

Labours of Representation A Bosnian Workers' Movement and the Possibilities of Collaborative Graphic Ethnography

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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Labours of Representation

A Bosnian Workers' Movement and the Possibilities of Collaborative Graphic Ethnography

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Abstract: Collaborative graphic ethnography can generate new ways of identifying, materializing, and documenting political possibility in what otherwise seems like an overdetermined world, and in doing so, offers a model for practicing anthropology differently. We come to these insights through our work in the embattled Bosnian detergent factory “Dita,” located on the outskirts of the post-industrial city of Tuzla, whose workers scored an unprecedented victory when they managed to preserve their factory and restart production despite the threat of bankruptcy and liquidation. In researching and telling the story of their struggle and victory through this innovative format, we build upon the historical popularity of comics in former Yugoslavia, as well as contemporary experimentation with the form among anti-corruption activists in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We explore ethnographic and political affordances of sequential art and the graphic form for an engaged or activist anthropology, including its capacity to visualize and materialize the immaterial and overlooked aspects of politics, mitigate anthropology’s extractivist tendencies, enlist the imagination and participation of readers in directions both hoped for and unanticipated, and engage and animate multiple local and international publics.

Keywords: graphic ethnography; multimodality; political otherwise; worker politics; collaboration; Bosnia and Herzegovina

Résumé: L’ethnographie graphique collaborative peut générer de nouvelles manières d’identifier, de matérialiser, de documenter la possibilité politique dans ce qui semble être un monde surdéterminé et, ce faisant, offre un modèle

pour pratiquer différemment l'anthropologie. Nous sommes arrivés à ces conclusions grâce à notre travail dans l'usine bosniaque de détergents « Dita », située à la périphérie de la ville post-industrielle de Tuzla, dont les travailleurs ont remporté une victoire sans précédent lorsqu'ils ont réussi à préserver leur usine et à relancer la production malgré la menace de faillite et de liquidation. En recherchant et en racontant l'histoire de leur lutte et de leur victoire à travers ce format innovant, nous nous appuyons sur la popularité historique de la bande dessinée en ex-Yougoslavie, ainsi que sur l'expérimentation contemporaine de cette forme graphique par les militants anti-corruption en Bosnie-Herzégovine. Nous explorons les possibilités ethnographiques et politiques de l'art séquentiel et de la forme graphique pour une anthropologie engagée ou militante, notamment sa capacité à visualiser et à matérialiser les aspects immatériels et négligés de la politique, à atténuer les tendances extractivistes de l'anthropologie, à solliciter l'imagination et la participation des lecteurs dans des directions à la fois espérées et imprévues, et à engager et animer de multiples publics locaux et internationaux.

Mots-clés : Ethnographie graphique ; multimodalité ; politique alternative ; politique ouvrière ; collaboration ; Bosnie-Herzégovine

In 2009, in response to the question “How Is Anthropology Going?” Jane Guyer argued that despite its many transformations, twists and turns, anthropology has had one enduring commitment: to grapple with and envision possibility. In Guyer’s (2009, 357) eyes, this commitment constituted at once “an ethical stance” and “a vision of politics,” both of which required courage, discernment, study and steadfastness, but neither of which could, in principle or practice, ever be abandoned.

This pledge to remain open to possibility permeates our discipline’s recent embrace of multimodal methods and innovative forms of ethnographic representation—a shift we might gloss as anthropology’s “creative turn.” Although this experimental and playful approach to form and method is not without historical precedent, today’s creative turn is part of a self-conscious and deliberate effort to inhabit the present differently, and to keep alive the possibility of an ethical and political otherwise (Povinelli 2012; see also Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamon 2019).

In this article we offer an account of how collaborative graphic ethnography, just such an experimental form of research and representation, opens up new opportunities for anthropologists to tell different kinds of stories about political landscapes that otherwise seem overdetermined and increasingly

marked by abandonment and hopelessness. Our intervention is rooted in a story of what the Bosnian weekly magazine “Dani” once dubbed “The Greatest Workers’ Victory in post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina.” This headline appeared at the conclusion of the multi-year struggle of the workers of the Bosnian detergent factory “Dita,” located in the industrial city of Tuzla. They had pulled off something no other workers’ union had succeeded in doing: put a stop to the liquidation of their factory after its ill-fated privatization and subsequent bankruptcy. Over the course of nearly four years, and against insurmountable odds, workers fought to protect their factory, demanding that they be allowed to restart production and preserve Dita for future generations. They finally succeeded on the wings of the 2014 Bosnian uprising—a series of radical socioeconomic mobilizations that led to confrontations with police, the destruction of government headquarters and the formation of general assemblies known as plenums (Arsenijević 2014). In a country besieged by relentless declensionist narratives about the inevitable plunder and ruination of its productive capacities, the struggle and unprecedented victory of Dita’s workers seemed to redeem the promise of the uprising and demanded attention and analysis.

As a pair of researchers who had been involved with Dita’s workers and their local allies for several years, we also saw this mobilization as an opportunity to practice a different kind of anthropology. Since the 1992–95 war and international intervention, Bosnia has been a magnet for researchers seeking to investigate nationalist politics, post-war reconstruction, refugee return, international peacebuilding, and the postsocialist “transition.” Most of these studies, however, are carried out according to political and scholarly agendas created elsewhere, and often with no direct connection to any local public. This has led some activists and politically-engaged academics in Bosnia to accuse foreign researchers of practicing a form of extractivism—coming to the country to mine the raw data with which to make or maintain academic careers, while producing research that is largely irrelevant and unaccountable to research participants in Bosnia because it never circulates back into the country in a form they can use.

Having conducted research in Bosnia since the early to mid-2000s, both of us took this critique seriously, and wanted to develop new research practices and forms of output that could model a different kind of anthropology. The story of Dita offered us a unique opportunity to join forces and explore the possibilities of working with others—other anthropologists, yes, but also

industrial workers, activists, artists, and politically engaged local academics. As we subsequently describe, it was the Dita workers' own openness to working with others that enabled our research collaboration. We wanted to explore how collaboration might influence our anthropological research practice, our methods and our goals, knowing all along that producing research that mattered to our interlocutors might mean embracing its political potential.

It is against the backdrop of these multiple motivations—to understand and explain the victory of Dita's workers, to rethink the political, and to practice anthropology differently—that we were attracted to the possibilities afforded by graphic ethnography, that is, ethnography in the form of sequential art, like comics or graphic novels. We then teamed up with Sarajevo-based graphic artist Boris Stapić, with whom we subsequently carried out ethnographic fieldwork in 2018, looking to add to our existing research archives built through prior collaborations with Tuzla-based activist-researchers. We soon realized that this mode of work allowed us to identify and render visible by rendering visual critical elements of the workers' struggle that are often overlooked, dispersed in space and time, and considered uneventful. In doing so, we are able to push past spectacular acts like mass protests and grand theoretical abstractions, such as capitalism, nationalism, or clientelism, through which politics is usually identified and conceptualized in popular discourse, and instead to locate the political in more diffuse, immaterial, improvised and mundane sources.

