

Love in a War Zone

During my fieldwork Tijuana was gripped by a particularly violent and tumultuous period of the War on Drugs, which continues to shape life along the Mexico-US border. In 2011, the year in which most of my fieldwork for this book took place, an average of forty-seven people were killed per day in Mexico, four of whom were tortured, two of whom were decapitated, three of whom were women, and ten of whom were young people, suggesting a pervasiveness of violence (Molzahn, Rios, Shirk 2012). That same year Tijuana's overall homicide rate—twenty-five deaths per one hundred thousand—represented one of the highest in all of Mexico (Heinle, Ferreira, and Shirk 2014). For sex workers and their partners who use drugs in Tijuana, the cross-border drug wars enact multiple forms of violence in their everyday lives, from the psychological terror of widespread death to the physical threats of violent policing to the institutions that surveil and punish those struggling with addiction. Amid the myriad violence, it may seem like love is an impossibility and secondary to basic survival—but is this the case?

This chapter explores how the broader social contexts, institutions, and policies upholding the drug wars along the border shaped couples' everyday lived experiences and how couples countered their vulnerabilities with their own forms of resistance. When state institutions fail, and options for care enact further violence among already marginalized individuals, the couples in this chapter turned inward to their own resources, including networks of family and friends. Although all intimate relationships are situated within sets of social relations, the familial contexts of sex workers who use drugs are largely excluded from scholarly considerations of their lives.

Through the stories of Celia and Lazarus and Mildred and Ronaldo, I show how couples' dangerous safe havens can expand and absorb family, friends, and other social relationships to create communities of care. These living arrangements were sometimes chaotic but also represented a key strategy for marshaling household resources and offering social protection. Even as these household dynamics

complicated couples' lives, their intimate relationships remained fundamental to each partners' well-being and in important ways differed from their other relationships. The strength of these bonds were further tested when each couple experienced a period of social separation exacerbated by the violence of the drug wars: for Celia, this was a separation from her partner, Lazarus, and for Mildred and Ronaldo, this was a separation from their daughter. Through their stories we are urged to reconsider what it means to love, care, and rely on one another in the midst of a war zone.

CELIA AND LAZARUS

Celia was only two years old when her family moved from Ciudad Juárez to Southern California, where she spent most of her life. She grew up as one of twelve siblings, three of whom died from complications related to drug use. When she was little, Celia used to play parole officer by sitting behind a desk pretending to do paperwork. Celia liked school, but her brothers did not think it was "cool," so she started to hang around different crowds. Among them she met boyfriends who profoundly shaped her life and addiction trajectory.

Celia first got pregnant at age fourteen. Her boyfriend at the time wanted her to terminate the pregnancy and gave her the money for an abortion, but she spent it at the mall. She remembered giving birth around Easter time because there were "bunny rabbits and shit" hanging on the hospital walls as decorations. She became pregnant again at sixteen, this time with her new boyfriend. He had introduced her to crack. Celia claimed he smoked it even while visiting her in the hospital after she gave birth. Celia eventually started exchanging sex for money to support their drug habit "because I thought he loved me." Before he went to prison for gang-related activities, they promised each other that they would not fall in love or start a family with anyone else. She held up her end of the bargain and even had two abortions to do so. He did not and instead became romantically involved with someone else upon his release.

Celia herself has a significant prison record related to her drug use and armed robbery, and she has been deported three times. Twice she returned to the States on the same day because border security was less militarized in the 1990s. As Celia put it, "You'll do anything when you just want to go home." However, her most recent deportation left her stuck in Tijuana. She arrived with nothing more than the clothes she was wearing and a small amount of cash. On her first night she got a hotel room and got drunk. She was distraught and did not know what else to do. Eventually she got a job working in a bar and started exchanging sex to get by. She was gradually introduced to social contacts who used drugs. She already had a long history of drug use, and the easy availability of heroin and meth in Tijuana deepened her addiction. She wasn't interested in a relationship

when she met Lazarus in a Tijuana shooting gallery about a year after she arrived in the city.

Lazarus was also not from Tijuana, but another nearby border city, where his entire family remained. He struggled with the death of his mother when he was young, and he was not raised with care or affection. He grew up with his father and five brothers, but he was often left to his own devices and struggled with poverty and limited education, job training, and direction. He longed for love and affection growing up but instead started using drugs at an early age. Lazarus originally came to Tijuana with the intention to cross into the United States, but he found it “difficult” to do so, primarily because of his drug use. He ended up staying. As both he and Celia shared similarly disadvantaged backgrounds, histories of addiction, and limited support in Tijuana, they gravitated toward each other. They first got together because he was really good at hustling for money, and he helped her inject. She used to know how to inject but had long ago scarred her veins to the point that she needed assistance injecting into her neck. The couple started to spend a lot of time together, hustling for drugs, paying for hotel rooms to get off the streets, and injecting heroin. As he described it, their circumstances made sense for them to be together, and he “insisted” she become his girlfriend because he wanted to fill an emotional void. He knew that she had sex work clients and claimed that he would not get jealous.

