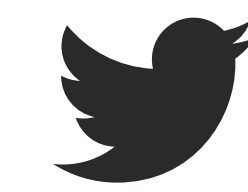




# FOTOHISTORIAS

## LIFE AT THE BORDER



#fotohistorias



fotohistorias@uw.edu



www.fotohistorias.org

This is an exhibition of **photos**  
and **stories** of **migrants**  
as they live their experience of migration at the  
**US-Mexico Border.**



This is part of a larger project in which we explore the experiences of migrants  
through participatory photography and conversational interviews  
in three distinct settings:

### In the South

in Cali and Buenaventura,  
Colombia

### At the Border

at the US-Mexico border, in  
Nogales, Arizona and Mexico

### In the North

in Seattle, Washington

We invite you to interact with the exhibition  
and to share your thoughts and comments.





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# FOTOHISTORIAS

## RESEARCH METHODS AND RATIONALE

**F**otohistorias uses participatory photography and conversational interviews as a way to elicit the life stories and experiences of migrants in different moments of their migration experience.

Inspired in other approaches such as “photovoice” and “photo elicitation,” Fotohistorias combines the power of images with the depth of stories and conversation to explore the experience of migration with sensitivity and care.

Our research seeks to understand and re-value the experience of migrants from their own perspective. In particular we seek to answer the following research questions:

- How do immigrant day laborers, recently deported immigrants, and prospective immigrants to the US reflect their identity, values and culture through photos and stories?
- What are the essential elements of everyday life for immigrants at different times and locations in their migration journey?
- How are transience, identity, and culture reflected in the pictures taken and the stories told by immigrants?



## Phases of Fotohistorias

**1. Collaboration with local organizations:** Working in partnership with local organizations in each research location, we build on local relationships of trust to invite and encourage voluntary participation.

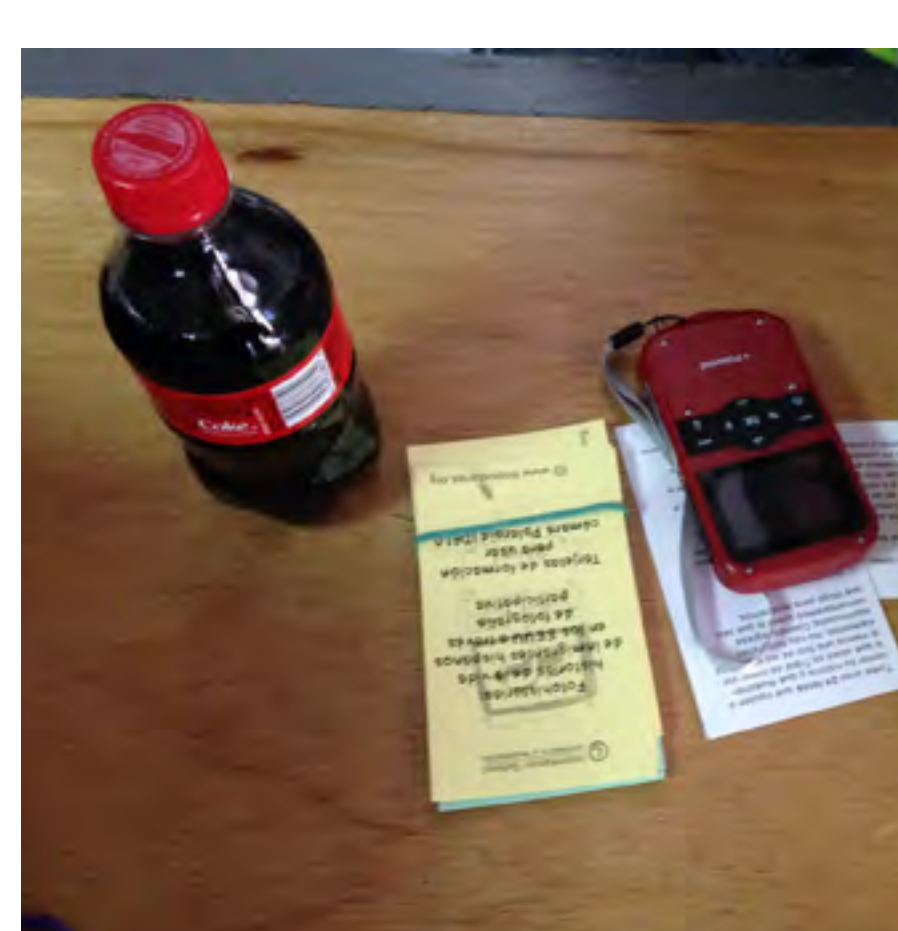
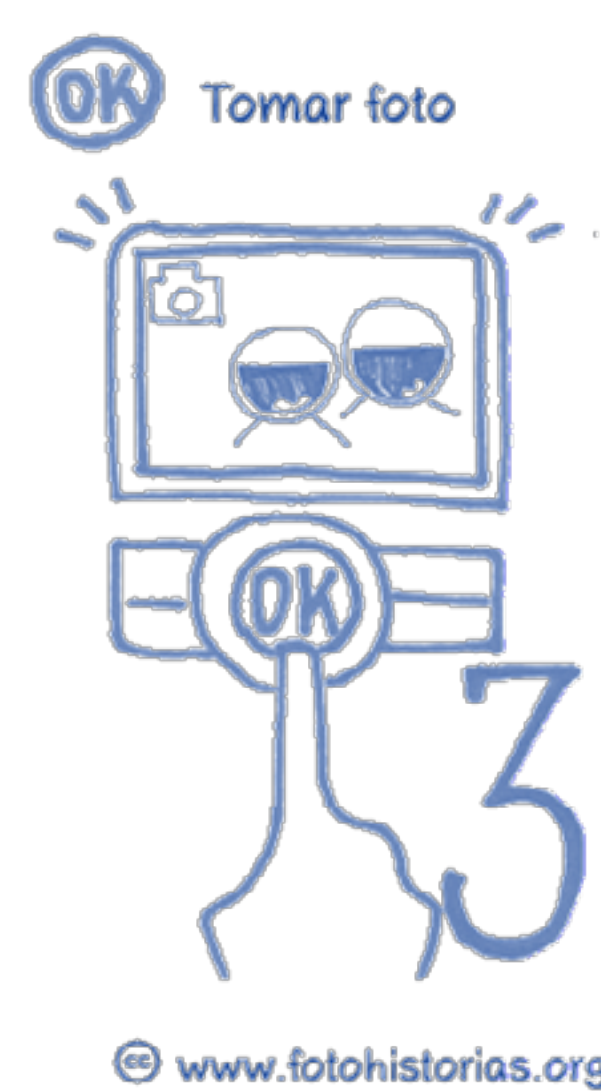
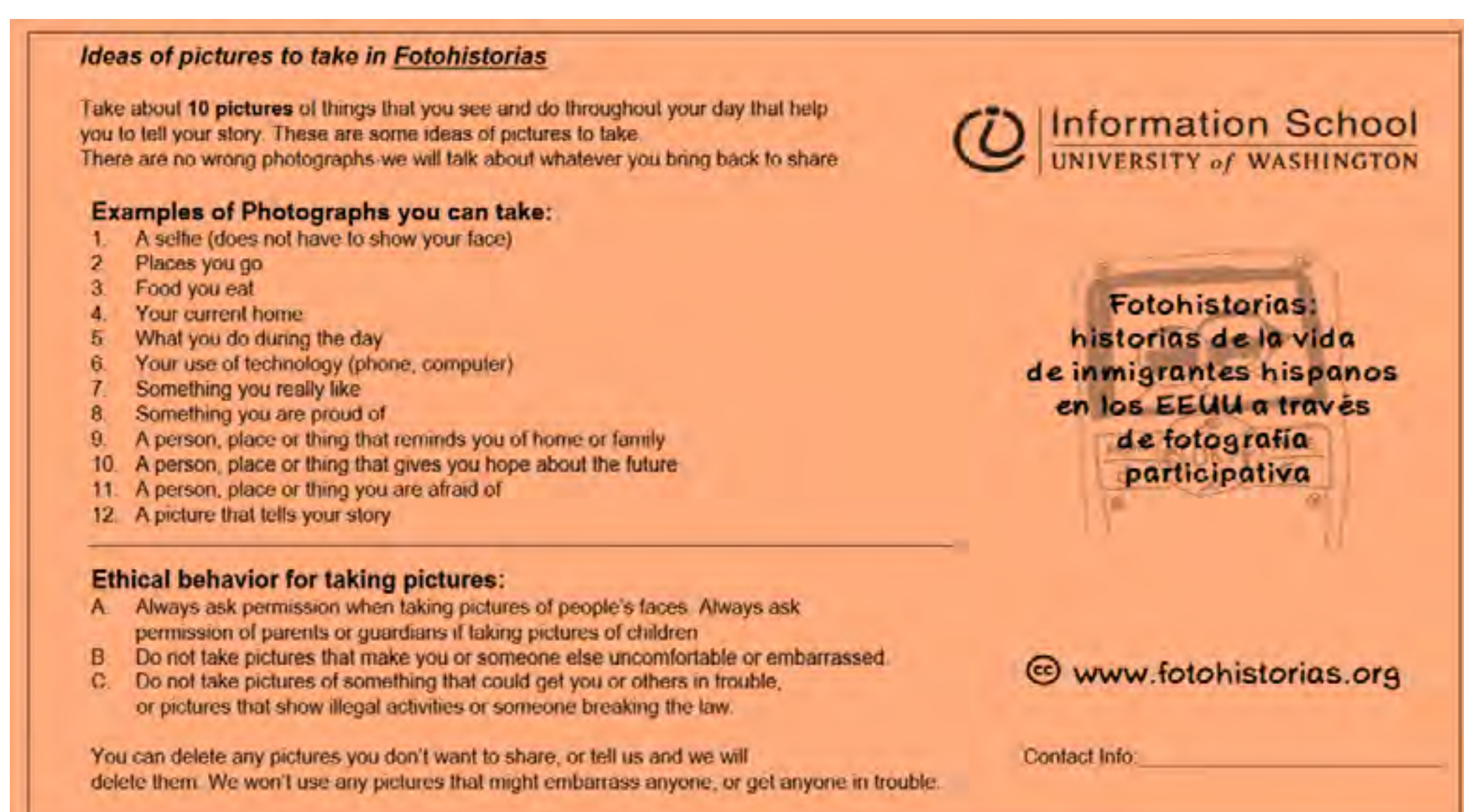
**2. Invitation to take pictures:** Participants borrow a basic digital camera (or can use their own) for a set time (between a day and a week).

- Ethical behavior: participants are reminded to ask permission when taking pictures, especially of children, and not to take pictures that could be embarrassing or put someone in trouble.
- Ideas of pictures to take (set goal of roughly 10): suggesting a specific list of ideas tends to work best, including a selfie, places you go, things you like to do, scenes that represent or remind you of home, etc.
- Learn to use a digital camera (if needed): Very basic instructions building on our previous work with Fearless Cards (training cards for very basic computer literacy for extremely marginalized populations, [www.fearlesscards.org](http://www.fearlesscards.org))

**3. Debriefing conversation:** Participants bring back their pictures and we hold a conversation about their work.

- Transfer pictures to our laptop using memory card or cable. Select photos to retain in the study, if needed (sometimes participants also take video, or take pictures of other things they don't want to include, or have duplicate images of same situation, or simply have too many pictures to talk about).
- Open conversation about the photos, one by one. Question prompts include: what is this? Why did you take this picture? How do you feel when you see this picture? What has been left out of this picture? Etc.
- Ask about how they felt about doing the photos and the conversation.
- Offer to print one or two pictures if they want (portable printer on hand), or to share by email, text, Facebook, or memory stick.

