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## Transbordering: Notes from a Quiet Border

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### ABSTRACT

*Transbordering* moves around and across the now quiet and permeable border between Venezia Giulia in north-east Italy and Slovenia, touching Gorizia/Gorica and Trieste/Trst, and moving along the Isonzo/Soča river it meets the Mediterranean. Interspersed with autobiographical notes, the narrative weaves a multiplicity of voices drawn from philosophy, history, news, media, political debate, environmental activism, architecture, photography, psychiatric and social reform, migration studies, documentary film, memoir, poetry, contemporary music and performance. The stories move back and forth in time to reinvent a chronology of proximities and returns, uncanny similarities, multiplicities and micro-separations. This is a tale of transbordering: of mixed identities and backgrounds, of fragile and porous national borders, of invisible divisions and removable boundaries, of vulnerable frontiers, oscillating divisions and conflicted confining ones, and of persisting subtle differences and new overt ones. It is one of the many possible stories of an apparently pacified borderland, where the border line traced on maps is almost invisible on the ground but continues to divide land and powers, conceal underlying scars and open fractures, and reshape identities. But identities are not linear, they transborder.

### KEYWORDS

Italian-Slovenian border;  
Gorizia/Gorica; Trieste/Trst;  
Isonzo/Soča river; Franco  
Basaglia's psychiatric reform;  
migration (Balkan route)

People asked me: “What do you want to change? It’s not possible.” But, day by day, things changed. Then they asked me. “Where are you going with this?” and I said, “I don’t know.” And it was true. I didn’t know. Franco Basaglia

## Chronicle

A story, or rather a tale, is always about something else, something that lies underneath the narration and invisibly acts, continuing to operate. This tale is about a now open border that has become almost invisible. Underneath remains the pull of many and different conflicts. They occasionally surface, fizzle, disappear, but never completely, and only to

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return in other forms. The pacified border is dormant; once traced it becomes a scar, flattened into a skin relief as it hardens: a self-graft, one's own skin only different, marked by almost imperceptible discontinuities. This tale veers far from currently hot and lethal borders, to look at a now quiet one – or so it would seem. Moving along the border between the Italian provinces of the Venezia Giulia and Slovenia, its starting point is unashamedly autobiographical, but its stories (indeed there are many, of which these notes evoke only a sample) are not about me. It only gets personal because I *am* border, as we all are in different ways. This is a tale of *trans*-bordering: of mixed identities and backgrounds (I Am Border), of fragile (Flying Bullets) and porous (Fence) national borders, of invisible divisions (Street) and removable boundaries (Park), of vulnerable frontiers (Canal) and oscillating divisions (River), and of conflicted confining ones (Silos).

A tale is a story of somebody or something that takes the place of some-*body* else, or pretends to be some-body else, or takes a form that is not its own. The tale is *trans*-formative: a body tries to be *other*-wise but cannot, as it searches for, or eludes, an *other* way of being, or a way of being *an-other*. Think of Walter Benjamin's impossible Berlin map that is not a map at all. Between 1932 and 1938 Benjamin reorganizes his childhood memories in a text titled "Berlin Chronicle" (Benjamin 1978). In the chronicle Benjamin revisits episodes he had previously gathered in fragments in "Berlin Childhood around 1900" (Benjamin 2006). The chronicle's flowing prose is not simply a catalogue of images of memories of things and places; its remembering is a process of reconnection and re-composition that reactivates. The reworking of the text, that is, "makes map" of them: it constructs relationships between memories and places, as well as between different pasts and the present time of the narrator. Drawing connections Benjamin makes his personal map of the city, which includes remembered things and forms but continues to renew itself through "the mysterious work of remembrance – which is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been" (Benjamin 1978, 16). It is only through this work of interpolation that Benjamin can overcome his "impotence before the city" (Benjamin 1978, 16) and succeed in representing it. While the possibility of graphically tracing the map remains only a suggestion, Benjamin's narrative restructuring makes a map of a set of spatial and personal connections with the places of his memory. By connecting places, he maps a memoir, in a process of recognition, of reconnaissance of the self (Benjamin 1978, 16).<sup>1</sup> Lines traced on a map can connect or divide, and connect and divide at once. Yet life, personal or collective, moves, changes, mutates; it adapts to the work of the line, and yet, at the same time, it fights it.

How to capture the life of a border then, even a dormant one? Possibly through a construction of "images," both in pictures and in text. Walter Benjamin's fragmented and discontinuous approach uses references, texts and images to "make constellations" of them for the construction of an argument. The attention to small things, minor episodes, and autobiographical details allows the discovery of nuances and offers alternative readings that are far from univocal, and critically engages "big" disciplinary histories. Benjamin's personal map of the city remains impossible, suggested but not drawn, and it is this very impossibility that makes it relevant, as it would have required a further leap into a different medium—cinema, in Benjamin's case.

Thirty years after Benjamin's double childhood chronicle, Roland Barthes declares the death of the author (Barthes 1967), in favor of a criticism that departs from the author's intention and biography as sources of explanations, and opens the work to the reader's

interpretation – and thus to otherwise unnoticed details and to new and multiple perspectives. This shift continues to inform Barthes’s post-structuralist work and is paradoxically (but not contradictorily) confirmed in his late work *Camera Lucida* (Barthes 1980), where autobiographical fragments and images provide key entry points to the work of the critic. The image – the photograph in the case of *Camera Lucida* – is opened to multiple interpretations that require a work of “mediation” across many disciplines – Barthes mentions the discourses of sociology, semiology, psychoanalysis. For Barthes, “at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses [lies] a desperate resistance to any reductive system.” And so he begins “to speak differently,” offering “nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies,” and wondering “why mightn’t there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)?” (Barthes 1980, 8).<sup>2</sup>

