

Venezuelan Detainees' Oral Histories

Description

A collection of letters written by Venezuelan detained migrants covering the topics of their life in Venezuela, conflict, their detained experience, and their collaboration with Detainee Allies. These letters were written by six people whose identities are kept anonymous, known only by their initials: E. L., S. G., A. R., M. W., and M. R. These writers come from diverse backgrounds, but share similar experiences throughout their journey, fleeing from many called the worst humanitarian, economic, and political crisis in Venezuela. Due to the sensitivity of their detained situation, not much is known of them other than what is written.

With rising corruption and resistance throughout Venezuela caused by various foreign and domestic factors, these letters portray the injustices they fled, only to be met by another at the US-MX border. Venezuela is just one of many Latin American countries impacted by US imperialism and global capitalism, creating diverse migrant caravans to the United States, which historically and currently continues to not welcome with a humanitarian effort.

Since detained migrants are stripped of their rights, a traditional oral history is not possible. Although this work is in English, all letters were written in Spanish; I valued meaning over direct translation throughout this project. These letters were gathered from Detainee Allies' online database, where I received access to and heard of through UCSD's course 'HIUS 120D: Race and Oral History in San Diego,' where some students and I collaborated with Detainee Allies. I am a 1st year transfer Chicax student at UCSD, and this oral history was gathered during the Spring term of 2019 for HIUS 120D.

The entirety of their letters are below, translated and organized into three sections.

The original letters can be read at: <http://www.detaineeallies.org/detainee-stories/>

All credit is given to Detainee Allies and their humanitarian movement.

**** = redacted information

Content Warning: Excerpts below contain graphic information of physical abuse which may be disturbing to some readers.

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Background of Letter Writers

EL: Wrote on Nov. 26, 2018 and Dec. 12, 2018 from Otay Mesa Detention Center. Traveled across Central America to request asylum after their home was expropriated after they attended a student protest; is an LGBT community member and has a health condition.

SG: Wrote on Dec. 18, 2018 from Otay Mesa Detention Center. Found Detainee Allies through their cellmate, hoping they could help him because the person assisting him is not returning their calls. Fled Venezuela due to Political situation.

AR: Wrote on Dec. 17, 2018 from Otay Mesa Detention Center. She left Venezuela in search of safety and protection upon being persecuted by the Bolivarian government.

MW: Wrote on Oct. 10, 2018 from Otay Mesa Detention Center. Worked for an American company in Human Resources, then Advisory; left due to political situation. Back up plan is to head to Peru, where their other son lives.

MR: Wrote on Jan. 30, 2019 from a Virginia detention center. Fifty year-old professional photographer who was beaten by federal police, leading to health conditions. Has been denied medical treatment in U.S. detention center after being detained for over a year.

Life and Conflict in Venezuela

EL: I come from Venezuela, a country that is going through the worst humanitarian, political and economic crisis in the history of my country.

For me it started in 2014. After seeing all that was happening, a group of students from different universities took to the streets to raise our voices against a genocidal government that does not care if an entire town dies in order to remain in power.

Using a group of organized armed gangs called *Los Colectivos*, the government located and expropriated my home. When I filed a complaint to the Public Ministry, my persecution inside Venezuela began, forcing me to emigrate to the border of Colombia, then Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico to the city of Tijuana where I turned myself in to immigration officials at the San Ysidro port of entry on **** of this year.

SG: I am Venezuelan and because of the political situation and other reasons, I can not remain in my country or even close to it.

AR: I left my country in search of help and protection, leaving my entire family and life in Venezuela due to persecution by the Bolivarian government, Nicholas Maduro, President of Venezuela.

MW: I worked for many years as the Head of Human Resources for an American company called ****, but I left there 9 years ago and most recently worked in Advisory. I also have 2 children and 3 grandchildren, two of them are in Venezuela and the other is with my son in Florida.

I had to leave Venezuela because of the political situation.

MR: I am a 50 year old Venezuelan. I am a professional photographer, born in the city of Caracas.

In 2010, I was the victim of a robbery because of the crime that exists in my country after the now ex-president Chavez took power. I was hit four times with a weapon, ****. I think I have generated a lot of pain in my upper-spine as a result, along with other side effects such as high blood pressure and weakness in my legs among others.

I had to leave my country due to the extreme violence that we are living through in Venezuela, where I was tortured, persecuted, beaten, threatened with death by the National Guard and National Police, and *Los Colectivos*, which is a group of gangs the government has that lashes out on citizens who are against the socialist and comunist government. In my country, they don't respect the civil rights of citizens anymore. Civil rights no longer exist; there is no right of self expression, something which the Venezuelan Press also suffers.

I have been fleeing Venezuela because I was a photographer of the Bolivarian National Police, where I covered almost all the protests in Caracas that were generated by the shortage of food, medicines, and even the medical health service, factors which exposed the Venezuelan people to extreme poverty. I witnessed the injustice, torture, mistreatment, persecution of individuals, and how the people who protested against Maduro were attacked with extreme violence, just for protesting for some food, medicine, medical care and social benefits.

In 2017, I went out to cover a protest where the National Police, National Guard, and *Los Colectivos* started beating and stripping my fellow photographers and I of our photographic equipment. As I was taking photos, *Los Colectivos* came at me, giving me a tremendous blow to the head with a motorcycle helmet, making me fall to the floor. That's when they attacked me, kicking me, taking my belongings and the most valuable thing I had, my camera equipment which supported my livelihood. That day the police wanted to arrest me. Chaos within the tear gas caused by the commotion of the people allowed me to escape to my motorcycle, feeling the area.