As Celia described it, he began to pressure her to have sex, but she wasn’t physically attracted to him. She eventually “felt sorry” for him and relented to have sex because he claimed that nothing would change between them. However, as Celia told it,

It wasn’t true because, after we had sex, oh my God. I couldn’t get him away from me. He just started being real possessive, jealous, and I don’t know. “You said you were not going to be like this. I’m not even your girlfriend. You know, we just had sex.” Then he just, you know, kept on and on and on and on, and I would push him away, whatever, and then I used to feel like bad because he’s a real good person you know. And real sentimental and stuff, you know, and I don’t want to be mean. But then I got real sick and then, you know how when someone takes care of you, like when you’re real sick and you think the people who are your friends would help you and they don’t, then somebody else does it who you least expected, and that’s what he did. He just won me over because he went out of his way for me, and that meant a lot to me, just the little things that he would do. And that’s how we started. I guess that’s how we became a couple, because he proved to me that he cared about me.

Seven years later Celia reflected on the development of their relationship and admitted, “I ended up falling in love with him because of the way he was, even though he wasn’t my type at all.” She called him a “border brother,” implying he was traditionally Mexican, whereas she had always preferred “gang bangers.” She also described him as a “caveman” when she first met him, but she helped refine him, teaching him manners. Celia treated him in a caring and motherly way, given that Lazarus had grown up without love and affection.

Celia was particularly grateful to him for his care after complications from her hysterectomy, as referenced earlier. He looked after her, got her food, bathed her, and helped her get dressed and go to the bathroom. When she got arrested, he would go to the jail to wait for her and try to bail her out if he could afford it, or else he brought her heroin upon her release. Her partnership with Lazarus thus helped her feel “safe” in the context of her daily stressors: “I love him, you know. I’m used to him. I just want to be with him, and I need him. I feel safe around here. I know when he’s with me I’m going to eat, right? I’m not going to be sick. He’s going to make sure we have our dope, whatever it is that I need, you know. So when he’s with me I just feel a little secure on that. And if something were to happen to me, like if I got shot, run over, or whatever, I know he would take care of me.”

Celia situated the importance of her relationship in terms of her material and emotional needs, and the security Lazarus would bring if another catastrophic health event occurred. Their shared heroin and meth use formed a core feature of their relationship from the very beginning, and they continued to act as a team, hustling for drugs and using drugs together. To Celia the provision of love and care was inseparable from the materiality of their daily basic needs, including their addictions. However, the couple faced challenges over their sexual relationship and her sex work. Celia was largely uninterested in sex, whereas Lazarus had a strong desire for it, particularly after using meth. Despite his initial claim that he wouldn’t be jealous of her sex work, he later admitted jealousy over her suspected clients. Why would she prefer to have sex with those much older men over him?

Their relationship was further complicated by their living arrangement with Celia’s two brothers, who constantly teased and tormented Lazarus and took advantage of his ability to hustle for money. Celia’s brothers could be intimidating. Chano is more than six feet tall, muscular, and covered in tattoos, and he injects heroin and meth. Oscar is a bit shorter but similarly broad and tattooed. Celia claims the latter went to “juvey” at age thirteen for killing someone and is schizophrenic, though I am not sure if he has been professionally diagnosed. I met and interacted with her brothers throughout the project and gained a sense of what her home life was like, as well as how Celia and Lazarus’s relationship functioned within this social context. I screened the couple and enrolled them into the larger Parejas study. I also conducted Celia’s quantitative surveys. Her surveys always took several hours, as our conversations went into insightful tangents about her life that were otherwise uncaptured in our structured data collection tools. In one of these interactions, Celia called heroin use a “full time job.” When I asked her a series of questions about who decides about her drug use practices (“You, your partner, or both of you?”), she answered, “The drug decides.” According to Celia, “This fucking drug doesn’t let you rest for nothing, you know. You’re constantly going, going, going.”

I invited Celia and Lazarus to participate in my project right before they were due for their six-month follow-up surveys and testing. However, right before we were to begin, Lazarus disappeared. He was regularly arrested and taken to the

veinte (local jail), as people who “look like drug users” are often targeted in Tijuana for police harassment and arrest. But Celia always found out about it, and this time he wasn’t in jail. Other times he took off for a few days at a time to get some space from the household chaos, but he always came back. This was the longest Lazarus had ever been away, and Celia did not know where he was.¹ In the meantime I continued to spend time with Celia, which lent insight into how Lazarus had a significant impact on her life and emotional well-being, even in his absence. Yet her heroin addiction meant she had to keep “going, going, going.” How did she manage?

RETHINKING “PICADEROS”

Celia lived in a tiny apartment with her two brothers, who were also deported. It was paid for by their mother in Los Angeles, who wired them the US\$200 monthly rent. When he was around, Lazarus lived there as well. The apartment was located in what could be considered ground zero in Tijuana’s drug war. Off the main strip of the Red Light District, their nondescript three-story building was within easy walking distance from our project office. They also lived in proximity to several *connectas*, or places to procure drugs. All of them had spent a considerable amount of time out on the streets and had profound insight into the area. Defying typical gender roles in the drug economy, Celia was often the one who went into the canal to procure drugs.

