
Rewriting Risk

In the light of the window, Cindy was kneeling in a chair and seeking relief from her physical suffering from heroin withdrawal. Visible in the light were the bruises and sores imprinted on her skin from a long history of black tar heroin injection, which permanently scars veins due to its viscosity and unregulated impurities in an illicit drug market. Often Cindy resorted to injecting subcutaneously, which provides slow relief but heightens the risk of skin infections. On this day she injected into the delicate tissue of her breast, which was extremely risky because the tiny veins are liable to rupture. But she was suffering and had few options left. Surrounding Cindy was the material evidence of her life's conditions, including her desk storing chunky high heels for sex work and an assortment of syringes that she and Beto shared. On the top of the desk was a little sparkly pink Christmas tree, a year-round ode to Cindy's love of pink. The decoration provided a bit of reprieve to the heaviness of the scene, as did her artwork and Beto's love messages in magic marker that adorned the walls of their home.

The image I describe was captured by Beto as part of his photovoice project. At the time Cindy was unaware that he snapped her photo because of her intense concentration during this risky task. The photo is devastating. It has always stayed with me. It captures the sense of urgency in the couples' daily heroin injection rituals amid their material constraints, while also suggesting the deep level of intimacy of their dangerous safe haven in which this scenario unfolded.¹

I open with this scene to make visible the concept of *embodiment*, a critical component of dangerous safe havens. Embodiment evokes the "mindful body" and the interrelationships between sociopolitical forces, the interior emotional experiences of individuals, and the ways that individual bodies navigate their world to forge social relations. Love is an emotional link and foundational to my conceptualization of embodiment. In the context of Cindy and Beto's relationship, love transcended epidemiological risk as emotions guided their embodied practices of sharing syringes and helping each other to get well. Individuals like Cindy, who

physically and very visibly embody the war on drugs in their track marks and skin lesions, often face the daily insults of societal judgment, discrimination, and stigma that in turn can become internalized as self-blame. Finding a partner who has embodied a similar lifetime of hardship forms the basis of dangerous safe havens in which couples unconditionally accept and care for each other amid the devastation of addiction and a world that has otherwise shown them no love.

This chapter explores Cindy and Beto's relationship through a lens of love as both an emotional experience and an embodied practice. Their dangerous safe haven represents the embodiment of shared histories of trauma that brought them together and illustrates how health "risk behaviors" that could enact physical harm also express solidarity and emotional commitment. While I examine how injection drug use and sex work shape the dynamics of their relationship—because this is part of their daily reality—I also want to widen the analytical lens beyond indices of risk to consider the everyday circumstances of their lives together. Without romanticizing drug use or minimizing the physiological distress of heroin withdrawal, I also want to draw attention to how their relationship is critically important even beyond their shared addictions. Embodied forms of intimacy and care reflect Cindy and Beto's pursuit of meaningful lives in contexts of disadvantage. But how did they find themselves in such circumstances in the first place?

AN EMOTIONAL DISEASE

Cindy was born in Mexico and smuggled across the border when she was very young, where she was raised by her grandmother in San Diego. She remembered the trauma of crossing the border with a *coyote* at night; he instructed her not to tell her real name to anyone and gave her a fake name to use. She cried because that wasn't her name. She didn't understand why she had to use another name. Growing up on the US side was supposed to bring Cindy a better life. She had gorgeous, impossibly long and thick dark hair and a voluptuous figure that she often showed off in tight jeans. She wanted to be a model while growing up, but her grandmother didn't see the point of Cindy pursuing her own career ambitions because, as she was told, she was only going to get married and have kids anyway.

Cindy grew up in a chaotic household, where her step-grandfather sexually abused her for many years, which her grandmother probably knew about. When Cindy finally gathered the courage to tell a counselor at school, she was told that she and her brothers could be taken from the home and separated into foster care. She thought that would be all her fault, so she retracted her statement. Her mother was mostly absent from her life, due to struggling with substance use, and Cindy sobbed when recounting her feelings of abandonment. She held a lot of resentment toward her mother and recalled a particularly painful time when her mother chose to go to a bar instead of spending time with her, which prompted

Cindy to begin her own experimentation with drugs as a teenager. The first time she used drugs, she went on a three-day meth binge until her friend's father had to intervene and help her. Although she loved school, Cindy dropped out and ran away from home multiple times because she could no longer tolerate the sexual abuse and emotional trauma.

Cindy married when she was young and generally described her relationship in good terms, for the first couple of years anyway. They wanted to have kids. She took care of her nephew for a while and loved taking on a motherly role. However, she couldn't seem to get pregnant. Every month when she menstruated, she grew upset, but she never went to the doctor about it because that would have acknowledged the problem. Things took a turn for the worse when her husband let his brother move into their tiny apartment. His brother stole from them to fund his heroin habit and eventually introduced Cindy to smoking the drug. Her addiction progressed until her husband left her, which sent her further spiraling: "I got really depressed, so I got even more hooked. I started just not showering, not caring, not cleaning the house, not cooking, not eating, nothing; I didn't care. I just started going out, and stealing, and shoplifting and stuff, and selling whatever I got, and giving it to the connect [person selling drugs]. And I ended up starting to sell for the connect." Cindy was moving large quantities of heroin before she was arrested and deported for robbing an ice cream shop at gunpoint. She was never in direct contact with her husband again. They never officially divorced.

