given the term different connotations. Members of the Venezuelan diaspora held particularly negative connotations of the term. For gig worker organizing to proceed under the concept of unionization, activists had to undertake significant work to make the concept 'stick' in this context.

On a rainy day in October 2022, I looked around at the u-shaped arrangement of white-tableclothed folding tables and counted eleven empty chairs. I had started to offer to go look in the hotel lobby to see if anyone was just looking for the room of the *escuela sindical* (union school) when the revving engine of a motorbike cut me off. Two figures, thinly protected from the downpour outside by their matching red-orange branded raincoats from the delivery company *PedidosYa*, got off the moto and made their way in. When enough people trickled into the room to start, Carolina turned on the projector and began talking over some slides to introduce FRENAPP and their various sponsors and allies. She flipped to a slide (see

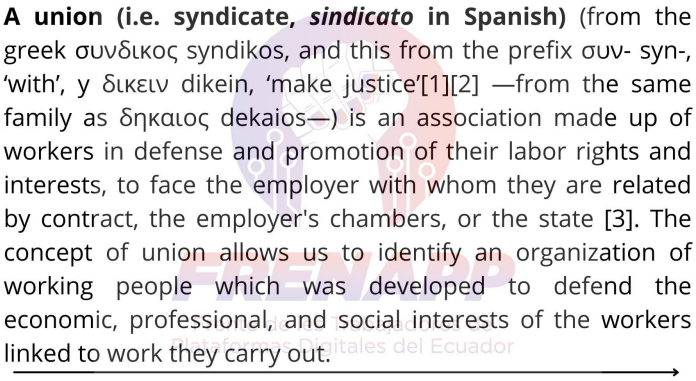


Figure 3.1: This is a translated version of a slide from a slide deck that FRENAPP often used at different meetings and union schools. The slide defines "sindicato" and includes detailed etymology from Greek and Greek characters are displayed as well as romanization of the root words.

figure 3.1) that detailed the Greek etymology of the term *sindicato*, even displaying the Greek letters. The etymology declares that the term comes "from the Greek syndikos, and this from the prefix syn-, 'with', and dikein, 'make justice." When she presented the slide, Carolina read off the etymology and definition, and then underlined the relationship between *sindicato* and justice.

The gathered gig workers had a variety of responses to the slide. One attendee was an Ecuadorian sociologist working full time as a rideshare driver. He was enthusiastic about the term and suggested that the group study strategies from anarcho-syndicalism. One of the people who had arrived in the *Pedidos Ya* raincoat raised his hand to say that unions were the best way to act collectively. He talked about the ongoing court case he had against his unfair dismissal by the delivery company whose jacket he still wore. He stated his gratitude to the leaders of FRENAPP who had supported him in the legal process and reiterated that he believed union organizing could lead to justice for his case and for others like him. Next, a rideshare driver who was not already affiliated to FRENAPP asked about union fees. He told us that he'd heard that unions easily became scams for union leaders to enrich themselves from the already miserable wages of the platform workers. Carolina replied that FRENAPP

was not currently collecting union dues, specifically to avoid this reputation. She explained the reasons that unions generally collect dues and indicated that it was a possibility for the future of the union if the members all agreed that the benefits were worthwhile. A longtime member of FRENAPP then recounted that whenever he talked to other delivery workers, using the word *sindicato* often meant that the person stopped listening and became defensive. He lamented that almost no one responded well to the term, even when they were fed up with the abuses of the platform company.

The slides detailing the Greek etymology of *sindicato* were shown repeatedly at other FRENAPP events and training sessions. A few months later, I joined an online meeting held by FRENAPP to publicize their stance about the ongoing efforts to legislate regulation for platform companies in Ecuador. The participant list included a few familiar names and several that I had not seen before. Carolina was presenting the usual slide deck for introducing FRENAPP, and the slide defining the term *sindicato* was shared again. This time the response was different from what I saw at the *escuela sindical*. When Carolina began to read off the definition of *sindicato*, a man unmuted and began to speak with some hostility in his voice. He stated that Venezuelan gig workers like himself had left Venezuela to leave behind *sindicatos* and socialism, and accused the Venezuelan hosts of the meeting of being *Chavistas*, or supporters of the regime of Hugo Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro[2] in Venezuela. Another man chimed in and said that starting *sindicatos* would scare away companies. Carolina responded that unionization had nothing to do with *Chavismo*, and that she and other Venezuelan leaders of FRENAPP had also left Venezuela themselves, precisely because they did not want to live under the conditions of Maduro/Chavez's Venezuela.

These sorts of accusations were repeated in other meetings, and in field organizing encounters like the one described in the opening vignette of this chapter. Accusations of *Chavismo* and

[2]Maduro rose to prominence as a union leader for bus drivers in Caracas. However, the relationship between unions and left-wing governments is not straightforward. One of the most prominent challenges to the leadership of Chávez in Venezuela was also carried out with leadership from unions, especially unionized workers at Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA).

the ruin that would be brought by socialism also occurred in WhatsApp chats and in the comments of Facebook and Instagram posts made by FRENAPP. These arguments often reached a strongly emotional register and ended without any common ground being found. In these cases, xenophobia and concerns about the socialist connotations of unionism combined to block the possibility of unionization becoming a means through which gig workers could come together in collective action.

On another occasion, the slide deck was not being used but FRENAPP's activists still did the work of preemptively trying to address gig workers' reservations about *sindicatos*. One day in May 2023, I was in the US but had set up a zoom room to host a video call between FRENAPP's leaders and Venezuelan delivery workers living in Peru. They had led a strike and protest recently, and now wanted advice about next steps. Carolina's voice crackled through my headphones: "I know that as Venezuelans, when you hear the word *sindicato* you will think of socialism and crime." Sharing her screen, Carolina paused to type in a word document with bold letters: "*Mitos sobre los sindicatos cuando hay intención por parte de los trabajadores de plataformas digitales de sindicalizarse*," (Myths about unions when there is an intention on the part of digital platform workers to unionize). She began to type as she talked (my translation follows):

> The vast majority of workers are immigrants from Venezuela and the experience of *sindicalismo* in this country is equal or synonymous with delinquency due to the Venezuelan state supporting, encouraging, and providing weapons of war to supposed *sindicatos*..."

She rattled off the names of *sindicato* organizations in Venezuela that she considered to be criminal gangs. Warming to the topic, she started to tell stories about *El Sindicato de Las Claritas*, which operated in the Venezuelan state of Bolívar's mining communities, where she had lived for many years. Turning back to the topic of gig workers, she continued, "the

only way you will stop getting blocked, the only way you can really raise your wages, is to unionize." Carolina pasted the text of ILO Convention 87, which protects workers' right to association, into the document. "I will put you in contact with the Solidarity Center in your country. They will help you with the process. I did it in Colombia and I did it here in Ecuador."

On this call, Carolina pre-empted disapproval about the term *sindicato* and also validated concerns that Venezuelans would have. She acknowledged the groups in Venezuela that were known as *sindicatos* but then explained that this use of the term *sindicato* was exceptional to Venezuela. She encouraged the gig workers' efforts to organize the strike and protest as noble and righteous things to do, and emphasized that this kind of upstanding action was in line with what *sindicalismo* was about outside of Venezuela. Carolina also drew on the legitimacy of international standards and the United Nations when she pasted in the ILO Convention. She wanted the Peru-based Venezuelan workers to know that they ought to have rights to association in Peru since Peru was a signatory on the convention.

The repeated appearance of the slide with its Greek letters, as well as the document and call with gig workers based in Peru are examples of the frictive work of proactively re-situating the term *sindicato* such that it was more authentically and originally associated with justice. The history of the Venezuelan diaspora and their negative experiences captured by *sindicatos* account for a specific way that gig worker organizing under a union model was challenging. Gig worker activists do not work with a clean slate when they try to mobilize their coworkers under the universal concept of a labor union. The vignettes show that while sometimes it was possible to successfully resituate the term with these strategies, other times a mix of past political experiences and prejudice meant that activists were not able to convince gig workers to organize under this concept.

3.3 Dynamic framing with global causes

Gig worker activists worked to make the primary global causes of unionization and labor rights and regulation meaningful in local contexts. However, activists also opportunistically reframed the issues of gig workers to take advantage of other global causes that were salient at a particular moment, deploying a common tactic in transnational activism in the context of gig work (Borgias and Braun, 2017; Benford and Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). These other global causes included feminism and women's rights; migration and human mobility; artificial intelligence (AI); and security.

Carolina had started her presentation at an International Women's Day panel on women's labor issues with a video taken by a fellow gig worker organizer. After she hit play, a singing voice asked, "*Dónde está el bebe?*" (Where is the baby?) The video zoomed on an insulated delivery backpack as a hand reached out to open the unzipped flap. "There she is!" A toddler giggled from inside as her mom closed the flap to play another round of *repartidora* peekaboo. The video showed how the constant material presence of the delivery backpack led it to double as a plaything, illustrating the intimate relationship between motherhood and gig work. Carolina then highlighted another gendered element of work that was subsumed into the *repartidora* identity:

> Each morning, my repartidora friend had to make sure that everyone had a clean uniform to wear and a clean backpack to carry. She worked while carrying her baby on her motorcycle. When customers demanded the food to be delivered to their door, she carried the baby with the food up the stairs. Every day, she faced harassment, xenophobia, men who answered the door in various states of undress. Then she had to go home and take care of the housework.

Seizing the opportunity of International Women's Day, the cause of gig workers was reframed

for a new audience through the global causes of feminism and women's rights. Carolina also drew on the framing of the 'second shift' and gendered harassment faced by working women. She formed a common cause with women workers who faced overlapping oppressive conditions.

In addition to feminism and women's rights, migrant rights and human mobility framed the gig worker cause to other audiences. At a congressional hearing that solicited feedback about migration policy in Ecuador, we heard from Ecuadorian return migrants and the Afghan refugee community. Venezuelan leaders commented on the ongoing amnesty program and the needs of the newly arrived. Into this context, Carolina added her testimony about the exploitation faced by irregular Venezuelans in gig work.

Other opportunities to participate and reframe the cause of gig workers in terms of a relevant global issue included a panel run by the UN on the need to regulate AI, where gig work was reframed as controlled by unethical AI, and exploitation was explained as a result of the lack of worldwide regulation. At the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, attacks on gig workers and robberies carried out by people dressed as gig workers were highlighted as concerns for regions around the world experiencing conditions of insecurity. Gig worker regulation and protection were reframed as needed to address cross-border issues of illicit drug trade and generalized violence.

Across the primary framing of labor unionism and secondary framings of women's rights, human mobility, AI, and security, activists work to make different global causes meaningful in the context of gig work among people who were primarily Venezuelan diaspora members. Using these global framings to describe the issues of gig workers allowed for greater visibility and access to new audiences and resources for the activists. At the same time, by giving these global causes traction in their local context, activists allowed concepts like the 'second shift' to make a difference in a new place (Tsing, 2005).

3.4 Condemning *cuarterización*: Contesting moral meanings

FRENAPP's activists sought to give traction to union-oriented mobilizing by assigning a particular moral value to practices that were understood differently by different gig workers. They worked to promote formalization and regulation of platform work as a path to improve workers' conditions, instead of other approaches such as pressuring companies to voluntarily improve conditions without regulation. This section details how FRENAPP's activists condemned the practice of subletting accounts to be worked by another person, usually someone who did not have legal status or who had been blocked from their own account on the app.

In one example, Carolina and I ducked out of a cab and into the office of the *Defensoría del Pueblo* (Ombudsman) of Ecuador, trying to avoid getting soaked by the heavy Quito rain. We waited a few minutes and then were led to a room where a staff member asked questions and took detailed notes on his yellow notepad. As Carolina detailed the injustices faced by delivery workers, the man attending to us interjected to ask what the word *cuarterización* meant. The word in Spanish for outsourcing is *tercerización*, which is a nounification of a verb form of the word for "third" (tercer). Carolina explained that delivery workers, especially those without regular immigration status, often rent an account from someone else. To account for this additional layer of subcontracting, she upped the third ordinal number in *tercerización* to four, creating the word "*cuarterización*." Her frown deepened as she tapped her acrylic nails on the stack of papers in front of her for emphasis:

> It is so sad to see how Venezuelans are exploiting their own countrymen. The ones who made it through the Darién and are in the United States now. The ones who worked 12-and 16-hour days in the pandemic and had maintained high ratings on the app, have left their accounts to be worked by newer migrants.

> The account owners take a huge cut of the earnings, after the companies already took a huge cut. Not just Venezuelans taking advantage of other Venezuelans, of course, Ecuadorians are doing it too. And in Spain they are putting out videos to teach people who have papers how to rent out accounts.

Carolina paused and began scrolling back through her WhatsApp messages with another activist to play the video from Spain.

A few months later, we were in a zoom meeting that included unaffiliated delivery workers. When she reached the topic of *cuarterización*, Carolina paused to acknowledge that some people might be blocked or might not have papers, and hence working on rented accounts might be a tempting option. She warned, however, that the people who owned accounts and rented them out were dangerous and exploitative. One *repartidor* unmuted to say that without papers, he had so few options that he appreciated being able to work on a rented account. Carolina firmly insisted that Venezuelans needed to invest in the regularization process. She shared the names of nonprofits that could support the cost of getting paperwork and posted the link to the Ecuadorian government's ongoing immigration amnesty program. To audiences ranging from sympathetic pro bono migration lawyers to impatient fellow activists, Carolina explained the practice of *cuarterización* as a negative, exploitative practice with local variance worldwide.

Members of FRENAPP used a negative diagnosis of *cuarterización* to contest different meanings that might be given to charging a fee to let someone else use one's account to work. One example of an alternative interpretation is that renting accounts was providing opportunities. Venezuelans (or others) with papers who rent their accounts to undocumented Venezuelans could be understood as doing an act of solidarity with a little bit of profit. They provided people with no options for employment with the opportunity to work, even if they were going to take a cut of their earnings. This could be viewed as an individual, idiosyncratic

way of getting around the rules so that a friend or relative could draw an income. Such alternative understandings of renting one's account were taken up by groups of gig workers who were against regulation. These workers were identified by members of FRENAPP as allied to platform corporations, since they campaigned against the regulation of gig work. Regardless of the extent to which platform companies approved of account subletting and materially supported particular anti-union and anti-regulation gig workers, this case demonstrates the alternative moral meanings that could be assigned to the practice of subletting accounts. Diagnosing and condemning *cuarterización* was needed to make progress with a particular type of organizing focused on union formation and regulation. By diagnosing the same phenomenon happening in Spain, Ecuador, Brazil, and elsewhere, a common problem was identified which called for common responses: formalization and regulation.

3.5 Friction in FRENAPP's organizing

The vignettes above illustrate the work activists did to allow the concept of unionization to be effective in a particular arrangement of digitally mediated work, transnational corporations backed by venture capital, and vulnerable migrant workers. Like environmentalism and human rights, which have been studied in their capacity as universals, labor unionization becomes universal through the work of activists to become meaningful in any given context. Tsing understands a focus on universals as identifying "knowledge that moves— mobile and mobilizing—across localities and cultures (Tsing, 2005, p. 7). This chapter has been showing how unionization gets moved by activists into the spaces of gig workers in Ecuador, and how unionization is sometimes mobilizing for gig workers to take collective action.

Tsing uses the concept of "activist packages" to theorize how universals travel in cases of transnational movements: "when an activist package is brought to a new location, it must enter new fields of meaning and social action to make a difference in its new home" (Tsing,

2005, p. 228). In Tsing's case, the theorization of activist packages comes from her fieldwork with transnational environmental activism. She notices the way that activists retell stories of rainforest protection in Brazil in a particular way to gain traction in the context of Indonesia. Activists in Indonesia excised working-class masculinist elements of the story of Chico Mendes to make it more easily align with the class and gender context of Indonesians interested in rainforest conservation. The concept of activist packages helps to trace the travels and transformations of universals as they are made useful in global activist contexts. The most prominent activist package in FRENAPP's organizing was the idea of a labor union. However, additional activist packages that were related to unionization traveled as well. The same slide deck that featured the definition of *sindicato* also included slides that explained the criteria used to determine whether an employment relation existed between a worker and a company, and cited the California state law AB5. The "Ley Rider" had also recently passed in Spain at the start of my fieldwork, and activists were updating the deck to include information about this law that recognized employment for gig workers as a default and had the burden on companies to prove otherwise. These are examples of regulation and policy that became models that crossed borders. These models served as traveling activist packages that activists used to inspire their coworkers that change was possible, and to analyze proposed laws in their own contexts. Ideals of state-guaranteed labor protections and defined employment relationships were being made more universal through concrete activities like updating slide decks and presenting them to different local audiences.