**4. Analysis and dissemination:** Translation and transcription, coding, analysis. Dissemination through presentations, exhibitions, web site, book.







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# CONTRIBUTIONS OF FOTOHISTORIAS PARTICIPATORY PHOTOGRAPHY APPROACH

Fotohistorias combines the power of images and the richness of stories. Together, they yield more depth and sensitivity than either photos or interviews alone.

Fotohistorias helps elicit multiple perspectives and symbols from the same image or place, emphasizing how people's perceptions and feelings shape meaning and experience.

Fotohistorias participants frequently feel empowered, heard and valued, and gain a new perspective and agency over their current situation and context.



**Sara:** This picture is of the number 15; why did you take this picture?

**Gilda:** Well, because next month I will turn 15 years of living in the United States, so for me, it's a magical number. It's a number that means a lot. These 15 years have been of many memories, many joys, many sufferings, many sadness... as an immigrant in this country, the first few years after I got here, I never thought I would reach 15. I thought "I'm going to go back next year." And times went by and when I realized it, I had been all this time in the United States. Every morning when I wake up I feel that I've made it here. I long for my country, I dream about my country and going back to my country and my family. But this has a very strong meaning for me because I have learned so much, so many mistakes that I have made. It has also been good to meet so many good people in my life, especially in times of difficulty. So that's why I wanted to bring this picture of the number 15. I cannot believe it myself.



**Chiapas:** Here is a picture of the cemetery.

**Ricardo:** Not the basketball court?

**Chiapas:** No, the cemetery. It made me remember when I was crossing in the desert I saw a cemetery. It was just a lot of crosses. Maybe people die and they are left there. I was thinking it must be very sad to die in the desert, and be buried there, and your family doesn't know. You never go back home. You don't even have a coffin. That's very sad. So you take the risk of going, and sometimes you'll make it through, you could be captured, or you could also die of hunger or of thirst. So that's why I took this picture of the cemetery.



**Chapin:** This is the basketball court... something that I'm a very big fan of. I play a lot of basketball. In Guatemala, I would wake up really early and play basketball. And then I would come back in the afternoon and play. Basketball was my passion.

**Ricardo:** So you see this basketball court and...?

**Chapin:** I see it and it just gives me anxiety because I don't have a basketball. I've asked for one [at the shelter] and they don't have one. And so I'm very anxious. I haven't played basketball for a month and I would like to play it again here. But I don't have a ball. My feet are itchy. I want to play but I cannot do it. So that's why I took that picture.



**Ricardo:** How did it feel to have a camera and to take pictures of your daily life here?

**Lupe:** Oh I liked it. I really liked it. Just thinking what is happening at this moment in my life. Well, that I'm no longer in detention, I'm not as angry as I was before, when I was in the CCA (Corrections Corp. of America). Now I'm free, I can value some other things that I did not think were as important. I look at their smiles, for example, and yes, we all have problems, but we also have to continue, we have to keep on going. When I saw that mountain, the little hill with the houses, I felt peace, tranquility, the inner peace that you need. So those are things that have helped me to meditate.





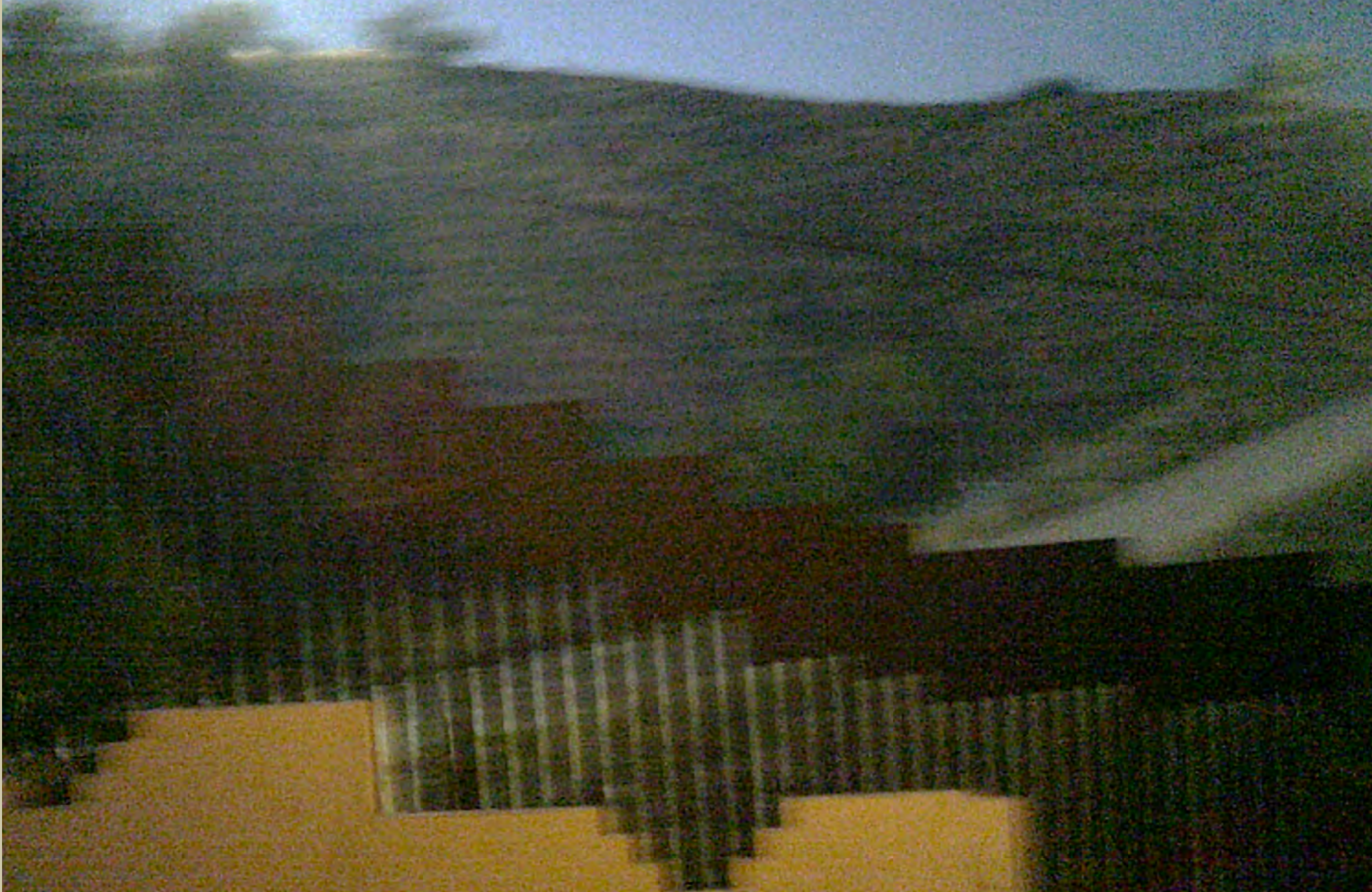
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# “CHAPIN”: I KNOW I HAVE A DREAM THERE...

I come from Guatemala and I’m heading to New York. Everything that I’m going through right now is like an adventure. I’m not getting too worried about anything. I’m in it as an adventurer. I’m experiencing different countries, going to different states in Mexico, and seeing different places. I don’t see it as something to be scared of, but as an adventure. I left my country almost a month ago. And look, I’m okay, nobody has robbed me, I haven’t been hurt, and I’m here at the border now.

And here I took some pictures of the wall of the immigration, which are the pictures I sent by Facebook to my family, so that they could see exactly where I am. So they could see the wall, because they’ve heard about the wall and here they can see it in pictures. So that’s why I took those pictures.

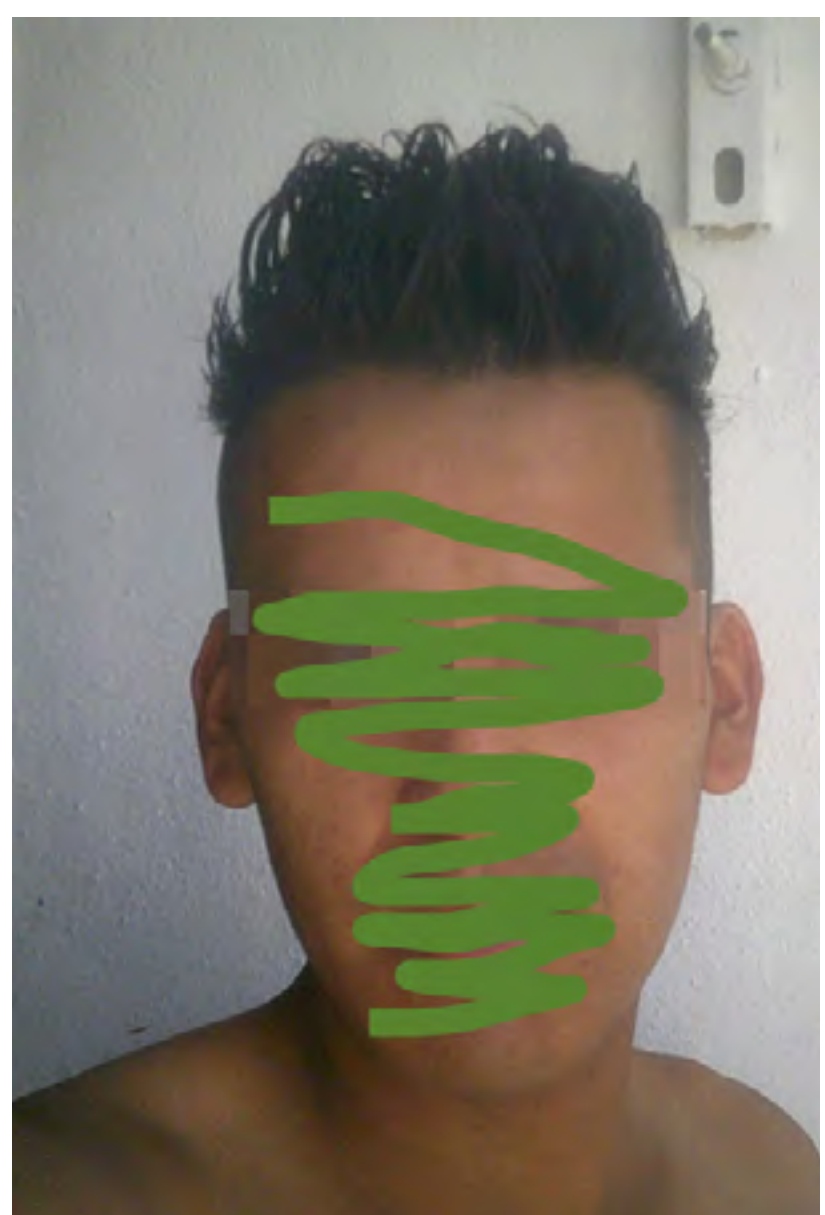




We are looking through the wall, and we can see the US and Mexico. This is such a beautiful scene for me. Looking at this, for me, is a work of art. Even though it is a bit dark, it’s a piece of art.

This is something that I have not been able to see anywhere else. I’ll never see it again because I’ll be somewhere else.

This is when I’m cutting my hair. I was taking pictures of what I was doing that day. I cut my hair, and I was going to have a shower. This first picture is when I still have my hair long, and look how it changes. Now my hair is very short here.