Estranged from her family, Cindy got by when she first arrived in Tijuana with the help of another deportee. She cleaned a man's house in exchange for staying with him until she figured out what to do. She lived with several different men and for a while worked in a bar and had a partner who became wildly possessive and wanted her to stay confined at home. When this partner became enraged one day, he slammed Cindy's kitten across the room and killed it. That was a breaking point. Terrified, she packed her bags and snuck out of the house while he was sleeping. Someone later told her that drug dealers from a meth deal gone bad came to the house, nailed all the doors shut, and set it on fire, killing the ex-boyfriend; his ex-wife, with whom he had rekindled a relationship; their newborn baby; his brother; and the brother's girlfriend. Cindy said she "skipped death" by leaving him. Out on her own again, and like many other women with limited options who find themselves in Tijuana by choice or unintended circumstance, sex work became a viable option for her survival. She was already engaged in sex work and deep into her heroin addiction when she met Beto.

Born and raised in Tijuana, Beto had a slight build, shaved head often hidden under a baseball hat, and gentle brown eyes. He grew up in a broken home and suffered verbal and emotional abuse from his mother. He was taken out of the home by child protective services but escaped three times before being taken in by his aunt. His aunt was married to an Iraq War veteran who was quiet and isolated, and the couple gave Beto considerable freedom. Beto started using alcohol and drugs

during his teenage years, ran away again to live on the street, and spent the majority of his adult life in and out of prison. At one point he got married but never felt emotionally connected to his non-drug using wife, with whom he had two children. During his marriage he navigated a period of sobriety and held a regular job, but he never felt content. The couple split up, and he started using drugs again.

Beto called drug addiction an “emotional disease” that stems from one’s childhood. In contrast to his trauma and dissatisfaction in life, drugs provided emotional relief: “You find in drugs what you did not find elsewhere. It is like a refuge, an escape. . . . You are looking for something, to fill the void, evade thoughts, evade situations, evade many things. . . . You are looking to find peace for a moment,” he described when reflecting on his long addiction trajectory.

Cindy and Beto met one day while connecting for heroin. They realized that they had a lot in common, and their relationship quickly developed. “One of the reasons she and I understood each other from the beginning,” Beto explained, “is because we had similar lives, the same addiction, the same environment, the same family state; we have suffered the same things.” As adults, Cindy and Beto finally found comfort with each other. As partners who had already survived so much, they didn’t judge each other for their addictions because they understood its deep roots. They found support in a shared “emotional disease” from past lifetimes of embodied vulnerabilities that also shaped their future possibilities.

LOVE AS EMBODIED PRACTICE

Cindy and Beto lived on a compound of land left to Beto’s family by his great-grandmother, the matriarch of a family who had lived in Tijuana for generations. There was one central house facing the main street, and the descendants had all been allowed to build small structures on the long, rectangular property. Cindy drew me a diagram of the compound, depicting a total of fifteen adults and five children living in an area that must be about a quarter of an acre. Often family members set up an informal flea market out front, where they sold everything from glitter Jesus figurines to electric candles, small furniture, and shoes, but mostly tools and car parts. Beto’s uncle ran it; he and Beto used to do drugs and get in trouble together, but this uncle had been clean from heroin for twenty years. He and his wife ran a drug rehabilitation center, but they never judged or pressured Cindy and Beto to enroll. They figured that if the couple wanted help, they would ask for it. Many of the other family members drank alcohol, including Beto’s other uncle, who lived in the main house and was usually sitting out front when I came by.

Inside the fenced property people were always coming and going, and a San Diego rock station constantly played in the background (the music was often picked up in my recordings, wherein the Beatles’ “Here Comes the Sun” might be juxtaposed against a discussion of the couple’s heroin use). Cindy said the cops

probably thought that they were a *narcotraficante* family because of all the activity. Yet amid so many people, the couple largely kept to themselves. I never observed much interaction, nor did anyone ever stop to ask why a *gringa* (or two, when a colleague accompanied me) kept coming around to hang out. Cindy and Beto often felt judged as the “heroin users,” and they didn’t like being around drunk people anyway. They personally never used alcohol as a harm reduction strategy to prevent overdose.

Even surrounded by family and so much social activity, Beto always felt alone until Cindy moved in: “With Cindy, everything is very different, very different. . . . She inspires me; I know that I have someone, because where I live, even though my family is big, even with all those people, I was still alone. And since she came to live there, I don’t care. She is everyone as long as I’m with her.” Beto had constructed their single-room dwelling on the property, where they carved out the physical, social, and emotional refuge of their dangerous safe haven. Evidence of the safety of their safe haven was inscribed in magic marker all over the walls, where Beto wrote love messages to Cindy: “Yeah, he wrote, ‘Mi Sirenita.’ He calls me his little mermaid [*laughs*], and then ‘te amo y te amaré por siempre mi flakis, mi flaca, mi flakis, y ‘solo tú y yo para siempre,’ ‘tu lugar está aquí en mi corazón,’ this is your place right here, and then [he drew] a heart. He wrote all those messages for me on the wall,” Cindy beamed.

