

Communicating Mobile Borders: Urban Conviviality and More-Than National Belonging in Trieste’s Interethnic Friendships

ZLATAN KRAJINA
University of Zagreb, Croatia

This article analyzes communicative practices of interethnic conviviality in Trieste, which make this frontier city the epitome of multiculturalism in Europe. My in-depth interviews with an ethnographic component explore friendships among Italians and people from neighboring ex-Yugoslav countries. Largely ignorant of official minority frameworks, they negotiate togetherness by self-identifying as Triestines, performing the city in everyday life as a cultural “marketplace”—Trieste’s ancient name—where they work out informal cooperation and joke about inherited cultural opposites (Roman/capitalist vs. Slavic/ex-socialist). In interpreting these communicative alliances, I draw analogies to Yugoslav interethnic solidarities of “*raja*,” where conviviality depended on both spatial proximity and the positive confrontation of difference. Trieste’s Italo-Yugo networks similarly rehearse what I term “more-than-national” or “elastic” belonging, resulting from their routine combining of embodied and digital communication as complementary forms of movement, whether through socializing in taverns and online groups or traversing nearby national borders.

Keywords: Trieste, communication, conviviality, friendship, mobility

This article observes how diverse forms of communicative practice underpin conviviality among Italians and people from ex-Yugoslav republics in Trieste, Italy. Nested in a narrow bay in the northeastern Adriatic, the city adopts a dual role. It is at once a global port city and a frontier city, situated within walking distance of the border with Slovenia and a short drive from Croatia (both former Yugoslav republics). In only one generation, these borders changed functions dramatically, from being considered a relatively admitting part of the Iron Curtain (see, e.g., Buhin, 2022, p. 162) to becoming a national border, then a European Union (EU) and Schengen border, and finally a living memory, after Slovenia and Croatia joined said territories and permanently opened their checkpoints.

Nonetheless, these neighboring worlds have historically been constructed as opposites, and this cultural boundary remains significant. There is the Roman/Occidental/capitalist world on one side of the border and the Balkan/Oriental/socialist on the other. Simultaneously, Trieste is a place of conviviality (“everyday capacity to live with difference”; Samanani, 2023, p. 2124) among Italians and people from

Zlatan Krajina: zlatan.krajina@fpzg.hr

Date submitted: 2025-01-06

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former Yugoslavia (hereafter, Slavs), stemming from the communicative resilience of their interethnic friendships. I explore practices of conviviality by focusing on these people's quotidian communication and seeking their broader relevance for understanding identity and belonging. I conducted 17 in-depth interviews with participants from the two largest ethnic groups and participant observation of their interactions in the city. My data suggest that observed conviviality results from the interweaving of different modalities of communication, including interpersonal exchange (in urban and digital spaces alike), transborder mobilities, dialect development, and geographic imagination. I further find that their networks of interaction and collaboration contrast sharp cultural divisions, nationalist orientations of their respective homelands (and of Trieste itself), and the "methodological nationalism" ingrained in Europe's thinking about migration (Robins & Aksoy, 2016).

Instead, these people work out what I term more-than-national belonging. This outlook does not deny differences with national or regional frames of reference (e.g., homeland belonging, historical wrongdoings, cultural stereotypes), but keeps them in a creative tension with these people's will to coexist. In their quotidian interactions, my respondents construct recalcitrant identities by joining references that official discourses tend to keep separate. They rehearse what I call elastic identification by recombining the usual hierarchies of belonging (national, regional, urban) to create and sustain community. Drawing from the main themes emerging from my interviews, I recognize their version of tolerance in the following set of practices: quotidian solidarity (exchanging help, sharing experiences), socialization customs (reliance on the local dialect, satirizing inherited ethnic prejudice), and taken-for-granted crossing of nearby national borders. I argue that these practices, which occur in seemingly separate settings like taverns, online chat groups, and local roads, become clearer as a valuable source of conviviality when observed together (see Morley, 2017). My respondents' respective ethnic cultures remain connected as distinct and near through a commitment to the city and self-identification as Triestines (*Triestini*).

I describe the value of these communicative alliances as "agonistic," drawing broad analogies to *raja* (pronounced *raya*) sociality—typical of interethnic solidarities in the pre-1990s Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina—and to its culture of tolerance dating back to the pre-national, Ottoman Balkans (Krajina, 2022; Šavija-Valha, 2013). The community and interaction of *raja* was defined by nearness and constructive coping with cultural difference (Šavija-Valha, 2013), just like the agony of articulating the coexisting difference is considered a necessary ingredient of modern democratic societies (see Mouffe, 1993 on "agonistic democracy"). Difference kept *raja* alive as much as ethnic cleansing during the 1990s wars arguably made *raja* a past memory (Šavija-Valha, 2013). My Slavic interviewees mostly belong to generations that, having escaped the 1990s wars, carried into Trieste a commitment to a pacifist, inclusive, and politically unambitious outlook, similar to that of *raja* and its agonistic community.

Friendships between Italians and Slavs tapped into the longer heritage of Italian/Slavic copresence in the city dating back to Trieste's pre-national epoch of development, when it was a key Habsburg port and a European cosmopolitan center (1719–1918). Quotidian interethnic contact endured the postimperial nationalisms that played out in this city, causing ruptures between Italian and Yugoslav societies. My respondents' routine encounters and interactions sustain a vibrant (i.e., never entirely easy or fully

conflictual, but continuously negotiated, "agonistic") cohabitation that echoes the multiculturalism of both pre-national Trieste and the Balkans.