Shaping their quick access to drugs was their apartment’s proximity to the canal, a significant site of drug use in Tijuana. The canal is a massive concrete structure large enough to allow vehicles to pass through on either side of a recessed waterway. Located just blocks from downtown, the canal’s underbelly is out of sight from most of the bustle of the city. It thus provides refuge and acts as a meeting ground for the growing population of migrants, deportees, the unstably housed, and other people who live and spend time there, including Celia and Lazarus. Parts of the canal are often strewn with garbage, and the stench of refuse and stagnant water can be nauseating. Encampments are rhythmically erected and dismantled as the police “sweep” the area and force individuals to resettle elsewhere. Police also regularly target their patrol activities in the canal because it is a well-known area of drug exchange and use. Public drug injection is common. While the scene is mostly male dominated, Celia was one of a handful of women who frequently visited the canal, and she seemed to know everyone. Many of the photos in her project depicted the canal and other street scenes in her daily hustle.

For Celia even walking the several blocks to our project office was a risk because the “asshole” police often harassed people whom they suspected of drug use. Police surveillance, arrest, and incarceration are some of the most ever-present and harmful effects of the drug war, which become embodied in individual subjectivity and sense of self. Tim Rhodes and colleagues suggest that punitive policing practices

have inlaid a pervasive sense of powerlessness among vulnerable populations, who embody its consequences in a “fatalistic acceptance of harm and suffering” (2011, 212).

Indeed, Celia internalized her situation; she said that people who get arrested “for looking dirty and looking like dope fiends” were to blame, as it was “their own fault for attracting that attention to themselves and putting them at risk.” She also told me that my other white colleague and I were lucky that we don’t have to worry about that, referencing the racialized politics of a drug war created to disproportionately scapegoat, blame, punish, incarcerate, and, in Celia’s case, deport Black and Brown populations. As a woman, Celia said she could better evade arrest compared to her brothers or Lazarus. She also had a strategy to wear baggy clothes and feign pregnancy should she get stopped by the police, as they typically do not take pregnant women to jail. Such survival strategies became particularly important in Lazarus’s absence.

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Given their central location and ties to local social networks of people who use drugs, Celia’s apartment functioned as a safe space for people she knew from the street who used drugs. Such places are often called “shooting galleries” or, in this context, *picaderos*. Shooting galleries are often described in the literature as largely impersonal spaces open for public injection in exchange for a fee or drugs. From a public health standpoint, this largely impersonal version of a *picadero* could bring strangers together into a space where unsanitary conditions and sharing can heighten transmission of HIV/HCV. From an anthropological viewpoint shooting galleries are also social spaces where forms of mutual care circulate in a “moral economy” (Bourgois 1998) wherein people pool money to buy drugs, assist one another with difficult injections, and ensure that people are present to help if overdoses occur. Thus, *picaderos* impart context-dependent social and public health risks and benefits.

While most scholarship focuses on public spaces of mutual assistance as it relates to drug use, less acknowledged are *picaderos* based on known social relations of family and friends. I conceptualize Celia’s home as an extension of her dangerous safe haven with Lazarus, thus addressing an understudied dimension of this moral economy. While mutual assistance as it relates to drug use is well documented in *picaderos*, other communal forms of care may circulate and extend beyond sharing drugs and injection assistance. Given the often fetid conditions of the canal and risk of arrest out in the open, Celia’s apartment became a social refuge. Drug injection assistance was a core feature of the exchanges in Celia’s apartment, but she and her brothers also provided a space where individuals often spent the night, showered, and got a fresh change of clothes. The select groups of individuals who stayed at and frequently visited Celia’s apartment helped one another collectively navigate the everyday violence of the ongoing drug wars.



FIGURE 5. A street-vending scene in Tijuana. Celia and Lazarus often sold goods in the streets as part the local informal economy. Photo by Celia.



FIGURE 6. An overcast day at the Tijuana River Canal. Two people sit atop the canal, as others mill about down below. The canal is a common meeting grounds for drug purchasing and drug use. Celia often scored heroin there and seemed to know everyone. Photo by Celia.



FIGURE 7. A scene from inside Celia and Lazarus's extended dangerous safe haven, which served as a picadero for family and friends to inject. Their apartment offered a space of social refuge compared to the conditions of the canal. Photo by Lazarus.

Celia's apartment sat at the top of a narrow concrete stairway, and its front door couldn't fully open because of a dark-blue couch in its way. On the opposite side of the room was a small bed, a rack of clothes hanging over it. Celia's brother Chano slept in the bed, and her other brother, Oscar, had the couch. They had a television with a VCR on top of it, decorated with a depiction of Jesus with two kids at his feet, and the Virgin Mary was on the wall space above it. Celia's bedroom was in the kitchen; her bed was blocked off by a string along the ceiling with pieces of fabric patched together to enclose the space. It was eclectically decorated: red glittery Valentine's Day cards, plastic flowers on the couch cushions stuffed under blankets that served as her bed, and family photos—one of a nephew in prison for murder and another of her mother and older brother, the latter also in prison. Attached to the sparsely stocked kitchen was the bathroom with a shower. There were always piles of newly washed clothes scattered about, as Celia and everyone else in the household participated in an informal economy of selling secondhand clothes in the streets.