The danger in their safe haven was anchored in the couple’s daily heroin use, which structured their time and was a collaborative endeavor that involved weighing multiple, competing physical and social risks. But a closer look at their relationship also reveals the deeper symbolism of their shared drug use and what is at stake in their relationship. While heroin use was a key feature of their lives together, their relationship at once revolved around but transcended the centrality of addiction.

Cindy and Beto shared the labor of drug procurement and use. They took turns purchasing drugs out in front of their compound. Logistically, Beto typically took charge of preparing the drugs, which meant heating and liquefying the black tar heroin in the bottom of a soda can, and equally dividing up the liquid into their syringes. Cindy frequently worked late, so Beto procured and prepared the drugs while she remained in bed. She was often woken up with “Baby, your stuff is ready,” and if he were able to buy a sugary donut or other breakfast treat to complement the full syringe, all the better. They shared all utensils throughout the preparation process (e.g., water, cooker, syringes) and kept their syringes in a common area, in which there was little indication of whose syringe was whose. With limited access they used whichever syringe seemed to work best for them at the time. Cindy said they don’t use condoms, so sharing syringes “doesn’t matter anyway.” While they typically injected themselves on their own, they helped each other to inject when one was struggling or in pain.

All of these drug injection practices are epidemiological “risk behaviors” that heighten both partners’ susceptibility to infectious diseases and other harms, including viral hepatitis and HIV. Heightened rates of infection gesture to a public health rendering of the concept of embodiment, which social epidemiologist Nancy Krieger conceives of as “how people literally embody, biologically, the multilevel dynamic and co-constituted societal and ecologic context within which we live, work, love, play, fight, ail, and die, thereby creating population patterns of health, disease, and well-being within and across historical generations” (2016, 832). Through this lens of embodiment, our lifetime experiences become physically inscribed onto our bodies in ways that help explain statistical patterns of health disparities at the population level.

The bruises and scarring all over the couple’s bodies signaled their lifetimes of embodied insults that manifested in and from drug use. The ongoing drug war and impurities of criminalized drug markets physically imprint viral and bacterial infections, skin infections, abscesses, track marks, and other health harms on the bodies of people who inject drugs. Not only did the couple contend with more distal threats of infectious disease like HIV, but they embodied these other physical risks that also socially “marked” their bodies as drug users. Cindy’s difficulty finding veins had even led her to start injecting into a delicate vein in her forehead. She worried that the beginning of a tiny track mark will quickly worsen.

Cindy and Beto recognized these physical health risks of their drug use. However, like many other people who inject drugs, they did not perceive their drug use entirely in terms of “risk,” nor did they necessarily prioritize disease avoidance in guiding their actions. Their concerns were just as much social and emotional as physical. Rather than acts of thoughtless destruction, helping each other in their drug use represented embodied practices of caretaking, reinforcing their relationship as a dangerous safe haven amid multiple and competing risks. Akin to anthropologist Angela Garcia’s work on intergenerational heroin use among close kin, practices related to drug use were not viewed as harm but are “oriented toward relieving the pain of the other and, as such, they were moral acts, embedded in the everyday context of shared vulnerability and difficult life circumstances” (2014a, 56).

For each partner the seedlings of addiction started early, accumulated in multiple forms of trauma over the life course, and became physically embodied as track marks, scars, and infections. This physical manifestation, in turn, exposes individuals to social discrimination and rejection. It further confines individuals under new forms of surveillance, including being targeted by police for their appearance as suspected drug users. Epidemiological studies in Tijuana have found that being arrested for track marks is associated with HIV infection, which is likely a proxy measure of the stigma, discrimination, and mistreatment that shapes the ill health of people who inject drugs (Strathdee et al. 2008a).

Embodiment thus has physical as well as social dimensions, or what French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1977) refers to as the “socially informed body,” which moves through the world internalizing the broader environment while navigating the emotional lived experience of inequality and cultivating a subjective sense of what really matters.² Couples’ embodied practices of caretaking prioritize their emotional unity and hold a key to reinterpreting the meaning of “risk behaviors.” Drug use was but one part of Cindy and Beto’s love and risk to be navigated amid other interrelated challenges, including economic precarity, sex work, incarceration, illness, and their collective will for survival.

* * *

Following the embodied ways in which Cindy and Beto moved through the challenges of their world together rewrites notions of risk as the couple themselves experienced it. Beto affectionately nicknamed Cindy *la chamuca*, or local slang for “the devil,” which also connotes a sense of mischievousness. Rather than anything inherently evil, *la chamuca* references how they considered themselves to be partners in crime in navigating their material circumstances:

Cindy: I’m not going to be a nag and be like, “No, don’t do that and this and that.” If I see it’s doable and there’s no risk, and I know I can back him up or look out for him, I’ll be like, “Okay, let’s go for it,” because I’ve always been down for things, so I’m like, “Okay, let’s go for it.” That’s why he calls me *la chamuca*, but he thinks it’s cool. We talked, and I said, “If I would be nagging you instead of being like, ‘Yeah, go for it,’ would you not do it?” and he’s like, “No, I would just have to hide it from you, and I’d have a hard time doing stuff.” It’s not like I’m making him do anything. That’s how I look at it.