Below, I outline the theoretical framework for my research. Adopting a materialist view of communication, migration, and Trieste's multiculturalism, I also engage intercultural communication research by foregrounding the processual and open-ended nature of intergroup friendships. I then present my qualitative methodology and research outline. Drawing on my observations, I describe elements of what I consider the city's communicative scenography (symbolic properties of urban landscape), which underpins belonging that is less about ethnic loyalty and more about urban (Triestine) and, in turn, more-than-national identification. Centrally, I present how conviviality is practiced by my respondents. Drawing on central themes from my in-depth interviews and additionally from participant observation (see below on "friendship as method"), I observe my respondents' routine intertwining of urban, linguistic, and corporeal modalities of communication as a key source of interethnic cooperation.

I conclude by arguing that Trieste is best considered a vernacular center of gravitation for these people's daily rounds and geographic imaginations. They draw from a sense of Triestine self-dependency (as a former key imperial port and a current national periphery) and pursue solidarity that resembles elements of the *raja* culture. Trieste thus possibly remains "an ideal place" to study "processes of European identity-making" (Bialasiewicz, 2009, p. 319). The city still harbors a Europe that is agonistic in practice, conceptually open-ended, spatially dense, and generative.

Materiality of Intercultural Communication and Trieste's Multiculturalism

In interpreting my respondents' descriptions of diverse interaction practices, such as online chatting, festive gatherings, and transnational commute, I find crucial relevance in Morley's (2009) "materialist, non-media-centric" paradigm, "a model for the integrated analysis of communications," defined as the "movement of information, . . . objects, commodities, and persons" (p. 114). This "non-media-centric" perspective observes communication holistically and contextually, that is, as spatialized and historicized. This definition of communication as the simultaneous movement of information, things, and people will be my organizing principle in presenting my respondents' accounts. Observing these modes of communication jointly allows for an adequate appreciation of their quotidian entanglements and implicated power relations. Practices like traversing national borders and exchanging memes, provide a deeper understanding of what it means to live alongside cultural boundaries and national borders than more narrowly defined approaches. My focus on bottom-up dynamics and their open-ended, uncertain orientations corresponds to what Georgiou (2013), in describing migration as urban communication, defined as the mingling of "multiple particularisms" that create "vernacular cosmopolitanism," that is, "orientations emerging out of practice" (p. 146).

Furthermore, friendship is increasingly recognized as a specifically potent type of relationship (Kastner, 2021) that can provide key support for positive outcomes of "intercultural communication" (Collier, 2003). Indeed, "cultural differences" can be found to "enhanc(e), rather than hinde(r), friendship development" (Sias et al., 2008, p. 11). This type of relationship can gain the status of "intercultural alliance," which is more than contact "between group X and group Y"; rather, of crucial importance is the

processual nature of the friends' "multiple identification," including the "interdependence" of actors who "often seek similar goals," while remaining mutually "responsible" and aware of their "cultural differences" (Collier, 2003, pp. 2, 14). At the same time, unlike approaches that focus on goal-oriented interactions (e.g., peacebuilding) in predefined settings (e.g., research centers), my specific case commands attention to the unintended potentialities of intercultural communication in generating new identifications. I study informants in urban settings where they seek to live together by relying on their own improvised resources without guarantees of success.

Situating this study in Trieste necessitates further footing in literature that observes this arguably "most written-about city" (Walley, 2009, p. 245; see especially Roić, 2013). If this is true in areas like fiction, travelogues, urban branding, and popular culture (Bialasiewicz, 2009, p. 323), this popularity comes with the price of mythologizing Trieste as cosmopolitan generally. My research favors portraying Trieste as an example of "actually existing cosmopolitanisms" (Ballinger, 2004, p. 31, as cited in Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1086). This perspective views tolerance as permanently incomplete, not least because it permits the coexistence of various (if normally dormant) nationalisms, rather than silencing them completely (Ballinger, 2004; Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1089).

Looking back on select indicative moments in Trieste's dense modern history, we can recognize sources of "actually existing cosmopolitanisms" (Ballinger, 2004, p. 31) already from the beginning. In 1719, Charles VI made this Illyrian fishing village a "Free Port" to serve as prime sea contact with Asia during the last two centuries of the Habsburg Empire (Morris, 2002, pp. 6, 29). This period incited an "extraordinary urban experiment": an architectural enterprise that constructed "a sort of Mitteleuropean St Petersburg of the Mediterranean," making the city seem like "the most 'European' of Italian cities" (Minca, 2009, p. 257) or "Vienna with the sea" (Carabelli, 2019, p. 387). As Trieste became the third biggest city in the empire (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1087), it welcomed all cultures as long as they benefited the city's trading ambitions (Morris, 2002, p. 6). This city was positively viewed as "not having any past," as Marx famously commented (as cited in Morris, 2002, p. 30). It permitted such cultural mixing where, for example, "in 1908 the same man was choirmaster of the chief Jewish synagogue, the Greek Orthodox church and the Serbian Orthodox temple" (Morris, 2002, p. 100). Thus, the city center is characterized by the absence of a central church tower, which is somewhat unusual in Europe. Because the empire sought "able immigrants from foreign countries and faiths," the city today has no milestone "tower or steeple" to align it with one religion (Morris, 2002, p. 154); instead, its urban tapestry interweaves Catholic churches with "Greek Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Angelica, Methodist, Armenian Catholic, Waldensian" (Morris, 2002, p. 154), Jewish (Tufi, 2013, p. 395), and Muslim places of worship.