Following Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and also art historian and theorist Georges Didi-Huberman’s working and thinking through images (Didi-Huberman 2004, 2012, 2011, 2017), this paper uses historical, personal, and visual clues to explore a “quiet” and nearly invisible border. In so doing, it also constructs a hybrid methodology, which – I argue – is necessary to unveil the dynamically layered and always tense “border condition.” The narrative episodes intend to demonstrate that only a combination of different sources – autobiography, site visits, photography, news items, local history, legislation, biography, memoir, poetry, literary criticism, music – and approaches – Benjaminian constellation, autoethnography, psychiatry, architectural history, post-structuralist critical theory, art theory, personal experience, in situ observations, documentary photography – working together can approach the complexity of “borders” and its “transborderings.” Borders, I argue, are never quiet. They are contested even when they are pacified: felt, feared, challenged, erased, remade, activated by processes of *trans-bordering*, by forms of inhabitation that turn lines into spaces, and markings into life. They may become invisible, but do not disappear.



Gorizia, Italy. Border crossing of Šempeter, 2024. In the background, the former city hospital. (photo by T. Stoppani)

## I Am Border

I was born in Gorizia, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy – just about in Italy. On the other side of the fence of the hospital precinct (main building, pavilions and garden) lies Slovenia, then part of Yugoslavia. The fence here is also the borderline, and next to the hospital, across the former check-point of Šempeter (now an open border crossing station) is the Republic of Slovenia. Now in the European Union and in the Schengen Area of open borders, and trading in Euros, Slovenia was, until 1991, part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz “Tito”’s post Second World War miracle mosaic of Yugoslav nations into a non-aligned country.

Italians mispronounce “Nova Gorica,” placing accents in the wrong places (Gòriza), as if trying to make it sound non-Italian. “It is Nova ‘Goriza,’” tells me Andrej, who lives in Slovenia and works in Italy. “But Italians pronounce it Nova ‘Gòriza,’ so when we speak Italian we use it too,” he adds with a smile. It is a sort of courtesy accent, I think. Andrej speaks a perfectly fluent Italian, mixed with a bit of local dialect. We have the same accent, he in Slovene and Italian, I in Italian only. Shame on me; sadly, I have never learned any Slovene – the legacy of historical prejudice, wars and invasions, forced migrations, diffidence and discrimination along and across this fluid border, and in my family too.

This peripheral and now relatively “safe” corner of the Mittel-Europa melting pot has always been a moving and dynamic border. It became explosive during the First World War, when it was the front line of trench-war and snipers. Then, during the Second World War, the combustible mix of ethnic, cultural, religious, linguistic and ideological diversity and divergences came to the surface with the detonation of fascisms and nationalisms and anti-fascisms, of all political colors and shades, from black to white to red to blue. These are complex and complicated entanglements of facts and interpretations that I am not going to delve into here. I remain, instead, with personal and recent and “smaller” stories. This border is now pacified, and in 2025, Gorizia and Nova Gorica are, together, European Capitals of Culture.



Gorizia, Italy. Former checkpoint of Šempeter, 2024. (photo by T. Stoppani)

### Flying Bullets

Venezia Giulia is a small region of Mittel-Europa where borders moved for centuries, and natural boundaries oscillated for millennia; where in geological, but also in human-scale times, rivers moved and merged and disappeared in the porous limestone of the *karst* and its underground caves and sinks. Its second city after Trieste, Gorizia had always been contested territory. The city's history in the twentieth century was marked by tragedy, death and destruction. Razed to the ground more than once during the First World War, it had been paralysed by the machinations of the drawing of borders during the Cold War, a process which had removed a large part

of the previous area covered by the Province of Gorizia. The international frontier, laid out in 1947, cut right through the town, dividing families, separating peasants from their land and even splitting up the dead inside cemeteries. Across the border were the Communists, and a huge red star was placed on the old Austro-Hungarian train station, just over the frontier to the east. [...] Armed guards patrolled the border. When people tried to escape to the west (usually at night), they were sometimes shot dead, and their bodies would only be found in the morning (Foot 2023, 17).

Then, in 1991, Slovenia broke away from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and within a few years Yugoslavia was no more. On June 28, 1991, the war “reaches the Italian border” (Selvelli 2023). Writing for *Meridiano 13*<sup>3</sup> Giustina Selvelli points out that June 28 marks a date in which a series of events made the history of this dynamic border – it is a significant coincidence, or perhaps a planned one. June 28 is *Vidovdan*, the day of saint Vito, a symbolic day for the people of former Yugoslavia. On June 28, 1914, Archduke Francis Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo; on the same day in 1989, Slobodan Milošević’s speech in Gazimestan, Kosovo, inflamed the feelings of the local Serb population against the Albanians. Selvelli reports how on June 28, 1991 the Slovenian war of independence reached the border in Gorizia, near the checkpoint of Casa Rossa-Rožna Dolina, and trespassed into Italian territory for a few minutes.

The Ten Day War had started on June 26, 1991, the day after the Slovenian Parliament had issued its declaration of independence, after a 1990 popular referendum had decided in favor of Slovenia’s independence from Yugoslavia. The declaration defined the *national sovereignty* and delineated the new national borders with Austria, Italy, Hungary and the Republic of Croatia, and the border crossings were immediately armed. On the evening of June 28, 1991, at the checkpoint of Casa Rossa-Rožna Dolina (the main border crossing between Gorizia and Nova Gorica) violent fighting took place between members of the Federal Yugoslav Army and the Slovene special forces of the *Teritorialna obramba* (territorial defense). The war actually trespassed, as some Kalashnikov’s bullets hit the wall of the “Casa Rossa” bar, situated a few meters from the checkpoint ... , and other buildings on the Italian side [of the border] (Selvelli 2023).

The trespassing bullets, their pockmarks still visible on the buildings, concentrated in one symbolic point on one symbolic day, highlighting the complexities of this now quiet border, which never was a line. It is instead a multilingual place of encounters and clashes and wars that vibrates and oscillates in a convolution where languages and cultures and commerce and identities mix.



