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### Rediscovering cityness in the Adriatic borderland

*Imagining cultural citizenship in Rijeka and Trieste across the long twentieth century*

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Rediscovering Cityness in the Adriatic Borderland

Since the nineteenth century, urban intellectuals, purveyors of culture, politicians, and policymakers in the Adriatic have imagined and represented urban societies as one among a number of possible paths through which their different political worlds and identities can compromise and coexist. This study concerns how a range of cultural and political actors have created their city, its histories, its material landscapes, and its imaginations. It explores how, as city-makers, they imagined and experienced Trieste's and Rijeka's distinct cityness—often inspired by a past of flourishing 'cosmopolitan' free-port cities—in relation to political turmoil and shifting borders in the wider Adriatic region over the course of the long twentieth century.

It argues that these practices of imagining a distinct sense of cityness have provided inhabitants of the Adriatic with alternative forms of belonging and strategic ways of navigating among the different political worlds they inhabit. This study critically unpacks some of the processes through which Rijeka and Trieste have been 'cosmopolitanized' and highlights how cultural narratives of cityness invoked new forms of urban cultural citizenship in the Adriatic borderland.

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Imagining cultural citizenship in Rijeka and Trieste  
across the long twentieth century

Milou van Hout



van Hout

Rediscovering Cityness  
in the Adriatic Borderland.  
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*Een toekomst bestaat bij de gratie van een verleden dat vergeten moet worden [...]. Maar wanneer het verleden ruiste van baljurken en rinkelde van juwelen en een komen en gaan was van prinses, gravinnen, ambassadeurs en groot-industriëlen en wanneer de herinnering aan het verleden de droom is van het heden, is toekomst niets anders dan iets wat ten overvloede nog wordt toegevoegd aan al wat is geweest. Dan verwatert de tijd tot hij zozeer is verdund dat niemand er nog iets mee kan.*

A future exists by the grace of a past that should be forgotten ... Yet, when the past was a rustling of ball gowns and tinkling of jewelry and a coming and going of princes, countesses, ambassadors and large industrialists and when the memory of the past is the dream of the present, the future is nothing more than a superfluous addition to all that has been. Then time is watered down until it is too diluted to be of use to anyone anymore.

Ilja Leonard Pfeiffer, *Grand Hotel Europa* (2018)

*Ons verleden, ons heden en onze toekomst zijn ons ontnomen. Er is nooit een toekomst geweest, want die heeft reeds plaatsgevonden. De toekomst vond plaats doordat nog eenmaal—op een heel eigen manier—het verleden plaatsvond.*

Our past, our present and our future have been taken from us. There has never been a future, because it has already taken place. The future has taken place because, once more—in a quite particular manner—the past has taken place.

Dubravka Ugrešić, *De cultuur van leugens* (Dutch Trans. Roel Schuyt, 1995)

# Table of contents

- 8     **Note on**  
geographies, names, and citations in a multi-lingual borderland
- 11    **Preface**  
The urban worlds of the bronze poet
- 14    **Introduction**

## Part I / HISTORIES

- 33    **1 / In search of triestinità**  
Towards a history of cultural citizenship
- 98    **2 / City of adventures**  
Rijeka in search of autonomy

## Part II / CULTURES

- 159   **3 / ‘Renaissance’ of triestinità**  
Heritagizing the cosmopolitan city
- 206   **4 / City of literary paths**  
The afterlife of Trieste’s literary tradition in city branding
- 232   **5 / Rediscovering Rijeka**