By contrast, with the tidal wave of national unification in Europe from 1866 onward, Trieste was considered no less than "a symbol of Italian unity" (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1087) and became part of Italy in 1919. The city's imperial architecture, "having no obvious purpose within Italy" (Morris, 2002, p. 7), obtained local purposes. For the fascist government from 1922 onward, the city was "a supreme national and even expansionist symbol," a place to claim "ancient Italianness" (Morris, 2002, pp. 111–112), as remains visible in the milestone university building and several memorials visible alongside those left from the imperial era. The two groups, majoritarian Italians and minority Slavs, nonetheless, continued to interact. Their leaders caused dramatic ruptures in their relationships. These included the exodus of Slavs,

following the prohibition of their languages and institutions (Morris, 2002, p. 114), as well as the "Italianisation of names (even in cemeteries)" during fascism (Tufi, 2013, p. 395). WWII saw the *foibe* ("ravines") murders by Tito's partisans (Tufi, 2013, p. 397) and the post-WWII mass exodus of Italians (*esuli*, "the exiled") from the adjacent eastern peninsula Istria (then Yugoslav, now Croatian) who fled to Trieste as "dispossessed refugees," some with "ineradicable resentment against all Slavs" (Morris, 2002, p. 101). The city even remained outside of any one national territory for several years (as "Free Territory of Trieste") before returning to Italy in 1954 (see Tenca Montini, 2020). This experience afforded Trieste the status of "a paragon" for Europe's traumatic milestones, including the fall of the Habsburg, as arguably "the most European of European empires," the coming of nationalism, and "competing totalitarianisms" (Bialasiewicz, 2009, p. 320).

As can be said of Europe (the birthplace of some of the "best" and "worst" legacies in human civilization; Morin, 1989, p. 96), contradiction runs through narratives about diversity in Trieste too. The monarchy provided Jews in Trieste with considerable privileges, with the city serving as the unofficial "Port of Zion," transferring via ships the emigrants to Palestine and the Americas during Nazism (Morris, 2002, p. 89). When the Nazis eventually entered, they took around 700 local Jews "to death or deportation" in Trieste's industrial complex San Sabba, making this city remembered as the location of the Nazis' "only extermination camp on Italian soil" (Morris, 2002, pp. 91–92). In the 1970s, the city pioneered the humane system of psychiatric treatment by closing large asylums and developing decentered community centers for destigmatisation and integration (Covacich, 2006, pp. 58–65). Following the 2000s crisis in Kosovo, the city invented the "diffused acceptance" model for refugees, recognized for opposing ghettoization and prejudice by housing refugees across different neighborhoods (G. Schiavone, personal communication, September 21, 2021). During the Cold War, the city was a relatively permissive part of a trans-European frontier between the Western, nonaligned, and, indirectly, Soviet worlds. As a result, the central canal area of Ponterosso transformed on weekends into an overwhelmingly busy open-air market. This unique period of its recent past has not been memorialized by the city. Contemporary Trieste retains functions of a global port, invests in international tourism and ship maintenance, and hosts several world science centers. Simultaneously, the city tends to vote right in national elections. Public signs are officially bilingual (Italian and Slovenian), though this is only modestly implemented ("Slovenian could be heard almost everywhere, but not seen"; Tufi, 2013, p. 400). Signs of conviviality are absorbed within the diverse textures of the city's landscape.

Decoding Trieste's Communicative Scenography of Hospitality

Having reflected on relevant historical traits in Trieste's multiculturalism and before turning to my participants' accounts, I briefly draw attention to certain symbolic elements of the city's public spaces that I observed, the better to contextualize my interviewees' accounts. I rely on Leach's (2002) argument that if urban space is more than the sum of its objects and infrastructure, it can usefully be observed as cultural text, "a patchwork quilt of traces of human existence" (p. 2; see, e.g., Krajina, 2021). Tasked with decoding relevant "hieroglyphics" of the city, the researcher, for Leach (2002), becomes like a "detective" who seeks "access to deeper underlying questions about society" (p. 2).

Centrally located and integrated with the sea promenade is the widest square, Piazza Unità, an elaborate, imperial "showpiece of the city" (Morris, 2002, p. 43). Its postimperial function remains multiscalar: The Piazza houses local and regional administrations and hosts nationally relevant events (celebrations, ceremonies) as well as international festivities (e.g., culinary or sporting events). It also evokes the past (e.g., Austrian waltzes are played over public speakers at Christmas while international cruise ships dock nearby). Further inside the city, regional Italo-Slavic varieties start to reveal themselves. The Emeroteca "Tomizza" (a public reading place, by the name of a famous local Italian writer interested in regional Italo-Slavic connections) features a shop window with numerous current issues of periodicals in regional languages, putting the city's present cultural diversity on display. Next door, the Literature on Trieste ("LETS") Museum, with the adjacent "Joyce Museum", takes visitors into the city's cultural past. Street stalls that sell old books in Trieste just outside the entrance add a historical testimony to the diversity demonstrated by the mentioned interiors. Other notable formal signs of multiculturalism (placards and even the buildings themselves) include the nearby "Civic Museum of the Civilization of Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia," visual (poster, sticker) commemorations in public space of James Joyce's historical presence, and permanent series of public events on regional migrations (e.g., "S/paesati"/"The Homeland-less") and identity (e.g., "Alpe Adria Cinema"). At the center, near the Slovenian bookstore, there is a former Hotel Balkan damaged by fire during the Italian national uprising in 1920 (Morris, 2002, p. 100) and presently housing the Slovenian *Narodni dom* ("National Hall"). Regional Slavic languages (rarely categorized nationally) are present not only in language textbooks for Italians in bookstores but also in Italian media outlets like "Balkan Observatory." Glimpses of bars and restaurants further reveal cohabitation as taken for granted. Among the standard Italian nomenclature, the popular local schnitzel offer is called Ljubljanska (gesturing the capital of Slovenia), while fast-food outlets juxtapose the words "Kebab" and "Pizza" as equals. Passing through the canal area and the presently open Ponterosso Square, one still hears chatters in Slavic languages, also understood by Italian shop assistants. This is only a far echo of the bustle that characterized this former open street market area on weekends through the 1960s and 1990s as a Slavs' shopping Eldorado.

The city's downtown shop signs further signify the city's multiculturalism, suggesting multitemporality as Trieste's usual urban experience. One frequently encounters well-preserved, old (early to mid-20th century) shop signs and storefronts, intertwined with the more contemporary, luminous LED signage. This unusual urban tapestry curiously underscores the city's multiculturalism and the presence of Others from other spaces and regimes of truth (see Massey, 2005, on "multiplicity"). Furthermore, thanks to Trieste's slow and uneven postindustrial transformation, downtown businesses still feature artisans, specialty and repair shops, dedicated to local living. By contrast, such commercial spaces in regenerating European cities have vastly given way to international service economies and the needs of less committed "digital nomads."

