Find Yourself in Tulum: Gig Work and the Political Economy of Spiritual Tourism

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Sofía Vicente-Vidal

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Title: Find Yourself in Tulum: Gig Work and the Political Economy of Spiritual Tourism

This dissertation examines the emergence of spiritual tourism in Tulum, Quintana Roo, Mexico, and the social, economic, and historical conditions that have transformed the region into a global destination for healing, wellness, and self-transformation. While spiritual tourism is often represented as an alternative to the alienation and inequalities of contemporary capitalism, I argue that it is deeply embedded within neoliberal political-economic processes that commodify spirituality, labor, and subjectivity. Through an analysis of the experiences of freelance gig workers in Tulum's spiritual tourism economy, this dissertation explores the central paradox that practices marketed as pathways to healing, liberation, and personal transformation frequently depend upon precarious labor arrangements, unequal mobility, and extractive forms of tourism development.

This study draws on approximately one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tulum between 2023 and 2024, including participant observation, informal conversations, and thirty semi-structured interviews with workers in the spiritual, wellness, hospitality, nightlife, and tourism sectors. Combining ethnographic analysis with historical and political-economic approaches, I trace how successive sociotechnical imaginaries have shaped the Yucatán Peninsula from the nineteenth century to the present, producing Tulum as a site of tourism, consumption, and reinvention.

I argue that contemporary spiritual tourism in Tulum represents the latest iteration of a longer historical process through which the region has been repeatedly reimagined according to

dominant visions of desirable futures. This dissertation introduces the concepts of the "comprehensive designer" and the "computational metaphor" to explain how workers and tourists alike understand selfhood, agency, and social transformation through frameworks of entrepreneurial self-design and optimization. At the same time, I demonstrate how race, class, and aesthetics structure access to labor opportunities through what is termed the "Tuluminati" aesthetic. Finally, I show that workers navigating Tulum's spiritual tourism economy relied on collective practices of care, mutual aid, and interdependence even as they embraced ideals of entrepreneurial self-design and individualized healing. These findings suggest that neoliberal subjectivities and collective forms of care are not mutually exclusive but emerge through their co-constitution within conditions of precarity and commodified spirituality.

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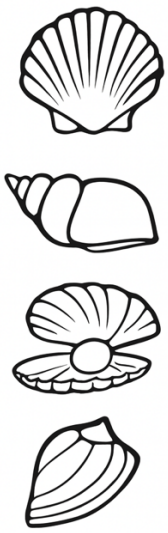


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CHAPTER I
FIND YOURSELF IN TULUM: THE COMMERCE OF SPIRITUALITY

A couple of days after I arrived in Tulum for field research, I biked from the town center to the entrance of the Tulum archaeological zone. Before reaching the Maya structures on the promontory rocks abutting the Caribbean Sea, visitors must first walk through a small shopping plaza. A restaurant, a pharmacy, a Starbucks, and a Häagen Dazs ice cream shop are just a few of the offerings that lead the way to an open *palapa* (a shelter similar to a carport with a thatched roof of dried palm leaves), where opportunities to capture a special photo abound. There is a red place-name statue with two rows of letters that spell out "TU-LUM." A smaller, offset hashtag symbol tacked to the side of the "T" in "Tulum" signals its social media post potential. To the side of that is a group of men dressed as Classic era Maya ballplayers who offer to pose with you and your party for a fee. And a few feet beyond them, you'll find spider monkeys, iguanas, and parrots to "cheese" with —each tethered to a handler by a leashed arm or leg. Just beyond them, ticket-takers will direct you to walk down a path to the right to reach the CONANP ticket office (Comisión Nacional de Áreas Naturales Protegidas). That's how it went for me, because I missed the ticket office in the midst of all the commotion. This sequence of events initially struck me as typical of a popular tourist site —a scene comparable to what one might find at museums or archaeological attractions elsewhere in Mexico or around the world.

However, as I walked further down the path to purchase my entry ticket, I stumbled upon something that signaled what might distinguish Tulum from other Maya sites in the Yucatán. An oddly freestanding Visa advertisement stood lining a portion of one side of the pathway. Against a white background, the advertisement featured three main elements: the Visa logo justified to the bottom right, the tagline "Wherever you find yourself, find Visa," and an image of three people seated in lotus pose on a wooden platform. Snow-capped mountains appear on one side of

the background, lush green trees on the other. The woman sitting in the foreground has her eyes closed and her hands palm facing upwards, the right over the left, forming a "cup," perhaps symbolizing a desire to receive good things from the universe. Behind her are two men — presumably backpacking tourists—attempting to emulate her posture. The man behind her on the right side has his eyes open and looks over the woman's shoulder to her hands in an effort to emulate them —implying that she is the tourist's teacher. Just beside her sits a portable payment card reader, suggesting she accepts payment for her services teaching yoga or guiding people in meditation. For tourists, it implies that if they carry a Visa card with them on their travels, they'll be able to pay for services like the kinds offered in the context of spiritual tourism. The message of the ad is that spiritual experience is available for purchase as various neatly packaged products.



Figure 1. Visa advertisement at the entrance to the Tulum archaeological zone depicting a meditation scene with the tagline "Wherever you find yourself, find Visa." Photograph by author.

Reconciling Contradiction: Research Problem & Central Questions

This advertisement captures what I understand to be the central paradox of this research: How can spaces marketed as sites of healing, spirituality, and wellness be simultaneously

sustained through systems of consumption, labor exploitation, and inequality? This contradiction becomes apparent when we consider that delivering the promises of Tulum's spiritual tourism industry relies on the labor, knowledge, and affective work of individuals whose own well-being may be undermined by the very system they sustain. Tourism to Tulum is marketed as a viable path for people seeking self-actualization, reconnection with nature, healing from emotional and psychic pain, and alleviation of the alienating characteristics of modern life. Yet these experiences depend upon the commodification of spirituality and Indigenous healing practices, extractive tourism economies, colonial imaginaries of discovery and expanding frontiers, precarious gig labor, and ongoing environmental degradation and land dispossession. The core problem addressed in this dissertation is that spiritual tourism in Tulum is framed as a site of personal and collective healing, while simultaneously structured through colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal systems that generate new forms of alienation, inequality, and depoliticization. The central questions of this research therefore examine how this contradiction works, both historically and in people's lived experiences.

I examine the historical processes through which sites of Maya structures in the Yucatán Peninsula were transformed into hubs of tourism. In particular, I trace how Tulum became a place where spirituality and healing are sold as commodities. To do this, I situate Tulum within a longer regional trajectory of tourism development. Although Tulum's rapid expansion as a global tourism destination is more recent, earlier forms of tourism development across the peninsula established the conditions that made its unique transformation possible. These earlier configurations provide critical context for understanding how Tulum emerged as a site where spirituality and healing are commodified. To account for this transformation, I trace the development of sites in the Yucatán, and of Tulum, through shifting dominant subjectivities and

their corresponding sociotechnical imaginaries[1]. I argue that, across four historical periods, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, dominant imaginaries rooted in colonial subjectivities and their associated "visions of desirable futures" played a significant role in shaping the political economy and material configuration of Maya sites prior to Tulum's emergence as a tourism hub (Jasanoff & Kim 2015).

Extending the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries to tourism development in the Yucatán Peninsula, I suggest that each phase of transformation can be linked to historically specific dominant subjects: nineteenth-century Euro-American explorers and archaeologists; the post-revolutionary Mexican state and its vision for nation-building; neoliberal development planners; and, more recently, the countercultural figure of the "comprehensive designer." The term "comprehensive designer" refers to a subject who interprets the material world as manipulable information patterns, uses computational models as both a tool and a model for human cognition, and exercises autonomy to transform their social and material world in pursuit of "human happiness" (Turner 2006, 56).Today, this latter figure is reflected in the distinctive spiritual aesthetic associated with Tulum. Together, these successive imaginaries have configured the Yucatán peninsula–and ultimately Tulum— as a space available for the consumption of commodified tourism experiences.

Scholarship in science and technology studies has developed the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries to describe collectively held visions of desirable futures that shape institutions, policies, scientific principles naturalized as fact, and subsequently material environments (Haraway 1991; Jasanoff & Kim 2009; Scott 1998). While this work has

[1] Jasanoff & Kim define sociotechnical imaginaries as "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff & Kim 2015, 10).

illuminated how sociotechnical imaginaries shape the development of nation-states, infrastructure, and technological systems, less attention has been paid to how these imaginaries are linked to specific dominant subjectivities, and how those subjectivities become popularized, romanticized, and aspired to, by individuals who do not share the same power, wealth, or class status.

By extending the idea of sociotechnical imaginaries to tourism economies and spiritual practice in Tulum, it becomes possible to identify how particular visions of desirable futures originate from, and are perpetuated by, specific dominant subjectivities (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke 2009). In this context, Tulum can be understood as a site of sociotechnical world-making, where imaginaries of agency, healing, and entrepreneurship shape both the built environment and the forms of labor that sustain it (Sosa El Fakih 2025). Freelance gig-workers are individuals who provide services to tourists via short-term labor agreements with a company or employer to "provide services upon request and receive financial compensation for the work performed" (Hudek, Tominc, & Širec 2020, 57). Through fieldwork, it became clear that many freelance gig-workers who participated in this research were drawn to Tulum precisely because it appears to offer the possibility of embodying these imaginaries. They described aspirations for freedom from demanding and unfulfilling corporate work, a willingness to take bold and intrepid risks in pursuit of existential meaning, and a desire to live in better alignment with values centered on healing oneself, others, and the planet and natural environment. These aspirations go beyond abstract ideals, they translate into concrete practices that organize international travel and migration, decisions about work, entrepreneurship, business models, land use, and infrastructure (Salazar 2012; Jassanoff & Kim 2015).

Similarly, the concept of tourism imaginaries—developed within the anthropology of tourism— has been applied to analyses of cultural and heritage tourism but could be more substantively applied to analyze spiritual tourism. An application of the conceptual framework of tourism imaginaries to a site of spiritual tourism like Tulum allows for a more precise identification of "the unspoken schemas of interpretation" that underlie specific imaginaries through which individuals understand and experience a site (Salazar 2012, 864). This research is an effort to make explicit the assumptions underlying the tourism imaginary of Tulum: to identify the dominant subjectivities from which the imaginary emerges, and to trace how it has been transmitted, popularized, and transposed onto the site. Tulum is illustrative of an imaginary that blends the tourism economy with spiritual practice. As a tourist destination, it has been attributed with imaginaries of healing, personal transformation, and freedom through entrepreneurship (Voigt, Brown, & Howat 2011). At the same time, these imaginaries function as development models that shape what kinds of work is meaningful for freelance gig-workers, the infrastructure and architectural style that is built, the forms of inequality that become naturalized as objective fact, and what futures are deemed possible.

Another guiding question centers on the lived experiences of freelance gig-workers who travel to Tulum in search of economic opportunity and meaningful work aligned with spiritual practice. To understand how workers perceive and navigate the contradictions of the industry they labor in, I ask: what does Tulum's "healing economy" look like from the perspective of the workers who sustain it? This question guided both formal interviews and everyday conversations with participants. Through ethnographic fieldwork and living alongside gig-workers, I explored a smaller set of related questions that would illuminate their perspectives: How do gig-workers understand the healing modalities they provide for tourists? How do they take care of their own

well-being? If they sought healing for themselves, how did they approach it? How do they sustain themselves economically through gigs, trades or exchanges, and informal labor arrangements? And how do they narrate their journeys to Tulum and their life aspirations? These lines of inquiry culminate in a more precise central question explored in this research: How do freelance gig-workers in Tulum's spiritual tourism industry navigate the contradiction between providing healing services to tourists and living through economic uncertainty and potential exploitation?

Important scholarship about spirituality and wellness has demonstrated the potential of spiritual practices and Indigenous worldviews to function as forms of resistance to the corrosive effects of an unfettered neoliberal capitalist economic system. These frameworks provide discursive contexts centered on values that can repair the damage that capitalism inflicts on relationships between individuals, communities, and the natural world (brown 2017; Escobar 2020; Krawec 2022). Just as important are studies in spirituality and wellness that examine the commodification and co-optation of spirituality and wellness practices within global markets (Carrette & King 2005, Purser 2019). Particularly in Mexico and other countries in Latin America where Indigenous identity and culture became an important aspect of nation-building and economic development, scholars have shown how the instrumentalization of Indigenous identity often produces a class of cultural brokers who fulfill the role of representative of a nation's Indigenous community in ways that align with state interests (Armstrong-Fumero 2013; Kurnick 2019). This dissertation builds on and complicates these discussions by moving beyond a binary in which spirituality is understood either as viable forms of resistance to capitalism or commodified and co-opted to attract consumers seeking relief. Freelance gig-workers in Tulum's spiritual tourism economy do not fit neatly into a group of duped consumers or radical resisters

of neoliberal capitalism. Instead, this project shows how they aspire to, and work towards, creating a life they deem meaningful within the structural constraints of neoliberalism, even as those constraints shape and limit the forms in which that meaning-making can take. In this context, spirituality —and particularly the belief in the computational metaphor, becomes a framework through which workers interpret the precarity of their work-lives. The "computational metaphor" describes the understanding of the self and social world as programmable systems that can be modified, optimized, or "reprogrammed" through intentional thought and practice. It operates as a survival strategy, a language of self-worth, a promise of self-actualization, and a way to invert critique of external social and structural constraints inward towards one's own mindset. In this sense, this kind of spirituality serves a peculiar role in the ways that freelance gig-workers navigate the insecurity of the gig economy by contributing to the internalization of its underlying structural conditions.

Scholarship in the anthropology of tourism and political economy has demonstrated how tourism functions as a vehicle for national economic development through neoliberal imperatives (Breglia 2006, Castañeda 1996, 2012). This body of work has also shown the ways that tourism reproduces racial and class inequalities, particularly through labor exploitation, displacement, and the reconfiguration of land and resources particularly among Indigenous and local populations (Escallón 2023; Manuel-Navarette 2016). The commodification of culture, heritage, and place has also been extensively researched as a central feature of tourism economies (Britton 1991).

What could use further investigation, however, is why individuals might find work in these economies appealing, and even meaningful and desirable. This project addresses this question by examining how spiritual tourism economies mobilize discourses of healing and self-

transformation to make tourism to, and labor in, a particular space feel especially meaningful. These political economies are shaped not only through markets and policy, but also through the use of hope that undergirds promises of healing, self-development, and self-actualization (Borup et al. 2006). In this sense, spirituality is not just a marketing strategy for tourism but becomes a form of soft governance that influences how labor is organized. For many workers who participated in this study, Tulum's veneer of healing and spirituality reframes potential labor exploitation as increased autonomy and personal growth, job instability as a greater measure of freedom and agentic power, and precarity as a worthwhile challenge in pursuit of more fulfilling life aspirations. This illuminates how neoliberalism is reproduced even at the most intimate levels of personal meaning-making (Sheller & Urry 2006; Wang 1999).

Many participants described their decision to move to Tulum for gig work as a courageous and astute life choice —one that presented the opportunity to live a much more meaningful life. Even as they navigated economic and material precarity and, at times, exploitative labor arrangements, they framed their experiences in Tulum in hopeful and aspirational ways. This raised yet another central question: Why is this system of labor appealing to workers who are often marginalized by it? To address this, I examine the appeal of the subjectivity of the "comprehensive designer," an idealized figure that emerged from U.S. countercultural movements of the 1960s. This figure imagines individuals as capable of designing and transforming their lives and the world through the creative use of information technology and personal autonomy. The comprehensive designer views the material world as a system that can be modeled, manipulated, and improved, and believes that individuals, acting outside of traditional institutional hierarchies, can reshape society to produce greater human well-being (Turner 2006, 56).

I argue that this subjectivity was introduced to Tulum through tourists who popularized it there during its early waves of tourism, and positioned Tulum as an alternative to the all-inclusive mega-resort style tourism of Cancún. Over time, this subjectivity has been reworked into a localized spiritual-entrepreneurial aesthetic, in what residents call the "Tuluminati." Following this idealized subjectivity is the appeal of the lifestyle of digital nomadism[2], which promises a greater measure of autonomy, mobility, and self-actualization through entrepreneurship. Central to this worldview is the computational metaphor— the belief that one's thoughts, intentions, and mindset can "program" and thus shape one's material reality. Through my conversations with gig-workers, it becomes clear how this subjectivity is adopted, reworked, and adapted across classed positions. Through their perspectives, it becomes easier to understand how workers reinterpret and partially internalize this dominant spiritual-entrepreneurial subjectivity, even as their material conditions diverge significantly from those of the affluent tourists who helped popularize it.

The Neoliberal Parameters of Healing

The core argument of this dissertation is that spiritual tourism in Tulum, while marketed to appear as a departure from colonial and capitalist logics, is actually a contemporary reconfiguration of them. In this context, healing, spirituality, and self-actualization are folded into market relations and depoliticized forms of consumption. I argue that the political economy of tourism in the Yucatán—and more recently in Tulum— has been shaped by successive sociotechnical imaginaries that are tied to specific dominant subjectivities. Rather than thinking about imaginaries as abstract forces, I identify four historically situated figures through which

[2] A digital nomad refers to a "class of highly mobile professionals, whose work is location independent. Thus, they work while traveling on a (semi) permanent basis" using digital technologies to work remotely, "forming a new mobile lifestyle" (Hannonen 2020, 346).

they operate: the colonial and imperialist explorer, who imagined the Yucatán as a site of discovery; the nationalist modernizer, who framed Indigenous heritage as a resource for nation-building; the neoliberal planner, who reconfigured select areas of the peninsula into sites of global tourism investment; and the countercultural "comprehensive designer," who envisions Tulum as a space of spiritual and holistic living, self-design, and entrepreneurial freedom. It is these imaginaries that play an outsized role in shaping landscapes, infrastructure, and labor systems, consequently defining what kinds of futures are desirable and attainable.

Another key assertion is that, within the parameters of a globalized neoliberal economy, healing becomes a form of market morality. This means that the cultivation of spirituality, healing, and wellness is reframed as a variety of consumer goods. Consequently, this produces a moral framework in which purchasing experiences is conflated with substantive political transformation. This process facilitates a depoliticized subjectivity, where structural inequality is framed as an individual problem of personal mindset.

Freelance gig-workers in Tulum's spiritual tourism economy live this core contradiction most intensely as they provide healing services while experiencing forms of precarity that undermine their own healing and well-being. Likewise, they pursue autonomy while relying on informal and oftentimes exploitative labor arrangements. And while many of the gig-workers who participated in this research cited a rejection of a former life in a corporate job, the alternative they found in Tulum is the gig economy, which is often rebranded as entrepreneurship (Carr & Kelan 2023, Scharff 2016).

At the same time, this argument moves beyond a simple claim that gig-workers are being duped by the misleading appeal of the digital nomad lifestyle. My ethnographic research revealed that, within the political economy of spiritual tourism, there is a classed re-

interpretation of spirituality and healing. I argue that tourists with wealth and resources, mostly from the United States or other countries in the global north, are able to buy commodified experiences individually, without having to forge interpersonal connections during their time visiting Tulum. Gig-workers who experience material precarity, by contrast, often build networks of mutual aid, community, and interdependence to address the gaps in their capacity to secure basic necessities. In doing so, they access an integral aspect of healing and spiritual and psychic relief: that of relationality and healing in community. This creates a classed divergence in how "healing" is actually lived and experienced by gig-workers and wealthy or well-resourced tourists. Rather than existing outside of capitalism, spirituality in Tulum functions as a mechanism that renders its contradictions livable, meaningful, and even desirable.

Tulum & the Yucatán Peninsula

Tulum is a municipality of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, located along the eastern edge of the Yucatán Peninsula. It is home to a set of coastal Maya structures that now form part of the recently developed *Parque del Jaguar* (Jaguar Park), which includes a short strip of beaches with basic amenities and protected ecological areas. The peninsula itself contains numerous major Maya archaeological sites and sits atop a limestone bedrock system that filters groundwater through an extensive network of underground caverns. This fragile ecological system has become central to the ongoing conflicts over regional development, particularly in relation to large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Maya train, which pose potential risks to water quality and environmental stability.

Tulum's Hotel Zone consists of a nine-mile stretch of Caribbean coastline just south of the archaeological zone. It is characterized by boutique hotels, high-end restaurants, and nightlife venues. Approximately five and a half miles inland lies Tulum Pueblo, often referred to as Centro, where more affordable housing, hostels, and everyday commercial activity are

concentrated. Centro straddles the main road, Avenida Tulum, dotted with souvenir shops, restaurants, coffee shops, and bars and dance clubs. Many gig-workers reside in Centro and commute to the Hotel Zone for work, reflecting the spatial organization of inequality within the tourism economy. Far from being an isolated paradise, Tulum is a site shaped by long histories of colonial encroachment, national development projects, and global tourism circuits. The Yucatán Peninsula has historically been imagined as a cultural, geographic, and economic frontier open to outside visions of transformation.

As such, Tulum is a condensed site of major anthropological concerns. It is situated in heavily contested land with a history of Indigenous resistance, forms part of a broader network of Maya sites transformed through archaeological and tourism development and exemplifies contemporary processes of postcolonial development in which land, heritage, and labor have been reconfigured for global tourism. Evolving from an informal rugged backpacker's hotspot to a globally recognized site of luxury wellness tourism, Tulum is a particularly compelling site for examining the political economy of tourism, neoliberal subject formation, and the commodification of spirituality.



Figure 2. Location of the Yucatán Peninsula within Mexico (left) and a zoomed-in view of the peninsula, including the state of Quintana Roo where Tulum is located (right). Maps created by the author using Google Maps.

Methods, Fieldwork, and Positionality

This dissertation is based on approximately one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Tulum, Mexico, from September 2023 to August 2024. During this time, I carried out thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with freelance gig-workers from Argentina, Mexico, Germany, and the United States. Many of these interlocutors became long-term collaborators, as I lived with them for extended periods ranging from weeks to months. This cohabitation enabled sustained engagement in shared daily life, including domestic routines, economic strategies, and social practices that structured participation in Tulum's tourism and wellness economy.

Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Occupation	Sector
Ana	24	Mexico	Server at restaurant and bar	Hospitality
Valentina	25	Argentina	Freelance businesses: Glitter bar & Hostel guest excursions	Tourism & Nightlife
Camila	24	Argentina	Freelance businesses: Glitter bar & Hostel guest excursions	Tourism & Nightlife
Paola	29	Argentina	Social media marketing, massage therapy at wellness spa	Wellness
Diego	42	Mexico	Café owner in Centro, former events coordinator in Hotel Zone	Tourism & Nightlife
Ilario	24	Argentina	Hostel volunteer/manager	Hospitality
Carla	mid-50s	Mexico	Hostel manager	Hospitality
Emma	34	Germany	Freelance Yoga instructor	Wellness & Spirituality
Omar	42	Mexico	Hotel Zone night club manager	Tourism & Nightlife
Celia	26	Mexico	Social media marketing, graphic design, Tarot card reader	Wellness & Spirituality
Sarah	36	United States	Temazcal facilitator	Wellness & Spirituality
Miguel	early 50s	Mexico	Regional Hotel Association President	Tourism Governance
Alonso	34	Mexico	Landscaper/Garden museum guide in Hotel Zone	Hospitality
Leo	26	Mexico	Temazcal facilitator	Wellness & Spirituality
Manuel	35	Mexico	Sian Ka'an Bioreserve custodian/Owner of campsite for volunteers	Ecotourism
Micaela	27	Argentina	Manager of Sian Ka'an campsite, tarot card reader	Ecotourism, Wellness & Spirituality
Oliver	46	Canada	Construction manager, Tourist staying at Sian Ka'an	Tourism Consumer
Adela	33	Mexico	Wellness program manager at Spa in Centro/Temazcal facilitator	Wellness & Spirituality
Lena	22	Poland	College grad on gap year/traveler	Tourism Consumer
Daniela	32	Spain	Freelance Belly Dancer for Hotel Zone Nightlife	Tourism & Nightlife
Ines	31	Portugal	Freelance Belly Dancer for Hotel Zone Nightlife	Tourism & Nightlife
Emiliano	38	Mexico	Restaurant manager in Centro	Hospitality
Mateo	25	Argentina	Freelance handy man, hostel volunteer	Hospitality
Mila	28	Germany	Hostel volunteer	Hospitality
Olivia	27	Argentina	Freelance Yoga instructor	Wellness & Spirituality
Marco	19	Mexico	Maya train construction worker	Tourism Infrastructure
Aurelio	43	Mexico	Hotel zone security guard/bouncer	Hospitality
Michael	mid-60s	United States	Retired real estate developer, Expatriate living in Aldea Zama	Tourism Consumer
David	35	United States	Business owner, psilocybin mushroom products and workshops	Wellness & Spirituality

Table 1. Interview Participant Characteristics. Demographic information, occupations, and sector affiliations of interview participants.

In addition to formal interviews, this project draws on extensive participant observation and ongoing informal conversations. I accompanied participants to contract jobs in the Hotel Zone and surrounding areas, including work as performers in nightlife venues, tarot card readings, and facilitators of spiritual practices such as temazcal ceremonies. These experiences provided insight into the embodied dimensions of gig-based spiritual labor and the ways that workers navigate precarity, aspiration, and self-making. Ethnographic data were also generated through everyday interactions like shared meals, transportation, housing arrangements, and social gatherings which were documented through detailed fieldnote journal entries.

My positionality shaped both access to the field and the kinds of relationships I was able to build. As a mestiza, first-generation Mexican-American and U.S. citizen, I occupied a shifting

position between familiarity and difference. Shared cultural references and linguistic fluency facilitated rapport with some interlocutors, while my U.S. nationality and academic affiliation also marked me as differently situated within hierarchies of mobility and privilege. These dynamics informed both the opportunities and limits of my fieldwork, shaping the kinds of narratives that were shared with me and the interpretations I bring to this analysis.

Another point worth noting is that my original project proposal was designed with the intention of interviewing Indigenous Maya workers employed within Tulum's Hotel Zone. However, a number of challenges encountered during fieldwork ultimately reshaped that aspect of the project. Many of the healing services offered within the Hotel Zone occur in private spaces that are accessible only to paying guests, limiting opportunities for participant observation and relationship building. In addition, when I attempted to approach Maya workers employed in service positions outside the Hotel Zone, I was often met with hesitation or reluctance. Based on similar experiences I encountered near Chichén Itzá, as well as broader histories of anthropological, archaeological, and touristic intervention in the region, I came to understand some of this hesitation as potentially rooted in longer histories of extractive encounters with outside researchers and institutions. Moreover, the spatial organization of contemporary Tulum further limited access to many Indigenous Maya workers. The Hotel Zone functions as a relatively isolated tourist enclave, while many workers commute from Centro or surrounding communities and occupy service positions that are less visible and less accessible to researchers that the spaces that became central to this project.

As a result, the workers who were most accessible to me were often international migrants, digital nomads, entrepreneurs, and freelance wellness workers who had relocated to Tulum in pursuit of alternative lifestyles and economic opportunities. Participants were recruited

primarily through snowball sampling and long-term relationships developed during fieldwork. Many of my earliest connections emerged through shared experiences of housing insecurity and cohabitation. Living in hostels and shared apartments introduced me to freelance workers, entrepreneurs, and spiritual gig workers who then connected me to additional participants. Over time, participants came to occupy diverse positions within the tourism economy, including wellness practitioners, hospitality workers, nightlife workers, entrepreneurs, tourists, and individuals involved in tourism governance and infrastructure development. Although the sample was broad in terms of industry sectors, my analysis ultimately focuses most heavily on wellness and spirituality, hospitality, and nightlife because those sectors most clearly illuminated questions of healing, labor, self-transformation, and precarity.

The absence of Indigenous Maya interlocutors in this study is therefore not only a methodological limitation but also an ethnographic finding in its own right. This absence is particularly striking given the extent to which contemporary tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula depends upon representations of Maya history, architecture, spirituality, and ancestral knowledge. Throughout the twentieth century, Maya archaeological sites became central to both Mexican national patrimony and international tourism development, while contemporary Maya communities whose ancestors created these landscapes often remained peripheral to the stories told about them. As I discuss further in Chapter 2, the historical production of Maya heritage as an object of study, preservation, and consumption has frequently occurred alongside the marginalization of living Maya communities. In this sense, the challenges I encountered in accessing Maya workers reflect broader historical patterns of visibility and exclusion that continue to shape the organization of labor, tourism, and social life in contemporary Tulum. The same processes that have rendered Maya history central to tourism development have often

rendered contemporary Maya workers comparatively peripheral within the social worlds that became accessible through my fieldwork.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 traces the historical transformation of the Yucatán Peninsula into a tourism economy, showing how colonial, nationalist, and neoliberal imaginaries shaped the region as a site for consumption. Drawing on the framework of sociotechnical imaginaries discussed above, the chapter argues that tourism development across different sites in the peninsula unfolded through four distinct historical periods (1842-1920, 1920-1960, 1960-2000, and 2000-present), each shaped by a dominant subjectivity and its corresponding vision of desirable futures.

