

Queer Detainee Empowerment Project

By Laura Zhang (BA '23)

Foreword

In the new year of 2020, I left university and went to Tucson, Arizona where I greeted migrant families released by ICE at the door of the detention facility and less than two days later, said goodbye in the same spot as they continued their travels across the United States. I met families with eight kids who carried their belongings in two trash bags, pregnant mothers who had been in detention for months on end, and children who wanted to watch Disney movies and ride bikes around a small courtyard. Volunteers are the backbone of the Casa Alitas program, but after families get on a Greyhound bus, what are their everyday stories? What does it look like to keep living? From the US and Mexico border to here in New York City, migration is a pervasive and growing story of the everyday.

The Queer Detainee Empowerment Project operates in New York City and supports people coming out of detention, inclusive of legal and social services. Since last fall I have been a participant in their pen pal program and been collaborating with other students and the organization on grocery member support networks. As the pandemic conditions have permitted safe gatherings, I have met QDEP members and their team once in person. Other than that, this project has been conducted remotely during a pandemic that has drastically impacted the following members' stories and the greater detained asylum seeking community. My work will continue after this project, as I remind myself it takes time to know the following individuals not only in the density of their stories but as human beings alike.

This project features oral narratives of queer asylum seekers who have been released from detention after arriving in the United States and are apart of the Queer Detainee Empowerment Project community. While gender and sexuality may not explicitly be at the forefront of each of these interviews, migration narratives through a queer lens bring attention to nuanced experiences of inequality at the intersection of status, race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Included in QDEP's mission is the statement "We believe in creating a narrative of thriving, not just surviving." I reflect with a deep gratitude for the friendships I have made through this project, and the strength through which those treated in undeserving and inhumane ways graciously look at themselves and others.

LGBTQ+ Legislation in Motion

- 2000: Camilo Perdomo and Juan Carlos Valez won political asylum based on being gay, right before George Bush was elected (Crossing the BLVD pg. 160)
- 2003-2007: Gay man, Jorge Soto Vega, denied asylum by judge for looking stereotypically heterosexual. Case was won four years later.

- 2009: Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act passed by Congress and signed into law by President Obama to include motivations predicated on gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability in hate crime law.
- 2011: Gay marriage becomes legal in New York State
- 2013: Queer Detainee Empowerment Project founded in New York City
- 2015: Same sex marriage legal in all 50 States by Supreme Court
- 2018: Matter of A-B- decision issued by attorney general Sessions considers removing domestic violence by private actors as viable asylum claim

Rosa, she/her/ella

Country of Origin: Honduras

Currently: Bronx, NY

“In Honduras, I started working at the age of 8 with my mother. I just reached the eighth grade in school because we had financial problems. My dad died when I was seven, but in reality he was killed. My mom was two months pregnant, and never remarried so she raised us alone. But my mom has also just died, in January 2018, and my brother and I are left alone.

I miss going to run in a field in Honduras, I have a passion for exercise. I liked to go in the morning because all the birds were in the trees. I would stay there for a long time simply listening to music. I used to sing in church. I had two friends and we always went out at night, maybe to walk, to laugh, or just to be on the street. And I miss the food. Baleadas are flour tortillas that have beans in the middle, they carry cheese and cream.

Since I can remember at approximately 5 years of age, I already felt like a girl, I wanted to do things that girls do, I wanted to see myself as a woman. When you know that your sexuality is different and when you are in a different body, you will always be afraid because the world is very big, you never know what awaits you and people are sometimes very ignorant on that subject. My mother did not accept me and particular people are homophobic, and transphobic. Many things are happening in Honduras that make it really difficult to be who one wants to be- women are murdered by the military, by the State Police. They kill us, they beat us, rape us- that is why you have to come to another country to be free. You die for yourself and no one has to live for you because if you live for yourself only then you will be happy because you aren't going to care what everyone says.

When I left Honduras, I passed through 2 borders. Honduras to Guatemala, Guatemala to Mexico, and alone without knowing the way, or anyone. I spent 7 months in Mexico and then I gave myself up to United States migration. I was detained for a year and 7 months in San Diego California at the Otay Mesa Detention Center.

In the detention center the officers do not treat you well. They yell at you because of your nationality, because of your sexual preference, and for your gender. Migration, it is never really in your favor. The pandemic separated many families while people died. I share the pain because I lost two people that I love. But also the pandemic had a good moment for some of us who were in detention. Because I am a transgender woman, the immigration judge said that she could protect me from the fact that the death rate in Honduras of transgender women is 98% . At that time there were no deportations to my country. They managed to make the decision after three people died from the pandemic. I lived a long time in the detention center with these people, I got to know them. It was traumatic for me to know that they had died from a pandemic, and migration could avoid it. I was afraid to go to my country because I knew what awaited me. Thank God I'm here.