Moving deeper inside the city, one reaches Piazza Garibaldi, the informal "Balkan town": a cultural backstage of Trieste's global Habsburg front image. Particularly noticeable is the diverse linguistic soundscape reminding us of Trieste's etymology *Tergeste*, "marketplace" (Trieste, 2025). Reflecting on this historical area of Balkan arrivals, and the more recent presence of African and Asian migrants, my respondent Rocco (middle-aged, transport worker) describes his experience of this "Trieste palette" with a sense of innate mobility: "I didn't travel around the world, the world has traveled around me." Surrounded, like much of the city, by rushing vehicles, this is an inner micro-transport node consumed by heavy traffic. Amid bars and specialty shops, one can spot luggage left around door fronts, implicating

further ongoing movement. Inside one of the bars, a set of seats brought from a truck cab is left beside tables and chairs. This unusual element of the bar furniture—the cab seats—gestures an additional, lyrical significance of these bars, and Trieste, as transfer points themselves precariously situated between homeliness and displacement.

Customers sometimes greet the newcomer as if recognizing in the other someone with a personal migratory story to share. A typical convivial greeting from Slavic/Balkan construction workers and truck drivers I encountered in the area was, “What kind of work or help are you looking for?” They socialize at these bars at the beginning and the end of the workday, sometimes playing card games, with Balkan folk music in the background, and waitresses addressing them in basic Slavic words. There is an ambiance of comradeship, quite like that depicted in Berger and Mohr’s (2010) landmark study of European laboring migration, whereby workers cope with displacement by exchanging “the cunning which is needed on all occasions” (p. 33). The men at the bars tell me that no other city they went too previously, such as in Austria or Germany was as consistently sociable as Trieste.

Methodology

This research comprised 17 in-depth interviews: nine with people from the former Yugoslavia, most of whom arrived in the 1990s, and eight with people of local origin (two autochthonous Slovenes and six Italians). All participants had friends in the other ethnic group, with most having some family connections in the other group. Interviewees were aged 22–66 and represented diverse genders and professions. I interviewed them in Italian or Croatian/Serbian in their homes or in city bars as part of my participant observation during 2021–2022 and intermittently from 2022–2024. Before these interviews, I conducted three pilot study conversations with people from relevant ethnic or academic institutions. I worked with “iterative data gathering and analysis” (Rivas, 2018, p. 432). Interviews were semistructured around participants’ experiences of initial contact with the other ethnic group, preferred forms of interaction (especially media use) within their intercultural friendships, strategies for coping with cultural differences, and understandings of regional geography. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and analyzed using “open” coding (Rivas, 2018, p. 433).

Though I mention two key groups, Italians and Slavs, the latter group refers to heterogeneous ethnic communities of Slovenians, Croatians, Serbs, and Bosnians. Slovenians, Trieste’s recognized “autochthonous” ethnic minority, constitute an estimated 10% of the city’s population of approximately 200,000 inhabitants and run ethnic political, educational, and cultural institutions (Tufi, 2013). Serbs, currently the largest group of immigrants, and Croatians also manage their respective national cultural organizations. Despite the ethnic/national framework of their formal representation in the city, their informal interethnic cooperation in Trieste thrives because these people from ex-Yugoslavia, whose compatriots had warred in the early 1990s, tend to self-identify both regionally (originating from the ex-Yugoslav “region”) and as *Triestines* (along with local Italians).

Contacts of interviewees were gathered by snowballing, which, despite its potential shortcomings in terms of including people “who might have similar experiences” (Seale, 2018, p. 167), proved most reasonable given my focus on a relatively specific, less publicly visible community that had not been known

to me previously. For example, when a Slavic interviewee mentioned the relevance of their friendship with Italians for their integration, the latter usually became my next interviewee. Apart from interviews, this project also profited from my accepting informants' invitations to their various social gatherings, where it became possible to verify my conclusions through participant observation. I found this additional dimension of my research to be particularly valuable, as it elucidated, in several cases, some benefits of what Tillmann-Healy (2003) recognized in "friendship as method," such as "relational truth" resulting from evolving relationships with informants (pp. 730, 733). Though I interviewed these respondents when we had only met, and could interact as relative strangers, through "keener observational eyes" (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735),¹ staying in the field provided ample opportunity for unorthodox, place-specific views of borders and belonging to emerge through interaction. As my Italian respondents would eventually start telling me, "now this is also *your* city," I, too, started to identify as an accepted Slavic migrant. Being of ex-Yugoslav origin with good command of regional Slavic languages and Italian, but residing outside of Trieste positioned me as sufficiently close and distant to my respondents, as assumed in good ethnographic rapport. I sought to mitigate my potential cultural bias by declaring my ethnic and generational positionality to my respondents and double-checking my understanding of their accounts. My other relevant points of entry into the field included following local media, gathering participants' anonymized screenshots of typical online interactions, and learning some dialect.

Mooring in the City of Transit: Italo-Yugo Friendships and More-Than-National Identification

Before elaborating patterns from my interview materials (first intercultural contact, daily interactions/mobilities, and dialect/belonging), I describe *raja* as my overarching interpretive framework, drawing from the work of Šavija-Valha (2013). *Raja* originally refers to "the community of everyday life in Bosnian-Herzegovina society" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 19). Its performative characteristics of agonistic coexistence can also be found across former Yugoslav societies and, as I suggest, in Italo-Yugo friendships in Trieste. Though these contexts are quite diverse, important parallels can nonetheless be drawn, not least given some respondents' biographical ties and a shared historical experience between Trieste and Bosnian cities like Sarajevo, of living with mixed identities under foreign rule.