Gorizia, Italy. Broken border fence near the Šempeter crossing, 2024. In the background, the former district hospital. (photo by T. Stoppani)

## Fence

Back to the old Ospedale Civile di Gorizia where my mother gave birth, less than one kilometer down the border from the Casa Rossa checkpoint. The hospital buildings are

still standing, some still in use by social and health services, but the main building has been abandoned for years. The hospital complex sits literally on the border: its fence, now broken in parts, marks also the national border – now between Italy and Slovenia, that is, between EU and EU. It is now an open border; but borders are always demarcated, and even when they become invisible they remain perceivable, and can be easily rematerialized. Here it happened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when fences were put back up, and *goriziani* from either side of the border met in socio-national distancing across the chain link wire mesh stretched across streets and squares. Now it is happening again, without new fences but with police surveillance: passport-free movement between the two Schengen Area countries has been suspended; the border checkpoints have been discreetly reactivated, manned by police agents, and random checks are carried out (*Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control 2025*).<sup>4</sup> The invading virus this time is human and digital, and so are the forms of control aimed at policing the illegal immigration from the “Balkan route.” Migratory flows, the Israel-Palestine war, and terrorism risk are the conflated motivations when, on October 21, 2023, Italy closes its land border with Slovenia for a period of ten days (*Member States’ notifications of the temporary reintroduction of border control at internal borders ... 2024*, 38).<sup>5</sup> Successive and continuative extensions of ten, twenty, thirty days, then increased to periods of five and then six months, suspend the freedom of movement between Italy and Slovenia and de facto reintroduce border controls to date, and the “land border with the Republic of Slovenia” continues to be one of the risk factors listed in Italy’s notifications of suspension to the EU (*Temporary Reintroduction of Border Control 2025*).<sup>6</sup>

Sitting dormant on this now reactivated border, the hospital precinct becomes a sort of tactical buffer zone, its “agony” (“L’agonia del vecchio ospedale ... ” 2017) an apt allegory of the border condition (Berlese 2022).

In 2023, the Gorizia city assembly approves the demolition of the hospital, and the construction of an education complex in its place. Among the issues raised by the oppositions is the question of whether the Slovenian education authorities have been consulted (Dissegna 2023). Shortly thereafter, the environmentalist association Legambiente issues a report against the demolition plans, lamenting the lack of a public consultation process and stressing that the complex includes not only buildings but also the 12-hectare park that surrounds them, and suggests that the precinct should instead be developed as a “citadel of care and health” in view of a “cross-border collaboration and integration of connected health services (as is already happening in parts of the [nearby] Basaglia Park).” (Legambiente Gorizia 2023).<sup>7</sup> At the end of the year, local TV station *Telequattro*’s news announces that in 2024 the hospital complex will be demolished, to be replaced by the city’s university campus (*Telequattro News 2023*). Conversations and confrontations continue, the University of Trieste’s Gorizia campus currently occupies a nearby complex, and the old hospital is still standing, derelict and unusable.



Gorizia, Italy. Former district hospital, 2024. View from Basaglia Park, across via Vittorio Veneto. (photo by T. Stoppani)

## Street

Gorizia spreads to the west of the hospital; to the east, on the other side of the border/fence is Nova Gorica. In front of the hospital runs one of the urban routes that connect Gorizia to Nova Gorica, Italy to Slovenia. The street (today Via Vittorio Veneto) separates the hospital from what used to be the city's psychiatric hospital (now the Basaglia Park); the main buildings and the main entrances of the two precincts face each other across the street, the space in-between that used to separate and mirror the "sick" and the "insane." Urban space between two heterotopias that now bears witness to their demise, this street is also a border.

The history of Gorizia's psychiatric hospital "is marked by its unique geographical and geopolitical location." (Scavuzzo 2020, 9). It is a history of transformations, in which national borders, therapeutic enclosures and health reforms intersect and are expressed in physical structures and spatial alterations. In *Il parco della guarigione infinita* (Scavuzzo 2020, 9), Giuseppina Scavuzzo explains how in this site converge

the theme of identity and of the fear of losing it, because of mental illness or because of the moving border, and, in parallel, the theme of alterity, the other being the madman or the foreigner. The alienated one – *alius* – is the other par excellence, the irreducible incarnation of the fear of alterity. But in this borderland, the foreigner is also, by definition, *alius*, "allogenuous" and "alloglot" (the term used to indicate the Slovenian-speaking Italians under the Fascist regime.) Alterity is feared for its subversive role and its resistance to normalization

[...] and this is true for both the alienated and the allogeous. In Gorizia these conditions are materialized [...] in the same bodies, that are dislocated, controlled, contained. Architecture has a role in these processes because it translates the need to dislocate and contain alterity into the tracing of ditches, the building of fences, the erecting of walls, but also in compartmentalizing, distributing, pigeonholing (Scavuzzo 2020, 9).

The idea of a provincial mental hospital had originated in 1862 under the Hapsburg administration (Gorizia was then part of the Austrian Empire). The hospital was built in 1905–08 (project by engineer Arthur Glessig and architect Ludovico Braidotti) and opened in 1911. It comprised more than twenty pavilions in a park, connected by a hierarchical network of streets and paths. Bombed and destroyed during the First World War, the hospital was then rebuilt under the Italian administration. Architect Silvano Baresi's 1927 project proposed to maintain the original masterplan and rebuild many of the existing pavilions. The rebuilt hospital was inaugurated in 1933, its pavilions in the park following a heterogeneous taxonomy that would well match that of a Borgesian encyclopedia: observation, the agitated, criminals, infirmary, workers, infectious diseases, oratory, kitchen, laundry, disinfection, workshop, necroscopic lab, stable, chicken coop.