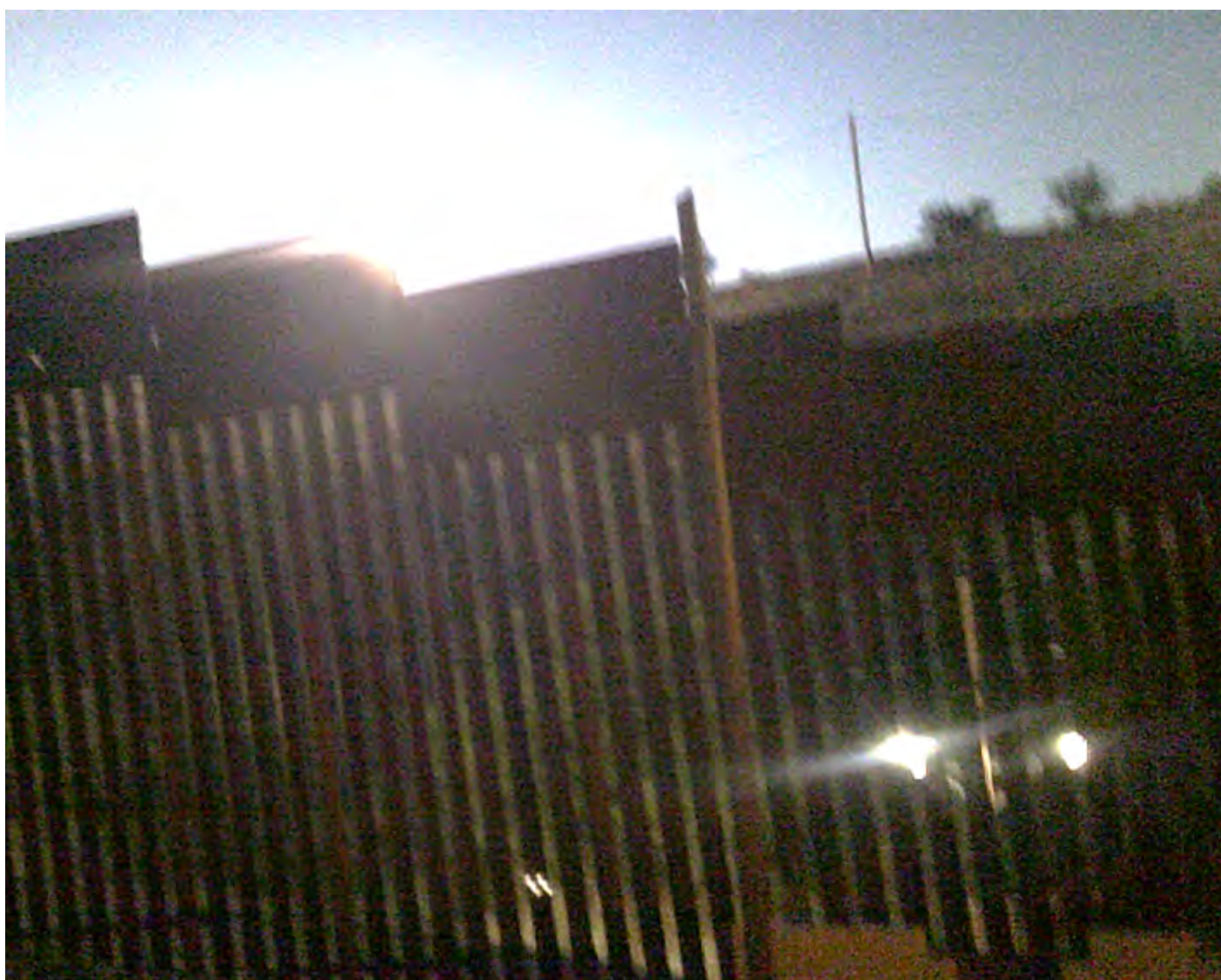


**Ricardo:** And how do you feel about being on this side of the wall?

**Chapin:** Well, I feel okay, I feel relaxed knowing that I have my dream. I have a new goal, a new objective, a new place that I’m experiencing, a new step that I have to take.

**Ricardo:** And how do you imagine being on the other side of the wall?

**Chapin:** Well, just imagine: First, I would be stepping on American soil; second, I’d be stepping on something my family and other people never stepped on. To be in a place where I will be reaching my dreams, that is what I’m thinking with this picture.



*If you have a wall in front of you, and you have a victory ahead, and you’re behind, you have to overcome that wall and you have to reach that victory. You have to take that victory into your hands. You have to take your dreams into your hands so that you can achieve them. Because if we don’t struggle for them, nobody will struggle for us.*



This is the wall and there’s a light behind it. I took this picture because there are barriers, but sometimes the problems [seem bigger than they really are]. We can see the problems like I’m seeing this wall now: It’s huge. You know that there’s this huge, very tall wall, and you cannot cross it. And you sometimes look at problems, and you see them huge like this wall. But if you look on the other side, there is a light. If you pay attention, when you look at the wall, you can see the wall is very small, if you plant yourself well in the ground and you know that you’re going to cross. You can see the wall is something really small in relation to everything else you’re going to have in your life.





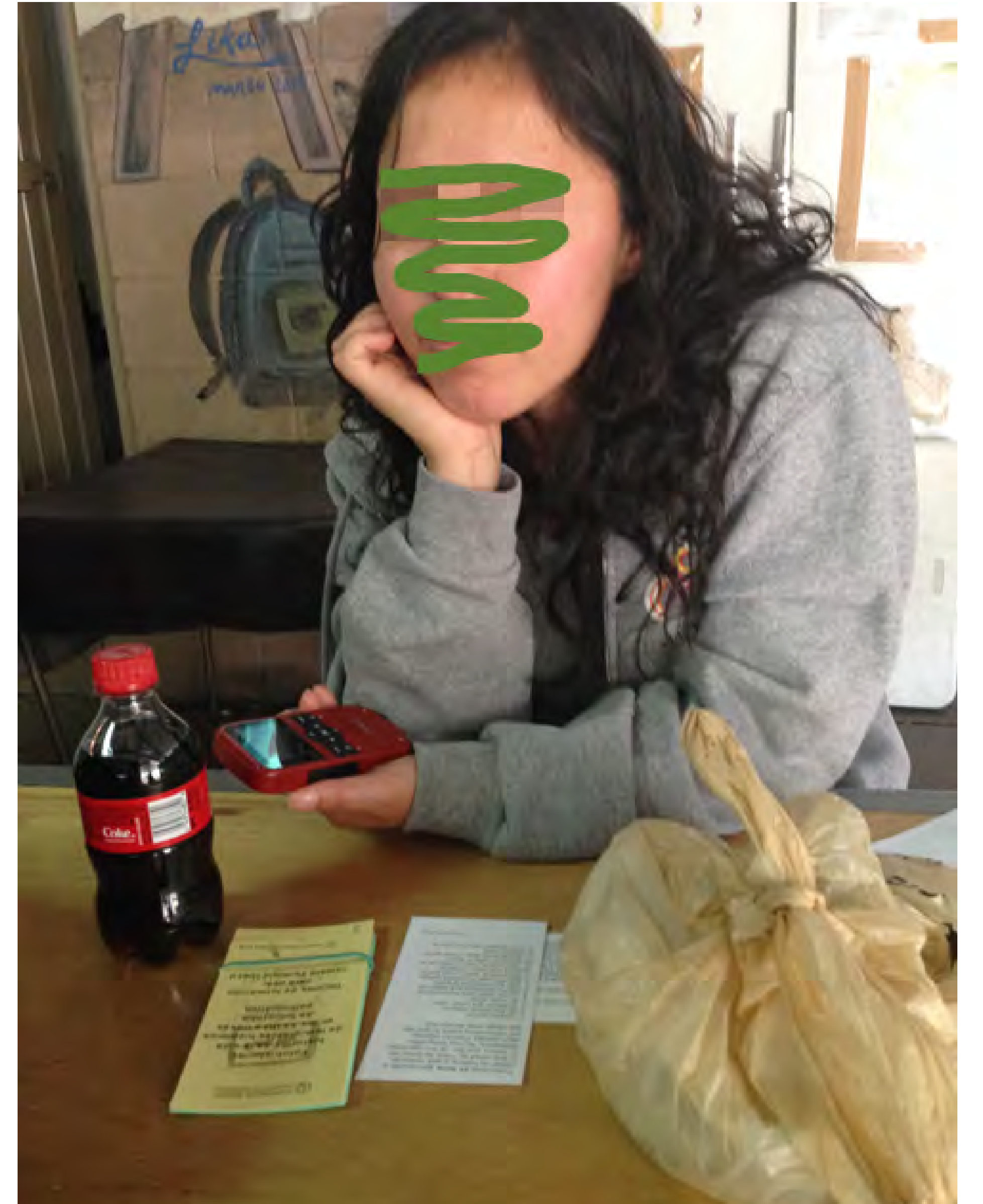
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## “LUPE”: THERE ARE NO SUPERHEROES...

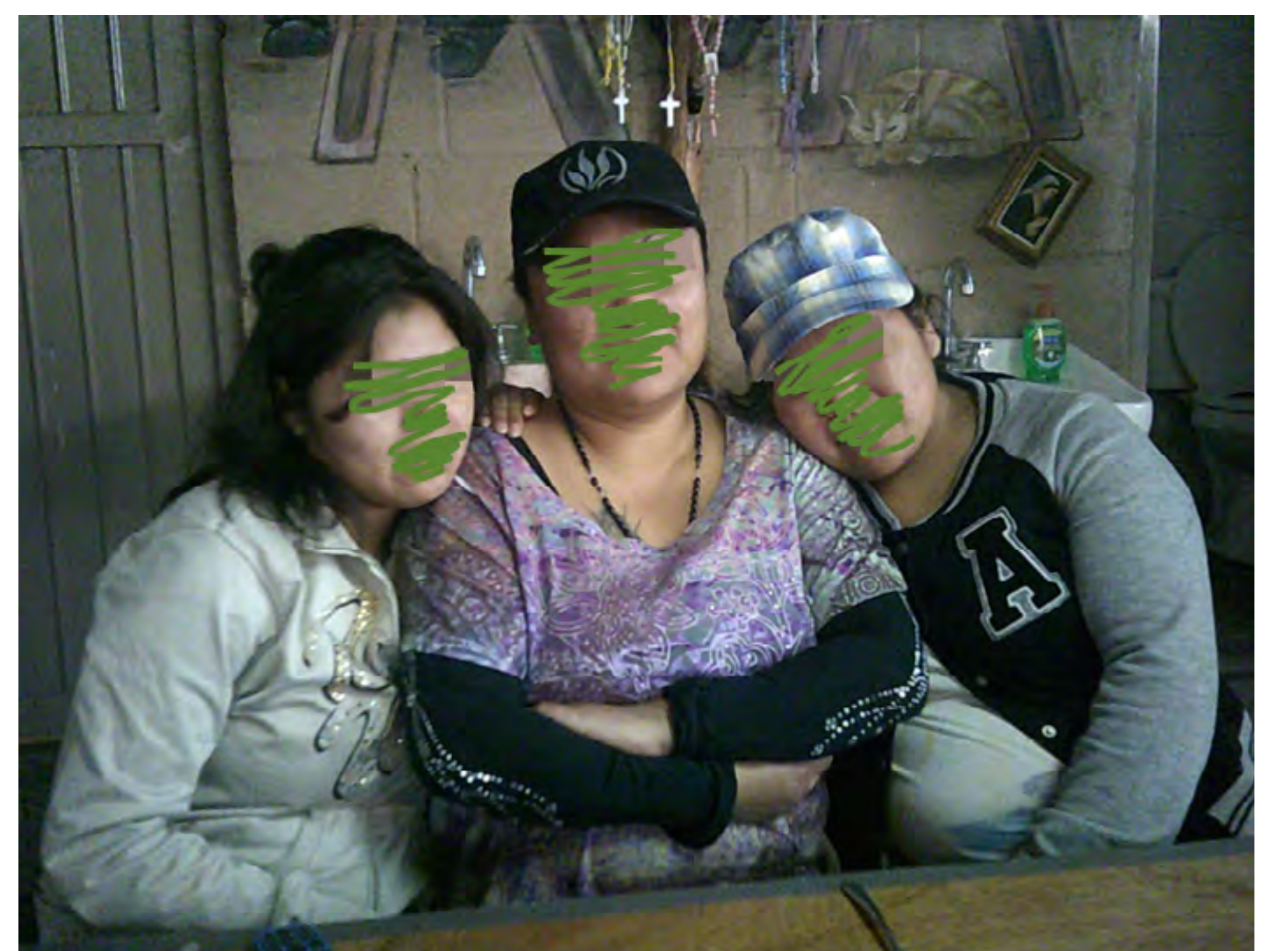
I left Mexico when I was 16. In the US I met my husband, I had my kids. I was there for almost 12 years. When I was pregnant with my last kid, the border patrol picked me up. My husband had been deported so I let them deport me, thinking that back in Mexico I would do okay. I was here for four years. Then my husband crossed back, and I sent my kids. Then I tried to cross as well, and couldn't. They picked me up. I was detained for three months. I was just released, just now.