The apartment did not fit the archetype of a shooting gallery, nor did we ever feel unsafe with the company there (especially after Celia yelled at Oscar to not "scare us away"). During one visit my colleague and I saw, sleeping in Chano's bed, a gaunt thirteen-year-old boy who used "every" kind of drug. The adults in the apartment said he did not have a mother, and they used to "baby him a lot"

and “show him love and friendship” because they felt bad for him. During another week a female friend stayed with Celia and her brothers. The friend bought a lot of heroin and kept them constantly “strung out.” Apart from these longer-staying guests, other friends and acquaintances cycled through the space daily.

Without Lazarus to help her inject, Celia had to find others to help her inject in the neck. Lazarus would say, “Girls always go first,” and carefully inject Celia before injecting himself. The neck is an exceedingly dangerous area of the body to inject but is common in Tijuana, due to the impurity of the drug market and long careers of injecting that damage veins (Rafful et al. 2015). Celia was already developing a callous there, but she had to trust others to help her. Indeed, my colleague and I witnessed a terrifying event in which her brother attempted multiple times to inject her. But we also witnessed other more expedient forms of injection assistance from “hit doctors” from the canal, who received a hot shower, fresh clothes, shelter, jokes, and friendship in return for their skills.

Contrary to images of people who use drugs as selfish, uncaring, and dangerous “others” best managed through punitive measures, Celia’s home became an extension of her dangerous safe haven wherein she and her brothers took people in and provided care. These networks of family and friends helped Celia navigate risk, including her injection drug use. The often animated social relations and multiple forms of care circulating through the apartment contrasted with the violence outside their door. Nevertheless, Celia missed Lazarus. During the period that he was gone, I asked Celia how she had been feeling without him. She answered, “Alone, just alone, fucking just hard on me, you know? Because, like I said, he was there; we were always together, always, always together. . . . The simple fact is that I need him financially and emotionally too, you know? The things that he does, he makes me laugh. I don’t feel alone; he’s here with me, and I can talk to him about anything.”

She had a feeling this was not the end. How could it suddenly be over after nearly eight years together? Despite their issues and the core of the relationship developing over drug use, she felt their relationship ran “too deep” to end so abruptly. “He’s got a conscience,” she continued, “because he’s not like the rest of these guys. I know him that good, just as much as he knows me I know him, so I’m pretty sure he’ll come around.”

THE REUNION

Celia was right. Lazarus unexpectedly returned home one day. As it turned out, he had grown “tired” of injecting and went to a rehabilitation center outside of Rosarito, south of Tijuana. One day he and Celia had gotten into an argument; he had already been contemplating seeking help to stop using drugs, and he impulsively left without telling anyone.

Although he genuinely wanted help and spent three months at the rehabilitation center, Lazarus received little medical care and few tools to address his drug use. Anthropologist Angela Garcia has aptly described residential rehabilitation centers in Mexico City as a “hybrid institution composed of parts 12-step program, mental asylum, prison, and church” (2015). In Baja California, the state where Tijuana is located, many of the treatment programs I heard about in the course of my research, including Lazarus’s experience, resonate with this description. These programs are concentrated in impoverished, drug war-torn areas, where they are run by recovering addicts who use not love but violence, humiliation, Bible study, and menial communal labor to keep individuals busy (and the program functioning). Lazarus took a few sedatives in the beginning to manage the pain of withdrawal, but for the most part his treatment consisted of four twelve-step style meetings interspersed during his fifteen-hour work days. Even after three months, the typical time for these treatment programs, those in charge said he was not permitted to leave. Increasingly desperate, Lazarus and a couple of other guys smashed a window and escaped. He had to walk through the desert for hours so he could hitch a ride back to Tijuana. The moment he showed up at the apartment, he wanted to get high.

Lazarus had been home for about two weeks before I connected with him. He already looked terrible. On that occasion he had not slept in three days because of the meth, and he twitched, fidgeted, and coughed throughout our conversation. Lazarus had returned home to the same drug war outside on the streets and social environment inside his apartment. Without a helpful experience in treatment to navigate these circumstances, it is understandable that he started injecting again. Lazarus cared for Celia, missed her, and longed to hug her when he was apart from her at the center. But part of the care they showed each other was through their drug use. Their extended dangerous safe haven also functioned as a space to care for others while ensuring the collective survival of their family unit. Within this context Lazarus was unsure if he could ever quit using drugs. He pointed out the near impossibility of quitting if a partner continues to use:

Well, two dope fiends can’t be together if one stops and the other one keeps using—the other one is going to start using again because they’re going to keep seeing it, seeing it, seeing it. And it’s a temptation. Once you got that in your blood system and you’re around it, you’re always going to be a dope fiend, so if she loves me and I love her, and she really stops and I stop together, you know, we’ll help each other out. You know ‘cause if she stops and I keep using, I’m going to get her to use because I’m going to want to go out and hustle to get my fix.

Amid Lazarus’s ambivalence about quitting, the two were happy to be back together, getting along well, and back to their usual patterns. Many of Lazarus’s photos for his project depicted him as back to work, hustling on the streets to provide

for Celia and their drug use. Other photos showed the continual flow of friends and acquaintances injecting and hanging out in the refuge of their apartment. For the time being, at least, their dangerous safe haven remained as it ever was.

