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Humanizing Drug Overdoses in Colorado: A Liberatory Harm Reduction Comic Made with Sex Workers and People Who Use Drugs

Anthropologists and folklorists with a desire to foster social justice change apply the graphic novel approach to share personal narratives of community members. Our team of arts-based researchers and community advocates offers details of a university-research partnership and a brief example of a graphic novel excerpt from the larger project. The graphic novel excerpt showcases Chloe, a person who uses drugs and sex worker, and an overdose incident at her workplace in Colorado. The graphic novel approach helps to humanize people who use drugs and destigmatize individuals who engage in routine drug use as part of their health care regimen.

Keywords (from the AFS Ethnographic Thesaurus):

Arts, imagery, community involvement, public health, research, methodology

IN SUMMER 2021, MARTY OTAÑEZ CONDUCTED recorded interviews with 76 individuals in Colorado who had experiences with prescription opioids, heroin, methamphetamine, and/or fentanyl overdoses as part of the Naloxone Champions project. The project was designed to promote overdose prevention and drug destigmatization and create a repository of 76 short videos to humanize people who use drugs (PWUD). The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) provided funds for the project. Betsy Craft enrolled as a participant and produced the personal

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Journal of American Folklore 138(549):351–360

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video *DUI* (2022), sharing an overdose incident she experienced that involved an auto accident and stigmatization from a first responder. During one of the public screenings of the project videos in Denver, Colorado, Betsy participated in a discussion with audience members. Marty's desire to learn from and collaborate with community members in research and creative work prompted him to get to know Betsy on a deeper level. They have since developed a friendship, have co-written a research proposal on PWUD, which is unfunded, and have co-facilitated four professional workshops and conference presentations between 2022 and 2024. In one of their conversations in Fall 2023, Marty presented the idea of developing a book-length graphic novel featuring six key themes in the repository of 76 videos created in 2021, with Betsy featured in the prototype chapter. Betsy agreed.

As the Policy Director with the Colorado Drug Policy Coalition, Betsy builds solidarity for drug user-led movements such as overdose prevention centers (OPCs), compassionate overdose response, and safe supply. The Coalition advocates for drug policy based on science, guided by public health best practices, and rooted in the principles of harm reduction (Colorado Drug Policy Coalition 2025). Overdose prevention centers are evidence-based public health interventions where trained personnel monitor participants at the earliest signs to prevent overdose deaths. Overdose prevention centers provide welcoming spaces that help bring drug use indoors and connect people to long-term, life-sustaining resources. On August 31, 2024, local harm reductionists, including addiction medicine physicians, policy advocates, PWUD, and peer support specialists, organized an outdoor, pop-up OPC as a direct-action in Denver's Civic Center Park. The direct-action showed policymakers that OPCs align with public health best practices for people to never use drugs alone and are practical interventions to save PWUD from preventable overdose deaths.

Betsy's engagement in community issues is consistent with Marty's approach to anthropology, which resonates with that of many public and academic folklorists. Marty sees the discipline as a platform for social justice and for creating space for community members to share their own stories on issues important to them rather than to have their stories told by other people. Before beginning the collaborative work with Betsy, Marty performed digital storytelling research and creative work beginning in 2009. During this time, he facilitated over 20 digital storytelling workshops with over 200 community members and administered university courses with digital storytelling assignments, overseeing the creation of over 600 digital stories. Workshop themes covered water justice, overdose reversals using overdose reversal medication, tobacco use, cancer survivorship, teen pregnancy, youth leadership development, and viral hepatitis experiences among Latinos and other disenfranchised communities. Significant overlap and synergy exist between Marty's creative work producing culturally appropriate visual narratives to increase public awareness of community issues and folklore's long engagement with storytelling, arts, and community centeredness. When Marty and Betsy met during the Naloxone Champions project in 2021, they established a partnership. The collaboration led to the application of the folkloric process, transforming Betsy's lived and living experiences as a person who uses drugs from a digital story to a graphic novel project. In this article, they explain their project and offer a short example, one person's visual story, of the larger project—Naloxone

Champions—to promote methods that bring together, on an equal footing, professors, students, and community members. The value of graphic novels that feature personal experience narratives is a resource for anthropologists and folklorists to foster change along educational and community health lines.