This bus has a superhero drawn on it. When I saw it, I thought of my son. When you are a kid, you believe in superheroes and everything they do. I was thinking that we have to be strong, because superheroes don't exist. They don't exist. We are on our own. We have to have our own goals. My own goal is to be with my kids. If I were a superhero, I would go flying all the way to my kids, but I can't. That's why I took the picture, because of that super hero.



There are too many deaths, too many people dying, women being raped, both by the coyotes and by the mafia. Some border patrol officers are good and some not so good. But this I can understand, we are coming into the country illegally. But all we want is to work. I want to work for my kids, to give my children a better life. Mexico is too difficult.



These are my friends. Since we are all Mexicans we support each other, even though we don't know each other well. We know we are in the same boat, we have the same goals. This one I know has her children in the US and she's trying to cross because of them. We are women and we are mothers and we are Mexican, and that unites us. I was really happy to be able to take a picture for them and to see their smile, after all these terrible things that we've been going through.



**Ricardo:** So what are you going to do now?

**Lupe:** I don't know. If I stay here, well, that would be better, but it would be turning my back on my kids. And I cannot do that, because they're my life. But if I try to go back and they catch me and they keep me in detention for a year, well, I don't want that either, because then I won't be able to be with my kids either. So I don't know, I don't know what I'm going to do.







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# “CHINO”: PRACTICING HIDING IN THE DESERT...

This is where I reached the wall. This was the first time I touched it.

I left home with the vision of getting to the U.S. and when I got to the wall I just wanted to cross it over and jump over right away and stop thinking that I was on this side. There is a border patrol car right there at about a hundred meters and they're watching the whole time. But I felt really good to be there, I even said I'm going to take a picture of myself here by the wall and the desert is in the background.

I am sleeping [at a shelter] right next to the wall. Last night I was thinking that I was sleeping just two minutes away from the wall, two minutes away from being on the other side. At night I could also see that they have lights on everything and I saw 4 or 5 border patrol cars going up and down.

This is the last thing blocking you, preventing you from getting to your family and to your friends. I want to cross it and reach my goal but it is very hard. I am so surprised that I can't just cross it and walk my 5 days in the desert till I reach a place where somebody can pick me up or I can take a bus. I thought I'd be able to just go through and start my walk in the desert.

So that is why I took so many pictures of the wall.

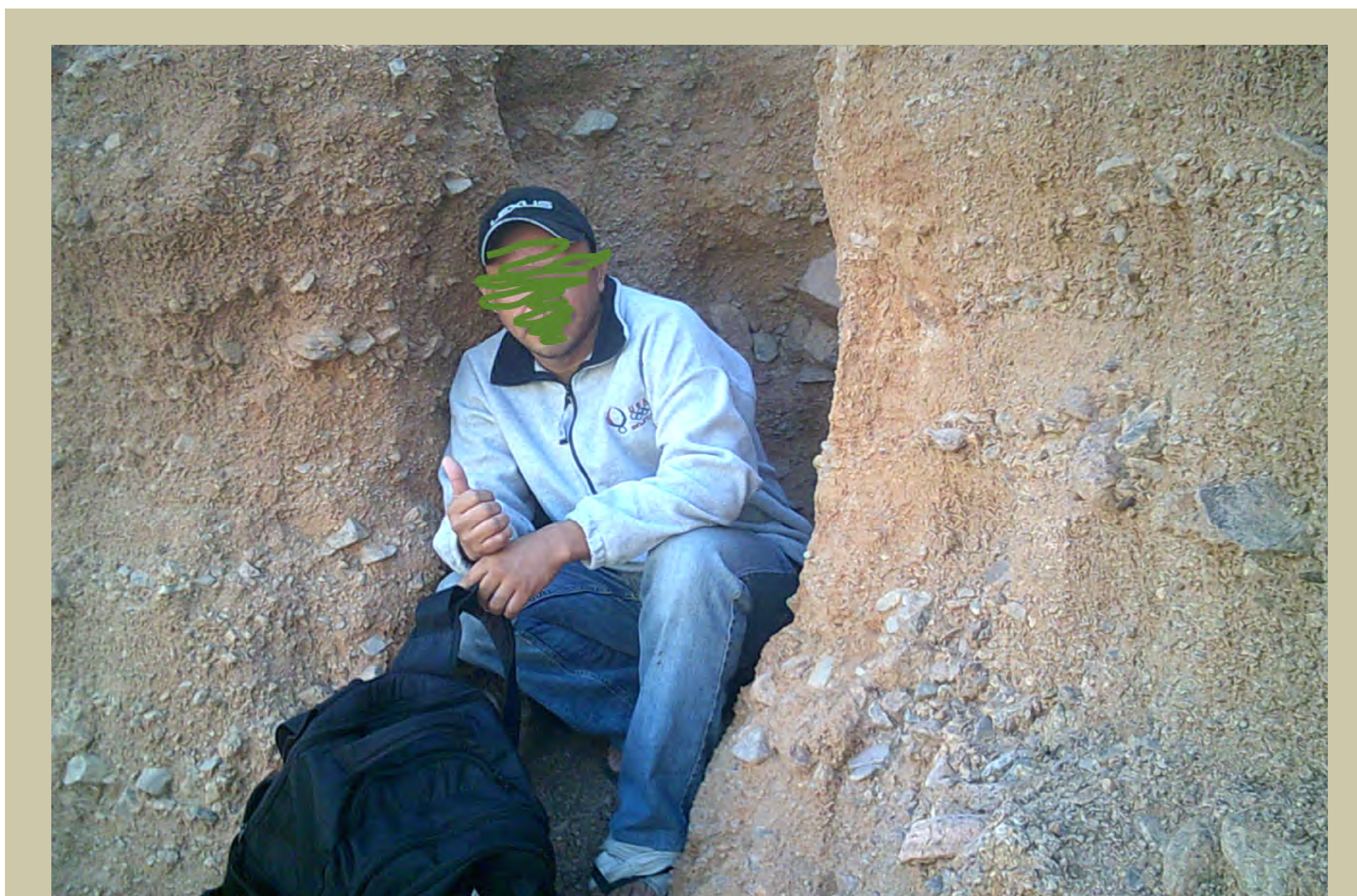


This sign is just to remind me of the time when I was here. It says "Frontera USA." The border of the USA is right here. I thought it was interesting that I am here, the border with the USA is here, and there is an arrow pointing right here, where I am just now: this is where I am. And that is me standing right next to the arrow saying "to the US, go here, this way."



Ricardo: How do you feel about seeing yourself here in this picture?

Chino: Oh I am very happy. I'm happy that I'm in good health. The pain in my foot is going away and I'll be able to start moving. I'm very happy that I was able to talk to my family and they are going to help me, they are sending me the help that I need so that I can cross, so things are good. So I am really happy now.



I like the idea of taking a picture in this little hole because I have this idea that I will be crossing the desert and maybe I'll be hiding like this in a little hole in the desert. I was thinking that this is how it would be like to be hiding [from the border patrol], hiding like this in a little hole in the sand. So that is why I'm hiding in that little hole, but I'm always with thumbs up.

This other sign here says welcome to Nogales. I was taking it from the Mexico side to the US and this one is as if I was coming back from the US and I see this welcome to Nogales.

**Ricardo:** So how do you imagine yourself at your return from the North?

**Chino:** Well, maybe it could be about 5 years from now, with the future of my kids and my family assured, I could be coming back and give them their studies, all the way to college if possible, and then they can work on their own. I see myself driving my own BMW, crossing the border [back into Mexico], with a trailer with all my things, with everything that I can bring back for my family. I imagine everybody waiting for me with their open arms, very happy to see me, with tears of joy for being able to get back together with my family.



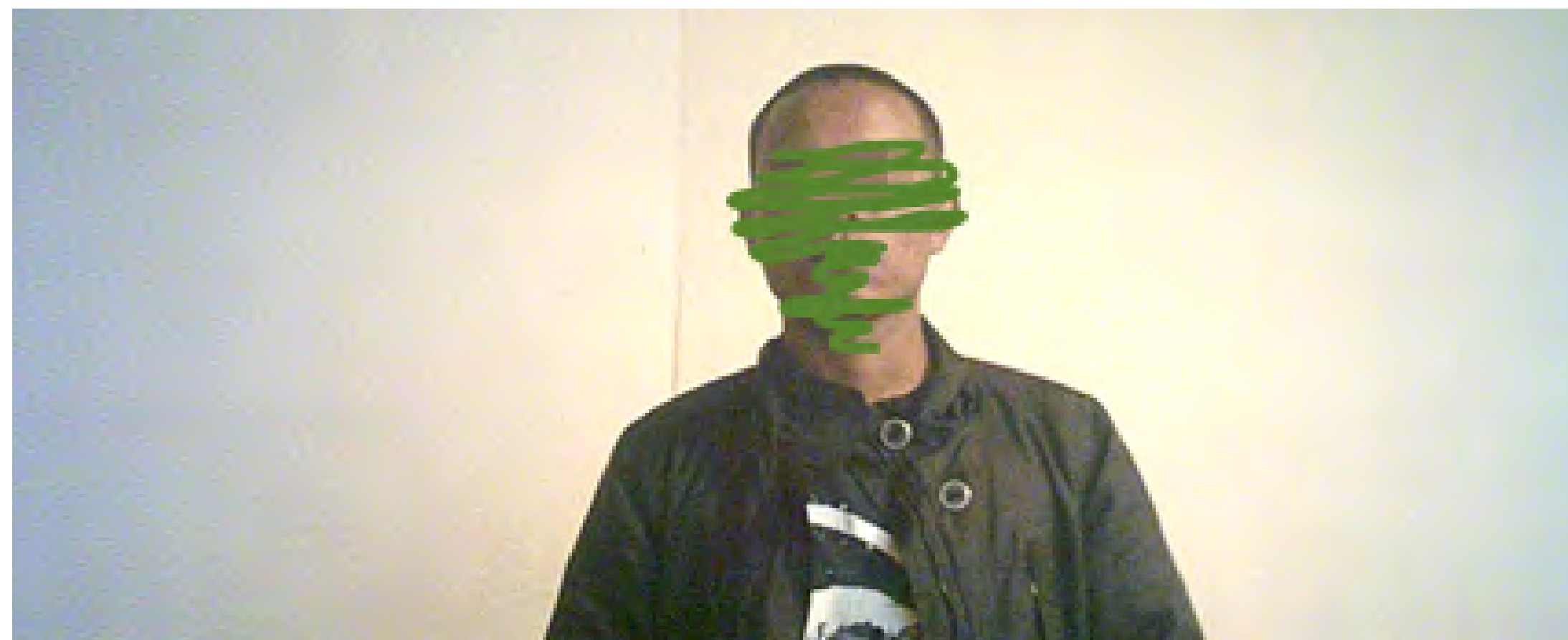




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# BORDER, WALL, PLACE: NEITHER HERE NOR THERE...