## Part III / PLACES

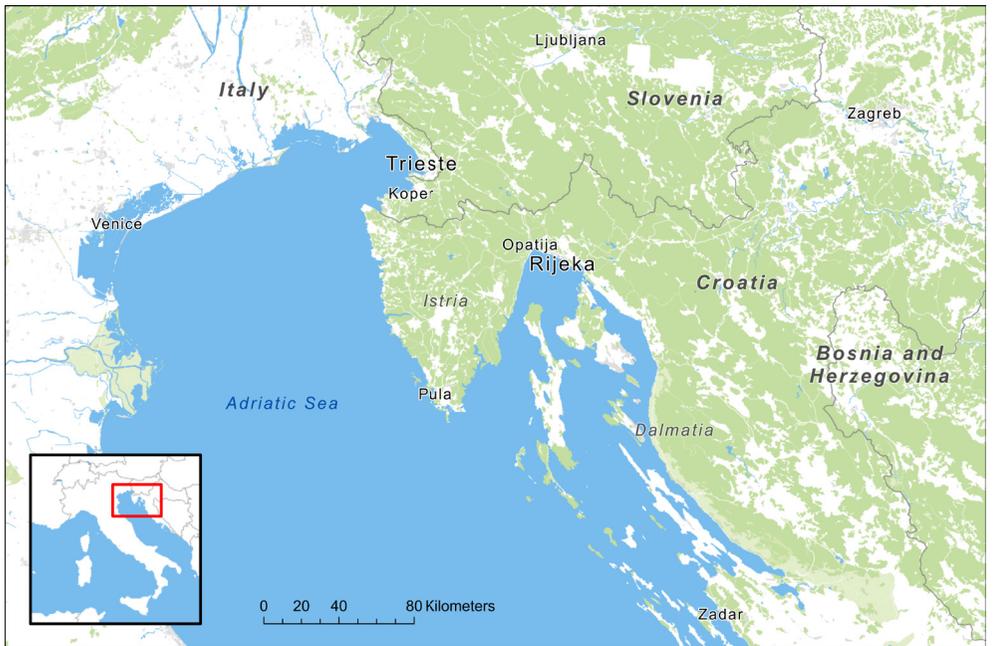
- 272    **6 / On beaches and literary cafes**  
          Embodying the microcosms of Trieste
- 311    **7 / ‘It had a soul before’**  
          Rijeka’s sites of urban empowerment
- 353    **Conclusion**  
          Cityness in and beyond the Adriatic borderland
- 370    Acknowledgements
- 372    Notes
- 408    List of illustrations
- 412    Bibliography
- 443    Summary
- 445    Samenvatting

## Note on geographies, names, and citations in a multi-lingual borderland

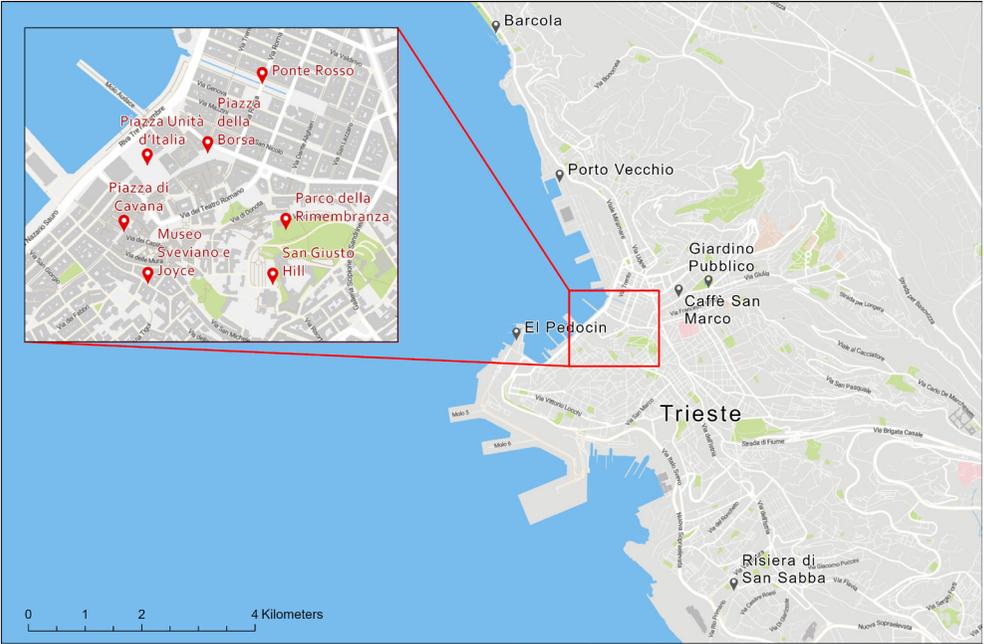
As a matter of course, research in a borderland involves a plurality of languages and various names, in a variety of languages, all denoting one and the same person or place.