In the first period (1842-1920), I show how Euro-American travel writers and archaeologists constructed Maya sites as objects of knowledge-production and early elite academic tourism, situating them within broader imperial and expansionist projects. In the second period (1920-1960), I examine how the Mexican revolutionary state reconfigured these sites as national patrimony, incorporating them into projects of nation-building and cultural tourism while regulating foreign academic involvement. The third period (1960-2000) traces the emergence of state-led, technocratic, and increasingly neoliberal tourism development, particularly through the construction of Cancun as an enclave resort economy structured by global capital, planned infrastructure, and spatially segregated labor regimes.

The final period (2000-present) marks the expansion of tourism south to incorporate Tulum into global tourism circuits. I identify the emergence of differentiated tourism zones—resort enclaves, budget-oriented Centro, and the boutique, wellness-focused Hotel Zone, each aligned with distinct tourist subjectivities and consumption practices. Across these periods, the chapter advances the broader claim that tourism development in the Yucatán is not simply an economic process but a form of sociotechnical world-making in which dominant actors configure

landscapes, labor systems, and cultural meaning according to specific imaginaries. The chapter provides the historical and structural context for the dissertation's central research question: how contemporary forms of spiritual tourism in Tulum come to appear as sites of healing and transformation while remaining embedded in, and produced through, longer histories of colonialism, capitalism, and uneven development.

Chapter 3 examines the contemporary formation of Tulum as a global site of spiritual tourism, focusing on how the industry's rapid expansion, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, reconfigured labor, migration, and the commodification of healing practices. Building on the historical foundations established in chapter 2, this chapter shifts to the present to analyze how the contradictions of spiritual tourism are lived and negotiated by freelance gig-workers. The chapter begins by tracing the pandemic-era tourism boom, during which Tulum remained open to international travelers while most of the world was closed. This catalyzed an influx of both affluent tourists and workers, including practitioners of Indigenous healing traditions. Through ethnographic accounts, it demonstrates how spiritual practices cultivated in community-based contexts are reconfigured as marketable services within Tulum's tourism economy. I then discuss the concept of the "market morality of spiritual tourism," arguing that healing is structured by a central paradox: while marketed as a path to well-being and connection, it depends on labor arrangements characterized by precarity, informality, and inequality. This contradiction is explored through gig-based work, exchange labor, and the interpersonal dynamics between workers, business owners, and tourists, as well as through the transformation of practices such as the temazcal into commodified performances.

In chapter 4, I analyze the subjectivities, aesthetics, and ideological frameworks that shape Tulum's spiritual tourism economy, focusing on the emergence of the "Tuluminati" as a

dominant cultural formation. I argue that this aesthetic—expressed through dress, architecture, and lifestyle practices—functions as a racialized and classed system of distinction that regulates access to work opportunities and legitimacy within the tourism economy. Drawing on ethnographic accounts, I show how the "Tuluminati" style is associated with whiteness, wealth, and a particular form of performative spirituality, often linked to U.S. expatriate and digital nomad communities. These aesthetic codes shape hiring practices and social hierarchies, requiring individuals to embody specific visual and affective markers in order to participate in front-facing roles within the industry. Then, I link this aesthetic formation to the figure of the "comprehensive designer" and the belief in the computational metaphor, tracing their origins in U.S. countercultural movements. I argue that this subjectivity—centered on autonomy, self-design, and the ability to "program" reality—has been transposed onto Tulum as a form of culturally imperial, neo-colonial logic that structures both tourism and labor practices.

This chapter demonstrates how the idealized subjectivity of the "Tuluminati" obscures material inequalities by promoting a cross-class belief in individual transformation. In doing so, it advances the broader claim that spirituality in Tulum does not operate outside of neoliberal capitalist parameters but instead functions as a key mechanism through which its inequalities are aestheticized, naturalized, and rendered aspirational.

Chapter 5 examines how freelance gig-workers reinterpret and inhabit the subjectivity of the "comprehensive designer" under conditions of economic precarity, revealing tensions between individualist ideologies of digital nomadism and the collective practices required for survival. Drawing on extended ethnographic engagement with freelance workers from Argentina, Mexico, and Europe, I show how participants are drawn to Tulum by a shared desire to escape economic instability and the "spiritual violence" of corporate work, seeking instead autonomy,

creative expression, and meaningful forms of labor. I argue that the computational metaphor functions as a shared, cross-class framework of agency, through which both wealthy tourists and precarious workers imagine the possibility of transforming their lives. However, for gig-workers, this belief is not enacted primarily through consumption, but through improvisational strategies of survival, including volunteer labor exchanges, freelance work, and the cultivation of social networks.

Focusing on practices such as *voluntariados* (arrangements to exchange volunteer labor for room and board in hostels and other locations) and collective living arrangements like the "Concha House," the chapter demonstrates how workers mitigate precarity through mutual aid, shared resources, and community-based care. These practices stand in tension with the individualized logic of the computational metaphor, revealing a key contradiction: while participants narrate their lives through frameworks of individual agency and self-transformation, their economic survival depends on forms of interdependence that challenge neoliberal ideals.

Finally, the chapter engages Anita Chari's concept of reified subjectivity to show how this contradiction is sustained through processes of depoliticization, fragmentation, and formalism. While many participants internalize individualized frameworks of agency, others articulate more politicized understandings that reconnect personal transformation to structural inequality. In this way, Chapter 5 advances the dissertation's central argument by showing that spirituality in Tulum operates as a flexible ideological framework that can both reproduce neoliberal subjectivity and open space for its critique.

Chapter 6 returns to the central contradiction explored throughout the dissertation: the promise that spirituality, healing, and self-transformation can be attained through commodified tourism experiences. Revisiting the Visa advertisement, I synthesize the dissertation's broader

argument by tracing how colonial, nationalist, neoliberal, and countercultural imaginaries collectively shaped Tulum into a global site of spiritual tourism. The chapter reiterates the argument that while healing in Tulum is marketed as an individualized consumer experience, many meaningful forms of care among freelance gig-workers emerge instead through shared precarity, mutual aid, and interpersonal interdependence.

I then revisit the figure of the "comprehensive designer" to examine why this subjectivity remains compelling for workers navigating unstable labor conditions. While the lifestyle of digital nomadism and entrepreneurial self-design frames precarity as freedom and self-actualization, ethnographic accounts reveal that workers' survival depends less on individual autonomy than on collective networks of support. Following a couple of interlocutors beyond Tulum to other global tourism destinations such as Ibiza, the chapter demonstrates how these contradictions travel across wider circuits of wellness, nightlife, and tourism economies that rely on gig labor.

Finally, the conclusion situates Tulum within broader global transformations linking spirituality, precarious labor, mobility, and digital economies. It reflects on how the ideals associated with the comprehensive designer increasingly overlap with contemporary forms of flexible labor, including emerging forms of AI-related digital work. The dissertation concludes by arguing that, although spiritual tourism often reproduces neoliberal and colonial inequalities, workers nevertheless continue to create meaningful forms of connection, care, and collective survival within these structures.

CHAPTER II
IMAGINING & CONSTRUCTING THE YUCATÁN PENINSULA FOR TOURISM: AN OVERVIEW OF 1842-PRESENT

In this chapter, I organize tourism development in the Yucatán Peninsula into four approximate periods: (1) 1842-1920, (2) 1920-1960, (3) 1960-2000, and (4) 2000-Present. I argue that each period is defined by a distinct political economy of tourism shaped by dominant colonial and neo-colonial subjectivities[3] (Britton 1982; Bianchi 2014; Chambers & Buzinde 2015; Quijano 2000; Maldonado-Torres 2007). By dominant subjectivities, I refer to historically specific modes of personhood —being, knowing, and acting— that become normalized within particular political-economic formations. These subjectivities are linked to broader imaginaries, or visions of desirable futures and social order, and are sometimes condensed in cultural figures, such as the explorer, the development planner, or the "comprehensive designer." Initially produced by American and European academic elites and later reconfigured in collaboration with the Mexican state, these subjectivities advance broader imperial and developmental projects tied to territorial expansion and the production of new cultural frontiers (Ward 2014, 42). Across these periods, tourism development both reflects and reproduces these subjectivities, structuring how space, labor, and cultural heritage are organized and valued (Breglia 2006; MacCannell 1999; Salazar 2012; Urry & Larsen 2011).

[3] Here, I use "colonial and neo-colonial subjectivities" to refer to what Sylvia Wynter theorizes as the figure of "Man," a historically specific, Western bourgeois conception of the human that comes to overrepresent itself as the human itself. As Wynter argues, this overrepresentation is foundational to what she terms the "coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom," through which a particular ethnoclass conception of the human is naturalized and universalized while other modes of being human are rendered subordinate (Wynter 2003, 260). In this sense, "Man" names a dominant subjectivity that is linked to broader imaginaries of knowledge, progress, and authority. This formulation helps clarify how specific ways of being and knowing become normalized as universal, shaping practices such as exploration, knowledge production, and territorial expansion.

What makes Tulum particularly significant is that, unlike other sites in the Yucatán Peninsula, it remained largely peripheral during the first, second, and third periods of tourism development. This relative marginality makes its rapid transformation in the twenty-first century—into a global hub for spiritual and wellness tourism—especially striking. I argue that tourism development in Tulum is organized across three spatial zones, each associated with a distinct tourism model and set of consumption patterns. These zones are not only spatially distinct but also structure a separation between sites of consumption (the Hotel Zone) and sites of residence (Tulum Centro), establishing the labor conditions that underpin Tulum's tourism economy. This dissertation focuses on the Hotel Zone, where boutique, wellness-oriented tourism has become the dominant model and the primary way Tulum is represented in global imaginaries. I argue that the Hotel Zone is structured by a wellness-oriented, self-making subject linked to an imaginary of healing, individual freedom, entrepreneurship, and self-transformation.

The first period (1842-1920) examines the early political economy of tourism at Maya archaeological sites, showing how it was shaped by the imaginaries of American and European travel writers and archaeologists. The second period (1920-1960) turns to an analysis of how the Mexican revolutionary government, working alongside Euro-American archaeologists and academic institutions, reframed pre-Columbian Maya sites as national cultural resources and incorporated them into projects of nation-building. In the third period (1960-2000), I trace the emergence of state-led, neoliberal tourism development, particularly in Cancún, where U.S. trained Mexican bankers and planners sought to transform the Caribbean coast into a globally competitive tourism destination. In the fourth period (2000-Present), I briefly outline the emergence of distinct tourism zones in Tulum—including all-inclusive resort development to the north, boutique and spiritually oriented hotels along the coast, and smaller-scale

accommodations in the town or *Centro*—before examining this transformation in greater detail in the following chapter.

In contrast to these broader regional transformations, Tulum remained only marginally integrated into tourism development for much of this history. Prior to its formal recognition as a municipality, Tulum's political economy was rooted in henequen production, subsistence agriculture, and fishing. Tourism infrastructure remained minimal, and visitors were typically backpackers willing to camp on the beach or stay in small beachside cabins without electricity or running water (Arroyo Arcos, López, & Pavón 2015; Juárez 2002; Marín-Guardado 2012). It was not until the most recent period (2000 to present) that Tulum's tourism industry expanded significantly, targeting an international market oriented toward spiritual and wellness tourism.

Across these periods, these transformations are not only material but also imaginative. They can be understood as evolving sociotechnical imaginaries — "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology" (Jasanoff & Kim 2015, 10). This framework helps link the material configuration of tourism spaces and their political economies to the visions and interests of specific actors and institutions.

Time Period	Dominant Subjectivity	Associated Imaginary	Site in the Yucatán Peninsula	Tourism Model
1842- 1920	Euro-American elite scholars, travel writers, & archaeologists	Discovery, frontier expansion, knowledge production	Chichén Itzá	Elite, scholarly & academic tourism
1920-1960	Mexican revolutionary government & Euro-American academic institutions	National patrimony, modernization	Chichén Itzá and other Maya sites	National Cultural tourism
1960-2000	Neoliberal development planners & U.S. trained Mexican bankers	Rational planning, economic growth, global competitiveness	Cancún	Enclave, all-inclusive resort tourism
2000-Present	U.S. Countercultural figure of the "comprehensive designer"	Healing, entrepreneurship, holistic self-transformation	Tulum (Zona Hotelera and Centro)	Boutique, spiritual, and wellness tourism

Table 2. Summary of periods of tourism development and their associated imaginaries. The table features each period, its dominant subjectivities, their associated imaginary, the sites through which these visions were realized, and the corresponding tourism model that emerged.

1842-1920: Travel Writers and Archaeologists

The construction of Tulum, and more broadly, the Maya sites of the Yucatán Peninsula, as objects of global interest began in the mid-nineteenth century through the writings and visual documentation of American and European travel writers and archaeologists (Breglia 2006; Castañeda 1996; Walker 2008; Ward 2014). These figures were typically affluent, educated white men who embodied a dominant subjectivity grounded in Western Enlightenment ideals: rational inquiry, scientific curiosity, and a self-styled bravery associated with exploring supposedly "undiscovered" lands. The broader imaginary organizing this subjectivity was one of discovery, frontier expansion, and scholarly authority. Through detailed written accounts and illustrations, they produced some of the earliest widely circulated representations of Maya sites for audiences in the United States and Europe.

In 1842, American travel writer John Lloyd Stephens described his first encounter with Tulum in *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*, emphasizing both the structures and their surrounding landscape: “We were amid the wildest scenery we had yet found in Yucatán. Besides the deep and exciting interest of the ruins themselves, we had around us what we wanted at all other places, the magnificence of nature” (Stephens 1843/1996, 255). Accompanied by illustrator Frederick Catherwood, whose detailed drawings further popularized these sites, Stephens helped establish a visual and narrative framework through which the Maya world came to be understood by foreign and Mexican elite readers and intellectuals who participated in these interpretive frameworks. These representations contributed to the romanticization and exoticization of Maya sites, shaping both scholarly inquiry and early tourist imaginaries (Castañeda 1996; Pratt 1992; Salazar 2012).



Figure 3. Illustration of El Castillo in Tulum by Frederick Catherwood. 1844.

At the same time, these representations did not simply describe the landscape, they also produced and reinforced broader U.S. expansionist ideologies. As the doctrine of Manifest Destiny underpinned the U.S. objective of territorial expansion and annexation of Mexican land. Within the context of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) travel writing and archaeological study in the Yucatán can be understood as part of a wider imperial project to expand U.S. spheres of cultural and intellectual authority (Pratt 1992; Ruiz 2014; Ward 2014). As historians of tourism and empire have argued, the rise of archaeological travel in the Americas was closely tied to broader U.S. imperial and cultural expansion. Evan Ward, for example, connects these developments to Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 frontier thesis, which framed expansion and frontier experience as central to the formation of U.S. identity. Although Turner's argument focused on internal territorial expansion, it has since been interpreted as extending beyond national borders, shaping broader cultural logic that positioned foreign landscapes, such as the Yucatán, as new sites for exploration, knowledge production, and proto-tourism (Turner 1893; Ward 2014, 42). In this way, tourism functioned as a cultural mechanism of imperial expansion. By rendering Maya landscapes legible, desirable, and consumable for foreign audiences, travel writing and archaeological discourse helped extend U.S. cultural authority.

Within this political-economic context, early tourism in the region emerged as a form of elite, scholarly travel structured by and for this Euro-American subjectivity. Archaeological research and travel writing were intertwined with the beginnings of a tourism economy oriented toward wealthy foreign visitors seeking intellectual enrichment and adventurous experience. In this model, knowledge production, cultural authority, and access to the sites were largely controlled by foreign scholars and institutions.

In contrast to these developments elsewhere in the peninsula, Tulum itself remained only marginally incorporated into these early tourism networks. During much of this period, the region was shaped by the Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1915), a prolonged conflict between Indigenous Maya communities and the Mexican state and regional elites. Rooted in resistance to debt peonage, land dispossession, and forced military conscription, the conflict transformed eastern Yucatán into a contested and often inaccessible zone. Tulum, particularly the settlement known as Santa Cruz Tulum, became an important center of Maya resistance. Its coastal location facilitated connections to broader Caribbean trade networks, including coastal commercial exchange routes and transport of arms through British Honduras (present-day Belize), while the rebellion itself was imbued with spiritual significance through the figure of the *Cruz Parlante* (Speaking Cross), which followers believed sanctioned and guided their struggle (Gabbert 2004; Reed 1997; Rosado Rosado & Santana Rivas 2008, 127-28). During this period, Tulum's social and political life was characterized by Indigenous resistance, autonomous governance, and regional conflict.

These conditions also limited archaeological access. As Samuel Lothrop later observed in his 1924 study, the isolation produced by the Caste War contributed to Tulum's "romantic atmosphere," even as it deterred sustained investigation (Lothrop 1924: 64-65). Accounts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries frequently describe failed or brief visits by foreign researchers who avoided landing due to fear of attack. Only after the end of the war in 1915 were more systemic expeditions undertaken, like those led by the U.S. Archaeologist Sylvanus Morley in 1916 and 1918, organized by the Carnegie Institution and funded through a combination of institutional and private support (Morley 1914-1916/2021; Ward 2014).

Even as access increased, the discourse surrounding Maya communities remained deeply shaped by colonial assumptions. Archaeological reports by Morley and tourist guides written by U.S. travelers such as Louis Effler frequently characterized Indigenous populations as obstacles to research or as disconnected from the cultural value of the sites themselves. These attitudes are especially visible in early tourist literature, such as Effler's 1937 guide to Chichén Itzá, which framed contemporary Maya people as indifferent to their own heritage while positioning foreign visitors as its proper appreciators (Effler 1937). At the same time, figures such as Edward Thompson played a key role in linking archaeological research to emerging tourism practices. By acquiring land near Chichén Itzá and hosting visitors, Thompson helped establish an early model in which archaeological authority, private ownership, and tourism development were closely intertwined. As anthropologist Eve Bantman-Masum (2018) argues, such figures can be understood as transnational cultural entrepreneurs who transformed archaeological knowledge into a marketable tourism product (Bantman-Masum 2018; Breglia 2006; Castañeda 1996; Walker 2008). Meanwhile, Tulum remained largely outside this emerging tourism economy, its development constrained by regional conflict shaped by Indigenous resistance rather than foreign visitation.

Taken together, this period reflects a political economy of elite, foreign-controlled knowledge production and early tourism development. Archaeologists and travel writers not only documented Maya sites but also shaped the terms under which these sites were accessed, interpreted, and commodified. The dominant subjectivity of the period: an adventurous, rational, and culturally authoritative Euro-American explorer, was both produced through and reinforced by these practices. While this model centered foreign scholarly authority, the post-revolutionary government reworked these dynamics under state control.

1920-1960: The Mexican Revolutionary State and the Formation of National and Cultural Tourism

In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), the relationship between the Mexican state, foreign researchers, and sites of pre-Columbian heritage underwent a significant transformation. With the ratification of the 1917 Constitution, and particularly Article 27[4], the Mexican state asserted national ownership over land, subsoil resources, and archaeological patrimony. This legal framework enabled the state to reclaim formal control over Maya sites that had previously been dominated by foreign individuals and institutions, even as it continued to permit regulated foreign participation in their excavation and study. Rather than marking a rupture with earlier forms of foreign involvement, this shift reconfigured the terms under which such involvement would occur, placing it under the authority of the post-revolutionary state (Diaz-Andreu 2013; Kelly 1994; Martínez-Tagüeña et al. 2022; UNESCO 1972/1986).

In the Yucatán Peninsula, these developments unfolded alongside broader regional transformations. The decline of the henequen export economy, which had dominated the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prompted efforts to diversify economic activity and more fully integrate the peninsula into national development projects (Alston et al. 2009; Escalante 1988; Joseph & Wells 1982). Within this context, tourism emerged as a promising avenue for economic growth, particularly through the promotion of Maya archaeological sites as both cultural patrimony and economic resources.

The continued collaboration between the Mexican government and the Carnegie Institution of Washington exemplifies this reconfiguration. Although Edward Thompson no longer retained ownership over the archaeological structures at Chichén Itzá, he maintained

[4] Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution establishes the nation's authority to regulate private property in the public interest, including the equitable distribution of wealth and the conservation of natural resources (México 1917, Art. 27).

control of the surrounding hacienda, which was later purchased by Yucatec businessman Fernando Barbachano Peón. Beginning in 1924, the Mexican government granted Carnegie archaeologists permission to conduct extensive excavations at the site, resulting in a seventeen-year research project that restored and monumentalized key structures. At the same time, Barbachano Peón developed the Mayaland Hotel and Bungalows on the former hacienda property, creating one of the earliest sustained tourism infrastructures in the region.

This arrangement reflects a distinct political economy of tourism characterized by state ownership of cultural heritage, regulated collaboration with foreign academic institutions, and the emergence of Mexican private investment in tourism infrastructure. The Mexican state positioned itself as the primary steward of national patrimony while simultaneously facilitating its transformation into a site of economic value. In this model archaeological research, state-building, and tourism development became mutually reinforcing processes.

This political-economic formation was underpinned by a corresponding shift in dominant subjectivity. As María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo argues, revolutionary state projects in Latin America articulated a model of subjectivity tied to development, modernization, and national integration (2003). The corresponding imaginary cast archaeological heritage as both national patrimony and economic resource, while simultaneously prescribing acceptable forms of Indigenous identity. Within this framework, Indigenous and peasant populations were not excluded from the national project but incorporated in carefully managed ways. In the Yucatán, Maya heritage was mobilized as a foundational element of Mexican national identity, while contemporary Maya people were positioned as both laborers within development projects and as cultural symbols to be curated for tourism. As Saldaña-Portillo suggests, this process involved "dictating acceptable modes of Indigenous subjectivity," aligning Indigenous presence with the

goals of the state while limiting forms of autonomy that fell outside its developmental vision (Quijano 2000; Saldaña-Portillo 2003, 63). At sites such as Chichén Itzá, this took material form through the labor of local Maya workers, who participated in excavation, restoration, and maintenance, even as interpretive authority remained largely in the hands of state officials and foreign researchers (Castañeda 1996). Simultaneously, early tourism practices framed these sites as accessible, orderly, and culturally legible destinations for both domestic and international visitors, reinforcing their role as curated representations of a national past.

Taken together, these developments also marked an important shift in the relationship between Maya people and Maya heritage. While pre-Columbian Maya architecture, history, and material culture were increasingly elevated as symbols of Mexican national patrimony and promoted as resources for tourism development, contemporary Maya communities were more often incorporated as laborers within these projects than as authorities over the histories and landscapes being represented. In this sense, the growing visibility of Maya heritage within national and international tourism occurred alongside the relative marginalization of living Maya communities in shaping how that heritage was interpreted and experienced. This historical tension forms an important backdrop to my own fieldwork, where Maya history and spirituality remained central to Tulum's tourism economy even as Indigenous Maya interlocutors proved comparatively difficult to access.

In contrast to the growing prominence of sites like Chichén Itzá, Tulum remained relatively peripheral to these developments during this period. Although archaeological interest in the site increased following the end of the Caste War and early twentieth-century expeditions, Tulum did not become a central focus of state-led tourism infrastructure or investment. Its relative inaccessibility, limited development, and marginal position within national tourism

planning meant that its political economy continued to be shaped primarily by subsistence activities, small-scale production, and regional trade rather than by the expanding tourism industry. As such, while the broader Yucatán Peninsula was increasingly incorporated into a national cultural tourism economy, Tulum remained largely outside its primary circuits of capital and development. These mid-century configurations of state authority, cultural patrimony, and tourism development would ultimately enable the emergence of a more expansive, globally oriented model of tourism under neoliberal economic restructuring in the decades that followed.

1960-2000 Late Twentieth Century: State-Managed Neoliberal Tourism Planning

Building on earlier efforts to consolidate state control over cultural heritage and develop a national tourism industry, the late twentieth century marked a shift toward large-scale, state-managed tourism planning grounded in neoliberal economic strategies. By the 1960s, the Mexican government increasingly viewed tourism, alongside export-oriented manufacturing such as maquiladoras, as a key solution to national economic challenges (Ambrosie 2015; Britton 1982; Castellanos 2010, xxviii; Torres & Momsen 2005). Within this framework, the promotion of Maya heritage was not only central to national identity formation but also to the generation of foreign exchange and integration into the global economy.

These priorities became materially realized through the creation of the Banco de México's tourism development agency, INFRATUR (Fondo para la Promocion de la Infraestructura Turistica. Later became FONATUR, Fondo de Promoción e Infraestructura Turística), in the late 1960s. Led by Antonio Enriquez Savignac, INFRATUR was tasked with identifying and developing new tourism hubs along México's Caribbean coast. With an initial fund of two million dollars and later support from a $100 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank, the agency undertook a highly technocratic approach to planning. As Savignac explained, the selection of Cancún as a development site was based on a rationalized, data-driven model:

"As bankers, we approached this from a banker's point of view, taking everything measurable into account, feeding it into a computer and leaving nothing to chance" (Enríquez Savignac 1972, quoted in Dunphy 1972; Torres & Momsen 2005). Thus, the dominant subjectivity of this period was the technocratic development planner, whose authority rested on the capacity to render territory measurable, legible, and economically productive. The imaginary animating this formation was one of rational planning, modernization, and export-oriented growth (Scott 1998). Further, this technocratic approach reflects what I later discuss as the computational metaphor: a way of understanding the world as systems of information that can be measured, optimized, and reconfigured.

This process involved not only assessing environmental and infrastructural factors but also identifying locations with sufficiently large, economically vulnerable populations to supply a stable labor force. In this sense, Cancún was not simply discovered as an ideal tourist destination but actively produced through a model of development that aligned state planning, financial investment, and labor availability. The resulting project brought together government agencies, private hotel investors, and airline business in what one INFRATUR official described as a "holy trinity" of development, underscoring the interdependence of public and private interests in this new phase of tourism expansion.

The development of Cancún reflects a distinct political economy of neoliberal tourism characterized by state-led planning, transnational financing, and the strategic incorporation of local labor into export-oriented service industries. Central to this model was the creation of spatially organized labor regimes. INFRATUR's plans included the construction of a designated "worker's city," intended to house the primarily Maya-descended labor force employed in building and servicing the industry. This planned community included schools, hospitals, and

other basic services, and was framed by planners as a means of ensuring social stability and worker satisfaction. As Savignac stated, “We want the workers to be happy, to feel that they are an important part of Cancún. This will reflect in the way they treat tourists” (Dunphy 1972).

However, as Bianet Castellanos demonstrates in her ethnographic work on Maya labor in Cancún, this ultimately produced a system of spatial and economic segregation (2010). The “worker’s city” evolved into a form of housing separation that concentrated laboring populations in peripheral zones, physically and socially distanced from the resort areas designed for tourists. This segregation mirrored broader patterns of resource distribution, in which access to infrastructure, services, and capital remained unevenly allocated (Castellanos 2010; Juárez 2002, 41; Torres & Momsen 2005). Moreover, Castellanos argues, Quintana Roo’s designation as a free-trade zone positioned the region within a broader landscape of export-oriented development, linking tourism labor to conditions similar to those found in maquiladora industries at México’s borders. In this sense, while Cancún’s development was widely regarded as an economic success, its promised benefits for local populations were unevenly realized.

The expansion of Cancún as a tourism hub also catalyzed broader infrastructural transformations across the eastern Yucatán Peninsula, reshaping the conditions under which other coastal sites, including Tulum, would be incorporated into the tourism economy. The construction of paved roads connecting Felipe Carrillo Puerto to Tulum in 1969 and Playa del Carmen to Tulum in 1972 significantly improved regional accessibility (Juárez 2002). These developments marked an important shift in Tulum’s integration into emerging tourism circuits, although its role remained secondary to that of Cancún (Marín-Guardado 2012) .