MILDRED AND RONALDO

Mildred and Ronaldo's relationship in many ways paralleled that of Celia and Lazarus. Mildred and Ronaldo had a caring but often conflictive relationship, but they remained bounded by love. In this case the love for their child served as the centerpiece of the story and their point of resistance to a world of disadvantage around them. Mildred and Ronaldo had been together since she learned she was pregnant. They both had always lived in the northern border region of Mexico. Neither started using drugs until later in life. For Ronaldo this was prompted by the grief from the death of his mother. Mildred had experimented with meth and cocaine but did not even know what black tar heroin was when she was introduced to it through a boyfriend.

After Mildred and Ronaldo met at a mutual acquaintance's home, they quickly formed a relationship that cemented itself with her pregnancy. After he found out Ronaldo traveled to a remote area to kick heroin cold turkey; she was unable to stop using until the last trimester of her pregnancy. She had already been in rehab at least six times in her life and, like Lazarus, described deplorable conditions: "It was horrible. I mean, that doesn't make you stop using drugs; on the contrary you come out with more resentment, with more desire to use." The lack of evidence-based services and social support meant they managed their addictions on their own. She went back to heroin immediately after Zoe was born; Ronaldo did not go back to heroin but started smoking meth.

The dangerous safe haven they constructed was friendly and caring, mostly sustained by their shared sense of responsibility of raising their daughter, Zoe. Mildred said she would "suffer a lot" without Ronaldo. People looked down on her for being a "junkie" and treated her poorly, but he made her feel protected because he was good at fighting and people feared him. "I feel that he supports me in that regard. I feel that if I am alone, I will do worse. People are really mean to me, and he gives me that support despite the fact that sometimes he makes me get upset," she said. Many of these arguments erupted over their mismatched sex drives, due to Ronaldo's meth use (just like Celia and Lazarus).

Ronaldo was one of the few male partners I met who had steady employment. Even so, it did not pay enough to support his family. Mildred engaged in sex work with several clients she could count on for regular financial support. Early on in their relationship, sex work created conflict between Mildred and Ronaldo. To avoid the topic Mildred lied, telling Ronaldo that she sold secondhand clothes and cut hair for cash, as she used to work in a salon. But Ronaldo was not naive: "At midnight, selling clothing? Cutting hair? That's kind of difficult!"

Reflecting on those early days, Ronaldo recounted how sometimes their fights escalated into pushing and kicking, and he was sometimes mean to her, humiliating her and acting macho in front of his friends to put up a front. Now, like most other couples, they avoid the topic. Like other men in the Parejas study, Ronaldo concluded that he had to accept her sex work as a way to contribute to their household needs, and he blamed himself for being unable to provide enough: "Well, what else can I do? The one to blame is me. That is how I feel, and I also feel guilty because we go back to the same story of drugs."

Ronaldo felt guilty that the some of the money they earned supported their drug use rather than everything going toward Zoe. He also worried that something horrible would happen to Mildred when she went out at night, but she said she was more afraid of the police than people who use drugs and solicit sex. As one measure of safety, the couple always used drugs at home rather than in public places. Similar to Celia and Lazarus, their home had also become a type of picadero, where she, Ronaldo, and their daughter lived with Ronaldo's brother, Marco, and his new girlfriend.

In contrast to the centralized tourist chaos of the Zona Norte, where Celia lived and our project office was based, Mildred and Ronaldo lived just on the outskirts of downtown. Nonetheless, this *colonia* (neighborhood) had a bustling informal street economy and active drug scene. During visits to the *colonia*, I saw informal marketplaces spring up on the sides of the road, and neighbors vending *hamburguesas* from carts in front of their homes as dusk approached. The project staff told me that younger males riding bikes were likely running drugs out of certain *tiendas* (shops), but I never asked any of those kids to confirm.

Lodged between a burned-down house on a garbage-strewn lot and a newly constructed two-story home right out of suburban San Diego, the modest single-story home where Mildred, Ronaldo, and their family lived had a tenuous roof and a broken window facing the street. Their front door opened into a dimly lit hallway partially blocked by a discarded toilet lodged in the corner. I always visited them with a colleague, and we sat around a wooden table in the kitchen, which was sparse, with only simple appliances and a half-torn-up *ET* movie poster decorating the sink area. A cluttered living room in the back had several couches, a large television, and other random knickknacks, besieged by several kittens and small dogs. Behind the living area in the very back of the house were two doors: one was Mildred and Ronaldo's bedroom and the other belonged to Marco and his girlfriend. Although Ronaldo was usually working, Marco was always in the background when we visited. He was quiet and polite, and his right arm was nearly completely skin grafted because of a serious abscess from injecting drugs.

Whenever we visited, my colleague and I observed a consistent flow of drug users, mostly men, who were greeted by Marco and escorted into a back bedroom, where we were not privy to their activities. As in Celia's apartment, Mildred

and Ronaldo's home functioned as an extension of their dangerous safe haven, a picadero that provided safety and care for known associates. Mildred said the same group of users, all relatives and friends, regularly came in the early morning and late afternoon or evening to cure; many of them held regular jobs during the day and scheduled their heroin use before and after work. She and Marco provided the safe space and sometimes injection assistance in exchange for drugs or a small amount of money. At least one person worked in San Diego but lived in Tijuana to use heroin.