For consistency, in this study I refer to the city of Rijeka by its present-day Croatian name. Until roughly World War Two, the city was commonly known as Fiume in Italian, German, and most other languages. Historically, Fiume was smaller than contemporary Rijeka. Its geography was quite different. The neighboring towns of Sušak and Trsat, which stand on the southern side of the river Rječina, were only incorporated into Rijeka in 1947. Today, despite being neighborhoods of the wider city, the towns' residents are still aware of their distinct historical identity, as is reflected in their public discourse. As for the other city addressed centrally in this study, I shall refer to 'Trieste' in Italian, which is commonly used in English too. The city is also known as 'Trst' in Slovenian, Croatian, and Serbian, and 'Triest' in Hungarian and German.

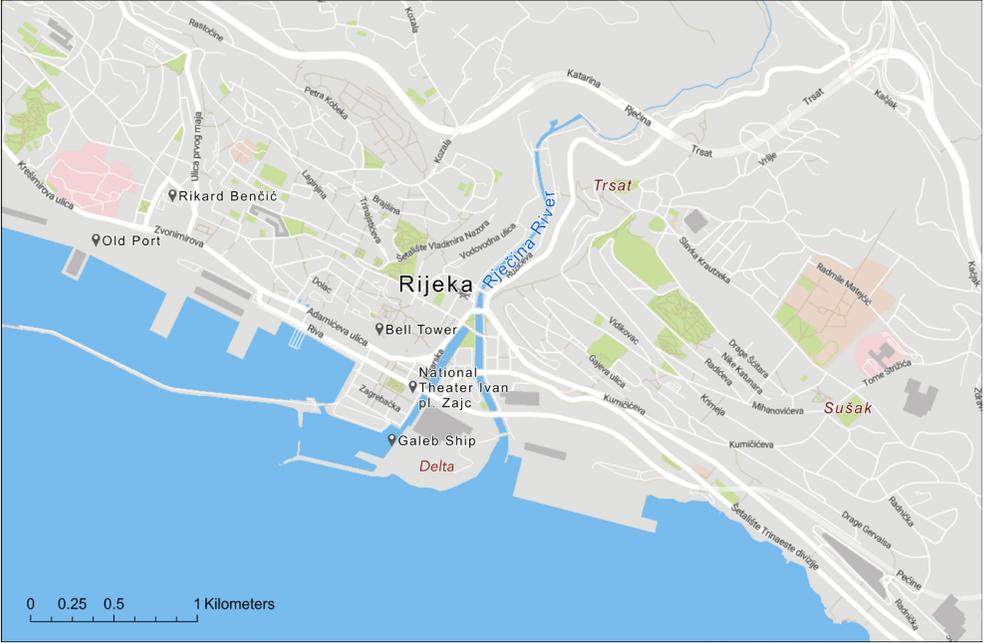
As for historical individuals' names, I have followed the forms common in the locality and period in question. Translations are mine, unless noted otherwise in the endnotes. I have translated Italian, Croatian, Slovenian, and German citations into English. The original texts are provided in the endnotes. I have reproduced sources in Trieste's *triestino* and Rijeka's *fumano* dialects, accompanied by an English translation. The complexities entailed in managing and translating the many languages of this Adriatic borderland underlines the skill of scholars from (and of) this region. As an 'outsider' from another region of Europe, I can only attempt to approximate the sophisticated intercultural dynamics of this multilingual domain. I have tried my best, shortcomings notwithstanding.



Map 1 - The Adriatic borderland



Map 2 - Trieste



Map 3 - Rijeka

# The urban worlds of the bronze poet

Across from the fountain of the Piazza della Borsa in Trieste, the statue of a poet sits on a low concrete bench. The bronze poet, lost in a book and leaning on a pile of other volumes, stands before the stock exchange, Trieste's economic centre. Well before it was installed in September 2019, the statue had caused a considerable furore in the city. The poet figured in the statue was Gabriele D'Annunzio, an author of nationalistic prose in the style of decadent aestheticism. He became famous around the world in 1919, when he led the occupation of the neighboring city, Fiume (present day Rijeka). Having instituted an avant-garde free state, which lasted for fifteen months, D'Annunzio left the city in a state of greater social-political chaos than when he had entered it. The nationalistic rhetoric of this remarkable literary figure paved the way for the radical political Fascism that took hold in interwar Italy. The bronze statue matters not only because of D'Annunzio's role in Fascism historically. Indeed, the statue was especially controversial because he is being taken up again today as a symbolic figure by Italian neo-Fascist politics.<sup>1</sup>