An Arts-Based University-Community Collaboration

Marty and Betsy share a passion for using visually compelling approaches to research and creative work to inform members of the public and other stakeholders about the humanity of PWUD and ethics of working directly with PWUD in university projects. Betsy helped Marty and future team members to understand that PWUD hold valuable knowledge and living experience. Betsy's approach informed the essence of our project. She suggested that PWUD working as co-leaders with professors and university students would be an effective way to destigmatize PWUD from over 50 years of dehumanizing and isolating consequences of the War on People, also known as the War on Drugs.¹ She considers PWUD to be heroes and champions who have been informing prevention best practices and serving on the front lines as the true first responders for decades. The best thing that PWUD partners can do is rally behind PWUD, knock down barriers, listen to PWUD, or just get out of the way.

From January to August 2024, Marty and Betsy worked together to develop the first story for the book-length graphic novel and to recruit a person who uses drugs in Colorado to create artwork for a draft chapter. Their thinking was that a sample chapter with artwork was needed to secure a contract from a publisher. They were unable to find a PWUD artist, but they expanded their team to include Andrés Guerrero, Nikketa Burges, and Ven Talley. In 2010, Andrés, the Director of the Overdose Prevention Unit in CDPHE, was a participant in Marty's digital storytelling research project focusing on health inequities among Latinx in Colorado. In 2015, Marty and Andrés co-published a book chapter focusing on digital storytelling and viral hepatitis in Colorado (Otañez and Guerrero 2015). In his position in CDPHE, Andrés developed expertise in drug overdose prevention and state-level interventions that could be leveraged to strengthen the story and artwork in the graphic novel.

Nikketa Burges, a person who uses drugs, was in her first year as a University of Colorado Denver (CU) graduate student in medical anthropology with Marty as her faculty advisor in Spring 2024. Marty suggested that Nikketa participate in the project because of her engagement in harm reduction issues. Since 2023, Nikketa has been a founding member of a military veterans' harm reduction advisory board. She has collaborated with Veterans Health Administration medical professionals and veterans who use drugs to advocate for the implementation of liberatory harm reduction within the veteran health care system. In Spring 2024, Ven Talley, a CU Denver undergraduate student in sociology and illustration, reached out to Marty to learn more about his overdose prevention work. The conversation led to Ven applying for and receiving an award from the university's Education Through Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (EURēCA!) program to work with Marty and other team members on the project. Ven has expertise in illustration, and he joined the project to create the visual imagery for the graphic novel excerpt. Ven identifies as



Figure 1. The final two-page comic spread documenting Chloe's overdose experience.



Figure 2. The final two-page comic spread documenting Chloe's overdose experience.

a person who uses drugs, but he does not specifically have a history of opioid use. As of 2025, the team plans to submit funding proposals to ensure sustainability of their work.

Chloe's Story: Graphic Novel Excerpt

In Summer 2006, Chloe (a pseudonym co-author Betsy selected for herself) overdosed on black tar heroin in a bathroom stall at a gentlemen's club in Colorado.² In our discussion, Chloe and Betsy are the same person, with Chloe as the protagonist in the graphic novel excerpt and Betsy as a team member/co-author. The overdose incident was one of more than a dozen overdoses she experienced from 2006 to 2019. Chloe agreed to share some of these life experiences as our team planned to create a book-length graphic novel using video stories about Chloe and 75 other participants in the Naloxone Champions project. In our team meetings, Chloe indicated that she wanted to share a story different from the one featured in her video that she made as part of her participation in the Naloxone Champions project in 2021. According to Chloe, the new story would fit nicely with the arts-based methodology and was consistent with our goals to promote destigmatizing representations of people who use drugs and liberatory harm reduction practices. According to Shira Hassan (2022:29), "liberatory harm reduction" refers to

a philosophy and set of empowerment-based practices that teach us how to accompany each other as we transform the root causes of harm in our lives. We put our values into action using real-life strategies to reduce the negative health, legal, and social consequences that result from criminalized and stigmatized life experiences such as drug use, sex, the sex trade, sex work, surviving intimate partner violence, self-injury, eating disorders, and any other survival strategies deemed morally or socially unacceptable.