I left detention in August of 2020. When I got out I did not even believe it because I had already been denied bail twice and thought I was going to be deported back to my country, I really had no hope. The organization told me- you are going outside, and that shocked me, I did not know what to do. This is a monster that is waiting for me; I do not know anything about the language and it was very good and scared me at the same time.

When I was released I went to Little Rock, Arkansas because a friend from Honduras' wife who is an American citizen did me the favor to receive me. I felt lonely, I had no support from anyone and there is practically no LGBT community nor are there organizations that can support us. In January I moved to New York and directly came here to the Bronx to a shelter. When I contacted the QDEP organization, they got me a lawyer who communicated directly with my ICE officer so that I could move. They also helped me pay for my plane flight and to settle here in this shelter. If it hadn't been for the organization, I think I'd still be in Arkansas and still have a difficult situation.

I can't say I feel at home, but I do feel a kindness because the community, organizations like QDEP, have people who give you a lot of love, a lot of support, and you feel really good. In the shelter here most people only speak English. There is a lot of noise and there is no respect. There is only one person who speaks Spanish, she is Mexican, she is also trans, and has been in the United States since she was very young. At ten o'clock at night you can no longer leave the shelter. You can go out all day but before 10 you have to be here when they count to see if you are in the shelter sleeping. The food in the shelter is really not good, sometimes I just eat lunch and sometimes I don't eat anything. When I have access to money, for example that my boyfriend gives me, I can buy some food to eat.

I am a very independent person, but when I got out of detention my life totally changed because I have a bracelet on my foot. This bracelet does not allow me to leave New York state

and it does not allow me to work because I have to be on time for the immigration appointments once a month. If they catch me working with this shackle it can get me in a lot of trouble. You have this bracelet, you sleep with it, you bathe with it, you eat, you do everything.

One of the factors that matters the most to me is to work because I have the responsibility to help and support my brother who is in Honduras because he and I are the only family that we have. It is difficult and frustrating not to work and to depend on migration, because it stops my dreams. I want to have an operation, I want to be totally a woman and not all resources cover that or also support my brother or my grandmother in Honduras. The resources are solely for me. If I work I can help with that, I can feel useful. Migration should not stop you in your goals because in the end we all have the right to improve ourselves every day to be happy. My plans are to be able to bring my brother with me, but my brother is barely 17 years old so I have to wait a little longer for him to be of legal age.

I had made a promise to him that I was going to be in this country - that we were going to be together again. What really makes me happy is that I have the ability to achieve my goals because when I came to this country I came alone, without anyone's support, without knowing the way. It was difficult, but my goal was to come here to have a better life, to be myself, and also to be able to get my brother out of the life which completely ruined us, I can say. One of the things that was most difficult for me was leaving him because we had not separated. The circumstances led me to leave my country but I'm happy to be here.

I'm very happy to have met all the people who have come my way because they support me in that way after no one supports anyone. That touches your heart because they really feel and have affection, even if it is words of support or to tell you "I am here, you are not alone".

Samuel, he/him

Country of Origin: Ghana

Currently: Brooklyn, NY

Our town in Ghana is very, very rough. We didn't have a good education even though we are now getting better schools in Africa. But within my time, we didn't go to school much. If your family doesn't have money you can't go to school in our town. It was hard for me because my parents didn't have education- I was very stubborn and didn't listen. I left when I was 15 because there was no money to continue. I was in the streets, you have to survive outside and then I needed to work. I started doing construction. I can't even go back to school because I have younger brothers- I got to support them.

I was 28 years old when I came to the United States in 2014. I came here because the human rights in Ghana are very low. I was working with friends whose sexual orientation is different than me. They are bisexual, homosexual, and in Africa it's very hard because it's not the law. Nobody's going to protect you so you can die anytime. I protect them because I don't have a problem with them. Somebody came to work and wanted to beat them and kill them. When they came I let them run so people thought I was like them too, because we do everything together. I don't know where they are now. There were three people but one got killed so two ran. I also became hated so I had to leave the country. Their beliefs are if you protect them you are a part of them.

I came alone. From Ghana I took a boat to Brazil. It took about one month- it was a fishing boat of seven to eight, not for passengers. And you gotta have money before you travel. From Brazil I went all the way up to Mexico. It's very hard, you gotta pass through the jungle and you have to walk sometimes. And in every country you go through immigration. I was on a bus and then to America. Took me three months. After I got cleared from immigration for seeking asylum, they let you come outside.