Levitt and Merry (2009) develop a complementary concept of "vernacularization" to describe the "process of appropriation and local adoption" of the universal concept of human rights (p. 446). In this process, human rights "take on some of the ideological and social attributes of the place, but also retain some of their original formulation" (ibid.). Their framing draws additional analytical attention to the role of "vernacularizers" who "take the ideas and practices of one group and present them in terms that another group will accept" (ibid.). These scholars attend to the social position of vernacularizers, centering the role of

those who must translate universals into different activist contexts. Activists of FRENAPP were vernacularizers of human rights also, using the rhetoric that migrant rights and labor rights are human rights, and self-identifying as human rights defenders in their biographies. Unionization, when put in action by FRENAPP's activists acting as vernacularizers, was made to take on some of the ideological attributes of the context of the Venezuelan diaspora in Ecuador and across Latin America. The activists put unionization in terms that separated it from socialism and *Chavismo*. Activists took ideas and practices that started in one place, where ILO Conventions were made and signed, and presented them in terms that might be accepted by fellow gig workers in cities across Latin America. The act of pasting the text of an ILO convention into a newsletter or slide deck was a way of adding legitimacy to FRENAPP's own materials. It also served to vernacularize the convention, exposing it to gig workers and sparking conversations where migrants who did not think about having rights in their host country were given the idea that there were universal labor rights that the ILO sought to promote for workers everywhere in the world and especially in signatory countries.

Framing the cause of gig workers as one of labor unionism made the fight of FRENAPP part of a worldwide struggle for workers to associate freely without retaliation from their employers. The work Carolina and other FRENAPP activists did in making the universal concept of a labor union travel improved the effectiveness of those concepts in different places in the world (Tsing, 2005). These concepts became truly global only thanks to the work of activists implementing their promise in local contexts.

3.6 Counter-organizing

The vignettes in this chapter have shown how the universal of unionization does not travel smoothly, but rather faces resistance from workers predisposed to be against such a concept

based on their personal and regional histories. Hostile exchanges during field organizing and accusations in meetings and on social media were commonplace. Disagreements about how to organize sometimes remained as small unpleasant interactions. Other times, activists were insulted, threatened, and verbally abused, including with death threats. While I did not witness any physical assaults, Carolina shared the story of a fellow gig worker activist who was beaten in connection with his organizing in Colombia during her time organizing there. Carolina herself had also been followed by people from the company Rappi while she was in Colombia and had her laptop stolen from her home. With evidence that the incident was connected to union persecution, she left Colombia and moved to Ecuador. Another leader of FRENAPP had received threats that targeted both her and her four-year-old daughter, claiming that they knew where the daughter went to school. This other leader ended up moving to Europe when she had the opportunity to leave Ecuador. This section considers the role of direct counter-organizing that has sought to prevent or weaken unionization, how activists responded, and the effect this had on activists and their strategies.

One day in March while we were working on parts of FRENAPP's website, Carolina showed me a screenshot of a tweet on her phone (see Figure 3.2). It read, "PROTESTS. Rappi deliverers claim that the labor reform of Petro[3] takes away their right to be badly treated and obliges them to receive benefits they aren't asking for. Many have threatened to return to Venezuela." The tweet was posted on a parody account based in Colombia called Alerta News 24/7, which is self-described as providing *"noticias en tiempo irreal"* (news in unreal time). The tweet was circulated in the WhatsApp chats of the leadership of the Colombian union UNIDAPP, of which Carolina was still an active part. The tweet aptly captured the sentiment of the activists who had been trying so hard to improve working conditions, now seeing decently-sized protests against those reforms from the very people who stood to benefit from the reforms. The "threat to return to Venezuela" was an ironic remark on

[3]Gustavo Petro had just started his presidential term at the time. He is considered to be Colombia's first left-wing president.



Figure 3.2: This is a screenshot of a tweet from a parody news account in Colombia. The tweet comments on the public protests by gig workers against the labor reform that would recognize their rights under the labor code.

the position of migrants protesting against the government in their host country, especially against something that was meant to (and in my analysis actually would) benefit them. Activists also felt betrayed that their coworkers would sell out for the promise of what was equivalent to $12 USD and a clean new jacket and backpack, which was the amount circulated in WhatsApp groups about what the reward was for participating in protests against the reform.

Based on their public statements, it seemed that at least some of the workers who protested against the reform not only collected rewards but also believed they were defending their livelihoods, which they saw as being threatened by the reform. Both in this case in Colombia and among people who organized against FRENAPP in Ecuador, people believed threats

from the companies that they'd pull out of the country if the reforms passed, and therefore they would have no job at all instead of a job that paid less than the minimum wage. They also believed that regulation would easily lead to the expropriation of companies, resulting in the same kind of hyperinflation and social instability that Venezuela was suffering. In the short term, they believed that the reforms would stop them from working more than eight hours a day. Though app based workers usually received less than minimum wage, they could work for as many hours a day as they wanted, meaning that if they were willing to stay logged onto the app for 12 or 14 hours a day and had a high rating in the app, they could make more in a day than they would if they had a minimum wage job that only let them work for 8 hours. These workers were willing to continue with the status quo, since they believed things could be much worse than the low pay rate and 14 hour shifts. As chapter two argues, subsequent generations of gig workers had fewer alternatives available and had come from a worse prior situation which made the status quo on the apps seem relatively appealing and worthy of defending. For people who felt very grateful to have the gig work job, there was nothing wrong with accepting a new backpack and bonus for coming out in defense of the company that provided them income to get through each day. The broader social context of precarity that drew people to doing gig work in the first place was harder to overcome than the negative association that people had of unions. Most recruitment and support came from long-time gig workers who had seen conditions decline over time, or people who had recently had experiences of work with decent pay and conditions. For their part, evidence that companies were rewarding counter-protesting had an effect of letting activists feel at least briefly vindicated. Activists were constantly facing rejection from other gig workers, so the externalized reason of why their coworkers, who they believed they were taking time and energy to help, would come out publicly against them, softened the blow. They also recognized that they were up against significant odds, with lobbying power from companies as well as more grassroots ways that resources of the companies were deployed against unionization.

Some counter-organizing took a more anonymous form, like the public protests against the labor reform. Sometimes it was more personal. In November 2022, FRENAPP's leaders were involved in advocating for a proposed national legislation that would regulate delivery and rideshare work along with *venta ambulante*, which refers to people who sell items informally in the streets and on carts. There were various versions of the law under debate. FRENAPP hoped that the law would by default recognize the employment relationship between platform companies and workers, thereby giving more recourse for unjustified blocking, establishing a floor for fees, and requiring companies to pay for insurance for the workers and workers' comp for accidents and deaths on the job. Other versions of the law followed the model of regulation recently passed in Chile, where there were two kinds of platform work recognized under the law, one with employment relations and one without. There was not a clear mechanism for proving which of the two models was being followed in a given case of gig work, hence leaving companies to be able to claim that everyone fell under the model without employment relations. FRENAPP's leaders appeared at the National Assembly to advocate for versions of the law that would recognize them as having labor rights. At another "working table" meeting where public comments could be made, a group of five gig workers showed up and insulted the members of FRENAPP, in particular leveling gendered and xenophobic insults at Carolina. This incident clearly weighed heavily on Carolina during the following months when we met.

A few months later, Carolina and I were on an hour-long city bus ride, returning from a meeting at a foundation's office in an upscale neighborhood of Quito. Carolina was holding her phone up to her ear, listening to audios quietly and frowning. Eventually she turned to me and told me that she'd heard there was a WhatsApp group called *"FRENAPP No Me Representa"* ("FRENAPP Does Not Represent Me") and had joined it with an anonymous WhatsApp account. She was visibly upset by hearing the audios that insulted FRENAPP and accused them of all manner of untrue scandals, crimes, and embezzlement, and threatened FRENAPP's leaders. Later that week we went together to the police station, and

Carolina filed a complaint for slander, threats, and hate crime. She printed out several screenshots from the chat and put some of the audios onto a flash drive to turn in as additional evidence.

In addition to reporting threats, FRENAPP's activists also tried to take some preventative measures. One day in March 2023, I was power-walking up a hill to a store that sold *"armas blandas"* or "soft weapons." I tried to catch my breath on the thin air available at 9,000 feet above sea level. We were trying to make it to the store before the sun set. Carolina had decided that we needed to prepare ourselves for worst case scenarios, since we were going to hand out fliers in the neighborhood where someone known to be managing the group *FRENAPP No Me Representa* worked. We walked into a small store with headphones, computer mice, brass knuckles, knives, batons, tasers, and pepper spray, all crowded into glass display cases. I hovered behind Carolina as she asked for the prices of various pepper sprays and batons, while explaining to the shop owner behind the counter why she needed to buy some self defense materials. After a bit of bargaining, she settled on a rainbow anodized titanium baton and the smallest size of pepper spray, telling me, "We'll get a taser next time when we have more money."

The next stop was the police station, where she hoped we could get a security escort to accompany us while we handed out the fliers. We had given up on finishing errands before dark, so we stopped for an empanada at her favorite Venezuelan restaurant and walked at a much more leisurely pace. When we arrived, there was no one in the window-kiosk area of the building, although the lights were on. Carolina called the posted phone number and was sent to voicemail. She began to knock very persistently. I had fully lost hope that anyone would appear when someone really did emerge from the back room and slowly approached the window. After Carolina explained her situation, we found out that the security protection she had been hoping to get access to was only available for cases of domestic violence. The rainbow baton and pepper spray would have to do.

A year after we had bought the pepper spray and baton, Carolina had come in contact with a nonprofit based in Mexico that sought to help human rights defenders with security planning. Over several zoom sessions, the nonprofit's trainer shared their model of how to plan for hostile actors and the steps that activists could take. They had a variety of flow charts and brainstorm activities that were carried out on the calls, and some surveys that were given to FRENAPP's members between sessions. One example of a brainstorm we did was to think of allies with legitimacy. FRENAPP was advised to make a plan to proactively strengthen connections with those allies, so that if slanderous rumors were spread about the union, they could have someone with legitimacy to vouch for them.

In a region with the highest rates of union persecution in the world, the state's abandonment of the activists in their quest for safety was not exceptional. In fact, state actors were often accused of collusion and perpetuation of violence against activists. The kinds of mass mobilization that were galvanized by the conditions of the pandemic were difficult to maintain as comrades re-migrated to countries seen as more lucrative and stable destinations, at the same time as the union-busting efforts of corporations ramped up. Concerns for retaliation led the activists to scale down outreach to people they didn't already know. Handing out flyers in public became an activity that was only done sparingly and with knowledge of and concern for the risks it came with. Nonprofit organizations tried to help fill the gap with strategies for self-help in the absence of more official protection. Activists consistently documented and reported threats and slander, even as no progress was made on their cases and no protection was offered. Being a public face for the union meant that many insults and threats were personal, and took a heavy toll on activists. Some fled the union persecution by fleeing to different cities or countries. Sometimes fear of being attacked led people to stay at home for long periods of time or to disguise themselves when they went outside. Many could no longer do daily work as gig workers, because people who were threatening them included other gig workers who would encounter them in popular waiting places or be able to follow them home. Activists shared that they felt afraid, paranoid, anxious, lonely,

and disillusioned, being targeted repeatedly and often with few outlets to take care of their mental health.

3.7 Navigating shifting political opportunity structures

Ethnographies of social movements have illustrated that political opportunity structure can constrain or facilitate the travel and uptake of universals (McAdam and Tarrow, 2018). Nagle (2020) shows that certain universal activist packages cannot gain traction despite the efforts of activists because of closed political opportunities, as in the case of post-conflict Lebanon. On the other hand, in response to changing political opportunities, activists may draw on varying activist packages and engage different universals over time to "frame" their causes (Borgias and Braun, 2017). The concept of framing is used by social movement scholars to analyze how movements communicate their causes to different audiences (Benford and Snow, 2000). Activists work to achieve frame alignment among individuals' beliefs and frame resonance to improve public interest in their cause (Snow et al., 1986). Borgias and Braun (2017) document how the engaged universal of environmentalism facilitated alliance with international environmental organizations, which provided resources and media support for an anti-dam campaign in Patagonia. However, the political opportunities that arose in Chile led to a strategic reframing of the cause from one of environmentalism to one demanding democracy and government transparency. These studies demonstrate that activists working to make universals travel must negotiate the limitations and opportunities of their local political structures.

Activists at FRENAPP also worked to navigate a shifting political opportunity structure. As discussed in earlier sections in this chapter, activists had spent significant energy on advocating for regulation to be passed in the National Assembly that would recognize the employment relationship between gig workers and platform companies, thereby giving them

more mechanisms by which to advocate for reinstatement of blocked workers, workers' compensation for injured and killed workers, and enforcement of a minimum pay rate. They had to work against lobbying by the companies and workers who supported the companies for a variety of reasons, including receiving perks for their participation. FRENAPP's attention to advocating for national legislation was put aside by spring 2023, when the government was in a constitutional crisis. Then-president Lasso was on trial for embezzlement, and before he could be impeached, he called on the "crossed death" clause of the Ecuadorian constitution and dissolved the national assembly, governing by decree until early elections were held in the summer. At first, FRENAPP hoped to re-start the process of advocating for regulation when the next administration began and the National Assembly reconvened. However, the Noboa administration's turn to iron-fist policies to address security and the national electricity shortages that wreaked havoc on the country became such overwhelming issues that activists decided the national political climate was too fraught. They found that politicians were not nearly as receptive to spending time on pushing for gig worker regulation as they had been in 2022, and it did not seem like the situation would improve in the short term. At those times they turned to different framings and also to different advocacy styles.

Scaling down to the level of city government, FRENAPP responded to changing political opportunity structures by posting their responses to ordinances by the city of Quito that sought to regulate rideshare drivers and delivery workers in the city. One day in March 2024, Carolina posted in a WhatsApp group of FRENAPP leaders and supporters an open letter analyzing the new ordinance in the city of Quito that she had written with an ally of FRENAPP. The letter requested tripartite dialogues between representatives of the city, representatives of the gig workers including FRENAPP, and representatives of the companies to discuss how delivery and rideshare work should be regulated in the city. The main finding of their analysis of the ordinance was that responsibility was put on the city and the workers to comply with safety considerations and registration, but no responsibility was put onto companies to ensure that workers, customers, and people in public spaces would be safer,

since the ordinance did not provide for sanctions for companies if violations occurred. The letter was circulated further among FRENAPP's members and allies, and a brief newsletter version of it was posted to social media several months later in July. The tripartite dialogues have not happened at the time of writing, but the calls for such a dialogue show the way FRENAPP responded to shifting political opportunity structures and adjusted the scale of their advocacy in response to crises at the national level.

Although it did not come to fruition during my fieldwork, another response to changing political opportunity structure came in the work that FRENAPP put toward researching the making of an alternate delivery application of their own to give workers another option outside of working on the mainstream platforms. One day in March 2023 when we were watching updates on the upcoming impeachment trial of Lasso and anticipating the dissolution of the National Assembly, Carolina called up an acquaintance who had once offered to make FRENAPP their own delivery platform. Later in the day, we walked to have lunch at a Venezuelan restaurant near his office, and then stopped by where he worked to discuss what was possible. He told us his analysis of the platform companies: they made huge amounts of money during the pandemic, but now they had raised prices on all sides and had gone too far. He had a background in technology development and had a small business that ran via a web app and coordinated logistics. He told Carolina that he would be willing to provide a version of the software to FRENAPP. As he warmed up to the idea, he began to estimate numbers. He said he would charge restaurants a $200 annual fee to be part of the platform, which he estimated to be 10 plates of food, and that was significantly more economical to restaurants than the fees of no less than 25% that mainstream delivery apps charged to restaurants. He also pointed out that delivery platforms often gave steeper fees to small restaurants, and big chains like McDonalds' might only get charged 10%, so neighborhood restaurants were the target of this subscription model. With his revenue from charging subscription fees to restaurants, he promised that FRENAPP and delivery workers would be able to keep 100% of whatever delivery fee they decided to charge to the customer.

He would handle technical issues, and he would leave FRENAPP to recruit and manage workers. With a focus on neighborhood restaurants and unionized delivery workers, he believed that better service could be offered to customers and the delivery workers would also be more professional and trusted by customers. Ultimately, we did not follow up again to attempt to implement the alternate delivery platform. Running a business and managing a cooperative or other equitable work arrangement would take vastly different skills and time commitments than advocacy and union organizing at the level that FRENAPP was doing. This was a direction that other members of FRENAPP's network had taken, however FRENAPP's leaders were not in a place to start such an initiative while I was doing my fieldwork. Nonetheless, planning and consideration of it as an option demonstrates another way that political opportunity structure was in play.

By shifting to advocate about city-level ordinances when the national assembly was either dissolved or very preoccupied with other issues, and by taking initial steps toward having an independent delivery work arrangement, FRENAPP's activists responded to shifting political opportunity structures and found ways to continue their advocacy when their main strategies were blocked by broader conditions.

3.8 Collective action through unionization

The concept of friction does not preemptively assign a liberatory or oppressive valence to the travel of global causes and movements. The opportunities and resources that can be obtained when allying with actors promoting a similar vision of the global are important for activists who operate with minimal resources. In this case, unionization was the path taken by activists. Although it was a choice that might have alienated some workers who otherwise were willing to act collectively against platform companies, the uphill battle of excising *sindicato* from its Venezuelan connotations held the potential payoff of receiving material

and legal support from organizations like the Solidarity Center. Making *sindicato* stick was not an easy job, but it would facilitate access to benefits from networks of transnational union organizations. Activists also chose to organize in this way because of their beliefs about what would put them on the "right" side of history. They bought into a moral status quo that still recognized peaceful protest, democratic processes, and the moral authority of supranational development organizations, even as they critiqued the state's failure to protect peaceful protestors and listen to constituents in the democratic process. This is in contradiction to subjects that Valencia (2018) has theorized as endriago subjects, who have come to a different conclusion after finding that their position in global capital is untenable. These subjects have embraced violence and disregarded moral norms around extreme violence, and rejecting governance by the state or mainstream capitalism.