To tell the truth, I have never agreed with how the government of my country is unfolding. On July of 2017, an official of the National Police saw me handing an equipment with information, a USB if I remember correctly, to my colleague who is a member of the media outlet called *Dolar Today*. At that time, I gave him photographic evidence of all the injustice caused by the police, including the National Guard, to the helpless people.

When I arrived at my job, they made me sign a resignation letter, accusing me of being a traitor to their ideals and even worse, being a member of an anti-government group. They continued following me, calling me over the phone, and threatening that they were going to kill me if I did not hand them the photos I had. It was at that moment when I decided to flee Venezuela to the neighboring country of Colombia, then Ecuador, and finally Peru. Unfortunately, I had to return to Ecuador where I had to hide for **** months because my life was in danger. That's where I made the decision to flee from Ecuador to the border city of Tijuana, Mexico.

Detained Experience

EL: I am detained because I am asking for asylum in this country. My country Venezuela has been living through a crisis for a long time that has aggravated these past 04 years by a humanitarian, political, economic, and social insecurity that it is now impossible to live in.

I have a relative here in the United States in the city of Philadelphia. She's an aunt from my mother's side, but she has no money to help me at this moment since 05 months ago her daughter was detected with ****. She is a 14 year old girl full of life, who is unfortunately facing this disease.

My case is progressing little by little within the Detention center; I now have a lawyer with the help of the 'Jewish Family Service' organization. This upcoming **** I have my second court date, where we will submit my application for asylum.

I also wanted to share with you that ICE has granted me a conditional release on a bail of \$10,000 and that it is subject to a Monthly Monitoring requirement (Atd Bracelet). But I do not have that money; I have already requested the redetermination of that decision taking into account that I belong to a social group (LGBT), have a health condition, and have never been detained in my life.

I am waiting on the day that they redetermine my parole and let me go out on my own to continue my immigration process from outside.

SG: I am an immigrant from Venezuela, and I am going through hard times. The person who would watch over me does not return my calls. I am worried at heart, I do not know what to do.

AR: I have been detained in Otay Mesa since **** of this year. I don't have family or resources in this country. My case is being processed, praying to God for parole to leave and await my courts from the outside to be approved.

MW: Here, I miss everyone so much. My other son lives in Peru, and if I do not receive the asylum I am requesting here, I will go there.

Here in the Detention center, they treat us well. We have a church, computers, gymnasium, and library that at least distract us so the time for us here is not too heavy. I will soon have been detained a total of three months.

MR: On **** of 2018, I arrived at the national border where I turned myself in to the San Ysidro port of entry in California, asking for some kind of political asylum, humanitarian aid, or a light of hope.

It has been 1 year since I arrived to America, presenting my request for asylum to a judge, who denied it. Now I am looking for humanitarian help. I am being processed in the court of appeals in the state of Virginia. Currently, I am detained in a detention center without knowing what my future will be like, without discarding my concern about my health problems and high blood pressure since I moved from San Diego to ****. I arrived with a swollen hand and foot because the ICE agent handcuffed me really tight. My foot has been swollen for 45 days, and I have not seen any recovery, and to top it off, **** came out. Oh God, I do not know what to do anymore, I do not have any relatives here, only a [male] friend who responds to me, and a [female] friend.

Excerpts From Comments on Collaboration With Detainee Allies

EL: Allow me to congratulate you for such a beautiful initiative to care for the welfare of immigrants detained by the United States.

I am deeply grateful for your Merry Christmas message. I thought that this Christmas nobody would remember me. I also want to thank you for your help in the Commissary, it was really helpful.

I'm sending you an immense hug and thank you for being here
 "God's timing is perfect."
 Blessings for all!

SG: I hope you are really well. Receive from me a great greeting. I was told of your good work and kindness by Mr A ****, who I share rooms with here in Otay Mesa detention center. I wanted to know if you [Detainee Allies] could help me, and if you could, in what way? Thank you and have a lovely day.

AR: Receive a warm and cordial greeting, may the spirit of Christmas fill you with many blessings and good health.

I would like some kind of help that you could give me for the day-to-day while detained. I would appreciate any help you could give me and consideration given.

God bless you in abundance!

MW: I was really happy when I received your correspondence because I like to share friendship with other people. I sent you a drawing I made so you can remember me, it's also how we occupy time.

I am very thankful for your collaboration, I received it at a time when I most needed it. May God look over you and your family with great mercy for having such a good heart. Thank you so much.

Greetings to your family, Roxanna, and Johanna. Tell them I am very grateful for you help.

A cordial hug for everyone!

*Colored image of doves attached, with note reading "With much love, **** 10/06/18"*

MR: You don't know how grateful I am for everyone who put together this beautiful humanitarian movement, with a great kindness and mercy, so I say from the bottom of my heart, I humbly wish each of you a very strong hug with gratitude.

As soon as I heard about you, I did not hesitate to send you this letter, wishing on the horizon for some guidance and help.

I need you to please help me find an organization or lawyer to see my case and help me, please, I beg you.

I very humbly beg your appreciable help, everything here at the police station is too expensive.

Thank you and may God bless and take care of you.