Beto: We’re accomplices. . . .

Cindy: Yeah, I always told him, “We’re accomplices; we’re buddies; we’re friends; we’re partners; we’re everything,” you know?

As indicated in this passage, they meant “everything” to each other, and together they negotiated risk taking. They shared a sense of what was possible in terms of their life constraints. Cindy did not “nag” Beto or try to make him into something he is not, but rather they supported each other as they are. As an example, Cindy encouraged him to steal a bike from someone outside in the street whom they had been watching through their window. They described their victim as succumbing to the effects of a “speedball” (a mixture of heroin and meth) in that he was alternately nodding off (from the heroin) and tweaking on the rocks on the street (obsessively focusing on an object, an effect of meth). Their victim was too distracted to notice before Beto snatched the bike and pedaled away. He later sold it for Mex\$100 (about US\$10) and three tamales. As she often did, Cindy seemed so proud of her man as she told the story.

In terms of day-to-day support, Cindy largely preferred to earn money from sex work to help maintain their drug use rather than Beto “risking himself” to

commit crimes. Beto sometimes worked as a mechanic, but it was not enough to reliably support their daily needs. With limited education and a prison record, Beto could not easily find stable employment. Petty theft was a last resort option that left him vulnerable to arrest. Further, Beto embodied his drug use in his own track marks and scars, and he picked at his skin whenever he smoked meth, which also “marked” him as drug user and left him open to harassment by authorities even when he wasn’t committing a crime. Cindy felt it was much easier for her to discreetly engage in the quasi-legal activity of sex work with her regular clients and avoid arrest compared to Beto undertaking regular criminal activity and potentially going back to prison.

Like the other women in this book, Cindy managed her sex work in ways that reduced her exposure to harm and maintained the love and emotional intimacy that she and Beto shared. Cindy described sex work as a process of dissociating herself emotionally while she let clients temporarily “borrow” her physical body. Cindy clearly distinguished the boundaries of her work from her relationship with Beto: “I mean, it’s a job that I’m doing; I’m not doing it for pleasure; I’m not doing it because I like it, or nothing like that. What I like, I do it with my husband, and only him, and I enjoy it only with him. When I do this, I don’t enjoy it. I’m like putting my mind out of my body, and like you’re borrowing a body, and my mind is just leaving, you know, to complete the job, get some money, and that’s the way I take it.”

Cindy was beautiful and crafty and often used her erotic assets to finagle money and other material items from her clients without even engaging in sex. While she cultivated friendly relationships with these regular clients for her financial benefit and physical safety, as did other women in this book, she was careful not to breach the emotional contract she had with Beto by developing feelings for them. She never allowed clients to kiss her; she called that practice “sacred” and reserved only for “someone you love.” She also used condoms with clients to demarcate physical and emotional separation. In contrast, using a condom with Beto would not be the same experience, either physically or emotionally. Condomless sex helped her feel “closer” to Beto and reinforced their trust: “You feel more like you’re trusting each other; you really, truly, trust him by not using a condom with him.”

Cindy loved and trusted Beto with her life. She perceived the benefits of her sex work as outweighing the couples’ competing risks, including his heightened risk of arrest and incarceration. Since childhood Cindy had suffered from feelings of abandonment, for which she had often blamed herself. Cindy’s mother was largely absent, and prior partners spent time incarcerated and left her in precarious situations. This continued to give her anxiety. One night after she and Beto had gotten high, he walked to the store to buy cigarettes. When he didn’t return for a long time, she panicked that he had been arrested. She was ready to walk all the way to the jail in the cold and dark of night to try to bail him out before she found him nodded off on the toilet in the shared bathroom facility of their compound. When she found him, she sobbed and hugged him in relief. Beto was somewhat

bewildered by her intense emotional reaction, but he offered comfort and reassurance that he wasn't going anywhere.

The stakes of imprisonment took on an almost mythical quality in a conversation we had one day about prison life. I naively hadn't realized that some of the best quality drugs in Tijuana were distributed from well-connected networks of prisoners, and gang affiliations on the inside can signal a struggle for survival where the stakes are life and death. Inmates are divided into different categories, including Sureños, a term for Latino gang affiliates from Southern California, and Paisas, Mexican nationals who have no gang affiliation. "He didn't use to like Sureños at all," Cindy explained, "and check him out, check him out! He got married to a Sureña [*laughter*]. Same with me though, I didn't use to like Paisas at all, and look at me." On the outside of prison they could laugh about it, but they both grew serious when they explained the context:

Cindy: Yeah, it's a war to the death, and he being the enemy, it's like, "What's up with you, dude?" Same with me. If I fall into prison, and they know about this, oh, I would be in trouble. But I told him that if that ever happens, God forbid, but if that ever happens, when I went to visit, I would cover my tattoos and all that. I would not speak English. I wouldn't say I was a southerner, so I wouldn't cause problems. . . . We are not supposed to be together. I love my baby.

Beto: If that were to happen, I'd play dumb. But I'm going to stay here.

Cindy: That's right. You're not going back to prison.