The model of unions, though able to make important moves to protect workers, is not a silver bullet. The history of organized labor in both North and South America includes movements that have upheld racist, sexist, and imperialist agendas. James Boggs is just one example of a theorist who has critiqued the conservativism of mainstream labor unions in the US, when they lost their militancy in controlling work in the factories after World War II ended, engaged in red-scare politics throughout the Cold War, and also failed to act decisively in support of the Freedom Riders during the civil rights movements in the 1960s (Boggs, 2011). US labor organizations like the AFL-CIO carried out a well-documented campaign attempting to destroy leftist and communist movements among workers and citizens of Latin America, using underhanded tactics in collaboration with the CIA (Anner and Evans, 2004; Frank, 2016; Schuhrke, 2024, e.g.). Though the working class, labor, and unions are often associated with left-wing governments, the alignment is not always so tidy. The examples from the US's cold war interventions are only one example. In Venezuela, although *Chavismo* and the Bolivarian Revolution were meant to be socialist and working-class oriented, and although current president Maduro rose to prominence as a union leader for bus drivers in Caracas, there are divides among different classes of workers who might be unionized.

Unionized PDVSA workers, who were more educated and middle-class workers, were leaders of early opposition to Cháves and were fired en masse from the company. Many of them were early members of the diaspora, and already did not associate unionism with *Chavismo*, although few of them were gig workers. The Venezuelans I met who used to work for PDVSA were leaders of Venezuelan associations who had more formal jobs and who had left Venezuela in the early 2000s rather than the late 2010s and the 2020s. The examples of mainstream US labor and Venezuelan labor unions show that unions do not always align with left wing or progressive causes.

Activist packages like unionization do not travel on their own but require the help of institutions in addition to the activists who use them: "Activist packages travel when they are unmoored from the contexts of culture and politics from which they emerged and reattached as allegories within the culture and politics of those with the institutional strength to spread the word" (Tsing, 2005, p. 234). The history of oppressive agendas carried out by mainstream labor organizations gives us good reason to be cautious about those who have the institutional strength to spread unionism. On the other hand, it is important to recognize that while unionism is far from perfect, it is one of the stronger existing institutions that might be a check against unfettered global capitalism. Participating in unionism also changes it, and the gig worker activists sought to push it toward a position of defending those who were in low-status or informal employment relations worldwide, and defending the rights of migrant workers and workers in the Global South. The next chapter further explores power dynamics and different practices of transnational alliance and coalition.

Unionization was not the only universal traveling into the context of gig work in Ecuador and across Latin America. Activists drew on and gave traction to labor rights, dignified work, and unionization as primary universals, alongside feminism, security, AI governance, and other secondary framings. On the other hand, companies drew on and gave traction to universal ideals of prosperity, innovation, convenience, and modernity in their business

models. Millar (2013) develops the concept of "compound friction" to highlight the way that traveling activist packages compete with one another. He analyzes how international agencies promote different global models of justice and peace in the same context. In addition to companies' competing universal, different transnational organizations promoted and funded different directions for addressing gig workers' conditions.

Some of FRENAPP's activities were aimed at educating a consumer-public about treating gig workers better. Some of their social media posts and part of the book they wrote emphasized that "we are humans, not robots," asking consumers to be more considerate. The prominent transnational research network FairWork, which distributed a large amount of funding for research on gig work, was focused on a "fair trade" model by rating apps and pressuring companies to behave better in search of better ratings. They also did public awareness campaigns like sponsoring murals and billboards and printing stickers with slogans such as "*con tu pedida va mi vida*" (with your order goes my life). Consumer education and fair trade ratings were a different model for change that this group emphasized (though freedom of association and fair contracts are part of their standards).

Writing about social movements that they termed "insurgent," Juris and Khasnabish (2013) argue that activists broaden the meaning of the political outside of party politics-focused advocacy: "Politics thus moves out from purely institutional domains to also inhabit the autonomous realms of social movement networks, grassroots communities, and the intimate spheres of everyday social life," (p. 9). FRENAPP often referred to themselves as "apolitical," as seen in the opening vignette. This claim was meant to emphasize that they were not affiliated to any particular political party or political movement like Latin American socialism. They took part in institutional politics by advocating for policies in the national assembly, but they did so without loyalty for any specific party. They attempted to get government accountability through audits of companies and labor inspections, which was another institutional form of politics they carried out. They also put energy toward mutual

aid and protest, and these strategies were used by both FRENAPP and those against FRENAPP. They pooled resources for funerals and tried to help take care of widowed mothers. They told each other about other jobs that were available and other migration routes that were possible. They threw fundraisers to pay for hospital bills. These acts of shared survival were also political, even though they were not institutional. Gig workers who were strongly opposed to unionizing and the institutional forms of advocacy that FRENAPP carried out still did their own versions of mutual aid, acting on care and reciprocity for the people they waited and worked with every day. They felt mutual aid was not incongruent with taking money from companies to defend the existence of their job, especially when the state had such a poor record of guaranteeing rights or defending marginalized people or keeping its promises. To these workers, companies were more able to provide the basic amenities of living in society, and uphold conditions of a social contract than the state. These workers were willing to accept labor conditions that did not meet what was stipulated in labor law because they were used to even worse conditions and were not convinced that politics focused on seeking accountability from the state would lead to better everyday experiences of work and life.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the daily, contingent work done by activists to make global concepts "stick" in mobilizing gig workers who are primarily a part of the Venezuelan diaspora living in Ecuador. Although they are not always successful in persuading their coworkers to mobilize under the global union-oriented movement they work toward, activists' work allows for tentative alliances to form and resources to be gained in defense of gig workers' rights. This adds an ethnographic perspective to prior work, which has focused on more organizational and structural analyses of gig worker organizing (Borghi and Murgia, 2024; Woodcock,

2021, e.g.). The analysis in this chapter is based extended ethnographic engagement with activists, contributing an angle beyond the current focus on labor process theories that explain how and why gig workers organize based on working conditions (Lei, 2021; Muñoz and Martinez, 2022; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020).

This study builds on the rich body of research that has taken up friction to analyze how universals travel and are taken up, rejected, and hybridized in uneven ways. Studies highlighting friction in different contexts have shown that ideas that claim universality among hegemonic international organizations are put into frictive contention as actors in different positions of power contest and adapt them to their own ends. The universals take work to be made useful, yet this work may often be worthwhile as activists are connected to resources that would otherwise not be available. Universals taken up and deployed by gig worker activists are no exception. Gig workers' everyday efforts stood against preconceptions of unionization as related to socialism and economic collapse, distrust in the state, union persecution from companies, and structural conditions of precarity. Though tenuous and carried out at great cost to themselves, activists' efforts at unionization work toward not only the rights and protection of the workers in their sector, but also toward an alternative vision of the global that is not dominated by profit, where workers are treated with dignity.

Chapter 4

Gig workers of the world

A row of flags sporting the logos of seventeen gig worker organizations from various countries hung from the rafters as I walked into the basement of the SEIU building in Los Angeles. I was handed a translation device with headphones and a printed sign featuring a raised fist holding a phone with a location marker (see Figure 4.1). The logos and national flags of the participating organizations circled the central image. The slogan "Gig workers of the world, unite!" was emblazoned on the sign in bold letters. It was April 2023, and I was participating in the first International Gig Workers' Congress on behalf of FRENAPP.

I sat next to Iván, who had also been able to get a visa to come to the Congress when it turned out none of the FRENAPP members who were actually gig workers could get a visa. We listened to a panel called "App Platforms: Stewards of the 21st Century" and then headed off to lunch. A large tent was set up in the SEIU parking lot and we queued up for tortas, or Mexican sandwiches. In line and at the lunch table, I got to chat with other attendees. At my lunch table, I met a young man from Denmark who had recently graduated university. He worked as a bicycle deliverer. He told the table that although they had industry-wide contracts that were signed by the big union centrals, he was fighting to

get more grassroots worker involvement to push for actually strong contracts. The contracts they had were signed without much effort or pushback by the union centrals. Someone else at the table was from Argentina, and remarked that they had almost the opposite problem: They had strong grassroots engagement, but the government repeatedly denied their union registration over trivial matters. After several years they still did not have legal status as a union to take action in a more official manner. After we had enjoyed our tortas, we lined back up for a warm, sweet cup of champurrado. I started talking to the contingents from Hong Kong and Taiwan, who were chatting in Mandarin. One of the people from Hong Kong was staff at a nonprofit and did a few hours of delivery work by foot each week to be better able to support organizing. She told us that she was surprised to see people who didn't work for the same companies brought together at the same conference, since her last experience with transnational gig worker organizing focused on solidarity among people who all worked for brands owned by Delivery Hero around the world.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on activists' understandings of scale and scalability in the efforts to create gig worker's movements at transnational and global scales. First, I argue that gig workers make a self-conscious effort to claim the global scale in their organizing. As large platform companies continue to grow their markets, expand into new regions and industries, and merge into monopolistic organizations, resistance and labor organizing are needed that can address the global scale of the phenomenon of gig work. I argue that the opening vignette describing the First International Gig Workers' Congress can be understood as a "scalar device." Ribes proposes "ethnography of scaling" as a method which focuses on the way that actors represent and manage large-scale endeavors through concrete tools, activities, and techniques, to which he refers as "scalar devices," (Ribes, 2014). This chapter



Figure 4.1: This printed sign was handed out for use at protests that were part of the first International Gig Workers' Congress which I attended on behalf of FRENAPP during April 2023 in Los Angeles.

will explore a variety of scalar devices in detail, demonstrating the rhetorical strategies and mundane work that go into claiming the global scale. This account shows where certain exclusions are made even as activists attempt to get close to a "truly" global movement.

This chapter is in conversation with the critique of monocultural scalability advanced by Anna Tsing and other scholars in science and technology studies (STS) and anthropology. Tsing (2012) has argued that scalability is one of the values of modernity, defined specifically as the ability of a project to continually expand without changing its nature. Expansion occurs in a dominating manner under this kind of scalability. When something gets added to a scalable project, it is *subsumed* into the scalable project, rather than maintaining its diversity. Scalability means that "indeterminacies of encounter" (Tsing, 2012) cannot occur: rather, the scalable project has already "solved" how to grow bigger and will not be changed by what gets added. Internal homogeneity is required to ensure that expansion is smooth and efficient. This kind of "solved" growth yields efficiency, speed, and profit for the project that is scalable. On the other hand, taking time and resources to transform in response to the indeterminacies of encounter slows down growth and makes the project change each time its influence spreads. Transformative encounters mean that no one owns, solely directs, or controls the growing project.

Here, I argue that although the activists construct their movement as global, meaning as an issue that crosses national boundaries and implicates people at the scale of the world, it is not *scalable* in the sense that Tsing (2012) describes. Rather, the movement exists on a global scale through mutually transformative encounters between individuals and organizations, whose investments in scalar devices produce the global scale without the homogenizing force of scalability. This chapter adds nuance to the critique of scalability by analytically separating *claims to the global scale* from *monocultural scalability*. Instead of having a "solved" approach to growth that would allow for smooth, efficient expansion, with new groups being subsumed into the scalable design, activists formed horizontal connections that allowed

for continued diversity within the movement. This process was slow and not replicable—each connection was open to the indeterminacies of encounter. Ideas from new groups could change the focus of the coalition or the way it worked at a given time. Groups maintained their heterogeneity within the movement, so it was not through adherence to consistent procedures and rules that the movement operated at a global scale. It was through mundane interactions that tolerated difference and inconsistency that activists managed and represented the global scale to themselves and to outside stakeholders. Activists strategically lay claim on the global scale to assert their solidarity and to match the scale of the common, global-scale exploitation they face as gig workers.

I argue that global-scale exploitation is being resisted with claims to global-scale solidarity, but the *monocultural scalability* that allows gig platforms to grow global in scale is not being met with monoculturally scalable resistance. Instead, mutually transforming connections formed between gig worker activists are activated in the investments that the activists make in scalar devices. By developing and deploying scalar devices, activists make a counter-claim on the global scale and show how room can be made for diversity within a movement that crosses national borders and spans the world in scale.

The chapter proceeds with an analysis of the transnational networks of which FRENAPP was a part, in conversation with literature about transnational labor activism and transnational advocacy networks. The next section focuses on the argument that activists claim the global scale through investments in scalar devices, with mundane practices, artifacts, and rhetorical strategies that work together to conjure the global scale of the movement. Then, the chapter discusses the distinction between scalability as a monocultural project and claiming the global scale. I argue that gig workers' alliances were formed with mutually transforming connections, making room for internal diversity. I turn to discuss power dynamics that are present in networked activism, in conversation with literature about labor philanthropy as a power-laden relationship that fails to reach solidarity. I also discuss how the dynamics of gig

work parallel the dynamics of the networked organizing I analyzed in this chapter. Finally, I discuss the gig workers' movement as having continuity with alter-mundializacion, since they claim the global scale for themselves rather than eschewing the global scale.

4.2 Transnational labor and networks

Over the years, FRENAPP and its predecessor Glovers Ecuador had participated in different transnational alliances. Some were more temporary or informal, like the coordinated strikes and protests across Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic that Ecuadorian gig workers participated in as part of Glovers Ecuador. These groups had found each other online and more groups decided to join subsequent strikes in the region. Although I never got a clear story of how and when it started and officially took the name[1], Alianza Unidos World Action (AUWA) was an alliance that was formed around 2018 and included many groups from around the world at one point (see Figure 4.2 for groups whose logos were included in materials posted by AUWA[2]). The meeting point for many was a conference hosted by the French Member of the European Union Parliament Leïla Chaibi in December 2019, where many of the organizers were present in Brussels. By the time I worked with FRENAPP in 2022, AUWA still had monthly meetings on the calendar, but attendance was spotty. Many of the groups who did attend were from Latin America, so the meetings were often held in Spanish when there was not consistent translation infrastructure.

At some point, AUWA began planning the First International Gig Workers Congress for April 2023. With this as a goal, meetings became more regularly attended by groups who were interested in going. The alliance was reconsolidated after the Congress, with new members joining and non-active members no longer part of new group chats and group logos. AUWA's

[1]Everyone referred me to someone else when I asked them directly.

[2]Their website was actively posting updates 2021 - 2023, with posts being made by an SEIU staff member on behalf of the alliance.

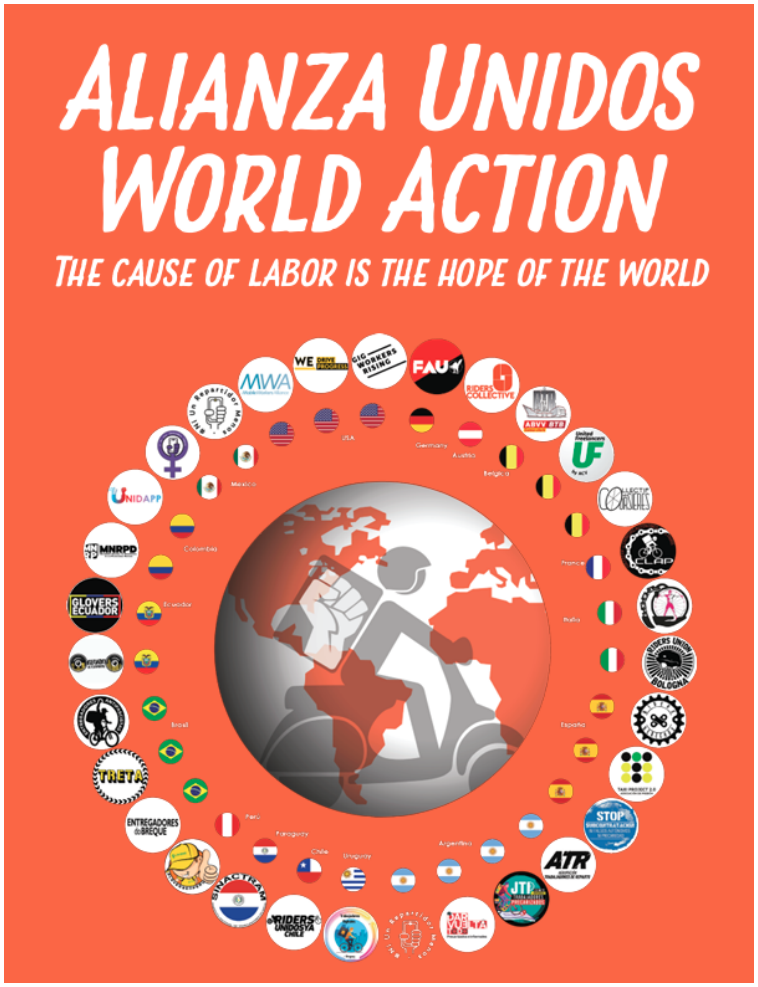


Figure 4.2: This is the cover of a digital flyer that is available to download on the website of AUWA at the time of writing, though the group is no longer active under that name as far as I know. There are many countries' flags shown in the logo, which has a similar design to the logo for the Congress which can be considered the next iteration of this alliance.

logo, which was on banners and social media posts leading up to the Congress, was replaced with a new Congress logo. The group's branding held continuity with AUWA, with member groups' logos and national flags circling a central icon. For AUWA, the central image was a globe, while the Congress's central image was a hand holding a phone with a location icon (see Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2). The shift in groups was caused by a variety of reasons. Some groups had already chosen to cut ties with AUWA due to disagreements over employment status and unions for gig workers. Other groups had become completely inactive or less active, or the person who was invested in AUWA had moved on even if the group was still carrying on to some degree. New groups heard about the Congress through other alliances, including groups that didn't exist yet when AUWA was forming. The 18 groups involved in the Congress were from 17 countries: Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Brazil, Mexico, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, Nepal, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United States. Two different German workers' councils attended. To my knowledge, there were four groups that were not unions but rights-oriented advocacy groups, a co-op was represented though not on the poster, three were gig worker unions that were not recognized by the state, three were umbrella union organizations rather than specific gig worker unions, and the rest were gig worker or deliverer unions recognized by the state.