One afternoon a couple showed up; it turned out that she was Marco's ex-partner, who had brought her *sancho* (new boyfriend) and nine-year-old son along. The couple disappeared with Marco into the back bedroom, while the boy entertained himself in the living room by playing with the pets. After they left Mildred explained their relationships to us and commented, "We are very modern," referring to their acceptance of shifting sexual partnerships within their familial group and how this did not disrupt the dynamics of their communal forms of care. For Mildred their home was part of a moral economy that helped the household marshal resources and try to avoid the police. Rather than in public spaces, private homes could keep all actors safe, including any children present. The adults were careful not to directly expose the children to drug use, but how safe are children in these dangerous safe havens?

LOVE FOR ZOE

Globally, many female sex workers have children, yet this is largely neglected in research. When the topic is considered, mothers who engage in sex work—and drug use—are often demonized as neglectful and undeserving parents. However, anthropologists have shown that mothers' stories are far more complex than dominative narratives. Sex workers often face difficult choices of living separately from children but providing financial support versus having children live with them to provide direct material and emotional care, which may also expose children to drug use or other illicit activities (Luna 2020). Most participants in the larger Parejas project had children (84 percent), about a third of whom had children under the age of eighteen living with them. Children profoundly shaped couples' relationships, as they were often the reason partners remained together and sometimes motivated partners to try to engage in health behaviors, like reducing drug use. However, trying to cover basic child-rearing costs often meant women remained in sex work in the context of limited other options (Rolon et al. 2013).

For Mildred and Ronaldo, having Zoe profoundly changed their lives. Amid the couples' personal challenges, Zoe kept them together. Raising Zoe also shaped Mildred's feelings toward Ronaldo: "There is love, from my part there is, and I

think that our daughter has made us come together, or maybe she doesn't let us separate, because I wouldn't leave him alone with the girl. I love her a lot. I wouldn't leave and take her away because I feel that she would suffer; either way, he is her dad, with all the defects that he has and his addiction. He loves her a lot and protects her."

Ronaldo loves their daughter very much, and he constantly talked about Zoe. Even as he sometimes expressed frustration and confusion in terms of his feelings about Mildred, he agreed that "our daughter helps us a lot. She helps us stay together." Mildred said he has an "incredible" love for Zoe. He cried when she was born, and "he gets really sad to see the girl hungry and that we have nothing for her. . . . He almost cries. It's incredible; he loves her so much."

Indeed, Ronaldo wanted to raise Zoe in a loving and supportive household. After Zoe was born, Ronaldo tried to change for her benefit and ensure that he offered critical forms of financial, material, and emotional support. Zoe reaffirmed his need to "calm down" and be a provider for the household, as the couple explained one day:

Ronaldo: I mean, I changed. Before I would wander in the streets a lot. I would be crazier and would wander the streets.

Mildred: He would get into a lot of trouble. . . .

Ronaldo: I would always be at the canal like that [*referring to drug use*] . . . but now with our daughter, I control myself more.

Mildred: You work every day. . . .

Ronaldo: I have to work every day.

The first and only time that I met Zoe, I had accompanied the Parejas field team to follow up with the couple in between visits and update their "locator form," or the documents we used to keep track of couples over the course of the study. We met up in the middle of a street in their neighborhood, as they were out running an errand. Zoe was absolutely adorable, dressed in a tan suede coat lined with sheepskin; she had a pretty smile and enthusiastic personality. She told me she was six at the time. I wondered why she wasn't at school that day.

Later I realized that both parents worried about how their drug use might affect Zoe and raise concerns in school. They contemplated slowing down or stopping their use, but they struggled in the context of limited options for humane drug treatment that would accommodate their family and not separate them during treatment. Ronaldo worried but thought, for now at least, they did a sufficient job of hiding their drug use from Zoe: "She doesn't know about our drug use, you know? The less she knows, the better for her. It has been very difficult, but we have to get over this [stop using drugs], because the day that something happens, we are going to let her down. I would feel bad. I would feel like I was losing something, like everything is lost."



FIGURE 8. Reflecting the often contentious relationship between Mildred and Ronaldo, especially in light of their daughter being taken into state custody, Mildred did not take any photos of her partner. This photo of her dogs was one of her favorites. Photo by Mildred.

Mildred, however, worried that Zoe already knew more than they wanted to her to. She worried that Zoe would be taken away if the school found out, as that had happened to other families:

Because of heroin, I don't do anything well, I can't gain weight, and I have to change my appearance, and those are some of the reasons why I haven't taken the girl to school. I am afraid that they will take her from me, and I don't know if I should send her with [Ronaldo], and then what are they going to say, "Where's your mom?" The girl talks about everything, and I am afraid that she will tell her teachers that "oh, my mom injects," and they will want to take her from me, because it happened a bit ago at the school that is near the house. The teachers from there sent someone from children's protective services to their house, and that woman is not even an addict. It was just because she would say bad words, and they sent child services, and they took her four kids. I am afraid. People are really mean; it's like they don't think about how much they are going to hurt others.

Unfortunately, these interviews foreshadowed events yet to come.