Our decision to turn this project into a team effort was inspired by the tradition of engaged, activist anthropology (Kirsch 2018; Razsa 2015) which seeks to reimagine ethnographic research as a practice conducted in dialogue and collaboration with our interlocutors, whose results are subsequently “socialized” in that very community (Loperena 2016, 334). In particular, we find ourselves in agreement with Charles Hale that to be truly transformational, activist anthropology needs to rethink not just its epistemological but also its methodological grounds (Hale 2006, 108). As a team engaged in a “strong collaboration” (Choy et al. 2009), we have taken Hale's call seriously, working to decentre the figure of the lone anthropological fieldworker and sole authorial voice, and to distribute our work across multiple scales and capacities (see Lassiter 2008). Our third collaborator, Boris Stapić, is not only an illustrator, but a cocreator of the graphic story who worked with us in the field and participated in the process of forging those long-term relationships that are central to any engaged anthropological project.¹ We see the graphic book as a means of making our research both more accessible to the workers, and of helping that

story circulate among various non-academic audiences. We explicitly hope that this mode of ethnographic representation will have the capacity to seed the political imagination of readers and inspire similar types of anti-privatization and other activism in the region and beyond. In that sense, this is a work of public anthropology, which aims to demonstrate how anthropological insight can make possible other ways of thinking and doing politics in non-academic settings (see Besteman 2013).

In what follows, we first offer a more detailed account of what exactly made the Dita workers' struggle so special. We then move to theorize what makes the graphic form particularly conducive to our goals. Central to our analysis is the concept of affordance—a kindred albeit more materialist companion to Guyer's "possibility"—which describes how the properties of things come to have palpable effects in the world and among various publics. Part of the graphic form's power in our ethnographic context derives from its historicity, which is why the next section examines the role comic and graphic art has played in the popular culture of the region. We then move to identify key affordances of sequential art by exploring how contemporary journalists and activists in Bosnia have been experimenting with this format to attract the attention of local publics to the ubiquitous problem of political corruption. The last substantive section explores those political and ethnographic affordances we seek to harness as ethnographers engaged in a complex act of storytelling that aims to document, communicate, evoke, and inspire in equal measure. Before we describe those affordances more fully, however, we provide some historical context for why the workers' victory stands out.

“Dita” as a Lens into the Bosnian Political Present

Much of the scholarship on Bosnia and Herzegovina focuses on the breakup of Yugoslavia, the devastating 1992–95 war and the massive international intervention that followed it. An underappreciated but far-reaching effect of the war, as well as postwar reconstruction, was the end of the state socialist system. In Yugoslavia, socialism took a specific form called worker self-management, which meant that the various factories and firms in the country were collectively controlled by the people who worked there, rather than the state. During the war, the new Bosnian government ended this system by legislative fiat, turning socially-owned enterprises into government property, thereby paving the way for their quick privatization after the war.

This historical transformation set the stage for the workers' struggle in the city of Tuzla. During the socialist era, Tuzla was the largest industrial hub in Bosnia, with an economy centered around mining and chemical production. Roots of these industries extend back into the nineteenth century when labour migration gave Tuzla a large multi-ethnic workforce which soon developed a reputation for its syndical activism (Armakolas 2011; Calori 2015). However, by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, most of the city's "industrial giants" had entered the worst phase of their decades-long decline: the lack of investment, effects of privatization, and shifts in market access and competition left most mass employers with huge debts and facing bankruptcy; workers became increasingly desperate and radicalized (Arsenijević 2014; Šakanović 2017).

This was true for the workers of Dita, a company that produced popular laundry detergents and other cleaning products. After privatization, multiple changes of ownership and years of neglect, workers found their factory idled and themselves owed months of salaries and social insurance contributions. Given the similar trajectory of other industrial companies in Tuzla, Dita's ultimate demise seemed foreordained. And this is what made Dita's three-year struggle and victory a proper political event: it was the first company of its size where a declaration of bankruptcy led to the re-starting of production rather than liquidation. This, in turn, allowed the workers to prove the viability of the company which was eventually bought by a new owner. At the time, Dita's successful reorganization in a country ravaged by disemployment and growing poverty was unprecedented and made the factory synonymous with political possibility (Arsenijević, Husanović and Vasić-Janeković 2017). It is this sense of possibility that we seek to capture and amplify through the affordances of sequential art.

On the Affordances of Sequential Art

In thinking about the political and ethnographic possibilities of sequential art (comics, graphic novels, etcetera), we have found it useful to think in terms of the form's affordances. We are attracted to the affordance concept for its simultaneous focus on the material, semiotic, inventive, and agentic dimensions of human being (Black 2017; Keane 2018). The classic definition describes affordances as "the specific combination of [a thing's] properties" in light of what it "offers, provides, or furnishes" for the person that perceives it (Gibson 1977, 67–68).

Although this concept directs our attention to the properties of things—like sequential art—and their potential uses and meanings, it also requires that we think about those properties as *possible* affordances that only become actualized in relation to the persons interacting with those things. For us, then, one value of the affordance concept is how it allows us to think creatively about designing graphic ethnography for distinct ends in relation to the fact that readers are bundles of socially-positioned, historically-situated, culturally-informed properties themselves. This means taking into account the general and specific properties or capacities of our readers, as well as the context of the reception of our book. At the same time, we also acknowledge that in the encounter between things and persons, there may be affordances we cannot anticipate, “an unexpected world beyond us that nonetheless remains always available” (Keane 2018, 32). In other words, to speak of affordances is to cultivate an openness to the experimental and speculative.

One of the unique properties of sequential art lies in the fact that it is openly reader-dependent, requiring the imagination and collaboration of readers to generate meaning (McCloud 1993). Others have pointed out inventive possibilities of comics which emerge from their mixed or recombinant nature, how they can draw upon and associate the conventions of other media outside the individual comic book or graphic novel, such as newspapers, graffiti, photography, film, sculpture, and so on (Ahmed 2016; Chute and Jagoda 2014). In other words, the potential for reader involvement in defining and interpreting the meaning of comics is multiplied through the play of genre and convention, drawing in and upon different systems of signification, and indexing and incorporating worlds that extend beyond the main narrative. The encounter between readers and the multiplex combination of words and images is generative—something more than the sum of the parts is produced.

Another widely recognized and unique characteristic of comics is their capacity to bring different temporalities into relationship. In the act of reading, for example, the pages and panels are perceived sequentially and simultaneously, and then there is the inherent contrast between the time-space representations in the comic and the here-and-now event of reading. Perceiving multiple temporalities at the same time can also be generative of new views in ways similar to the play of genre and convention mentioned above.

Comics theorists like Sousanis also show how sequential art lends itself to teaching some of anthropology’s basic humanistic lessons. Sousanis (2015, 37) argues that the combination of image and text can enact “distinct vantage

points, separate paths joined in dialogue ... [a]ctively interweaving multiple strands of thought ... from which to confront and take differences into account, and allow the complex to remain complex”. Referring to Simeon Dreyfus, Sousanis (ibid. 38) continues that “by holding different ways of knowing in relationship,” we can recognize “that our solitary standpoint is limited ... [and] come to embrace another’s viewpoint as essential to our own”. McCloud (1993) has theorized ways that comics artists can increase or decrease identification between readers and characters on the page, such that, as Sousanis (2015, 39) puts it, “seeing through another’s eyes from where they stand, and attending to what they attend to serves to shift our vision from the one-dimensional to a more multi-dimensional view”.