During the following decades, Tulum continued to exist primarily as a small coastal town with limited tourism infrastructure. By 1990, it remained a modest fishing community with a

population of approximately 2,000 Maya residents (Juárez 2002). Visitors were typically backpackers or day-trippers from Cancún drawn to the archaeological site but rarely staying overnight due to the lack of formal accommodations. Travel guides from the period describe Tulum as a relatively undeveloped and economically marginal town, with minimal services and little active promotion of tourism. As *Fodor's* (1990) noted, Tulum, "did little to encourage tourism" and remained "a small, poor community" despite its proximity to increasingly popular destinations.

At the same time, these accounts also anticipated the region's future transformation. The rapid growth of Cancún and development of coastal infrastructure suggested that Tulum's relative isolation would not persist. This shift became more pronounced toward the end of the century. In 1999, a regional decree rebranded the area between Cancún and Tulum as the "Riviera Maya" (O'Connor 2015; Pi-Sunyer & Thomas 2015). This rebranding was accompanied by increased investment, coordinated marketing campaigns, and infrastructural development aimed at extending tourism southward from Cancún. This set the stage for Tulum's subsequent transformation in the twenty-first century.

2000-Present: Boutique Luxury, Wellness, and Spiritual Tourism

While Cancún was a carefully planned and implemented national project carried out by the team at INFRATUR, a national development project known as a *Centro Integralmente Planeado* (Integrally Planned Center or CIP), Tulum's development has not been similarly meticulously planned. Tourism development in Tulum has been described as "spontaneous and continuous" in contrast to Cancún (Arroyo Arcos, López, & Pavón 2015). The establishment of hotels along Tulum's coast has been staggered and generally split into two different types of hotel accommodations, each catering to a distinct tourist subjectivity. The hotels established in Tulum's *Centro*, also known as Tulum Pueblo, cater to a distinct tourist profile oriented toward

budget travel, long-term stays, and flexible forms of work. Tulum Centro is where many freelance gig-workers lived—in hostels, hotel rooms, or rentals.

The two maps below outline three different areas of Tulum in which tourism development in the form of hotel accommodations has been established. Establishment of hotels in these areas do not follow a strict linear chronology, however, as mentioned previously, different kinds of hotel accommodations were sporadically established throughout the three areas. Tulum Centro is highlighted in black shading in both figures 4 and 5. Tulum's approximately 45 mile stretch of shoreline is divided into two different strips of hotel development bifurcated by the Parque del Jaguar, with the mega-resort zone to the north and Tulum's Hotel Zone (Zona Hotelera) in the south.

Figure 4 highlights in red shading the northern strip comprising about 28 miles of coastline from the town of Akumal south to the start of the Parque del Jaguar (Tulum archaeological zone). This northern strip is characterized by development of large-scale mega-resort projects beginning in the year 2000.

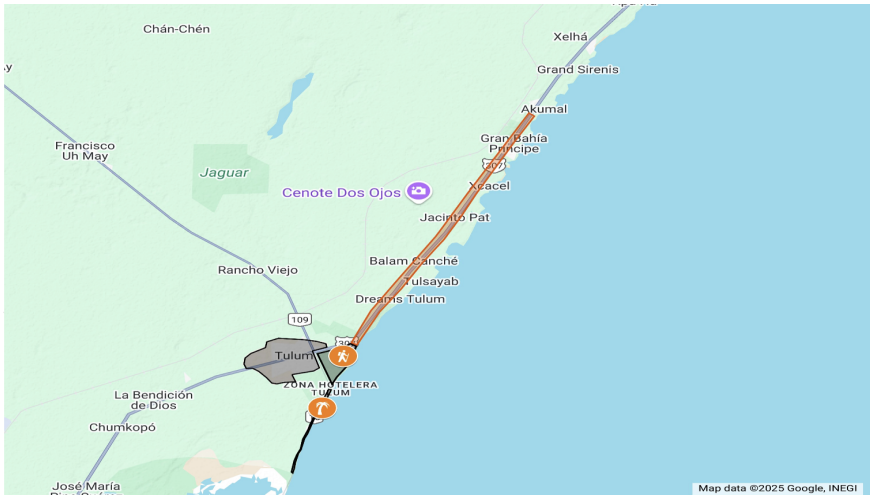


Figure 4. Map of the Tulum coastal corridor showing the resort zone highlighted in red along Highway 307, extending south from Akumal to the Parque del Jaguar and the Tulum archaeological site. Map data from Google and INEGI.

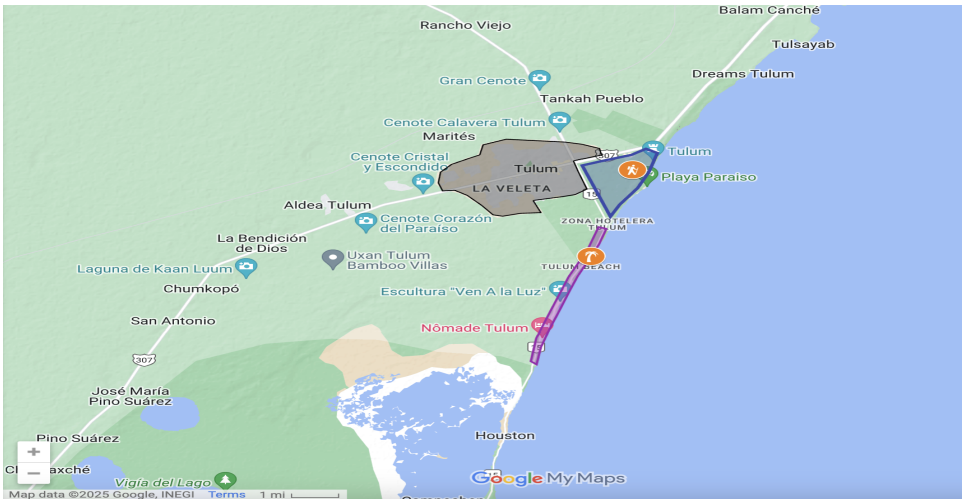


Figure 5. Map of Tulum showing the Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone) highlighted in purple, Tulum Centro in black, and the Parque del Jaguar in blue.

Figure 5 highlights in purple shading the southern stretch of about nine miles, which begins at the fork of Highway 15 (Avenida Cobá), just south of the border of the Parque del Jaguar (in blue shading) and goes south along the coast to the beginning of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve. This stretch in purple shading is what is commonly referred to as the *Zona Hotelera*, or hotel zone. These different spatial zones correspond to distinct tourist subjectivities, labor regimes, imaginaries, and consumption patterns.

Table 3. Subjectivities, tourism models, and spatial locations in Tulum.

Zone	Spatial Location	Tourism Model	Tourist Subjectivity
Resort Zone (north)	Along Highway 307, Akumal→Parque del Jaguar	All-inclusive enclave tourism	Vacationers seeking convenience, security, minimal local interaction.
Tulum Centro	The town is located about 5 miles inland from the coast.	Budget/mid-range, long-term stays	Backpackers, digital nomads, freelance gig-workers
Hotel Zone (south)	Coastal strip south of the Parque del Jaguar	Boutique, wellness, spiritual tourism	Affluent wellness seekers, lifestyle consumers and influencers.

The northern Resort Zone primarily attracts short-term vacationers seeking convenience, all-inclusive style resorts with minimal engagement beyond the hotel's enclave. In contrast, Tulum Centro draws budget travelers, backpackers, and long-term visitors, including freelance gig-workers. The coastal Zona Hotelera (Hotel Zone) south of the archaeological site (Parque del Jaguar) caters to a different clientele: wealthy international tourists seeking boutique luxury, wellness practices, spiritual development, and experiences framed as an alternative to the mass tourism of the mega-resort style through a rugged, earthy, jungle aesthetic. Although Tulum's tourism economy is segmented across three distinct zones, this project is focused on two of these zones: the Hotel Zone and Tulum Centro. The Hotel Zone is the primary site of boutique and spiritually oriented tourism, while Centro serves as a residential and social hub for the freelance gig workers who sustain this industry, and where I was based during fieldwork.

Beginning in 1970, small, rudimentary cabin accommodations were established in the hotel zone. Arroyo Arcos et al. have compiled a list of these kinds of tourist stay offerings, many of which continue to stand today, although having evolved throughout the decades, many of them maintain the small, boutique style which has come to represent the Hotel Zone (2015). I argue that the dominant subjectivity shaping this tourism consumption style is oriented toward self-making through wellness, spirituality, aesthetic distinction, and entrepreneurial flexibility. I use the figure of the "comprehensive designer" to name and condense this mode of personhood, which draws on U.S. countercultural ideals of autonomy, holistic transformation, and the capacity to redesign one's life and surroundings.

Small, 3-star hotels and hostels in Tulum Centro sprang up beginning in 1980 and throughout the 1990s, many are concentrated along the main road, Avenida Tulum. By the year 2000, Tulum had captured the attention of mega-resort corporations AMResorts and Grupo

Piñero. AMResorts is a subsidiary of an American conglomerate called Apple Leisure Group, which specializes in hotels in México and other places in the Caribbean. In 2000 they built their first all-inclusive resort in the Northern section (red shading in figure X.X), called Dreams Tulum Resort. In 2001, Grupo Piñero, a Spanish tourism industry conglomerate operating since 1975, built and expanded upon their mega-resort hotel under their brand Gran Bahía Principe on highway 307 of the Northern zone. Their Gran Bahía Principe resort in Tulum is comprised of three sections, starting in 2001 with the "Tulum" section of 858 rooms, followed by their "Akumal" section which added 630 rooms in 2006, and finally, their "Cobá" section providing an additional 1,080 rooms (Arroyo Arcos et al. 2015, 130).

I refer to this northern zone along highway 307 as the "resort zone" because its tourism development is similar to the mega-resorts of Cancún. Foreign conglomerates have invested in building all-inclusive resorts that create a kind of mini-city enclave, bubbled in the midst of the surrounding jungle and local people and villages of Tulum (Britton 1982; Ceja Morales 2025; Torres & Momsen 2005). They offer a broad range of amenities, including golf courses, tennis courts, and private beach access. The resort zone, however, differs in style and aesthetic to Tulum's Hotel Zone and Tulum Centro, which are located south and west of the Tulum archaeological site (El Parque Del Jaguar), respectively. This tourism model, and the labor regimes that sustain it, are central to this dissertation.

While more traditional neoliberal resort development models are found in Tulum, what makes part of its tourist development distinct is a focus on spirituality, healing, and the performance and projection of these experiences in person and through social media (Blanco-Moreno et al. 2024; Siegel 2025; Xiang & Gretzel 2010). The following chapter discusses the transformation of Tulum into a global site of spiritual tourism accelerated by the COVID-19

pandemic global lockdowns. Chapter 4 illustrates the pandemic-driven influx of tourists and capital, followed by an analysis of the labor migration that made this expansion possible. I then focus on spiritual tourism as a key site of labor and value production, drawing on ethnographic accounts of practitioners of the *Camino Rojo*. Finally, I analyze how aesthetics, race, and class shape hierarchies of value and legitimacy within this economy.

Tulum's post-2000 development thus reflects not only the spatial extension of neoliberal tourism models southward from Cancún but also the emergence of a distinct tourism economy organized around spirituality, wellness, and aestheticized forms of alternative tourism. While enclave-style, all-inclusive megaresorts continue to operate north of the archaeological zone, the growth of boutique luxury hotels, wellness retreats, and spiritual tourism south of the zone signals forms of commodification centered on the promise of self-transformation through experiences marketed as channeling or drawing from Maya cosmologies and healing traditions, even as they are reconfigured within global circuits of consumption (Castañeda 2021). The following chapter builds on this analysis by examining how these transformations intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. It focuses on the rapid influx of tourists and migrant workers, the reorganization of labor, and the expansion of spiritual tourism as a key site of economic and social production. In doing so, it traces how spatial and economic arrangements are lived through the experiences of freelance gig workers who sustain the industry.

CHAPTER III
THE WORK OF HEALING: SPIRITUAL TOURISM, GIG LABOR, AND MARKET MORALITY IN TULUM

This chapter examines how Tulum's emergence as a global hub for spiritual and wellness tourism intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. I focus on the tourism model that has taken shape in Tulum's Hotel Zone and Tulum Centro and the kinds of workers it has attracted. This model caters to elite spiritual wellness tourists seeking boutique luxury framed by a rugged, earthy, jungle aesthetic, and is structured by the subjectivity referred to as the "comprehensive designer." Interviews with gig workers revealed that many were drawn to Tulum not only because of economic necessity, but also by their own commitments to spirituality, healing practices, and the possibility of crafting meaningful livelihoods. Yet, as they enter into short-term, flexible labor arrangements, their skills, bodies, and knowledge become commodified in ways that often undermine the very forms of wellbeing that this industry claims to provide (Yu et al. 2025). At the same time, workers, employers, and tourists often share the aspiration of entrepreneurship, revealing how neoliberal ideals of autonomy and self-design shape subjectivities across class positions (Gershon 2011).

This chapter traces these dynamics through several interconnected processes. I begin by examining the pandemic-driven influx of tourists and capital, followed by an analysis of the labor migration that made this expansion possible. I then turn to spiritual tourism as a key site of labor and value production, drawing on ethnographic accounts of participants of the *Camino Rojo*. Finally, I discuss how aesthetics, race, class, and performance shape hierarchies of value and legitimacy in this economy.

Tulum Boom During the Pandemic

Building on the spatial and economic transformations outlined in the previous chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated Tulum's emergence as a global hub for spiritual and wellness tourism. While much of the world restricted international travel, the state of Quintana Roo moved quickly to reopen its tourism sector, designating it an essential industry. As a result, Tulum became one of the few destinations where international travel remained accessible (Coordinación General de Comunicación, 2020). This decision had significant economic consequences (Cruz-Milan & Lagunas-Puls 2021, 13-14). As Maya Averbuch and Rafael Gayol note, "poverty in Quintana Roo rose early in the pandemic and the state lost 97,000 jobs, but by June 2020 hotels were reopening" (2022, 30). By reopening, Tulum attracted an influx of international visitors, particularly remote workers who now had the flexibility to be digital nomads and were able to relocate to destinations that combined leisure, work, and relative freedom of movement (Ehn, Jorge, and Marques-Pita 2022; Fraga & Robledo 2022, 161; Thompson 2018).

The rapid return of tourists generated an equally rapid expansion in demand for accommodations, hospitality services, nightlife, and spiritual and wellness offerings. In tandem, Tulum drew diverse groups of workers seeking to fill these roles, including internal migrants from other regions of Mexico, residents of Quintana Roo, Argentinians, Europeans, and U.S. nationals, many of whom were specifically drawn to opportunities within the spiritual and wellness sector. As the following accounts illustrate, this period was experienced as both one of economic opportunity and intensified labor, as Tulum was transformed into a site of heightened consumption and inequality.

Diego, an events coordinator working in the Hotel Zone at the time of Tulum's reopening, described this moment as one of rapid and unprecedented expansion:

> When the pandemic and all that happened, what I was able to observe was that, well, to start Tulum was like a capital in the world, because all parts [of the world] were closed and at around four months from the start of the pandemic they [Tulum] started to open. So people from all over the world started to arrive. There were people who could not see each other from distinct parts of the world, so they would agree to meet up here in Tulum. That was when, for me personally, I didn't see the metrics [limits] at that time. Maybe the government knows them. But for me that was the most explosive time in Tulum. There were parties everywhere, there was always life 24/7.

Diego contrasted this period with the months just before Tulum reopened to tourism (March-June 2020), when work slowed significantly and he was able to spend more time with family, often going on daily boat trips and hiking excursions with friends. After June 2020, however, his work intensified as the hotel became consistently busy, marking a period of economic opportunity. The income he earned during this time ultimately allowed him to save enough to open his own coffee shop in Tulum Centro, about five miles inland from the Hotel Zone, where we sat down for our conversation.

Omar, a 42-year-old manager of a dance club in the Hotel Zone, similarly described the pandemic as a watershed moment in Tulum's transformation into one of the most popular "hotspots" in the international party tourism circuit. Having visited Tulum for over a decade prior to the pandemic, he reflected on how dramatically the town had changed and expressed a sense of fortune at having witnessed its evolution over time. Originally from Mexico City, Omar was sent to Tulum in December 2019 to oversee the opening of a restaurant in the Hotel Zone which officially opened in February 2020:

> And by March 2020 the pandemic lockdowns happened and we went back [to Mexico City], they said 'no one can stay here,' they closed the hotel zone, they closed everything. I went back to Mexico City, but everything began closing over there. I had two small restaurants, everything began to close, then around June, end of May, beginning of June, Tulum re-opens. So I came back, we reactivated the place and then I stayed here. The pandemic was very good for Tulum, in contrast to the rest of the world.

Omar went on to explain that a restaurateur friend later invited him to help open another establishment in the Hotel Zone. He was initially hesitant, but changed his mind after attending a "friends and family" event prior to its official opening. As he recalled, "I saw the place and I was enchanted, it was divine." Omar now manages this popular discotheque, restaurant, and bar in the Zone, notable for its incorporation of a *cenote*, a natural limestone sinkhole characteristic of the Yucatán Peninsula.

Reflecting on the pandemic period, Omar described the kinds of visitors who began arriving in Tulum as:

> people with the most purchasing power in the world, they were all here, people with a lot of money, people of an incredibly high economic position. [Tulum] was extremely expensive. And for the same reason, there were parties, people setting up businesses, strong demand, and the economy of the town grew considerably, and then after that comes Tulum after the pandemic.

Together, Diego and Omar's accounts underscore how the pandemic transformed Tulum into a site of intensified labor and elite consumption, where economic opportunity for workers was inseparable from heightened precarity and the reproduction of global inequalities.

The *Camino Rojo* comes to Tulum

The pandemic closures and subsequent lack of employment opportunities in Mexico City catalyzed labor migration to Tulum of individuals who had already been developing skills and knowledge in Indigenous healing practices as part of a movement known as the *Camino Rojo* (Red Path). While many had not previously relied on these practices as a primary source of income, the pandemic pushed them to seek ways of monetizing this knowledge after losing more stable forms of employment. Celia, Adela, and Sarah (pseudonyms) were among those drawn to Tulum during and after the pandemic in search of work in the spiritual tourism economy, where a growing demand for healing practices created new opportunities to commodify and employ these skills within a rapidly expanding tourism market (Christou, Pericleous, & Singleton 2023; Smith & Diekmann 2017). Celía and Adela, both originally from Mexico City, relocated to Tulum in 2020, having already been active participants in the Pan-American spiritual movement known as the "Camino Rojo." The *Camino Rojo* or Red Path, is a spiritual movement that draws on diverse Indigenous traditions of North America, including those of the Lakota Sioux, and specifically incorporates practices such as the Sun and the Moon dances, the temazcal (sweat lodge), and vision quests involving substances like peyote (de la Torre 2019; Scuro, Giucci, & Torterola 2018). As Celía explains, the movement began to take shape in the early 1980s through a renewed interest in practicing the temazcal:

> Temazcal is healing that got retaken or "rescued" from the native Mexican tradition in the Eastern part of Mexico City, it gained popularity in this neighborhood called Neza (Nezahualcóyotl), the part of the city that is still adjacent to a part where there is still some lake. There is a place that is famous for violence, what they call a "barrio bravo," so there's a lot of violence and a lot of crime, but also there is where a lot of people started

retaking this identity of the Nahua. The people from this neighborhood started getting into the danza Mexica, an ancient dance dedicated to the sun or to the rain, or to the fire.

Celía suggested that the growing popularity of the temazcal may have emerged in response to, or as a way to counteract, widespread violence. She describes how people began constructing temazcal sweat lodge domes in their backyards as part of this movement. Prior to the pandemic, Celía was already an active participant in the Camino Rojo in Mexico City, motivated by a desire to deepen her understanding of Indigenous healing practices and traditions. When the pandemic-related shutdowns disrupted her job prospects, she relocated to Tulum, where an influx of tourists created demand for the kinds of spiritual and wellness experiences, she had been training in. Adela's trajectory follows a similar pattern. She is thirty years old and moved to Tulum in 2021:

> What brought me was that I was in a state of unemployment. I was living in San Luis Potosí, and a friend told me he was going to an event in Tulum with some of his friends that I have known for years. It was an opportunity because the three of us came to look for something more. So, I called another acquaintance [in Tulum] who I knew had a temazcal and I asked if there was an opportunity to work in his temazcal and he said yes, so come because he was working alone at [redacted name of wellness spa]. So we decided to come here. I brought my things, my documents and thought maybe there was an opportunity for work.



Figure 6. Painted exterior of a temazcal dome and adjacent wood-fired oven used to heat stones for the interior of the dome during ceremonies.

Like Celía, Adela grew up in Mexico City and began participating in the Camino Rojo movement at age seventeen. Her involvement began when a classmate announced workshops for learning Náhuatl and invited anyone interested to join weekend meetings. From there, she gradually became more involved, branching out into broader activities associated with the Camino Rojo:

> So, I gradually began to go every weekend to the temazcales that they held every twenty days, or around the count of the moon [phase]. It was one of the things the group was trying to rescue. They wanted us to do the celebrations every

> determinate number of days and it was there that I began to learn a bit [about the Camino Rojo]. Then I got into a course where the group held activities.

Although Adela remained actively involved in the Camino Rojo, particularly in temazcal ceremonies and the Moon Dance, she also pursued higher education, earning a master's degree in psychology. She describes these two forms of training as complementary, noting that her academic background informs her work as the wellness program coordinator at a spa in Tulum:

> Well, for example, in my studies of Náhuatl that I had years ago, they talked about the old psychology (psicología antigua) and how the old healers were psychologists. Even in the western books that I studied in my academic career, it said that before people were not accustomed to going to the psychologist, because they went to the healers of the towns and as I studied a bit more then I knew that there is no difference, right? The healers use plants, they use herbs, and psychologists use words and their ears to listen, right? So it's a complement to the holistic healing of a person and in many places and cultures, even the people who come [to Tulum] to do 'breathworks' and healing meditation, they say it is very important to say and to hear the words. Right now, I participate in the moon dance every year and the guide, in the context of medicine, all the time is talking about how saying and confessing is an act of will and an act of healing. So, that's what I feel, how psychology seen from a holistic view can help a lot of people.

Both Celía and Adela hold university degrees but were also drawn to the Camino Rojo through a shared commitment to reviving Indigenous healing practices as part of a broader, transnational effort to address individual and collective trauma stemming from the ongoing structural and symbolic violence of colonialism (Zermeño & Laster Pirtle 2021).

Sarah is also a participant in the Camino Rojo movement, though she came to Tulum from Oakland, California. She has been living in Tulum since 2022, has participated in the annual Moon Dance for the past two years, and works as an assistant to a medicine man during temazcal ceremonies. Like Celía and Adela, Sarah understands the resurgence of practices such as the Sun Dance in Mexico, within the broader Camino Rojo movement, as coinciding with the:

> re-emergence of traditional native ceremonies for all the people that were coming back from Vietnam and experiencing all this PTSD, people who had developed drug addictions…and there were a bunch of folks who were beginning to do ceremonies in order to heal trauma that was present in so many people's communities.

Sarah further suggested that the resurgence of the Sun Dance in Mexico emerged alongside the emergence of several civil rights movements in the United States —including the American Indian movement, Chicano movement, Black Liberation movements, and Women's Rights Movement —linking these efforts as part of a broader historical moment that helped catalyze the growth of a Pan-American movement centered on Indigenous healing traditions.

Like Celía and Adela, Sarah was drawn to practices such as the Moon dance and the temazcal through a desire to participate in forms of healing she understood as necessary for individuals and communities experiencing trauma. At the same time, the pandemic reshaped the conditions under which this knowledge could be practiced and sustained, requiring many participants to monetize their skills. Tulum's relative accessibility during the pandemic, when many other tourist destinations were shuttered, attracted a population of travelers with the financial means and mobility to relocate. The resulting influx of tourists spiked demand for spiritual and wellness experiences, creating new opportunities for participants of the Camino

Rojo. For Celia, Adela, and Sarah, this demand, combined with limited employment prospects in their home cities or countries, prompted their migration to Tulum, where they found work in the spiritual tourism sector facilitating temazcal ceremonies and offering services such as breathwork sessions, energy healing, and tarot card readings as freelance gig workers.

The Market Morality of Spiritual Tourism

While participation in the Camino Rojo is motivated by interlocutors' desire to facilitate healing—for themselves and for others suffering emotional and psychic distress—the material conditions of the pandemic and its aftermath required many to monetize these skills and engage a consumer market of tourists in Tulum. I argue that spiritual tourism in Tulum is structured by a central paradox: while marketed as a space of healing, relationality, and transcendence, it depends on labor arrangements that produce precarity, inequality, and disconnection. This paradox is not incidental but foundational, emerging from the integration of Indigenous healing practices into a global consumer economy (Juarez 2002b).

In this section, I explore the idealized subjectivities that shape the consumer relations of spiritual tourism offerings. By "idealized subjectivities," I refer to the aspirational identities produced through popular discourses of Tulum as a destination for spiritual growth, healing, and self-transformation (Smith & Kelly 2006). These subjectivities differ across actors: tourists imagine themselves as seekers of healing and transformation; workers as healers or facilitators; and business owners as entrepreneurs who mediate and profit from these exchanges. By "consumer relations" of spiritual tourism offerings, I refer to Mimi Sheller's concept of "the binding mobilities of consumption," or the fixed and prescribed modes of relating between consumers, workers, and business owners (Sheller 2003, 24).

As freelance gig workers, Celía and Sarah provide services to tourists via short-term labor arrangements with a company or employer to "provide services upon request and receive

financial compensation for the work performed" (Hudek, Tominc, & Širec 2020, 57; Tran & Sokas 2017, 63). Their experiences offer insight into how these idealized subjectivities are both inhabited and negotiated, revealing not only their own aspirations but also the expectations and projections of their employers and the tourist consumers they service.

A salient theme common across my interviews with freelance gig workers in the spiritual tourism economy is a central paradox embedded in these labor relations: services marketed as promoting emotional and physical wellbeing often depend on forms of labor exploitation that, in turn, undermine the wellbeing of the workers who sustain this informal yet vital to the broader tourism economy of Tulum. A second, related theme is the widespread idealization of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Across positions—gig-workers, employers, and consumers —share in the idealization of the subjectivity of entrepreneurship. They all express a desire to move toward the figure of the entrepreneur from their own, bound position in the hierarchy of consumer relations.

As our conversation shifted from Celía's involvement in the Camino Rojo to her work as a freelance practitioner offering spiritual and healing services for tourists, she described her experiences working for the owners of a holistic spiritual wellness spa in Tulum. She characterized her interpersonal relationship with the two owners —whom she had met and befriended at a Mexica Moon Dance ceremony—as both personal and professional. One of the women, Celía noted, has "facial features [that] are Maya but she is white," and came from what she described as a "Mayan dynasty" with significant political power and wealth. She also referred to them as a family of entrepreneurs and businesspeople, highlighting the intersection of spiritual practice and commercial enterprise in their work. According to Celía, the two women became business partners and opened the spa together. One of them, who had the financial

resources to invest in the business, invited Celía to contribute her skills as a photographer and graphic designer to help market the spa and attract clients. Rather than offering monetary compensation, they proposed an "exchange basis," providing her with a place to stay for a month. As Celia recalled, "I got into it because I thought, well I can use my talent to help out these friends."

After that initial month, Celía chose to remain in Tulum and continued working with them:

> I ended up staying and continued working with them but the whole dynamic was not feeling great for me because you know Tulum is expensive and working on an exchange basis doesn't work if you're not getting steady income and they wanted me to spend a lot of time at their events and a lot of time at their useless meetings that never got anywhere and a lot of time and energy that I was putting and the way that it was sold to me was that the whole idea was to preserve the jungle and work to heal humanity and connect people with their souls and their body and blah blah blah, and I thought "oh yeah I like that" cause their family also owns an ecological development, I learned that it was supposed to be a clubhouse, but they made it like a ceremonial center, so they brought someone from Brazil to do an ayahuasca ceremony and this friend, this woman, Pili (pseudonym), she has a deep connection with her ancestors and she does genuine work that's why I kind of got on board because I have seen her work and I have seen, like I have done mushrooms with her and have seen the beings that she works with and I know that she is in service, that her intentions are genuine, but speaking of not having the…not knowing that you are under the… I don't know if she knows, I don't know if she cares, but she's very focused on, right now her focus is on like getting

> money to get her businesses going so she can help more people but like the way that it was structured and the way that I was feeling, like, not honored, and the way that I was showing up didn't feel in alignment.

Later, Celía reflected on how her former friend and informal employer related to her and to others within the business:

> The way that Pili at least connects, always comes from the lens of 'are you helping me make money? Are you helping me grow my business?' and the moment that I was not helping them build their business to what they thought was the marketing success, then they were like 'okay you are no longer useful to me.'