Psychiatrist Franco Basaglia arrives in Gorizia in 1961. As director of the hospital, he introduces a practice of psychiatry focused on respect and on the well-being of the patient. Basaglia gives dignity to mental illness, considering the patient not as a broken object to be fixed, but as a person to welcome, listen to, understand and help. His reform of psychiatric care starts from the assumption that “mental illnesses are reactions to unbearable stresses in life.” (Foot 2023, 29). Patients are individuals and subjects to be helped rather than objectified inmates to lock up or hide, confined and separated from society. Basaglia's deinstitutionalization of the psychiatric hospital is based on the principle that, far from being a *machine à guérir* (Foucault et al. 1976), a therapeutic apparatus, the hospital is itself a “nefarious pathogenic machine.” (Scavuzzo 2020, 86). The reforms introduced in Gorizia rapidly spread across Italy and the world, and “by 1968, Gorizia's asylum became a symbol, a place to visit, a model to imitate” (Foot 2023, 9). In 1968, Franco Basaglia published *The Negated Institution* (Basaglia 1968), and

Young psychiatrists, nurses, patients, intellectuals, journalists and militants all started to define themselves as Basaglians. A heady mix of anti-authoritarianism, liberation theories, self-analysis and ideas of alternatives to the family found a mass audience. Suddenly, asylums were opened up and documented (Foot 2023, 9).



Gorizia, Italy. Basaglia Park, 2024. On the left, corner of the main building of the former psychiatric hospital; in the background, across the street, the former district hospital. (photo by T. Stoppani)

## Park

The real boundary surrounding Gorizia's psychiatric asylum, more than the national border, was its enclosure, and the street that separated the two hospitals, and "sick people" from "mad people." Basaglia's opening practice dismantled barriers within the park of the psychiatric hospital, removing categories and taxonomies within and without, redesigning the layout of the residents' accommodation in clusters of bedrooms organized around shared living rooms, with larger spaces housing the assembly hall, the café, and other social spaces.

Similarly, the perimeter enclosure of the hospital was made porous: the border fence was transgressed, cut open, and eventually demolished; the front gate was opened and crossed.

"The dismantling of the fences takes on a symbolic meaning. The demolition of the first enclosures by the inmates is filmed as an epochal event" (Scavuzzo 2020, 90). The changes introduced by Basaglia in Gorizia were empathetically documented in Sergio Zavoli's 1968 TV documentary *I giardini di Abele* [Abel's gardens] (Zavoli 1968), in which images of the old "close" hospital are contrasted by scenes in which the patients remove the fence of the hospital's park, and others in which they stroll or socialize in the park, or walk out into the city, passing by the symbolically wide open front gate.

The reform project was not only psychiatric, but also social and political, as it "gathered together a hybrid and diverse group of people, from artists, actors and theater directors to student militants, psychiatrists and sociologists, as well as the patients themselves" (Foot 2023, 17). In 1969, Franco Basaglia and Franca Ongaro Basaglia published *Morire di classe* (Dying of class) (Basaglia and Basaglia 1969), a volume with photos by Carla Cerati e Gianni Berengo Gardin that documents the harsh internment conditions in several Italian asylums. The title is a polemical statement on the class-based inequality and disparity of treatment that punishes those who are most in need.

At last, in 1978, the Italian Parliament approves Law 180 (13 May 1978), concerning "Voluntary and compulsory health checks and medical treatments," known as the "Basaglia Law." (Legge 180/1978).<sup>8</sup> In 1971 Basaglia leaves Gorizia to continue his psychiatric reform in Trieste. Gorizia's psychiatric hospital was closed in 1979, and its buildings and park have since been shared between the Local Health Agency (two thirds) and the Province Administration (one third). In 1995 some of the buildings are refurbished to accommodate a new Mental Health Centre, and in 2001 Gorizia's urban plan<sup>9</sup> transforms the hospital gardens into a public park



Šempeter pri Gorici, Nova Gorica, Slovenia. View of Parco Basaglia, Gorizia, Italy, across the border fence, 2024. The note on the gate is an advance apology for the noise during a summer festival and an invitation to the Slovenian neighbors to attend the event. (photo by T. Stoppani)

entitled to Franco Basaglia (*Catalogo regionale del patrimonio culturale del Friuli Venezia Giulia*). The national border side of the precinct is now a simple wire fence in the fields, facing a few houses and fields in Slovenia. On my visit in December 2024 a bilingual (Italian-Slovenian) note from a summer event is still posted on its gate:

Dear neighbors, we'd like to inform you that this weekend (19-20 July) there will be the annual celebration of the Lunatic Festival. We wish to apologize for any inconvenience, and of course you are invited! Warm regards, the staff.

## Canal

I was born in Gorizia because my mother had decided to give birth in the district rather than the local hospital, but I grew up in Monfalcone, by the sea, 20-odd kilometers down the border from Gorizia, and five kilometers from Slovenia. Monfalcone sits by the northernmost corner of the Adriatic Sea, and therefore of Mediterranean waters (a plaque in town proudly marks the exact spot), and is home to the biggest shipyard in Italy. Formerly part of the territory of the Austrian Empire ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrian\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrian_Empire)), Monfalcone was then incorporated into the crown land of Gorizia. During the First World War the town was captured by Italian forces in 1915 and became the rear line during the Battles of the Isonzo ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battles\\_of\\_the\\_Isonzo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battles_of_the_Isonzo)); it was briefly recaptured by Austria-Hungary after the 1917 Battle of Caporetto ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_)

Caporetto), and then returned to Italy in 1918. In those years, the border (and frontline) was very mobile, volatile, and bloody.