We suspect that these and other general properties of sequential art are behind the relative boom in comics and graphic books produced by anthropologists and other scholars.² And as mentioned earlier, there are good grounds to see this boom as part of the current interest in multi-sensory and multimodal anthropology.³ Before we describe the specific political and ethnographic affordances of sequential art that we identify and embrace in our work, however, we need to contextualize our endeavour within the broader history of comics in Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for this history is an important condition of possibility for our project.

Graphic Genres in the (post)Yugoslav Space

Comic art has a long and storied history in former Yugoslavia, just like other parts of Eastern Europe (Alaniz 2017, 95). The form first appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century but reached the pinnacle of its popularity during late socialism. Comics were a standard feature of the popular magazine *Politikin Zabavnik*, which was first issued in 1939 and was largely responsible for introducing audiences of the then Kingdom of Yugoslavia to American comics (Zupan 1999). After WWII, Yugoslav communists warmed up to its potential as a form of political pedagogy thanks to the publication of the first original Yugoslav comic, *Mirko i Slavko*, two youthful Partisan couriers during the People’s Liberation Struggle (Savić 2017). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the central Yugoslav republic, it was the so-called “youth press” (*omladinska štampa*) that became an important conduit for the popularization of comic art in the country (Ajanović 2015 [1998]).

Over time, the local repertoire expanded to include translations of Western, particularly Italian, comics. Perhaps the most famous of those was the Italian series *Alan Ford*, the popularity of which reached epic proportions. Teofil Pančić (2005) suggests that for young people born into socialist Yugoslavia, reading *Alan Ford* was their first introduction to irony, sarcasm, and representations of the socially-marginalized. For the generations raised with *Alan Ford*, comics became iconic of a counter-cultural sensibility which informed an “us vs them” self-definition in relation to official politics and mainstream society. Of course, there were many other popular titles; it is estimated that over 11,000 unique comic books were published between 1971 and 1981 alone (Bulić 1983). As a result, cheap paperback comic books sold at newsstands became a quintessential aspect of life for Yugoslav youth.

While many women certainly appreciated the format, much of the popular comic book output foregrounded masculinist themes and interests. Our own research also attested to the ways in which the popularity of comics crossed class lines and called up fond associations for members of multiple generations. Older and younger workers alike mentioned that they would often hide comic books inside more “serious” monographs, so as to make their parents think they were reading something “more useful.” A middle-aged university professor and Dita supporter attested to his love of comics and recalled the moment when he was told he was “too old” to be reading them.

This ubiquity of comics in popular culture, and their association with adventure, helps explain why, during our fieldwork, workers showed an interest in our book-in-the-making. When we brought them Boris’s preliminary sketches of their likenesses, they grew visibly excited, gathering around the images and assessing how successful the artist conveyed their faces and the scenes in which they participated (See Figure 1). One of the female workers even suggested that given all the drama entailed in their long-term struggle, a book like this would be perfect for capturing it (*mi i jesmo za knjige!*)



Figure 1. July 2018. Dita workers observing illustrations. Photo by Larisa Kurtović.

Perhaps an even bigger reason that our middle-aged interlocutors are interested in this form is its association with youth culture, and the promise that this holds for inter-generational communication. Workers lamented that young people today have very little understanding of industrial labour and union-based forms of collective action, even though the workers credit these forms and contexts for the successes of their struggle—which is itself often articulated as a means of ensuring that future generations would also have a place to work. Additional hope for a graphic book about the workers’ struggle lies in the historical and cultural association between youth and revolutionary potential (Greenberg 2014). Such a hope is no abstraction: during the 2014 Uprising, which marked a turning point in the workers’ struggle, it was the mass participation of young men and their willingness to confront police violence that both fortified popular resolve and de-legitimized the position of the government (Gilbert 2018).

Graphic books are a relatively new phenomenon in the region, where they have only recently been recognized as a medium of artistic creativity (Stanič 2003). In Bosnia, the book-length format was introduced by foreign artists, especially Joe Sacco, whose renowned work on wartime Bosnia, including his graphic books *Safe Area Gorazde* and *The Fixer*, earned him both international and local admiration. Sacco’s ascent coincides with the rise of this form as a documentary medium, “extremely valuable [...] for understanding problems crucial to the representation of history trauma” (Vervae 2011, 161).

The postwar period has indeed seen the emergence of a new generation of Bosnian graphic artists, many of whom thematize political and historical questions in their work.⁴ More recently, graphic books have moved into the domain of activist work and post-secondary pedagogy. For example, 2020 saw the publication of *Zemlja-Voda-Zrak (Earth-Water-Air)*, a comic that documents various ecological disasters and environmental struggles ongoing in contemporary Bosnia (Gačnik, Šehabović and Arsenijević 2020). Moreover, academic colleagues in Bosnia have turned their attention to the potential of this medium in the classroom, particularly in relation to philosophy and political science (Cerić and Cerić 2020; Cerić and Rašidagić 2019). Our work, therefore, must be seen as belonging to this new wave of graphic representations of historical struggles, as well as to the revival and transformation of comic art and the graphic form in Bosnia proper.

The Graphic Arsenal: *Biznismeni Patriote*

Part of the potential of sequential art to help us do anthropology differently clearly comes from the regional history, which has positively shaped the social context for the reception of a graphic ethnography like ours. And as we just noted, we are not the only ones to experiment with comics as a form of public and political intervention. Indeed, unique affordances of the graphic form come into view when we look more closely at contemporary uses by journalists and activists. To that end, we turn to an anticorruption comic by the name of *Biznismeni Patriote* (Businessmen Patriots, Figure 2) which is one of our collaborator Boris Stapić's earlier works. *Biznismeni Patriote* is especially interesting because the story it tells exists in multiple formats—as a trial transcript, a documentary film, and this 36-page comic book—allowing us to ask what exactly is unique about graphic storytelling and its political potential. There are of course key differences between a journalistic exposé and a graphic ethnography: one is based upon a trial transcript and aimed to refocus public attention on corruption and make it newly objectionable, while the other is based on fieldwork, built around the voices of numerous protagonists, and has multiple aims. The key point we advance here is that part of the potency of the graphic form, which these two works share, lies in its ability to offer a stable, visual representation of those elements of political life that otherwise exist as speculation, suspicion, rumour, or public secrets. In that sense, the graphic form's creative license is both more expansive than that of photography or video and can be deployed to create a compelling kind of evidence for that which is obfuscated yet long suspected as true.