The graphic novel excerpt is framed to humanize PWUD and bring to life statistics that portray loved ones impacted by preventable drug overdoses. Representative 2023 data from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE 2024) show drug overdose deaths of 1,865 in Colorado and, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, drug overdose deaths of 107,606 in the United States (Ahmad et al. 2024).

Chloe wrote a first draft of the story (3,000 words). After a series of re-edits to strengthen the narrative and ensure the accuracy of representation, we produced a shorter version of the story (1,400 words) to inform the creation of the artwork. In Spring 2024, Marty, with input from Betsy, Andrés, and Nikketa, used Pixton, a web-based app to make comics, to develop an initial draft of the chapter to illustrate the vision of the project and to share rough sketches of the visual story with any artist who joined the project. After Ven joined the team in Fall 2024, the members met on three occasions to discuss the story and artwork, and they tasked Ven with making the graphic novel panels because of his expertise as an illustrator. Ven used Adobe Photoshop to create original black-and-white thumbnails and digitized color sketches

in the graphic novel excerpt featured in this essay. Also, we agreed that publishing an excerpt of the graphic novel would provide the team with an achievable short-term goal, develop the aesthetic look that other participants' stories in the graphic novel would look like, and promote best practices of co-working with PWUD in research and creative work.

In four additional meetings, we developed and settled on the story concept and visual imagery, and Ven produced a graphic-novel-style storyboard with rough sketches. In the process, we revisited scene settings, body types, and narrative elements to ensure that they were consistent with Chloe's life event history. Betsy and team members offered feedback on the story and artwork. The team agreed that we would not move forward if the imagery was stigmatizing or if Betsy was dissatisfied with the story and artwork. Betsy asked for fishnet stockings and stiletto shoes for Chloe. Also, she requested that close-ups of a syringe in panels not be used because they can be triggering to PWUD and may also add unnecessary shock value ("trauma porn"). Ven completed a few re-edits on Chloe's body type based on input from Betsy who wanted to depict a freedom of expression and sexiness without oversexualizing Chloe.

Ven brought his physical sketches and thumbnails into Photoshop to digitize line-work, bring in text composition, and bulk up details both in line and grayscale tones. He expanded set-dressing and characterization moments as informed collaboratively with the team to include small elements, from the graffiti on the bathroom walls to the bystander who "wanted a dance" on the second page.

Medical Anthropology and Applied Folklore

We apply an arts-based approach to medical anthropology and applied folklore. This approach, which overlaps with the graphic medicine genre of comics (Czerwicz et al. 2020), employs storytelling, visual arts, and other artistic and visual processes to understand and represent human cultures, particularly through ethnographic work (Leavy 2017). The driving force of our project is to develop "thick solidarity" (Jobson 2020) with community collaborators and share scholarly work with non-academic audiences in fun and engaging ways. This means treating study participants as more than sources of data and instead as individual knowledge keepers with expertise and wisdom to co-author publications and creative work projects. By creating space for PWUD in university-community initiatives, PWUD are primary actors in information sharing and in making researchers accountable to communities that universities are designed to serve. As co-leaders of research and creative work teams working alongside academic partners, PWUD increase their capacity as citizen scientists and contribute to leadership development, for example, to work as paid members of university-research-related community advisory boards. Also, our approach seeks to bring parity between traditional written text and visual text in scholarly work and to ensure that students, faculty members, and community collaborators are properly recognized and rewarded for their contributions to the work. In this way, medical anthropology can take on the perspective lens of folkloric tradition and "folklife strategy" (Folklife [PAR] Network 2025) with examples of socially engaged storytelling driven by community collaborators.

Liberatory Harm Reduction Praxes

The subtext of the story and artwork is liberatory harm reduction praxes. As liberatory harm reductionists, we “support each other and our communities without judgment, stigma, or coercion, and we do not force others to change. We envision a world without racism, capitalism, patriarchy, misogyny, ableism, transphobia, policing, surveillance, and other systems of violence. Liberatory Harm Reduction is true self-determination and total body autonomy” (Hassan 2022:29). Liberatory harm reduction honors the lineage of Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and Trans Queer Femme activists³ and survival strategies of sex workers and PWUD. Also, this set of praxes recognizes drug use as a phenomenon existing on a continuum from abstinence to chaotic use, and advocates for nonjudgmental, noncoercive support rather than ignoring or criminalizing PWUD. This approach to PWUD is required to de-center abstinence-only approaches that stigmatize individuals who engage in routine drug use as part of their health care regimen. In the panels showing Chloe receiving care after the overdose, individuals illuminate appropriate steps for compassionate overdose response, consistent with liberatory harm reduction.