**Catracho:** I took this picture so they can see how thin we are. Look, we are looking very thin. I am looking very thin. I can see my bones. I've gone through a lot so I'm very thin.



**Chiapas:** Here [at the border] I'm right in the pivoting point. I'm neither there nor here. My task is to cross. I don't want to go back home in defeat. So that's the picture I took there. It will remind me of being here in Nogales.

**Catracho:** There I am alone. My friends already crossed over and they are gone, they would probably feel bad because they are on the other side and I'm still here at the border.



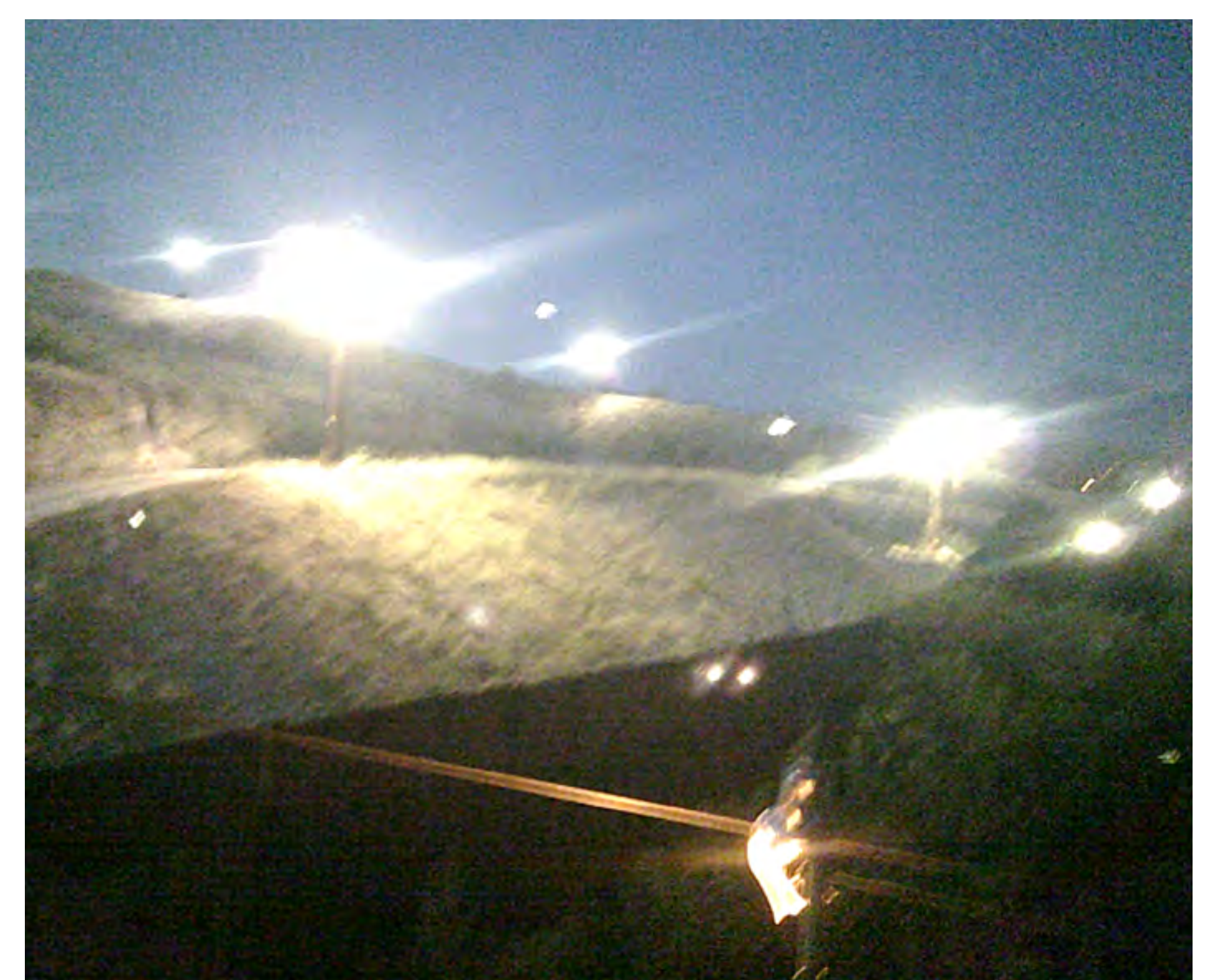
**Catracho:** Oh this picture it is daylight already in the shelter, but they have not turned on the light and so you can't see anything. It is all the people who slept there, and it is at the beginning of a new day. That is one more night at the border, thinking: Are we going to continue here? Are we going to go to another border town? What are we going to do?



**Ricardo:** what do you fear of crossing over?

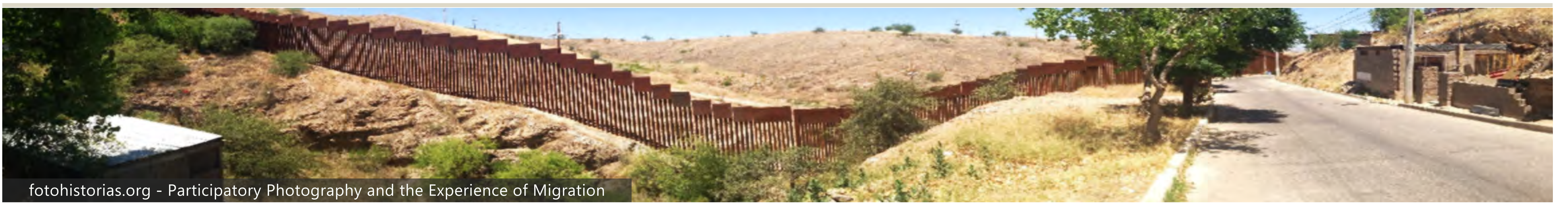
**Chavalo:** Oh, it's really the thieves and the gangs. That's what we're afraid of. It's not so much the cold or the heat, it's the crooks, the thieves... because we can fight against nature, but to fight against the crooks and thieves is a lot more difficult.

You can find water for the desert, but you can't really do much when you have a band of crooks that comes on you with guns.



With this picture I know I have a dream there, in that land [on the other side of the wall]. It has all those lights, and when I cross that wall I have a dream that I can reach. I took it at night with those lights because I like seeing that landscape, and those lights, and how you can see everything.





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# FAMILY & COMMUNITY: WE ARE ALL BROTHERS HERE...

**Chavalo:** Well, we're all Hondurans, we all met on the road so we became friends because we come from the same place. Who would have thought that we would be meeting all these people from Honduras? When you leave there, you leave thinking that you are going North, but you don't know who you are going to meet on the road, and you meet all these others from Guatemala, from Honduras, from Mexico...



**Lupe:** These are the daughters of this woman from Honduras. She came to the shelter yesterday. The girls are the same age as my daughters. This one is six and the other one is ten.

They remind me of my daughters. I'm just thinking of my daughters.



**Chiapas:** If I see this picture again in 5 years I would say: "Where is this guy? Did he make it to the US? Is he back in his country?"

We are here together today, but as soon as we take off in our different ways we won't see each other again. Maybe they'll make it through, but we'll never be together again. That's why I took a picture with all of them. In this picture we have everybody together the way we are today.

**Catracho:** Those two on the picture look like brothers, they're having a good time together and they're resting. We are all in the same uncertainty, the same boat. Maybe some of these will go back, maybe some of these will continue to live in the U.S. maybe some will wait some more. There's many who come here for the first time and they feel the pressure, they are afraid and sometimes they just return without even crossing, without even trying.



This is one of our friends  
and he is immortalized in this picture.  
My friend, my compañero, my brother.  
We are all brothers here.







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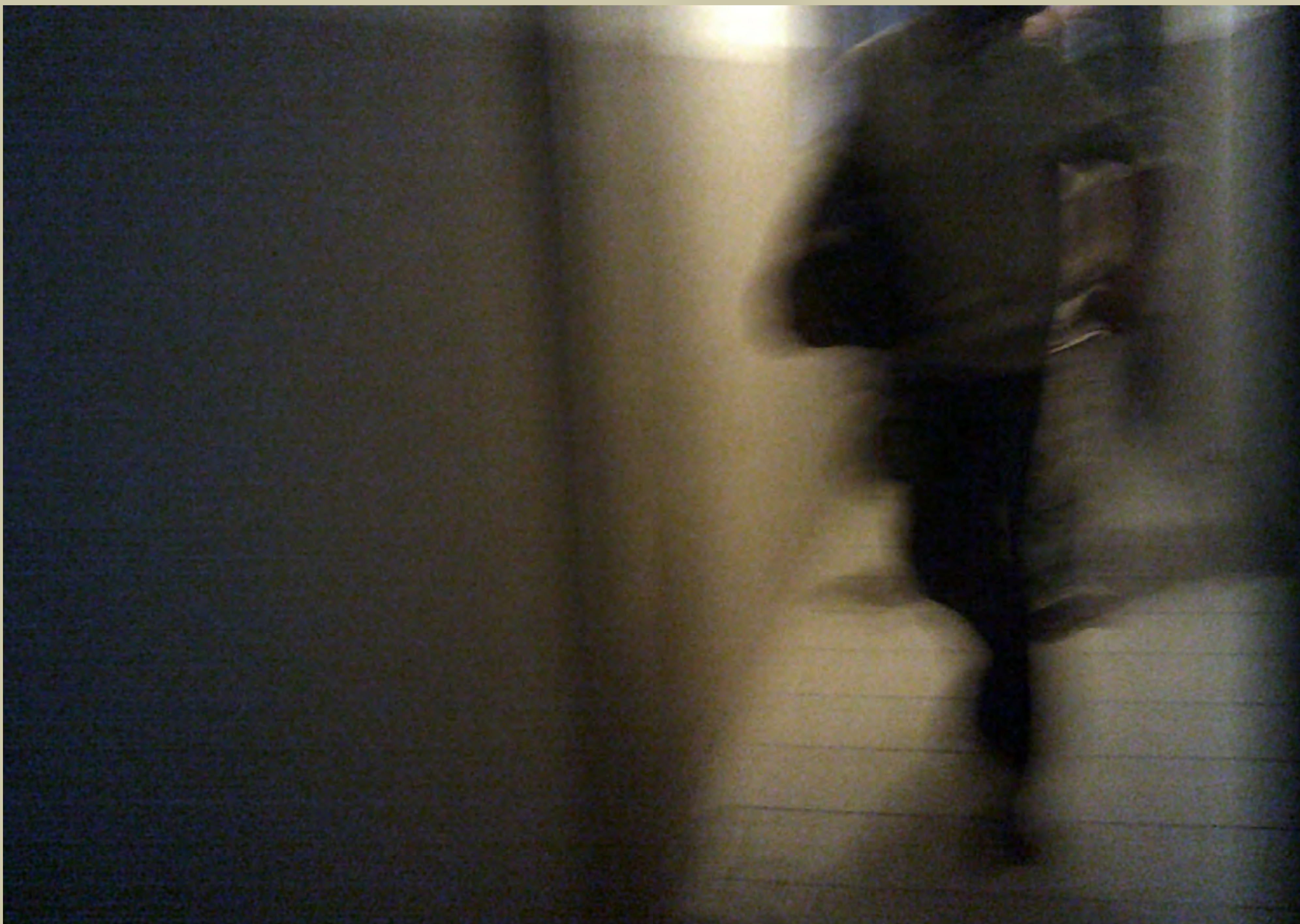
# TRANSCIENCE & UNCERTAINTY: THIS IS TEMPORARY...