Ford (2024) highlights the strategies that transnational labor activism uses to target corporations and other private actors, adding "corporate campaigns" and "thematic campaigns" to the "boomerang" model. In these cases, alliances including transnational unions and local organizations across borders collaborate to target corporate actors based on specific labor issues or even broader objectives such as the treatment of labor migrants. The networks that FRENAPP was a part of spanned these kinds of networks that Ford has categorized. Transnational gig worker organizing has taken shape with networks and strategies of different types described by Ford, including in alliances that FRENAPP was not part of.

International relations scholars Keck and Sikkink offer the concept of a transnational advocacy network to highlight voluntary participation in a globalized civil society. They use the term to refer to "those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services" (Keck and Sikkink, 1999, p. 65). They were responding to theorizations that transnational actors in a globalized civil society were only diffusing Western culture (Boli and Thomas, 1997) by highlighting the networked structure that characterizes many transnational actors and transnational relationships. Keck and Sikkink find a "boomerang" pattern that characterizes the emergence of transnational advocacy networks. In boomerang activism, Global South actors have agency in forming alliances with supranational and international groups who can pressure national governments. In this way, Global South actors are active participants in a globalized civil society, and not merely passive recipients of diffused Western culture.

Activists at FRENAPP had campaigns that followed this boomerang pattern, especially their fight for union recognition. Following Ecuadorian law, a union should be able to register with the Ministry of Labor after obtaining 30 signatures. The Constitutional court had recently released its ruling on the case of the banana union ASTAC, allowing them to belong to the same union though they worked for different companies[3]. In October 2022, FRENAPP had collected enough signatures and submitted their registration. However, they found they had been denied. FRENAPP appealed the decision, citing the ASTAC sentence. They also brought their case to the Ombudsman's office of Ecuador. These direct appeals did not get the union recognized, so they began to appeal to the ILO. Their appeals to the ILO were met with the response of the ILO sending a memo to the Ecuadorian government "strongly recommending" that as signatories on these conventions they should immediately accept FRENAPP's registration as a union. This is a clear example of the boomerang, where activists were blocked when appealing to their national government, and so sought to exert

[3]Companies got around freedom of association by creating subsidiary companies for their banana plantations until less than 30 people worked for the same company.

pressure from above by enlisting support from the ILO.

An example of a "corporate campaign," (Ford, 2024), a different shape of transnational labor activism, comes from the story shared to me by the activist from Hong Kong mentioned in the opening vignette. This was an alliance that FRENAPP had not participated in. The activist from Hong Kong had learned about the Congress through another transnational alliance, Delivery Hero Riders United, that was organizing groups working for apps owned by Delivery Hero. This alliance was sparked by a major strike of Food Panda delivery workers in Myanmar in 2022 and was supported with infrastructure from the Asia Working Group of the International Confederation of Labor. This alliance was scoped to focus on people who worked for brands owned by Delivery Hero, as a call posted on the International Confederation of Labor demonstrates: "You are working for a brand linked to Delivery Hero or are involved in a union used by Delivery Hero riders to get organized? Get in touch with us..." The focus for this alliance was to connect unions and groups across borders with a focus on a company instead of on the state. This meant that the decisions about inclusion into the alliance focused on the employer, a multinational conglomerate that had bought many delivery brands.

Although at the time the Delivery Hero Riders United group did not seek to form a global union federation that could bargain with the companies directly, this is a path that has been documented and advocated in the literature (McCallum, 2013). This is a more top-down approach, requiring a single, unified organization of a GUF that is able to sign on behalf of the unions who are affiliated. This approach does not focus on rights guaranteed by the state where workers are, but rather expects that a strong GUF entity can make agreements with corporations that can be enforced with the belief that the GUF can call for transnational strikes or other labor actions that are disruptive enough to ensure that companies follow agreements.

The vignette included the activist wondering why this Congress included groups who worked

for different companies, showing the Congress was not a "corporate campaign" or "governance struggle," following Ford's typology (Ford, 2024) Rather, the Congress was more similar to a "thematic campaign," with a broader objective of guaranteeing labor rights and the freedom to association for gig workers, regardless of the company for which they work. Another reason the Congress did not focus on a single company was because some people worked for multiple apps at once or worked for different apps in succession when they'd been blocked, and companies changed their names or left certain markets somewhat frequently. While many groups had started with names focused on a single brand like "Glovers Ecuador," Glovo left Ecuador and everyone went to different apps, so the name of FRENAPP and the activists organizing with them were no longer focused on a single brand.

Scholars have reinforced the importance of national governments and regulation by national governments. The Global South can have different definitions, but one common association of the term is with nations that are "underdeveloped" or "developing," hence do not have strong national governments that can make favorable trade deals with other nations or with corporations. These governments are often in debt to global financial institutions that require them to make policies that are friendly to companies and capital, mostly from the Global North. Due to this understanding that governments in the Global South are unable or unwilling to protect workers' rights, the strategy for many labor protection campaigns, especially anti-sweatshop campaigns, has been to circumvent attention to national governments and to instead focus on directly attempting to require corporations to behave with social responsibility (or having unions sign directly with corporations, as McCallum advocates). Seidman (2007) argues against the idea that consumer pressure on multinational companies to self-regulate is an effective strategy for labor. Companies agreeing to self-regulate or be monitored by a nonprofit does not translate to improved working conditions and usually is not an agreement that can be enforced. The networks of AUWA and the Congress tended to focus on ensuring that states strengthen and enforce their labor laws. Groups that favored voluntary compliance from companies often ended up splitting off from these networks.

Beyond the patterns of transnational networks and campaigns identified in the literature, I elaborate in the next section on how activists were invested in scalar devices and claimed the global scale.

4.3 Claiming the global scale and scalar devices

One day in November 2022, I was meeting with leaders of FRENAPP. Carolina mentioned that she had been in conversation with staff at a foundation that had previously supported the union with grants. The foundation was inviting FRENAPP to submit a proposal for writing a book. Carolina invited me to help put together the book proposal and to be involved in the research, writing, and translation of the book. We met up later in the week to write up the proposal, using a template they had from previous grant applications. I was tasked with filling out the section about what set this project apart from existing efforts, using notes I took from conversations with Carolina and my own experience writing grant applications. Carolina was using Canva (a free online graphic design website) to create sample book covers. She had just found a template featuring an epic-looking rendering of the earth. "Let's add the different types of gig workers to the top of the world," she said. She took her time scrolling through different free clipart websites until she was satisfied with the images she pasted on top of the globe (Figure 4.3). She inserted a placeholder title for the book: "La Precarización en las Empresas de Plataformas a Nivel Mundial" (Precarization in Digital Platform Companies at the Global Level). She included slogans at the top of the sample book covers which translated to "An [old] exploitation with a new economy," and "If the precarization is global, the fight is international." She credited the slogans to AUWA.

In the sample book cover Carolina created, the viewer and the clipart gig workers lie outside of the stylized image of the whole earth. The globe becomes the prominent scale, superseding national borders, buildings, and neighborhoods. Images such as this call the scale of the



Figure 4.3: This is the sample book cover that was submitted as part of the proposal to get funding for FRENAPP's book project, showing gig workers of different transportation types on top of a stylized image of the whole earth. The book's cover includes sample titles and riffs on slogans which Carolina credited to AUWA: "An [old] exploitation with a new economy," "If the precarization is global, the fight is international," "Precarization in platform companies at the global level." She had included me as a co-editor in the proposal, so my name also appears on the sample cover.

global into being and visually assert the connection between the cause of gig workers and the scale of the world as a whole. The title of the book reinforces the idea of the global scale.

Following Anna Tsing, I consider scale to be "not just a neutral frame for viewing the world: scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted. Scales are claimed and contested in cultural and political projects," (Tsing, 2005, p. 58). The sample book cover image and slogans are examples of how activists claimed the global scale. In this section, I argue that activists brought the global scale of their movement into being through their investments in scalar devices. Ribes argues that ethnographic methods allow us to analyze how actors are representing and managing their large-scale endeavor. Based on his engagement with large-scale cyber infrastructure projects involving geographically dispersed scientists, Ribes proposes "ethnography of scaling" as a method for studying sociotechnical systems and organizations that span borders and are large in size (Ribes, 2014). Ribes introduces the notion of "scalar devices" to refer to "practical activities, techniques, and tools" that are observable to an ethnographer, which actors use for "representing and coping with the size of their endeavor," (Ribes, 2014, p. 158). Scalar devices take different kinds of work to be developed and deployed, sometimes requiring the overcoming of unstable infrastructure. The indicator of scale that results from the process of development and deployment could be received in different ways by different audiences. Scalar devices are subsequently taken up by organizations to represent and manage the global scale of the movement.

4.3.1 International Gig Workers Congress

The First International Gig Workers Congress, described in the opening of this chapter and earlier section, can be understood as a scalar device. The event holds certain parallels with the All Hands meeting described by Ribes (2014) as a scalar device that enabled scientists to

manage a large-scale collaboration. It was a meeting which required many meetings to plan, where diverse members of a geographically dispersed project could gather in-person to render the scale of the project available to human observation. As mentioned, the Congress grew out of a loosely connected network of gig worker organizations called Alianza Unidos World Action (AUWA), which held periodic virtual meetings at the time I began my fieldwork. In these meetings, dates and locations of the Congress were discussed, additional invitees were suggested and sometimes included, agenda items were debated, and logistics of multilingual panels were arranged. An Argentinian grassroots delivery workers' union, SiTraRepA, was one of the leading organizations alongside the Los Angeles local of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which was organizing gig workers in California with the California Gig workers' Union. A combination of volunteer activists and paid staff at SEIU worked to finalize the guest list, collect people's paperwork, book flights and hotel rooms, and arrange for local transportation and meals. Depending on the relationship of their passport with the US border regime, attending activists worked to apply for visas with their own money for the application fees, using letters provided by SEIU. Not everyone was able to secure a visa to travel to the US, and some attended via video messages or sent allied individuals on behalf of their organization. My own attendance was an example of this: none of the leaders of FRENAPP were able to secure a visa to travel to the US, so I was attending on behalf of the union as an academic who had been accompanying and supporting their work and hence was intimately familiar with their situation.

In addition to the people I described in the opening vignette, I met people who were still full-time gig workers, and people who no longer worked full-time in gig work but still were active leaders of unions. Working in the country where they had citizenship and holding a certain passport made it possible for them to attend: gig workers from Taiwan with a Taiwanese passport could enter the US relatively easily, as could Argentine passport holders who were working in Argentina. The contingent from the Philippines who attended were not gig workers themselves, but were staff at a union center that was supporting gig worker

organizing. From Hong Kong, I met an active gig worker and someone who was staff at a nonprofit who did a few hours of delivery work a week to be better able to support organizing. The group who came from Spain included people who had started a delivery co-op, and no longer worked on mainstream delivery apps. Activists and labor organizers in other precarious fields who had relationships with activists involved in organizing the event were also invited to attend and speak at panels, including activists with Amazon warehouse workers, fast food workers, and baristas at US coffee chains.

Decisions about who to invite, how much to cover costs for attending, where to hold the Congress, what kind of language infrastructure to provide, and which issues to spotlight allowed activists to come to concrete terms with the scale of the transnational alliance. These decisions both brought the scale of the movement into being and made exclusions.

Much like Ribes describes scientists taking turns presenting about their contexts to bring everyone onto the "same page" (Ribes, 2014), the Congress featured presentations from representatives of many of the members of the alliance, summarizing organizing efforts that had occurred to date in each context. Headphones and a multitrack translation device facilitated simultaneous translation of the event, accommodating the "largeness" of the meeting in terms of language diversity. Speakers gave updates in panels which were organized into themes such as "Challenges facing unions in the 21st century" and "Organizing and struggle for the labor rights of gig workers." Between presentations and during mealtimes, attendees commented on common struggles in their own contexts, or pointed out differences and unique barriers they faced. They compared notes about lawsuits and legislation and traded protest strategies and ideas for addressing union persecution. Some attendees were complete strangers. Others had been in contact virtually and were having their first in-person meeting. Some activists had met at other transnational gig worker events and were catching up about everything that had changed since the COVID-19 pandemic had kept people from gathering. Still others were constantly in touch about other active campaigns they were co-

ordinating regionally, and took moments to step away from the broader conference activities and address urgent issues.

Each day of the Congress also featured in-person protests. These in-person experiences solidified social relations and allowed activists to enact the global scale to each other and to the targets of the protests. On one of the days, we rallied with our signs at the Los Angeles State Building and marched to the Argentine Consulate to protest the mistreatment and miscategorization of gig workers transnationally.

By physically bringing together gig worker organizers from different places around the world, the Congress created a space where actors could come to grips with their movement as existing on a global scale. The simultaneous interpretation of the Congress (in English, Spanish, French, and Chinese) created the possibility for communication among regionally dominant languages, further producing the global scale of the event. Both in the poster and at the event, national flags and the flags of gig worker organizations were prominently displayed, self-consciously modeled on the aesthetic of the United Nations. The breadth of countries and continents present at the event was a point that was highlighted both visually in the space and on printed materials, as well as verbally in the speeches and panel presentations throughout the congress. The visual decisions of the congress further conjured the global scale, reinforced by the direct call in the slogan for gig workers of the world to unite. Photo and video recordings of the panels and protests served to capture the global scale being enacted in the Congress.

The meeting as a scalar device was taken up subsequently to continue to assert the global scale of the movement. Reports about the meeting circulated back among the members of represented organizations who were not able to attend in person. For example, the newsletter circulated by FRENAPP and published on its website featured images that were posted on the Congress's social media pages to promote and summarize each panel (see Figure 4.4). The logos, flags, signs, and banners that had been created in support of the meeting and

protests, which showed the individual logos of participating organizations and their flags in a circle surrounding a central icon, also continued to be circulated. The common slide deck that FRENAPP often used as a base for presentations had featured a slide about international connections and their participation in prior transnational protests. A slide was added that briefly described the Congress and included the visual promotional material and logos that were made for the Congress's social media.

An important indicator of scale that remained in action and supported subsequent manifestations of the scale of the movement is the WhatsApp group that was created during the Congress. As mentioned earlier, the Congress was planned with groups who had been affiliated with an earlier coalition called AUWA which had gone through some splits and had some inactive members. The Congress provided the occasion for a new WhatsApp group which included the attendees plus groups that were later invited due to their interest in being part of the coalition and who wished to participate in future meetings of the group.

4.3.2 A book of gig worker testimonials

The book I described in the beginning of this section is another scalar device I will describe in detail (Hevia de Brandts and Ramírez, 2023). The process of developing the book shows how the global scale of a gig worker movement was made concrete in mundane activities that culminated in the more exceptional event of the launching of a book. Activists were motivated to write the book and collect their own testimonies on a transnational scale because they saw that resources for knowledge production were often directed away from grassroots actors. They wanted more directly to represent their struggles in all their diversity on their own terms.

One important mundane scalar device that contributed to the more notable scalar device of the book was a spreadsheet of contacts, kept and updated by leaders of FRENAPP. The

Primer congreso de trabajadores de plataformas digitales

Gig Workers Congress

En el congreso internacional de trabajadores de plataformas digitales llevado a cabo en Los Ángeles, California estados unidos se reunieron 15 países donde asistieron varias organizaciones entre sindicatos y colectivos de trabajadores de plataformas digitales, Estados Unidos fue quien organizó la logística para hacer posible este evento estuvieron presente dirigentes de los países como Argentina, Alemania, Brasil, Bélgica, China, Ecuador, España, Paraguay entre otros.