Raja as Communication

Communities in pre-national Bosnia-Herzegovina were formally divided by the Ottoman "millet" system (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 51). The millet granted communities confessional autonomy in return for recognizing superior rule. However, self-identifying as "peripheral" and feeling "left behind by history" (Giordano, 2001, p. 94, as cited in Šavija-Valha, 2013, pp. 75, 85), arguably like the groups in Trieste (e.g., sensing their city as invisible in national media), the millet communities also tacitly collaborated. According to Šavija-Valha (2013), members of different local religious communities professed suspicion for and tactical opposition to changing foreign rulers (pp. 52–55, 79–81, 83). With a sense of dependence on one's neighbor, the locals developed certain shared communicative practices as a reliable defense (Šavija-Valha, 2013, pp. 54–55). The "everyday" sphere of their cooperation, including forms of solidarity and friendship, enabled "trans-religious" connection, leading to "the strategy of the neighborhood" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, pp. 54–55).

¹ See Moores and Metykova (2010) on broader intellectual benefits of this crucial methodological position.

Extending into the successive post-Ottoman period, these neighborly interethnic (horizontal) coalitions grew into a kind of folk culture recognized as *raja*. According to Šavija-Valha (2013), *raja* derives from "reciprocity of exchange in socio-economical and moral way" (p. 92). There are no "higher goals" for this kind of collaboration other than sustaining itself; the *raja* is keen to dismiss "nonreciprocal" relationships that "may lead to concentration of power" and political ambition (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 96). Originating from the Arabic term for "herd," *raja* has come to signify a highly integrative, insular form of solidarity, a "tribal self-sufficiency" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, pp. 97, 101). It emerges among "individuals of heterogeneous (ethnic and generally diverse) identities" who encounter each other in urban space and commit to serendipitous "socializing" that is affectionally evocative of comradeship, yet practically dependent on custom and obligation (Šavija-Valha, 2013, pp. 19, 152). Irresolvable disputes about history or politics are typically worked through the discourse of joking, which is resolutely anti-national and "anti-elitist" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 18). The typical quotidian situation of, for example, coffee drinking (or celebrations, housework, groceries, etc.), revolves around sharing about how things are done or seen "at yours" and "at ours" while "simultaneously making humorous comments about those divisions, denying them" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 89). This is how *raja* becomes "one (authentic) way of coping with identitarian ambivalence in ethnically heterogeneous society," thus enacting conviviality "*sui generis*" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, pp. 19, 96).

Interethnic Friendship as a Communicative Resource

Though typically described as lively (Covacich, 2006), contact between Italians and Slavs, as described in my interviews, was not always about pleasurable socializing. The more senior Slavic respondents recall early difficulties upon arriving Trieste in the 1990s or earlier. These were particularly noticeable "with every crisis," when, typically, "prejudice resurfaces." As participants noted, historically, it was possible to hear that, earlier, "Slovenes" and later, more "Kosovans" were "to blame" for economic hardship. One could hear "shut up, Slovene" uttered on the bus or see "via gli sciavi"² written on the wall. Ida, who had arrived fleeing a warring Yugoslav country in the early 1990s, first received demeaning messages from a neighbor. Suzana, also arriving at the time, could not rent a flat, even with the right documents and funds. Sometimes, Slavic surnames were taken off apartment doors. These episodes were eventually followed by positively transformative moments around the late 1990s, when, for instance, the rude neighbor left flowers at the woman's door, and the woman started to feel "at home."

All my Slavic respondents speak of their current interactions with Italian coworkers or neighbors as "pleasant" and their Italian friends as "lovely." They now generally see incidents of xenophobia as foisted onto Trieste from the outside through national politics that periodically activate historical antagonisms. This is "not" something experienced "among familiar people, at home or at work," a Slovene informant (senior, blue-collar worker) emphasized. There is "some nationalism," but it is mainly "out there" in the media, another one pointed out. There is a working duality between the public sphere's openness to national influences, thus creating a sense of what my respondents saw as "contrasts" to the more gated sphere of private and community life, which is shielded by interethnic friendship. In communication, this tactical balancing between "vertical" (regional, national) and "horizontal" (interpersonal) domains of interaction is familiar in media audience research as the commonness of the "negotiated code" in people's interpretation

² "Go away Slavs," using the old politically incorrect term "sciavi," or slaves in Triestino.

of national media in everyday life (Morley, 1992, p. 265). Similarly, for Šavija-Valha (2013), interaction among the *raja* oscillates between "antagonism" (political/vertical) and "cooperation" (civic/horizontal; p. 16). The former is seen as produced by "the elites" and the latter sustained through the "micronarrative of cooperation," born out of "permanent interethnic encounter" and "proximity, directedness towards one another" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 87).

The process of acceptance in Trieste relied chiefly on the participants making friends from the other group; for the locals, it was more a matter of curiosity, and for Slavs, a necessity. Danijel (middle-aged, transport worker) and Filip (middle-aged, transport worker) narrated formative moments about their respective arrivals to Trieste as children from the then-warring Yugoslav countries. These included, for both, speeding up their Italian to alleviate "being teased at school" or "not getting what was being said." They simultaneously befriended the Italian Antonio (middle-aged, transport worker), whom they still refer to as a close friend. Danijel specifically recalls meeting Antonio when they both showed up at the wrong entrance on the first day of school and then, together, finding their way to the right one. In Danijel's words, in terms of "my . . . integration, my friends were most important to me, more important than the school," they are "like brothers" to him. He was "lucky" to have Italian friends who "quickly accepted" him.