**Chavalo:** This is the dorm where I slept. This is my home today. I can spend the night here and I can be safe.

We are in a safe place, we're not sleeping out on the street or by the railroad. It is very difficult to be out on the street and on your own. Here at least you are with others and you are safe.

**Chavalo:** This is the hall of the shelter. It is dark, like the moment we are in now: narrow and kind of dark, and of out of focus, and we don't know exactly where to go. It is a critical moment in life that is blurry, like this picture is blurry.



**Catracho:** That person is carrying all his belongings in that plastic bag... It feels bad, because that's all you own. That's all you have in this moment. Though, maybe if that bag was full of dollars then it would make a difference.

*I feel at peace. I just know that this is temporary. This is a place for rest before I get to the US.  
So I feel good, I'm well treated and I'm okay, and that's why I'm here.*



**Chiapas:** They look like they're happy, but I know that inside they're worried. Inside you are thinking: How am I going to cross? Will I get there? Will I make it? That's why I took this picture: They look like they're happy but I know that inside, each one of us is worried.

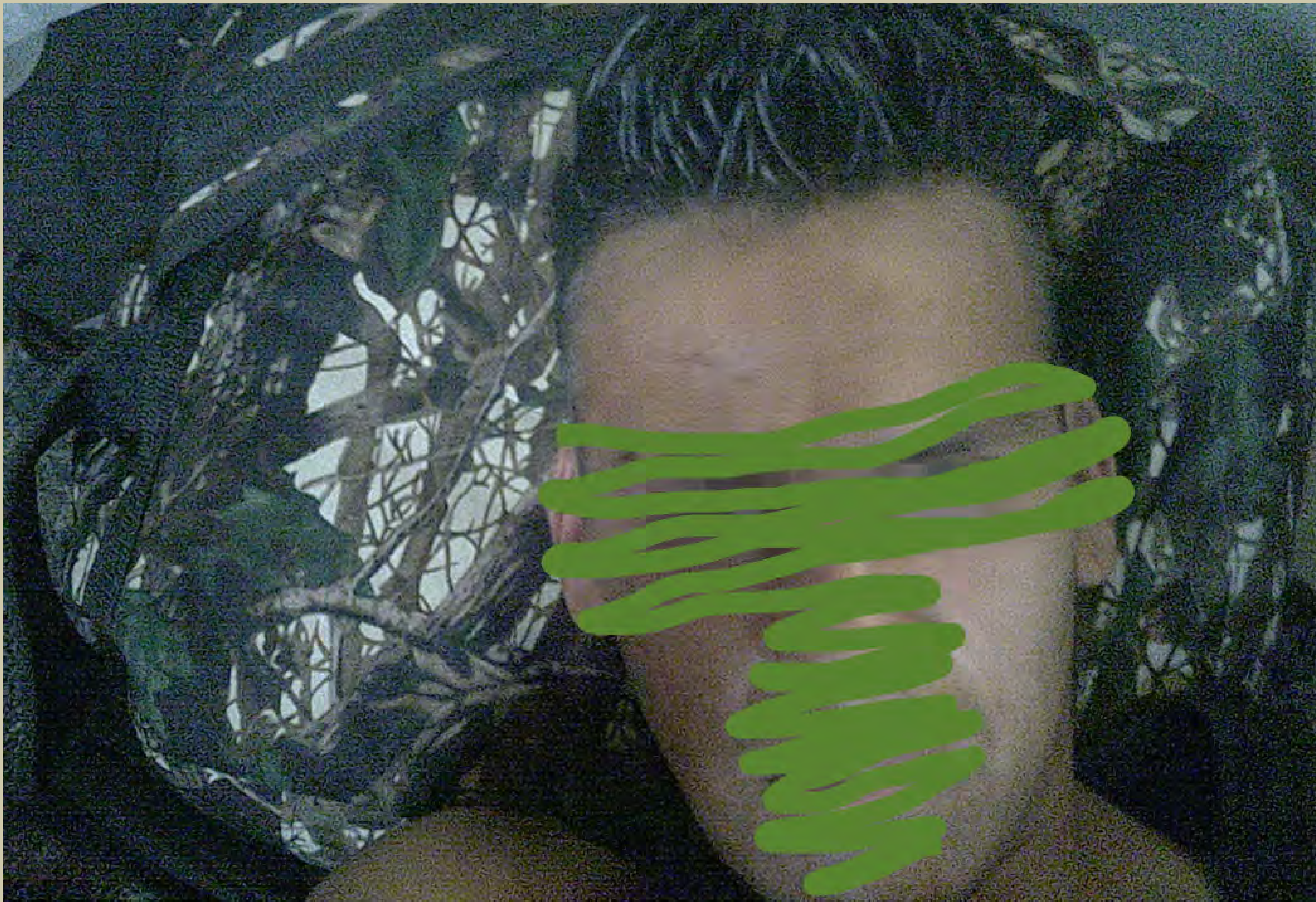
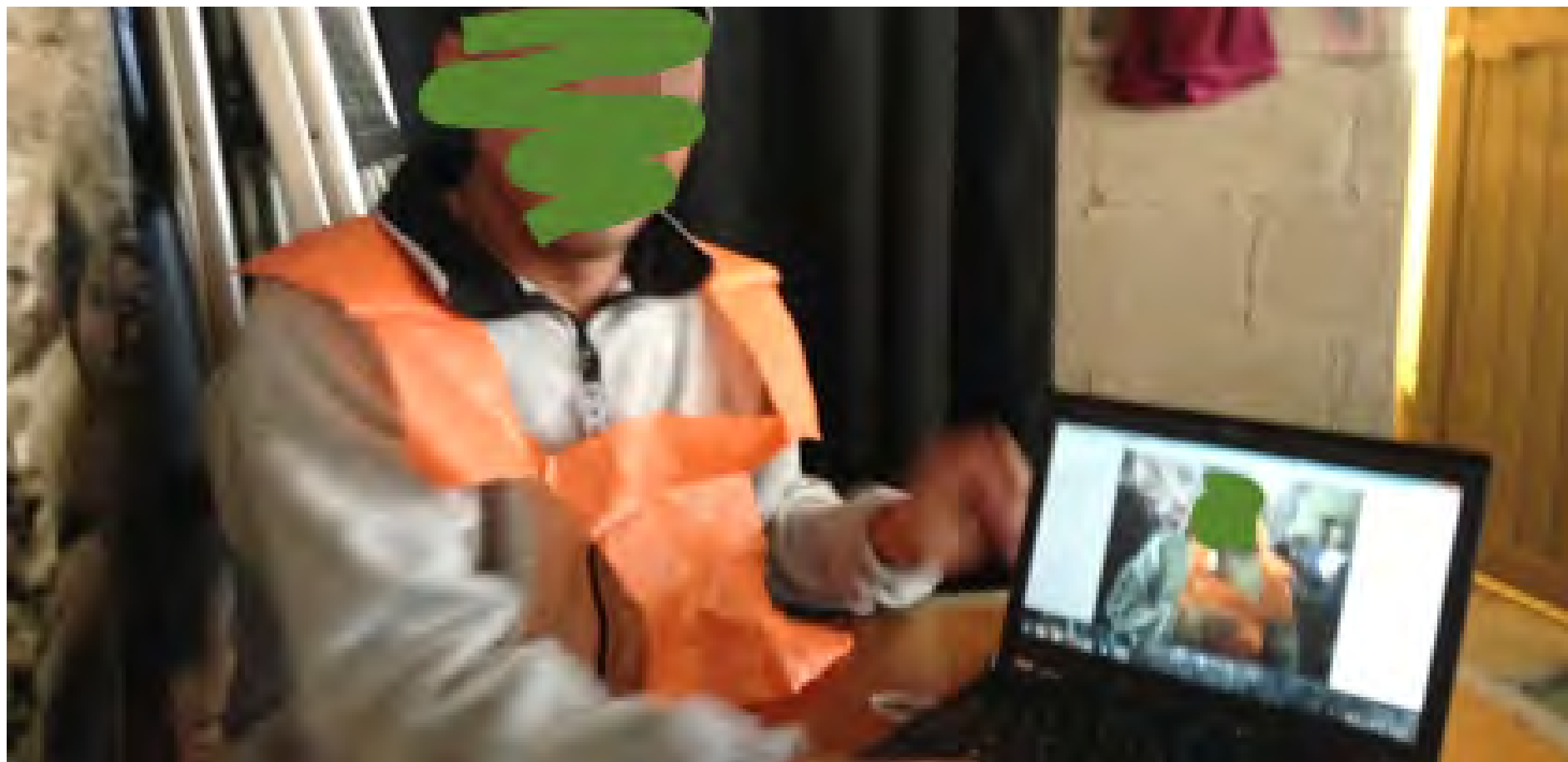




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# MOTIVATIONS: IT'S ALL FOR MY KIDS...

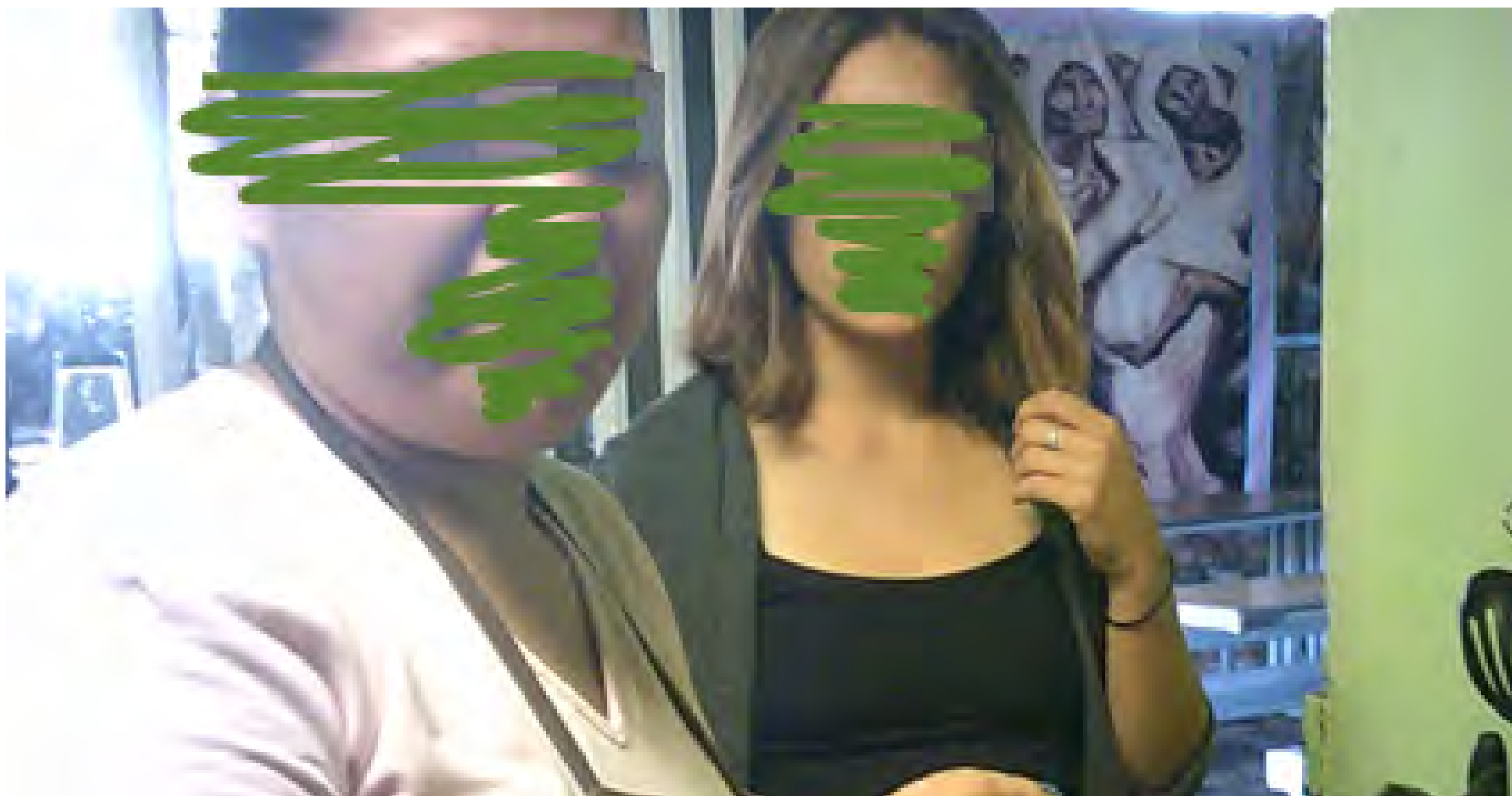
**Chino:** Well, maybe it could be about 5 years from now, with the future of my kids and my family assured, I could be coming back and give them their studies, all the way to college if possible, and then they can work on their own.



