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# Exopolis reloaded: fragmented landscapes and no man's lands in a North-Eastern Italian border region

Roberta Altin<sup>a</sup> and Claudio Minca<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of the Humanities, University of Trieste, Trieste, Italy; <sup>b</sup>Cultural Geography Department, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines a 'landscape of power' in the marginal northeastern corner of Italy, near the Italian-Slovenian border. The landscape is centred around the small town of Gradisca and its highly contested centres for asylum seekers and marked by the concomitant presence of a giant shopping mall, the largest Italian war memorial, and an aestheticised wine district. The result of participant observation, visual and textual analysis, and selected interviews, this study reflects on the transformation of a former cold war border area into a mix of carceral, hospitality, commercial, residential, rural spatialities that seem to be entirely disconnected with each other and linked instead to broader regional, national and international geographies. This fragmented landscape, dominated by massive 'fortified' enclosures and with gradually deterritorialised in-between spaces, described here as no man's land, may be provocatively analysed as an Italian *exopolis*.

## KEYWORDS

Landscapes of power; no man's land; exopolis; camp; asylum seekers

This paper examines a specifically fragmented landscape in the marginal province of Gorizia, in north-east Italy, which has recently received significant media attention. Located in the proximity of the former Italian-Yugoslavian and present-day Italian-Slovenian border, this landscape is centred around the small town of Gradisca and marked by the concomitant presence, just about 10 km away, of a giant shopping mall, the largest Italian war memorial, and an aestheticised wine district. This fragmented landscape, dominated by massive 'fortified' enclosures and numerous undefined in-between spaces, may be tentatively (and perhaps provocatively) described as an Italian *exopolis* (Soja, 1996, 2000). We will refer to it from now onwards as the 'Gradisca exopolis', since the area around Gradisca and its contested 'hospitality and detention camps' for asylum seekers are often identified in the media as a key site in the redefinition of the long transition experienced by this unique urban sprawl with no clear core and no periphery. Indeed, if we start from the complex Gradisca town/camp (but we could have started elsewhere) in order to 'visit' the other three key landmarks marking this fragmented landscape, we may end up drawing an arc, comprised of enclosures and largely undefined but important buffer zones, or 'no man's lands', that is, unregulated spatialities where, in the case here discussed, an increasing number of asylum seekers have established temporary forms of dwelling.

Exopolis is a term famously coined some 20 years ago by urban theorist and geographer Edward Soja in his search for new spatial categories capable of analysing the changing urban formations of postmodern Los Angeles, where, according to him, during the 1990s 'it all came together' (see Soja, 1989, Chapter 8). Exopolis, for Soja, was to be understood as a (post)metropolitan 'outer space', with no clear

**CONTACT** Claudio Minca ✉ claudio.minca@wur.nl

centre, but rather dotted by a series of functional territorial ‘islands’—often highly surveilled and spatially disciplined—and a changing series of buffer zones keeping these ‘islands’ separate. In *Thirdspace* (1996), and later in *Postmetropolis* (2000), Soja employed this spatial metaphor within the specific confines of the Orange County while trying to make sense of the rapidly mutating urban form of the greater LA:

The prefix exo- (outside) is a direct reference to the growth of ‘outer’ cities, and also suggests the increasing importance of exogenous forces shaping city-space in an age of globalization. Perhaps never before, short of military invasion, had endogenous development and localized synekism been as intensely affected by global constraints and opportunities. [...] The prefix can also be seen as denoting a hint of the ‘end of,’ as in the ex-city, the rise of cities without the traditional traits of cityness as we have come to define them in the past. Hence, there are implications of a significantly reconstituted cityspace, urbanism, and polis/civitas. (Soja, 2000, p. 250)

Soja suggests exopolis to be the combined product of both ‘a decentering and a recentering, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, continuing sprawl and intensified urban nucleation, increasing homogeneity and heterogeneity, socio-spatial integration and disintegration, and more’ (Soja, 2000). Exopolis may thus be described as a key manifestation of the fragmented and somehow militarised urbanisation of the suburbs and the rise of the Outer City, a spatial configuration increasingly difficult to delineate and map with any clarity or confidence. Notably, his grand reconceptualisation of postmetropolis included a chapter on the LA ‘carceral archipelago’ (Soja, 2000), a overlapping and complementary component of exopolis, something resonating with the exopolitan landscape of the Gradisca area and its fragmented spatialities discussed in this article.