Celía agreed to work on an "exchange basis" for a friend she trusted and regarded as a genuinely skilled healer. That trust was grounded in her personal experiences with Pili in settings such as the Moon Dance, as well as witnessing her healing abilities while in an altered state of consciousness. Celía understood Pili's spiritual gifts and her connection to ancestral practices as authentic and believed in her capacity to help others. Yet, Pili's treatment of Celia within the context of a capitalist relationship between employer and freelance gig worker undermined — and in some ways eroded—that foundation of trust. The shift from spiritual collaboration to labor arrangement disrupted the good faith that is often central to practices of communal healing. Further describing the trajectory of their relationship, Celía noted that:

> She also was like 'This is not working for either of us,' we triggered each other on a lot of things…I started getting other opportunities on my own, reading tarot and doing other things in other places and it's been good but it was really intense like going through that because we were really close and after the first eclipse, the lunar eclipse, I was not feeling super great because I felt a lot of Pili's priority is

> making money to get her business going and my priority was 'well, I have to also make money to get my own things going,' but I was focusing a lot of time and energy to growing her business instead of me, I was feeling weird about it… then there was this peyote ceremony where someone came, an abuela (an elder) came and she was the one sharing medicine and Pili went to this peyote ceremony and I asked her only, I only asked her to put some tobacco in the fire for me, that was all my request, but then we had developed this kind of weird dynamic in which she felt she was like my mentor or something like that, and she felt with the right to have some opinions about my life choices and making sarcastic remarks about them, and then she told me some stuff that…I felt she was projecting. Because she said 'oh the abuelo fuego has a message for you: that love is free and love doesn't bind you.'

Over the course of their personal and working relationship, Celía had come to trust Pili, sharing details about her personal struggles and relationships. In this instance, however, Celía felt that Pili instrumentalized that closeness, using her authoritative role as a receiver of messages in the peyote ceremony to indirectly criticize and judge her. Following the ceremony, Celía texted Pili to express discomfort and that she no longer felt safe sharing personal information with her. Pili responded defensively, dismissing Celía's concerns and suggesting that if she could not accept the way messages were delivered, she should not ask her to provide them:

> I'm not going to dim my light just to appease people, these are my gifts and talents and if you don't like how I deliver my message then be mindful of what you ask me in the future so we can continue sharing.

Celia's account illustrates elements of the paradox inherent in the spiritual tourism industry that surface at the interpersonal level: relationships initially grounded in trust, shared spiritual practice, and mutual recognition can become reconfigured within market labor arrangements. What began as a collaboration through shared values gradually took on the logic of the market, where Celía's time, energy, and creative labor was evaluated in terms of how they contributed to the growth of Pili's business. Further, Celia's experience reveals the tension between the moral language of healing —centered on connection, care, and reciprocity— and the underlying dynamics of extraction that structure these relationships. Within a market context, spiritual and entrepreneurial subjectivities become intertwined in ways that can erode the shared values and goals associated with healing. The role of the authoritative healer can become a performance through which one receives a constant source of outer validation. This dynamic is especially visible in the use of social media marketing of spiritual services via posts on platforms such as Instagram, where engagement in the form of follows, likes, and comments of praise and admiration function as a source of both the production of value and legitimacy and addictive validation.

This dynamic points to another dimension of the paradox: limits on self-understanding and reflexivity that shape how individuals understand their motivations and actions. Arturo Escobar attributes this limited reflexivity to one's subject formation within the liberal model of dualist ontology:

> For us, the urban-moderns living in the spaces most strongly marked by the liberal model of life (the ontology of the individual, the market), relationality presents a major challenge, given how much personal inner work it takes to unlearn the

> civilization of disconnection, economism, science, and the individual (Escobar 2020:43).

Read through this lens, the interpersonal tensions described by Celía can be understood as arising from the challenge of attempting to reconcile competing subject positions. The performance of the subjectivity of a healer becomes muddled, and in constant conflict, with the idealized subjectivity of competitive entrepreneurship. This highlights the contradictions that arise when confronting the challenge of sustaining practices of healing and relationality within a market-driven context.

This ethnographic example underscores the importance of examining the consuming practices that structure spiritual tourism in Tulum. As Mimi Sheller suggests, we must understand "consuming practices as embodied material relations" if we want to take seriously—both individually and collectively— the work of transforming how we have been conditioned to relate to others and to the world (Sheller 2003, 24; Escobar 2020, 43).

In his discussion of Dr. Cornel West's analysis of American consumerism, Frederik Portin argues that U.S. consumers may have a uniquely challenging time assessing the implications of their consuming practices in grounded, real-world outcomes. Drawing on West, Portin suggests that the U.S. prioritization of business interests has produced a culture saliently marked by consumption and thus "promotes addiction to stimulation…[and] a culture obsessed with consuming as the only way of preserving some vitality of a self" (West quoted in Portin 2020, 10).

From Celía's perspective as a freelance gig worker, the dynamics of a "market morality" become legible in her own interactions with her employer, whose business is built on the intersections of her identity as a cultural broker of Indigenous Maya knowledge and healing

practices, but also as a member of a wealthy and well-known family with the means to invest in a business project of spiritual tourism in Tulum. In this context, Celía's experience reflects what West and Portin describe as market morality, in which economic imperatives shape interpersonal relations. As Portin writes: "when market logic thus influences morality, 'money-making, buying, and selling, or hedonistic self-indulgence will be at the center of one's behaviour.' Consequently, market morality entails that the individual's preferences and needs become the crucial standard for individual moral commitment" (Portin 2020, 10).

Temazcal Healing in the Context of Tulum's Market

In another conversation, I sat down with Celia and her partner, Leo, who works as a guide at one of the most prestigious and expensive hotels in the Hotel Zone, leading guests through its jungle garden and art installation museum. Leo also freelances as an *águila* in temazcal ceremonies, a role that involves heating heavy stones and carrying them into the center of the temazcal dome. Both Celía and Leo are originally from Mexico City, where they first began practicing the temazcal. Together, they shared important context about the origins and revival of the temazcal practice as part of the broader *Mexicanidad* movement of the 1980s. As Celía explained:

> The Mexicanidad movement began most strongly in Mexico City…because that was the cradle of the Mexica Empire, which, before the Spaniards arrived, were the true rulers of that part of the world. In the 1980s, several archaeological discoveries began to be made at the Templo Mayor, and people started to take a greater interest in ancestral history. There were groups like the one led by the abuela, who did the Moon Dance, who were concheros or Mexica dancers…they gathered more often in the Zócalo and in churches, as well as in plazas…so the Mexicanidad movement rescues all those traditions and the

> Indigenous dance. In these neighborhoods on the outskirts of Mexico City, they began to hold temazcales, and temazcales are a very ancient purification ceremony.

Celia and Leo have firsthand experience of the temazcal's resurgence as part of the movement of Mexicanidad, catalyzed in part by archaeological finds of the Mexica Empire in contemporary Mexico City. Because they practiced temazcal prior to migrating to Tulum for work in spiritual tourism, they have unique insight about how the practice is transmuted within Tulum's market context. Celia explained the contrast between its practice in Mexico City versus in Tulum:

> More than something purely ceremonial…temazcales are indeed ceremonial in Mexico City, but there's much more of an emphasis on their use as a therapeutic tool…it's not just an experience where you go once and say 'oh, I went to a temazcal and took a photo,' but rather it's like a form of therapy. People go every week, or to temazcales that take place every fifteen days or once a month. But they are consistent communities. These men healed their addictions through temazcales. For example, Agustín (pseudonym, medicine man and temazcal leader in Tulum) told us that he used to be an alcoholic and was violent toward his wife…he started going to the temazcal, started working on himself, and he healed. That's the story many of the people who share temazcal in Mexico City have…people who came from addiction, who used to be heavy drinkers or drug users, and through temazcal they've managed to connect more deeply with themselves and with the willpower to make changes in their lives.

Here, Celia explains that in Mexico City, temazcales function as community-led therapeutic practices that entail consistent participation within organized groups who gather regularly. Healing, for someone like Agustín, occurs within this broader context of collective practice and

community support therapy as organized by followers of the Camino Rojo. Celia illustrates this point through anecdotes of Agustín's life history and healing transformation, adding that:

> Obviously no one is perfect, and maybe he still has a long way to go, but let's say he healed, so now he goes and shares the temazcal with other people.

As a temazcal leader and medicine man in Tulum, Agustín is regarded as having the spiritual authority to facilitate this form of healing. Yet his life prior to this role, along with Celia's observation that his own process of healing may be ongoing, foregrounds his ordinariness. While he occupies a position of authority as a healer within Tulum's spiritual tourism economy, he remains an evolving subject. This tension is often obscured in tourist encounters, where visitors may interpret figures like Agustín as possessing stable or inherent spiritual authority.

As Celía and Leo further explain, individuals like Agustín —who have personally experienced healing through the temazcal— find their knowledge and experience in high demand within Tulum's tourism market. However, within this market context, the practice is reconfigured—or transmuted— into a performance for tourists, rather than a sustained, substantive therapeutic process:

> **Celia**: When that therapy comes here to Tulum…it becomes a commodity, a consumable experience…it's not a habit. The people who come here might do it once and then leave and never again in their lives go to a temazcal. The people who arrive with such hunger for spirituality and connection, they come to these places with these men who, perhaps in another context, their story might be helpful, but here they start holding temazcales for half-naked women on the beach. Those women, they're so hungry for connection and spirituality that they see these men as figures of authority, as abuelos, when in reality they're not shamans, but since they have that platform, they get carried away: 'yes, I'm

the abuelo,' and then they start a performance. Within the Mexicanidad tradition, almost no one is given the title of 'Abuelo' anymore unless they are truly an elder and a leader of a community…but here they call themselves abuelos. Here they're the 'medicine men,' the ones who are going to heal…the speech they give inside the temazcal, here, I feel, borders on a monologue.

Leo: Here we're talking about tourists…people who have no knowledge at all about what a temazcal is…that's why you have to start with an introduction. Whereas in Mexico City…they explain it to you in three quick sentences. In the hotels they ask you to make it more of a performance, more of a show. They tell you, 'I don't care if a temazcal usually lasts an hour and a half, make it two.' [They ask you to] share cacao and other things that don't really have much to do with it.

Celia and Leo describe how, within Tulum's tourism economy, the temazcal is often stripped of its original context, and, with it, much of its therapeutic healing potential. In its commodified form, the ceremony becomes a performance in which the facilitator —often a man who has experienced the temazcal within more community-based contexts elsewhere—assumes an authoritative role for tourists who may lack familiarity with the practice's collective dimensions (Zermeño & Laster Pirtle 2021). This emphasis on performance is further reflected in Celia's observations about how tourists participate in these ceremonies. She notes that women attendees are often encouraged to conform to particular aesthetic norms and may idealize the temazcal leader as a figure of heightened spiritual authority and wisdom. Within this dynamic, facilitators may come to inhabit and perform this authoritative role more fully, while also receiving attention and validation from participants. As a result, temazcal ceremonies, as practiced in Tulum, can be understood as characterized by several interrelated dynamics: (1) commodification, in which the

practice is detached from its communal and ongoing therapeutic context; (2) performance, in which participants, facilitators, and hotel management occupy prescribed roles in the construction of a curated experience; and (3) gendered power dynamics, in which men often occupy positions of spiritual authority in relation to women participants, who may be in vulnerable states as they seek healing and emotional relief.

Sarah also reflected on the presence of sexism and misogyny within commodified temazcal practices in Tulum, noting how norms around dress and behavior differ from more traditional settings:

> This woman…always wears a thong to the temazcal, which is a whole other thing. In other temazcales, people aren't allowed to wear thongs or show their tattoos. This isn't a place you come to show off, you don't wear a thong to church, you come to pray.

Both Celia and Sarah emphasized that temazcal practices vary across sites in Tulum, with some settings maintaining closer ties to their communal and ceremonial origins than others. In more commodified contexts, however, they noted that participants—particularly women—are often permitted or encouraged to attend in minimal clothing, reflecting a shift in the framing of the practice. Reflecting on changes at one particular spa, Celía described how the practice has evolved over time:

> It's interesting to see how that's evolved since working at [redacted name of wellness spa]. I feel that now there's a fair number of people who come on a consistent basis, people who have some kind of relationship with [the medicine man/temazcal leader], and not just the kind of women who show up half-naked. It used to be pretty common — women would take off their bikini tops inside the temazcal. But if you go to the Danza de la Luna or a traditional temazcal, it's a completely different vibration. People come

> wearing skirts, with energetic protections; they come to pray. They're not coming for a one-off experience just to look sexy or to post on Instagram: 'I did a temazcal!' and the people who we were working with at the beginning were even saying 'We should make a video of people when they go inside the temazcal, and then we could charge $35 (USD) for a recording, like, give them their own video experience of the ceremony'

As Celia suggests, some spaces in Tulum have shifted toward more consistent participation, with repeat attendees developing relationships with facilitators and with one another. At the same time, she contrasts these settings with earlier experiences of highly commodified ceremonies, in which participants approached the temazcal as a one-time, aestheticized experience oriented toward visibility and self-presentation on social media platforms. In contrast, in the contexts where she first learned the practice—such as the Moon Dance in Mexico City—participants tended to dress modestly and engage the ceremony as a sustained, collective process of healing.

These observations point to another dimension of commodification: the emergence of prescribed roles and aesthetic expectations within temazcal ceremonies in Tulum. Women participants, while often seeking healing and connection, may also be positioned within visual and affective economies that emphasize appearance and desirability. At the same time, facilitators may come to inhabit the role of authoritative healer in ways that are reinforced through participants' attention and idealization.

More broadly, aesthetics and performance are central to the commodified forms of temazcal practiced in Tulum. Participants frequently conform to a recognizable style associated with the Hotel Zone, reflecting a broader visual and cultural branding of the destination. This aesthetic—referred to by many interlocutors as the "Tuluminati" style—extends beyond individual practices to shape the overall experience of spiritual tourism in Tulum.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that Tulum's spiritual tourism economy is structured by a central paradox: practices marketed as fostering healing, connection, and transformation are sustained through forms of labor that produce precarity, inequality, and disconnection. The pandemic intensified these dynamics, drawing both tourists and workers into an expanding market in which spiritual knowledge, affective labor, and embodied practices are rendered commodifiable services. For participants such as Celia, Adela, and Sarah, engagement in healing practices is not reducible to economic necessity alone, but is deeply entangled with personal commitments to spirituality and care. Yet, within the conditions of the market, these commitments are continually negotiated through short-term labor arrangements, entrepreneurial aspirations, and unequal power relations.

By tracing these dynamics, this chapter has demonstrated how spiritual tourism operates in Tulum through a form of market morality in which economic imperatives shape interpersonal relations, redefine value, and reconfigure practices of healing. In this context, idealized subjectivities are not only imagined but performed within a system that binds workers, consumers, and business owners into asymmetrical relations of exchange. These relations not only commodify healing practices but also reorganize the social and material conditions under which they are practiced, often undermining the relationality they claim to cultivate. Differences in access to economic resources, mobility, and forms of social and cultural capital shape who is able to participate in this economy, under what conditions, and with what degree of legitimacy.

In the following chapter, I build on this analysis by examining how these inequalities are rendered visible and enforced through the "Tuluminati" aesthetic that structures tourism spaces in Tulum's Hotel Zone. I argue that this aesthetic operates as a racialized, classed system of value shaping access to employment, legitimacy, and belonging within the spiritual tourism

economy. By tracing its historical roots to U.S. countercultural formations and the figure of the "comprehensive designer," I show how aesthetic performance, cultural imperialism, and neoliberal logics of self-entrepreneurship converge to reproduce hierarchies of race, class, and labor in Tulum's Hotel Zone.

CHAPTER IV

THE ELITE "TULUMINATI" AESTHETIC & PRACTICE: U.S. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM, RACISM, & CLASS

Tulum has become known for a specific aesthetic that permeates tourism spaces throughout and around the Hotel Zone, shaping everything from architectural design to an implicit dress code. My interlocutors refer to this as the "Tuluminati" style. This chapter argues that the "Tuluminati" aesthetic is not simply a fashion trend or lifestyle branding, but a racialized, classed, and culturally imperial formation that structures access to work, legitimacy, and belonging within Tulum's spiritual tourism economy. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and participant observation, I examine how this aesthetic operates as a set of visual codes that workers must adopt in order to participate in front-facing roles in the Hotel Zone. I show how adherence to this aesthetic is unevenly accessible, prioritizing those with economic capital, mobility, and proximity to whiteness, while marginalizing others within a hierarchized labor market.

To situate this formation historically, I trace the Tuluminati aesthetic to a longer genealogy of U.S. countercultural ideas centered on self-design, technological liberation, and spiritual transformation, crystallized in the figure of the "comprehensive designer." I argue that this subjectivity has been rearticulated in Tulum as a marketized and performative ideal, in which the self becomes a project to be curated through consumption, aesthetic presentation, and participation in commodified spiritual practices. The chapter then examines how this subjectivity is adopted, negotiated, and contested by freelance gig workers, particularly through their efforts to secure employment and establish legitimacy within the tourism economy. In doing so, I demonstrate how the Tuluminati aesthetic functions not only as a visual style but as a mechanism through which cultural imperialism, racialized value, and neoliberal logics of self-entrepreneurship are reproduced in everyday labor practices in Tulum.

Importing Tuluminati Style

Diego, who has lived in Tulum for fifteen years, describes the "Tuluminati" as an original aesthetic introduced to the region by an exclusive group of foreign visitors:

> **Sofía**: Well, what is Tuluminati?
>
> **Diego**: From what I understand, not that I've researched it, but mostly it's about the style of dress. It was the way they dressed at that time, you could identify the Tuluminatis. Because they wear beach type clothes, but not regular kinds of beach clothes. Like long shirts made from a type of fabric, they wore a lot of silk, long sleeve shirts, sombreros with feathers on them. With their faces painted. It was a really cool style and to some extent, very exclusive. This was all when the Tuluminati parties were starting, they became really fashionable, before all the festivals they started doing here, they used to do private parties here in Tulum. And the people were very exclusive. I don't know where they came from, really. Because there was no publicity yet at that time, but they were like a social group and amongst themselves they would communicate and arrive.

Diego's account highlights both a recognizable mode of dress and a form of social exclusivity associated with those labeled "Tuluminati." He situates the peak presence of these visitors in the period immediately before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying the subsequent lifting of global travel restrictions as a key turning point that reshaped the demographic composition of tourists in Tulum and, in his view, reduced the exclusivity of this group and of Tulum. As discussed in Chapter 3, Diego recalls the pandemic period as a time of economic expansion, during which Tulum's tourism sector flourished alongside his own income and capacity to establish a business. For him, the original "Tuluminati" represented a class of visitors whose economic resources enabled them to travel, relocate, and continue consuming luxury tourism despite global lockdowns. In this sense, Tulum's openness during the pandemic

positioned it as a destination for a highly selective and well-resourced group of travelers, whose presence contributed to the perception of exclusivity in the local tourism economy.

> **Diego**: The market was really good…it had its own essence, its own style, they didn't copy anybody. And obviously Tulum began to be known, to become fashionable, and now Tulum is fashionable in a lot of parts of the world, right?

Diego's reflection frames the period immediately before and during the pandemic as a peak moment of economic prosperity in Tulum's tourism economy. He attributes this prosperity to a relatively exclusive class of visitors whose wealth and consumption practices helped cultivate an air of luxury that, in turn, generated income opportunities for service workers like himself.

This perception aligns with broader structural conditions. While much of the world imposed long-term travel restrictions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, officials in Quintana Roo moved to reopen the tourism sector in mid-June 2020, classifying it as an essential service. Reopening carried significant consequences for local workers, including heightened exposure to the virus. However, the state derives approximately eighty percent of its GDP from tourism and the decision to reopen reflects the extent to which economic dependence on the industry shaped policy during the crisis. Indeed, during the months in which tourism was suspended, unemployment in Tulum spiked, reaching rates of up to fifty percent (Sieff 2020).

The economic advantages of reopening to tourism at a moment when many competing destinations remained closed positioned Tulum as one of the few accessible sites for international travel. As a result, it became especially attractive to well-resourced consumers with the financial means and flexibility to continue traveling despite global restrictions. This context helps clarify Diego's characterization of the period as one in which there were "no limits" to economic growth, driven by a class of visitors able to sustain luxury consumption while many

middle and working-class individuals lacked the resources—or the "work-from-home" flexibility—to travel during the pandemic (Dreher & Triandafyllidou 2025; Holleran & Notting 2023).

In Diego's account, this relatively brief period—when Tulum remained open while much of the world was shuttered—stands out as a particularly prosperous moment in the destination's history. He associates prosperity with a specific class of tourists, who he identifies as the original "Tuluminati." However, he contrasts this period with the moment when global travel restrictions began to ease. As broader segments of the population regained the ability to travel, Diego describes a shift in both the composition and perceived status of visitors to Tulum, which he frames as a decline in the "level" of tourists:

> **Diego**: When that time passed, in the moments when the world was opening up to everyone, these types of people left, and more people that were more United States style began to arrive. Without being racist, there was a time of Black people. Black people began to arrive at all the parties and it was then that style. In all the parties it was music for them, their style of food, their style of dress. And that's what started to make Tulum fall, for me, to a lower level because they go a lot for brand names. And there began to be all these brands that people know here, obviously, but it wasn't attractive. Here in Tulum, you knew that you saw someone dressed and they could have ten thousand dollars on them without wearing a single brand name. So when this kind of market began arriving [to Tulum], it started lowering the level, right? The level of tourists who arrived.

Diego frames the end of this period as a loss of exclusivity, linking the easing of global travel restrictions to a shift in both the composition and perceived status of tourists arriving in Tulum.

As travel became more accessible, Diego notes that a broader range of visitors, including those from middle and working-class backgrounds, began to frequent Tulum. In his account, these post-pandemic tourists are not only less affluent and less exclusive than the original "Tuluminati," but also less aligned with the racial and aesthetic norms he associates with that group. Notably, he characterizes this broader demographic as failing to embody the "Tuluminati" aesthetic, which he understands as a form of "quiet luxury"—a style in which wealth is subtly signaled through their style of dress and presentation rather than through visible brand names, and which, in Tulum, is often intertwined with markers of spirituality and enlightenment (Han, Nunes, & Drèze 2010).

Taken together, Diego's observations reveal how aesthetic judgments are inseparable from racialized and classed distinctions. The ability to embody the "Tuluminati" style, and by extension, to access the forms of labor and legitimacy associated with it, is structured by uneven access to economic capital, transnational mobility, and proximity to whiteness.

While Diego's account frames the "Tuluminati" aesthetic as an informal and socially recognizable mode of dress tied to exclusivity, similar aesthetic codes are also actively codified and circulated through tourism marketing and branding. In this sense, what appears in his narrative as an emergent style is simultaneously formalized as a marketable identity that can be learned, performed, and consumed. The following example illustrates how the Tuluminati aesthetic is not only socially recognized, but also explicitly defined, commodified, and promoted to prospective visitors as part of Tulum's global tourism appeal.

A blog post published by a Tulum-based public relations and marketing agency outlines the defining features of the Tuluminati style, tracing its origins to foreigners who came to Tulum "...to live a spiritual life in the jungle while wearing organic designer clothing, attending cacao

ceremonies, and practicing yoga at sunrise," while simultaneously offering potential clients a curated experience of Tulum "like a true Tuluminati."



Figure 7. Screenshot of the title and top image of a blog post by a Tulum-based marketing agency. The image shows two people representing "Moda Tuluminati," an aesthetic characterized by neutral tones, natural fabrics, and understated "quiet luxury."

The blog post begins by describing Tulum as the birthplace of the globally renowned "Tuluminati" fashion style, framing the natural landscape as a "runway:"

> *Tulum is no longer just a paradise of crystal-clear beaches and Maya ruins. Today, it is also a natural runway where fashion and a bohemian lifestyle merge with sustainability and spirituality. The phenomenon known as the "Tuluminati" has crossed borders, positioning this destination as a global reference point for conscious fashion and alternative luxury.*

It goes on to describe what "Tuluminati" means and the kind of clothing that characterizes the style, asserting that it has become a "global aesthetic trend," characterized by:

- *Loose and lightweight clothing, perfect for the tropical heat.*
- *A neutral and earthy color palette, such as beige, white, ochre, and olive green.*
- *Natural and organic materials: linen, raw cotton, hemp.*
- *Artisan design: embroidery, handwoven fabrics, and boho chic details.*

- *Minimalist accessories, often made by local artisans*

More than just a fashion style, it has become an expression of a relaxed way of life -one that is connected to nature, art, and well-being. (Sun and Flower Agency 2025).

The post ends with a pitch for tourists to contact the agency for a tour of select boutiques, tying the fashion style with consciousness:

> *Tulum doesn't just set trends with its parties, beaches, or spiritual retreats. Today, it also dresses the world with its own style: free, natural, elegant, and conscious. If you visit this paradise on the Mexican Caribbean, don't miss the chance to explore its universe of boutiques and local designers. Dress with purpose, connect with the earth…and look like a true Tuluminati.*

Framed in this way, the Tuluminati aesthetic is not only described but actively produced as a consumable identity, one that links style, spirituality, and place into a cohesive brand. By presenting this aesthetic as both aspirational and attainable through curated experiences, such representations transform embodied markers of belonging into marketable forms of value, reinforcing the role of appearance and performance in structuring access to participation within Tulum's spiritual tourism economy. Further, access to this aesthetic is shaped by differential access to economic resources, mobility, and proximity to whiteness, creating a fashion trend that simultaneously operates as a racialized and classed standard that organizes and stratifies the tourism industry in Tulum.



Figure 8. Screenshot of concluding paragraph of a blog post by Tulum-based marketing agency Sun & Flower.

While such representations frame the Tuluminati aesthetic as an aspirational lifestyle available for consumption, workers' experiences reveal how these aesthetic expectations are enforced in practice. As the following account illustrates, embodying this style is not simply a matter of personal expression, but in some cases, a condition for securing and maintaining employment. In a conversation with Celia about a job interview for a freelance tarot card reader position at a hotel in the Zone, she explained that she interviewed with one of the co-managers of the hotel's wellness program. One of the co-managers is Mexican, while the other is Argentinian. Celia described how she dressed for the interview:

> I was wearing a t-shirt and some shorts —basically my worst 'look.' But I went to do a tarot card reading for this girl and she really liked it. So, like, after that she said 'Yeah, go ahead.' It was obviously understood that I wasn't going to show up to work dressed like that. But anyway, the point is that she connected with what I said and paid me for the session, so it was like a 'yes.' Later, they invited me to one of their parties… and one day I went to the hotel while she was still the director, and afterward she sent me a message and said, 'Hey, [redacted name of Argentinian co-manager of wellness program] told me

> to please tell you to dress better.' So, the dress code there is 'Tuluminati.' So, in my first readings, I went dressed according to my idea of what's formal. I didn't go in an evening gown or anything, but I wore a little floral dress and some jewelry, in my opinion, not bad. But for her, it wasn't enough. The boss then had someone else tell me indirectly that I needed to dress better. …the Mexican girl told me, 'Look, buy yourself a few "Tuluminati" dresses and alternate them. Think of it as an investment in your image. You're charging for your tarot card readings, so the client should feel like they're getting something of value—that your reading is worth the look you have. That what you're charging matches how you present yourself.'

Here, Celia describes how the "Tuluminati" dress code and aesthetic are not merely stylistic preferences but are actively mobilized as markers of legitimacy within the market context of spiritual tourism in Tulum's Hotel Zone. Her employment as a freelance tarot card reader was contingent upon her willingness to invest in clothing and to conform to the aesthetic expectations associated with the "Tuluminati" style. In this context, her ability to embody the aesthetic was understood to validate the value of her services in the eyes of tourist clients (Jones, Manoharan, & Madera 2024; Warhurst & Nickson 2009; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson 2003). Celia also describes contrasting interactions with the two co-managers of the wellness program. While one is Mexican and the other Argentinian, she perceived the Argentinian co-manager as exhibiting a sense of entitlement, particularly in the indirect manner in which she communicated that Celia's appearance did not meet the expected standard.