Giani Stuparich's book *War of 1915* (Stuparich 2015) draws from the "skeletal annotations," as he calls them, that he made when he was a volunteer soldier in the Italian army during the first two months of the war. Bare, stripped down to the facts and



Monfalcone, Italy, 2025. Aerial view of the Fincantieri shipyard, the Panzano workers' village (bottom right), Porto Rosega harbor (top right), and the Valentinis Canal (left middle). (photo by T. Stoppani)

essential emotions, the narration is restrained even when exposing the complexity and conflicts of what Angelo Ara and Claudio Magris have called “a frontier identity” (Ara and Magris 2007, 106). Born in Trieste of an Istrian family, Stuparich joins the Italian army together with his brother. His is a “home” war, fought in a territory he knows well, only a few kilometers from where he has grown up, gone to school, fallen in love. Therefore, his account of life in the trenches is intersected by childhood memories, and his war notes blend with evocations of recent pasts (Tommasini 2017). Accompanied on the front by his brother, and familiar with the battle grounds, to fellow Italian soldiers Stuparich remains a foreigner and a potential traitor: he is othered by his literary activity as a writer, by his family history and by his geography (he was born “abroad,” as Trieste was then part of the Austrian-Hungarian empire), and he is “other” also because he has chosen the war and which side to fight on.<sup>10</sup> The trench war on the hills of the Karst is a war against an invisible enemy: both armies are buried in ditches, holes in the ground, natural caves and manmade tunnels. The frontline moves slowly, laboriously and bloodily, but also rapidly and fluidly, in the water, in the air, at the speed of a bullet. It is hot on the 29th of July 1915 in Monfalcone. Giani knows the area, and he knows that the canal (that northernmost limb of the Adriatic, along the then *Adria-Werke* shipyard) is not far.

What if we went for a quick swim? I tell Carlo: his eyes twinkle; but we have to tell the others. [...] as we move away from them, they shout: Watch your heads! The canal is deserted, the water is dark and rippled; on the other side, sad and scary, is the burnt carcass of the shipyard. We undress. [...] Carlo and I swim away; we haven’t even reached the middle of the canal when two hisses pass us by, nearly at the same time: two shrapnels explode a few meters ahead of us and shell bullets on the opposite bank and the water beneath. We swim back laughing with fear. (Stuparich 2015, 2)

The canal where the Stuparich brothers swim and risk their lives in the hot July of 1915 is the Valentinis Canal, where the fresh water of one of the artificial branches of the Isonzo River mixes with the salty Adriatic waters in Porto Rosega, Monfalcone’s harbor. The devastated shipyard towards which the Stuparich brothers swim had been founded a few years earlier by the Cosulich family from the island of Lussino, now Lošinj, Croatia. Many Italian families had migrated to Monfalcone from Lussino at the start of the century. There were



Valentinis Canal, Monfalcone, Italy, 2018. On the right the shipyard, now Fincantieri. (photo by T. Stoppani)

job opportunities, and a shared language and culture. One of them was my grandfather, Giovanni (Gianni) Stuparich from Lussinpiccolo (Mali Lošinj). Gianni – not a direct relative of Giani – a naval officer forced to stop sailing in the commercial navy by a worsening myopia, had come to Monfalcone to take on a clerical job in the shipyard. Finding himself in fascist Italy in the 1920s, Gianni had his family name forcibly Italianized, as happened to all those with “foreign sounding” family names. To him was imposed the name Stoppani, an Italian surname mostly found in Lombardy and Tuscany, not in Friuli Venezia Giulia or in Croatia. Sometimes borders are not lines “creatively” traced on maps; sometimes they are words, impositions of names, violent labels, fictional identities defined to suit a regime. I ought to be, I am, Teresa Stuparich.

## River

Today the borderline between Italy and Slovenia embroiders the river path, as they intersect. Like my grandfather, the river is given different names as it is crossed by the border: ninety-six kilometers of Soča in Slovenia, from the spring to the border, followed by forty-six kilometers of Isonzo in Italy, and then into the Adriatic Sea. Before the First World War ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First\\_World\\_War](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_World_War)), the river ran parallel to the border between the Kingdom of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. During the war, between May 1915 and November 1917, it was the scene of twelve ferocious battles culminating in the Battle of Caporetto ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_)

Caporetto), and the place of death of over half a million soldiers. In time, the river changed name according to the dominant power of the moment in the region: *Aesontius*, *Sontius*, *Isontius*, *Lisonçum* (1261), *die Ysnicz* (1401), *der Snicz* (ca. 1440). From *Sontius* come both the current Slovenian *Soča* and the Italian *Isonzo*.

The Isonzo is one of the rivers evoked in Giuseppe Ungaretti's memoir poem *I fiumi* (the rivers) composed in a trench on the 16th of August 1916, while stationed on the front in Cotiči (Savogna d'Isonzo). A dip in the river during a quiet moment of trench life triggers memories of other rivers that marked the poet's personal history:

This morning I lay down / In an urn of water / And like a relic / I rested / The river Isonzo  
flowing / Polished me / Like one of its stones [...]

This is the Isonzo / And here better / I recognized myself / A docile fiber / Of the universe /  
[...] / I observed again / The epochs / Of my life [...].

(Baruffi 2018 ([https://www.amazon.com/Alessandro-Baruffi/e/B01FARM8Q6/ref=dp\\_byline\\_cont\\_ebooks\\_1](https://www.amazon.com/Alessandro-Baruffi/e/B01FARM8Q6/ref=dp_byline_cont_ebooks_1)); Ungaretti 2005)

The flowing water helps Ungaretti “re-establish the harmonious relationship with the world that the war experience has shattered” (Dardano and Giovanardi 1994, 789). For Francesco Puccio this experience touches on universality: the river's waters are not only reconnecting the soldier, for an instant, with the environment and the world, but they melt individual identities and remove differences. The immersion in the river is a rebirth, an expansion of the “I” to all the modalities of being: Ungaretti loses the specificity of human being, and is transformed [...] to feel one and the same with everything and, beyond any contrast, to feel everything in one's self (Puccio 2000, 441).