Engaging with the most recent spatial developments of this corner of Italy, we found exopolis a useful geographical metaphor to start describing, *a la* Soja, a ‘territory’ at the edge of the Friuli-Venezia Giulia administrative region—as often depicted in local political debates—a landscape in the midst of a sea-change due to the presence of major geographical formations often perceived as ‘imposed from above’. With no pretence of rigidly applying these LA-inspired categorisations, we nonetheless would like to provocatively propose a virtual aerial view of the Gradisca landscape, and read it as the by-product of a series of intersecting geographies generated at the most diverse scales, which are the source of its extreme fragmentation and of the related crisis of representation conducive of a sense of emergency and loss of identity among the residents.

In particular, drawing from Soja’s ‘exopolitan’ touring of LA, we commence by focusing on the town of Gradisca and the spatialities produced by the presence there of a former military barrack converted into a Centre for Identification and Expulsion (*Centro di identificazione ed espulsione*, hereafter CIE) of ‘illegal’ migrants and a Centre of Hospitality for Asylum Seekers (*Centro di accoglienza per richiedenti asilo*, hereafter CARA) (Rivoli, 2014). We accordingly consider these centres as ‘camps’ (see Minca, 2015), as enclosures where detention, custody, care and hospitality all too often appear as one and the same (on this, see Minca & Ong, 2016). As noted above, the area broadly comprising the Gradisca exopolis is characterised by a series of functional ‘enclaves’ barely connected with each other: the largest Italian military memorial with the remains of about 100 000 Italian soldiers who lost their life during the First World War; one of the largest shopping malls of the Italian north-east centred around a recently inaugurated IKEA store and at the origin of a remarkable—for its size—transformation of the road system to privilege access to this commercial hub, a Los Angelesque infrastructural landscape in the midst of this until then low-key and semi-rural urban sprawl; finally, the ‘Collio’, a highly branded, isolated and beautified area renowned for its prestigious wines and unique ‘cultural’ landscape local promoters would like to see included in the UNESCO World Heritage list. The spatial fragments making this putative exopolis are complemented by residential areas in Gradisca and other small towns, now faced with the ‘disturbing’ presence of carceral and commercial centres and their often unwelcomed ‘guests’.

This article thus attempts to provide a critical reading of the changing late-capitalist exopolitan landscapes of this Italian periphery. It does so, on the one hand, by suggesting that this Italian version of exopolis may be better delineated via an aerial view *a la* Soja (1989); on the other, by interrogating some its most significant and contested spaces-in-between via the concept of *no man’s land* as recently discussed by Leshem and Pinkerton (2016). In particular, we focus on the informal no man’s land around the Gradisca camp complex used by the asylum seekers in ways that have recently become for

many—and in particular for the residents—a somehow disturbing visible *and* invisible presence in the already unstable self-representations of these once quiet and orderly rural and residential territories.

The result of participant observation, visual and textual analysis as well as selected interviews, this article reflects on the transformation of this former Cold War border area into a mix of carceral, hospitality, commercial, residential, rural spatialities that seem to be entirely unconnected with each other but instead linked to distinct broader regional, national and global geographies. In particular, our participant observation consisted of multiple visits during a period of six months to the town of Gradisca and the Cara, the Tiare, the Collio hills and the Redipuglia memorial. During the same period we conducted 20 open and semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers, CARA's authorities and social workers, local majors and the prefect. We have also consulted textual and photographic archival material together with documents concerning the juridical status of the refugees. Finally, during the period March 2014–May 2015, we collected vast materials on the Gradisca landscape from local newspapers (mainly *Il Piccolo* and *Il Messaggero Veneto*).

The article is organised in three main sections. First, we introduce the supposed 'core' of this fragmented exopolitan landscape: the town of Gradisca with the annexed detention and hospitality camps for 'illegal' migrants and asylum seekers. The second section proposes a sort of tour *a la Soja* of exopolis. Starting from our privileged anchor/standpoint of the Gradisca/camp, we trace a hypothetical arc by 'island hopping' this border territory, briefly visiting the above-mentioned self-referential landscapes connected to distinct broader geographies of commerce (regional), war memorialisation (national) and landscaped gastronomy/wine production (global). Finally, we explore how the no man's land spatial formations around the camps have been informally occupied by the asylum seekers freely roaming during the day in the fields, in the abandoned parking lots, and along the nearby Isonzo River, at times even establishing temporary settlements. These spaces, we argue, may be key to maintaining the discipline inside of the camp as well as the relatively deregulated buffer zones between the camp and the other dominant enclosures making the Gradisca exopolis. The concluding comments thus reflect on the disciplinary power inherent to these fragmented landscapes and the need to understand the working of such an exopolis, something relevant in a moment in which controversial popular narratives of threatened 'territorial identity' seem to heighten the unease and the sense of emergency among its residents.