Beto: I'm not going to fall into prison anymore. I already have three years out, and before that I was three months on the outside at any given time at the most, and then inside again. Two years, three years, one month, I went out two months, and in again for two years, three years, five years. For eleven years, I had almost three years total on the outside, and the rest of the time, I was inside. And when I was out here, I was also in a rehabilitation center for a while, another kind of confinement.

Sex work, then, is a form of situated rationality and a moral act of care within Cindy's life constraints primarily aimed at supporting the couple and keeping Beto out of prison again. Her carefully cultivated client base enabled her to reduce her own physical risks, while caring for Beto in ways that helped assure their collective social safety. She also supported him in her role as *la chamuca*, encouraging him to engage in "low-risk" activities to contribute financially. All of these embodied practices prioritized the socioemotional sense of security that their dangerous safe haven provided. Beyond finances Cindy's sex work was her way of assuring the longevity of her dangerous safe haven and showing unconditional care for a partner who helped make her feel like a complete person:

We love each other a lot. We found our other half; we found the one we were looking for. It's cool stuff. I always tell him he's never gonna be alone again; since he has me,

he'll never be alone again. He'll always, always have someone that worries for him, that looks after him, and I told him I might just be a lady . . . but I can take care of him too. There's things that I can do to take care of him, to look after him to make sure he's okay, he's safe. Not just because he's a man he's gonna be the one to take care of me. I can take care of him too, and I'll always take care of him in any way that I can. Always, always, always.

* * *

At one point during the Parejas project Cindy asked, "I wonder how other couples are. Are they like us? Are they on the same page, and do they answer the questions like we do?"

From my perspective the answer to Cindy's question is no—not all couples were like them. Though forms of love and care were apparent across couples, as seen in earlier chapters, Cindy and Beto proclaimed to be "in love" with each other. Their relationship had a depth of emotion, and the couple embodied their love and care for each other through daily practices beyond drug use and sex work.

Cindy constantly complimented Beto. She often bragged how smart he was even for having little formal education. Sometimes as she spoke, he looked down sheepishly, and she would rub his head or kiss him on the cheek. Cindy was also impressed by Beto's street smarts. When Beto shared a series of photos of street scenes taken for my project, he told the story of leaving home and living with a community camped out on a hill behind some roadside billboards. They managed to evade the police by running away, which involved jumping down onto a rooftop and sliding down the billboard pole. Cindy had heard some of these stories, but not all of the details, and she was impressed by his ingenuity. She remarked to me, "Survival, huh?" And then to him, "That's pretty cool stuff, smarty pants. Baby you're so cute." Survival indeed: Beto was eventually arrested and incarcerated, only to be released several years later and find out that his street friends had either passed away from drug-related causes or were infected with HIV.

The same will for survival translated to their own relationship, in which HIV and other forms of illness posed a constant threat, particularly given their precarious living conditions and limited access to health care. Cindy was frequently sick, including several bouts of undetermined flu-like illness throughout the project. Solidarity in sickness offers an important example of closeness and care in sex workers' relationships, as we also see in Julieta and Mateo's story in chapter 2 and Celia and Lazarus's story in chapter 3.

During one particularly severe bout of illness, Cindy suffered from a high fever, exhaustion, vomiting, and a stomachache to the point that she was immobilized and thought she "was going to die." In her frustration she told Beto that she was becoming a "hindrance" and she should leave. "She told me . . . that my life was very *heavy* as it was," Beto recalled, and that leaving would free him from her suffering. He told me a different view:

“I told her, ‘That’s a joke, right? That’s what your partner is for: to rely on in the good and the bad. If there is really love and the relationship is serious, then I think that one must be together until the last consequences, whether they are good or bad.’”

Then Cindy turned to Beto: “You know the truth, not because I don’t love you. I love you [*no porque no te quiera, te amo*], and that’s why I wanted to leave.”

Then she turned to me: “But he told me that it wasn’t right, that I should let him decide if he didn’t want to be in that situation. He always tells me not to decide for him, not to think for him, to let him think for himself, and that was his thought, his decision, that he didn’t want me to change anything. He wanted to keep taking care of me. He was happy like that and it was the support I needed because I was feeling bad, thank God.”

Angela Garcia has described a similar “closeness and heaviness” in the relations of heroin-using families who share an embodied understanding of the world (2014b, 209). The moments of “closeness and heaviness” for Cindy and Beto speak to the intensity of their relationship that included, but transcended, their shared heroin addiction. While much of their daily support for each other was geared toward “getting well” in terms of heroin withdrawal, Beto also had a greater sense of responsibility in caring for his sick partner, no matter how “heavy” his life already was. Beto did not leave. In fact, in his quest to care for Cindy, he “borrowed” money from one of her regular clients so he could buy her medication.