The site of a momentary rebalancing for the poet, the Isonzo is also a perilous frontier, a frontline that threatens identities and redefines fragile divisions and separations on a nearly daily basis. Its border waters, dangerously cooling the Stuparich brothers, are for Ungaretti a liquid vessel that dissolves identities and challenges the fixity of lines and limits, if only for a moment.

More than a century later, the liquidity of this border is celebrated in *Ultra Lison-tium*,<sup>11</sup> a two-part concert premiered on March 22, 2024, in Monfalcone, in the heart of the Bisiacaria, the land between two rivers (*bis aquae*, the Timavo and the Isonzo rivers), where the Isonzo meets the Adriatic Sea. *Ultra Lison-tium* is a project for music and voices that follows the Soča-Isonzo, moving along the



*Ultra Lisontium* premiere, Teatro Comunale Marlena Bonezzi, Monfalcone, Italy, March 22, 2024. (photo by T. Stoppani)

verses by local linguist and poet Ivan Crico, a “dowser who gathers the secret voices of these borderlands.” (Teatro Comunale di Monfalcone 2024). Crico writes in an archaic form of the local dialect, derived from old Venetian and Friulan, infused with Slovenian and German influences, and evolved from the fusion of local “linguistic fossils.”

The first part of the concert engages with the inland path of the river. *Ultra Lisontium*, by Friulan composer Alessio Domini, is a “postmodern symphony for narrator, female voice and orchestra.” The symphonic form is a reference to the short-lived Hapsburg empire that had held together east and west across the river in a fragile equilibrium; but its musical influences are wider, ranging from the blues to Bèla Bartok’s octatonic scale, to sing the lands crossed by the river with a combination of western and eastern (Slavic) sounds. This is followed by *Passaggi* (passages)(Mačus 2024), by Slovenian composer Ingrid Mačus, a single movement for narrator, female voice and orchestra, that continues to follow Crico’s verses, but changes their sounds, as the river opens wider and splits and mixes its fresh waters with the salty Adriatic shallows. Mačus’s music is liquid; it flows and loops like a nursery rhyme, simple and universal, and it is punctuated by Luisa Cottifogli’s iridescent sound interventions, when she breaks into song, trills or scats, making the poetry breathe.

A true sonic fusion, it would seem; yet, notwithstanding the linguistic acrobatics by Crico and the sonic virtuosisms of Cottifogli, the binary structure of the project reveals the fragilities and micro-fissures that continue to exist, and not only in the linguistic, cultural and political differences of a remote or recent past. The present is richer and more vastly articulated, and a concert of present voices should include the

Bengali, Urdu, Romanian, Serbian, and Albanian voices of recent migrations, and the many more that arrive or try to arrive via the Balkan route.<sup>12</sup>

## Silos

In this fragmented semi-autobiographical collage of stories, a lot remains unsaid or unseen – hidden. This apparently quiet borderland that I am trying to evoke is very good at hiding things, and bodies. Geologically, its karstic topography of soluble carbonate rocks is a perfect receptacle of secrets. Common in the Karst (Carso) region that stretches around the border, across Italy and Slovenia, are the *foibe* (from the Latin *fovea*, meaning pit or chasm), deep naturally occurring sinkholes caused by the collapse of a portion of bedrock above an underground void; some of these sinks can be very large and configured as a sheer vertical opening into a cave.

At the end of the Second World War, the *foibe* became the site of mass killings in a series of events known as the “foibe massacres” (Pupo 2019-20b), in which Yugoslav partisans and secret police<sup>13</sup> killed a large number of persons – estimated between 3,000 and 20,000, according to different sources and narratives – by throwing them, dead or alive, into the foibe. The victims included the local ethnic Italian population (Istrian and Dalmatian Italians), anti-communists associated with Fascism and Nazism, anti-communist autonomists, as well as real, potential or presumed opponents of Tito’s (Jozip Broz) communism (Commissione storico-culturale italo-slovena / Slovene-Italian Historical-Cultural Commission 1880–1956 2000 14).<sup>14</sup>

Unwanted persons, feared persons and discarded persons were buried dead or alive in a preventive political purge. The terror campaign and the transfer to the Yugoslav regime of regions vastly inhabited by Italian populations produced the forced migration of large numbers of Istrian and Dalmatian Italians – what the migrants referred to as the “exodus” to “stress the biblical dimension of their tragedy.” (Pupo 2019-20a).<sup>15</sup>

The first point of arrival across the border was Trieste, where many remained for years in temporary shelters for war refugees organized in the former grain warehouses in the old port known as “Silos.” Conveniently placed between the city’s main railway station and the harbor warehouses, the Silos became a temporary home for many exiles. “Thousands of Italian refugees were camped for several years here in the 1950s” (Altin 2020, 201) and the Silos “became a place of transit and suffering, inhabited by people stuck between war and normalization” (Altin 2020, 202). After their relocation, the nearby harbor Warehouse 18 remained the home of many household items, furniture and tools, documents and personal belongings that had been left behind – traces of lives in transit (Altin 2020, 202).<sup>16</sup> In 2021 Warehouse 18 was vacated, and its contents are now displayed in the nearby Warehouse 26, refurbished to house the Museum of Istrian, Fiuman and Dalmatian Culture (Čok 2021), a “large cultural container” heralded by the city as “a further step towards [the development of] a large museum and culture hub of European relevance” (Comune di Trieste).

After many years of national and international oblivion and ongoing local disgruntlement, since 2004 the foibe massacres and their victims are officially recognized by the Italian state with a law that institutes a “Day of Remembrance” of the Exiles and Foibe.<sup>17</sup> Yet, recently the “great urban container” (Degrassi 2021) of the abandoned Silos began once again to house human beings, as Trieste became the first European

point of arrival for migrations that, through Greece and the Balkans, reach Central Europe over land.