## Taking Gradisca apart

### *Scene 1: the 'fortress' under siege*

Gradisca d'Isonzo is a small town of about 6000 residents along the Isonzo River, a few kilometres away from the Slovenian border characterised by a history of plurilinguism with Italian, Slovenian and Friulano recognised as official local languages. For local historians Gaddi and Zannini (2008) the town's name derives from the Slavic term '*gradišče*' that refers to 'ruins of a fortified site' (see Alberton, 2011, p. 9), something revealing of how the location along the river has been long perceived as a defensive post to contain invasions from Eastern Europe. This explains the presence of city walls and an actual fortress built to protect the Republic of Venice from the Ottomans (1473), a role played also when Gradisca was incorporated in the Habsburg Empire after 1511. From that moment onwards, and despite several regime changes, Gradisca has somehow continued to play this defensive role along the eastern frontier, to the point of being recalled by many still today as 'The Fortress'. However, similarly to many other towns located along the former Iron Curtain—here the border between Italy and Yugoslavia—Gradisca is now experiencing a long and uncertain transition due to the new post-Cold War European geographies, including the conversion of many former military spaces to new uses (see Baccichet, 2014). One typical case is a barrack (dismissed in 2008) at the edge of Gradisca converted into a place of 'hospitality' for asylum seekers (CARA) and for detaining illegal migrants (CIE) as part of the new spatial strategies implemented by the Italian state to manage the recent increasing inflow of migrants in need of care



**Figure 1.** Asylum seekers in Gradisca's central square. Photo: Authors.



**Figure 2.** The CARA, view from the main road. Photo: Authors.

and hospitality while their process of identification and definition of status (and related destination) is being determined by the dedicated authorities (Pinelli, 2014, pp. 70–71) (Figures 1 and 2).

Starting from the 1990s, and in particular after the implementation of the Schengen Agreement in 1992, Italy has in fact experienced a sharp increase in the arrival of asylum seekers often in transit towards other European destinations (IDOS, 2014, pp. 42–56; Mazza, 2013; Tesauro, 2010, pp. 486–487). In the following decade, the Italian Parliament has reacted to the new situation with a series of interventions aimed at providing hospitality and custody to the newcomers, who often entered the Italian territory after a long and perilous crossing of the Mediterranean or along the above-mentioned



eastern border with Slovenia. These interventions included a law that introduced the so-called '*Centri di permanenza temporanea e assistenza*' (Centres for Temporary Residence and Assistance) and the crime of 'illegal migration'. However, the centres were renamed a few months later to the above-mentioned CIE. This change of denomination corresponded to a fundamental shift in the role of these 'camps' established in many Italian regions—detention and expulsion soon replacing the original aim of custody and assistance for unidentified migrants (Medici Senza Frontiere [MSF], 2010; Rovelli, 2006; Van Aken, 2005). Questions of security and a sense of emergency became the guiding principles of these camps and of the management of what was often described as an undefined and threatening crowd of people coming from unknown places with unknown purposes (Dal Lago, 2009; Rahola, 2003). Hubs for assistance and hospitality for asylum seekers were thus created within the country in parallel with their militarisation and transformation in de facto detention centres (Malkki, 2002; Ravenda, 2011). According to many critics, this is an exemplar case of militarised humanitarian intervention implemented in the name of emergency, soon becoming a permanent state of carceral governance (Agamben, 2005; Elden, 2006; Fassin & Pandolfi, 2010).

The 'multi-functional' centre in Gradisca, originally comprising both a CARA and a CIE, is located in Via Udine, along the road linking the town to the Collio hills and the city of Udine. The CARA and the CIE were originally adjacent and separated only by a Plexiglas barrier. The whole camp has one single entrance and its perimeter is marked by barbed wire and electronic surveillance devices. Like other detention centres, no photos are allowed inside or outside, while visits must be authorised by the Prefect. The location and the spatial management of the camp, compared to the town of Gradisca, thus reflects an implicit intent to keep the detainees confined in an isolated area, detached from the everyday life of the residents in town (see Figure 2).