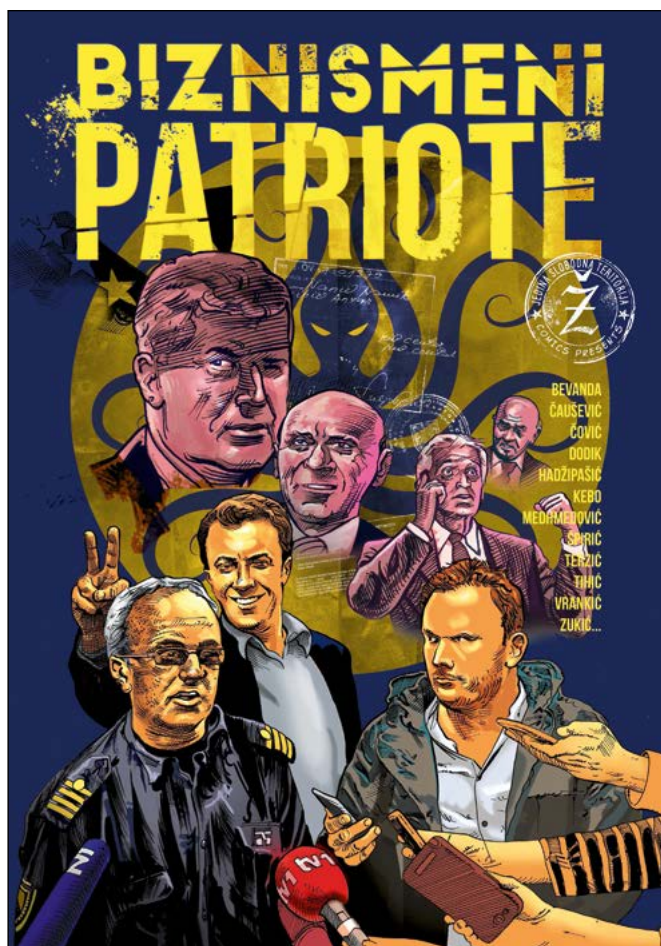


Figure 2. Cover of anti-corruption comic *Biznismeni Patriote* (*Businessmen Patriots*), 2017. Illustration by Boris Stapić.

The comic *Biznismeni Patriote* was commissioned in 2016 by the Sarajevo-based Anti-Corruption Network “Account” and the local news web portal *Žurnal*. Their investigation closely followed the 2014 corruption affair “Pandora,” centred on the Indirect Taxation Authority of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its former director, Kemal Čaušević. Čaušević was accused of defrauding the Bosnian state of one billion Euros—money that was ultimately used to fund various business schemes of wealthy oligarchs close to Bosniak (Bosnian-Muslim), Croat and Serb nationalist leaderships. The transcript of Čaušević’s testimony provided unprecedented insight into how political relations are organized and distributed across various levels of government and ethnic power-sharing agreements.

In the words of Boris’s collaborators and coauthors of *Biznismeni Patriote*, Zoran Ivančić and Aleksandar Saša Brezar, the comic was conceived as a means of returning the public’s attention to this spectacular scandal almost two years after the court transcripts had become public. Zoran, a long-term activist and

president of CPI Foundation in Sarajevo which advocates for government accountability, suggested that what made the scandal so compelling was the fact it revealed the transethnic nature of political corruption. Čaušević's testimony showed that the leaderships of the main ethno-nationalist parties, who were publicly antagonistic, functioned symbiotically behind the scenes, united in their quest to extract wealth out of state funds and privatize the commons for their own advantage. The trial offered a clear window into the internal dynamics of the Bosnian "deep state," revealing aspects of postwar politics that had so far only been the subject of popular speculation. Initial reporting on the trial offered a series of thrilling revelations, something that the Account Network sought to capitalize upon by using the court transcript to create a documentary film and comic book.

The film, entitled *Pandorina kutija* (*Pandora's Box*) is a classic journalistic exposé and has been streamed on YouTube over 72,000 times.⁵ The comic, as Boris explained to us in the summer of 2018, was supposed to "fill the gaps" left behind by the film, which was limited to the existing video footage of the events described in the trial transcript. Given the backstage and behind-the-scenes nature of corruption, there was no footage to match many of the most explosive revelations. By transforming the testimony into a visual form of evidence, the comic book imaginatively rendered those moments into a stable and material form. It could then enlist the reader's participation in the story as a de-facto witness of the political scandal's key episodes.

Nevertheless, the storyboarding process revealed an important tension inherent in using the graphic form as a documentary format: when portraying those aspects of the scandal which had taken place away from the public eye, the authors needed to organize the material in such a way as to maintain its veracity. According to Zoran, this required developing novel practices of visual and other kinds of verification:

We started by meeting in different cafes in order to figure out how to divide the story into chapters, based on the content of the transcript, grouping it into various episodes and descriptions. Next, we sought to imagine [orig. *izmaštamo*] the locations, the interiors and the exteriors [where these events were taking place]. But then we had two journalists help us as fact-checkers [...] They verified the names, what people looked like, those locations [...] working on the basis of what was in the media, various archives, press clippings ... so that the whole thing would be more truthful. (Author interview, 5 February 2020)

Zoran's account of the process of transmuting a court transcript into a graphic story not only points to important practical and ethical demands. It also suggests that meeting the goal of the comic—to “expose the truth” to the Bosnian public about corruption which had theretofore only been suspected—would hinge on managing this tension successfully. If done well, the comic's visual rendering of various forms of otherwise obscure and illicit conduct—including clientelism, contract fixing and bribes—would enjoy a similar truth status as other non-fiction forms and genres of documentation.

This being said, the graphic representational format also afforded its authors a playfulness unavailable to those other forms and genres. For Saša Brezar, a long-term fan of the comic form who had collaborated on several works of sequential art over the years, *Biznismeni Patriote* demanded a certain kind of a representational nuance:

It was important that this actually be a news exposé, true to how the story was represented in the press, what [Čaušević] said and how it all looked. Sometimes we did have to improvise, though those improvisations [...] mostly concerned his subjective understanding of things [...] and we did joke around [...] there is this one scene where Čaušević is in his apartment, and he is being haunted by ghosts ... [these were meant to be the entities he imagined had him under surveillance] or when he is talking about [one of his political associates] who was supposed to be fair and honest, so we rendered him into the image of a Yugoslav pioneer [as the embodiment of virtue]. (Author interview, 14 February 2020; see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Illustrations from *Biznismeni Patriote*, 2017. By Boris Stapić.

In Saša's account, just because this comic was put into the service of investigative journalism, it did not mean it had to adopt the soulless affect of that genre. Instead, it needed to stay true to the comic form, which makes space for humour and imagination. In part, this is why the comic form was attractive for the goal of making political corruption relevant and worth acting upon. Saša elaborated:

To tell the people that two billion were lost to corruption ... as soon as they hear the word 'corruption,' they automatically tune out. [...] Because we are so used to that state of things. The concept of corruption is so normalized here [...] People think that some societies are corrupt and some are not and say, hey, if corruption like this exists here we must be corrupt, why pretend otherwise. But in reality, there is corruption in every society, so the question is how to develop mechanisms to contest it.

In Saša's words, the challenge was one of rendering something so normalized into a format where it could be made newly visible and thus evaluated in a new light. For Saša, the comic was in some ways an activist intervention, even though the work itself does not offer any solutions to the problem. While the results of their aspiration were decidedly mixed—due in part to problems with distribution—Saša nevertheless thought that a different kind of material and semiotic visibility carried more transformative potential than the usual didactic forms of critique that were part of daily journalistic discourse.