This interaction also points to the broader racialized and national hierarchies that structure labor relations in Tulum, where authority, aesthetic standards, and access to front-facing roles are often unevenly distributed along lines of nationality, race, and perceived

proximity to whiteness (Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson, 2003). Celia further noted that the hotel was owned by Argentinians and that, shortly after her hiring, the Mexican co-manager of the wellness program was dismissed, leaving the position solely in the hands of the Argentinian co-manager. She interpreted this shift as indicative of broader patterns within Tulum's tourism economy. This portion of our conversation draws attention to the racialized and national hierarchies that structure labor relations in Tulum, as well as the tensions they produce among different groups of workers. In particular, Celia points to emerging friction between the growing population of Argentinian migrants, Mexican nationals—many of whom identify as mestizos—and Maya workers:

> **Celia:** There are many countries in crisis —for example, Venezuela and Argentina— and so there's also a lot of migration of people from Argentina who are leaving the country…I mean, Latin America is just…
>
> **Leo:** In flames (en llamas)
>
> **Celia**: Not great. And well, the ones who are most like, 'to hell with this, I'm leaving, what do I do now?' are the Argentinians. So right now, there's a lot of immigration of Argentinians to Mexico. But something that happened with Argentinians is that there wasn't a racial mixing there like there was here. So, most Argentinians are…well, to start with, it was the same —they exterminated the Indigenous people in Argentina, and those who weren't killed were pushed aside, sent away to remote areas—to the jungle, to faraway places. And most Argentinians who are young now come from second or third generations of European grandparents, that is, their grandparents were mostly Italian or German.

> The thing is that Mexico, being a colonized country, is a place where there's a lot of racism and a lot of colorism —even if people don't want to talk about it or say that it doesn't exist—because Mexicans have this reputation for being super friendly and super welcoming to everyone. But it's true that there's a preference for white people.

Celia situates these dynamics within a broader historical and social context, pointing to Mexico's long-standing patterns of racism and colorism, Argentina's history of murder, displacement, and marginalization of Indigenous populations, and Tulum's contemporary preference for a "Tuluminati" aesthetic closely associated with whiteness (Chamosa 2008; Flores & Telles 2014; Krozer & Gómez 2023; Villareal 2010). Taken together, she suggests that these factors contribute to conditions in which Argentinian migrant freelancers are more likely to be selected for front-facing roles in Tulum's Hotel Zone. This observation was echoed in my own fieldwork. During a casual conversation over breakfast, my Argentinian roommate noted that hotels often hire her and others who resemble her, for hostess positions, attributing this preference to being perceived as "*blanquita y bonita*" (white and pretty). Celia continued by explaining:

> The point is that there really is a preference for whiteness. So there's this cultural phenomenon where the descendants of Europeans —who are now Argentinians– would, in the old caste system of New Spain, be considered criollos. The children of Spaniards born in Latin America are criollos. So these Argentinians who are now coming, fleeing Argentina because their currency has completely tanked (está de la fregada), many of them are like criollos, white from head to toe, and they come to a country where doors are opened to them because of their skin color and their aesthetic. The 'sexy girl' aesthetic in Tulum is that of an Argentinian woman.

Celia draws an explicit connection between contemporary aesthetic hierarchies in Tulum to longer histories of racial classification in Latin America. In her account, the preference for whiteness that structures access to front-facing roles in the tourism economy echoes colonial caste distinctions, in which European-descended populations—referred to as *criollos* in the context of New Spain—were afforded elevated social status. By invoking this parallel, she suggests that many Argentinian migrants, often perceived as phenotypically white, are positioned advantageously within Tulum's labor market, where aesthetic presentation and racialized perceptions of desirability shape hiring practices (Chamosa 2008).

Building on this, Celia characterizes the idealized "Tuluminati" aesthetic as closely aligned with whiteness, even describing the dominant "sexy girl" image in Tulum as that of an Argentinian woman. Her interpretation underscores how aesthetic norms operate as racialized standards of value, linking appearance to employability and social legitimacy (Jones, Manoharan, & Madera 2024; Warhurst & Nickson 2009; Witz, Warhurst, & Nickson 2003). These observations point to a broader process through which the Tuluminati aesthetic can be understood as a historically layered formation. While Diego describes the style as emerging from an exclusive group of early visitors, the aesthetic itself bears strong resemblance to visual and lifestyle codes associated with affluent, predominantly white countercultural wellness-oriented communities in the United States—particularly those linked to spaces such as California's Silicon Valley and music and art festival circuits centered on New Age spirituality. In this sense, the Tuluminati aesthetic can be read as a culturally imperial formation: an imported set of aesthetic and ideological practices that has been recontextualized in Tulum and consolidated during the late 2010s and early pandemic period, when the destination attracted highly mobile and well-resourced tourists.

Celia's account foregrounds the role of Latin American histories of race and hierarchy in shaping aesthetic and labor dynamics in Tulum, other interlocutors point more directly to the influence of the U.S. expatriate communities and cultural practices (Benson & O'Reilly 2009). The following account highlights how these dynamics are also understood in relation to visibility, wealth, and cultural authority of U.S. visitors and residents in Tulum's tourism landscape.

Emma, a 34 year old freelance gig worker from Berlin, lived and worked in Cancún until the pandemic closures, after which she relocated to Tulum to pursue work opportunities following the area's reopening to tourism. In her account, she explicitly connects the Tuluminati dress code and aesthetic to U.S. tourists, linking their influence to the relative wealth they bring in comparison to local populations. She explains:

> **Emma**: …so there's a whole expat community of Americans and I know many of them, I had an American boyfriend like two years ago, and I was kind of like, I knew those people, I knew them, they started doing a lot of community events in their houses, cause they would live in really big expensive apartments, so they would come here with their American income and then just live in amazing houses and host events like cacao ceremonies, mushroom ceremonies, and also make money with those ceremonies. So there's a whole… I'm part of like five whatsapp groups where everybody is doing that kind of stuff, and they're all inviting each other, and it's like this spiritual people playground. And I'm still in those groups, but I'm not really participating actively, because it's somehow not really my vibe.
>
> **Sofia**: How would you describe the vibe?

Emma: It's hard to summarize. I think it's just a rather personal thing. I'm not really a person, I don't really take mushrooms, I took them once or twice, but I'm not really interested in the ceremonies, I'm not interested in guiding the ceremonies, It's also a bit more, for me, it's often almost like, like showing off the work you're doing in the community, and there's also a lot of like, they have their beautiful dresses and they're dressing up and I can do that every now and then but usually I just like really don't care about these things.

Yeah, like I have a really good friend and he's a really nice guy and he invited me so many times to his like rooftop with a rooftop pool and everything and they have a friend who is a DJ and he brings all his equipment and they have this sunset ecstatic dance dinner evening. And they charge, they do charge you because obviously there will be food and there will be a DJ. Very often, that's too expensive for me. So that's one reason and then the main reason is that uh, I think I'm too much of a hippie for that kind of stuff, to be honest. So it's interesting you know because in my experience, Tulum, I've experienced this mainly American community, people from the States, and then I've experienced the Mexican community, only Mexicans, maybe Argentinians, but mainly Latinos and then there's a little bit like, in between, where like people speak English and Spanish fluently, and they're like Europeans: you're not from this group and you're not from that group. And I don't know if it has to do with the nationality, I think it does make a difference because obviously I don't 100% belong to this or that group, but it's also, I think it's also the money because the Americans, what they…the activities they have, most Mexicans cannot afford that. And also the other way around if the Mexicans would invite the Americans from those specific groups, they would be like 'oh this is kind of

boring' not fancy enough, or like 'we want to be at the beach at a beautiful hotel' and Mexicans they work at the hotels they don't go and, well it's not true for every Mexican obviously and also not true for every American but the main patterns that I have been seeing…those are the main divisions.

Emma mentions that she mostly hangs out with Mexicans, perhaps for the reasons mentioned above. Below, she elaborates further about how she perceives American culture, that the performative aspect of the "Tuluminati" aesthetic might be a unique marker of American (U.S.) culture.

Emma: It seems to be a big part of American culture to show that you can do this and you can do this well and it's great and amazing.

Sofia: Where do they show it? Like online?

Emma: It's in everything. Like the way they dress, that's the very obvious thing. And you know they have this expression, the Tuluminati style. It's like, fancy clothes, what they wear is worth 2,000 pesos, you're not going to find a single Mexican wearing that. Even if they have the money, they're not really interested in that.

Emma's observations about the differences among groups based on national origin are particularly significant because she identifies U.S. tourists as key arbiters of the Tuluminati aesthetic (Zhao 2025). She describes this "vibe" as one that prioritizes performance—what she describes as "showing off" forms of virtue or participation in spiritual practices. At the same time, Emma links this aesthetic authority to the relative wealth of U.S. expatriates and tourists, whose economic resources distinguish them from both Mexican and Argentinian workers and shape their influence within Tulum's tourism landscape (Higgins-Desbiolles 2022).

Taken together, Emma's account underscores how aesthetic authority in Tulum is closely tied to the economic and cultural influence of U.S. visitors, whose visibility and resources position them as key arbiters of value within the spiritual tourism economy. Emma explicitly attributes the Tuluminati aesthetic and its associated forms of spirituality in Tulum to wealthy tourists from the United States. While Diego does not directly identify the United States as the origin of this style, he similarly describes its early adopters as affluent, predominantly white trendsetters who popularized a mode of dress signaling inconspicuous wealth and spiritual virtue.

Similarly, Omar's recollections in Chapter 3 further suggest a temporal shift in Tulum's tourist landscape: reflecting on visits to Tulum as far back as 2005, he recalls a relatively undeveloped destination: "there was nothing. I would come to disconnect, I would come and lose two days on the beach." But by 2015 he described the emergence of a new class of visitors—people who played "music with tribal sounds, very interesting people who would come here for refuge, well-known people."

Celia's account adds another dimension, emphasizing how proximity to whiteness shapes access to employment and legitimacy within this aesthetic regime. As she describes, conforming to the Tuluminati dress code was necessary to be perceived as credible by wealthy clients, directly linking aesthetic presentation to the valuation of her labor. She also pointed to the "organic" architectural style of the hotel where she worked as emblematic of this broader aesthetic formation. These accounts, alongside my own observations of architectural stylistic patterns in the Hotel Zone, suggest that the Tuluminati aesthetic is not locally produced in isolation, but rather reflects a transposed set of visual and cultural codes. These codes bear strong resemblance to those associated with affluent, predominantly white U.S. based countercultural communities, pointing to the Tuluminati style as a culturally imperial formation that has come to

shape both the visual landscape and the labor dynamics of Tulum's tourism economy. In the following section, I suggest that the Tuluminati aesthetic is rooted in a broader subjectivity shaped by specific historical and ideological formations, which I examine through the figure of the "comprehensive designer."

The Comprehensive Designer: A Culturally Imperial Neo-Colonial Subjectivity

As outlined in Chapter 2, I contend that each period of tourism development in and around sites of pre-Columbian Maya structures in the Yucatán Peninsula, including Tulum, is shaped by a dominant subjectivity and a corresponding sociotechnical imaginary that informs the tourism model of a given site. In the case of Tulum, I argue that the "Tuluminati" aesthetic—encompassing dress, New Age spirituality, and architectural style—represents a transposition of a culturally imperial subjectivity originating in the United States. This subjectivity aligns with what Stanford communications professor Fred Turner terms the "comprehensive designer."

Recognizing the recurring role of such archetypal subjectivities in shaping the material and symbolic development of tourism sites in the region allows for a clearer understanding of the contemporary moment. Specifically, it situates Tulum's recent transformation within a broader historical and discursive framework, in which a neo-colonial iteration of this subjectivity has come to structure the forms of tourism, labor, and aesthetic practice that characterize the Zona Hotelera and, increasingly, Centro.

In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Fred Turner traces the figure of the "comprehensive designer" to ideals stemming from the U.S. countercultural movements of the 1960s, particularly the Free Speech Movement. Central to his analysis is a shift in how advocates of free speech came to understand information technology. In the 1960s, University of California president Clark Kerr's depiction of Berkeley as a machine that produced knowledge in service of labor exploitation and

war symbolized dehumanization through the linking of "computers and commerce" and the disembodiment and alienation of human beings through "the transformation of the self into data" (Turner 2006, 16). By the 1990s, however, this perspective had shifted significantly. The emergence of the internet was viewed by free speech advocates as a "moment of social revolution…but this time the forces of information were on the side of the people" (Turner 2006, 13-14). The disembodiment of the self, writes Turner, "had come to be seen as a route to a more holistic life" that allowed for "new forms of equality and communion" (Turner 2006, 16).

From this faith in the liberatory power of information technology, came the historically produced subjectivity of the comprehensive designer, which is characterized by the following six attributes or beliefs:

1. They see the material world as a system of intangible rules and "information patterns."
2. They believe that the information patterns of the material world "could be modeled and manipulated by information technologies" like the computer.
3. The computer serves "as a model for the human being."
4. They are someone who can use the "informational energies of the world to transform the 'system'" that is life and the material world.
5. They have autonomy in that they are free from the bureaucratic hierarchies of industry, as they operate outside of them.
6. They have agency in that they are able to take actions that allow them to utilize information technologies that influence real outcomes in their material world with the intent of fostering "human happiness" (Turner 2006, 56).

By conceptualizing both themselves and the material world as forms of data, comprehensive designers imagine that these informational systems can be modeled, manipulated, and ultimately

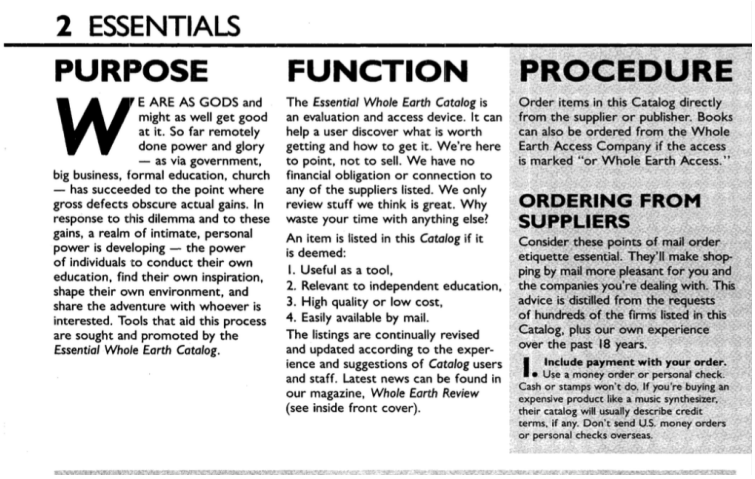
redesigned. In this view, information technology becomes the primary means through which imagined possibilities can be translated into material reality. The comprehensive designer thus values a form of autonomy understood as operating outside the bureaucratic and hierarchical confines of conventional organizational structures, and regards the internet as a key medium through which to exercise individual agency in shaping one's environment.

This subjectivity is grounded in what Turner describes as "the computational metaphor," defined as "the notion that the material world can be imagined as an information system…that 'the universe is a computer, thinking is a kind of computation, DNA is software, [and] evolution is an algorithmic process'" (Turner 2006, 15). This metaphor constitutes a central organizing principle of the comprehensive designer's worldview, informing both their understanding of the world and how they perceive their role in it. It also underpins the form of New Age spirituality associated with this subjectivity, in which transformation, optimization, and self-realization are brought to fruition through the logic of informational systems.

While the U.S. counterculture movement encompassed a broad range of struggles, including efforts to expand civil rights, it also includes a branch of predominantly white, upper and middle-class groups who promoted a philosophy of seeking spiritual growth through the rejection of mainstream work culture. This orientation emphasized communal, "back-to-the-land" living coupled with a strong belief in the liberatory potential of information technology. I argue that this particular branch of counterculture has, over time, been rearticulated as a performative and idealized form of consumerist spirituality.

Key proponents of this worldview institutionalized these ideas through projects such as *The Whole Earth Catalog*, a widely circulated publication that catered to followers of this branch of countercultural New Age spirituality. The catalog featured specially curated tools, materials, and

resources intended to enable individuals to design and construct their own ideal environments. At the same time, it implicitly advanced the notion that building a better world could be achieved through the acquisition of carefully selected goods—those endorsed by the catalog's editors. This reflects a worldview closely aligned with the Western bourgeois dualist ontology described by Arturo Escobar (2020). Its idealization of the comprehensive designer is evident in the "Purpose" statement published in the 1986 issue of the catalog:



2 ESSENTIALS

PURPOSE

WE ARE AS GODS and might as well get good at it. So far remotely done power and glory — as via government, big business, formal education, church — has succeeded to the point where gross defects obscure actual gains. In response to this dilemma and to these gains, a realm of intimate, personal power is developing — the power of individuals to conduct their own education, find their own inspiration, shape their own environment, and share the adventure with whoever is interested. Tools that aid this process are sought and promoted by the *Essential Whole Earth Catalog*.

FUNCTION

The *Essential Whole Earth Catalog* is an evaluation and access device. It can help a user discover what is worth getting and how to get it. We're here to point, not to sell. We have no financial obligation or connection to any of the suppliers listed. We only review stuff we think is great. Why waste your time with anything else?

An item is listed in this *Catalog* if it is deemed:

1. Useful as a tool,
2. Relevant to independent education,
3. High quality or low cost,
4. Easily available by mail.

The listings are continually revised and updated according to the experience and suggestions of *Catalog* users and staff. Latest news can be found in our magazine, *Whole Earth Review* (see inside front cover).

PROCEDURE

Order items in this Catalog directly from the supplier or publisher. Books can also be ordered from the Whole Earth Access Company if the access is marked "or Whole Earth Access."

ORDERING FROM SUPPLIERS

Consider these points of mail order etiquette essential. They'll make shopping by mail more pleasant for you and the companies you're dealing with. This advice is distilled from the requests of hundreds of the firms listed in this Catalog, plus our own experience over the past 18 years.

1. **Include payment with your order.** Use a money order or personal check. Cash or stamps won't do. If you're buying an expensive product like a music synthesizer, their catalog will usually describe credit terms, if any. Don't send U.S. money orders or personal checks overseas.

Figure 9. "Purpose" section from the 1986 issue of The Whole Earth Catalog, which articulates a vision of individual empowerment through self-directed education, tool use, and environmental design—an early formulation of the idealized subjectivity of the "comprehensive designer."

The connection between *The Whole Earth Catalog* and Tulum is not a direct line of imitation, but a historical transformation of the same underlying subjectivity. In the 1960s and 1970s, the comprehensive designer imagined liberation through tools, self-education, ecological design, and communal experimentation. By the 1990s and 2000s, this ideal increasingly moved into digital culture, where the internet became imagined as a tool for autonomy, self-design, and alternative forms of work. In Tulum, this subjectivity appears later in a marketized form: the spiritual tourist, influencer, remote worker, and entrepreneur who imagines their lifestyle, environment, body, and identity as elements to be curated and optimized (Turner 2006; Zhao

2025). Throughout the decades, followers of this consumerist spirituality have provided a market of tourists who have the income and wealth to fuel Tulum's spiritual tourism industry and drive the dominant trends, aesthetics, and political economy of Tulum's Hotel Zone, particularly through the dissemination of images on social media platforms (Scolere, Pruchniewska, & Duffy 2018).

The founder of *The Whole Earth Catalog*, Stewart Brand, can be understood as a key figure that links 1960s counterculture to the emergence of contemporary digital economies. Through the publication of the *Catalog*, Brand popularized a vision of the individual as an empowered, tool-using agent capable of designing and transforming their environment. This vision aligned with, and helped popularize, what Fred Turner describes as the figure of the "comprehensive designer," a subjectivity grounded in systems thinking, ecological awareness, and a belief in the transformative power of technology. Brand's subsequent projects extended this idea into emerging technological and institutional domains. He co-founded the "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL)," one of the first online communities that prefigured contemporary forms of online social networking (Defayes 2017). In 1987, he helped found the Global Business Network, a consulting firm which offered corporate, government, and non-profit clients the expertise of a network of members who would collaborate on strategies for client projects. Additionally, Brand began publication of the *Whole Earth Review*, a successor to the *Catalog*, to continue advancing the "whole earth" ethos, blending it further with emerging technologies such as personal computing and the internet. The rise of online communities and digital culture is attributed, in part, to the *Whole Earth Review*, which ran from 1985 to 2002.

Together, these projects further embedded these ideals within corporate strategy and technological discourse, facilitating their circulation within emerging innovation economies.

They illustrate how the initial countercultural critiques of hierarchy and institutional authority were rearticulated into new configurations of knowledge, labor, and value. In this way, Brand's work helps illuminate how particular subjectivities—centered on flexibility and self-design—became integral to contemporary political economies of digital capitalism.

Another key feature that links 1960s counterculture to contemporary political economies, including the political economy of spiritual tourism in Tulum, is the popularization of communes and "back-to-the-land" movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Whole Earth ethos espoused beliefs in communal self-sufficiency through collective living to circumvent dependence on hierarchical institutional structures. Tools, innovative technologies, ideas, and techniques were curated in service of increasing autonomy. More broadly, this vision was centered on designing an alternative world through anti-capitalist experimentation. I argue, however, that the contemporary political economy of tourism and labor in Tulum represents a rearticulation of these "back-to-the-land" communal living ideals. Within the parameters of neoliberalism, the ideal of self-sufficiency morphs into individual survival through gig work and tools are curated to optimize one's ability to participate in the tourism market. Further, experiences that may have originated from anti-capitalist experimentation are transmuted into commodified experiences available for purchase and the vision of designing alternative ways of being is confined by the necessity to design a marketable self.

"The Whole Earth" Ethos in Tulum

Tulum, and particularly the Hotel Zone, are marketed as a place conducive to embodying the core tenets of the "Whole Earth" ethos. Tourists and gig workers who are drawn to Tulum share an underlying view of themselves as a project they can design and optimize through forms of healing, self-discovery, and transformation. The vehicle through which to implement the project of self-design are commodified tools, in this sense specific experiences like yoga

sessions, temazcal ceremonies, tarot readings, and the presentation of the self-design project on social media platforms. Within the market context of spiritual tourism, these tools are branded and marketed, purchased, and performed and shared with a network of online followers.

In this sense, the project of self-design, or of the comprehensive designer, becomes inextricable from market participation. Tourists and gig workers alike inhabit an entrepreneurial iteration of the subjectivity of the comprehensive designer in that they curate their identity through a spiritual aesthetic and lifestyle, it is simultaneously marketed to them as they market it themselves to online networks, and, as Celia's example illustrates, their successful assimilation of these aesthetic markers translates into legitimacy as service providers that can monetize their skills. And herein lies the paradox at the center of this dissertation: practices that are framed as healing and liberation become forms of market participation that are in turn embedded in precarious labor relations. The promises of autonomy, transformation, and freedom are conditioned by the instability of gig work (Robinson et al. 2019).

In this sense, Tulum's Hotel Zone and (increasingly) Centro is a more radical iteration of what Jean Baudrillard refers to as simulacra —a collection of images that are divorced from reality which form a network through which tourist consumers relate to one another more within a discursive context of the spectacle the images create, than they do in reality (Baudrillard 1994). The idea that tourists to Tulum's Hotel Zone relate to one another within the context of its spectacle, removed from reality, becomes most evident in terms of the differences in class, wealth, and access to material resources that exist, first, between the image or implication of wealth portrayed in posted images on social media by tourist influencers visiting Tulum and, second, by the freelance gig-workers who are influenced by these images to travel to Tulum with the purpose of living a life of digital nomadism, with the goal or expectation of making a living

through a combination of freelance gig work, volunteering for room and board, and remote work—often as social media marketing and management for private companies.

I argue that this class dimension is where Baudrillard's "vestiges of the real" begin to assert themselves through the tatters of the spectacle of the images mapped onto Tulum's Hotel Zone (1994). While the idealization of the dominant subjectivity of the comprehensive designer holds influence with travelers to Tulum from across social and wealth strata, what freelance gig workers often find appealing or relatable about the image and subjectivity is the spiritual aesthetic or what that aesthetic might symbolize, and they also are attracted to the idea of becoming financially stable or even wealthy, through remote work or digital marketing and influencing on social media. The simulacra of Tulum is what holds both groups together in a hidden class relationship that produces what appears to be a seamless world in which all participate. The simulacra of Tulum as a place of spiritual growth and connection with pre-Columbian Indigenous cosmologies and practices is a fantasy idealized, desired, and aspired to by people of all social and economic classes.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the "Tuluminati" aesthetic is not merely a fashion trend or lifestyle branding, but a racialized, classed, and culturally imperial formation that structures labor, value, and belonging within Tulum's spiritual tourism economy. Emerging from a broader genealogy of U.S. countercultural and digital imaginaries, this aesthetic operates as both a visual code and a marketable identity, linking spirituality, consumption, and self-presentation. As ethnographic accounts throughout this chapter demonstrate, adherence to the Tuluminati aesthetic is not simply expressive but materially consequential: it functions as a condition of employability, shaping access to front-facing roles and reinforcing hierarchies based on

economic capital, mobility, and proximity to whiteness. In this sense, the aesthetic operates simultaneously as a style, a labor requirement, and a racialized standard of legitimacy.

At the same time, this chapter has situated the Tuluminati aesthetic within the broader subjectivity of the "comprehensive designer," tracing how countercultural ideals of self-design, autonomy, and transformation have been rearticulated in Tulum as a marketized form of consumerist spirituality. Within this framework, practices framed as healing and liberation are inseparable from capitalist relations, as spirituality becomes both labor and commodity within a political economy structured by precarious gig work. The promise of self-transformation is thus conditioned by material inequalities, even as it is sustained through shared imaginaries of possibility.

The following chapter builds on this analysis by examining how gig workers, particularly migrants from Argentina, navigate these conditions in practice. It explores how participants interpret and attempt to embody the idealized subjectivity of the comprehensive designer and its local iteration in Tulum as the "Tuluminati" lifestyle aesthetic, and how these frameworks can mediate class differences through a cross-class belief in the liberating potential of the computational metaphor and individual agency to transform one's material circumstances. Like tourists, many gig workers are drawn to Tulum by the promise of healing, autonomy, and self-transformation, as well as an alternative to disillusioning and often exploitative forms of corporate work. Yet, as this chapter has shown, these aspirations are shaped and constrained by the material realities of precarious labor.

By focusing on the lived experiences of freelance gig workers, Chapter 5 examines how participants reinterpret and attempt to embody the idealized subjectivity of the comprehensive designer under conditions of economic instability. It further complicates the contradictory

meanings assigned to the computational metaphor as either exploitative or liberating, illustrating how it can operate as both for freelance gig workers in Tulum. At the same time, it highlights how participants rely on practices of mutual aid, shared housing, and collective care to navigate these conditions, bringing into focus the tension between individualist ideals of agency and the interdependent realities that sustain everyday life. What emerges is not a simple rejection of neoliberal logics, but their reworking within the constraints of precarious tourism labor through everyday practices of survival, aspiration, and interdependence.

CHAPTER V

CLASSED ASPIRATIONS & SHARED SPIRITUAL LOGICS: GIG WORK, DIGITAL NOMADISM, & THE COMPUTATIONAL METAPHOR IN TULUM

This chapter examines how the culturally imperial subjectivity of the comprehensive designer has been reinterpreted by gig workers in Tulum. This reinterpretation reveals tensions between the individualist ideology of digital nomadism and the collective survival strategies required under conditions of precarious tourism labor (Chari 2015; Mancinelli 2020; Turner 2006). In this chapter I interpret the narratives of six gig workers with whom I conducted extended ethnographic engagement during my year of fieldwork in Tulum. Three of them are from Argentina, two are from other states in Mexico, and one is from Germany. I lived with several of them for a period of weeks to months, shared housing and daily routines, and conducted multiple recorded interviews and informal conversations about their work trajectories, migration decisions, and aspirations. They all aspired to a different lifestyle and came to Tulum to find it, as suggested in Chapter 3. These interlocutors represent a broader population of middle-class or downwardly mobile "digital nomads" who arrive in Tulum through volunteer labor exchanges and freelance tourism work.

As suggested in Chapter 4, the neo-colonial subjectivity of the Tuluminati is the container for the manifestation of the comprehensive designer in Tulum. Originally referring to a group of wealthy visitors, mainly from the United States, the term has come to denote an aesthetic and lifestyle associated with spiritual tourism, entrepreneurial creativity, and digital nomadism (Bozzi 2024; El Fakih 2025; Mancinelli 2020) . This lifestyle implies values of individual agency and the belief that one can shape material reality through imagination, intention, and technological tools. Further, the power to wield one's imagination and thoughts are aimed toward goals of psychological and emotional healing and integration, and also financial and economic survival and potential wealth.