**Chapin:** This is where I woke up. It's good to know that God gave me a new day. Each time when I wake up I thank God for giving me a new day. I wake up and open my eyes, and move my arms and legs. And there's other people who can't. There's other people who die. So every day when I wake up and I look around I say, thank you, Father, for giving me a new day.



**Catracho:** I'm here waiting to cross to the other side just for a better future for myself. I'm not married or anything, but maybe one day I will. So I want to find a good job and something stable so that I can give something better for my family.



**Mariana:** Sometimes they would give me work and I would clean their house and they would give me a bit of money. I would not buy anything for me. It would be all money I sent for my kids.



**Chiapas:** I'll keep on trying two or three times, and if I cannot make it and will try to find a job here, because in my state, things are really bad. I want to find a place where I can have a job with dignity and not get into trouble. I want to save more, so I can have more money. Maybe have a family.





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# SERVICE & HELP: WE ARE NOT ALONE...



This is a trailer from the Red Cross. That's me coming out of the Red Cross because I was asking for a bandage and pain medication.



This is the recreation room [at Grupo Beta] where we can chat and hang out with friends and watch TV.



That is an exercise machine that they have there so I can do some exercises for my foot. I'm starting to put more weight on my foot.



This is in la Roca, the shelter where we're sleeping. That is where put out our mattresses and our blankets. There we are. Last night there were only about 12 of us.



We're waiting for these brothers from church, they bring us soup at noon... It feels good because we get a lot of people supporting us.



This is in front of the bathrooms and we were waiting for the shower. It's really good to have these bathrooms and that we can take a shower.



**Chiapas:** The truck of the Beta group gives me hope – it makes me think that if I'm dying of thirst, they bring water and I'll do better. That's why I took a picture of my friend [by the truck] and I asked him to take a picture of me too.

So that picture is just showing the hope that there are these organizations that help us and support us. Because we're going through a very difficult time, and they help with water or medications.

So this is my food, my breakfast just before we came in to talk. I'm very thankful for it...



[When I came here] I didn't have anything, I didn't have food, I didn't have any water, nothing.

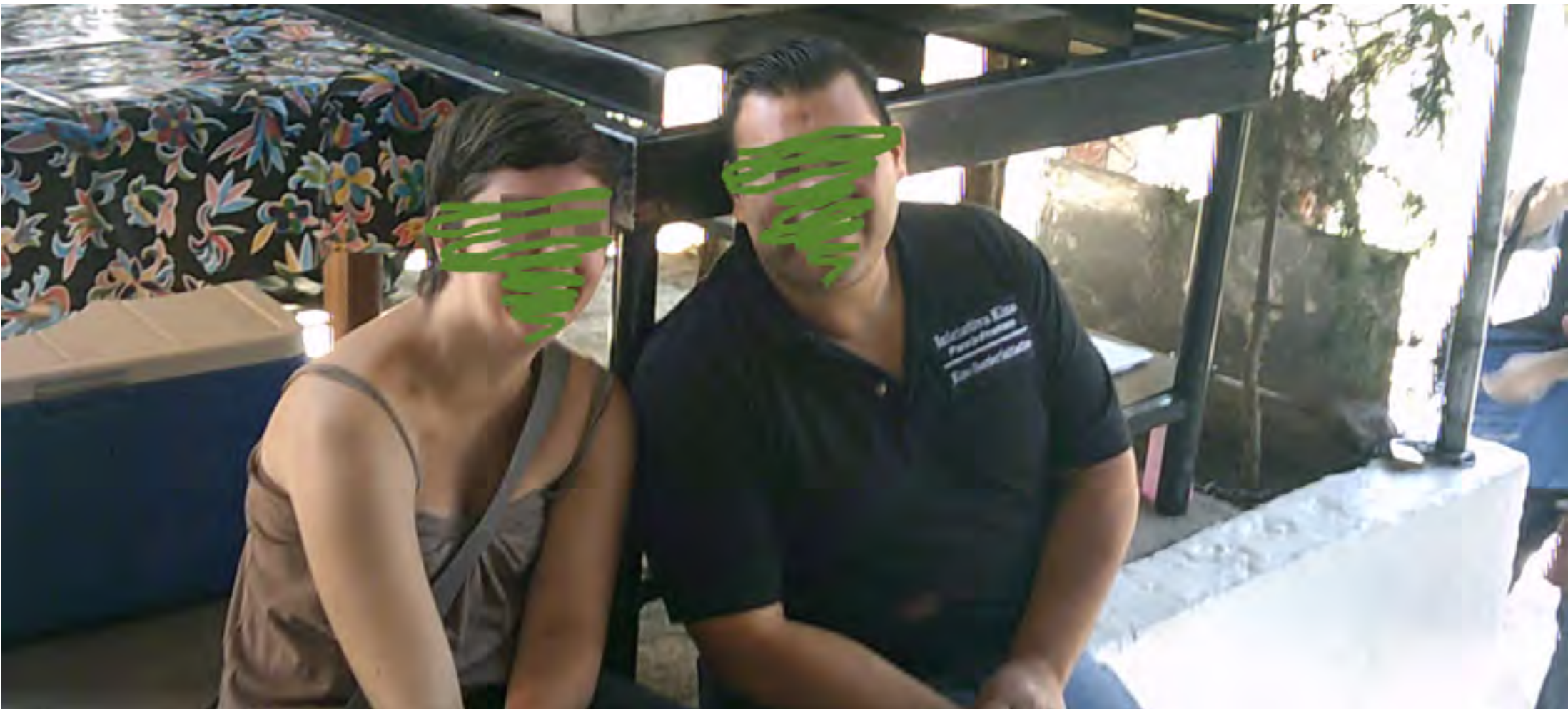
And here, this next one, we're helping to peel some of the yellow peppers. Because I came early and I was helping here in the kitchen.



I took the picture because I always like helping.

**Chapin:** And here I am with my other friend. I met her here. And I wanted a picture with her because I'm glad to see this person who helps me, and when you think that there's nobody who will help you, there's always people who will help you. If there's a door that closes, you also have another door that opens. There's always somebody willing to help you, and you can help others too.

**Armando:** This is another friend, another volunteer from No Mas Muertes, No More Deaths. She comes in and gives phone calls on Saturdays and Sundays.

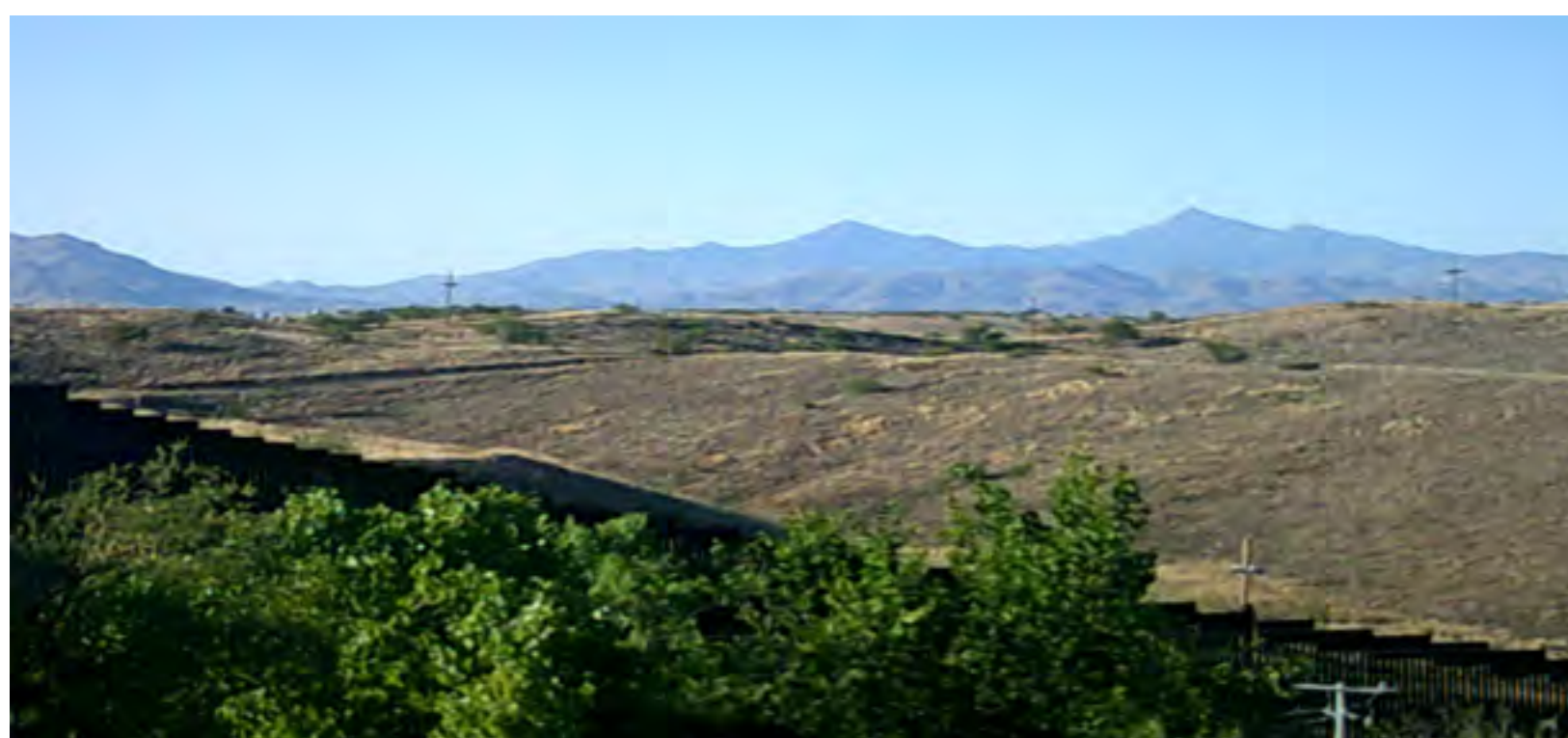






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# SECURITY & AUTHORITY: IT'S HOT AND DANGEROUS...