Some indication of this potential was evident when the comic book was promoted in Banja Luka, the administrative centre of Republika Srpska, the Serb-dominated half of the country. When activists announced plans to publicly distribute printed copies on the street, they were met with criticism by the local nationalist leadership. The authorities were probably worried about the depiction of governmental corruption in the comic book, which revealed that their omnipresent nationalist rhetoric vilifying ethnic others was simply a smokescreen for a harmonious, well-organized and multi-ethnic enterprise of plunder, theft and predation. Their attempt to curb the circulation of this work suggests that comic art and caricature are recognized as having the potential to disrupt politics-as-usual. It also reminds us as anthropologists that power often lies in the capacity to control what is made visible and/or invisible. The revelation of long-suspected truths about the post-Dayton state threatened to undermine that capacity for the politicians, and thus they had to reassert their power to keep it from the public eye. Distribution also had to be curbed because

the comic form had the capacity to materialize, stabilize and therefore make real elements of political life that remained obfuscated by incessant nationalist rhetoric. Moreover, the fact that it was a street distribution that set off their criticism points to another affordance of comics, the way in which its material form influences its political potency: in being distributed hand-to-hand it becomes an instrumental object of a possible counterpublic-in-formation.

Our project shares with *Biznismeni Patriote* an interest in the affordances of sequential art and the truth value of representation. We too pursue visual strategies to remind readers of the empirical grounding and veracity of our narrative, including realist representations of people and places, building the story primarily from direct quotations, and putting ourselves and the scenes of our field research in the book. Our graphic ethnography also includes reproductions of newspaper reports and photographs to imbue our narrative with the associations that come with those forms and genres: for example, the sense that newspapers report on events that “really happened” and the axiom that holds photography as a medium of truth and accuracy (see Figure 4). The results are more than multimodal; rather they are instances of “transmedia,” a combination of media forms and genres that is “proliferating and relational rather than additive” (Chute and Jagoda 2014, 2), showing yet another unique way that comics can generate an aura of truth and credibility.⁶

We find *Biznismeni Patriote* an encouraging example of some of the political and representational affordances of sequential art. We now turn more fully to our own work to illustrate other affordances of the graphic form to tell a story uniting disparate moments of struggle, conflict and collaboration in a way that not only informs, but also might inspire Bosnian and other readers to imagine new forms of political action.

Affordances of Representation: Rethinking the Political

Relations and Collaborations

With the factory idled by the debts and neglect of an absent owner, and under conditions where the traditional tactic of withholding their labour was unavailable, the workers’ mobilization was of necessity marked by a spirit of experimentation. Dita’s situation forced workers to go beyond the factory and into the streets, courts, and government buildings. This created openings to collaborations of varying duration and intensity, and which were critical to the workers’ ability to restart production. Their willingness to work with others,

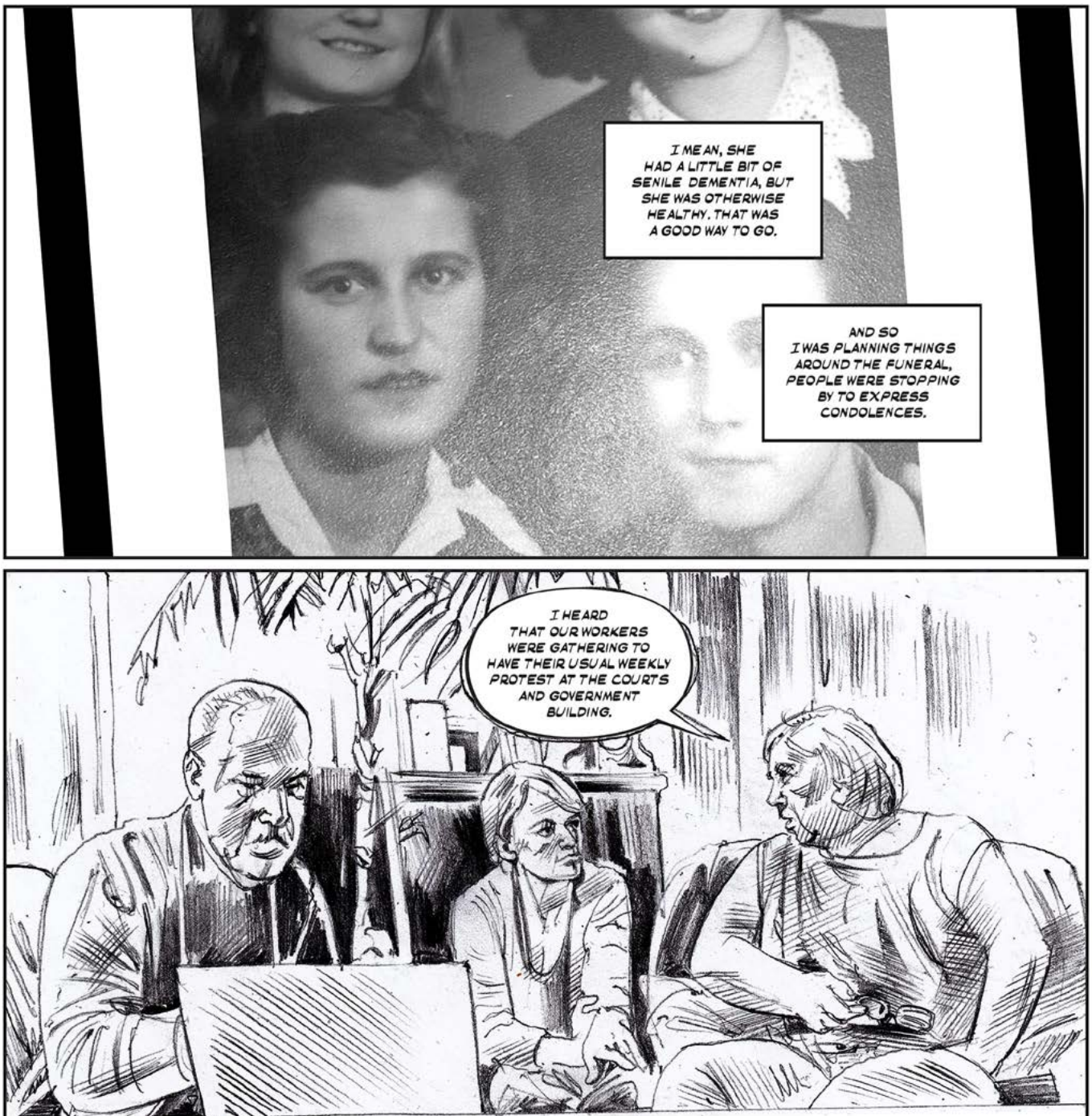


Figure 4. Illustrations from Reclaiming Dita graphic ethnography project. By Boris Stapić.

however, only succeeded because they managed to find ways to work with each other—despite being beset by the factionalism, suspicions and doubts that destabilize and undermine similar worker campaigns.