Although participants often described themselves as economically precarious, they were not among the poorest sectors of society, as can be the case for international migrant workers who need the capital to move. Most had completed university degrees or held white-collar jobs prior to moving to Tulum. These educational backgrounds gave them familiarity with digital technologies, social media, and international travel. At the same time, economic instability in Argentina and dissatisfaction with corporate employment pushed them toward alternative livelihood strategies in tourism economies like Tulum. They are aspiring artists and entrepreneurs, they moved to Tulum to leave an unfavorable economy in their hometowns or countries, they abandoned a corporate career trajectory, and are actively seeking personal and spiritual growth.

These subjectivities have common underlying characteristics with the dominant, neocolonial subjectivity of the comprehensive designer, who view themselves as individual autonomous agents capable of transforming their material world through creative and astute use of information technology. But while the subjectivity of the comprehensive designer is rooted in liberal dualist ontology of individualism and other isolating tenets of neoliberalism, interviewees who work freelance engage in and practice forms of mutual aid and community care —bringing into higher relief the tension and contradictions of the idealization of individualistic, transactional capitalism and the dimensions of spirituality that value principles of interdependence.

Although study participants may idealize and seek to embody some of the characteristic subjectivities of the dominant figure of the comprehensive designer or its local iteration —the aesthetic of the “Tuluminati” figure— one deeply consequential difference is in their material resources and power. Workers don’t have the wealth that the localized iteration of this archetype,

the Tuluminati, ostensibly have. However, they do have a western liberal education and skills they can monetize using the internet. Further, many participants expressed the idea that the material world is data and that "thinking is a kind of computation" which one can use to shape the material outcomes of one's life through one's mindset, intentions, or energy (Turner 2006, 15). In this way, they echoed what Turner describes as the ***computational metaphor:*** the belief that thought and information can be used to reorganize the world. Interviewees featured in this chapter also embody the idea that mobility is a sign of the internet's egalitarian effects, "serving as a rhetorical prototype for new, flexible, and mobile ways of working and living" (Turner 2006, 14).

Many participants engaged in forms of remote or flexible digital labor. Some worked in social media marketing, graphic design, or online content creation, while others organized tourism excursions, managed hostel reception desks, or produced music and events within Tulum's nightlife economy. These forms of work relied on skills they had developed in previous white-collar positions, including digital literacy, language skills, and familiarity with international tourism networks. Tulum is constructed and marketed as an ideal destination for people pursuing the romanticized lifestyle of a digital nomad: the freedom to move and travel to beautiful tourist destinations, to escape the trap of a life of long work hours in an office or in a single place, and, perhaps most complex and compelling: to be able to say that one owns one's own time —the ultimate circumvention of labor exploitation in the service industry or in corporate settings, what David Graeber refers to as the "spiritual violence" of "bullshit jobs" (Graeber 2018, 67). Anthropologists and sociologists have increasingly examined the rise of flexible and precarious labor arrangements associated with digital platforms and global tourism economies. Scholars have described how workers in these sectors often frame their participation

not only in economic terms but also as projects of self-realization and lifestyle experimentation (Neff 2012; Gershon 2017). These narratives frequently emphasize autonomy, creativity, and personal fulfillment even as workers navigate unstable income and informal labor arrangements.

The main break in the common subjectivities that study participants have with those of the idealized elite tourist comprehensive designer is in their purchasing power and subsequent inability to practice the consumerist spirituality characterized by the comprehensive designer figure. This difference in financial resources informs the ways in which gig-workers from Argentina, and other places, seek to mitigate problems of material precarity in Tulum. Further, their belief in the computational metaphor, or that their thoughts and ways of thinking is a form of computation that shapes the quality of their lives and real-world outcomes, is the spiritual basis they share with the archetypal culturally imperial subjectivity of elite tourists, but with very different life consequences and practices.

Study participants expressed idealizations of subjectivities that are shared with the culturally imperial archetype: An intrepid adventurer and risk-taker who pursues art and creative passions, is entrepreneurial, and possesses a strong sense of individual agency and drive to explore possibilities. These imagined subjectivities are made more attainable through the internet, as the lifestyle of a "digital nomad" facilitates the pursuit of each of these idealized subjectivities and ostensibly provides interviewees the tools to design their lives the way they'd like to imagine them:

- They are someone who can use the "informational energies of the world to transform the 'system'" that is life and the material world.
- They have autonomy in that they are free from the bureaucratic hierarchies of industry, as they operate outside of them.

- They have agency in that they are able to take actions that allow them to utilize information technologies that influence real outcomes in their material world with the intent of fostering "human happiness" (Turner 2006, 56).

The stories of Argentinian gig-workers follow a similar pattern. Many of them frame the difficult economic situation in Argentina as a catalyst that evoked in them a sense of resourceful creativity and willingness to take adventurous risks to achieve economic survival and live a life of satisfaction. They attribute their ability to seek economic opportunity in Tulum and elsewhere to a unique quality of intrepidness that not everyone possesses.

The ability of study participants to shape their destinies through the power of their imaginations, will, and individual agency led them to search for alternatives to work lives in either or both a declining national economy and an exploitative, soul-crushing corporate work life. For them, the subjectivity of a digital nomad arises as the most viable alternative. This lifestyle retains many of the appealing characteristics of the comprehensive designer, but is accessible to people without the economic and material resources of the original cultural imperialists who first explored the ruins of Tulum and embodied the wealth and consumerist aspect of the subjectivity. Indeed, all of the interviewees featured in this chapter made their move out of their previous circumstances and into exchange-based and freelance work in Tulum through online platforms designed to match cash-strapped travelers with hostels and other tourism businesses. Sites like WorkAway served to link interviewees with volunteer labor positions in hostels in Tulum, allowing them to arrange for a place to live free of charge when they arrive in Tulum. Tourism businesses in Tulum could staff their establishment with volunteers willing to provide their labor in exchange for room and board. Volunteers would labor in a wide range of tasks, like washing bedding and towels, cleaning rooms and bathrooms,

stocking supply closets, landscaping, bartending, cleaning the kitchen and other shared common areas for guests, and working at the reception desk for various shifts. If volunteers have social media marketing skills, they are tasked with producing video and photographic content promoting the hostel. Other volunteers worked by organizing and hosting guided day-trips and excursions for guests on behalf of the hostel.

This volunteer labor-based business model is made appealing to people like my interlocutors because it promises an alternative to difficult and frustrating circumstances. Further, it holds the appeal of certain measures of freedom from the perspectives of interviewees: their volunteer jobs gave them the opportunity and time to pursue and develop artistic passions, to pursue psychological and emotional healing and spiritual growth, and to establish their own entrepreneurial projects in hopes of also one day embodying the comprehensive designer/Tuluminati characteristics of economic stability and wealth. Yet despite the rhetoric of autonomy and self-design associated with digital nomadism, these arrangements depended heavily on informal networks of reciprocity, shared housing, emotional support, and collaborative survival strategies among workers navigating Tulum's precarious tourism economy.

Economic Migration, Corporate Burnout, & Aspirational Mobility

Valentina is a twenty-five-year-old woman from the Argentinian province of Misiones. At the time I met her and moved in with her and her sister in January 2024, they had been in Tulum since early 2023. Valentina and her sister own and operate their own party entertainment business in which they are hired by event coordinators to set up a body and face glitter makeup booth for partygoers. They started the business in Argentina and have expanded it to two cities in Mexico and other cities in at least two other countries. In a conversation we had in January 2024, Valentina described part of the reason her and her sister decided to move to Tulum:

Valentina: In Argentina the economy is becoming more and more difficult, and maintaining an independent project is almost impossible. That's why many people my age look to move, to try their luck in other places, even if only for a while. Uruguay was an experience of stability, and Mexico now allows me to grow, to expand.

Sofía: And do you feel that glitter (business) was also born of that need?

Valentina: Yes, one hundred percent. We're part of a generation that invents its own work, that doesn't wait for someone to hire us. It's like 'ok, there's no space, I'll create it.' We've gotten used to that —to trying things, to adapting. Sometimes with precarity, yes, but also with a lot of creativity. It's a way to support ourselves, to do what we like and at the same time live off it. The project allows me to move around, to travel, to get to know places, to keep creating. It's a way of surviving doing something that represents me.

Valentina's narrative reflects a broader pattern among my interlocutors: economic instability in Argentina catalyzes literal and entrepreneurial mobility while reinforcing an identity centered on creativity and independence.

Ilario, a 24 year old man from the Argentinian province of La Pampa came to Mexico as a hostel volunteer, first in Mérida in the Mexican state of Yucatán and then became the manager of the same hostel chain's location in Tulum. Although most interlocutors arrived in Tulum before Javier Milei's November 2023 election, their accounts of inflation, instability, and shrinking opportunities reflect longer-standing economic crises in Argentina that have intensified under Milei's administration and contributed to new waves of outward migration among young creatives and professionals. Ilario, like Valentina, asserts that many Argentinians came to

Mexico, and specifically Tulum, in part because of the economic situation in Argentina, but also because of a subjectivity of adventure, artistic pursuit, and creativity:

> *I think it's not just the economic situation, but also the type of person, the type of Argentinian who comes here to Tulum. Many people come because of Argentina's economic situation. But it's also the kind of Argentinian who ends up in Tulum: more artistic people, people looking for a different lifestyle. Many end up working as waiters, promoters, musicians, but deep down they come because they connect with this environment. Yeah, I think the situation in Argentina pushes a lot of people to come, but there's also something about the spirit: wanting to create, to try something different, to live differently…they come because they're looking for another way of living.*

Here, Ilario acknowledges the difficult economic circumstances in Argentina as a motivating factor for young Argentinians to move to tourist areas in the Yucatán Peninsula, and Tulum in particular. However, Ilario makes a point of the idea that there is a specific kind of Argentinian who is drawn to Tulum —those with an intrepid spirit. Further, Ilario implies that Tulum represents an environment and a lifestyle that matches the "spirit" of young Argentinians who are risk-takers, adventurers, and creative explorers. Ilario directly imbues Tulum with the quality of being a fitting home for people who possess these qualities.

Paola is a 29-year-old from the Argentinian province of Corrientes. I also had the privilege of living with Paola for about a month, as she stayed in the living room of an apartment I shared with three other freelance gig-workers, Valentina and her sister Camila from Argentina and Ana from the Mexican state of Veracruz. In a conversation about her life and what brought her to Tulum, Paola expressed her desires to be an artist —specifically a DJ, her efforts toward her dream to make music production her primary way of making a living, her entrepreneurial

endeavors towards that aim, and her quest for healing and spiritual growth, particularly after leaving a high stress job in an international foreign trade firm.

> **Sofía**: Why did you move to Tulum?
>
> **Paola**: First, because of the music and the sea, I always wanted to live near the ocean. Also, to study at a local academy, though later I couldn't, because of the cost. And to work. To do a season and save money. Economically, here I was able to earn in a few months what I couldn't in Argentina; there, as a college graduate, I made only 200-300 USD per month with a lot of stress. Here I worked as a hostess and at a spa giving massages, and I also continued with my marketing agency.

Paola first cites the draw of Tulum's natural landscape, the ocean, and the active music scene, but also contrasts the kind of work and pay she received in Argentina and how it compares to how much she can earn in Tulum. The natural beauty of Tulum and the growing electronic music scene played a role in her decision to leave Argentina and its declining economy. Like Valentina and Ilario, Paola also mentions a quality of the spirit of exploration, adventure, and being a pioneer in her family:

> I also love being the black sheep of the family. Because I think that, in many ways, I opened their eyes. I was the pioneer in doing many things, all kinds of things. Today my mom tells me, 'I admire you because you're doing things that I, as an adult woman, never dared to do.' For example, walking away from what doesn't do you good. Without a doubt. And I think that's also something that defines me: daring to go after what I want, even when no one else dares.

Another common theme that study participants expressed was a desire to abandon high stress jobs in their home countries. Paola discusses that she had what was seemingly an ideal corporate

job in Argentina, but she grew disillusioned by it after enduring exploitative practices and other stresses:

> I had my 'dream job' at a foreign trade company, a representation office for Latin America. I had my own office, a Mac, a phone, a car —I learned a lot. But I worked ten hours a day while being paid for eight, without a formal contract (sin contrato en regla), and the professional and the personal got mixed together, like going out with the owners, after office events. There was manipulation and abuse of power. One weekend, when I was going to play a [DJ] set, they demanded I handle work matters; on Monday they called a harsh meeting and ended up firing me. They went through my personal computer, which is a crime. I took legal action and received compensation, with that money I traveled and began to heal. I developed bruxism from stress, broke a tooth, became depressed, and started therapy.

Here, Paola touches on a common perspective about idealized "dream" corporate jobs, a disenchantment with its original promised lifestyle, and a subsequent need to heal emotional and psychological pain that may have resulted from the experience or that compounded previously unaddressed trauma and brought it to the surface until it could no longer go unaddressed. Emma expressed a similar sentiment about her job in a business travel agency in Berlin:

> I worked in an office, I received so many emails, I had so many meetings, and I really didn't enjoy it at the end. I probably didn't enjoy it for like two years already, but I had a really nice colleague and a really nice boss. I enjoyed the people but I did not enjoy the work. So that's tricky because you know you go to work, and you enjoy your colleagues, but then, it still doesn't work if you're frustrated 'like what the hell am I doing here? I don't really care about what I'm doing.' I basically just stayed there but in the end I was

> like ‘no, I don’t really care anymore about whatever is happening in this company. I just can’t do this anymore.’ It was a build up of emotions. I knew I didn’t enjoy it already for two years, but I didn't really know the alternative. I was like ‘I don’t want to do any proper job, I don’t want to sit in front of a computer for eight hours a day, five days a week or more,’ so that was my confusion. Like, ‘what am I going to do now?’ Because this is what I studied for, this is how the system is. Most people are in the system.

Emma signals a growing sense of meaninglessness in her job and a frustrating feeling of not knowing what an alternative to this lifestyle might be. Also worth noting is that she refers to being in this position as “the way the system is,” alluding to the intentional design of the kind of lifestyle idealized in the “liberal model of dualist ontology” described by Escobar. Further, describing it as a system also implies that it is an arrangement of the material world with a fixed data set which leads to feelings of emptiness or perhaps feeling trapped. Emma continued by relating how she ended up changing her circumstances, also attributing it to a sense of courage and risk-taking:

> I met a lot of people who are artists, painters, and photographers, and musicians. All of these people, they work outside of this usual 9 to 5 stuff. That was really helpful to get enough courage and say ‘you know, if they can do it, I’m gonna just at least try it, if it’s not gonna work out, I can still go back.’

This rebellion against a formerly idealized subjectivity of a corporate worker in favor of pursuing creative and artistic endeavors as a form of healing or soul-searching also echoes a trait attributed to the comprehensive designer, mainly in that it implies a rejection of conventional norms and life trajectory for a risky adventure of self-discovery and development, international travel, independent pursuit of learning and developing one’s passions, and working for oneself.

This growing rejection of corporate work life arguably created in white collar workers a sense of spiritual and existential emptiness which made their experience of working in the corporate world lose the appeal it once had: the promise of material security and expanded capacity to consume (Bailey et al. 2019; Maslach & Leiter 2016). A bunkmate from my time living in a hostel made this point quite bluntly. Ines is from Portugal and had been traveling around the world with her Spanish friend Daniela. Together they freelanced offering belly dancing and fire-breathing performances for restaurants and hotels in the zone and centro. I wrote the following in my field journal after a trip with Ines and Daniela to one of the only *cenotes* (freshwater sinkholes formed in the limestone bedrock of the Yucatán Peninsula) that is still accessible free of charge, in the affluent neighborhood of Aldea Zama:

> **Field Journal Entry dated December 13th, 2023**
>
> *Ines shared that in Portugal she had a good-paying job but she was working so many hours and was always stressed and tired. She said she had money but no time to spend it. And said that when she did spend it, it was on stupid things that she didn't actually need. Her sentiment was that the time we spend alive is not just to work. So she's been traveling around, making enough to pay for a place to stay and to eat.*

The experience of exploitation and burnout in corporate life became unbearable for many interviewees, and the disillusion with this formerly idealized subjectivity made room for the idealization of the lifestyle and subjectivity of the comprehensive designer. It also left many participants in search of spiritual fulfillment, and Tulum has been constructed as a place where spiritual practices are tied to the belief that personal mindset, intention, and emotional healing could transform one's material circumstances. Spirituality, framed in this way, fits the characteristic subjectivity of a person who boldly exerts their individual agency to create a better

life for themselves, both materially and spiritually. Consequently, Tulum is narrated and imagined as an ideal place for people who choose to break with convention, adapt to uncertain or unexpected circumstances, but are apt and bold enough to turn it into an adventure that yields their desired results.

Ana is twenty-four from the Mexican state of Veracruz, she studied architecture in college and began working as part of the project management team of a construction company. In our conversation, Ana echoed Emma and Paola's sentiments about life in corporate work:

> There I learned a lot, but it also showed me the part of architecture I don't like: budgets, negotiating with suppliers, and doing projects that, for me, had no life, no soul. It was building for the sake of building, without thinking about anything except delivering. It was an eight to ten hour job, enclosed within four walls, with little light, with fifteen other people. My immediate supervisor resigned and…they offered me the job as head of the architectural projects department. I was twenty-two years old. My parents were very proud…but within all of that, I realized it wasn't what I wanted. I wasn't happy. I couldn't see myself living that way. I knew that if I accepted the position, I wouldn't stop—I would commit myself too much, and then there would be no way out. And that's not who I am. I needed more.

Taken together, these narratives reveal a shared dissatisfaction with corporate labor as both materially exploitative and existentially unfulfilling. Further, participants frame their migration to Tulum as more than an economic strategy, but as an effort to cultivate a more authentic, agentic, and creatively fulfilling self. In this sense, Tulum is imagined as both a geographic destination and an alternative to forms of labor experienced as alienating or spiritually empty (Korpela 2020; Mancinelli 2020; Reichenberger 2018). These experiences help explain why

participants were drawn to lifestyles centered on flexibility, creative self-expression, healing, and entrepreneurial experimentation. In the sections that follow, I situate these experiences within a broader theoretical framework, drawing on David Graeber's concept of "spiritual violence" to explain why forms of work that appear stable or even desirable can nevertheless produce deep affective distress, and why alternative lifestyles such as those found in Tulum hold such powerful appeal.

Alleviating Spiritual Violence: Tulum and the Search for a Meaningful Life

For many of the freelancers I worked with, dissatisfaction with corporate work was not only economic but deeply affective and visceral. Participants repeatedly described their previous jobs as empty, stressful, or lacking purpose, what Ana referred to as work with "no soul." These experiences help illustrate what David Graeber describes as the "spiritual violence" of work that fails to produce a sense of meaningful impact in the world. In this context, Tulum is imagined not simply as a place to find work, but as a space where this form of spiritual harm can be healed. The lifestyle marketed and circulated through what is locally referred to as the "Tuluminati" offers an alternative grounded in autonomy, creativity, and the possibility of aligning one's work with personal values, healing, and self-development.

In contrast to the rigid and demanding schedules, hierarchical management, and surveillance described by participants in their previous jobs, life in Tulum is imagined as flexible, self-directed, and open-ended, even when in practice, it remains economically precarious. The "Tuluminati" lifestyle implies possessing autonomy in that people are free from the bureaucratic hierarchies, surveillance, and rules of work in a corporate setting and having agency in that they are able to take actions that allow them to use information technologies, a computer and the internet, to influence the material outcomes of their real lives. These two aspects, autonomy and agency, were among the most frequently cited reasons participants gave

for coming to Tulum. However, as I show in the sections that follow, this promise of autonomy and healing is not a complete rupture from the conditions participants sought to escape. Instead, it often reconfigures those conditions in new forms within Tulum's tourism economy (Wood et al. 2019; Mancinelli 2020).

These experiences of dissatisfaction and disillusionment are not unique to the participants in this study. Anthropologist David Graeber offers a useful framework for understanding why forms of work that appear stable or even desirable can nevertheless produce deep feelings of emptiness and frustration. Further, Graeber's work provides insight into why the lifestyle advertised as possible in Tulum is especially appealing to a social class of workers disillusioned with work they've come to view as meaningless. Graeber suggests that the spiritual violence of these kinds of jobs comes from erroneous assumptions about human motivation. These assumptions are rooted in widely accepted classical economic theory which is underpinned by the belief "that if humans are offered the option to be parasites, of course they'll take it" (Graeber 2018, 81-82).

This understanding of human motivation suggests that people who are being paid decently, or even very well, for work that lacks meaning or purpose should, in theory, be happy: they have a job and a satisfactory income which does not require any real exertion of their intellect or creative power. Graeber argues that there is ample evidence that suggests humans have much more complex motivations that are not predicated on calculations of minimal personal costs to maximize benefits. Instead, humans seem to be motivated by a desire to relate to others and the world around us in ways that have clear and meaningful impact. To show this, Graeber cites two studies that provide insights regarding our understanding of human motivation.

"The Pleasure at Being the Cause," is a phrase coined by German psychologist Karl Groos, to describe the expressions of joy displayed by infants after "they figure out they can cause predictable effects in the world." Graeber continues by explaining that this feeling of joy ensues after each exercise of power, regardless of whether the resulting effect "could be construed as having any benefit to them [the infants]" (Graeber 2018, 83). "The Trauma of Failed Influence," is what psychoanalyst Francis Broucek called what results when humans "discover and experience the delight in being able to cause a certain effect" only to later be denied that experience (Broucek 1979; Graeber 2018, 84).

Graeber suggests that this is what happens to college-educated people who go on to work in jobs they find meaningless, and find themselves lacking existential purpose. A university education is presumably a time when students, either through the financial support of their parents, scholarships, stipends, or (at least temporarily) student loans "are free to pursue other forms of value" beyond the motivation to make money.[5] Western liberal university educations promise a period of self-actualization that develops from the pursuit of knowledge and experience that might allow one to exercise their influence and have an effect on the people and the world around them. However, once they enter the "real world" of work as part of the "professional managerial class," they may find themselves trapped in a job they might describe, as Ana put it, with "no soul."

Thus, the spiritual violence that results from feelings of being trapped in a meaningless job that has no real effect or use in the world constitutes "a direct attack on the very foundation

[5] This fieldwork was conducted primarily between 2023-2024, during a period when generative AI technologies were becoming increasingly visible but had not yet fully transformed creative labor, education, and digital entrepreneurial practices in the ways that accelerated rapidly after 2024. The growing use of generative AI in academic settings further complicates the assumption that higher education functions primarily as a site of intellectual development and self-actualization.

of the sense that one even *is* a self. A human being unable to have a meaningful impact on the world ceases to exist" (Graeber 2018, 84; emphasis in original). It is perhaps then plausible that after experiencing, and enduring for an extended period of time, the spiritual violence of a job without purpose, that one might then seek to embody the complete opposite and in turn perhaps overcompensate in search for meaning or proving that one's impact in the world is much grander than it has been in the past.

The following photographs of a startup business under construction in Tulum may be interpreted as an illustration of this dynamic: Someone, or perhaps a group of individuals, possessed the capital, social connections, or technical knowledge necessary to invest in real estate and begin developing a business project in Tulum. The establishment, named "Vibe-Nation," featured the tagline "The New Way of Life." Its promotional signage advertised a wide range of services—from wellness practices and creative production to lifestyle programming—suggesting the ability to encompass multiple domains of life under a single entrepreneurial project.

While I was never able to determine a single clearly identifiable owner or organizational structure behind Vibe-Nation, the project appeared to function as a hybrid entrepreneurial and lifestyle venture characteristic of Tulum's spiritual tourism economy. Online promotional materials associated with Vibe-Nation described the project through diffuse language emphasizing creativity, networking, lifestyle branding, and alternative forms of work, suggesting an attempt to merge multiple forms of entrepreneurial activity under one aspirational vision. One webpage described the project as an "e-directory" and "network of contacts" intended to promote music, creators, and lifestyle products while connecting multiple entrepreneurial and creative activities in a single platform. Although none of my primary interlocutors worked for Vibe-

Nation, several described similar aspirations to develop projects that combined artistic passion, digital entrepreneurship, healing practices, and digital labor. In this sense, Vibe-Nation was significant not because it was exceptional, but because it reflected a broader cultural logic circulating in Tulum during my fieldwork.

One way to interpret the ambitious scope of this project is as an attempt to produce a more visible and meaningful impact in the world, particularly in contrast to the experiences of invisibility and frustration described by participants in their previous jobs. This "New Way of Life" would be the complete opposite: one in which one had a great deal of influence and agentic power over the real, material configuration of the world. The vision of this business seemed to encompass the appealing aspects of being a "comprehensive designer" —working and making a living outside of the conventional forms of work and industry, being autonomous and free of the constraints of work in a corporate or surveilled work setting, and having the agency to use information technology and the internet to create a "new way of life."

In this sense, Graeber's concept of "spiritual violence" offers a useful way of understanding why such projects hold appeal. If, as Graeber argues, the inability to perceive one's impact in the world undermines one's sense of self, then projects like Vibe-Nation can be seen as attempts to reclaim that sense of agency and significance. At the same time, the project's expansive scope, attempting to encompass multiple domains of life under a single vision, suggests not only a desire for meaningful work, but a drive toward amplified or even exaggerated forms of agency.



Figure 10. Façade of "Vibe-Nation," a commercial and residential development under construction in Tulum, marketed as "the new way of life," illustrating the branding of holistic lifestyle spaces within the region's tourism economy. Photograph by author.



Figure 11. Promotional signage for "Vibe-Nation" listing a wide range of services marketed as "all in one place." Photograph by author.

The appeal of projects like Vibe-Nation is also shaped by Turner's concept of the computational metaphor —the belief that the world can be transformed through information and the intentional manipulation of systems. Many participants expressed the idea that changing one's thoughts and mindset could directly influence material outcomes in their lives. In this sense, agency is not only reclaimed through entrepreneurial activity but also imagined as a kind of personal capacity to reprogram one's reality. This framework helps explain why Tulum is experienced as a place of possibility: it is not only a new geographic location, but a site where individuals feel they can actively redesign their lives through a combination of digital tools, creative labor, and spiritual practices. The emphasis on individual agency, whether expressed through entrepreneurship or through the belief that one can reshape reality through mindset and intention, locates solutions to meaninglessness within the individual. In this way, the computational metaphor reinforces a form of agency that is deeply individualized, even as participants seek collective or structural alternatives.

I often passed by Vibe-Nation on trips between the Hotel Zone and Centro. Throughout my year of living in Tulum, I witnessed the location's transformation through various stages of development: from workers installing floor-to-ceiling glass windows on the second floor, the installation of an ATM machine on the first floor, and eventually, toward the end of my fieldwork, the apparent abandonment of the building and its gradual fall into disrepair. Similar partially completed or abandoned entrepreneurial projects were common throughout Tulum during this period, particularly following the rapid speculative growth associated with the pandemic-era tourism boom. The trajectory of Vibe-Nation illustrates how aspirational projects centered on autonomy, creativity, and alternative lifestyles were often materially precarious despite being framed through the language of possibility and transformation. It suggests that the

search for meaning does not simply lead away from conditions of spiritual violence but may also produce new forms of aspiration that remain entangled with the same underlying logics of individual achievement and self-optimization. This tension points to the importance of examining not only the desire for autonomy and agency, but the forms through which that desire is imagined and enacted. As I argue below, these forms are shaped by what Anita Chari describes as reified subjectivity under capitalism.

Voluntariados: The Appeal of Digital Nomadism

My interlocutors began searching for alternative ways of living after becoming disillusioned with either, or a combination of, Argentina's declining economy and a sense of emptiness and frustration associated with corporate work. *Voluntariados*, or volunteer work arranged through cultural exchange travel platforms, emerged as a viable pathway through which they could distance themselves from what they had come to view as an unsustainable or undesirable lifestyle (Avolio, Prados-Peña, & Pardo 2024; Robinson et al. 2019). These exchange-based volunteer opportunities typically provide participants with food and accommodations upon arriving in a new country. For many of my interlocutors, particularly those from Argentina, voluntariados also offered the possibility of achieving a comparatively better quality of life while working fewer hours and devoting less of themselves to conventional forms of employment. In Tulum, voluntariados additionally served as a point of departure from which participants could pursue other aspirations, particularly artistic and entrepreneurial projects, alongside projects of psychological healing and spiritual growth (Qi 2021; Avolio, Prados-Peña, & Pardo 2024; Spyriadis & Went 2024).