Figure 4.4: This screenshot from FRENAPP's newsletter shows references the Congress and includes images that were used to promote the Congress on social media. A high level summary states that unions and collectives of gig workers from 15 countries convened in Los Angeles, California for an international congress. The text says that the US organized the logistics so that leaders could be present from countries such as Argentia, Germany, Brazil, China (though it was actually Hong Kong and Taiwan that were represented), Ecuador, Spain, and Paraguay.

most important information on the spreadsheet was the WhatsApp phone numbers of people who represented or belonged to other groups of gig worker activists. The global scale of the alliance was made more digestible as the spreadsheet was organized by continent and then alphabetically by country, so that various Argentine gig worker organizations could be found in adjacent rows on the sheet. Many of the organizations were small and grassroots, and did not have websites, but Facebook pages and Instagram accounts were linked whenever they were found. Another column of information was the languages spoken by contacts, which was generally not filled out for the South American continent as most people were expected to speak Spanish, but was more diligently noted for European countries. The organizations in the spreadsheet overlapped heavily with the members of the alliance that organized and attended the Congress. However, there were also other contacts that were made through various means. Some contacts were made organically, when news reporting of strikes and mass demonstrations led other gig worker organizers to reach out to visible leaders. Some contacts were made through virtual and in-person gatherings held by nonprofits and labor organizations supporting gig workers. Some contacts were maintained even after the organizations were no longer part of the alliance.

The scalar device of the spreadsheet encapsulated FRENAPP's global network, from which they drew to assemble a book of testimonials. With the grant in place, FRENAPP's leaders and I worked to get from spreadsheet to book. First we messaged the contacts FRENAPP had. If someone responded with interest in participating, we scheduled an interview and then had to navigate challenges of connectivity and language barriers. In one interview I conducted on behalf of FRENAPP for the book, the spreadsheet had listed the Morrocan-Belgian union leader as an English speaker. We arranged a time to meet on Zoom. At the beginning of the call, he was still riding his motorcycle and I could only hear the sound of the engine. A few minutes later he stopped at a park bench and sat down, putting his helmet beside him. Between weak internet connection, background noise, and more of a language barrier than anticipated, we decided that I would send him questions translated to French

via WhatsApp and he would send back voice memos. Another interviewee from Venezuela also participated via WhatsApp voice memos, since internet infrastructure in Venezuela was rarely able to support synchronous video or audio calls. Some of the gig worker activists we interviewed for the book were able to call from a quiet place with stable internet, but more often than not, people were between gigs on motorcycles or in the car while talking to us.

Having the grant for the book meant that we were able to compensate the people we interviewed for their time. However, moving money across borders to pay the interviewees was also a challenge. The trust it took between FRENAPP and the interviewees to get them paid for the interviews also helped to solidify connections with those who were involved with the book. In one case, we tried to pay a participant via PayPal. He wanted us to send the money to another member of the union who had a PayPal account. We tried to send the money but discovered the entire country of Paraguay was banned from receiving transactions internationally. We then had to wait for a Western Union to open, and wired the money for in-person pickup instead. Some people in countries experiencing hyperinflation asked to be paid in cash when we met at the Congress later. We then collected signatures of receipt for accounting for the grant. From internet connections to payment methods, unstable infrastructures added challenges to the development and deployment of the book, but did not stop this scalar device from coming into fruition.

After this preparatory work was finished, the book required writing, transcribing, translating, editing, and researching the material for each chapter. These activities allowed for the creation of a book that could become an indicator of the scale of the movement, this time with FRENAPP as a central node and featuring the stories of the organizations in other countries with whom they were connected.

The final book contains chapters organized around the testimonies of activists from each country from which FRENAPP was able to interview. Each organization featured has a different presentation. Most include images of logos and photos of the activists who were

interviewed. Their testimony may be more personal, or may be more general about the state of regulation in their country. They may discuss the catalyst that got them to organize. Some chapters were very long, with many stories about protests and organizing efforts over many years. Other chapters reflected the shorter responses that were given by the interviewed activists, sometimes constrained by internet availability, and the smaller amount of organized actions that had been taken in that context.

The book references other scalar devices that had taken the form of international gatherings in the chapter corresponding with the main hosting organization and country. The chapter on Spain includes the statement of Conclusions from a conference hosted by the Spanish delivery workers' advocacy group Riders x Derechos, signed by organizations both included in the book and others who were not part of either the book or the recent Congress. For the Congress, the Declaration of Principles which were voted upon and approved by the attendees was included. Tweets with images that showed the speakers at the panels were also reproduced and cited.

A final section of the book cited and summarized academic research. Several academics who have supported FRENAPP wrote short essays to be included. The book summarized reports from researchers in different countries affiliated with the FairWork initiative from Oxford University. Studies commissioned by the main funder of the book, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation of Germany, were also cited.

A book launch event was held in Ecuador and online in June 2023, featuring presentations from academics, lawyers, and activists. The talks celebrated the work done by gig work activists thus far and emphasized the need for continued mobilization with government and corporate targets, as a lack of regulation continues to contribute to the exploitation faced by workers. The book continues to be freely available as a PDF on FRENAPP's website, as an artifact that indicates the global scale of the movement of which FRENAPP is a part.

The book has served as a central point for various social media campaigns by FRENAPP. Posts often contain emoji flags of the countries represented in the book, further symbolizing internationalism. The book is referenced as a concrete artifact that symbolizes the global nature of the gig workers' movement, where the parallels between gig workers' testimonies can be seen together in one place.

Carolina later began to collaborate with other unions, including a banana workers' union based in Ecuador with connections to other transnational food justice groups. She cited the book and its launch event as an exemplary way of solidifying transnational connections that could be taken up by other union organizations seeking to claim the global scale.

4.3.3 A shifting global scale

The movement's aspiration to be truly global in scale bumped up against various limitations. International border regimes constrained who was able to attend the Congress in-person. Predictably, those with passports from the Global North, those of middle class and higher status could attend while those living under irregular migration status were rendered immobile. Others did not have the time to travel internationally even if they had visas and passports that allowed for it. Those who could not travel to attend the Congress in-person still were a part of the resulting indicator of scale, as their organizations' logos and progress were still reported at the Congress through other representatives or through video and text updates submitted to the group. However, the indicator of the in-person Congress reflected the greater centrality of those who could attend in person.

Coalitions are often not meant to be permanent organizations. Groups that are part of a coalition may outgrow their original purpose or pivot to respond to changing realities on the ground. Changes in ideological alignments and the loss of a common adversary might cause splits (Juris, 2008). The networks of which FRENAPP was a part have gone through

many iterations, implicit dissolutions, membership changes, periods of dormancy, splits, renamings/re-formations, mergings, and fusings. The story of the evolving groups was told to me in fragmented ways by different activists, some of whom relished in telling me their unfiltered opinion on people who were not part of the network anymore, others of whom tactfully directed me to other people who might know more or summarized protracted ad-hominem conflicts as "disagreement about union ideology." Competing and complementary groups continued to appear over the years, as gig work and delivery work continued to be contested topics. Companies were changing conditions, legislation was being drafted, lawsuits fought, and academics, journalists, and foundations were interested in funding and organizing events and producing publicity.

Juris (2008)'s ethnography of anti-corporate globalization led to his recognition of a networked organizational process and logic of organizing, enabled by internet technologies and desire for decentralization after disillusionment with opposition institutions. Juris argues that networked activist formations worked in "movement fields" alongside more traditional leftist institutions and more militant anarchist groups, but had their own organizational and technological practices. Importantly, he finds that the networks are unstable, constantly reforming and splintering. This is not only a spatial argument about decentralization, but also focuses on time and the regrouping of movements. Splitting is not necessarily a negative, because continued institutionalization is not meant to be a feature of networked activism as Juris describes it. He notes his sense of distress upon arriving at his fieldsite and sensing the network he chose to study, his "primary object of analysis, was seemingly coming undone," and that "similar processes were occurring at the transnational scale" (p. 4). However, he came to see that given their instability, it was more fruitful to consider not a specific network as an object of study but rather "the concrete practices through which such networks are constituted. Indeed, contemporary activist networks are fluid processes, not rigid structures," (Juris, 2008, p. 5).

Juris saw the repeated splitting and fusing and reforming of networks with overlapping people and different local, regional, and global scales. He argues that communicative work around competing ideologies, practices, and organizational forms lead to the evolving pattern of shifting alliances he observed. In particular, conflicts about networking versus "traditional command logics" were central to the conflicts he witnessed. Without a strong vertical organizational structure, the social movement networks were understood as rhizomatic, more horizontal and without a central root.

As he initially worried, the network Juris set out to study did in fact "self-dissolve" two and a half years after its founding. The involved parties did not publicly lament this decision, but rather took the opportunity to release a manifesto declaring that they did not want a "fixed identity, a static structure" and decided to desert "boring politics" through their own dissolution (p. 93). Their declaration encapsulated the ideals of a "new fluid network-based politics" that was not preoccupied with institutional continuity or longevity. Juris argues that the rhetorical virtuosity "obscured as much as it revealed": reasons such as "lagging participation, internal conflicts, the difficulty of sustaining diffuse network formations, or the emergence of new initiatives," also contributed to the dissolution of the network (p. 94)

Although none of the networks that FRENAPP was part of did a public self-dissolution based on deserting "boring politics," the instability of networked movements that Juris observed was echoed in my observations. Besides for strategic and ideological splits, there were also interpersonal conflicts that kept alliances from holding indefinitely. I saw and heard about conflicts in various organizations I worked with or talked to people about blow up into screaming fights, letters of resignation, WhatApp blocks, open letters with many accusations, and more[4]. Some of these were overcome, sometimes people asked to be added back into WhatsApp groups they had virtually stormed out of, sometimes people laughed over their past fights. Other times the bitterness lingered and people took every opportunity

[4]This will be intentionally vague as I do not wish to publicly air the internal interpersonal and ideological and other problems of groups I worked with and people I spoke to.

to negatively talk about their former friends and comrades.

Connections formed, broke, were strengthened by recoveries, or stayed shattered in the networking processes of the gig worker activists I worked with. Networks, alliances, and organizations were often unstable and fleeting. Who and what an organization was often fluctuated, and varied depending on the perspective. There were attempts to capture the fleeting history of variable networks and connect more visible moments of protest. The website that I helped Carolina develop for FRENAPP strung together protests from the days of Glovers Ecuador, transnational coordinated protests from when the Latin America regional network was more active, and more recent iterations of activity with the International Gig Workers' Congress. The website helped produce a longer narrative of accomplishments, even as the entity itself was open ended. Legitimacy and some sort of stability despite the temporary nature of organizations and alliances was sought in the collection of news articles and academic publications, and the genealogical tracing of the organization beyond its official beginning.

This ethnographic account can only present the coalition during a moment in time, which had limitations in its membership that did not live fully up to a global reach. At the time of the research, there were regional limitations and no organizations from the African or Australian continents were represented in the global actions. This was in part due to the personal connections that had already been formed, as well as geopolitical and linguistic patterns that made some connections easier to form than others.

Within the scalar devices described in this chapter, there are also shifting and overlapping sets of groups that concretely form the global scale that is called upon in the movement. The book features a set of organizations that have strong enough relationships to FRENAPP where a lead activist was willing to share their testimony. The Congress had the US California-based union and Argentine union as central nodes, while plans for a second congress have many more Asian unions and associations interested in joining.

This section has shown how gig worker activists managed and represented the scale of their movement through concrete activities, tools, and techniques. Activists developed and deployed scalar devices, putting in time, finding funding, managing logistics, and making decisions about tradeoffs such as feasibility, inclusion and exclusion, timing, and consensus. The resulting scalar devices enacted and represented the scale of the movement to themselves and to other stakeholders. Holding an international congress allowed members of the coalition to physically convene, strengthening connections among people and performing collectivity through sharing space. The resulting photos, videos, reports, posters, social media posts, and other artifacts and documentation served to continue to represent the scale of the coalition. Creating a book of gig worker testimonies activated connections that formed the coalition and produced an artifact representing the global scale of the movement that also claimed knowledge production and legitimacy for the activists. The scalar devices I observed often referenced one another. Open letters from past meetings were reprinted as a part of the book. The book also featured a report on the Congress. Personal connections developed at the Congress fed activists' willingness to participate in further activism. Each scalar device worked with the others to reinforce the activists' understanding and representation of the scale of their endeavor.

4.4 (Non)scalability and diversity

During one of the monthly follow-up Zoom meetings after the Congress, a leader of the Brazilian collective Ja Basta shared that they were planning a large strike and requested support from the coalition. Groups present on the call took turns unmuting to state what they could do to demonstrate solidarity from where they were. The Argentinian union SiTraRepA offered to have a special version of their regular "solidarity stops." These weekly events involved setting up folding tables at a street corner where many gig workers wait and

offering free coffee and phone charging. They printed out posters in support of the Ja Basta strike and gig workers who stopped by to get coffee could take photos with the posters. The photos were posted to social media and the WhatsApp group. Carolina shared that FRENAPP was not conducting any in-person events at the time due to security concerts in Ecuador, but posted several times in support of the strike on social media. A Taiwanese union in the group also mentioned that they would be able to support with social media posts. The leader who was at the meeting said he hoped to work up to a level of engagement with the union's members such that they could hold supportive rallies in the future. A German group said that they could mobilize a small rally with the most active members of their union, and they posted photos of their group with a big hand-painted banner that said "same shit, different name" with a multi-headed monster that had different delivery companies as each head. They also had smaller posters of support for Ja Basta. In the US, the California Gig Workers' Union held a car caravan, with a group of rideshare drivers who taped posters in support of Ja Basta and leftover posters from the Congress to their cars. They honked their horns and drove slowly down the road of embassies in Los Angeles, and posted videos of the protest in the group.

This vignette is an example of coordinated protest actions that occurred with the overlapping networks that comprised AUWA and the First International Gig Workers Congress. Coordinated protest actions are also scalar devices that call up the global scale and allow activists to manage and represent the scale of their movement in a concrete manner. This section of the chapter focuses on how activists maintain internal diversity while enacting the scale of their movement. I contrast internal diversity that activists maintained with the "scalability" of platforms, showing that the global scale is claimed and enacted differently by the companies versus their workers.

Anna Tsing has argued that scalability is one of the values of modernity, defined specifically as the ability of a project to continually expand without changing its nature Tsing (2012).

She highlights the way scalability inhibits transformative relationships and diversity:

> Scalability is possible only if project elements do not form transformative relationships that might change the project as elements are added. But transformative relationships are the medium for the emergence of diversity. Scalability projects banish meaningful diversity, which is to say, diversity that might change things. (p. 105)

The example of sugar plantations illustrates how scalability operates: by conquest and genocide of indigenous populations, and by destroying the ecosystems that existed in lands colonized, the sugar plantations can expand on what has been made *terra nullius*, and isolated crops can grow under tightly controlled conditions, tended to by the labor of enslaved workers. Ecosystems and relationships between people and land are destroyed, and controlled expansion is put in its place. While scalability is not good for diversity, it is capable of garnering massive profits for those who control the land.

The positive value assigned to scalability has been naturalized among many people. To counter this, Tsing advances a theory of nonscalability. She advocates for a renewed ability to see and value diversity, in an effort to reconceptualize and rebuild the world away from the image of the colonial plantation. While nonscalable methods of production or relating are not automatically less exploitative than scalable ones, they leave more possibilities for diversity. The next parts of this section of the chapter will explore further how diversity is maintained when activists call up the global scale of their movement.

Transnational support for the Ja Basta strike was more involved and required synchronous planning during the video call. Other updates were shared via text in the WhatsApp group between Zoom meetings, and smaller coordinated protest actions took place within a quick turnaround time period. In another example, Carolina was on the phone with her comrades in Colombia, who were facing acute union persecution and backlash after the government

released a proposed labor reform. She posted about these developments in the WhatsApp group which at the time corresponded to mostly AUWA members. Groups in the chat expressed their support and solidarity with the Colombian union. A leader of the California Gig Workers' union offered to do a small action in support of the Colombian union. He suggested that they could deliver an open letter to the Colombian consulate in Los Angeles. Since I had some bandwidth, I ended up working with the leaders of UNIDAPP to draft a letter in Spanish and English that briefly summarized the situation and demanded an end to union persecution, titled "Proposed Labor Reform and Union Persecution of Leaders of Digital Platform Workers."

These examples demonstrate two prototypical ways that coordinated protest actions were carried out, but many variations occurred. Open letters may ask for feedback from members or just provide options to sign on or not as individual coalition members. Sometimes actions or signatures were taken in the name of the coalition if no one objected. Similarly, requests for videos may be accompanied by a suggested script or be more open-ended in nature. Coordinated protest actions were sometimes more involved than a signature or message of support. Protests, rallies, social media campaigns, and mutual aid events could also be coordinated in support of a member of the alliance. Sometimes these were planned with more notice on semi-regular video calls with members of the alliance, with attendees saying one by one what they would be able to do to support. Other times planning was more spontaneous and was carried out in the chat or with individual calls to certain activists with whom there were closer relationships or higher alignment with the issue. Generally, these ad-hoc requests took far less effort to fulfill than the work that went into planning the Congress. They were able to occur more frequently and on short notice, in response to external events. The scalar devices of open letters and messages of support allowed activists to represent and activate the global scale of their movement.