Thus, one important aim in explaining Dita's victory is to present the internal complexity of the relationships among the workers and the differences

in their individual situations and perspectives, without either turning them into a homogenous whole or denying the fact of their unity and its political potential. Our visual strategy thus parallels our narrative approach in which the workers' perspectives form the basis of how we account for their victory. Across multiple chapters we feature the faces, words, and at times divergent interpretations of dozens of workers. Thus we allow the act of reading to assemble these parts into the complex totality of a collective political subject. The visible appearance of so many narrators has the simultaneous benefit of advancing our anti-extractivist aims by de-centring our narrative voice and ethnographic authority.

This, in turn, may influence the way readers relate to and identify with the figures depicted on the page. Through the act of reading, people come to invest in and care about issues by caring about the characters that embody them. While forming relations with characters is not unique to the comics medium, this effect may be amplified when the characters are depicted through images—the mediating voice of the narrator recedes and readers come to reckon with diverse figures as protagonists with perspectives that must be taken in account.

In addition to demonstrating the complexity of worker perspectives, the graphic form allows us to showcase the ordinary, everyday co-labouring activities through which workers supported one another, and thus to expand and redefine what counts as political labour. For example, we give great attention to the quotidian work of guarding the factory, which was of vital importance for the protection of Dita's productive capacities as embedded in the machinery and infrastructure. Figure 5 shows how the years-long process of guarding the factory required not only various forms of organization and distribution of labour, but also unfolded alongside workers' efforts to earn a living elsewhere. In laying out the multiple scenes where the workers are simultaneously seen gathering at the barricade, but also portrayed doing survival work on the side, we communicate a sense of the parallel happenings that dispel any illusion of a singular, dramatic event through which the fight for Dita was won. Instead of one decisive moment, we get a sense of the duration and the myriad forms of effort that were required of the workers to maintain their own and each other's capacities to continue their fight. What is more, on this page, we also see different types of sociality produced at the barricade: one where men congregate in cold weather, looking concerned and exhausted, and another, where there is dancing and socializing which boosted morale and helped the workers pass the time.



Dežuta (8)

Figure 5. Illustrations from Reclaiming Dita graphic ethnography project. By Boris Stapić.

As mentioned above, collaboration with various outsiders was also decisive. For example, activists helped workers connect with sympathetic journalists, while lawyers offered free legal aid and filmmakers produced a documentary film about their plight. Alongside these specific and important collaborations, there were also activities aimed at building much wider solidarity networks. For example, various outsiders regularly showed up to spend time with workers as they blocked the entrance to their factory in tent encampments, to eat with them and listen to their life stories. Both workers and visitors recounted the significance of these visits, coming at a moment when the workers felt increasingly abandoned. On the surface, these were simple acts of co-presence that had the effect of producing some social visibility—the feeling that workers were not alone, and that someone cared—which over time built the social foundations for later actions. By including these mundane, unspectacular moments—both between workers, and between workers and outsiders—we reveal a critical social source for maintaining political will. Moreover, by giving such moments the same visual space in the narrative as the more confrontational actions (like street protests, traffic blockages, or hunger strikes), we can expand even further what counts as important political labour and solidarity.

The graphic form also enables us to contextualize our research as a form of collaboration by depicting the scenes of our fieldwork, talking with and learning from both workers and their allies. Those allies, who continuously supported the Dita workers' struggle, are included as storytellers in their own right. For example, Figure 6 features Denis Sadiković, who helped make the documentary film *Voice of Dita*, and Damir Arsenijević, who spoke about bringing his students to the barricade to demonstrate their solidarity with the workers. The fact that the graphic narrative illustrates them speaking to us in 2018, rather than only depicting the events from 2012 they describe, gives the reader a sense of the well-earned longevity of those relationships. To parallel a point made earlier, it also locates the basis of our ethnographic authority in our collaborative research process and the social labour of producing a politically relevant account.

Visually dwelling on these major and minor events of collaboration and co-labouring, of being and working together, of fleeting connections and more durable alliances, has a cumulative effect that makes one rather obvious but critical point about the social source of political force: enlisting more people in Dita's cause proliferated the social relations—and senses of obligation—that made available other resources and capacities. We thus also hope that by



Figure 6. Illustrations from Reclaiming Dita graphic ethnography project. By Boris Stapić.

visually identifying the diversity of participant roles and social locations of the various collaborators and co-labourers in the struggle, as well as by depicting the mundane and ordinary acts that culminated in a series of victories, our graphic ethnography will seed the political imagination of readers and inspire them to see themselves participating in similar kinds of mobilizations.

Materialization

Sequential art also offers unique capacities to materialize (in multiple senses) the location, source, and stakes of political struggle and political commitments. Through its creation and combination of images, it can render visual and visible and thus emphasize the materiality of bodies, chemicals, and the complex assemblage of concrete, steel, and machines that make up the factory campus. Moreover, comics can animate a “haptic visuality” (Marks 2000, 162; Orbán 2014, 173) to feel, taste, smell, and hear with the eyes, allowing for a broader sensorial communication and evocation of the embodied experience of industrial labour and political struggle. It can also give visual and material form to immaterial dimensions of political life, such as its transtemporal and affective and emotional elements. What sequential art allows us to offer, then, is a kind of bio-graphics of politics—a visual and visible representation of complex forms of life involved in the Dita workers’ struggle.

In Figure 7 we visually link the organic, chemical, and mechanical dimensions of industrial production and its accumulated effects and show how such multiform means of production took a toll on worker bodies that in turn conditioned the capacities for and stakes of the struggle to preserve and re-open the factory. In a different scene, this worker used some of the same vocabulary to describe both factory labour and political labour, suggesting that the physically demanding and risky nature of this work also explicitly informed his willingness and readiness for the physical hardships of the struggle.

The graphic medium, of course, also contains more-than-realist means of capturing the interweaving of the organic and mechanical, and bodily and political capacities. When the charismatic leader of Dita’s strike committee had a heart attack and required serious surgery, the future of the workers’ struggle seemed threatened. In Figure 8 we depict the stress and bodily sacrifice of the worker’s fight, her role at the heart of struggle for the factory, a vital organ necessary to the circulation of possibility and hope. Indeed, it was her willingness to risk her body—such as when she fell in front of a moving car to prevent the removal of critical documents from the factory office—that generated feelings of obligation on the part of other workers and fortified their own resolve to confront police and risk their own bodies.