After the ‘Arab Spring’ and the subsequent Syrian Civil War, the Balkan route resumed its old function as an overland passage from the East to Central Europe. Silos therefore once again became a refugee shelter, a space of first arrivals. (Altin 2020, 203)

By 2020, “everyone knows exactly what the situation in Silos is – and the police occasionally evict the refugees and clear out all their belongings – but after a while, everything goes back to the way it was before” (Altin 2020, 204).

Silos house an “overflow” of migrants, both in terms of numbers, when they find no hospitality, and as a form of “surplus” humanity: [...] the ambivalence of this shelter, today as in the past, is to serve as a protective and collective space, but also as a place where migrants are pushed back to the margins, to abandoned spaces, to a no man’s land [that serves as place of] reception, accommodation and detention with functional segregation (Altin 2020, 204).<sup>18</sup>

This goes on until June 2024, when “Trieste packs its asylum seekers into a ghetto called Silos, just in time for the pope’s visit” (Salvi 2024).<sup>19</sup> The title of the newspaper article is intentionally provocative, but in fact on 21th June (ironically, the day after World Refugee’s Day) the city mayor signed the eviction order for the Silos, and it was vacated. Pope Francis had manifested his intention to visit the Silos during his visit to Trieste in July for the 50th annual convention of Italian Catholics, to meet the asylum seekers who had found temporary shelter there. And so they were removed before the Pope arrived, and the evacuees moved to the streets and to other abandoned warehouses nearby (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2024) “Same thing, but more out of sight. What matters is that the Pope must not know” (Baraggino and Tieri 2024). To be repeated, again.

## Unquiet

National, international, local, urban, cultural, ethnic, and domestic: at all levels, borders divide, seclude, and exclude. In January 2023, filmmakers Matteo Calore, Stefano Collizzolli e Andrea Segre released the film *Trieste è bella di notte* (Calore, Collizzolli, and Segre 2023), a documentary on the Asian migrants who attempt to reach Italy on the Balkan route. The film is a j’accuse against the refoulements and readmissions of May 2022, when asylum seekers were rejected at the Italian-Slovenian border and pushed back (refoulements) from Italy to Slovenia, and from there to Croatia and on to Bosnia, without being offered the possibility (and their legal right) to seek asylum in the European Union, in a process of dubious legality labeled “informal readmission.” (Filius 2023). *Trieste è bella di notte* (English title *Trieste Shines at Night*) is a film on and about the border or, as Valentina Re observes in her review, on the multiple dimensions of the border.

The Italian-Slovenian border is an internal border, if considered from the point of view of the EU, and an external border if considered from the point of view of nation states. An internal border is also the space within which migrants are temporarily segregated, a sort of borderland where rights can be suspended and security is not guaranteed. In the journey across the peripheries of Europe, through marginal places and territories that

allow to remain unseen and escape control, borders and frontiers appear at once porous and unmovable, uncertain and inflexible (Re 2023).

This story is not mine. Not only. It is the story of a small place in the world, now pacified, but only apparently so. It is a story of stories of borderlands, traced along a conventional line that is marked on maps and inscribed across lands and bodies, and that even now, when it has become so subtle and invisible, remains ever so powerful. Laws, ownership and belonging can “other” and reject; they divide land and powers, and reshape identities. But identities are not linear, they trans-border and they are time.

Let’s reconsider Walter Benjamin’s map/nonmap/film, and its failed structure or *neverhappened* form. What is more important than what is declared, enunciated, formalized in his account are the connecting threads, the repetitions, the suspensions, the concealments. Borders are never quiet, even when they seem so. As long as demarcation lines, visible or invisible, mark differences of treatment, political affiliation, economic power, social status and belonging, and allow inequality and different regard or disregard of human rights, they will never be quiet.

## Notes

1. “I have long ... played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life ... graphically on a map. [For this] I have evolved a system of signs, and on the grey background ... they would make a colourful show if I clearly marked in the houses of my friends and girl friends, the assembly halls of various collectives, from the ‘debating chambers’ of the Youth Movement to the gathering places of the Communist youth, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves that I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafes whose long-forgotten names daily crossed our lips”.
2. “I had always suffered from the uneasiness of being a subject torn between two languages, one expressive, the other critical; and at the heart of this critical language, between several discourses, [...] I was bearing witness to the only sure thing that was in me [...]: a desperate resistance to any reductive system. For each time, having resorted to any such language to whatever degree, each time I felt it hardening and thereby tending to reduction and reprimand, I would gently leave it and seek elsewhere: I began to speak differently. [... I resolved to start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed for me. Nothing to do with a corpus: only some bodies. In this (after all) conventional debate between science and subjectivity, I had arrived at this curious notion: why mightn’t there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer *universalis*)?”.
3. *Meridiano 13* is a cultural association and online journal that strives for the promotion of socio-economic, cultural, musical, and artistic content from and about Central and Eastern Europe, Balkans and Caucasus. <https://www.meridiano13.it/>
4. “The Schengen Borders Code (SBC) provides Member States with the capability of temporarily reintroducing border control at the internal borders in the event of a serious threat to public policy or internal security. The reintroduction of border control at the internal borders must be applied as a last resort measure, in exceptional situations, and must respect the principle of proportionality.”
5. “In line with the Schengen Borders Code in case of foreseeable events constituting a serious threat to the internal security and public policy the Member States may reintroduce border control at internal borders for a period of up to 30 days or, if from the outset it is known that the serious threat will persist for a period exceeding 30 days, for the foreseeable duration of the threat.” In Notification 388, from Italy, for the period 21/10/2023 - 30/10/2023, states the