Ad hoc coordinated protest actions varied in the indicators of scale they produced for activists

to understand and manage the scale of the movement. Physical gatherings in protest would be an ephemeral indicator that resulted from a call for coordinated action. The act of coming together in protest in support of an issue raised by members of the coalition based in different parts of the world enacted the global scale of solidarity and was a tangible way to portray the scale of the movement. In these cases a photo, a printed sign, or a video during a small rally or gathering would be recorded and shared back in the group chat as a more durable artifact to document how global solidarity was enacted at a moment in time. Other times there was a more stable artifact, such as a letter that was signed by different organizations in the chat. Coordinated actions that were carried out over social media produced more lasting indicators of scale, as the record of supportive videos and open letters remained on social media and were often reshared over time and by different groups.

To give a more concrete example of an indicator of scale that has resulted from coordinated protest actions, the English version of the letter that was delivered to the Colombian consulate is quoted here:

> On March 17, 2023, the national government of Colombia released a proposed reform to labor law, including Chapter 7, *Trabajo en Plataformas Digitales Tecnológicas de Reparto* (Work on Digital Delivery Platforms) that protects the rights of delivery workers, who until now have been misclassified as independent contractors. Under this misclassification, they have been denied access to health insurance, pensions, overtime pay, and more.
>
> Since 2020, *Unión de Trabajadores de Plataformas*, UNIDAPP, an industry-wide union of platform workers, has fought for labor protections for gig workers, and has supported workers who have been unjustly dismissed from the apps and who have suffered work accidents without proper protection from the companies or the state.
>
> In response to the proposed labor reforms, Rappi S.A.S. and other platform com-

panies have begun an underhanded campaign to delegitimize the union Unidapp, and stir up support from riders to go against the legislation and against the protection of their own labor rights. The leaders of Unidapp have faced union persecution, including defamation and death threats.

We have come to the Colombian Consulate to support the ongoing struggle of our colleagues in Colombia. We demand that the labor protections present in the proposed reforms be upheld and that the underhanded tactics of Rappi to weaken the regulation be stopped. We demand protection for union leaders who face threats for the work they have done to provide advocacy, solidarity, safety, and legal protection for their colleagues.

The letter included the logo of AUWA, which was the name of the coalition at the time and of the group chat where the letter had been circulated. The English version of the letter uses the language of misclassification, connecting the proposed labor reforms of Colombia in their specificity to the more general name of a framing of gig workers' issues that would be understandable in the US, where the letter was being delivered. The letter highlights struggles particular to the Colombian case but also uses language that resonates more broadly with struggles faced by other unions in the coalition. Unions and groups who were part of the coalition had all faced backlash and threats to some degree, with the Colombian case being one of the more extreme cases. Without flattening the diversity of challenges faced by the groups within the coalition, the letter expressed solidarity and members of the coalition were activated in the common experience of persecution when they protested and underhanded efforts by companies to weaken regulation.

Those who requested support have responded with appreciation for the expressions of global solidarity that are made concrete via open letter signatures, messages of support, and other coordinated protest actions such as strikes, rallies, and mutual aid events. Without having to gather in the same place or follow the same protest strategy, actions coordinated in time

enacted the global scale of the movement for activists. The example of the Ja Batista strike and support for the strike shows the variety of actions that might be taken in different places by allied groups for the same statement of solidarity.

The coordinated protest actions continue to enact the global scale of the movement after their moment of release. They are referenced and reshared in subsequent documents produced by members of the alliance, such as in newsletters and social media posts. When shared again later, they provide a concrete means of demonstrating the solidarity that has been shared among the different members of the movement. Those who respond to open calls for signatures of support videos strengthen their links with other members of the alliance. The feeling of trust, reliability, and responsiveness from other activists in the coalition is another way that the scale of the global movement is made meaningful to individuals who are part of the movement.

The Congress was a very large indicator of scale that took many months of planning. The vignettes above show how activists initiated smaller coordinated protest actions in an ad-hoc manner. These requests and the artifacts they produce serve as ad-hoc ways in which the global scale of this gig workers' movement is enacted while maintaining diversity. These ad hoc coordinated protest actions also show that any member of the coalition can direct what causes are acted upon in a given moment, rather than having a top-down way of operating the coalition. Activists were motivated to request and participate in coordinated protest actions because they were able to feel like they were not alone in moments when challenges were stacked high against them locally. Displays of transnational support were also able to help rally local participation at strikes and protests, as people knew they had supporters in different locations who would witness what was happening and be a voice of defense for them.

4.4.1 Monocultural platforms, mutually transforming resistance

As described in earlier chapters, corporate platforms are structured to extract maximal profit for investors and hence have a mandate for scalability. Many corporate platforms are backed by venture capital and are given funds to grow aggressively and capture as many users as possible towards an eventual monopoly that can then provide profit for the investors (Lampinen et al., 2022). For such aggressive growth to be profitable, the underlying culture and model of the platform does not change as users are added. As Tsing (2012) argues, projects are scalable when they have "the ability to expand—and expand, and expand—without rethinking basic elements," (Tsing, 2012, p. 505). Such smooth expansion, Tsing argues, "requires that project elements be oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter... Thus, too, scalability banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things," (Tsing, 2015, p. 38). As mentioned, colonial sugar plantations are paradigmatic of how scalability operates: the violent creation of *terra nullius* makes way for mass growing of the same, isolated crop in tightly controlled conditions, where plants and workers are made as equivalent and replaceable as possible. So too are gig workers isolated and designed to be as replaceable as possible in platform apps. The expansion of platform companies has another commonality with settler colonial plantations, since previous laws and relationships are disregarded and instead forcefully overwritten. Del Nido Del Nido (2022) gives one clear example of how local laws are completely disregarded and broken by platform companies as they enter a new market and country. In Buenos Aires, judges ruled against Uber's operation in the city without licenses and without following regulations for public transportation, but the company blatantly disregarded these orders and offered to pay fines for drivers to encourage them to break the law. The scalable expansion of platforms can also be seen in the way large transnational platform companies use common rhetoric used to recruit platform workers around the world Woodcock (2021).

While corporate platforms are typically monocultural and scalable, other forms of digitally

mediated work take far more diversity. For example, an allied union in Paraguay has WhatsApp groups by neighborhood where deliveries are managed in a manner similar to traditional taxi cooperatives with a dispatcher coordinating orders. These delivery workers are mostly people who have been banned from corporate platforms and have turned to this place-based model where workers are familiar with one another and the neighborhood and clients. This model does not scale in the same way. In addition to social limits, the size of a WhatsApp group also limits how many people are members of a given informal cooperative. If more delivery workers seek to join, a remapping of zones may occur to ensure that workers are in an appropriately local neighborhood and are fairly distributing demand. Other examples of nonscalable platform work includes the cooperative Señoritas Courier, a delivery cooperative owned and managed women in Brazil, which has struggled to expand in competition with mainstream platforms Salvagni et al. (2022). Dalal et al. Dalal et al. (2023) provide insights into platforms they have labeled as "indie platforms" in food delivery, where they find a subsidiarity business model as opposed to a scalability business model, hence allowing more human intervention and agency from deliverers and restaurant stakeholders.

Shifting to non-scalable platforms has been one way that gig workers organizing have responded to exploitative conditions and to being blocked by the platforms. However, many people still work for the corporate platforms. Organizing workers of monocultural platforms should not itself become monocultural. Through layered scalar devices, activists were able to understand, represent, and enact their movement as global. I argue that the scalar devices I observed among gig worker activists were able to enact the global scale of the movement while leaving room for diversity (Tsing, 2012). Multilingual translation welcomed conference attendees to speak in heterogeneous languages. Coordinated actions did not require each participating group to take the same action. This approach took into account that safety and other conditions might constrain certain groups from doing public protest. Collected testimonies in the book allowed both parallels and incommensurabilities to be shared without requiring the same structure or trajectory for each group's story.

The final chapter of the dissertation discusses in more detail how activists can continue to spread their influence without a monocultural capture of participants. The concept of processes of proliferation attunes us to how activist initiatives' blueprints can travel while being transformed by their interaction with new places and new leaders who take up those blueprints Lampinen et al. (2022). Examples from the fieldwork include the encounters between gig workers. From early pandemic protests to the call with Peruvian protest organizers, activists reach out to one another in open-ended encounters that can lead to the traveling of blueprints. When workers migrate (or re-migrate) to new countries and begin organizing and meeting with organizers in their new countries, mutual transformations also happen in another process of proliferation.

The story of Carolina's migration from Colombia to Ecuador, and how she worked with Glovers Ecuador to start FRENAPP is an example of this. Carolina did not attempt to simply expand UNIDAPP into Ecuador or form a hierarchical relationship between UNIDAPP and activists in Ecuador. She did not start from scratch in trying to start organizing and she did not ignore the different context that already existed in Ecuador. Instead, she got in contact with the activists of Glovers Ecuador, and FRENAPP was created in a way that carried on the legacy of the organizing that had happened under Glovers Ecuador. The work done by Glovers Ecuador continued to inform FRENAPP's choices and FRENAPP continued to celebrate the achievements of Glovers Ecuador. FRENAPP and UNIDAPP existed in a mutually transforming relationship: Carolina's and other UNIDAPP leaders' experiences organizing were able to provide scaffolding and support to FRENAPP. FRENAPP's own experiences and connections were examples that were shared back to UNIDAPP leaders. The relationship with banana unions is one example of how FRENAPP evolved in a different direction. They shared back their knowledge of new-to-them global causes like an environmental "just transition" (*transición justo*) and their new network of connections to funders.

This section has shown through the coordinated protest actions of activists that groups involved in this transnational coalition maintain diversity and do not operate in a hierarchical manner. The gig workers' movement claims the global scale and enacts it without falling into the scalability that allows platform companies to reach massive scales. The growth of the gig workers' movement was slow and not replicable. Encounters remained open, and sometimes connections formed that were lasting while others were not, as was seen in the unstable membership and activity of AUWA over the years. Either way, subsumption was not the goal. Mutually transforming connections were formed where learnings were shared in multiple directions among activists.

4.5 Power dynamics in a transnational labor coalition

The alliances described in this chapter cross many divides. One important divide is the divide across the Global North and Global South. There are varied ways in which organizations self-consciously address these divisions. Some unions from the Global South refused to take money from other entities, preferring to make sure that they remain completely independent in their fundraising and that they are not beholden to other interests, especially those in the Global North. For example, the union SiTraRepA from Argentina was very wary of both transnational union funding and from joining the nation's union centers. Other unions saw membership in alliances as a means to access resources, both in terms of funding and social capital. For FRENAPP, taking funds from transnational organizations or groups from the Global North was not a concern. However, FRENAPP, like SiTraRepA, was very wary of the national union centrals that had also offered various kinds of support or membership. Union centrals had members like taxi unions that had directly opposed gig workers. Members of FRENAPP were concerned that union centrals would try to represent the concerns of gig workers without actually consulting gig worker groups and take advantage of transnational

interest in the issue. Union centrals also often had leadership members that were elected for life and hence gig worker activists felt they were "dinosaurs" who did not understand and could not represent the challenges that faced gig workers.

Indeed, the conditions of gig workers were quite different from traditional factory-style workplaces where union centrals drew the majority of their membership. Like scholars have observed from studies of Occupy-style organizing[5], this movement had a networked and decentralized, "leaderless" structure (Castells, 2013). Membership was fuzzy and relationships were horizontal. People were organizing loosely across differences. The form of coalition among gig workers, which was an informal network affiliation, aligned with the structure of gig work itself. People worked for multiple platforms, either in succession or simultaneously, came together in pockets of urban public space, and did not have days characterized by temporal regularity. None of their coworkers were their boss or manager, and all gig workers were formally equal at the bottom of the platform company's hierarchy being managed by an app. Similarly, coalitions came together in irregular ways, without temporal or spatial regularity. Groups belonged to multiple coalitions and were not required or expected to be loyal members of just one hierarchical organization. Streams of resources would be directed toward a certain event like the Congress or the book, but there was not an expectation of stable resources, stable roles, and continual stable projects for the coalition. As chapter two argues, both gig work and coalitions of gig worker activists were characterized strongly by temporariness.

Unions and other groups within the coalitions of which FRENAPP was a part had unequal access to resources, safety, and stability. Some groups were barely able to stay functional, while others had become established or were supported by larger organizations such that they had dedicated staff. Some union groups were formed of mostly citizens, and had dif-

[5]Occupy-style organizing refers to the famous chain of Occupy Wall Street and protests that started in the US but were taken up in many other places, and other movements like what is known as the Arab Spring in different countries in the Middle East and Indignados movement in Spain, which are often studied under the same paradigm.

ferent concerns than those that mostly were noncitizens and risked particular harm due to their immigration status. Groups were in countries with more or less general safety and general hostility toward unionization. Government recognition of unions and labor rights varied in each country. Although during my fieldwork, FRENAPP did not feel that the networks they were part of were divided in a paternalistic way across Global North versus Global South lines, transnational labor solidarity can easily become what South African labor scholar Sakhela Buhlungu (2008) has called "labor philanthropy," where power relations between Global North and Global South labor movements are reified rather than unsettled (Gill, 2009). Labor philanthropy is "a form of activism born out of moral outrage when a community or society perceived to be vulnerable is being abused, exploited, or oppressed." (Buhlungu, 2008, p. 355). Labor philanthropy diagnoses situations where Global North (or otherwise privileged workers) seek to generate sympathy for less fortunate workers, and do not invest toward the empowerment of those "less-fortunate" workers to self-advocate, in contrast to true labor solidarity where workers come together to defend their common interests across borders. Gill (2009) documents how an effort at transnational labor activity ended up being more of an example of labor philanthropy. The United Steelworkers lawyers wanted to support justice for Colombian labor activists organizing in Coca Cola plants who had been assassinated. However, this transnational effort resulted in pressure to settle a lawsuit when the Colombian organizers while the conditions of negotiation left fired union activists unable to speak out. The union felt their cause had been depoliticized and the US allies focused on an individualized, human rights framing that left out class struggle and did not make the union any stronger. The union decided that they were not interested in settlement in the end, since the process was leaving them with even less of a voice over their own story and priorities. Buhlungu highlights the fact that such an approach to activism does not include in its goals the ability for the victims of labor abuses to build organizations for themselves and run their own campaigns in the future, thus creating dependence in patterns that follow colonial lines. Drawing on Atanasoski and Vora

(2019), I would argue that this also is more about demonstrating the moral character and the fuller humanity of the labor-philanthropists while perpetuating hierarchies and scales of humanity (p. 171, 174). In response to monitoring schemes that Seidman (2007) notes are not useful, Buhlungu (2008) further notes that financial resources, organizational strength, and empowerment is actually going to (differently classed) monitoring NGOs rather than to workers (see alsoTsing (2005)).

In contrast to cases of blatant labor philanthropy, the model of the coalitions studied in this chapter have so far remained truer to the model of transnational labor solidarity, through the horizontal style of relation and the slow and organic growth of groups who entered a loose set of relationships that rhetorically asserted rights-focused global resistance against platform companies. Although groups in the Global North usually had access to more resources and more safety, and could fund events such as the Congress to happen, I did not hear feedback that these groups from the North were more controlling of the directions that the coalition took. Coordinated protest actions were started by groups in all parts of the coalition, and the type support would be directed by the asking member and was understood to be constrained also by what each group's capacity would be. Continued coalition with transnational labor actors and across power differentials should always remain strategic and open-ended, with continual vigilance against co-optation.

4.6 A different global scale

The ubiquity of transnational gig companies has made it so a traveler from the US can open their phone in another country to get around with the same Uber app and order food to their hotel with the same Uber Eats app that they use at home. Seamless convenience across borders, on offer for those who can afford it, is one vision of the global that companies and consumers of upper-class positions have made to exist (Del Nido, 2022). This vision operates

through what del Nido calls "post-political reasoning" to ensure that the local claims of taxi unions and city government cannot stop Uber from operating in Buenos Aires. The work carried out by activists at FRENAPP and the coalitions of the Congress and AUWA to make a global movement for gig workers' rights responds differently to the vision of app companies. Unlike the case del Nido documents, where local and national scales are asserted in opposition to Uber's capitalist version of globalization, these coalitions counter gig work companies with an alternative global vision. In this sense, their work shares a legacy with the *alter-mundializacion* (alter-globalization) movement launched in the 1990s by the global solidarity for the Zapatista movement(Rovira, 2019). Alter-mundializacion was erroneously reported in the media as an anti-globalization movement. Rather than eschewing it, alter-mundializacion also demonstrated a commitment to the global scale, as a means for resisting capital rather than as a paradigm for unfettered capital. These forms of counter-hegemonic globalization (Evans, 2000) are not automatically found in the contradictions of corporate globalization, but rather take the contingent work of activists to be made meaningful. Gig workers' efforts to make a global movement in defense of their labor rights represents a means by which a different kind of globalization is imagined and enacted, however partially and contingently.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the transnational coalitions of which FRENAPP was a part, and the ways that the activists represented and managed the scale of their movement through scalar devices. By putting scalar devices in conversation with theory from STS that is critical of *monocultural scalability* and the ways that scalable projects flatten diversity for ease of growth, the chapter argues that mutually transformative encounters between activist groups can become claims to the global scale through investment in scalar devices. The chapter

shows how activists left room for diversity and mutual transformation while enacting the global scale through the scalar devices described. Despite the risks and power dynamics that remain in any effort toward coalition, the activists enact an alternate claim on the global scale, one that prioritizes dignified work conditions and does not focus on profit, efficiency, and smooth expansion of companies as the platform companies' does. The final chapter of this dissertation will discuss further how scholars can support collective action that allows for heterogeneity, and scaffold additional mutually transformative encounters among activists. As the "uberization" of industries continues and increases the number of precarious workers, it becomes ever more crucial for gig workers to fight back against exploitative conditions at a global scale. This chapter argues that making and maintaining a global gig workers' movement should not focus on *scalability* in the sense of *scaling up*, but rather continue to proliferate a diverse ecology of initiatives that can contest monocultural platform capitalism.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This dissertation has told a story how gig workers of the world have sought to unite to make a common demand for justice and respect as workers and people. Gig worker activists I spent time with worked to make things better for themselves and their coworkers. They found ways to share and survive even when someone was blocked from their work and incapacitated by injuries from accidents or COVID-19. They came together so someone could have a funeral, shared ways for a family to survive after a breadwinner was killed and the app responded by issuing a warning for an incomplete delivery. They defended each other against robberies, sickness, threats, and sabotage. They hustled and navigated through bureaucracy and trends and relationships for a chance to access the potential of resources, fundings, and support from international foundations over the years. They learned lingo and translated laws and researched the ways different regulations might change how work happened, for better and for worse, depending on if one had papers. They debated what tactics might be worth trying, what kinds of risks had not paid off in the past, what kinds of sacrifices were tolerable for a temporary job in a temporary place.