Harkening back to the beginning of their relationship shows that not all moments were so heavy in cultivating their closeness. When Beto first invited Cindy to stay with him, she asked if she could bring along her dog, Paloma. Beto hated dogs. To his horror, on their first night together, Paloma slept in bed with them. But Paloma came to play a critical and symbolic role in their relationship. Beto saw how important the dog was to Cindy. Paloma was always around, often waiting with them in the driveway for the drug dealers to drive by to score (or chasing their cars down the street). Most of the time, when they sat in the shade of the driveway waiting to connect, they smoked cigarettes, talked, or read to each other, with Paloma by their side. In fact, a selfie of the couple that Beto snapped depicts them in this scenario. The photo is classic: Beto has a cigarette hanging out of his mouth, and both are wearing dark sunglasses and leaning closely into each other. Cindy pointed out that Paloma was in between them, but only the tip of her ear was caught in the bottom of the frame. Cindy said it was one of her favorite photos from the project because it shows how close they are as a couple.³

Feminist scholar Donna Haraway has written extensively about the importance of interspecies bonding between humans and their dogs. As Haraway has noted, the “acts of love” shown in caring for pets “breed acts of love like caring about and for other concatenated, emergent worlds” (2003, 61). Beto’s learned love for Paloma was an expression of his love for Cindy, as he recognized the importance of the dog to Cindy. Over time he grew fond of not only Paloma but her subsequent litters of puppies. Paloma had the same father for all three litters of puppies



FIGURE 10. Although Beto was not fond of dogs when he met Cindy, his attitude changed because of the love that Cindy had for her dog, Paloma. Beto even grew particularly fond of one of Paloma's puppies, whom they named Sabastian. This was one of Cindy's favorite photos. Photo by Cindy.

over the past few years, and this dog always came back to check on her after she gave birth. Cindy said that, just like she and Beto, the dogs are “in love.”

* * *

Many of the embodied acts of love and care that Cindy and Beto showed each other are “obvious” or “typical” among any intimate couple, including sharing, holding hands, speaking to each other affectionately, and accepting pets into the family. These moments also include the simple pleasures of telling jokes and stories, finishing each other's thoughts, and even sharing a good meal or the sugary snacks they loved. Even seemingly insignificant practices like smoking cigarettes were embodied acts of care and imbued with meaning. When they first started dating, Beto always lit Cindy's cigarette first. When one day he lit his first, she worried that he did not love her anymore and started to feel upset. Sensitive to her feelings, he asked her what was wrong, and she confessed her fear. Now, as they both laughed, they assured me that Beto always lights her cigarette first.

To be certain, drug use was interwoven into these more mundane daily practices and rituals. However, it was one piece of a bigger picture that I began to better understand through the course of fieldwork. On one occasion my colleague and I spent the entire day at Cindy and Beto's home. We witnessed several injection

episodes, observed them smoke meth (which they said was rare), and conducted an extended interview for the Parejas project, as well as chatted with them and hung out on a much less formal basis. Their morning injections were of typical intensity and duration, and then, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, we played darts and talked about Paloma and the latest litter of puppies until it was lunchtime.

We had brought them some leftover carne asada from a party over the weekend, and Cindy suggested it would be “fun” to teach us how to make tortillas. This also provided us with an opportunity to visit the main house in the compound, where Beto’s uncle lives. They suggested we buy him a forty-ounce beer in return for using his kitchen facilities to make lunch, which was well received. We took turns hand rolling the tortillas, and Beto took charge of cooking, including making French fries from scratch. He told us that if the tortillas bubbled up as they cooked, it meant one was ready for marriage. Apparently, he was ready.

After lunch the cadence of their daily ritual demanded that they score heroin again. Our original plan was to head back to the project office to conduct “official” data collection, as the couple was to participate in a joint follow-up interview about their experiences in the larger Parejas public health study. Instead, we all went outside and waited to connect. In their driveway, where they often passed the time together, we turned on our recorders and started the interview, including asking them if anything had changed in their relationship over the past year of their participation in the project:

Cindy: Actually, nothing is new, right? Paloma had more puppies [*laughs*]. But everything else remains the same, and always good. He and I don’t let anyone affect us. While he and I are happy with each other, we’re fine; then we’re good, and nothing else matters, so people can try what they want to break us down, but they can’t.

Beto: Yes, this is how it always is. I wonder how common the word love [*amor*] is. . . . If it’s only words, or it happens in all couples . . . but it has happened to us; we have never stopped talking or doing things. We never get to extreme situations, where one of us does something that the other does not like, or that does not seem right to the other, or that we have to change the relationship. Since the very first day, everything has been awesome.

This question did not directly ask about love, but Beto tied the durability of their relationship to the ingredients of love, not just as a word but as a way of interacting and embodied practice.

We also learned that the project had inspired them to reflect on their relationship. Beto admitted that he felt nervous to participate at the beginning, but he came to see the interviews as conversations where he could open up about his experiences. Cindy also came to value the Parejas project as a way to have a shared experience with Beto that also helped them communicate as a couple and

feel closer. Even in the context of a study on HIV risk, the embodied possibilities to locate love, care, and intimacy were present.

After Beto scored we all went inside to continue the interview as they injected. As it was later in the day at this point, they were not quite as *malilla*, or sick from heroin withdrawal, as they were first thing in the morning, and so they were not as quiet and focused in their injection processes. They told us to keep asking them questions, and they were lucid and forthcoming about their experiences in the project.⁴ As we saturated the topics in our semistructured interview guide for the main study, we branched out into more casual conversation, including asking how the injection process was going this time around. Beto lamented the trouble they both had from long careers of injection. He said that some men have resorted to injecting in their penis, though he called that “sacred,” and he has not tried it. But that reminded him of a story: it is the “legend, er, true story” of Mata Hari. Yet another example of the embodied ways that Cindy and Beto worked together as a couple was through their storytelling. They often took turns telling stories, particularly recounting their lives together and helping each other fill in the details. But they also shared silly moments of exchange, like our conversation that emerged about the “true” story of Mata Hari.

