Title of Project: The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project
Country where the project took place: Venezuela
Nominating Institution: Ringling College of Art and Design, Class of 2023
Project Leader: Maria Fernanda Bencomo Arevalo (from Venezuela, UWC ISAK Japan alum)
Project Website and Main Deliverable: venqueteca.org

Summary
The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project is a digital oral history archive aiming to document and preserve testimonies of queer Venezuelan people. The testimonies are meant to reflect the landscape of LGBTQ+ rights in Venezuela and its diaspora. The archive itself is labeled Venqueteca, a combination of Venezuela, queerness, and biblioteca (library in Spanish).

Project Description
Over the last ten years, Venezuela has witnessed a severe deterioration in its economic, social, political, and cultural foundations, primarily in the context of an authoritarian regime. The nation currently grapples with one of the most urgent humanitarian crises globally, coupled with a migration crisis. The civil rights framework has notably eroded, particularly for marginalized groups, who now face increased vulnerability to various forms of harm, discrimination, violence, joblessness, and limited access to information. Queer people in Venezuela have no legal framework to protect their civil and fundamental rights. They cannot access equal marriage, change their names or gender on legal documents, or report discrimination. Queer Venezuelan refugees in other countries face nuanced challenges that intersect with racism, classism, and xenophobia.

As a queer Venezuelan, I have experienced these problems in my own skin. I consider the lack of information and research about LGBTQ+ rights in Venezuela a crucial barrier to changing the status quo. Thus, creating a digital archive for visualizing and documenting the silenced realities of queer Venezuelans seemed like a logical approach.

From the beginning, the project was set to be conducted remotely via the Internet, primarily because of budget constraints and safety concerns. We also thought digitality would allow us to collect diverse stories from all around Venezuela and the diaspora. Besides, web-based publications create opportunities for reaching a more extensive audience since archived materials are not bound to borders or physical barriers.

Team members collaborated from more than eight countries, reflecting our complex migration crisis. Isadoro Saturno (Venezuelan transmasculine writer and political strategist), Gabriela Mesones Rojo (Venezuelan queer journalist specializing in sexual and reproductive rights and gender-based violence), and Andrea Paola Hernandez (Venezuelan Afro-Indigenous journalist, activist, and poet) served as the main editorial and writing team. They scouted potential stories, built connections, transcribed interviews, and edited and translated texts while I took responsibility for designing a visual identity for the archive, developed all technical aspects of the website, and managed commissions with illustrators. Without their support, I would not have been able to carry this project forward, as they provided the necessary expertise in oral history, journalism, and ethical storytelling.

Beyond the grant given by Projects for Peace, no other fundraising efforts were necessary to complete the objectives we set to accomplish: collecting, editing, and publishing at least 10 testimonies with their corresponding illustrations on a functional digital archive.

I will be continuing the project from now onwards. I plan to register the project as an official non-profit organization and fundraise further. I aim for the archive to reach at least 100 testimonies in the next four years. The estimated necessary funds to reach that goal is $50,000.
Reflections
I define peace as a state of society where everyone has access to fundamental human rights despite their racial, socioeconomic, ethnic, or sexual identity. Peace is the absence of direct and systemic discrimination. Achieving the goal of granting fundamental human rights to LGBTQ+ individuals in Venezuela and ensuring they can live free from discrimination is a complex undertaking that demands a comprehensive set of multifaceted strategies. In the short term, my project contributes to this undertaking by moving one small degree closer to documenting and bringing to public view the challenges faced by queer Venezuelan people.

In the long term, I foresee that a comprehensive archival database within The Venezuelan Queer Oral History Project could shape forthcoming policy development by granting access to pertinent testimonies. The collected accounts and records may even assist LGBTQ+ migrants and refugees from Venezuela in seeking humanitarian asylum in other countries, citing instances of discrimination and oppression as grounds for their request.

Obstacles
Throughout the process of implementation, we faced many obstacles. One of them was an unforeseen need for technological resources to ensure quality recordings of the interviews. Many people who provided their testimonies could only communicate with us through WhatsApp, making it difficult to record the calls without paid third-party software. Weak internet connections in Venezuela caused a lot of sound interference, causing problems in ensuring exact transcriptions and, thus, posing ethical concerns since accuracy is intrinsic to oral history and testimonial data.

We responded to this difficulty by collaborating closely with our testimonial narrators. They were highly involved in reviewing the texts. Firstly, they provided feedback on the first draft. Then, they gave their last approval when the text was finished. They also provided feedback on the illustration that represented their testimony.

We must establish that narrators were in control of how they wanted to be represented. In some cases, where phone or internet calls were completely impossible, we adjusted to creating a written form for narrators to fill in their answers.

These adjustments made me reflect on the many forms oral history can take. I realized that, even when unorthodox in terms of methodology, it’s paramount to think of alternative protocols to increase accessibility, especially when gathering diverse experiences. This idea inspired me to continue exploring oral history, testimonial narrative, and cultural preservation, with a specific focus on auto-representation, auto-determination, and what constitutes ethical storytelling; I would love to not only explore these fields as a learner but also as a thinker and investigator of best practices.

Personal Statement
A lot has happened in my homeland in the past few years, and a lot has been said in domestic and international media. Still, very little has been portrayed from an intersectional, anti-racist, and non-classist perspective. In between the discourse of left and right, the perspectives of minorities like the LGBTQ+ community are often lost. Queer Venezuelans need an outlet to express and convey the intersectionality of their struggles both in and outside Venezuela.

The future of Venezuela is undoubtedly uncertain. But despite any ideological stance or partisan approaches, diversity, inclusion, and non-discrimination must be considered fundamental for building future pathways of peace in the nation. I am happy to have used the opportunity provided by Projects for Peace to contribute, even if just a tiny bit, to this cause.