Ida and Suzana met each other upon arrival in Trieste, befriended Italians through a local Jewish Italian group, and became best friends. Along with another friend from a then-warring Yugoslav republic, and the mentioned Italians and Jews, Ida and Suzana formed a group that continues to socialize regularly both in-person and online. Through their group, they feel "at home" in Trieste. These networks of supportive interaction are for some of my respondents a supplement and for others a working alternative to the more formal ties, like family or marriage, which they subsequently created in Trieste. Friendship, especially through its symbolic extension, such as social media groups, can thus be observed as media, as it embodies a living archive of shared life events, including uncertainties about mobility, mooring, and the ordinariness in-between.

Communication as Multimodal: Inhabiting Urban, Online, and Regional Spaces

A crucial point of interethnic contact in Trieste is the interweaving of different communication modalities (Morley, 2017). That is, social gatherings, both in person and online, as well as cross-border mobilities. Whether at home or in bars/taverns, my respondents' hours-long get-togethers are a necessary, ritual ingredient of belonging. Whether they were enjoying the company, planning joint activities, or exchanging support for the daily grind, their group buzz became additionally tangible in their screen-based communication. Their lively chat groups, run via mobile phones, are a virtual extension of physical meetings, generating an audio-visual scrapbook of references brought up in face-to-face conversations, thus making the mediated nature of their urban friendships explicit. Alongside local viral jokes, links to Yugoslav and Triestine pop music are also exchanged. Should any political news enter the online arena of interaction, it is often satirized, providing the group with a self-sustaining "defense" system, much like the "two-step flow" communication model, which recognized the value of the "primary group" in locally refracting the power of national media (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Memories of the 1990s wars are, sometimes, also shared by different sides. The value of this occasional exchange is in learning "how it was" for the other (Antonio). Similarly, though one of his parents was an Italian refugee from Istria (*esule*), Rocco nonetheless shows

interest in different testimonies, viewing history as being about “versions” (“one in textbooks, another in personal experiences, etc.”). Of no less importance are more practical exchanges of updates about which bordering country offers cheaper petrol or other vital goods at a particular time. Though they remain largely unconscious of this broader cultural significance, my respondents’ overall communicative coexistence performs “the ability . . . to move from standpoint to standpoint, to think from the perspective of others . . . that makes a fundamental difference” (Robins & Aksoy, 2016, pp. 156, 176).

Through digital means, symbolic movement across borders never ceases during one’s inhabitation of Trieste. Corporeal movement across borders is, for my respondents, equally unexceptional. Italians routinely traverse the region in search of local produce or reside in cheaper houses on the surrounding Slovenian hills overlooking Trieste. Several of my respondents expect to find “traffic jams” on weekends when Triestines go to their “vacation houses in Istria.” Accompanying my informants on hikes or weekend barbecues was, for me, an unusual experience of hardly noticing signs of national borders. Some were tucked between overgrown trees, and others were civically appointed to disuse by stickers and graffiti. The now invisible border, however, remains a meaningful background to Triestines’ sense of normalcy, as it becomes visible during disruption. The derelict, zombie checkpoints were reawakened in periods like the 2020–2022 pandemic. The joy of the postpandemic reopening was captured by viral videos showing Italian friends entering Slovenia in a car vivaciously, playing Yugoslav pop music, and cheering “finally, Jugo! Liberty! Now let’s buy some petrol and eat čevapčići!” (a popular local meat dish).

Some Italian respondents compared their record speeds in reaching Ljubljana or Zagreb as a source of personal achievement. Others, while acknowledging the practical benefit of no longer having to wait at the checkpoint, expressed nostalgia for crossing the border. As a young man in his 20s, at the time, my Italian respondent Luca (middle-aged, scientist) would sometimes find living in Trieste monotonous. What afforded him, and several other Italian respondents, a sense of adventure was keeping the passport (or a local pass), along with the Slovenian and Croatian currencies, in the car and the calculator app on the front screen of his mobile phone. The vehicle was thus kept “stand-by” for transfer, ready to serve as a portal into the nearby Slavic lands, whether to wander, visit a local discotheque, or buy cheaper tobacco. Though the border was physically near, the rite of passage of crossing into the semiknown East felt more daring. With the abolition of border checkpoints and the adoption of the euro (and higher prices), the appeal of whimsical excursions into this space of anticipated “exoticism” has, for Luca, “largely gone.”

Linguistic Belonging: Speaking Triestino, Becoming Triestino

Though an elemental means of interpersonal communication, spoken language is often taken for granted. As Tufi (2013) reminds us, language “actualises and materialises social and cultural territory and a sense of belonging or of exclusion” (p. 397). The degree to which the dialect serves as a connective tissue among Italians and Slavs cannot be overstated. The rich dialect, preserved in thick dictionaries, is a horizontal mixture of languages that ever mingled in the area.

According to Bialasiewicz and Minca (2010), Triestino was promoted by the then “new urban class” of the city’s “cosmopolitan bourgeoisie” of the late 18th century as “Trieste’s lingua franca,” quickly becoming “the linguistic glue that bound the city’s diverse national communities” (p. 1093). For this purpose,

it accommodated “elements of other Italian dialects to Armenian, Croatian, Czech, English, German, Greek, Hungarian, Maltese, Slovenian, Spanish, Turkish, and Yiddish” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1093). It turned out to be both “municipal” and “highly internationalized,” providing its diverse citizens with a shared symbolic refuge after WWI, when borders were introduced in the city’s proximity (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, pp. 1093, 1094). Triestino, once conceived as the linguistic infrastructure of imperial and “commercial” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1093) cosmopolitanism, became a cultural resource of enduring conviviality during postimperial nationalism.

This crucial token of belonging in Trieste still demonstrates the city’s openness—anyone who is willing to adopt the dialect is welcome (cf. Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1102). Speaking the dialect is itself read as an act of recalcitrance. As Triestino is usually preferred to Italian and Slovenian, the dialect performs a symbolic boundary separating Triestines from both Italian and Slavic surroundings (Tufi, 2013, p. 399). Some of my Italian respondents recalled sensing Italian “as a foreign language” they had to learn “for the first time in elementary school” (a local journalist recalls his childhood in Trieste identically; see Covacich, 2006, p. 90). As a symbolic vehicle of past migrations, the dialect remains a source of vitality for Trieste’s present-day minority cultures. Triestino now also absorbs the vocabulary of “the city’s most recent immigrant communities—Albanian, Chinese, Romanian, Senegalese” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1102).