The second chapter in this dissertation shows the odds stacked against gig workers to unite

at all. The conditions that make gig work a phenomenon in the world also make collective action extremely challenging. Being made temporary by border regimes and the design of platform companies' business models compounded with workers' own temporary orientations to the place they lived and the job they had. The third chapter focuses on how gig workers in one part of the world attempt to unite under the model of unionization. Giving the concept of unionization traction in the context of anti-socialism in Latin America required the careful work of activists in resituating the term and contesting other potential understandings of gig work and how to respond to working conditions. The fourth chapter is focused on how gig workers united at the global scale. The chapter discusses how activists called up and claimed the global scale without requiring internal homogeneity, and formed mutually transforming connections instead of growing by monocultural scalability.

The rest of this concluding chapter elaborates on the contributions I make in this dissertation. First, I discuss how this dissertation contributes to conversations about how digital technology changes experiences of time and space. I argue that rather than time-space compression, migrant gig workers' lives are overdetermined by temporariness, both imposed against their desires and chosen forms of temporariness. While consumers of platform services experience a time and space of convenience and not needing to plan ahead, workers are unable to plan ahead and instead must find ways to wait well in the unknown time that is imposed on them. Next, I discuss how this dissertation contributes to literature on labor organizing and transnational social movements. I argue that temporariness in many dimensions discussed previously plays out in ways that make traditional labor organizing challenging. Most gig workers had anti-socialist and anti-union dispositions. Against this backdrop, activists I encountered sought to rehabilitate a version of union organizing even as they also mistrusted traditional unions in their own countries. They took an agnostic approach to strategies, including mutual aid and seeking accountability with the state despite their lack of trust in the state. They also followed transnational patterns of advocacy by appealing to supranational organizations such as the ILO. This dissertation is also a story

of localization in transnational (labor) organizing. I contribute analysis of the work activists did to rehabilitate the concept of unionization, showing how structural analyses of labor processes and common conditions of work are insufficient to understand how collective action takes place in certain contingent ways. It takes vernacularization and contestation against different possible interpretations of working conditions and potential solutions. Scholars of organizing at different scales should pay attention to how different universals are localized and transformed in the process. Third, to literature on scale and globalization, I contribute an understanding of bottom-up coalitioning. Scale is not only enacted by big hierarchical organizations. The global scale can be claimed by heterogenous networks that allow for internal diversity. The global scale is achieved by the monocultural scalability of transnational platform companies, but a homogenous globalized world of convenience is not the only way that national borders can be crossed. Gig worker activists' investments in scalar devices allow them to manage and represent the scale of their endeavor while remaining open to transformation from each of the members of the coalition. Scholars of transnational labor organizing and technologists who seek to support activism should pay attention to this kind of coalitioning and support it. Finally, this dissertation makes a contribution to discussions around academic encounters with activists. Encounters across power differentials are never innocent but can also be mutually transforming instead of dominating. I argue that errand as method is a means for ethnographers to dedicate time and energy to accompany activists in times and activities of maintenance, where unglamorous care tasks are carried out to keep organizing going. This also means being there for moments of affective negativity and supporting, listening, and witnessing. Academics, especially those in HCI and technology design, can put our attention toward supporting coalition and proliferation, and scaffolding mutually transforming connections among ourselves and among activists who may not yet be in conversation. We can put academic resources in the service of activists by building infrastructures of listening, curating and convincing audiences to listen, and providing space and time for hearing the voices of activists.

5.1 Temporariness in time and space

This dissertation makes a contribution to theorizations of time and space in a world saturated by technology and crisis. Dominant "speed theory" and theories of placelessness argue that time and space compress as a result of digital technologies: information and communication can travel ever more quickly. Massey (1994) and Sharma (2014) argue that time-space compression applies to only the elite stakeholders of global capitalism. They call on us to attend to power in relation to our assumptions about time-space compression. Some people are held in place or forced to move, and made to wait or rush, in order to sustain dominant temporal orders and facilitate the mobility of others. The mobility and temporality one experiences is not uniformly sped up and free, but depends on one's position in the power geometry and power chronography.

This ethnography shows how migrant gig workers in Ecuador exist in a temporality and spatiality not characterized by speed-up and mobility of technology and modernity but by temporariness. The place they are living is a temporary stop on a migration journey; the job they have is temporary by design down to the minute. There is a pervading sense that one cannot trust the continuity of mundane life even as one continues to try to survive. This kind of "temp culture" (Berlant, 2011) is not unique to gig workers, but migrant gig workers are paradigmatic of a new level of impermanence and orientation to time and the future. Berlant describes "temp culture" as an increasing expectation that affective and material benefits of relationships and institutions will not be reliable in the present or future. Her analysis of film and literature highlights the lack of reciprocity that people experience after structural adjustment and the shrinkage of the state. Employment and interpersonal relationships are marked by temporariness and a requirement for flexibility. Desire for stable reciprocity often ends up blocking the flourishing of those who desire, becoming an optimistic attachment that turns out to be cruel. Temporariness is the primary experience of time and space for people who do not get the increasingly rare stable jobs that can sustain an upwardly-mobile

middle class lifestyle, for those who are newly exposed to precarity and for those who have been experiencing uneven distributions of vulnerability before state shrinkage.

Activism that insists on reciprocity from platform companies through better conditions and recognition of employment refuses to accept that temp culture is the only way. Migrant gig worker activists embraced some aspects of temporariness in their own orientation to place and to their job, but rejected the complete abandonment of reciprocity. They supported each others' projects to move on from where they lived to find a more stable milieu to try again. They took other jobs but continued to put their time and energy toward the project of the union and various projects of mutual aid that took place under the gig worker banner.

Following the argument that borders multiply labor (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013), chapter two shows the ways platforms are designed to facilitate progressively more marginalized groups to work temporarily on the apps as conditions worsen over time alongside removal of subsidies from venture capital. Workers themselves often narrated a temporary orientation to the job of being a gig worker. Many recognized that this was a job that did not provide stability or advancement opportunities and was not considered a job of high status, and even those who worked for a long time on apps often did not identify with gig work as their career. Migrant workers often had a temporary orientation to their stay in Ecuador and planned to re-migrate to the US or Spain, or to return to Venezuela. These compounding temporary orientations made many unwilling to engage with collective action. Nevertheless, activism and organizing still occurred around a tentative and sometimes former identity as a gig worker. The essence of a gig worker was strategically used as a mobilizing slogan (Spivak, 1993). As the chapters show, it was an essence that did not require people to homogeneously identify. The coalitions I studied were built around the gig worker essence in a way that allowed for affinity instead of identification(Haraway, 1991).

In chapter two, I discussed the dual temporal logics that pervade gig work platforms. For consumers, there is a temporal logic that is focused on convenience, so one does not have

to plan ahead. The speediness and mobility that are meant to be part of technology and modernity are made available to consumers via gig platforms, who can sign onto an app almost anywhere and expect very similar services to be available for purchase. Rather than needing to book a ride ahead of time or wait for the bus, a consumer can opt to do less planning and keep more flexibility in their travel arrangements. For gig workers, the temporal logic of being made temporary does not allow them to plan ahead. The circumscribed time that Mazmanian et al. (2015) finds is the dominant temporal order is also the temporal order that underlies factory logics of clocking in and clocking out. Gig workers do not clock in or clock out, which could allow for some flexibility. Both in the literature and among gig workers I met, not having to ask permission to call off work was an important aspect of why gig work would be appealing. But this flexibility also means that they always might be missing out on more orders or opportunities to earn. A block of time dedicated to waiting for orders does not reliably turn into an earned sum, an experience that gig workers have in common with certain forms of taxis and other industries that pay by piecework. Delivery and other location-based gig workers could not space out their orders so that they could use their time evenly, and instead had to alternate between waiting and rushing through traffic, at risk to their own and others' safety. Gig workers, like taxi drivers before them, make the most of this waiting time with strategies for waiting well. They find and share strategies to increase the time they spend making money or the time they can spend resting and they develop and share geospatial knowledge about the places they work. Waiting time also provided activists and workers with space and time to form socialities that allowed for collective action.

In addition to the waiting that is imposed in the way work is mediated on the app, gig workers and gig worker activists are made to cope with other forms of waiting imposed upon them. The many migrants wait for their paperwork or status to change, wait to be reunited or for conditions to change so they can go home. Activists experience another layer of waiting, as they wait for legal justice processes to play out, and wait for the government

to recognize union status. Activists wait for grant funding and then rush to fulfill send in their deliverables to release much needed financial resources.

Not being able to plan for the future puts gig workers in the present time frame. With the concept of staying with the trouble, Haraway (2016) encourages this kind of temporal orientation in response to crises of different sorts that are causing uneven suffering:

> In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing point between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as more critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. (p. 1)

Haraway urges us to avoid faithful belief in techo-salvation as well as a defeated stance of hopelessness. Reading the notion of staying with the trouble alongside gig workers' acceptance and contestations of various aspects of temp culture allows us to see how struggles for gig workers' rights can be part of a politics that demands reciprocity without requiring permanence.

5.2 Specific challenges of migrant gig worker organizing

This dissertation has taken an extended ethnographic approach to understand the specific challenges of organizing migrant gig workers. The perspective from daily accompaniment

allows for analysis of the daily work that comprises organizing in this context. This study complements literature from a view from further outside that focuses on how the structure of gig work would lead to certain kinds of organizing or label a new vanguard as the digital proletariat. My analysis of FRENAPP's strategies contributes to discussions of the role of the state in labor organizing for non-standard work arrangements, showing the pragmatic and agnostic perspective of activists who make the best of available options in conditions of irregular immigration status and low trust in the state, while maintaining some attachment to practices of advocacy that adheres to the standard operations of international civil society. Despite their own mistrust and low expectations of state accountability, gig worker activists at FRENAPP worked to make union organizing stick in the anti-socialist context of Venezuelan diaspora in Ecuador. This work of friction made universal concepts meaningful locally and transformed them in the process.

Migrant gig worker organizing was challenging in specific ways because of the temporariness discussed in chapter two. Many people did not identify long-term as gig workers. Border regimes left them without full rights, and their status could become changed for better or worse depending on ongoing decisions about immigration policy. Their days were not characterized by temporal regularity and they met in spaces of waiting in the city but without the regularity of an office or factory. They did not all work for the same company, and most people had worked for more than one platform either in sequence or simultaneously. No one was anyone else's direct boss, since they were all more or less equally at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, and being managed by an anonymous application. These fuzzy memberships and horizontal relationships also translated to the way that gig workers organized into coalitions, as described in chapter four. Rather than investing in a steady structure, streams of resources were directed toward more one-off events like the Congress described in chapter four.

The choice to organize in the style of unionization posed specific challenges for gig worker

activists in anti-socialist contexts. Activists had to rehabilitate the idea of a union against a backdrop of strong anti-socialist sentiment after the collapsing of Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro and the polarizing administration of Rafael Correa in Ecuador. The concept of friction (Tsing, 2005) draws our attention to how activists have attempted to make a union-focused type of collective action relevant to gig workers in the context of the Venezuelan diaspora in Ecuador. Common work conditions are not sufficient to bring people together, or for unionization to become a path forward around which workers mobilize. Activists worked to directly resituate the term for union, *sindicato*, and link the term with justice and the potential for improved working conditions while delinking it from notions of groups affiliated with Maduro's government carrying out criminal activities in Venezuela. Activists reframed the cause of gig workers to be legible to different causes including feminism and women's rights, migration and human mobility, artificial intelligence regulation, and security. Such framings made different global causes meaningful in their connection to the daily struggles of gig work. They also allowed for greater visibility of gig workers' struggles and access to new audiences and resources for the activists. Activists worked to contest the moral meanings of different practices in line with the goals of the particular kind of transnational organizing of which they were a part. The practice of renting accounts to another worker, usually one who was blocked or did not have papers, was named as *cuarterización*, a naming that riffed on the word for outsourcing or subcontracting. This naming highlighted the benefits that accrue to the one renting out the account at the expense of the one using the account. Such a practice could have been understood more charitably as a way to work around the app's restrictions and allow someone the opportunity to work, but activists consciously rejected this interpretation. The work of friction highlighted in chapter three illustrates the particular challenges of organizing in this context.

FRENAPP took an agnostic stance toward the strategies they used in organizing. They did not trust or expect the state to work, but they still followed the norms of international civil society: they participated in transnational networks that were focused on getting unions rec-

ognized by the state, getting ILO conventions respected, and passing laws to recognize the employment relationship between gig companies and workers. They did not trust that the state would provide accountability, but they tried anyway, and dedicated time to forming a union and registering it with the ministry of labor, seeking a labor inspection with help from the Ombudsman of Ecuador, and pushing for legislation that would recognize employment relationships and regulate platform companies. As accountability from the national government was not achieved, they also sought accountability from supranational organizations like the ILO, following the classic boomerang model of advocacy (Keck and Sikkink, 1999), as described in chapter four.

Seeking accountability from the state they did not trust or expect to work and using a human rights framing is the approach taken by FRENAPP's activists, who despite their cynicism still followed moral and political norms that suggest peaceful protest and legal advocacy. Although they sometimes overlapped with more radical groups, FRENAPP's members were generally quite distant from the politics of armed revolution, having a generally negative view of leftist revolutionaries and such a path to politics. To discuss another counterfactual to the approach taken by FRENAPP, I return to Valencia (2018), who analyzes gore capital as a form that has taken hold in Latin America and especially in places that are strongly affected by illegal drug trade and organized crime. She analyzes actors who have developed 'endriago subjectivities' in response to being blocked in achieving an identity of masculinity and agency by the state's inability to provide accountability or a chance at a lifestyle of hyperconsumerism that has been enforced on people in poverty without opportunities for social mobility. These subjects have responded to the state's abandonment by breaking with moral norms and embracing extreme and spectacular violence as a means to have control in their lives and to accumulate wealth. In the case of FRENAPP, their efforts at organizing stayed within state-oriented advocacy and mutual aid, maintaining the moral and political framework of human rights.

FRENAPP also took an opposing approach to groups who chose to rely on companies to provide social benefits. These were the groups who, with support from companies, organized against FRENAPP. Many of the gig workers who were hostile to socialism, unionization, and recognition of employment relations between gig workers and platform companies had little faith in the state's ability to enforce any kind of improved working conditions. They believed that anything they paid toward the state for social benefit (such as paying a small amount into social security to access public hospitals) would only lead to having less money, since waits for public hospitals were so long as to make them defunct for many people. These gig workers wanted to protect companies who would pay them in dollars. They sought only to have their rates raised but agreed with companies that they should not be regulated by the state. These were the gig workers who came out to protest against laws that would have granted them labor rights, discussed in chapter three. FRENAPP's approach to organizing under a union model despite their distrust in the state had to contest the legitimacy that many gig workers gave to this alternate understanding of working conditions and what should be done about them.

Although FRENAPP is a union organization seeking official recognition as such, their advocacy and organizing efforts should not be judged only by this category. Zárate (2023) invites us to think beyond the categories of exploited workers or individual entrepreneurs in his analysis of racialized Latinx gardeners in Orange County. He does not "equate agency with economic mobility or success at traditional labor organizing," but rather attends to "fugitive sociality" where "life finds a way to emerge and sustain other life," and practices of "tending to make breath together," (p. 2). This framing takes us even further from a straightforward analysis that would judge success or failure on union membership numbers or the passage of a law, which are important benchmarks but which also exclude from interpretation the liveliness of activists' and gig workers' experiences. Refusing to equate agency with economic mobility is an important acknowledgment that even if they do not make gig work lucrative again or make gig work actually temporary and return to a more prestigious

career, the activities of organizers have value. Loyalty to these kinds of benchmarks may tie us to means of politics that are not really able to serve gig workers toward more reciprocity in their daily lives.