First I was in Georgia for one to two months to continue my case. Then I was in Newark and I got married. We met at a wedding and decided to do it, we were a couple for two years. I said we gotta help each other but we got into arguments. I didn't marry a good person, I'm doing my immigration paperwork and we were just talking and she called the cops on me. She's a US Citizen. She lied and abused me saying I did all this stuff and the cops came and said I had to see the judge. I went to see the judge and later immigration picked me up -that was 2019. I was in Essex County Jail 19 months before I got transferred to Elizabeth Detention Center. For 19 months I was not able to be free.

I don't have nobody in this country. I have a family back home in Africa- my younger sister, my younger brother. And my daughter- she's almost six years old. She loves to play because when I came outside I bought her a tablet. She calls me and we chat all the time. If I get a chance I'll let her come to the United States- I would love her to come here to get an education. A couple of my family knows I'm in the US but the rest don't know where I am because I didn't tell anybody when I left. I didn't want them to search my background.

Here I live with one of my close friends Amit. We both come from Ghana. He always takes care of me going to the lawyer, he does his part. I call him my brother. Then I call one lady my mom. The day I met her, she came and visit me in the Essex County Jail. She took care of me, sent me the money all the time, so I took her like my mom. I told her my story and she said- I'm gonna do anything I can so you can get your freedom. Always, always, always, she took care of me. Not just one time. She gave me my food, my everything, and I don't have no mom in this

country. But she's my mom. God helped me and I always pray for myself. I try and give myself faith and hope.

I was in Essex County Jail during COVID. We don't have ourselves there. They have you, so anything they're gonna tell you to do you're gonna do it. Stay inside. We are already fucked up inside already and then this thing comes. You're gonna be more suffering than outside. That's the problem. You're more suffering.

They said they wanna make the house safe but it's not. Imagine we are all together in the facility. There's no way you're going to separate so people get the virus. Elizabeth Detention Center is an open place. It is a dorm not a cell- sometimes cells are a little bit better because they are only two people in a room. But the bad thing in the cells is you don't come out. So you are inside a jail in another jail. That's the painful place.

It's a very, very hard system. When it comes to criminals, how are they going to understand this person is innocent? We have to let it go or something. The system is not feasible, it is not something that fixes the world. Some people make money, some people suffering.

One day I was like no- I gotta do something new to be happy. I was talking to my friend ... I love music and flowers. We just sit down and create. Any kind of music is very beautiful, like a couple of my African music... that is a part of my relaxing.

I was positive because I think to myself- I'm innocent. One day, you're gonna be your freedom because it's not something I did. I can't go back to my country... I'll stay here and I know, one day, I'm gonna get the freedom. I was so happy when I came outside. I couldn't even imagine our outside. That's my freedom. I talked to my family, all my friends, and got myself busy. The one thing I was so happy to have is my friends I'm mingling with, and I stay with them. We all eat together. Talking, laughing. All of that is part of the blessing.

Now I'm appealing my asylum and still waiting to see what is going to happen because I got lost in the asylum insight. My problem is I've been released before so I meet people I don't know and then I gotta protect myself. I'm not going some places because I just tried to save myself. And I have to take a look at any people I mingle with to see good hearted people. I'm saying take a look at the person who you want to trust, and you know who is who. That's why, that's why I tried to stay by myself right now. I'm not gonna say all people are the same but definitely you gotta be scared because you've been through a lot. When I was outside before, I never had the experience. Always my heart is clean. I'm the person who feels bad for people but that's why I got a problem. Because my heart is too soft. Always I see somebody I don't even know and I say God took me inside to let me know more about people. I see someone suffering, I open my heart for everybody. You know, until I get this problem.

Right now I don't have a choice yet. You have to pay the rent. You have to get employment so you can go to start work and your life. You got to think about all that before you take the step. The place I live in right now feels like home, because I'm close to my own country people. I met them here and we connected. Someone says, oh I know this person... then this my brother... this my cousin. The community we grew up in Ghana is big, but we are all going to East side together and sometimes we'll mix. So if you know this person, maybe the person don't know you but they know your family or they know a family member. That's why we come part of a family in this place helping each other. They give me some place to take myself until I get my own, so that's a blessing. I don't want to rush- I gotta fix myself first. So I can continue my life.

Maria, she/her/ella

Country of Origin: Honduras

Currently: Virginia

I was born in a small town in Honduras called Camp. I have many beautiful memories, I have three older siblings and a little brother. I had a happy and more or less normal childhood, but I started having problems because at age 13 I had my first... you could say girlfriend? It was when my mom and family in general were realizing, and then it was getting difficult in my life. I knew very early on about my identity. My mom maybe had some idea, but she never asked me directly. And just as I did not, that subject was always totally evading in the house.

My mom and my dad have a property in a village and my mom decided to take me there. It was a good thing- my cousins and some other family were there. But I didn't socialize with them, I was isolated almost all the time.