Most of my Slavic respondents also considered speaking Triestino “better than Italian,” sensing it as “closer” to their identities. The undisciplined spirit of Triestino extends into multilingualism, a linguistic version of “thrown-together-ness” (Massey, 2005, p. 151). My Slavic respondents insert Triestino or Italian when speaking among themselves, while my Italian interviewees had at least a minimum command of regional Slavic languages. They sometimes flag this capacity as “parlare per zakaj” (“parlare,” Italian for “to speak”; “zakaj,” Slovene/Croatian dialect for “what”). On a chilly day, my respondents might say in Triestino, “che zima!” (“it’s cold!”); the former is Italian and the latter Slavic. This symbolic interoperability permits speakers to circumvent overarching linguistic reigns while conveying meaning. Indicative is also the use of (for Italians) and familiarity with (for Slavs) the prefix “Jugo” (from Yugoslavia) for things (e.g., “it malfunctions, what can you do, it’s Jugo”), sentiments (e.g., positive stoicism in saying “we’ll find a way somehow”), and spaces (e.g., “I’ll hop to Jugo to get this type of bread”). Here, nearness does not mean sameness, and difference does not mean remoteness. Jugo is a linguistic gesture that highlights a vital part of Trieste’s folk culture, experienced as simultaneously homely and outlying.

As a tactical practice (De Certeau, 1984), the use of the dialect indexes wider acts of “joyful sociability” (Bialasiewicz & Minca, 2010, p. 1102; see also Ara & Magris, 1982) that characterize ties among the Triestines. Thus, from the start of the interview, Antonio inserts his self-taught sentences in Serbian and Croatian, which he had picked up on his casual drives across the border and from his Slavic colleagues at work. He also shows me his YouTube playlist of Yugoslav pop music to further convince me of his intentionally elusive identity; it intrigues him to see whether playing certain songs might still raise some eyebrows in parts of the formerly conflicted parts of the region. In contrast, Marko (middle-aged, Serbian artist) recalls when, years ago, during a night out, he shouted a curse word in a very strong Slavic accent, and his Italian friends later repeatedly teased him. Rather than impoliteness, he saw this situation as coping with differences. Adnan, too, though a bit younger, recalls comments relayed to him as a Bosnian, such as

"watch out for that Serb there" as "banter," to which he learned to respond without damaging the relationship by quoting intra-Italian prejudice toward Southerners as "terrone." Similarly, a Slavic friend who may dislike socialist Yugoslavia may receive from an Italian a congratulatory message for International Labor Day featuring the red star, to which the Slav could respond by citing a familiar nationalistic Slavic phrase "Trst je naš" ("Trieste is ours," in circulation since the early 20th century).

For Damir and his friends, during their settlement in Trieste in the 1990s—when they initially felt they "didn't know where we belonged"—it was important that "we didn't ghettoize ourselves," but instead "chose" to remain "curious" about cultural Others. Presently, as Filip explains from his own experience, "there isn't a person with whom I don't interact." The pleasurable intercultural conduct rests on tacit agreement to "tell things . . . directly," while "not confronting" the other insistently with overly difficult topics (Antonio). The motivation, according to Antonio, is not to resolve irresolvable convictions about who is right, but simply to "joke," incite connection, and "de-dramatize certain things, hopefully." This joking typically aligns collocutors in a tension without destruction that is, without retreating to ethnic competition or superiority. Quite similar to that of *raja*, the jokes function as what some of my Slavic respondents called the "amortizer" of cultural differences. It reinforces shared urban identification, which is most accessible in quotidian situations.

Communicating Urban Identification—A Future of Multicultural Europe?

Any casual evening gathering I attended during my research may involve an irreverent discussion of politics, such as one about which totalitarian regime on the two sides of the border was worse. "Relax," a Slav responds, "we're not in 'Jugo' here." "Right," the Italian goes on adding, "and neither are we in Italy!" They share an assertive gaze and then a chuckle, momentarily releasing each other from all commitments beyond Trieste. Later, another Slav suggests eating the sweet bread traditionally with salty ham, adding collaboratively, "as god commands." "As *Triestines* command!" the correction follows from another Italian, positioning the city above all hierarchies, including religion. The food is enjoyed collectively. Literary accounts register similar anecdotes, such as when someone tried to pay the bill in the tavern for a group of friends, and the innkeeper told him, "Move away, you Italian!" making "everyone in the tavern burst into laughter" (Covacich, 2006, p. 86).

These instances exemplify Trieste's "urban patriotism," an urban culture based on "pluri-national" elements (Minca, 2009, pp. 259–261). Born in the final decades of the Habsburg Empire, the myth of "Trieste nazione" suggests that Triestino is anyone who exerts "conscious, self-aware adherence to/participation in a particular urban project" (Bialasiewicz, 2009, pp. 326, 329). As part of this collaborative tolerance, in my interviews, Trieste's Italians referred to Italians as "they." We find, to quote further from Bialasiewicz (2009), that "Trieste is . . . much more than the sum of its various nationalities," which are "all profoundly transformed in Trieste—not erased, not 'assimilated,' but consciously transformed into a unique urban togetherness-in-difference . . . the 'Triestinità'" (pp. 323–324). For Šavija-Valha (2013), inhabiting the border is also an opportunity afforded by the "accessibility of multiple identitarian significations, a capacity for playing ... multilayered 'linguistic games'" (p. 99). It is the constant proximity of the Other that matters.