The appeal of voluntariados rests largely in the freedoms they appear to offer—freedoms that many participants felt had previously been unattainable within the economic conditions of Argentina or within their former jobs. These included not having to pay for housing and food,

greater control over one's schedule, increased free time to pursue personal goals, and, consequently, more time and energy to dedicate to personal and spiritual development (Reichenberger 2018; von Zumbusch & Lalicic 2020; Bozzi 2024). At the same time, I contend that the appeal of these freedoms may obscure the ways in which volunteers continue to experience certain forms of labor exploitation.

While the path of the *voluntariado* also gives the volunteer a sense of embodying the kinds of subjectivities shared with the figure of the comprehensive designer, as discussed in the previous section, the life of a hostel volunteer in Tulum can also be quite demanding on one's time, body, and overall wellbeing. Tulum is an increasingly expensive place to live and work in exchange for a bunk in a shared room and up to two pre-determined meals a day may not be sustainable, especially because many participants also have other personal and entrepreneurial aspirations which require time, energy, and money to develop. Many volunteers find that they must work a few other freelance gigs in addition to their hostel volunteer hours in order to bring their ideal digital nomad life to fruition. However, Valentina, Paola, and Ilario (all from Argentina) and Emma and Ana did not view this pathway through volunteer work as exploitative, as they felt a greater measure of freedom through their ability to build their businesses, develop their artistic passions, and pursue healing modalities offered in Tulum.

While it may be true that hostels and other tourism businesses that use travel volunteer labor may engage in exploitative practices, many of the people who participated in this research viewed it as a necessary aspect that helped them bridge the gap between the resources they had and what they needed—including meeting friends and building support networks that helped them achieve their personal goals, address emotional and psychic pain and healing, and teaming up to address challenges of material precarity (Spyriadis & Went 2024). It is, however, important

to note that this is a social class of workers with much more privilege and favorable economic circumstances relative to refugees and migrants from other places in Central America. The participants in this project represent a class of "digital nomads" who, through access to higher education, sought greater economic and social mobility. Project interviewees have college educations and, as Graeber suggests, were socialized within a liberal model of individual self-actualization and prioritize personal self-development. Further, their desires for personal development are appealed to precisely by the promised alternative lifestyle marketed by tourism interests in Tulum. Spiritual tourism to Tulum thus caters, not only to an elite class of wealthy tourists, but also to a class of middle, or downwardly mobile individuals, first generation college graduates, who are imbued with the liberal ontological desire and motivation for self actualization. For this group of young people, the way they can attain the promise of a life in Tulum is through volunteering in hostels, exchanging their labor for room and board, and monetizing their skills with freelance gig work in the entertainment and spiritual tourism economy. They service wealthy tourists in an effort to also share in the lifestyle the wealthy tourists seem to embody in Tulum.

This class difference between the wealthy tourists who have popularized spiritual tourism in Tulum and the workers who arrive through labor-exchange volunteer programs informs the different ways these groups experience and navigate life in Tulum. Under conditions of low and often unpredictable income, freelance gig workers frequently rely on friendships, social connections, and community networks to address both material and emotional needs. In this sense, economic precarity often necessitates forms of collective living and mutual dependence that foster sustained interpersonal interaction.

Living and volunteering in hostels facilitates forms of sociality less common in more individualized forms of luxury tourism. Hostel life is organized around shared kitchens, bathrooms, bunk rooms, and common living spaces. Volunteer labor often includes shared cooking and cleaning responsibilities, communal meals, and group excursions. In contrast to the relative privacy and insulation of luxury villas, boutique hotels, and individualized wellness retreats, hostel environments require frequent interaction and collaboration among workers and travelers sharing limited space and resources. These communal arrangements often produced forms of emotional intimacy, mutual aid, and everyday interdependence that participants themselves described as meaningful and emotionally supportive (von Zumbusch & Lalicic 2020.

This is not to suggest that affluent tourists are incapable of forming meaningful relationships or experiencing healing in Tulum. Rather, the spatial and social organization of luxury tourism and hostel living facilitate different forms of interaction and social connection. While luxury wellness tourism often frames healing as individualized and privatized consumer experience, hostel environments more frequently embed participants within networks of economic interdependence and communal daily life.

Paola describes one of the first significant connections she made as a volunteer worker at a hostel in Tulum and how this connection consequently resulted in a positive healing effect:

> I met this Argentinian woman, a tarot reader and cacao facilitator, during my first month here. I was doing a volunteer stay at a hostel, and that's where I connected with her. She gave me a lot of trust and calm, and she opened me up to working through all these issues…it was like a starting point for my healing process.

She credits her volunteer time at a hostel with meeting someone who was able to impart a valuable connection that helped her begin her own healing after having left a difficult and

traumatic situation in Argentina. In addition to this first friendship, Paola discussed her desire for work that would permit her to continue pursuing her goal to be a DJ and to grow her online marketing business:

> After what I went through at that company, I said, 'never again.' Never again will I wear the shirt for anyone but myself (Nunca más me pongo la camiseta por nadie que no sea por mí). I don't want to work under someone else's authority again, not in Argentina or anywhere else. Now I want to focus on myself, on my dreams, on my projects. I want jobs that give me time and resources for music…I'm not looking for the 'dream corporate position.' I already had that, and it didn't make me happy. I want to do whatever is necessary—any job that gives me the opportunity and the time to dedicate myself more to music. I don't care what kind of work it is, as long as it allows me to keep creating and moving toward what I really want.

Valentina also made statements expressing that voluntariados at hostels served as an important step in getting settled and as key to their economic survival in Tulum after her and her sister decided to leave Argentina to expand their glitter party makeup business in Mexico:

> We initially came with the idea of traveling around Mexico City for two weeks and then continuing on. But when we got here, we realized we didn't have as much money as we thought. So it was like, 'well…volunteering, let's see what happens.' And it worked. That's how we started: they gave us food, we had a place to sleep, and we met a ton of people. It was a way to get settled while we figured out how to move around and while we were getting [the glitter business] up and running.

At one of the *voluntariados*, Valentina explained that she served as both a tour guide for hostel guests and at times at the reception desk. She recalled her experience volunteering as the hostel's

in-house tour guide, taking guests out on day-trips to beaches and *cenotes* (natural limestone caves for swimming) in Tulum, as a pleasant one. She also discusses the community she formed part of at the hostel:

> In one volunteer position I worked as a tour guide and some days at reception…I would go to the beach, accompany people on the outings, we talked a ton. It felt like traveling within the trip…There was a really lovely group vibe, very good energy (muy buena onda). The people were special; a really nice little group formed.

Unlike the idealized subjectivity of the comprehensive designer, or its local iteration, the idealized archetype of a wealthy "Tuluminati" styled digital nomad, my interlocutors of this middle/downwardly mobile class background inevitably end up relying on community networks of support and mutual aid. Indeed, one of the most appealing aspects of digital nomadism and hostel volunteering cited by my interlocutors is that it facilitates establishing important bonds and networks without which one could not survive economically as an individual in Tulum.

These differences of class status and scale are at the crux of the contradiction of the spiritual tourism industry. The digital nomad archetype is an iteration of the comprehensive designer, which is itself an iteration of the archetypal romanticized adventurer/colonizer. Tulum gig workers and freelancers might adopt some of the values and ideals of the lifestyle, aesthetic, and outward-facing philosophy of the digital nomad of Tulum but their social and class status represents real material discrepancies between travelers from the global north who might hold full-time corporate remote jobs and could easily move to Tulum during the height of pandemic lock downs to live a life where their income currency provides them with much more buying power than local residents and similar "nomads" from countries in the global south, in this case, specifically from Argentina.

Freelance gig workers must place value, intention, and focus on interdependence at the interpersonal level because their material realities require it. Yet, this social-class dimension is often obfuscated, and other, shared characteristics are emphasized in the ways my interlocutors identified with yet another iteration of this neo-colonial archetype, what locals refer to as the "Tuluminati." Perhaps this dissonance is the result of a depoliticized subjectivity, which has facilitated the proliferation in popular cultural discourse of the view of the computational metaphor as solely or mostly liberatory (Andrejevic 2013; Chari 2015). But for the freelance gig-workers living in the Argentinian diaspora of Tulum, they live both sides of the computational metaphor: they are at once exploited by it and in other ways, liberated by it. As Mark Andrejevic writes: "It is not clear, however, that the Marxist-inflected critiques of exploitation…are incompatible with a sense of enjoyment or pleasure" and "the critique of exploitation does not devalue individual pleasure any more than such pleasures nullify exploitative social relations" (Andrejevic 2013, 153).

Addressing Housing Precarity, Together: Collectivizing and Simplifying the Tuluminati Lifestyle

As Andrejevic writes, there is exploitation that is facilitated by depoliticization. In this case, the depoliticization is seen through the obfuscation of the social-class dimension of difference between the idealized subjectivity of the digital nomad in Tulum, which is coded as wealthy or not lacking for material resources, and the often challenging material realities faced by the Argentinian workers I lived with and interviewed. However, as I lived with two Argentinian freelancers and one service industry worker, it became clear that those material and class differences —namely being constantly cash-strapped, working many hours, and still making a low income, were addressed and mitigated through practiced values of community care within the home, and broader networks of mutual aid among Argentinians in the diaspora.

I can also frame my own positionality within this understanding of an idealized, dominant subjectivity and the realities that mark my lived experience as different from the romanticized archetype of a cultural anthropologist conducting field research. During the first two months of field work, I lived in a private room in a hybrid hotel and hostel in the heart of Tulum Centro. There was a tiny, shared kitchen on the rooftop, which was used by all the guests, however, it was almost always in use and lacked windows, which made cooking a time-consuming challenge that left one drenched in sweat after plating a single meal. It was in this place that I met Ana, a young woman from the state of Veracruz who had moved to Tulum at the start of 2023. She was living one floor above me, renting a bunk bed in a shared room with two other women. She worked two jobs, six and sometimes seven days a week. At 6 a.m. she would begin her shift at a coffee shop on the main street of Centro; she would have a break in the afternoon and then begin her shift at a restaurant and bar from 6 pm to just past midnight.

We became friends as we used the kitchen at the same time during her break and when I would stop into the coffee shop to work. Our friendship later became an important source of mutual aid and support when the owners of our building informed us, and all other tenants, that they had sold the hotel to a Spanish company, and we could either move out at the end of three weeks or agree to stay on and pay a much higher rate of rent. As the new rate proved unaffordable for both of us, Ana and I searched for new housing together, along with one other Argentinian woman who bunked in the same room as Ana. While Ana and her bunk-mate Paola worked, I would set out to check out possible places for us to live. Of the few places in our budget was a studio apartment/hotel room with two twin beds and a bathroom. Our plan was for us to take turns who would get to sleep solo in a bed each night. The manager showed me the potential unit and then asked me a series of questions about myself and my friends.

It became apparent by her expression and shift in affect after I told her it would be three of us living in the room and what we did for work that she was no longer interested in having us as tenants. It was a sinking feeling —the prospect of being denied even the most modestly priced housing option. Then, about two weeks before we had to be out of our current housing, we celebrated that we had secured a one-bedroom apartment not far from our current residence. We rejoiced in the fact that this place was an actual apartment, with a private bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen, and not just a studio or hotel room. The three of us pooled our cash for half of the deposit, with the understanding that we would pay the other half of the deposit in two weeks' time, when we would move in. I went in person to meet with the landlord, a mestizo Mexican man who attended school in Texas. He was pleasantly surprised when I presented my U.S. passport as identification and that I spoke English. He also seemed impressed that I was in Tulum conducting research for a doctoral project. Ana and Paola had warned me that the landlord was stuck up and rude, and I believed them, as it became clear to me that my status as a U.S. citizen, educated, and potentially also because I am mestiza, his attitude and treatment towards me was different, and arguably better than the way he treated the women who would be my roommates.

I signed a handwritten receipt and joyfully texted Ana and Paola that the apartment was ours. Then, two days before we were meant to move in, Paola realized that she may not have enough money to cover her third of the rent and second portion of the deposit. And, although I was expecting a portion of my research grant money to come in later the following month, I was also cash-strapped and only had enough money to cover my own portion of the rent and deposit. Plus, I had to spend about half of my first grant installment to pay back a loan from a friend who had helped me out to survive during the summer. Paola asked us if it was okay for her to ask the

landlord if we could split the second half of the deposit payment and pay it over the first two months of our lease —so we would pay one part of the remaining half of the deposit on move-in day, and the remainder of the deposit the following month along with the second month's rent.

This is a common practice in Tulum, especially because most workers are freelancers working gig to gig and they all live off the money they make on a daily basis. For this reason, we did not expect the landlord to respond with a berating voice memo, stating that he believed we were trying to take advantage of him and that this request made him doubt that we would be reliable tenants. He revoked the housing offer we had already signed off on and asked that I come by to retrieve the cash for the first half of the deposit we had already paid. This kind of housing precarity is a common experience of freelance gig workers who make their living doing short-term odd jobs in the spiritual, wellness, and hospitality industries of tourism in Tulum. Not only do these workers face housing insecurity because of their piecemeal income, but they also experience instances of classism that places them and their housing at the mercy of landlords who may decide on a whim and with very short notice to revoke their housing (Robinson et al. 2019; von Zumbusch & Lalicic 2020).

After this, we only had one day to find a new place to live. We decided to try to find housing individually, and I ended up living in a hostel, renting a bunk bed in a shared room and one bathroom with seven other women. This hostel was located further away from Centro and thus was a bit cheaper than any other hostel closer to the main road of Tulum. I lived there for about a month and a half, all of November and half of December of 2023. I went to California for the Christmas holidays and returned to Tulum on December 31st. During my time in California, I was in communication with Ana, as I would need to again find housing. She and Paola had found an apartment with another Argentinian woman but were again being priced out

of their current building. The tourism high season had begun in November and would continue into April and May of 2024, so their landlords would raise their rent.

Ana had reached out to two other Argentinian women who she met while living in a different hostel earlier in 2023. Valentina and Camila are sisters from the Argentinian province of Misiones and they had found a two-bedroom apartment just a few blocks from Tulum Centro's main road. Ana and I would move in with them and share a room in that apartment beginning on December 31st. The four of us became a temporary "found family" and we decided to call our home the "Concha House."

The experiences of housing instability described above were not resolved individually, but through collective strategies of mutual support that became central to participants' ability to remain in Tulum. The formation of the Concha House reflects how housing precarity was addressed not through stable employment or institutional support, but through flexible and improvised forms of collective living. These arrangements were often temporary and constantly renegotiated, yet they provided crucial infrastructure for remaining in Tulum. While these forms of instability were significant, they differed from the more extreme forms of housing precarity experienced by other migrant and local populations in Tulum. Participants were able to mobilize social networks and transnational mobility to navigate these conditions, even as they remained economically vulnerable.

La Concha House and the Social Life of the Computational Metaphor

As mentioned previously, the Concha House was composed of myself, Ana who is Mexican from the state of Veracruz, and Valentina and Camila who are sisters from Argentina. We moved in together on December 31st 2023. I arrived from Cancún that afternoon and was given the address by Ana while she was at work. I had never met Valentina or Camila before, but they greeted me when I arrived at the gates of our apartment building with a hug and helped

bring up my luggage. Our apartment was at the back corner of the small complex, on the second floor. Valentina was cooking chicken and rice on the small two-burner cook stove in the kitchen. I set my stuff in a space under the television in the living room as the room I'd share with Ana was still full of the previous tenant's belongings. This tenant planned to come by later after their work shift to move their things out. In the meantime, I sat on the couch and Valentina and Camila served me my first meal in our new home.

It was in the community at the Concha House that I was able to mitigate the initial loneliness and isolation I felt during the first few months of fieldwork. We helped each other out in more ways than we could probably recognize —both materially and in terms of social and psychological needs, like those of human connection and belonging (Dodge et al. 2012). We helped one another find and maintain a more solid and long-term housing situation. Further, as I was being paid in U.S. dollars and my work was remote and could be conducted at my own schedule, I was able to help my roommates in material ways that eased the burdens of their own busy schedules and tight budgets. I took over shopping and paying for groceries and household items for the four of us and would take all of our laundry to a local service, saving them hours on their one day off a week, no longer having to wash their clothes by hand and hang dry them. We would rotate who would cook for the house and we'd eat our meals together. We'd often have people over, usually other Argentinian freelance gig workers who were friends of the other "Conchas." They'd have other Argentinian gig-workers come over to provide services like hair-braiding and manicures and pedicures at prices much lower than local Tulum rates.

Valentina and Camila worked several different gigs to gather together an income. First, they had their own businesses. Their main business is a party service: a glitter bar for private parties, music festivals, or discotheque events. They developed their own kind of body glitter

through years of experimenting with mixing different kinds of hair gel and types of glitter. When contracted for an event, they dress in black head to toe, do their own makeup with glitter, and arrive at the venue with their equipment and gear: a large suitcase which holds their containers of body glitter, brush sets, rhinestone decals, portable ring light, mirror, and a portable mini backlit marquee sign with their business name. Partygoers line up to get their face and body made up with glitter designs and reflective decals and can take photos in front of the ring light to post their memories on social media.

A second business they started was a guided cenote (natural sinkhole) or ocean snorkeling excursion business. They partnered with the caretaker of an ejido plot, ejidal, a designated parcel in communally held land, located within the Sian Ka'an bioreserve. They brought tourists to his beachside campground, where he also accepts volunteer workers to run the space for tourist stays. Indeed, Valentina and Camila began their move to Tulum by doing a *voluntariado* at the reserve in Sian Ka'an.

Through sharing a home with the Conchas, I gained a community and connections that helped me gather the information and interviews I needed for this research. Valentina helped me set up interviews with her Argentinian friends who worked freelance gigs and in *voluntariados*, as well as hostel managers and the steward of the ejido in the Sian Ka'an bioreserve. The sisters also invited me to tag along with them to a temazcal ceremony for tourists, through which I met the followers of the *Camino Rojo* discussed in chapter three. I doubt that my project would be what it is without them, and in many ways, this dissertation project is a collaboration with them.

Beyond providing material and emotional support, life in the Concha House was also structured by shared ways of thinking about agency, healing, and transformation. A recurring theme in conversations, notes, and messages within the house was the idea that thoughts and

intentions directly shape material reality. This reflects what Turner describes as the computational metaphor —the belief that thinking operates as a form of computation that can produce tangible outcomes in the world. The common thread that runs through various social classes of visitors to Tulum, from wealthy elite tourists to volunteer migrant gig-workers, is the belief that thinking is a form of computation. Turner discussed the belief in the computational metaphor within the context of the consumerist spirituality that characterizes the class of wealthy tourists who come to Tulum in search of healing. Indeed, Turner mentions that the comprehensive designer figure's belief in the computational metaphor takes on a "mystical" quality (2006). What became particularly striking was that this belief was not limited to wealthy tourists engaged in consumer-based spirituality but was also shared by freelance gig workers navigating conditions of economic precarity. The computational metaphor thus operates as a cross-class framework for imagining agency, even as the capacity to enact that agency differs significantly. While participants maintain this same belief in the computational metaphor, they are less able to exert their autonomy and agency through participating in the consumption that wealthy tourists engage in as a form of practicing spirituality (Chari 2015; El Fakih 2025; Robinson et al. 2019).

The following images are a sample of the kinds of notes and messages my roommates at the Concha House would post as a form of encouragement. These specific messages illustrate the common belief in the computational metaphor, or that our minds and the thoughts we entertain are the seminal driving force of the real world and circumstances of our lives.

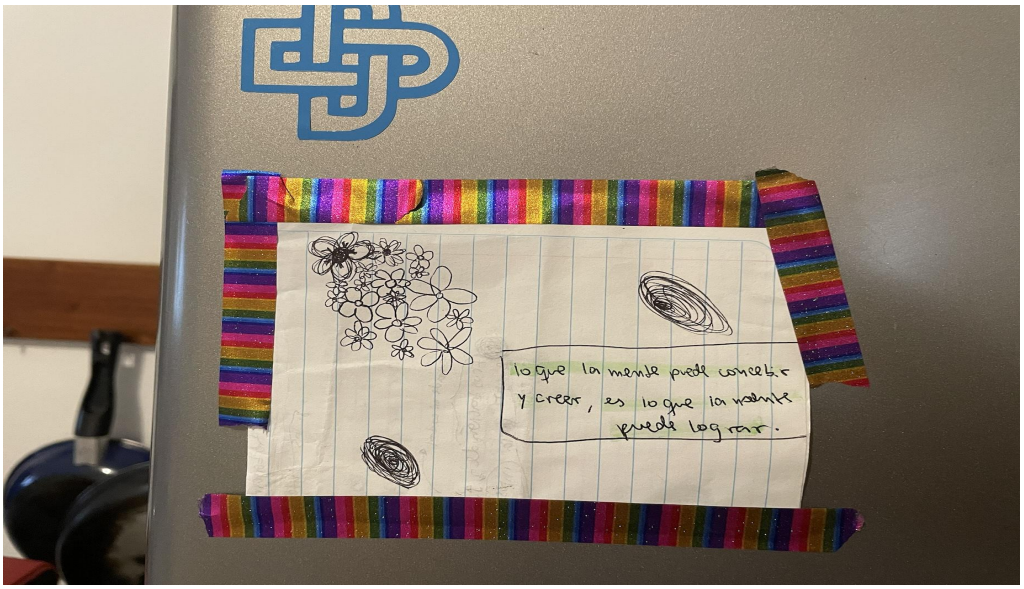


Figure 12. Note posted on the refrigerator in the "Concha House" apartment. The note reads: "lo que la mente puede concebir y creer, es lo que la mente puede lograr." "What the mind can conceive of and believe, is what the mind can achieve." Photo by author.

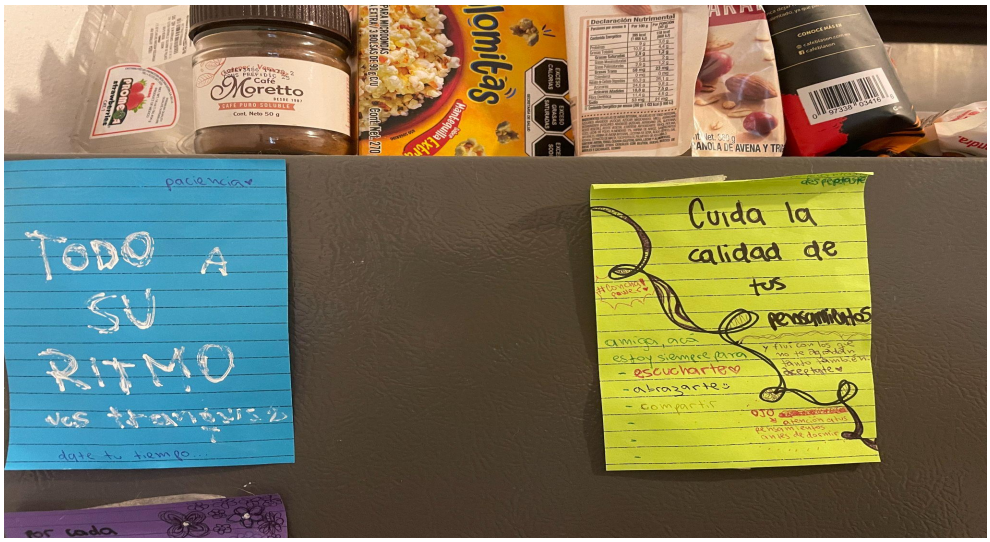


Figure 13. Yellow note on the right: "Cuida la calidad de tus pensamientos, y fluí con los que no te agradan tanto también como aceptarte." / "Take care of the quality of your thoughts, and flow with the ones you don't like, as part of accepting yourself." Photo by author.

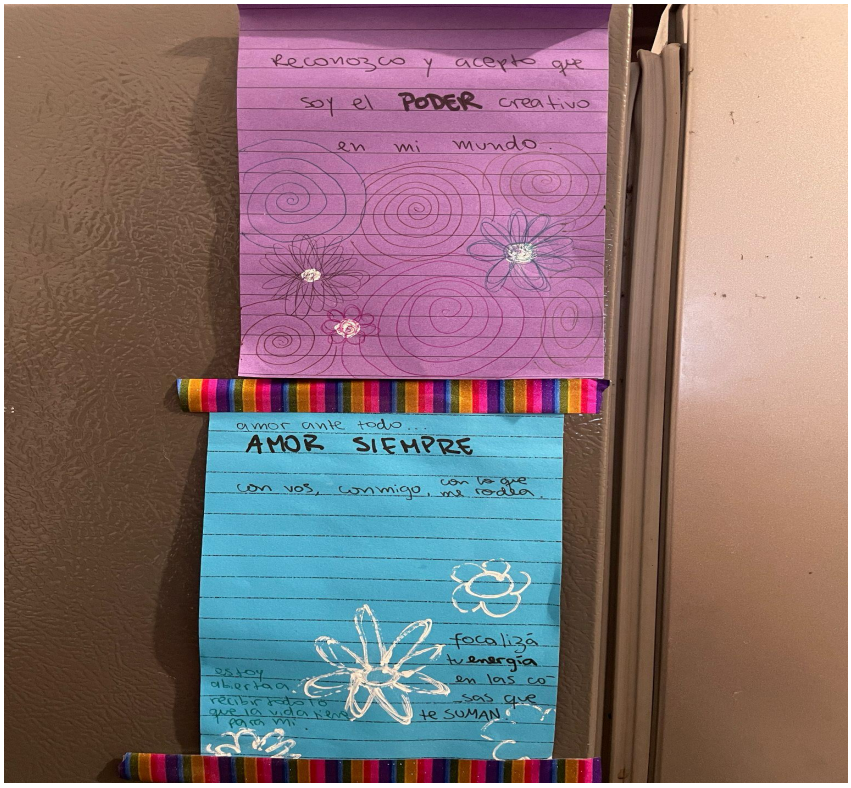


Figure 14. Various notes posted on the refrigerator of the "Concha House" Apartment. (1)

Top note: "Reconozco y acepto que soy el poder creativo en mi mundo." / "I recognize and accept that I am the creative **power** in my world."

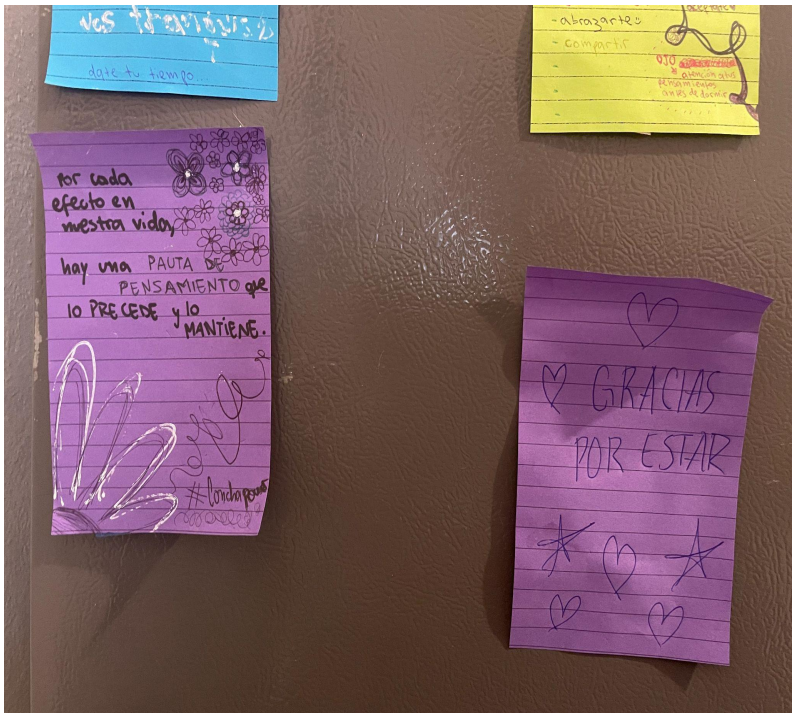
Bottom note: "Amor ante todo… **amor siempre**. Con vos, conmigo y con todo lo que me rodea."/ "Love above all… **love always**. With you, with myself, with everything around me." "Estoy abierta a recibir todo lo que la vida tiene para mí." / "I am open to receiving everything that life has for me." "Focalizá tu **energía** en las cosas que te suman." / "Focus your **energy** on the things that add to your life." Photo by author.

Figure 15. Various notes posted on the refrigerator of the "Concha House" Apartment. (2)

Purple note on the left: "Por cada efecto en nuestra vida, hay una pauta de pensamiento que lo precede y lo mantiene." / "For every effect in our life, there is a pattern of thought that precedes and sustains it"

Yellow note on the top right in red ink: "Ojo→ atención a tus pensamientos antes de dormir." / "Heads up→ pay attention to your thoughts before going to sleep."