Check for responsiveness, by gently shaking the person and listening for breathing. If the person is unresponsive, administer a low dose of naloxone overdose medication. Next, administer rescue breathing (one breath every 5–6 seconds) over the next 3–5 minutes. If the person is still unresponsive, call 911 or ask a bystander to call 911 and inform the dispatcher that you have an unresponsive person. Before giving a second low dose of naloxone, check for responsiveness. If the person still isn’t breathing or responding, administer a second dose of naloxone and continue rescue breathing until emergency medical services (EMS) arrive. It is important to prioritize rescue breathing and wait at least three minutes in between doses to mitigate withdrawal symptoms. Once the person becomes responsive and their breathing resumes, gently welcome the person back to consciousness. If the person wants to leave, allow them to leave, but advise them that because the naloxone will wear off over the next 30–90 minutes, it is best not to use during that time to avoid another overdose. If the person is still unresponsive after two doses of naloxone, continue rescue breathing until EMS arrives. If you must leave before EMS arrives, place the individual in the recovery position (on their side, with one arm and one leg bent) to prevent choking. If naloxone is unavailable, administer rescue breathing and call 911. (Russell et al. 2024)

Related practices involve easy access to sterile syringes, overdose reversal medications (e.g., low-dose naloxone), and other safe use supplies, and to never use alone. Liberatory harm reductionists advocate for overdose prevention centers (OPCs) as a harm reduction strategy to reduce overdose deaths. These points are sprinkled throughout the graphic novel excerpt and are highlighted in the final panel with placards that advocate for OPCs to reduce drug-related deaths among PWUD (Wenger et al. 2024). Our contribution adds to the growing liberatory harm reduction literature and to the creative work that views OPCs as a treatment option where PWUD can connect to voluntary wraparound individualized resources. “Wraparound individualized

resources” refers to peer-led and clinical care, drug checking, and other health promotion services for PWUD. We need more artistic narratives and alternative prose to the traditional scholarly approaches found in academic publications (Roulston 2010:79) about overdose prevention and stigma reduction, to leverage the knowledge of PWUD and to communicate public health messages to non-academic audiences.

The collaborative method and the graphic novel excerpt for this project provide a model that could be applied by anthropologists and folklorists to other projects and goals. From the outset, relationships of trust and shared ethical praxes are needed for the longevity of a university-community partnership. The model can be implemented in projects that prioritize individual and collective stories about, for example, food sovereignty in community gardens, anti-racist youth leadership development initiatives, or preservation of creation stories shared by elders in nondominant cultures who emigrated to the United States. As virtual reality and generative artificial intelligence (AI) increasingly complicate the lives of our collaborators and our own, the model may be applied to document the diverse ways that digital technologies such as virtual reality and AI influence human identities and behaviors, and it can be used to determine the ways in which individuals resist digital technologies. An area where the model can more directly assist our partners in nonprofit organizations is applying the model to create arts-based evaluation pieces. With graphic novels that feature project evaluation details and experiences, university researchers and students may help to ease our partners’ workload that is due to the administration of community grants, thereby freeing up their time to make collaborative art for research and creative purposes.

Notes

1. “War on People” more accurately describes the “War on Drugs” and how the War on Drugs has destroyed the lives of millions of marginalized community members and has increased violent crime and other social problems (UN News 2024; Tabarrok 2000).

