Context

In the past decade, Venezuela’s economy, social and cultural infrastructure has collapsed due to hyperinflation, violence, political turmoil, medicine and food shortages, and the decay of the public health system. To date, the country faces one of the world’s most pressing humanitarian emergencies and migration crises within an authoritarian context. As such, the civil rights system has significantly weakened, especially for minorities, who are more vulnerable to attacks, discrimination, violence, unemployment, and little access to information. The Venezuelan LGBTQ+ community is more endangered than ever.

Queer people in Venezuela have no legal framework to protect their civil and fundamental rights. In Latin America, equal marriage is legal in ten countries; eight countries on the continent have passed laws that allow name and gender changes on IDs, and more than half of the region have laws that promote an anti-discrimination culture. In Venezuela, however, the lack of laws and information about gender violence, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ voices in the context of the current crisis has hindered the promotion of equal rights in the country and limited the understanding of queer Venezuelan refugees’ nuanced struggles.

Project Description

The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project will be a multi-phase oral history project that aims to document, archive, and preserve queer Venezuelan experiences. It will provide first-person testimonies that will allow viewers to understand the civil rights situation across the country through written and audiovisual stories made by and for the LGBTQ+ community in both English and Spanish. These stories will be archived on a digital site, accessible to everyone with an internet connection.

In the first phase of the project, conducted with the help of the Davis Project for Peace grant, I will be identifying, collecting, editing, and publishing ten stories (out of what I envision to be 100+ stories in the digital archive in the near future). I am interested in prioritizing diverse stories from different social strata to explore a broad scope of the situation lived by Venezuelan queer individuals inside and outside of the country.

Project Deliverables

- A digital archive that exists as a web page with text and audiovisual display.
- A list of the first ten LGBTQ+ Venezuelan individuals inside and outside Venezuela that are willing to share first-person information (primary source material).
- Guidelines to interview the participants, editorial style guide, and recommendations to interview LGBTQ+ people in vulnerable situations.
- A style guide for visual components of the project, website, illustrations, photographs, and social media posts.
- A selection of the first ten stories to be published following established guidelines.
- Interviewing 10 queer individuals and helping them structure their story, transforming the testimony into a comprehensive, appealing story, and including them in the editorial process and thus promoting media literacy among the LGBTQ+ population in Venezuela.
- Curation of ten LGBTQ+ artists and illustrations for the featured image of each testimony.
- Production, edition, and publication of ten written and edited stories with photographs or illustrations by LGBTQ+ individuals from Venezuela.
The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project
Venezuela, 2023

Mafer Bencomo, from Venezuela

- Printed poster reward for the interviewees/participants of the visual material (photographs and illustrations) used in their published story.
- Press releases, media attention, and the promotion of the stories on a multi-channel strategy focused on social media campaigns.

The Impact - How does this project further peace in the world?
Ensuring that queer Venezuelans have access to fundamental human rights and can live without discrimination is an extensive objective requiring an array of multi-layered approaches to achieve a peaceful resolution. However, we can consider that the lack of information and research about the causes and manifestations of the conflict are crucial barriers to improvement and peacebuilding.

Currently, there are no editorial outlets or independent media focused on the LGBTQ+ population in Venezuela. In this context, The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project will be an essential vehicle for visibilizing and documenting the silenced realities of the queer Venezuelan community. Aside from bringing attention to these realities, the site will be a tool for promoting empathy and non-discrimination among all Venezuelans, queer or not, by leveraging the power of testimonial storytelling, appealing visuals, and a user-friendly interface. The digital archive will foster bonds, understanding, and reconciliation around the intersecting labels of queerness and Venezuelaness. To maximize the project's impact, the goal is to reach 50,000 impressions across all published content during the first three months after official release while steadily increasing engagement in the following months through social media sharing and media outreach.

In the future, I envision that an extensive archival database in The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project has the potential to influence future policy building by providing access to relevant testimonial evidence. In the present, the gathered testimonies and documentation could go as far as helping LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees from Venezuela ask for humanitarian asylum elsewhere on the basis of discrimination and persecution.

Logistics and Partnerships
This project will be done with an editorial team of three people: myself, Isadoro Saturno, and Gabriela Mesones Rojo, as editorial advisors and writers. Isadoro Saturno is a Venezuelan transmasculine writer, activist, and political strategist based in Miami, FL. Gabriela Mesones Rojo is a Venezuelan queer journalist specializing in sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and the effects of the humanitarian emergency on gender-diverse individuals. She has also given workshops about journalism and how to interview vulnerable people from a gender perspective while being based in Venezuela and Spain.

Both Isadoro and Gabriela have agreed to help me meet the project objective. I am confident that with their experience, advice, and collaboration, I will be able to deliver the project in a feasible, scalable, and ethical manner. We will collaborate and carry out all project-related tasks remotely via the internet, as it would be impossible to do so in person in Venezuela due to budget and safety constraints. However, Gabriela will be living in Venezuela during this project, so we will have one person networking and conducting interviews from inside the country.

The team has already extensively worked with the LGBTQ+ community in Venezuela and will use that experience with individuals, collectives, and organizations to find diverse stories for the archive. We have set the criteria to select each story according to region, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, social status, migration process, and perspectives.
Timeline

1. **May 06 - May 26**
   - Develop style guide, website, and social media platforms/campaigns.
   - Scout and select interviewees
   - Establish first contact.

2. **May 26 - July 15**
   - Conduct Interviews, writing, fact-checking and editorial process.

3. **July 15 - August 10**
   - Review/integrate feedback.
   - Start implementation of social media campaigns.

4. **August 10 - September 10**
   - Publish digital archive
   - Publish 10 stories
   - Conduct social media campaign

**Scalability**

As mentioned, most interviews with LGBTQ+ participants/storytellers will be conducted remotely/online, while the archival publication will be fully available for everyone on the internet. While the digital approach may limit the gathering of sensitive nuances that tend to arise during in-person interviews, digitality allows us to establish a greater platform for collecting diverse stories from all across Venezuela and the diaspora. Moreover, a digital archive creates opportunities for a more extensive audience reach since archived materials, stories, and data are not bound to borders or physical barriers.

After using the Davis Projects For Peace grant to launch the first iteration of the archival site with its first ten published stories, I envision an enormous potential for the project to continue thriving, reaching 100+ published stories in the next few years. Having the first version of the site on the web will help me gather feedback, enact improvements, and continue to build compelling evidence for future grant applications or crowdfunding campaigns.

**Dilemmas and Obstacles**

As this project deals with a highly vulnerable minority, I understand that I have a responsibility to represent their stories in a dignified manner. For this, I envision LGBTQ+ participants/interviews to be active participants in the telling of their own stories. The editorial team will work with each participant to ensure they are always on board with how they are represented in the archive. Given Venezuela’s lack of protection toward the LGBTQ+ community, we will publish some of the stories anonymously to guarantee the interviewee’s safety.

**Personal Reflection**

This project is, needless to say, very close to my heart as I am a queer Venezuelan. A lot has happened in my homeland in the past few years, and a lot has been said in domestic and international media, but very little has been portrayed from an LGBTQ+ perspective. Queer Venezuelans need an outlet to express and convey the intersectionality of their struggles both in and outside of Venezuela.

When people ask me what I think will happen in my country in the next following year, I always respond that the horizon is very uncertain. But I do believe that despite all uncertainties, political ideologies, or partisan approaches, the rights and well-being of queer Venezuelans should be of top priority. Diversity, inclusion, and non-discrimination must be considered fundamental for building future pathways of peace in the nation.