5.3 Scale, proliferation, coalition

This dissertation makes a contribution to discussions about scale, scalability, and globalization. As Tsing (2005) argues, any given scale is not neutral nor does it preexist the arguments that are made for its significance over other potential scales. Scales are "claimed and contested in political and cultural projects," (Tsing, 2005, p. 58). I argue that the global scale is claimed by monocultural platforms, but organized gig workers make a counter-claim on the global scale through their investments in scalar devices. The fourth chapter has taken the approach of an "ethnography of scale" (Ribes, 2014) to understand how activists represent and manage a global-scale movement. I examined the First International Gig Workers' Congress, coordinated protest actions, and a book of testimonies of gig workers as scalar devices. Scalar devices referenced each other and layered upon one another to conjure the global scale of movement-making rhetorically while providing concrete means of understanding and managing this scale. Temporariness, both imposed and chosen, made it so that claiming the global scale would be an effective way to respond to transnational companies. Companies cross borders, as do workers who are migrants and often re-migrate. Being denied citizenship rights at the national scale as migrant workers also requires an approach that seeks accountability at other scales, too.

Although I have framed the analysis in this dissertation through the more commonly used analytic of the transnational, the notion of "transborder" will be an important guide in moving forward with my exploration of scale and coalition. This concept gives us vocabulary to decenter the borders of nation-states when talking about different scales of both activism

and migration. Blackwell (2023) elaborates:

> The concept of transborder is also useful to call attention to the multiple colonial, racial, class, and gendered borders that transborder migrants and organizers navigate [...] —to include transindigenous or Indigenous nation-to-nation relationships and to account for multiple configurations of power within nations [... and] to denaturalize multiple colonial borders, colonialities of power (systems that have colonial arrangements of meaning and power at their center), and settler colonial structures (designed to eliminate the native). (p. 35)

One site of border-crossing that remains in the background of this dissertation as told is the divide between rural and urban groups in the same nation. In many ways urban workers across national borders have many more commonalities than they have with people who live in rural parts of the same country, and especially with indigenous people in the region.

Chapter four details the different border crossings that have taken place in gig workers' transborder organizing efforts. One border that was not commonly crossed was the line between gig workers and traditional union centers or union federations at the national scale. These organizations were usually heavily mistrusted by gig workers and gig worker activists. Many were considered "dinosaurs" with lifetime leadership that wouldn't understand gig work's conditions, or were considered yellow unions and groups that were in cahoots with the government and were not interested in change, or did not welcome migrants, or were actively against gig workers because they were strongholds for traditional taxi unions. The strengths and established institutional pathways of long-term, place-based (labor) organizing do not translate easily into gig worker activists' experiences of temporality and mobility

Scale and scalability have long been concerns in HCI and technology design, and especially for tech-for-good. For example, Brown et al. highlight the research challenges for HCI that come with designing for massive and continually scalable sociotechnical systems such as

social media and big data (Brown et al., 2017). Among scholars concerned with values-based organizations and social impact, scaling up has been one approach that is advocated, with a role for HCI to play in enabling greater impact for sustainability initiatives (Biørn-Hansen and Håkansson, 2018). Recently, scholars have critiqued the normative force of scalability and scaling up as values for computing and social-justice oriented interventions, drawing on Tsing's theory of nonscalability. Hanna and Park argue against the overvaluation of scalability as a "morally good trait", which they refer to as "scale thinking" (Hanna and Park, 2020). Tracing the logics of scale thinking in computing, they note that such logics need to be resisted in order to address social inequities in a structural manner. Larsen-Ledet et al. seek to challenge the association of large-scale and goodness, asking the HCI community to "challenge the bigness metaphor in both thought and action," and to search for alternate metaphors (Larsen-Ledet et al., 2022, p. 77). Karusala et al. deploy speculative design as a means to preemptively explore the effects of upscaling of a WhatsApp health chat service. By centering workers' perspectives, they document the possibilities for growing the impact of the system without alienating workers or erasing diversity (Karusala et al., 2023).

With a focus on social and solidarity economies, platform-mediated cooperatives, and non-profit sharing initiatives, scholars have argued for attention to "processes of proliferation" as opposed to scalability (Lampinen et al., 2022). Scalability, following Tsing's theorization and understood as "a monocultural way to capture an ever-growing number of participants," is profitable to those who own platforms, and is pursued relentlessly by venture-backed startups and companies (Lampinen et al., 2022, p. 1). However, the values that underlie scalability in for-profit platforms also push these platforms to ignore the needs of marginal stakeholders, homogenize users, and take agency away from local actors. Advocates of social economies and social innovation have promoted replication via franchising and networked confederations of initiatives, which allows for greater impact without necessarily promoting the consolidation of a single platform or project (Manzini, 2015). Another counter to the over-valuing of

scalability is the acknowledgment that some projects or initiatives have served their purpose and can end while still providing insights for future kindred initiatives (Olgado and Pei, 2022). Light and Miskelly consider how co-located sharing initiatives might engage in meshing rather than scaling, promoting a diverse ecology of initiatives that can share infrastructure without attempting to expand or capture ever-more users into their own platform (Light and Miskelly, 2019).

Scholars have developed the notion of "processes of proliferation" to analyze how values-driven organizations can increase their influence without necessarily being drawn into the imperative to scale up or to become scalable (Lampinen et al., 2022). Processes of proliferation allow coalitions to form in ways that are mutually transformative, allowing members of coalitions to remain autonomous, following a networked logic of social movements (Juris, 2008). Collaborations allow for work toward common goals without requiring merging of organizations. Groups are inspired by each other and may change their manner of working without having to fully follow the same template. Activists may also guide and inspire new organizations to form in different places, providing blueprints or resources without subsuming the new organization under their own.

I argue that continued advocacy among gig workers will require not scalability or scaling up, but rather processes of proliferation that can spread the influence of the activists without requiring a monocultural capture of participants. In processes of proliferation, blueprints travel, but are transformed by their interaction with new places and new leaders who take up those blueprints (Lampinen et al., 2022). This has already been happening as organizers meet one another and leaders of protests reach out to more established union leaders seeking advice. Another process of proliferation occurs when workers migrate (or re-migrate) to new countries and begin organizing and meeting with organizers in their new countries, leading to mutual transformation. The experience of Carolina's re-migration sparking new connections is detailed in chapter four.

Activists make claims that match the scale of the platforms and assert an alternative way that borders are crossed and decentered (Blackwell, 2023). Their process for claiming the global scale does not lead to efficient and swift growth. By remaining open to the indeterminacies of encounter, activists' interactions with one another leave everyone with the possibility of transformation rather than recruiting more members to a hierarchical structure. Activists' rejection of corporate globalization and monoculture does not lead to a rejection of the global scale. Rather than globalization for convenience, they enact a globalization based on solidarity.

5.4 Academic encounters with activists

Academics' encounters with activists will never be innocent. Activists themselves may be idealized but also cannot be completely innocent, a perfectly oppressed character that is on the right side of history. Activists also ally with oppressive actors and benefit from oppressive structures. As feminist STS scholars have taught us, seeking an innocent position by refusing to engage is not a path that will get us toward a more livable world (Haraway, 1991, 2016). Ambivalence is something that is uncomfortable and inconvenient to carry but it is important to hold onto both our cynicism, our critical lenses, and our willingness to try something in a careful and respectful way. These stances are at the heart of trying to do what I am proposing as *errand as method*, spending time together and trying to make ourselves useful in the mundane. Taking errand as method means not coming in as an expert consultant, or only being there during high-profile and positive-affect moments. It means participating in unsexy care and maintenance work, and partaking in the highs and the lows of the affects that come with activist work.

Accompanying activists in the long term means being present and experiencing a variety of affects, from the exuberant feelings of protest and victory to boredom, frustration, and

grief. Kurik argues that initial protest and co-existence in occupied public spaces "generate a landscape of strong and pleasant affects with such an intensity that people connect through them to the concrete cause, to broader ideas such as radical democracy, to occupied space, and to each other" (Kurik, 2016, p. 60). The attraction to protest through co-presence in occupied spaces has been theorized as 'affective solidarity' (Juris, 2008). A story like the story of this dissertation might familiarly be told with examples of tenacity and mutuality building up to a climactic protest, a regulation passing, a good or better contract being signed, the inauguration of a union, the winning of a lawsuit, or a positive change in the way the company works. A hopeful, good-feeling payoff for the hard work along the way, some kind of noticeable big positive change brought to the lives of gig workers through the agentic strategizing and collaboration of worker-activists. Some of these good-feeling victorious moments have in fact happened during the journey of my interlocutors at FRENAPP. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were moments that might have been read as emerging victoriously in mass protest, in an assembly that asserted their presence even if they were "ungrievable" (Han, 2018, from Butler, 2004) and their lives regarded as non-essential while their work was singled out as essential (Zárate, 2023). Mass demonstrations were being coordinated regionally, with a feeling of building energy and solidarity among gig workers across borders as they spoke to reporters about their demands for better pay and protections. Moments of discontent shared in person and on social media built into transnational connections and visible expression of the collective demand to be treated better by the companies they worked for and by society. The hard work of reaching out, patching differences, learning to trust enough to work together, at least for a time allowed these mast protests to happen. Reframing and redefining and renaming and reattaching concepts and practices to morality and ethics, making new meanings attach to how gig work operates and how people negotiate and workaround the affordances of the work arrangements, connecting practices here to discourses there, these efforts made it possible for FRENAPP to come to exist as a named union organization, a thing that is out in the world. It was a victory against difficult

odds to hold together the people and the sociotechnical infrastructure to sign a union into being. Days after I left Ecuador at the end of my first trip to do in-person fieldwork, Carolina and others testified at the National Assembly to support the passage of a regulation that might allow more rights to delivery workers and rideshare drivers, providing an avenue for further efforts to get those rights respected. Such a moment was also a picturesque culmination of transnational cross-pollination and a testament to the drive and determination of the activists.

The work of FRENAPP and their alliances does call into being a global scale that is different from neoliberal capitalist globalization. Their willingness to connect across difference, the patient work put into learning so many updates on late-night or early-morning meetings, the time taken to record a video or print a poster in solidarity with an action somewhere else. Their bravery, the will to keep trying, the unglamorous tasks they did on a daily basis, taking phone calls of comrades' long venting sessions, waiting in line at the bank, getting into an argument with someone who was defaming the union on social media, deciding if they'd move to an even smaller place or find another way to make rent for another month, sweet-talking their friend's restaurant into credit for a little longer, these moments of fighting on do make a difference. They add up to moments that feel good, moments that look victorious, moments that could look like a happy ending if the story were to end there. They add up to changes that have made or could make a material difference in how difficult it is to survive as a gig worker.

As much as there is to celebrate, gig workers continue to be exploited by the platforms for which they work. Legislative efforts supported by FRENAPP have been stopped and restarted and stopped as impeachment and national crises have taken attention away from regulating gig work, even among the activists themselves. People living in Ecuador and across parts of Latin America devastated by the cocaine industry continue to suffer as their daily reality is suffused with gore capitalism and the brutal effects of accumulation through

spectacular, normalized, professionalized, specialized, extreme violence (Valencia, 2018). For many gig worker activists for whom living in Ecuador and working on gig platforms was always meant to be temporary, the opportunity to re-migrate or return to Venezuela or find a different job has led them to discontinue organizing work. For people who continue to organize with FRENAPP, the exhaustion and need to take time and energy to survive and nurture personal dreams of a stable life does not become any easier to manage.

Temporariness went along with a feeling of regression, a feeling of going downhill or backwards rather than progressing. Conditions on gig work apps often worsened over time, despite the efforts of activists. The initial progress that some migrants made in financial stability, sending remittances to help their families survive, and feeling safe in moving around in the city also eroded, as discussed in chapter two. The feeling that time and life projects were flowing backwards and that any progress toward life goals could evaporate at any moment was a demoralizing affective landscape in which to organize and to continue insisting on reciprocity for gig workers.

Accompanying activists meant also having to process the grief and frustration of 'living in times of retrograde motion'[1]. An ethnographer is also there as a person who can witness and listen to frustrations, and to be company in time that is filled with waiting and boredom and anxiety. Care is not just about good feelings (Murphy, 2015). Care calls upon us as scholars to stage our objects of study in a way that casts in our lot with a perspective and centers perspectives typically marginalized or left out of frame. Care is a commitment that often requires confronting and staying with negative affects, too.

Alongside errand as method in activist accompaniment and ethnographic studies of activism, I propose that future work should consider how scholars and technologists can support "meshing" that increases influence without requiring monocultural scalability (Light and Miskelly,

[1]Thanks to Roderic Crooks for the formulation of "living in times of retrograde motion." This is an apt way to phrase the many dimensions of backward motion that my interlocutors talked about feeling.

2019). Scholars studying sharing economies based in neighborhoods in London have proposed "meshing" as a counter to "scaling." Meshing, by their definition, involves the interlacing of individual initiatives that occur in the same locality, which become a greater phenomenon through the bottom-up connections that are formed in a neighborhood-sized community. Light and Miskelly suggest that technologists can support both the deepening and the spread of trust that facilitates meshing and proliferation through scaffolding social media connections and financial transactions (Light and Miskelly, 2019). Such scaffolding should not be permanent but rather should be reevaluated as initiatives and meshing relationships develop over time. Scholars, especially in HCI communities, can consider how "meshing" can be identified and supported in activist and labor organizing contexts, and how to build scaffolding to promote trust and the ability of groups to form mutually transforming relationships that allow activism to grow. Additionally, future work should continue to identify and support the development and deployment of scalar devices to support the ability of activists who form coalitions through mutually transforming relationships to act on large-scale issues. A particularly interesting path for this would be to focus on the re-migration of gig worker organizers. These departures often weakened organizations, but on occasion it helped to spread organizing and promote coalitions. Scholars can make a conscious effort to support this kind of proliferation.

Scholars can also support processes of proliferation through interventions in sociotechnical infrastructure. Salehi et al. (2015) have proposed a framework and matching sociotechnical infrastructure (named Dynamo) to overcome stalling and unproductive friction in collective action for gig workers who work virtually on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Dynamo can also be considered a means for supporting processes of proliferation, since the model for collective action is decentralized and still allows for friction and diversity of opinions. Future scholarship can continue to analyze, design, and build sociotechnical infrastructure that supports activists in expressing larger-scale messages and actions while maintaining diversity and autonomy.

"Infrastructures of listening" can be an effective means to support the proliferation of gig worker organizing. Hess (2023) considers the role of anthropologists who study "activist expert cultures," where the anthropologist does not take on the stereotypical role of giving voice to others, but rather works to create spaces of listening such that activists' own knowledge making is heard by broader audiences. Practically, this kind of outreach and "audience curation" work requires the scholar to convince different audiences, including those with funding and other resources, to listen to activists. It also can involve scholars investing resources into creating spaces such as conferences and workshops that are in places activists can travel to based on visa restrictions, with language support for people coming from different linguistic communities, and with financial support for both travel and time taken off from work. Although the networked form of activism allows for splintering, splitting, and impermanence without automatically understanding such moments as failures, the work it takes to make connections through open-ended encounters is difficult and can happen more easily and more often with material support.

My interest when I started graduate school was focused on "tech for good" and studying the harms that such interventions can produce and the ways such interventions can uphold oppressive systems and relationships. I wanted to understand what could go wrong with these projects, and also what might be inherent in these projects that could merit a different approach to engaging with injustice from academic and technologist positions. My dissertation work offers lessons that can be interesting for scholars and technologists who have also been on a journey of understanding what "tech for good" produces while searching for different ways to engage across difference. My earlier work around tech-for-good intervention and efforts to intervene to do good for a beneficiary argues that such initiatives follow a common pattern across development, humanitarianism, philanthropy, and corporate social responsibility initiatives. I sought to position myself differently in this dissertation project, as an activist's assistant instead of a tech-for-good intervener. Continuing to engage with different academic audiences, I can also position myself as an audience curator, working to

facilitate connections, doing the work of making connections that can let resources move.

Another lesson for community-collaborative initiatives in tech design but also in other domains focuses scale and scalability. Community-collaborative initiatives often are faced with the default criticism, "Is it scalable?" The implication in such a question is that initiatives might be strong and worthwhile in their small context but if they cannot be smoothly replicated and scaled up, then they are not worth investment or further attention. I seek to directly counter that position and argue that "is it scalable" is not the question that should be asked of promising initiatives, but rather, how can this connect with other existing constellations of projects, each rooted in their own unique contexts? How can such a connection be mutually transforming? As researchers, we can seek to support this kind of connection that I was seeing in my fieldwork among gig worker activists.

We live in a world with no guarantees. We rack up our bad debt and we fight for reciprocity in the temp culture and we try to stay with the trouble. Activism is happening, and we can try to engage in a way that is less extractive and not savioristic but recognizes that we have resources that might be helpful to people. We have to continue to imagine different ways to act on our responsibilities to each other across different histories of oppression.

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