- following motivations: “Raise of the threat of violence within the EU following the attack on Israel, risk of possible terrorist infiltration, constant migratory pressure by sea and by land, increase in the Central Mediterranean migratory flow; land border with Slovenia.”
6. Notification 454, from Italy, for the period 19/12/2024 – 18/06/2025 states the following motivations: “Continued threat of terrorist infiltrations into migratory flows along the Mediterranean route and the Balkan route, ongoing crises in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, increasing migratory pressures and the risk of terrorist infiltration, risk of violent actions against Israeli citizens and terrorist activity, and heightened security risks associated with the Universal Jubilee of the Catholic Church; land borders with the Republic of Slovenia.”
  7. “[...] cittadella della cura e della salute” in view of a “collaborazione/ integrazione transfrontaliera di più servizi sanitari di prossimità (come già si sta realizzando in una porzione del Parco Basaglia).” Legambiente is an Italian environmentalist association with roots in the anti-nuclear movement that developed in Italy and throughout the Western world in the second half of the 1970s. Founded in 1980 as part of the ARCI (Italian Recreative and Cultural Association), it later became a stand-alone organization.
  8. Legge 180/1978 “Accertamenti e trattamenti sanitari volontari e obbligatori,” *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, May 16, 1978, n. 133. The bill was not proposed by Basaglia himself, but it applied some of the principles of his approach to psychiatric care and made Italy the first country to close psychiatric asylums.
  9. The New General Master Plan of Gorizia (2001) destined the area to “Service Citadel n.2” for a large-scale service center, relevant for its “proximity to the border” and for the potential of environmental regeneration offered by the park. (Catalogo regionale del patrimonio culturale del Friuli Venezia Giulia)
  10. “The literary author, who strives to blend in with the average mentality of the army, and the *triestino*, the “foreigner” who has chosen the war and is looked upon with diffidence by his fellow soldiers” (Tommasini 2017, 192).
  11. *Ultra Lisontium*, “a poetry and music journey through the Bisiacaria,” comprises *Ultra Lisontium*, postmodern symphony for narrator, female voice and orchestra by Alessio Domini, and *Passaggi*, one movement for narrator, female voice and orchestra by Ingrid Mačus. It premiered at the Teatro Comunale di Monfalcone “Marlena Bonezzi” on March 22, 2024, performed by the Friulivenezia Giulia Orchestra directed by Christian Ugenti, with narrator Ivan Crico narrator, and singer Luisa Cottifogli.
  12. In Monfalcone and surroundings (the “lower Isonzo” area of the Venezia Giulia) the Fincantieri shipyard and its contractors and subcontractors are the major attractors of the recent immigration from Bangladesh. In 2015 an optimistic newspaper article observed that Bangladeshi, Balkan, and East-European shipyard workers – a mosaic of 83 different ethnicities – feed a thriving labor market, and cites the Monfalcone as a laboratory for integration, where the mixing of races, cultures, solidarity, and models of coexistence have been experimented with for over 15 years. (Maugeri 2015). (Author’s translation and paraphrase, to avoid potentially offensive language.) Ten years later things are not so rosy, and a *La Repubblica* newspaper special report thus sums up the ongoing diffidence and resistance to integration by the electorate of the now right-wing local administration: “No to the veil. No to cricket. No to prayers. In the city of Fincantieri, where one third of the population is foreign, the Right blows on the embers. But there is no fire” (Staglianò 2025).
  13. The secret police of Communist Yugoslavia that existed between 1944 and 1946 was commonly known by its acronym OZNA, which stood for *Odeljenje za zaštitu Naroda*, the Department for Protection of the People.
  14. *Rapporti Italo-Sloveni 1880–1956* (Slovene-Italian relations 1880–1956), the report by the Slovene-Italian Historical-Cultural Commission published in 2000, concludes that the Italian exodus had multiple causes and “the 1945 killings were triggered by the atmosphere of settling accounts with the fascist violence; but, as it seems, they mostly proceeded from a preliminary plan which included several tendencies: endeavors to remove persons and structures who were in one way or another (regardless of their personal responsibility)

linked with Fascism, with Nazi supremacy, with collaboration and with the Italian state, and endeavors to carry out preventive cleansing of real, potential or only alleged opponents of the communist regime, and the annexation [...] to the new Yugoslavia” (*Rapporti Italo-Sloveni 1880–1956* 2000, 14).

15. The use of the term “exodus” “has become, in time, a formula adopted by historians to define a particular typology of forced movement of the population, different in its form but not in its results from deportation and expulsion”(Pupo 2019-20a). For a detailed documentation on the “exodus” and the “foibe” see *Vademecum per il giorno del Ricordo*. The *Vademecum* explains that the exodus was not an event but a process that lasted from 1943 to 1956. Giulians and Dalmatians abandoned their homes for different reasons and at different times, and the overall number of the flow is estimated at 280.000- 300.000 persons. (*Vademecum* 2019).
16. “An extraordinary zone where the objects of ordinary daily life have been interrupted, a kind of frozen frame of domesticity in other times and spaces. It is of course particularly ironic that this has taken place in a port and a train station, which also symbolize mobility and movement” (Altin 2020, 202).
17. Italian Law 92 of 30 March 2004 instituted a *Day of Remembrance* on 10 February to commemorate the victims of Foibe and the exodus of the population of Italian origin living in Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia. The Republic acknowledges the 10th of February as Day of Remembrance “to preserve and renew the memory of the tragedy of Italians and of all the victims of the foibe, and of the exodus from their lands of the Istrians, Fiumans and Dalmatians after the Second World War, and of the more complex events of the eastern border” (Legge 92/2004). Following the end of the Second World War in 1945, the Paris Peace Treaties were signed on 10 February 1947. The treaties changed the Italian–Yugoslav border.
18. See also Altin (2017, 39–40).
19. “Out of sight, out of mind – that’s all that matters to them. And this time it’s going to happen, as there’s a good reason to pull all the stops to sweep them under the rug for just long enough the Pope will visit Trieste on July 7.” (Salvi 2024).

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