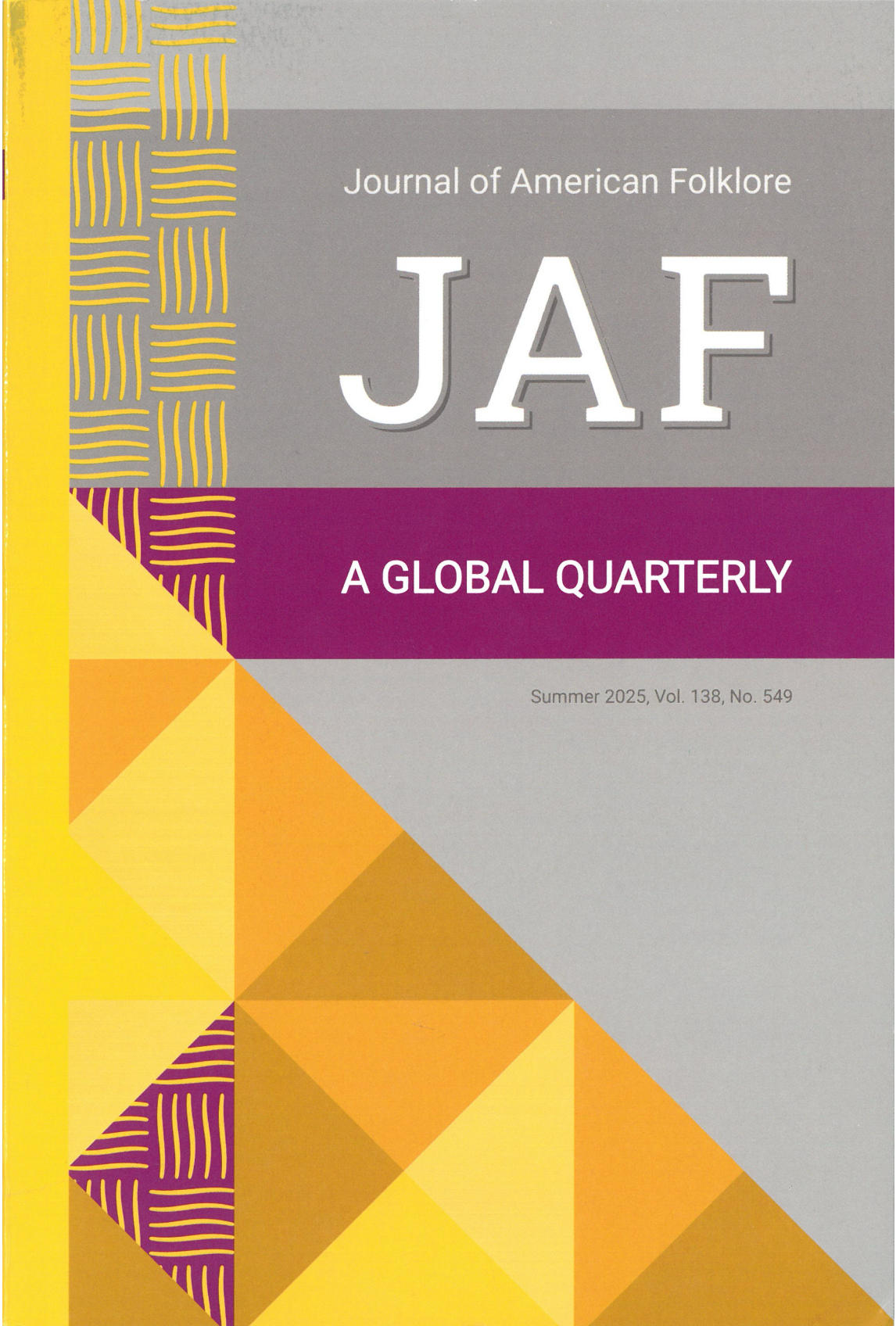
2. The overdose took place in 2006, prior to Colorado enacting the “911 Good Samaritan Law,” which indicates that “By law, there is no immunity from arrest and prosecution for an individual who experiences or reports an overdose event and is found by law enforcement to be in possession of four grams or less of fentanyl” (Harm Reduction Work Group of the Colorado Consortium for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention 2022; Drug Policy Alliance 2012)."

3. According to Donish (2017), “the term ‘femme’ does not simply mean ‘feminine’; it is used in queer circles to designate queer femininity, in a way that’s often self-aware and subversive. It’s both a celebration and a refiguring of femininity. From the invisibility queer femmes can feel in some lesbian circles to the sharp vulnerability inherent in being a trans woman, no two femme-identified individuals share the same experience of what it means to be femme.”

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The cover features a grey background with a horizontal purple band. On the left, there is a vertical yellow bar and a large triangular graphic composed of yellow and orange geometric shapes. A pattern of yellow and purple wavy lines is visible in the top-left and bottom-left corners.

Journal of American Folklore

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A GLOBAL QUARTERLY

Summer 2025, Vol. 138, No. 549