While their home may have served as a safe space and picadero for friends and family, the constant foot traffic began to draw heightened police surveillance. It all started when the police came into their home without a warrant, looking for information on the whereabouts of a fugitive. When they noticed syringes, they threatened to send Zoe to social services if Ronaldo did not provide them with information on the suspect's whereabouts. He honestly could not help them. The following week the police showed up again and took Mildred and Zoe into custody, along with several syringes—that they had planted this time—for evidence.

The police lied to social services and said that they found Zoe two blocks away from the house because law enforcement cannot legally remove a child from their home without the presence of personnel from social services. Once Zoe was in custody, social services requested her birth certificate, which the couple could not produce. After Zoe was born, they owed Mex\$6,000 (about US\$450) to the general hospital that they could not afford to pay, so the hospital withheld her documents.² The couple said they received poor treatment from hospital staff who suspected that Mildred used drugs and tested Zoe three times to try to find evidence of substances in her system so they could keep her from her parents. Because her parents were unable to pay and procure proper documentation from the hospital, Zoe's life was disadvantaged from the start.

These circumstances demonstrate Mildred and Ronaldo's structural vulnerability, including the stigma and institutional discrimination faced by people who use drugs. Amid the violence of an ongoing drug war, in which drugs are more readily available than evidence-based drug treatment, Ronaldo said it was his daughter who was criminalized and punished. As he put it, the police "did everything brazenly. In other words, without a search warrant, without an order to pick her up, without an order to take her away, and they can't put a minor in a patrol car, you know? Do you think a six-year-old girl is a delinquent? The police treated the girl like a criminal." Ronaldo was angry and upset at their treatment by DIF, or the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (National System for the Integral Development of Family), Mexico's child protective services. He felt like he got the runaround with his case, his paperwork was delayed, and his lawyer was available for him only in the mornings—when he was at work. He felt stigmatized for his drug use and unsupported in his case.

Zoe was kept in custody and would be assigned a home placement while the parents demonstrated their fitness to win her back. To regain custody Mildred and Ronaldo underwent state-mandated drug testing, an enactment of biopower that, as French philosopher Michel Foucault notes, regulates and controls health behavior as a means to construct proper citizens ([1978] 1990). Because penalties for women are more severe, due to the stigmatizing of women who use drugs as "selfish" mothers, the couple acquired a drug-free urine specimen to fake Mildred's test results. Ronaldo submitted his own urine, which tested positive for meth. They reasoned that if one of them tested positive for drug use, it might reduce the authorities' suspicion that both used drugs. The positive meth result mandated Ronaldo to twelve sessions of parenting classes for two hours every Friday. He completed the coursework but tested positive again and was mandated to sixteen sessions of "personal reconstruction" classes targeting emotional and psychological issues. Parenting skills, mental health, and coping strategies for emotional trauma are clearly important, but such individualistic approaches also obscure the broader social structures that classified Ronaldo as an unfit parent requiring moral transformation. In many ways the couples' interactions with the state only inflicted further violence and injury in an already fraught situation.

The late Black feminist writer and activist June Jordan asked herself, “Where is the love?” whenever she evaluated life’s possibilities. In particular, she urges us to ask how the powerful treat socially vulnerable communities: “How do the strong, the powerful, treat children? . . . the so-called minority members of the body politic? How do the powerful regard women? How do they treat us?” (2003, 269–70). Jordan’s questions are part of a long history of Black feminist critiques of state-sanctioned violence and the potential for love to create political change in our communities. Here I find her questions useful to think through the effects of the drug war, including how state apparatuses inflict and enable violence, forcing individuals who use drugs to find alternative sources of redress.³ People who use drugs in Tijuana are highly stigmatized and frequently subject to harassment and poor treatment. If they have children, is the state more concerned about the welfare of the child or punishing the parents? Jordan suggests that examining the actions of the powerful tells us that our institutions are designed to entrench and perpetuate inequities. Current structures of policing, child welfare, and other institutions do not deserve patience and understanding from those who continue to be harmed; they require a total transformation.

“But what can we do? We can’t do anything,” Ronaldo lamented. “In other words, everything is by force. If we don’t do what they say, what is the DIF going to do?” Any noncompliance on their part threatened their custody case, and, as people who use drugs, they did not perceive themselves as having any power to change that. The couple internalized their poor treatment by hospital staff at her birth, the police, and social services, which left them feeling caught in the crosshairs of a war on drugs they were unable to escape. Zoe’s removal brought the couple “closer and created distance,” as Ronaldo put it. They struggled with their drug use, the guilt of Zoe’s removal, the powerlessness they felt against the system, and the stress on their own relationship. But the couple’s response to comply just enough to put them on the pathway to regain custody of Zoe was their way of uniting in solidarity to resist a system that they felt worked against poor people who use drugs.

