

Capire el confine. Gorizia e Nova Gorica: lo sguardo di un'antropologa indaga la frontiera

Giustina Selvelli (2024) *Capire el confine. Gorizia e Nova Gorica: lo sguardo di un'antropologa indaga la frontiera* [Understanding the border. Gorizia and Nova Gorica: an anthropologist's perspective on the border] Udine: Bottega Errante, 184 pp, price: €20.00. ISBN 979-1-255-67030-8

An anthropologist, sociolinguist and, until recently, postdoctoral researcher at the University of Ljubljana, Giustina Selvelli works on minorities, nationalism and the environment, with a particular focus on the Balkans. Her recent publications include *The alphabet of discord. the ideologisation of writing systems in the Balkans since the breakup of multiethnic empires* (Ibidem, 2021) and *Language attitudes. Collective memory and (trans)national identity construction among the Armenian diaspora in Bulgaria* (Peter Lang, 2024), not to mention her contribution to the collective work *Capire i Balcani occidentali* [Understanding the western Balkans] (Bottega Errante, 2021).

Published in 2024, her new book is timely: Gorizia in Italy and Nova Gorica in Slovenia are jointly European Capital of Culture for 2025.¹ What makes *Capire il confine* both unique and interesting is that it effectively combines a personal story with the history of this border region. Giustina Selvelli, born in Trieste, skilfully unravels the threads of these two intertwined stories. She vividly remembers how, in her childhood years in Pieris (near Monfalcone), she crossed the 'Iron Curtain' that first separated Yugoslavia, then Slovenia, from Italy; and how she bridged the Isonzo/Soča river – a linguistic and cultural frontier separating the Bisiac and Friulian worlds.² Later on, the political border became truly porous in 2007 when Slovenia joined the Schengen Area, before closing temporarily during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021). In 2025, the former high school student from Gorizia (1998–2003) and lecturer at the University of Nova Gorica (2020–2021) sees these two cities united, hence this particularly successful book.

In the author's own words, *Capire il confine*

... is a tribute to this journey that began in my early childhood but of which I have only recently become aware. It is also a eulogy to what is often referred to as 'the margins' and an invitation to exploit their potential to develop new centres that are non-exclusive,

- 1 For a comprehensive overview on Gorizia/Nova Gorica, focusing notably on crossborder cooperation, see Alberto Gasparini (ed) (2010) 'Gorizia. Il futuro del momento prima' *ISIG Quarterly of International Sociology* XIV (1–4), accessed 23 October 2025 at: <https://isig.it/w-p-content/uploads/2012/11/45.-GORIZIA-IL-FUTURO-DEL-MOMENTO-PRIMA-XIX-1-4-2010-2011.pdf>.
- 2 Bisiac is a dialect spoken in Friuli in the area between the lower course of the Isonzo river and the Karst plateau, as distinct from those who use Friulian. Both are of different branches of the essentially five types of Northern Italo-Romance dialects.

non-centralising, multiple and indomitable – a foreshadowing of a better Europe. The stories I tell you are drawn from my direct experiences, from the socio-cultural, geographical, linguistic and political dynamics that characterise the places I have travelled throughout my life; as a result, my subjectivity plays a particularly important role. I would like to define this type of writing as a kind of ‘auto-ethnography’ based on the collection of qualitative data relating to my life, in which the barriers between the observer and the observed situation become fluid and influence each other to become a true borderland, to be explored and experienced with complete sincerity and freedom. In this sense, this process helps me to realise how much I myself have been determined by the border described here and how much this border is determined by myself and my experience. (p. 7)

Here, the anthropologist is informally addressing the poet Gino Brazzoduro (1925–1989): the border is not only political, it is also intimate:

In each of us is the border
a clear outline
that cuts through the air
the horizon
an imperceptible line
like the fleeting hour that separates
day from shadow

silence and sound
memory and annunciation

death and life
a single flower.³

This is important, as the former often serves as a fig leaf for the latter:

Borders – real ones – do not run between states or nations or, worse still, between ‘races’. They run through each of us, through every consciousness, every soul, every existence, every individual destiny.⁴

Capire il confine is constituted precisely of this material.

This intense experience of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region and Slovenia – as mentioned the author has lived on both sides of the border – will be complemented by other borders that serve as levers for anthropological reflection:

It was essential to discover other dynamics, other borderlands that resembled in some ways those I had experienced in my places of reference. On the Greek side of the border [between Greece and Albania], I saw certain characteristics in issues concerning the Albanian minority that reminded me, for example, of the role of Mexicans in California or Slovenians

- 3 Gino Brazzoduro, *Poetic Works I. Frontière suivi de au-delà des lignes*, translated from Italian by Laurent Feneyrou and Pietro Milli, Paris: Triestiana, 2023, p. 95. The translation into English here is that of Christophe Solioz, our reviewer, who has retained Brazzoduro’s layout and punctuation.
- 4 Gino Brazzoduro, unpublished letter to Biagio Marin dated 2 December 1979, in Gino Brazzoduro, *Poetic Works I*, p. 10.

in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, although all the differences were taken into account, and which I would have declined in other contexts even further east. (p. 36)

As we know, depending on the language, words and their meanings are multiple and do not overlap. One word in German, ‘Grenze’, and in French, ‘frontière’; two in Italian, ‘confine’ and ‘frontiera’; at least three in English, ‘boundary’, ‘frontier’ and ‘border’ – the first emphasising social construction by individual actors, the other two referring to a collective scale.

In this Babel of language, the author takes a clear stance:

In this book, the two words are used in accordance with the semantic distinction that still exists in the English language. While on the one hand, the border (confine) is associated with a threshold demarcating and delimiting territories, serving to close off and clearly define what lies ‘beyond’, on the other hand, the border (frontiera) takes on the opposite meaning, that of opening up to an unknown space, or a key to exploring other possible ways of cultivating relationships and sociality. (p. 40)

As the pages speed by, the word ‘frontier’ (confine) gives way to the notion of ‘margins’: no longer just dividing lines, but territories with multiple identities.

In the company of Giustina Selvelli, we explore the Gorizia/Nova Gorica region in every direction. Her book offers a sumptuous display: the genesis of a border identity, languages, minorities and borders, spaces and practices of encounter, the ecology of borders, and, in closing, beyond Italian-Slovenian dualisms, migration. All this is crowned by a chronology tracing the history of the Italian-Slovenian border alongside an intelligent bibliography for further reading.

Possessed of a rare quality of insight, this book is both scholarly and concise. It is also educational, thanks to its numerous boxes that travel with the reader throughout: readers will learn the essentials about the founding of Nova Gorica, the Yugoslav era, the languages and dialects of the region, the place of the Slovenian language but also German, not to mention the various places of meeting.

Capire il confine is a wonderful invitation to explore the territory during and beyond Go! 2025: Nova Gorica/Gorizia European Capital of Culture.

Christophe Solioz was involved from the early 1990s in various citizens’ initiatives in the former Yugoslavia, most notably in the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly (hCa). Founder of the Association Bosnia and Herzegovina 2005 (2003–05) and, later on, of the Centre for European Integration Strategies (2005–14), he was Professor of Philosophy and German literature at the College de Genève (2013–22) and, in 2022, initiated the Multiplex Approach (MAP) Nomad Seminar. He has written extensively on transition and democratisation as well as on EU integration and regionalism in south-east Europe. <https://christophesolioz.exposed/>

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2025 at: <https://www.courrierdesbalkans.fr/Blog-o-Nova-Gorica-Gorizia-le-territoire-partage>. It has been specially translated into English and updated for inclusion in the *SEER Journal* by Christophe Solioz.



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