As noted by the mayor:

the relative marginality of the centres has helped in particular at a time in which the camp experienced revolts and violence ... this distance has protected the town from potential acts of vandalism ... the 'territory' has been securitised by the presence and the monitoring of the police forces, who paid particular attention to the protection of the town of Gradisca. (interview: April 17, 2014)

The former barrack hosting the CARA is in a semi-rural area linked to the town centre by several paths along the fields. After a revolt exploded on 12 August 2013, during which the detainees barricaded on the roof, and one of them died after falling from it, the CIE was highly contested in the national media. It was ultimately closed together with other similar centres in Italy for their 'inhumanity', and because of allegations over the poor management of the cooperative in charge of the detainees (*Il Piccolo*, 2014a). The CARA, the 'hospitality' centre, however, remained in operation and is still operative today, although facing growing pressure due to the national emergency provoked by the continued landing of 'boat people' on the southern shores of Italy, partly 'relocated' to the 'camps' in Northern regions. These 'migrants'—as often described in the media—to be accepted in the country need to be recognised as asylum seekers deserving protection, and are therefore subjected to long and often times complex procedures of identification to define their status (Sorgoni, 2011, p. 17). However, the emergency now faced by the Italian Government in the management of the growing number of asylum seekers requires their frequent displacement and relocation, and new pressure over the Gradisca camp to accept larger contingents of them (IDOS, 2014, p. 46).

At the time of writing, the Gradisca camp officially hosted about 250 asylum seekers, including many women and children, mainly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, Nigeria, Guinea and Bosnia. The figure is far higher than the planned capacity, something that has forced the authority to expand the CARA to the space once occupied by the CIE, thus creating a further sense of confusion about the disciplinary spatial regime of these asylum seekers. The camp/centre is 'open' between 8 am and 8 pm. During this time, the 'migrants' are allowed to leave the centre and roam in the surrounding areas. However, no public transportation connects the camp to the city centre, which must be reached on foot by its 'guests' (while a shuttle bus connects the city to the IKEA centre, as we shall see later). This very fact produces what is perceived as the unusual scene of individuals dressed in 'exotic' clothes walking along the road as if they were going (and coming from) nowhere (Rivoli, 2014). These 'walking presences', of



**Figure 3.** The Redipuglia memorial. Photo: Authors.

people with no apparent clear purpose, have ignited controversy in public debates, especially when the centre's expansion to 500 individuals was envisaged by the national authorities. These roaming people, strangely 'invading' the everyday spaces of the residents, are often perceived as a threat, as an alien presence, and as the unintended result of poor national strategies of hospitality imposed on this 'territory' from above. According to the Mayor of Gradisca:

When we learnt that [...] a refugee camp was to be established we strongly expressed our concern, in line with the spontaneous groups of residents who protested against this possibility ... we have indeed done everything we could to avoid the opening of such a centre, especially because we wanted to preserve the Gradisca local community and its 6000 residents. After a few months we were nonetheless informed that a CARA will be established in that location. ...Immediately after the centre was opened, its detainees invaded the town centre .... (interview: April 17, 2014)

It is about time to start our aerial tour of the Gradisca exopolis, and pay a brief visit to its more significant spatial presences in the landscape, self-standing territorial islands, surrounded by undefined buffer zones to which we will return in the conclusion.

## **Gradisca, exopolis reloaded**

### ***Scene 2: monumental space***

The military memorial in Redipuglia is the largest and most majestic First World War Italian memorial, dedicated to the soldiers who lost their lives in this area during the conflict. Completed in 1938 under the Fascist regime, Redipuglia is a dominant presence and a uniquely shaped landmark in the Karst region where many key battles of that conflict were fought. Distinct from other war cemeteries, the conspicuous monument complex is built on a hill in the form of giant terraced stairs containing over 100 000 soldier graves while a second hill hosts the most diverse war remnants. The geometric shape transforms the hill on which it is built into a grand structure of giant stairs over-imposed on the surrounding morphologies. The monument represents the symbolic rise of the Italian army into the sky, with three crosses on the top reminiscent of Mount Golgotha and the crucifixion (Nicoloso, 2008; Valle, 2014).

The Redipuglia memorial is a combination of representation, abstraction and actual warsites, making it a material remnant of the hundreds of kilometres of trenches that literally rewrote the frontier landscape for war purposes. The Eastern Front was precisely such invisible and pervasive presence. This



**Figure 4.** The Tiare's 'urban landscape'. Photo: Authors.

rather isolated monument aims at commemorating the physical presence of the war tracks in their analogies with the actual vocation of the 'territory' (Valle, 2014, pp. 88–89) (Figure 3).