One of the most important materializations focuses on the complex assemblage of workers and diverse elements and properties of the factory and its industrial park. Such depictions help us to explain the factory’s “transformative

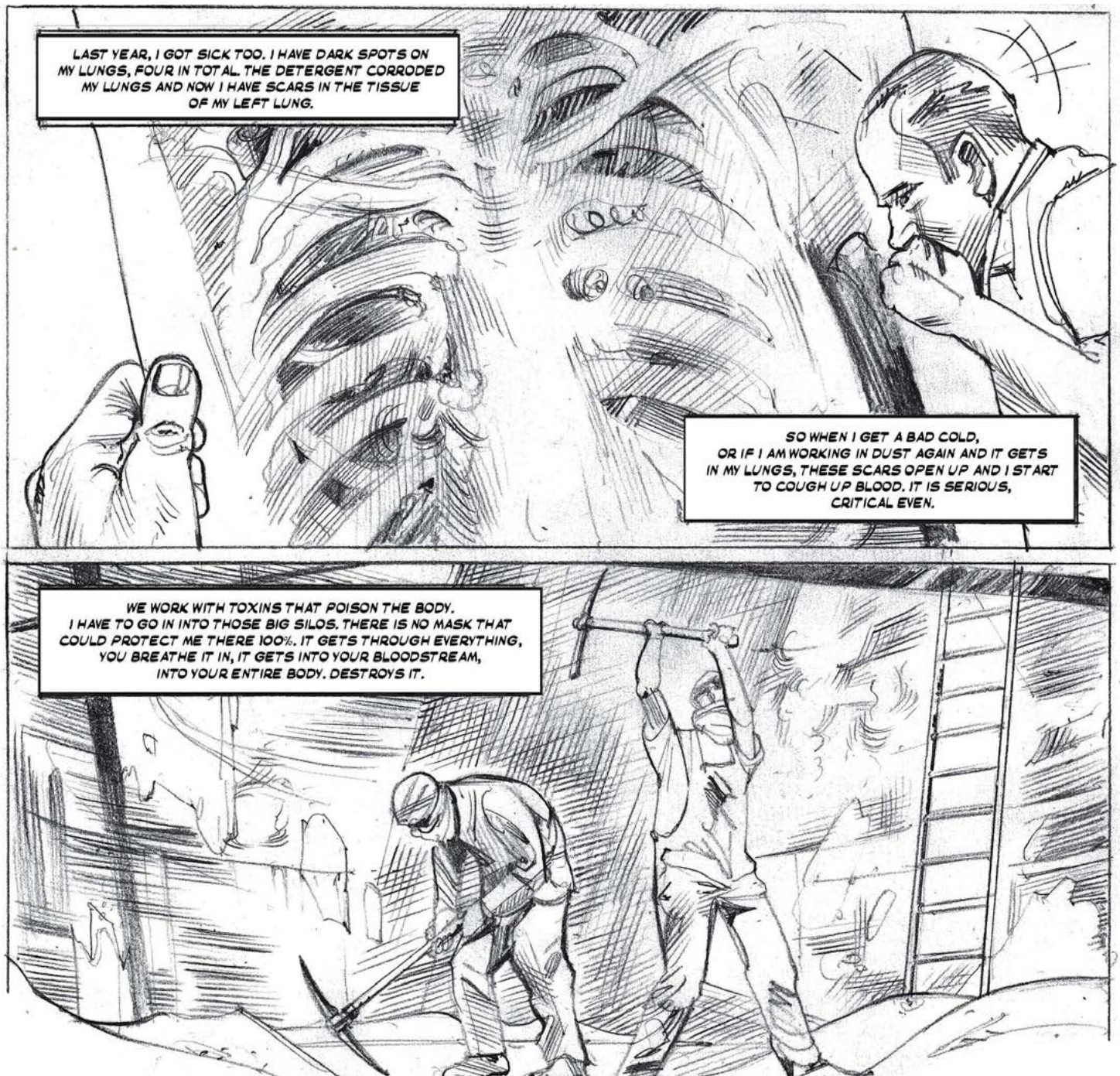


Figure 7. Illustrations from Reclaiming Dita graphic ethnography project. By Boris Stapić.

potential and political force” despite appearing “dormant, or, alternatively, worn down and derelict” (Kurtović 2020, 233). This necessarily entails a revaluation of the factory, a process with important stakes in Bosnia and Herzegovina because of how “socialist-era industrial complexes and material culture are routinely devalued, despite their history as vehicles of profound social transformation” (ibid.). It is this multiplex existence of the factory, as a material site of worker subjectification and social reproduction—as the means and ends of their struggle—that requires particular strategies of visualization.

One method is simply to continually insert pictures of the machines, silos, labs, storage facilities, workshops, and asphalt so as to visually link worker thought and action with the site itself. By building up and accumulating diverse associations and meanings and linking them with the materiality of the factory, we reveal it as a site invested with sweat, labour, love, and moments of conviviality, and thus as an object that helped constitute and stabilize the relationships forged by the workers—first through the labour of commodity production, then through forms of struggle, protection, and care, and once again through renewed commodity production.

This brings us to another strategy, visualizing and materializing the immaterial. As has been widely recognized, sequential art offers diverse ways of figuring and communicating time. Proceeding from the position that all politics must make historical sense to be effective, we use the graphic possibilities of transtemporal representation to capture the sense of accountability and creative ways that workers approach the historicity of their own political commitments. When one worker explained their fight for the factory with a reference to important beginnings—“Tito built it and now we have to guard it”—we sought to materialize such feelings of political commitment by visually indexing the era of “building socialism” and the country’s productive capacities that simultaneously built social and political subjects. We did this in Figure 9 by depicting the complex symbol of Josip Broz Tito (work actions), the organized voluntary labour activities of youth used to build roads and railways as well as other public and industrial infrastructure.

In another example, we depict local time-space relationships, inserting representations of the rebellious past into the present to show visually how an earlier popular model of historical agency was taken up to animate and legitimize new politics. On one page we show Tuzla workers facing off against riot police in 2014 juxtaposed with images of armed, striking miners facing off against Yugoslav gendarme in the Tuzla village of Husino in 1919, an event that became known as the Husino Rebellion. The Husino Rebellion has been preserved as part of the region’s anti-authoritarian legacy and class struggle against injustice and was celebrated through popular songs and a Yugoslav state-produced film. As the 2014 protests got underway, almost immediately they were dubbed “a new Husino rebellion.”



Indeed, Minka's heart attack worried many workers, who cared deeply for her and looked to her as a leader in their struggle.

Chapter 3 26

Figure 8. Illustrations from Reclaiming Dita graphic ethnography project. By Boris Stapić.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the unique affordances of the graphic form and its capacity to help imagine and enact an “otherwise” for both grounded forms of political struggle and anthropological ways of doing and knowing. In writing about our experiments with graphic ethnography, we find ourselves in agreement with Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamo’s (2019, 220) argument that multimodality offers “a line of flight for an anthropology yet to come” . In other words, for us, the *ethnographic* narrative—particularly one that emerges out of team-based fieldwork and thick collaboration—is a way of prefiguring a new kind of anthropology.

In making this claim, we have been particularly attentive to the generative capacity of sequential art. Like other forms of representation, graphic ethnography is always and already performative, in the sense that it is capable of transforming the world. In our work and that of *Biznesmeni-Patriote* we have identified multiple affordances of the graphic form that link representations of “the political” and making politics. In our analysis of *Biznesmeni-Patriote*, we showed how a comic can turn readers into witnesses, a role with different obligations than that of a mere reader or viewer; how rendering scandals visually can come with the power of revelation that threatens elites by undermining their capacity to keep their acts hidden; and how the physical form of a comic can enable the staging of events with political possibility, such as a book launch or street distribution, drawing attention to the publics that such circulation might generate.