In 2015, I made a Facebook post where I was declaring I liked girls. My family and my friends almost never had encouraging words. They were saying that it was wrong, that I was sick, and that this was not normal.

I had friends that were declared as queer, they had their girlfriends and that was daring. I never went out publicly with someone. I had a lot of fear because they told me their experiences- even in my small community. I saw that they lived such traumatic things because of the abuse of the police. Unfortunately in my country, people like me who belong to the LGBT community cannot live freely without being harassed, discriminated against and not only verbally, but also physically and emotionally. To such a degree that I had to leave my country fleeing. In the big cities, if you go with a partner of the same sex they kill you.

I lived through something that made it so I definitely couldn't stay. I don't like to talk much about this. At that time I had my partner and the police and a group of gang members did a lot of harm to me. There were super strong threats, reasons I had to leave.

My dad is in the United States in Miami. But leaving came fast and I never commented on anything. I was really reserved and quiet about what happened to me. At this moment, my family doesn't even know. I traveled to Guatemala alone. There, I saw that I couldn't do Mexico alone, it is too dangerous. And it was there in Guatemala that I called my dad. I told him that I was already halfway and to please help me. I remember nothing more than that a man picked me up. He was the one who helped me pass through Mexico but it was also a terrible thing. They wanted to leave me there thrown away. We came without eating, we came even without sleeping, without drinking water. When I arrived at the border of Mexico, I couldn't pass migration, and they returned me to Mexico again. I fell into the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) program- those who are returned to Juárez.

When I was in Mexico I was kidnapped, which is why I now have a fracture on my left foot. In short, I escaped and I remember that I was in a place with other women and then I jumped a wall. Two boys were the ones who carried me for quite a long time as we travelled because my foot was a complete disaster. My tibia was split and broke, the bone was exposed, I was bleeding out. It was so terrible.

After that, I went over the bridge again and was detained for thirteen months in El Paso, Texas from 2019 until the end of 2020. They are quite inhumane, they treat you super badly. And I was positive with the Coronavirus twice. In detention they have super tiny rooms, which are supposedly for people who misbehave as punishment. They are practically going to kill people there. When I got infected, that's what they did with me. My foot was bad because I had just had 5 operations on my foot. They left me there in that little room where there was hardly a bed and the bathroom. That is as terrible as it gets- totally alone. That's when I looked for a way to contact QDEP.

I got asylum after a year in detention- thank god! Hector, my lawyer, helped me with the asylum papers. I almost fainted from emotion. It was something very exciting because I had already lost all hope. I was so disappointed, so depressed that I said I preferred to be locked in, because my biggest fear was that I would be deported to my country. I knew I couldn't go back. The truth is that my state of being was really really bad. I saw that so many girls were being deported. When I was told that I am going out I was very happy. QDEP bought me the ticket and helped me with everything else to meet my family. I was living with my dad for a few days, but I wasn't there much. And after that, the organization has continued to give me legal support as well, because Hector has continued to help me with the work permit. It is the organization that I

have always had for support since I left detention. Ana (QDEP team member) is who was in frequent contact with me before and after I left detention. She's always been there for me and I think she's the only one.. She helps me get funds because in my condition I can't work. Truly, I think QDEP has helped me with everything. They have helped me with income or food, because I started from nothing, zero.

Asylum was something that really cost me a lot. I thought that after I got out of detention then I already had the legal documents, as well as the permit to work and all that. But not all of this is a process that is followed after leaving detention. Covid is part of it as well. I have been out of detention for more than 6 months and I am still waiting for a work permit. Another thing is health insurance, because it has been a long time since my last surgery. I really need the therapies for my foot to be able to walk but wherever I go I need insurance. Now I'm in Virginia- It depends on my crutches but I don't go out. I do therapy myself. I have to because I haven't been walking for a long, long time.

Life after detention was still really hard because my relationship with my biological family is not very good. Now I'm living here with one of my brothers but the truth is that we have never been really close. Since I left I've felt that I have no family support and with so many things that have happened, it's a terrible pressure.

Another thing I want to focus on is English classes, because I need to learn. I take some classes at a school. But at that level it was super advanced, and I have to start from scratch. I understand what they tell me, but I don't know how to respond.

Now I am feeling a little better, I have a place with more space, more privacy where I can be distracted reading a book. I like to write a lot—I started writing my own story actually. It was when I was detained because I had so much time. I really love listening to music but I especially love dance. The traditional Honduran is called the Punta, I've loved dancing since I was little. And the bachata. It's funny because I love English music a lot, I don't understand it, but classical music or pop helps me relax. Right now I can't, but also I love going out in the mountains to walk in Honduras because I love nature and the animals. Also going out to the beach, I feel so free there.