Invoked and remade for present purposes, D'Annunzio continues to stir up emotions one hundred years after his intervention in the Adriatic borderland. Whereas Trieste's mayor insisted that the political connotations of the statue in the Piazza della Borsa were minimal, citizens turned against its arrival by starting a petition. While some saw the statue as no more than a reminder of an avant-garde writer, others felt that it bolstered extreme right-wing Fascist voices in both Trieste and Italy more broadly. To them, giving D'Annunzio cultural prominence dishonored the reputation of Trieste as a city: 'it would mean to declare to everyone that this city wants to unite around values that are contrary to inclusion,

and make a world of exclusion, chauvinism and imperialism even more real (Kirchner Reill in: Marcolin 2019a).<sup>2</sup> Historians both at home and abroad, local writers, artists, journalists, and politicians, and the mayors of both Trieste and Rijeka, all took positions on the bronze poet, which the cities' media eagerly recorded.<sup>3</sup> The official inauguration of the statue even elicited the condemnation of both the Croatian president and minister of foreign affairs, who claimed that it celebrates irredentism (Vladisavljevic 2019).

By the 'Adriatic borderland,' I mean the region along the northern Adriatic coast, along the Istrian peninsula, which today includes parts of Italy, Croatia, and Slovenia. From the 1990s onward, this borderland has been discussed intensively through the rhetorical lenses of reunification and Europeanization. Nevertheless, D'Annunzio's statue was sufficiently provocative to open up unresolved tensions around borders and ideological divisions in the region. The controversy threw into relief the roles played by historical actors and contemporary intellectuals in the area's complex identity politics. Moreover, the heated discussions served to highlight how the past is continually reimagined in the context of contemporary border and identity politics in this region. Further still, they also emphasized the significance of Trieste, Rijeka, and their urban landscapes in contemporary re-mappings of identity, history, and ideology in the Adriatic borderland. On the one hand, Trieste's and Rijeka's pasts have been marked by extreme politics and radical nationalism. Two especially salient examples are the months during which Rijeka (then Fiume) was occupied by D'Annunzio and his avant-garde troops, and Mussolini's promulgation of racial laws in Trieste in 1938 (after this, the city was considered Italy's most Fascist city). On the other hand, however, local intellectuals have tended to present the pair of cities as islands of multiculturalism, diversity, tolerance, and above all autonomy in an otherwise politicized reality. The international reputation of Claudio Magris, probably Trieste's most famous contemporary intellectual, reflects a wider sense that Trieste is a microcosm of the mosaic of cultural fault lines that is Europe. In line with this same discourse, in 2020 Rijeka was accorded the title of European Capital of Culture under the telling slogan of 'Port of Diversity.'

This study attempts to identify the dynamics of an ongoing process. Some six years ago, when I first undertook research on the Adriatic region, Gabriele D'Annunzio was at most a figure of the past, whose history was rather to be forgotten. The story of his statue—installed in Trieste but depicting a figure belonging to the history of Rijeka—has a significance that extends beyond the Adriatic region. It provides a snapshot of a history in the making, a new narrative through which cultural practitioners enroll the past as a means of engaging in

contemporary political projects and processes. This study is motivated by the conviction that it is not only important to explain how the past is relived and appropriated for contemporary political purposes, whether those be nationalist (or directly Fascist), neoliberal or cosmopolitan. What is more crucial, perhaps, is to understand why such reworkings of the past in the present emerge, to what ends they are engaged, and what sorts of urban cultural politics they make possible. This study aims to provide answers to these questions through the kaleidoscope of two Adriatic border cities. In so doing, I hope to advance our understanding of how some of the crucial concerns of contemporary European societies and politics—namely historicity, belonging, identity politics, and borders—are negotiated in urban contexts.