Redipuglia is a national memorial visited by thousands of people every year. In 2014, it was also visited by the Pope in an event widely covered by the national media. However, despite the attempt of the initiators to link this conspicuous monument to the surrounding areas, today it stands out as a stark, isolated and entirely disconnected presence in the Gradisca exopolitan landscape. There is no clear connection between the memorial and the town of Gradisca, or the Collio or the Ikea centre. The memorial appears as an extraterritorial 'island', part of that archipelago of isolated yet dominant spatial presences defining this exopolitan landscape. Redipuglia's stark layout is important because, despite being an alien presence, it does not seem to disturb the cohesive narratives of a landscape that Gradisca's residents and their political representatives instead claim is being threatened by the presence of little more than 200 newcomers with colourful clothes and undefined status. However, before launching a more comprehensive critical reflection on the relationship between such isolated spatialities and the presumed 'identity' of the Gradisca exopolis, it may be helpful to 'hop' to the next, far more recent, island, the Tiare-Ikea commercial complex.

### **Scene 3: commercial hub**

The Tiare is a giant shopping mall built by the Inter Ikea Centre Italia which has literally revolutionised the landscape of the Gradisca exopolis here discussed, including a radical transformation of the area's retail distribution and transportation network. This €220 m project is one of Europe's largest commercial hubs with about 90 000 square metres of retail space, conceived to serve a macroregion—the Italian north-east but also parts of Slovenia and Croatia—comprised of 1.3 m potential customers. With approximately 200 new jobs created (and a total of 1000 predicted), this commercial complex includes indoor corridors, streets, squares, recreational facilities, one hypermarket, bars and restaurants, one multiplex cinema, and shops offering local, national and international brands. It has almost immediately become an enclavic leisure/shopping urban hub gravitating around the dominant presence of the Ikea anchor shop, which was visited by 1.35 m visitors in the inaugural year (*Il Piccolo*, 2012). Indeed, its internal social and recreational activities resemble those of a mini city—the 'cityness' otherwise missing in the



Gradisca postmetropolitan exopolis, to speak in Soja's terms—with sport and art courses, birthday parties, cabaret and live music, as well as a vast gastronomy offer. The calendar of the events mirrors the local festivities, such as Mothers' Day, Carnival, St Valentine's Day, and Easter, providing opportunities for further consumption. The shopping mall also hosts the information centre Infopoint 'Carso 2014+' set up by the Provincial government to provide general tourist information and, most recently, information about the First World War centenary celebrations centred on Redipuglia and opportunities for entrepreneurial initiatives in the region, including the promotion of the Collio products. Notably, the new 4200 parking spots made available to the mall's clientele have implied a radical restructuring of the local road network, including the 183 m euros massive connection to the nearby highway, but also with the major cities of the region and the Slovenian highway network. In addition, a dedicated shuttle bus connects the Tiare to the cities of Trieste and Gorizia (Figure 4).

In *Friulano*, the vernacular local language, Tiare literally means 'Terra', 'earth' or better, 'land', a name clearly intended to recall the concepts of 'territory, patrimony and heritage' as noted by the mall's manager in an interview to the *Messaggero Veneto* (2013), a name chosen after a survey involving a million Ikea store visitors. Despite these symbolic references to the nearby territories, the opening of the 33 000 square metres IKEA store in 2011 had an almost immediate dramatic impact on the local economy, contributing to the recent collapse of the already declining 'Distretto del mobile' (The Furniture District) located in the vicinity of the Collio wine region. When asked about the possibility of a further significant expansion of the shopping mall, the regional minister has recently voiced his opposition to the project:

faced as we are with an already existing conspicuous retail space, I believe no additional commercial development should be allowed before the new spatial development plan is approved, especially in light of the vast amount of space made available by the demise of former industrial areas. (*Il Piccolo*, 2015b)

Another 'fortress', this commercial hub seemingly tries to make connections with the Gradisca area's history and identity with its denomination (Tiare) and events referring to the local festivities. At the same time, its retail activities, aimed at serving a transnational macroregion, have significantly impoverished the local economies and the small-scale retail sector.