Zoe was placed with one of Mildred’s relatives in another border city, which was a best-case scenario in this situation. They were allowed limited visitation rights. Ronaldo spent more time on public transportation getting there and back home than he did visiting with her, but he dutifully went every Sunday. Sometimes Mildred did too. Throughout their case, Ronaldo dutifully did his part to regain custody. He said he learned a lot in his classes and showed my colleague and me his notebook of emotions he was working through. He was not over his anger and anguish for his family’s treatment by state authorities. He clearly missed Zoe. He often became emotionally distraught while trying to hold back tears in his interviews. No matter what questions my colleague and I asked, all of our conversations with Ronaldo circled back to Zoe. Ronaldo could not think of any specific reasons for taking the photographs in his project, including one of a broken bicycle. Afterward I thought about how he told us in an earlier interview that he sold his bike because Zoe was hungry; he needed his bike but he loved his daughter and would sacrifice anything for her.



FIGURE 9. A broken bicycle, one of the few photos that turned out from Ronaldo's roll of film. Photo by Ronaldo.

Ronaldo's photo project was not as fruitful as other couples' work in terms of the photographs produced. However, it was just as insightful in other ways. He drove the conversations to what was really important to him—not HIV and "risk behaviors"—but the love of his daughter. Equally insightful was a comment Mildred made as she walked through the living room at one point while we discussed his photographs. When I asked him why he decided to take photos of what he did—friends working in the backyard, his bedroom, the bicycle—he seemed to interpret my standard questioning as if he had taken photos of the "wrong" things. He asked if he should redo the project. Inadvertently, my project seemed to enact another form of violence, as if the impositions of the health-care system, police, and DIF were not already enough to upset him. Mildred tenderly intervened: "They asked me the same thing, love. I say that the project is good because you feel that they are a little interested in you, and you no longer feel so rejected by society, right? Someone is actually looking at us!"

Indeed, looking into their story provides insights into the familial dynamics and love for children that can characterize extended dangerous safe havens. It reveals a counternarrative to dominant portrayals of parents who use drugs as selfish and uncaring. It also shows that the ways we treat people who use drugs—making them feel "so rejected," as Mildred puts it—only exacerbates the harm and violence in their lives. In reality, child protective cases are extraordinarily difficult situations for everyone involved. Ronaldo bore the brunt of the requirements the couple needed to win her back. He was torn apart by being separated

from Zoe and counted down the days until they would learn if they could get her back.

My colleague with whom I conducted this fieldwork clearly struggled with their story, as did I. The candid reflections in her fieldnotes capture the complexity of the situation:

I was moved by his experience. He made me question the system but also his situation. At the end of the interview I found one of his acquaintances [who came over to inject] disturbing—he wasn't composed—he kept staring at Jennifer with creepy desire and mumbled some things. His partner's acquaintances, also injectors, use their house as a shooting gallery. . . . Is this the right environment for a 7-year-old to grow up? Probably not. But should she be taken away from a father who clearly loves her to death, misses her, and is fighting his addiction and our society to become a provider for his daughter? Definitely not! I was torn after this interview. Made me question life in general, but also made me incredibly grateful for my relatively simple life.⁴

It is easy to make judgments from afar about what a “normal” family “should” look like and what is “best” for children. However, family relations and child care-taking in the context of addiction are really complicated. These situations raise difficult questions about how love and care are expressed when poverty, disadvantage, and violence are part of a family's daily experience. Were Mildred and Ronaldo unfit parents whose drug use rendered them as undeserving of living as a family? Should state authorities be empowered to decide if parents are suitable caretakers? Zoe was in a position of disadvantage from the very day she was born; what about the complicity of the state in producing a precarious life? In circumstances of state-supported violence and precarity, it makes sense for families to turn inward and extend their dangerous safe havens to relatives and friends who help each other survive.

“WHERE IS THE LOVE?”

Turning back to June Jordan's question of “Where is the love?” challenges us to rethink the ways that couples must navigate the state-sanctioned violence of the drug war. When the state deprives its most vulnerable of love in any capacity, individuals must find love elsewhere. Couples crafted dangerous safe havens as one such solution, and, as we see in this chapter, some of these safe havens expand and absorb family, friends, and other social relationships in efforts to create their own communities of care. These extended dangerous safe havens are imperfect responses to the violence and institutional failures of the drug war. These strategies do not change any of the harmful political or social structures of the drug war, as that takes the kind of collective political love and action further discussed in the conclusion. However, the forms of support and mutual aid outlined in this chapter are a starting point of couples' collective survival and offer a social commentary on what happens when we wage war on instead of care for people who use drugs.

In Tijuana the drug-related violence and addiction that couples navigate was not met with evidence-based drug treatment options or supportive social and health services; it was police terror and bureaucratic indifference as usual. Lazarus genuinely wanted help for his drug use, but his experience—typical of many in Parejas—amounted to yet more violence. Mildred and Ronaldo's treatment by various state agencies in their daughter's birth and custody case subjected them to further forms of everyday violence and removal of their child. Celia's and Mildred's intimate relationships were not always easy, but their experiences of separation brought to the forefront the emotional solidarity that underpinned their long-term unions. Even amid the social chaos of their homes and drug-related violence of their lives, their relationships offered forms of love, emotional support, and caretaking that helped them navigate an otherwise oppressive world.

Whereas this chapter examines the structural and social contexts in which dangerous safe havens are forged and strategized, the next chapter turns to the interior emotional experiences of drug use and sex work within these intimate relationships. Circling back to the story of Cindy and Beto gives a fuller picture of how sex workers' relationships can embody social meaning beyond violence and individual risk.