Purple note on the bottom right: "Gracias por estar." / "Thank you for being" or "Thank you for being here."
Photo by author.



Notes like these, as well as self-help books and YouTube lectures and discourses by Argentinian philosophers and academics were constantly referenced in our home. Once I returned to Eugene and began to look through these photos and our group chat, I realized the idea that undergirds these posted messages and doodles—the idea that our minds and thoughts shape our material world— echoed something that Celia said in a conversation that I will discuss at length below. It also helped me see the connection or common belief in the computational metaphor as a thread that runs across social and economic class lines. In other words, my field material suggests that the belief in the computational metaphor serves as the spiritual belief upon which people of different social classes share common ground, and is another shared subjectivity with the comprehensive designer and Tuluminati figures (Andrejevic 2013; Chari 2015; Samarathunga et al. 2024; Turner 2006).

Another notable example of people of different social classes identifying with the Tuluminati archetype is the following meme that was shared in the Concha House WhatsApp group by one of my roommates during the height of the high tourist and music festival season:

The meme consists of two still images from the 1976 film *Rocky*, starring Sylvester Stallone as the title character (bottom) and Burgess Meredith as his trainer, Mickey Goldmill (top). The text reads “De pie Tuluminati, todavía faltan 15 dias de fiestas!” / “On your feet, Tuluminati, there are still 15 days of parties left!” Within the context of the Concha House, my first interpretation of the meme was that it referenced the grueling work schedule of my roommates. Indeed, during the high season and time of days-long music festivals, they would be in and out of the apartment from job to gig, sleeping, showering, getting dressed and doing hair and makeup, rushing out with their glitter-packed work suitcase and equipment and backpacks with clothing changes and other accessories, just in case. It was only much later when I revisited my fieldnotes and came across the meme again

that I realized that this meme could be interpreted in various ways depending on the social-class of the person who shares it and the people they share it with. My immediate assumption was that my roommates were joking that they felt beat up by the demanding work schedule and hustle of the high season.



Figure 16. A shared meme of film stills from Rocky (1976) in the Concha House WhatsApp group chat. (Left)

A standalone, larger image of the *Rocky* (1976) meme. (Right)

Later, as I thought more deeply about the text of the meme and what being "Tuluminati" might mean, I now believe this meme illustrates how identification with the "Tuluminati" subjectivity is not limited to wealthy tourists but also taken up by freelance workers through shared aesthetic and spiritual frameworks. In this case, the qualities that make them part of the Tuluminati group is their shared search for spiritual healing and belief in the computational metaphor, and an adherence to the visual aesthetic of, as Celia has put it, proximity to whiteness, normative standards of physical beauty, and wearing clothes that abide by the Tuluminati dress code. The original "Tuluminati" group of elite tourists and contemporary wealthy tourists might see this meme and interpret it as a joke about how hard they have been partying and see it as encouragement to muster

the energy to continue partying for the remainder of the festival season. Freelance gig-workers in Tulum might consider themselves part of the "Tuluminati" because of their adherence to the aesthetic markers of being "Tuluminati," and not take into account the key difference in social and economic class that they do not share with the original "Tuluminati."

This depoliticized, de-classed identification with the "Tuluminati" aesthetic serves as an example of the importance of what Anita Chari calls a "political economy of the senses." In her book of the same title, Chari examines two main forms of depoliticization under capitalism, highlighted by Marx's theory of democracy. The first is the "rigidification of the political," which refers to the critique of capitalism coming solely from the political sphere itself. The second form of depoliticization refers to a separation or "bracketing of politics…from the extrapolitical spheres of social life, including the economy." Thus, democratization efforts entail a critical assessment of the ways in which politics are made to appear separate from realms of social life deemed "beyond politics." To do this, Chari contends that we need "an explicit theory of the production of subjectivity in capitalism and the specific relationship between subjective experience, practice, and the sociopolitical form of capitalist society" (Chari 2015, 111).

Chari invokes Lukács's concept of reification as a way to think about how "capitalist forms permeate the subject's perception of the world at the most intimate level" (Chari 2015, 112). Our subjective experiences and perceptions of capitalist society are important grounds of analysis and are a form of reconnecting spheres which might appear outside of politics, back to a critique of political economy. Our reification, or subject formation and concretization, as neoliberal subjects, is characterized by three dimensions outlined by Chari.

The first, dissociation, refers to the ways the body is transformed into a mechanism within capitalist contexts, resulting in not fully feeling experiences and the "*sensations or effects of [one's]*

actions" (Chari 2015, 113; emphasis mine). This dimension is exemplified by the accounts of interviewees in which they expressed dissatisfaction in work without purpose, citing it as a catalyst for them to exercise more agency in search of a new life in Tulum. Dissociation from the effects of one's own labor is reflected in participants' descriptions of work lacking "life" or "soul." Participants' belief that they can reshape their reality through mindset reflects an attempt to overcome the dissociation they experienced in previous jobs, yet it does so by relocating agency entirely within the self.

The second dimension, which Chari calls formalism, "refers to the schematic character of experience in capitalist society…which reveals the merely formal character of rational knowledge, which does not penetrate the content of the material world, reified subjectivity is only able to grasp the forms of concepts without grasping their content" (Chari 2015, 113). The dimension of formalism may be exemplified by the aesthetic of the Tuluminati archetype, which invokes both spiritual enlightenment and inconspicuous wealth in a purely abstract or symbolic manner. Similarly, the expansive yet diffuse vision of projects like Vibe-Nation reflects this formalism: the tendency for experience to be organized through abstract forms that gesture toward meaning without fully grounding it in material conditions. The computational metaphor also contributes to this dimension of formalism, as complex social and economic realities are reframed through simplified logics of input and output: thoughts become causes, and outcomes become programmable.

The third dimension Chari discusses is fragmentation, described as the "inability to perceive the social totality," and the perception of our subjective experiences as separate from this totality. This fragmentation of one's subjective experience could be what facilitates the way interviewees are able to identify with an archetype that originated from a wealthy elite class of foreigners from the United States. It helps explain how participants can identify with the "Tuluminati" aesthetic while

remaining materially excluded from the class position it represents. The framework of the computational metaphor further reinforces fragmentation, as structural conditions such as class inequality or labor exploitation are backgrounded in favor of individualized strategies for transformation.

These three dimensions of reified subjectivity within capitalist society offer insight into why participants seek to attain greater autonomy, agency, and healing in Tulum. They also suggest that Tulum, while marketed as a place where one can escape the conditions that participants sought to leave behind, actually reconfigures those conditions within new entrepreneurial and spiritual frameworks. The way that a "Tuluminati" lifestyle implies increased autonomy through the agency of entrepreneurship ultimately negates it as a true alternative to the dimensions of reified neoliberal subjectivity and instead represents an iteration of the same stance within capitalist contexts (Andrejevic 2013; Chari 2015; Escobar 2018). The Concha House reveals how collective forms of survival coexist with deeply individualized frameworks of agency, producing a social life in which mutual aid and neoliberal subjectivity are not opposed, but intertwined.

While many interviewees framed their sense of agency through what is described as the computational metaphor, they differed significantly in the extent to which they connected this framework to a critique of political economy. For example, Celia articulates a version of the computational metaphor that explicitly links individual consciousness to systems of oppression:

> Systems of oppression work as computer programs in our minds, so it's like the only power that they have or the way that they can create or not allow us to create is because of the hold that they have in our subconscious mind. We are programmed since childhood in these systems and it is our collective agreement that these systems are real, that keep us bound to them. If you unplug yourself from that program where…if you deprogram

> yourself from that you can begin to function outside of that, but the way that the collective reality can begin to shift is if more than one person is out of that program because, one of the things that I have learned here in Tulum, ever since I got here, when I first got here, I was very focused on this type of oppression, like the pollution of the environment and all these very real things that are happening but I was in a place of a lot of disempowerment, I was feeling like a victim of the system and I feel that part of my journey these past three years has been about reclaiming my power to not be a victim and instead create a different reality for myself, a reality that does not conform to the system. I feel that we can all do that and we all have the power to do that, but not all of us believe that we can or are on the level of the awareness of the program and not everyone has the tools to remove that program because part of removing that program is doing a lot of trauma work and nervous system healing and a lot of things that a lot of racialized people and oppressed people maybe don't even think about because they're focused on survival and focused on doing other things. So that's my reflection about how we can start to approach these topics of oppression and systems of oppression not from a place of disempowerment or feeling victim to them but how we can really take our power back.

Her account reflects a distinctly politicized understanding of the computational metaphor. Like my roommates at the Concha house, Celia shares a belief in the agentive power of thought. However, she departs from them in the degree to which she explicitly situates this belief within a broader analysis of power. Celia, along with other freelance workers such as Sarah, foregrounds the ways that classed, gendered, and racialized inequalities shape one's capacity to "reprogram" oneself. Rather than treating the computational metaphor as an individualized framework for

self-transformation, she connects it to the social totality, emphasizing how structural conditions constrain who has access to the time, resources, and tools required for such transformation.

Celia articulates the computational metaphor in a way that reconnects individual transformation to structural critique. Celia states that her experiences of living and working in Tulum actually catalyzed her ability to more strongly connect those subjective experiences to the larger social totality. Thus, connecting those experiences to a critique of capitalist political economy. In this sense, Tulum presents another mind-twisting paradox. On the one hand, it cultivates a widespread belief in the transformative power of the mind —the idea that one can "reprogram" their reality. On the other, it reproduces an intensified form of neoliberal subjectivity in which economically vulnerable individuals pursue autonomy through precarious freelance labor, moving from gig to gig in the spiritual tourism economy. Celia's experience brings these tensions into sharp relief. While she initially arrived seeking healing, she became increasingly attuned to the "market morality" of commodified spirituality. These experiences did not lead her to abandon her belief in the computational metaphor, but rather to politicize it, reframing it as both a tool of empowerment and a site shaped by structural inequality.

While not all who come to Tulum for similar reasons arrive at this kind of politicized understanding, the fact that the computational metaphor can facilitate both deeper reification and critical awareness underscores its central role in shaping how agency, spirituality, and inequality are experienced and interpreted in Tulum. The computational metaphor, then, is not inherently emancipatory or depoliticizing, but operates as a flexible framework through which individuals negotiate the relationship between self-transformation and structural constraint. In this sense, Tulum's spiritual tourism economy does not simply produce entrepreneurial subjects seeking freedom and self-actualization, but also reveals the social limits of neoliberal ideals of autonomy.

The experiences of participants suggest that even within highly cultures of wellness, digital labor, and self-transformation, people continue to rely on communal relationships and shared forms of belonging to navigate precarity and construct meaningful lives.

CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION: WHEREVER YOU FIND YOURSELF

Returning to the Paradox

The advertisement discussed at the beginning of this dissertation condensed the central contradiction animating Tulum's spiritual tourism economy: the promise that one can "find oneself" through experiences available for purchase. Destinations like Tulum are marketed as spaces of healing, transformation, and liberation from alienation, yet these promises depend upon systems of commodification, precarious labor, unequal mobility, and extractive tourism development (Carrette & King 2005; Britton 1991). At the same time, ethnographic fieldwork with freelance gig workers demonstrates that commodified spirituality cannot be dismissed as simply false or meaningless. Participants cultivated friendships, networks of mutual aid, creative collaborations, and forms of emotional support that they experienced as genuinely transformative within the contradictions of the spiritual tourism economy.

This dissertation has argued that Tulum's spiritual tourism industry emerged through layered colonial, nationalist, neoliberal, and digital imaginaries that positioned the Yucatán Peninsula as a space available for tourism, consumption, and reinvention since at least the mid-nineteenth century. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics, accelerating Tulum's growth as a destination where healing became increasingly tied to entrepreneurial labor, aesthetic performance, and mobility (Coordinación General de Comunicación 2020; Cruz-Milan & Lagunas-Puls 2021; Ehn et al. 2022). The Tuluminati aesthetic revealed how race, class, spirituality, and legitimacy became encoded through style and employability while workers' everyday survival depended less on the individualized autonomy promised by digital nomadism than on shared housing, friendship networks, and collective care.

The contradiction of Tulum, then, is not simply that healing is commodified. Rather, healing is marketed as an individualized consumer experience while many meaningful forms of care emerged through interdependence, shared precarity, and relationships among workers themselves. Affluent spiritual tourists often encounter healing through purchasable experiences: retreats, ceremonies, and wellness treatments. By contrast, the workers who sustain these tourism spaces frequently experience care through collective practices emerging from shared precarity itself. In this sense, class position shapes not only unequal access to tourism consumption, but also different forms of spirituality and relationality.[6] The individualized healing marketed to tourists coexists alongside collective forms of connection and mutual support produced among workers navigating precarious labor conditions. This suggests that the precarity produced by neoliberal tourism simultaneously gives rise to more subtle forms of spirituality and sociality grounded in reciprocity.

Peeling Back the Layers

The contradictions of spiritual tourism in Tulum did not emerge suddenly in the twenty-first century. They are the result of layered historical imaginaries that have repeatedly positioned the Yucatán Peninsula as a space to be "discovered," organized, developed, consumed, and transformed. By imaginaries, I refer not only to representations or fantasies about place, but to visions of desirable futures that organize material life. In the Yucatán Peninsula, these imaginaries have shaped what kinds of tourism were built, whose mobility was valued, whose labor was required, and which forms of culture, nature, and spirituality became available for consumption. In the first layer of the "explorer" subjectivity, the Yucatán was made available for tourism through colonial forms of seeing, writing, and representing. Euro-American explorers,

[6] See Chapter 5 for the dissertation's ethnographic account of how class shapes both access to healing and the social forms through which it is experienced.

travel writers, and archaeologists represented Maya sites as mysterious, magnificent and available for "discovery."[7] This produced the region as a frontier of adventure and knowledge production. Maya people were often displaced from the narrative or positioned as obstacles to exploration. This produced an early tourism imaginary based on scholarly authority and colonial romanticism.

The second layer was nationalist modernization, in which Maya sites were reinterpreted as national patrimony and incorporated into post-revolutionary projects of Mexican identity, modernization, and cultural tourism. While Mexican post-revolutionary nationalism challenged some forms of foreign ownership, it used pre-Columbian heritage and materiality to construct national identity and developed national and cultural tourism as part of the project of modernization. Indigenous culture was simultaneously valued as national heritage and transformed into a consumable resource for tourism development (Breglia 2006; Kelly 1994; México 1917; Saldaña-Portillo 2003). In this sense, post-revolutionary nationalism did not eliminate earlier forms of extractive relationships to Indigenous culture and land, but reorganized them through state-led projects of modernization and cultural tourism.

The third layer was neoliberal development planning, in which the Caribbean coast was reimagined as a calculable economic resource, a site where infrastructure, labor, and landscape could be organized to attract foreign capital and produce globally competitive tourism destinations. Tulum's significance lies partly in its delayed incorporation into this tourism economy. Because it remained peripheral to earlier large-scale development, its later transformation could be narrated not as mass tourism, but as an alternative to it. For the earlier phases outlined in Chapter 2, Tulum's political economy remained tied to fishing, subsistence

[7] See Chapter 2 for the historical discussion of explorer discourse, travel writing, and the colonial framing of Maya sites.

agriculture, henequen, and backpacker tourism. Its later development after 2000 allowed it to be branded differently from Cancún, which emerged as a mass tourism resort zone, accessible to people with many different incomes. By contrast, Tulum became associated with boutique luxury, nature, wellness, spirituality, and alternative lifestyle (Torres & Momsen 2005; Ambrosie 2015; Ceja Morales 2025).

The fourth layer is the comprehensive designer, localized in Tulum through the Tuluminati figure: a spiritual-entrepreneurial subject who treats the self, the body, the landscape, and even reality itself as open to redesign through intention, aesthetic curation, mobility, and market participation (El Fakih 2025; Turner 2006). It transforms Tulum into a stage conducive to self-transformation, aesthetic performance, and entrepreneurial reinvention. Taken together, these historical layers show that tourism is not simply an economic sector added onto an existing place; it is a process of world-making. The world made through Tulum's spiritual tourism economy is one in which nature becomes a therapeutic backdrop, spirituality becomes an experience economy, and laborers are asked not only to work, but to perform authenticity and adhere to aesthetic standards. Indigenous practices are incorporated into wellness markets and freedom is framed as mobility and self-employment, even when workers experience economic and material precarity.

Within this world, healing becomes a market morality: a framework through which suffering is individualized, transformation is commodified, and consumption is imbued with spiritual significance. Healing is treated as an individual responsibility, suffering is framed as something that can be managed through mindset, energy, consumption, and self-design (Carr & Kelan 2023; Carrette & King 2005; Purser 2019). In this sense, structural problems are obfuscated and framed as a problem of personal mindset. This does not mean that spiritual

practices in Tulum are necessarily insincere or devoid of meaning. Rather, it means that their circulation through tourism markets reorganizes healing through consumption, entrepreneurial aspiration, and uneven access to resources. Yet, this market morality remains incomplete because workers do not simply reproduce it. While many adopt the language of autonomy, manifestation, entrepreneurship, and self-design, their everyday lives reveal that survival in Tulum depends less on individual transcendence than on shared housing, friendships, and networks of care. It is in the lives of freelance gig workers that the historical arc of tourism development, the Tuluminati aesthetic, and the market morality of healing converge most sharply.

Designing the Self

One of the central questions that remains at the conclusion of this dissertation is why the subjectivity of the comprehensive designer is so compelling, particularly for workers whose material conditions make its promises difficult to fully realize. The comprehensive designer imagines the self as autonomous, creative, mobile, and capable of reshaping the world through intention, information, and entrepreneurial self-design. In Tulum, this figure emerges through the Tuluminati aesthetic, digital nomadism, entrepreneurship, manifestation discourse, and spiritualized forms of self-transformation. The appeal of the comprehensive designer does not stem from workers misunderstanding their conditions or being passively deceived by a false promise. Rather, this subjectivity resonates because it speaks to real experiences of exhaustion, instability, creative frustration, and the desire to build a life that feels meaningful. As Ana reflected about her choice to leave her job at an architectural firm, “I realized it wasn’t what I wanted. I wasn’t happy. I couldn’t see myself living that way…And that’s not who I am. I needed more.” For many participants, the figure of the comprehensive designer offered a way to imagine alternatives to forms of work and life they experienced as emotionally unfulfilling, exploitative, or spiritually empty.

For participants such as Paola, Ilario, Emma, and Ana, who described corporate jobs as exploitative, stressful, or disconnected from any meaningful impact on the world, Tulum appeared to offer a life organized around creativity, mobility, healing, and self-development. The figure of the comprehensive designer is especially compelling because it transforms mobility and instability into signs of agency. What might otherwise appear as precarity—moving often, working multiple gigs, lacking stable housing and employment—can instead be framed as courage, flexibility, and creative self-design.

The appeal of this subjectivity depends not only on the promise of mobility or entrepreneurship, but also on a deeper spiritual logic: the belief that thought, intention, and information can shape material reality. The computational metaphor—the idea that thinking operates like computation and can alter the world—appears in a spiritualized form, where thoughts, intentions, energy, and mindset are treated as forces capable of configuring the material conditions of one's life. In Tulum, this logic emerges through the language of manifestation, alignment, vibration, and intention, but also through the practical work of branding, social media marketing, freelancing, and entrepreneurship.

The power of the comprehensive designer lies in its ability to translate instability and precarity into possibility. Under conditions where stable employment, housing, and economic security are increasingly difficult to obtain, this subjectivity offers a language through which uncertainty can be narrated as freedom, risk as courage, and precarious work as entrepreneurial experimentation. However, the limits of this ideal came into sharper focus through ethnographic fieldwork. The comprehensive designer imagines autonomy as individual self-mastery, but the lives of freelance workers in Tulum show that autonomy is often made possible only through interdependence. Workers may describe their trajectories through the language of freedom, self-

design, and entrepreneurial courage, but their daily lives depend on shared apartments, exchanged favors, emotional care, job referrals, collective problem-solving, and networks of trust. This is one of the central contradictions of spiritual tourism in Tulum: the dominant ideology is individualistic, but survival for the workers who create the experiences of spiritual tourism is collective.

In this sense, some meaningful forms of healing in Tulum often emerge in kitchens, shared rooms, friendships, collaborations, and improvised forms of care among people trying to make a living in Tulum. The continued trajectories of my interlocutors after my fieldwork ended show that this tension between self-design and interdependence did not resolve when they left Tulum, but traveled with them across other tourism circuits.

From Tulum to Ibiza

The tension between self-design and interdependence did not end when my formal fieldwork ended. In the months after I left Tulum, several of my interlocutors continued to move through the same circuits of tourism, aesthetic labor, and entrepreneurial experimentation that had first brought them there. Among them were the Conchas, whose glitter business exemplified the forms of creative, aesthetic, and mobile entrepreneurship that Tulum's party and spiritual tourism economies make possible, even as they remain unstable. After my fieldwork ended, the Conchas traveled to Ibiza, a Spanish island in the Mediterranean associated with nightlife, electronic music, luxury tourism, and wellness culture. Much like Tulum, it attracts international tourists seeking experiences of escape, pleasure, and transformation. Its tourism economy similarly depends upon flexible, mobile, and precarious forms of work. where they brought their glitter business into another global tourism and nightlife economy before eventually returning to Tulum. Their movement from Tulum to Ibiza makes visible that Tulum is not an isolated

destination, but part of a wider transnational circuit of tourism hotspots where nightlife, wellness, aesthetics, and digital self-presentation overlap.

Their glitter work was not incidental to these tourism economies. It was a form of aesthetic labor that helped produce the atmosphere of transformation, fantasy, and embodied self-expression that destinations like Tulum and Ibiza sell. In many ways, their trajectory appeared to realize aspects of the comprehensive designer ideal: they had created a portable business, moved across international tourism circuits, and used creativity, social networks, and aesthetic skill to generate work. Yet, this mobility also points to the precariousness of that ideal. Moving from Tulum to Ibiza and back was not simply evidence of freedom; it was also a strategy for staying economically afloat in industries organized by seasonality, trendiness, and uneven demand. Their trajectory reveals the double character of entrepreneurial mobility in spiritual and party tourism economies. On one hand, it allows workers to pursue creative livelihoods, expand their networks, and imagine themselves as agents of their own futures. On the other hand, it requires constant movement, reinvention, and responsiveness to unstable markets.

The Conchas' movement illustrates the broader contradiction traced throughout this dissertation: the same economies that market freedom, transformation, and self-expression also depend on workers' ability to remain flexible, mobile, aesthetically available, and entrepreneurial under uncertain conditions. Their return to Tulum suggests not closure, but continuation: the ongoing search for viable work, creative expression, and life that feels meaningful within tourism economies that make such lives possible and precarious at once. Their return also reflects the importance of the social relationships and support networks they had built there. When they decided to return to work in Tulum for another season, the Conchas were able to

reconnect with their local network of friends to help them find housing they could afford and gig referrals. This suggests that mobility across tourism circuits did not eliminate the need for rooted social connections, rather, precarious mobility seems to intensify reliance on them.

Beyond Tulum

Tulum is not an anomaly, but an intensified example of broader global transformations linking wellness, mobility, entrepreneurship, aesthetic labor, and precarious work. Similar dynamics can be observed in other global destinations associated with wellness, retreat culture, digital nomadism, nightlife, and spiritual reinvention, including Ibiza, Bali, Costa Rica, Sedona, and Joshua Tree. These sites differ historically, politically, and culturally, but they share a growing convergence between lifestyle mobility, spiritual consumption, entrepreneurship, and precarious service labor. The figure of the comprehensive designer is not limited to Tulum. It circulates through influencer economies, wellness industries, retreat culture, festival economies, and digital nomad hubs, wherever people are encouraged to understand themselves as flexible, creative, mobile entrepreneurs responsible for their own healing and success. If Tulum offers an intensified case of these global transformations, it also points toward questions that exceed the scope of this dissertation: questions about environmental futures, digital technologies, post-pandemic tourism, and the possibility of collective healing beyond consumer spirituality.

One implication of this dissertation is that the Tuluminati could be understood as more than a local moniker or aesthetic category. While the term emerged as a descriptor used by local residents in Tulum, my research suggests that it also functions as a broader analytical concept for understanding an emergent form of entrepreneurial spiritual subjectivity. Although this subjectivity became especially visible in Tulum, similar configurations increasingly appear across global wellness destinations, influencer economies, digital nomad communities, and platform-mediated forms of labor. Future research could examine how the Tuluminati circulates

across different geographic settings and how local histories reshape this broader configuration of entrepreneurial spirituality.

Developing the Tuluminati as a theoretical concept also suggests opportunities to extend Fred Turner's concept of the Comprehensive Designer. This ethnography demonstrates how the subjectivity of the Comprehensive Designer becomes localized through particular histories of tourism development, colonialism, race, spirituality, and labor. In Tulum, the comprehensive designer is not merely a technologically oriented entrepreneur, but also a spiritual seeker, aesthetic performer, freelancer, and wellness worker whose labor involves continually designing both the self and the environments in which transformation is imagined to occur. Future research could explore how this historically situated figure appears in other tourism economies and creative industries, allowing the Comprehensive Designer to be understood not as a singular ideal type, but as a web of related subjectivities shaped by different political, economic, and cultural conditions.

Additionally, further research could expand on the relationship between neoliberalism and community care. Throughout this dissertation I have argued that workers relied upon shared housing, reciprocal labor exchanges, friendships, and informal support networks to navigate precarious conditions. Rather than emerging despite neoliberal labor arrangements, these forms of collective care may arise because of the instability those arrangements produce. They simultaneously mitigate the hardships of precarious work while making it possible for workers to continue participating within those labor markets. This tension raises broader questions about whether community care primarily reproduces existing political-economic arrangements or whether it also creates possibilities for alternative forms of sociality, solidarity, and collective flourishing.

Finally, the computational metaphor explored throughout this dissertation points toward emerging questions surrounding AI and digital labor. The Comprehensive Designer already imagines thought, information, and intention as technologies for reshaping reality. Contemporary AI discourse increasingly promises many of the same possibilities through optimization, creativity, self-improvement, and entrepreneurial productivity. As AI becomes more deeply integrated into creative industries, freelance labor, wellness entrepreneurship, and digital platform economies, it may intensify rather than replace the forms of entrepreneurial spirituality examined in this dissertation. Understanding how AI reshapes not only labor markets but also contemporary forms of subjectivity therefore represents an important direction for future research. Rather than existing outside the historical processes traced throughout this dissertation, AI may represent their latest articulation, extending the logics of self-optimization, flexibility, and entrepreneurial self-design into new technological domains.

Final Thoughts

One of my favorite memories of living in the Concha House was a night when none of us felt like cooking. We ordered two large Domino's pizzas, potato wedges, and a couple of 1.5-liter bottles of Pepsi. After sharing dinner, we moved a double mattress and a twin mattress out into the living room and laid them side by side facing the television. We brought our comforters and blankets, watched *La Sociedad de la Nieve* together, and eventually fell asleep there. The film recounts the story of a Uruguayan rugby team whose plane crashes in the Andes, forcing survivors to rely upon one another under extreme conditions. Although our circumstances were obviously very different, the themes of collective endurance and interdependence explored in the film resonated with the communal forms of care that shaped everyday life in the Concha House.

When I think back on my time in Tulum, I often return not to the carefully curated spaces of the Hotel Zone, but to the more improvised spaces where the workers who sustained those

worlds gathered, rested, cooked, shared meals, planned, and cared for one another. These were not the spaces marketed to tourists, gig workers, or digital nomads as sites of transformation. Yet this project suggests that meaningful forms of care, connection, and repair emerged within these everyday spaces of shared precarity and survival.

The spiritual tourism industry promises that healing can be purchased as an experience, but the lives of the workers I came to know suggest that healing is often experienced less as a product than through supportive relationships with others. These forms of care did not resolve the inequalities that structured life in Tulum, nor did they eliminate the precarity of freelance work. But they reveal how people continued to make meaning, build connections, pursue creative passions, and seek personal healing within the structures of the spiritual tourism economy. The *Visa* advertisement at the Tulum archaeological zone suggested that wherever one finds oneself, one can also find the means to purchase healing and transformation. But the experiences of gig workers who participated in this project were not only purchased; they were also shared, negotiated, improvised, and sustained through relationships. The story of Tulum, therefore, is not only a story about commodified spirituality, but also about the fragile and persistent human effort to make life feel more livable.

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