Historically, Mata Hari was a famous Dutch exotic dancer accused by the French of espionage in World War I, though many considered her to be persecuted for breaking moral codes governing women’s “proper” roles at the time rather than for any evidence of treason. Cindy and Beto’s version of the Mata Hari, however, was quite different. They took turns telling the story of a woman from “high society” so upset and enraged by her partner’s philandering that she killed him, wrapped him up in a curtain, and kept him in the closet. One day she realized that she would never find another man like him, and she could not live without him, so she must kill herself to be with him again. She decided to cut off what Beto called his “noble part” and held it close to her as she jumped out of a window and to her death. Beto concluded, “The penis is taken from her and put into a museum. It’s a piece of art. It is called Mata Hari, which means “The most beautiful penis in the universe.” Although we were all heartily laughing at the absurdity, they both colluded in trying to convince us that it was a “TRUE story.”

That night, when writing my fieldnotes, I thought about how they worked together as a team to completely upend our plans to go to the project office in a more structured environment for data collection. I appreciated their comfort in inviting us in, allowing for a less scripted version of themselves that made their home—heroin injections and all—feel like a safe haven to us, even as risk was all around. I began to understand how perceptions of danger can shift when we are with other people we trust, and how this is surely amplified in the context of their intimate relationship. However, I also questioned the “scientific value” of transcribing the entire recording, including the Mata Hari story. After all, those are not the kind of data the NIH was probably expecting out of these interviews.

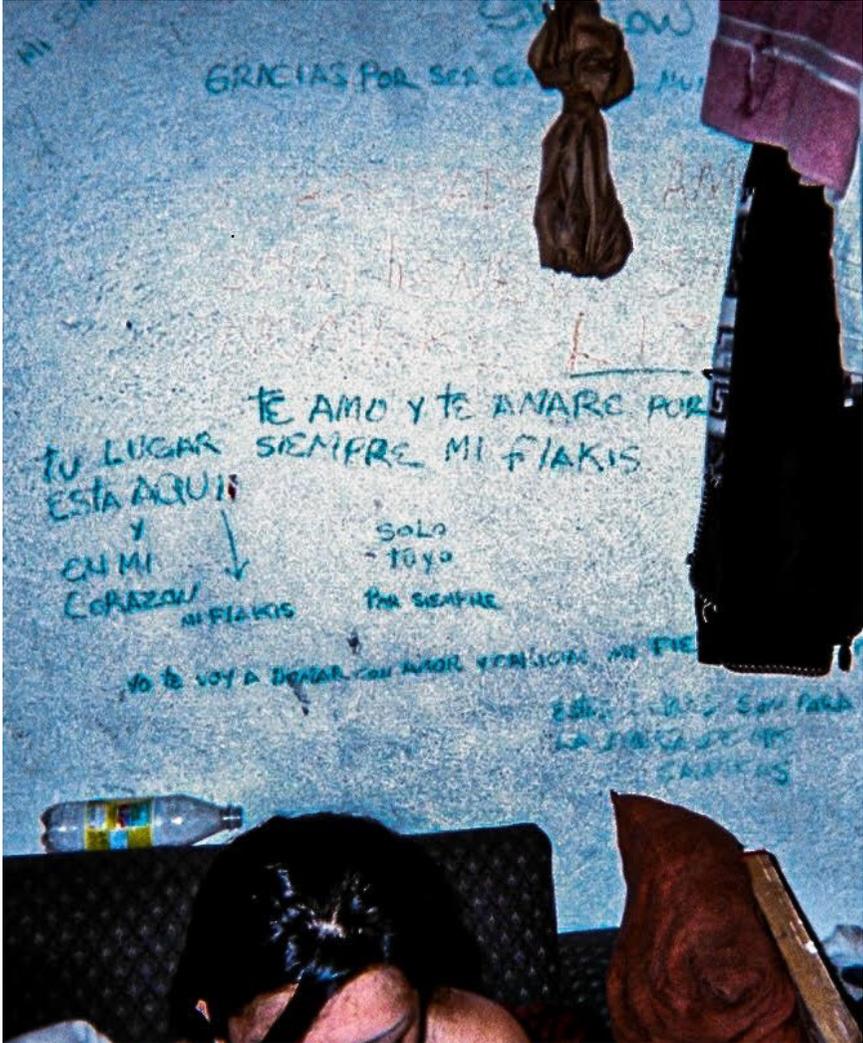


FIGURE 11. Beto perhaps misfired in this shot of Cindy, which was part of a series of photos of the couple smoking meth with a friend. Although Cindy is mostly cut out of the frame, the photo reveals some of the love messages Beto wrote in magic marker on their walls, translated as “I love you and I’ll always love you,” “your place is here and in my heart,” and “only you and me forever.” Photo by Beto.