When it comes to our own work, we have shown how the graphic form offers new avenues for exploring ethnographic representation and intervention. This includes a way to practice an anti-extractivist anthropology by creating a form that our interlocutors could access and that could also reflect and even advance the political stakes of their struggle. It enables us to de-centre our narrative voice and ethnographic authority while creating fresh ways to represent a collective political subject in its multiplicity and unity. Graphic storytelling can also materialize the immaterial (such as transhistorical relations) as well as render perceptible the otherwise invisible or embodied aspects of the workers’ struggle.

The graphic form can also help redefine what counts as political labour as well as identify and describe overlooked or underappreciated sources of political commitment and political will that were nevertheless critical to achieving

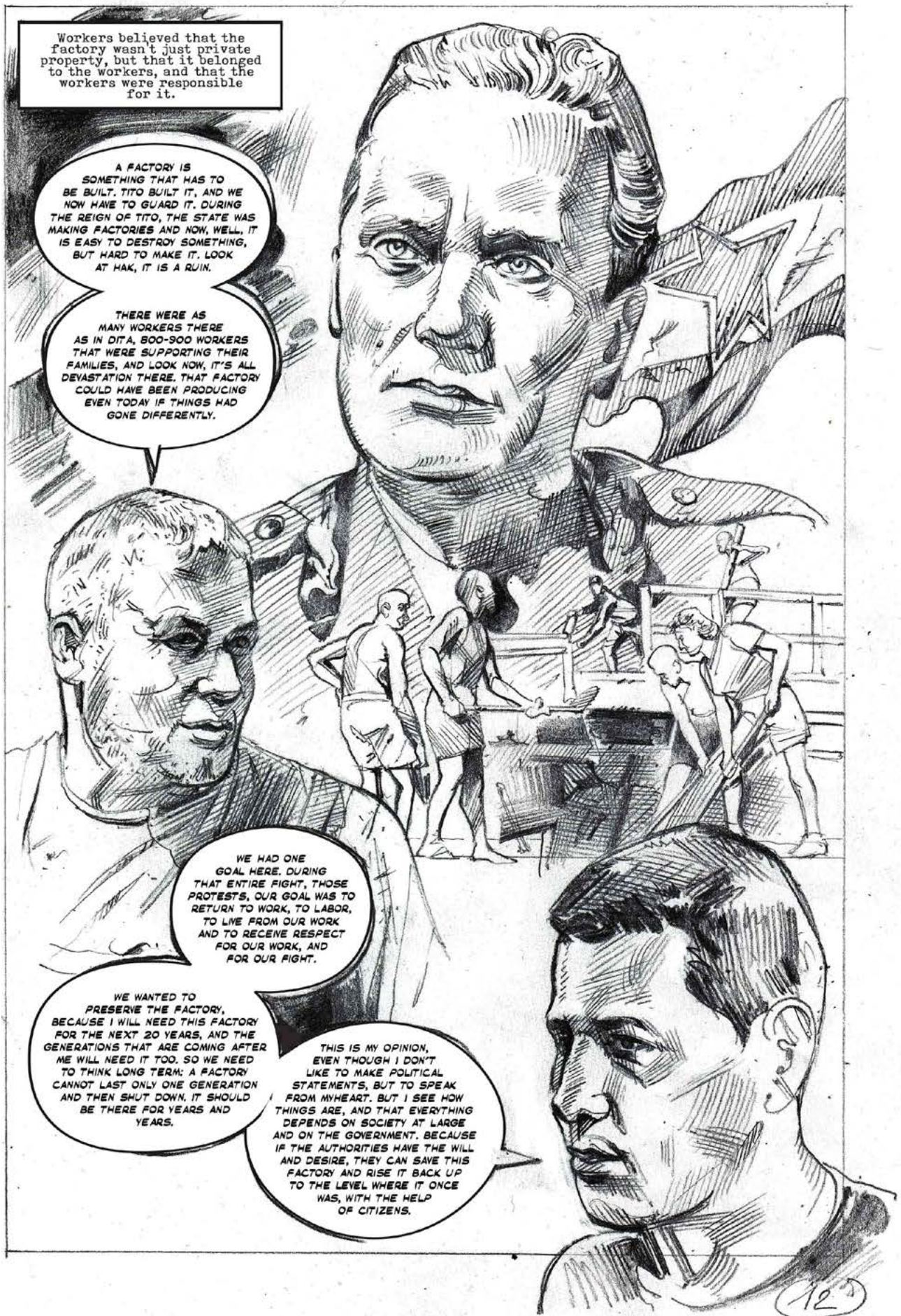


Figure 9. Illustrations from Reclaiming Dita graphic ethnography project. By Boris Stapić.

important victories. In finding new locations for the political, we make space for political thinking and action beyond abstract terms such as nationalism or neoliberalism. And once we link such representations to the generative nature of sequential art—based on the open reliance of comics on the imagination and participation of the reader—we can see how graphic ethnography can pull readers in to having a stake in the story and the fate of its protagonists. It can also counteract characterizations of the Bosnian political present as hopeless and immutable, and lead readers to overcome the feeling that the social itself is so fractured that it is impossible to act collectively.

Of course, the affordance concept and the reader-dependent nature of comics remind us that there will be ways that our work is taken up that we cannot anticipate, something we embrace for the ways in which it might contribute to an anthropological “politics of invention” (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamon 2019), that is, an “anthropology whose political character is derived from its ‘resistance to confining reality and being confined by it’ (Marrero-Guillamon 2018)” (quoted in Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamon 2019, 221). In sum, we see enormous political and social potential in graphic ethnography to produce new ways of relating to ethnographic material and to the political struggle that inspired it, while also providing a compelling model of public anthropology and novel kinds of accountability to the communities and groups with which we work.

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Notes

- 1 Although we do not have the space here to address the collaborative aspects of our project in an in-depth way, we have done so elsewhere (Gilbert and Kurtović 2020; Gilbert, Kurtović and Stapić 2021).
- 2 This proliferation is evident in the emergence of new blogs, exhibitions, initiatives, and curated conversations (anthrocomics.wordpress.com/, imaginative-ethnography.com/graphic-ethnography/ www.graphicmedicine.com, illustratinganthropology.com/, positivenegatives.org/), articles in newspapers (Pavlotski 2019) and academic journals (Galman 2020; Newman 1998; Pigg 2019), as well as the growing number of entries in the University of Toronto Press *ethnoGRAPHIC* book series (Carrier-Moisan 2020; Hamdy et al. 2018; Waterston 2020).
- 3 One clear sign of this was the re-naming of the Visual Anthropology section of *American Anthropologist* to Multimodal Anthropologies, beginning in 2017 (Collins, Durlington and Gill 2017). Many of the articles published in the section have focused on drawing and graphic methods as a research method in fieldwork and elsewhere (Hollands 2018, Hurdley et al. 2017) as well as in the communication of research (Atalay et al. 2019).
- 4 We do not have the space to provide greater detail about the work of these artists, but a detailed summary of their accomplishments can be found in Stapić 2014 and Ajanović 1998.
- 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTspZjyEPug> (accessed 25 November 2021).
- 6 As Dix and Kaur 2019 note, graphic storytelling offers many avenues to convey the truths collected through ethnographic research.

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