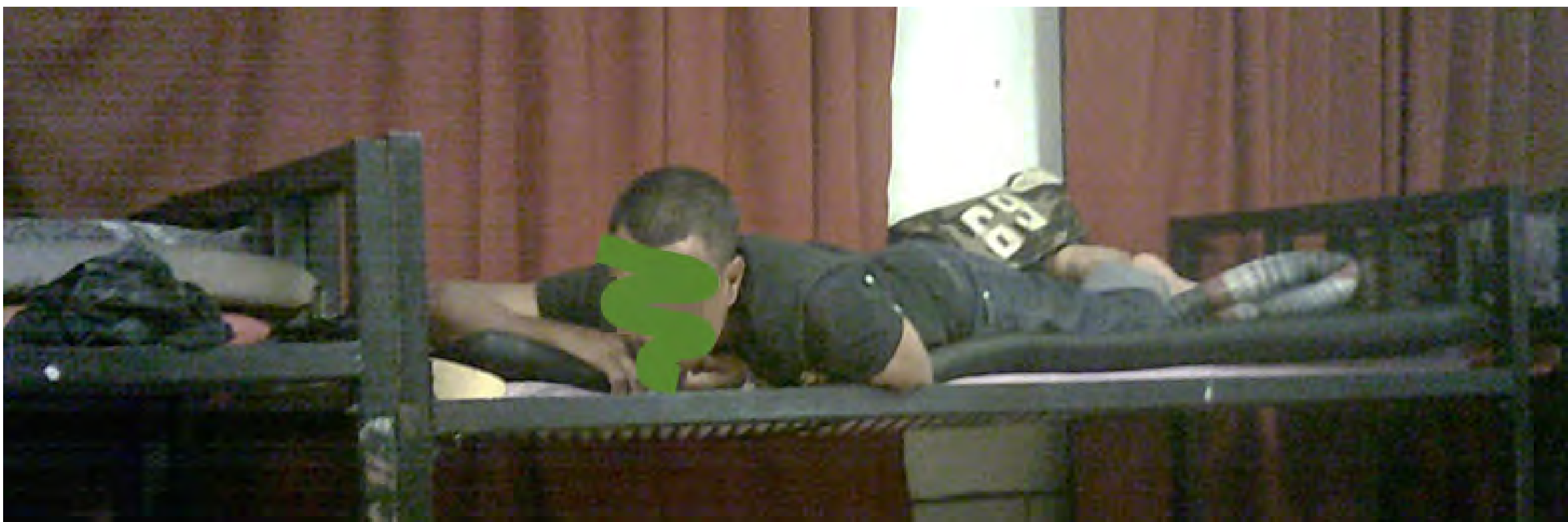


**Chavalo:** What is most difficult is finding who to go with, who can be a trustable guide. Anybody can say, "Yes, I'll take you." But then they leave you stranded on the way or turn you in.

**Chino:** It looks really hot and dangerous, and you can see there is also a border patrol truck parked there...

**Chino:** All along the wall on the other side they have strong lights that illuminate everything. This picture is around midnight and they still have all those lights on, so it looks like daylight.

That means we cannot cross at night because it is just as if it was during the day.



**Catracho:** These are all friends. They are all happy there saying hello... They are all in the same situation. Some of them were just deported and some of them are waiting to cross for the first time. Here in Nogales it is really difficult, you cannot just go to the border on your own, you have to pay the mafias, they're also watching.

**Ricardo:** So you have to deal with the border patrol and with the mafia. Which one is worse?

**Catracho:** Oh, the mafia is way worse, because the mafia will kill you. As soon as you cross into the U.S. you don't worry so much about the mafia, but then you are trying to hide from the border patrol. The mafia will kill you; the border patrol will arrest you and deport you, but they won't kill you.





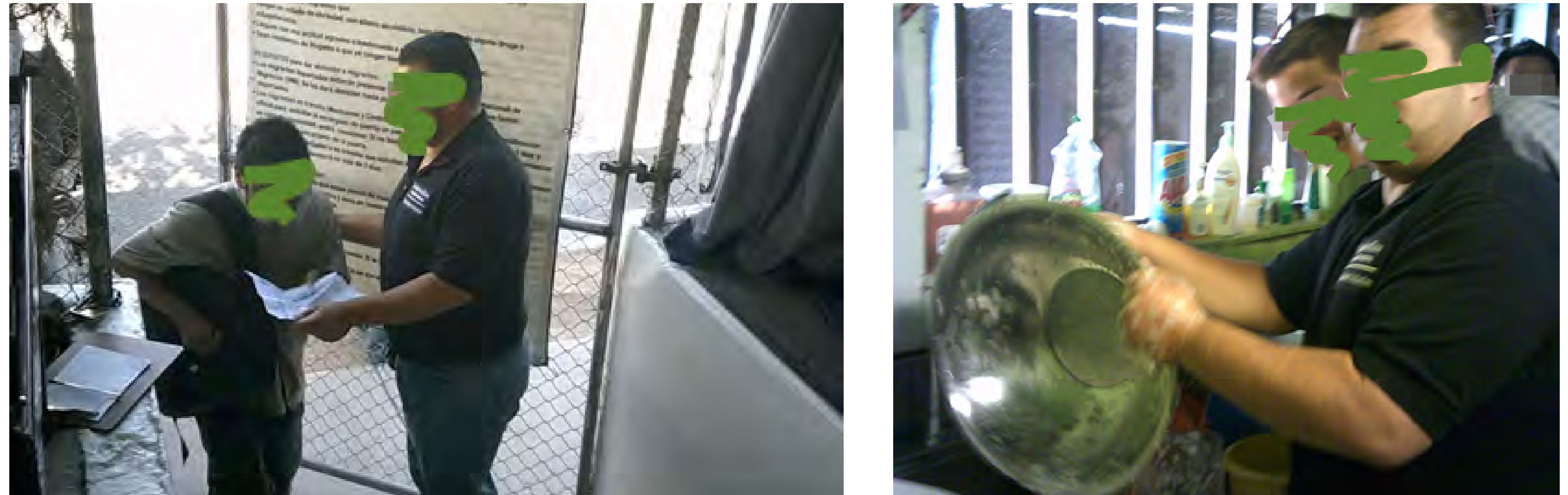


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# WORK: LIVING A NORMAL LIFE AT THE BORDER

**Mariana:** I get up at 6 am, and I get the kids ready to go to school, and then my work starts at 7. I cook for the migrants who come to the Comedor. Sometimes it's eggs with chili, or zucchinis, rice, beans, whatever there is to make, because everything here is from donations.

I do this with love because everybody who comes here after being deported reminds me of when I got here after being deported. I was one of them. I was and I still am a migrant here in Nogales, but I'm now established here. We now live here and work at the Comedor.



**Armando:** My work starts at 8 in the morning. I sweep the floor, and sweep the sidewalk in front, so that this place is clean and with dignity, so that the migrants can come and be happy here when they enter the Comedor.

I'm the one who does the maintenance, the painting, I clean the toilets, I fix the bathrooms. I like my job. All I want is safety for the migrants here.

Here I'm guarding the door. This is my job. It feels really good, I'm in charge of the door to keep this a safe place for the migrants. Saying no to somebody who is not a migrant, denying them food, feels really bad. It's hard for me to deny entry to somebody because I've been in that line. I know what it is to need food.

Mariana makes lunch for us so we all sit down and have lunch together.

That's the best thing. Even if it's only beans, but we are together.



These are my kids. This is when they leave school. It's not very far.



That's the three of them with their backpacks heading home.



Thanks to our work we can rent an apartment here, that is our home.



Those are my three kids sitting at the table having lunch.



This is my daughter doing homework. She prepares a dance performance.



This is my young one taking a nap.






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# CAST OF CHARACTERS

## Participants in Nogales


Anonymous migrants at El Comedor who shared their stories:




"Chavalo"



"Chapin"




"Chino"




"Lupe"

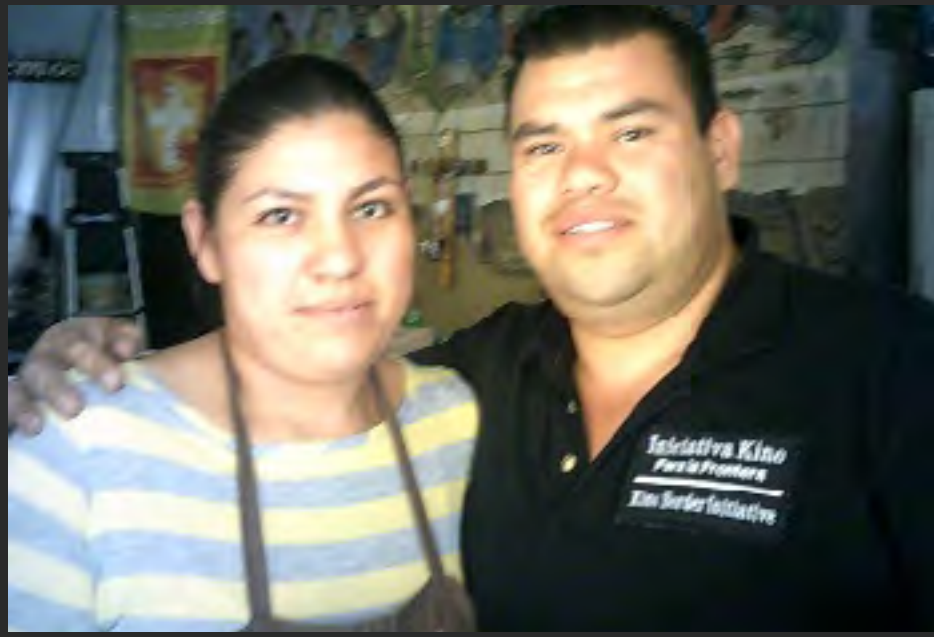
and former migrants, now staff at El Comedor:



"Chiapas"



"Catracho"



Mariana & Armando

## Team in UW

Ricardo Gomez with contributions by:

- Bryce Newell
- Katya Yefimova
- Luis Fernando Barón (Cali)
- Mauricio Beltrán (Cali)
- Sara Vannini
- Verónica Guajardo

Assistants:

- Amelia Klaus
- Cherry Wang (graphic design)
- Chris Setzer (web site)
- Hadiza Ismaila (transcriptions)
- Korissa McGlocklin (transcriptions)
- Mantra Roy
- María Gómez (illustrations)
- Philip Reed (web site)
- Staci Fox (web site)
- Oscar Iván Trejos Acevedo (Cali exhibition)

## Participants in Seattle

Day laborers members of Casa Latina:



"Pedro Infante"



Beatriz



Blas



Carlos



Escher



Gilda



Jimmy



Jorge



Juan



Lourdes



María



Pedro



Ramón



Salomón



Servando



Ventura

## Collaborators in Nogales

- El Comedor
- Kino Border Initiative



## Participants in Cali-Buenaventura

Consejo Comunitario La Plata, Bahía Málaga



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Comunidad Nasa de Buena Vista, Buitrera



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## Collaborators in Seattle

- Casa Latina



## Collaborators in Cali

- Universidad Icesi
- Consejo Comunitario La Plata – Bahía Málaga
- Comunidad Indígena Nasa de Buena Vista - Buitrera