The quotidian urban context of cohabitation requires us to appreciate that, as Robins and Aksoy (2016) put it, "cosmopolitanism is ordinary" (p. 159). Given the inventiveness of quotidian coping with differences found in my respondents' accounts, we might ask, with Robins and Aksoy (2016), "perhaps, even, the European future—the future of the meaning of Europe—now depends on the thoughtful contributions of its migrants and postmigrants?" (p. 180). As the authors remind us, we need a deep appreciation of "differential everydayness . . . the ordinary and consequent thoughtfulness and innovation" as played out by "migrant circumstances" (Robins & Aksoy, 2016, p. 155) or interethnic friendships.

For a younger respondent, Adnan, who described himself as "firstly Italian and then other," his Yugoslav (Bosnian) origin was a point of entry into Italian friend groups. When he played for a local soccer team, he was also invited to social events because of his background in the world of music they appreciated. In such moments, the convivial spirit of pre-1990s Yugoslavia, known as "brotherhood and unity," is relived in Trieste as the late country's ideational refuge. Significantly, this happens not only among Slavs but also among Italians. Adnan, who was only born at the time of Yugoslavia's dissolution when his family arrived from Bosnia, had no direct historical experience of "Yugoslav brotherhood," but he confidently uses the term to describe his socializing in Trieste, even though it may only refer to his "micro group." As other interviewees ascertained, they prefer to bond with "people of good morale" rather than with those of "correct" ethnic origin.

As another Slavic respondent, Damir (middle-aged, public servant), speaks, he looks toward the Italian Donatella (middle-aged, tutor), whom he befriended upon arrival. As a former student of Slavic studies in Trieste, she helped him and many others learn Italian. He considers her "a kind of a link between our two worlds." For him, coming from a family that originated from warring sides in ex-Yugoslavia, socializing in Trieste offered a sanctuary that provided the "relief of being away from . . . nationalism." Examples of more-than-national belonging can vary further. Rocco, for instance, describes his family origin as "Istrian," with parents identifying as "too Croatian to be Italian and too Italian to be Croatian."

Thus, Donatella, who originates from a nearby Italian town with a "more closed mentality," sees her Italo-Yugo friendships as a "privileged" kind of relationship:

I've never been seen as a "typical" Italian, so to say (giggles), and with them [Slavic friends] I share a certain way, an imaginary. I can talk to them about things, about which I cannot speak with others, not even with my very close friend, who is Italian.

This sense of understanding, built through long-term personal investment in cross-border contact (e.g., learning languages, travelling, cultural consumption, making acquaintances and friends), led her to a personal narrative of belonging not constrained by national territoriality, but rather drawn from the continuous accessibility of the other culture. The geographic and embodied nearness of ex-Yugoslavia and Italy is performed in Trieste as communicative. For Damir, this proximity has been largely sensed as "an advantage . . . to live freely in both contexts . . . to meet . . . in mixed company . . . make parties . . . to live a certain kind of Yugoslav-ness when we wanted to." This experience included "choosing" which school (Slovenian or Italian) and meeting Italians, including those who had already shared familiarity with Yugoslav culture.

With each routine cross-border movement, these people's pleasure in inhabiting a space wider than that intended by national communication shifts from a personal sentiment of "being different" from compatriots to a social fact of intercultural mediation. It becomes a cultural formation of more-than-national belonging, where those identifying this way feel, to borrow from the discussion of *raja*, not a "unity" with others, but "multiplicity" (Šavija-Valha, 2013, p. 128). These relationships afford members a space to belong to a desired version of the self, a freedom to belong not merely by fate but also by choice.

Conclusion

Studies of Trieste's cosmopolitanism, mainly in history and fiction, have tended to essentialize the place as a "border city," implying an inherent sense of limitation. Drawing on my respondents' accounts, I conclusively see this theoretically defined marginal position as tactical (De Certeau, 1984) and played out through quotidian pleasures of having access to "the best of both worlds" (worldviews, socializing, shopping, vacationing, etc.). The raft of communicative practices I presented (corporeal, symbolic, and physical; Morley, 2017) forms the building blocks of interethnic friendships in Trieste. These relationships, so to say, slightly "elevate" the city from its narrow status as a typically less familiar eastern national periphery (for Italy) or as a western point of cultural contact and foreign trade competitor (for Slovenia and Croatia; see, e.g., Buhin, 2022; Roić, 2013). Interethnic communication positions Trieste as a center of vernacular geography, one that challenges inherited macro-narratives of irreconcilable cultural differences (East/West). Trieste becomes an appropriated periphery, a center of diverse locals' mobile cohabitation and trans-border conviviality.

Drawing on communicative practices, such as sharing the dialect *Triestino*, urban socializing, digital messaging, and mobility routines, the Italians and Slavs I interviewed in Trieste together improvise a communicative, performative polygon of what I term elastic belonging. Though some tensions about unresolved historical disputes may resurface in daily interactions, these macro-narratives typically do not become divisive within the micro-narratives of personal relationships. My respondents' decidedly polyvalent, more-than-national identification pacifies centripetal (nationalist) pressures from either side of the border. I find this particularly relevant in milieus such as Trieste, where belonging has historically been defined territorially. Current symbolic and physical cross-territorial mobilities constitute a vital part of Trieste's multiculturalism and a source of my respondents' strong attachment and commitment to the city.

Analogies drawn with the sociality of *raja* allowed me to appreciate the conviviality in Trieste not as idealized harmony, but as "pragmatic tolerance . . . endless translation . . . (and) permanent negotiation of difference" (Bialasiewicz, 2009, pp. 324, 328). This understanding requires us to trust semivisible civic capacities in working out tolerance and to appreciate inconclusiveness in observing cultural boundaries. In a Europe that growingly politicizes cultural differences and supervises intercultural communication, there is much to learn from Trieste, which practices more-than-national belonging as inclusive, multimodal (symbolic, embodied, physical communication), agonistic, and, most importantly, ordinary.

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