Yet, how could I ignore it? Cindy and Beto were engaging in a fundamental part of the human experience: making sense of the world and conveying their experiences through storytelling. By mythologizing *Mata Hari*, they were conveying a symbolic message about their own lives, including a juxtaposition of their desires and frustrations. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has called myths a “contemplation of the unsatisfactory compromises” in life. “In the devious statements of the myth,

people can recognize indirectly what it would be difficult to admit openly and yet what is patently clear to all and sundry, that the ideal is not attainable" ([1967] 2004, 52).

I later began to think about how the idea of the perfect romantic version of love that has become the Western—and increasingly globalized—ideal is one of the most troubled subjects of myth. Literary scholar Joseph Campbell (2004) traces this idealized version of love in literature to the poetic works of twelfth-century troubadours: the archetypal myth of Tristan and Isolde reflects the emergence of a companionate love between two tormented individuals for whom only their love for each other could bring true healing amid suffering. Perhaps Cindy and Beto's version of the Mata Hari was yet another rendering of Tristan and Isolde, Romeo and Juliet, star-crossed Sureños and Paisas, or any number of other love stories that reflect the core message of all myths: that everybody must find their own "pathway to bliss."⁵

A life of material disadvantage and heroin addiction may not be the typical stuff of mythical love stories, but building a dangerous safe haven with a partner who understands, loves, and protects in such conditions may be the best pathway to take in an otherwise loveless world. Even as this book has critiqued a singular, perfect image of romantic love, Cindy and Beto embodied a love for each other that manifested in multiple ways, big and small, related to drug use but beyond addiction, and into the mundane and even the absurd. Maybe their version of the Mata Hari was just a silly story they told for their own entertainment as well as ours. But maybe Cindy and Beto can teach us to look past mythologized versions of love to understand that different kinds of relationships can be lived on their own terms, with couples carving their own pathways toward a meaningful life.

'TIL DEATH DO US PART

The last time I saw Cindy and Beto was in the project office, when they returned for a follow-up survey and HIV/STI testing. I chatted with Beto in the waiting room, as it took a while for the nurse to find a vein from which to draw blood from Cindy. When she emerged, he pulled two lollipops out of his pocket and gave one to her. After we said goodbye, I peered outside our second-story window and saw them stop at an ice cream vendor across the street for *paletas* before walking off into the crowded street, holding hands and eating their popsicles.

Cindy and Beto's story lends insight into what it means to love and care for a partner in broader contexts of inequality, marginalization, and disadvantage. Like the other couples featured in this book, they understood each other's embodied life trajectories of trauma and hardship and offered each other multiple forms of support that included but transcended supporting each other's addictions. They shared an emotionally close relationship, in which they considered themselves to be "in love," and their relationship was transformative in their lives up until the end. Unfortunately, Beto's proclamation that couples "must be together until the last

consequences, whether they are good or bad” came to tragic fruition when Cindy passed away from complications of an illness.⁶

Cindy’s premature death takes us back full circle to a public health rendering of embodiment, in that she literally and biologically embodied her disadvantage and inequity in the form of illness and untimely death. Her death reflects patterns of premature morbidity and mortality that characterize populations of sex workers across global contexts. These patterns are not accidental or natural but rather reflect the structural inequalities that limit opportunities for women like Cindy, drive them into sex work and injection drug use, and shape their options for survival. A socially informed rendering of embodiment also reminds us that even if the couples’ love for each other couldn’t change the social structures that enacted harm all around them, it did make life worth living, even in a life cut short. But even in physical death, spirits can live on to inspire us. Could one of Cindy’s final contributions to the world be to challenge stereotypes about sex workers’ ability to find love? Can reflecting on her life and intimate relationship reveal new possibilities for love—including opening up a space for love to transform our own embodied practices?

Grappling with Cindy’s untimely death has inspired me to rethink my own research practices. In struggling with questions about friendship, positionality, power, and the implications of research, I found a connection to a reflection written by Gregory Reck about his friendship with his “star” informant, named Celestino, whom he met during fieldwork in Mexico. Reck considered himself to be a good anthropologist and a friend to his participants like Celestino, but he struggled with the complexity of research relationships, including what it really means to those involved and why the work matters. When Reck left the field, he didn’t realize that he would never see Celestino again, but that the deep imprint of their relationship would carry on long afterward: “I would never see him again, but he wasn’t gone from my life. Not really. He was there all the time. I talked about him in chandeliered ballrooms filled with anthropologists. I wrote a book and several articles about him. He came to my classes, and I introduced him to my students. I told stories about him, about us, as friends. But most of all, I thought about him. . . . At the strangest of times, Celestino would simply appear in my head. He still does” ([1995] 2006, 44). For me the same holds true about Cindy and Beto. I still think about them (and the other Parejas participants) and what our relationships meant. Beyond ugly chandeliered ballrooms, I think we have an imperative to do more.

As the following chapters continue to grapple with sex work, drug use, love, and risk, I also begin to interweave a tone of reflexivity in relation to the broader implications of our research. The stories of Maria and Gwen in the next chapter are equally tragic yet revealing of the power and limitations of dangerous safe havens for couples’ health and well-being. Their participation in Parejas also offers an opportunity to consider the role of love in shaping our research methodologies, a theme that also compels us to rethink global health intervention and practice.