Even more significant for our main argument are the shopping mall's initiatives addressing the questions of the asylum seekers, for example by promoting funding collection. In March 2015 the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), jointly with the Ikea Foundation, organised a campaign entitled 'Let's help the family of the asylum seekers to study also after the sunset': for every LED lamp bulb purchased by clients at the Ikea store, one euro was donated to the asylum seekers. This fund collection, while acknowledging the asylum seekers' need for assistance, at the same time appeared as an initiative intended—by turning a global issue local, yet ignoring the local disputes over these unwelcomed presences—to contribute to the promotion of the self-affirming cosmopolitan image of the company. Ironically, no asylum seekers are normally seen roaming the mall. Their presence was thus fundamentally limited to a poster, evoking a somehow abstract idea of asylum seekers, removed from this immediate 'local' reality inside the mall. Highly surveilled and spatially disciplined, the Tiare represents an urban, private commercial enclosure surrounded by large transport infrastructure networks and numerous undefined in-between spaces where the actual asylum seekers may be seen roaming, 'out there'.

It is time to visit the last of the 'isolated islands' of the Gradisca exopolis, the Collio hills, an area globally known for its aestheticised landscapes, with terraced vineyards and prestigious 'products of the land'.

#### **Scene 4: landscaped global wine**

If we leave Gradisca heading to the north-east along the road that passes the detention complex, after encountering several semi-abandoned commercial and industrial areas, we come across Mariano, a small village split in two by the main road. Mariano may indeed strike one as ghostlike, with doors



Figure 5. The Collio landscape (<http://www.collio.org>).

and windows shut and rarely any people in the street. Immediately after Mariano is the Versa River with an outstanding bridge both in size and design. This 110-m-long and 30-m-tall bridge was built in 2012, as part of a new 75-km-long road costing €23 m. The new road is now the bypass connecting Gradisca, Cormons (the virtual capital of the Collio region) and Mariano, planned to facilitate access to the picturesque hilly vineyard landscape on the other side of the river (*Il Piccolo*, 2013).

Indeed, once the visitors pass the bridge they are immediately embraced by an entirely different view, the Collio beautified wine landscape. All of a sudden, the squalor and the sense of decline of the in-between spaces previously crossed are replaced by a spectacle of beautifully designed hills marked by the vineyards and the presence of fruit trees and flowers. The Collio is comprised of both Italian and Slovenian land that extends along the Isonzo River. It confines with the area around the Provincial capital of Gorizia, on one side, and the Gradisca municipality, on the other, representing another enclavic ‘anchor’ of the exopolitan Gradisca landscape. Idyllic vegetation and picturesque landscapes *a la* Tuscany welcome the visitors, while rural tourism accommodations and gentrified local products’ outlets advertise in English and German. There are chalets with luxurious gardens for wine tasting, and wine and food routes to immerse visitors into this seemingly unique, cultured natural space (Figure 5).

The vineyards here date back to the fifteenth century when they were found in the monasteries and the lands of the local aristocracy. In the 1970s a Consortium for the official recognition of the quality of the local wine was formed, with the by-now prestigious ‘Collio denomination’ assigned to about 1500 hectares of selected grapes cultivated using highly sophisticated methods. More recently, a local transnational Committee was established to promote the recognition of the Collio cultural landscape as world heritage by UNESCO (*Il Piccolo*, 2014b). Inspired by the recent recognition obtained by the Langhe wine region, in Piedmont, the committee’s official documents highlight the heritage value of the Collio’s unique rural environment, a landscape deserving protection and valorisation for its ‘morphological, rural, cultural, traditional, architectural, geographical values’ (*Il Piccolo*, 2014b).

This initiative is supported by the public authorities at all levels, with the official promotional website named ‘Fall in Love with Collio’ directly addressing an international clientele by stating the inherent qualities of this region:



**Figure 6.** Asylum seekers playing cricket in the no man's land. Photo: Authors.

Collio lies in the very top right-hand corner of Italy, in the region of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, one hundred kilometers northeast of Venice, between the Giulian Alps (*sic*) and the Adriatic sea. This crescent-shaped collar of land is bounded to the west and south by two rivers, the Judrio and Isonzo, and to the east by the country of Slovenia. You can imagine the cultural cross-pollination that is its heritage.

Here you will find a small but complex world where individuality and unique character are found everywhere: on the table, in the wine glass, in the restaurants. The beauty of Collio's landscape—craggy mountains and alpine lakes, hills as far as the eye can see, and the level blue of the sea—evokes a deep sense of peace and real emotion. (<http://www.collio.it>, accessed May 27, 2015)

We may now cross the bridge again, to return, via more buffer zones, where our tour started: the Gradisca/Camp complex. After the bridge, not only the Tuscanesque Collio landscapes appear as an 'outer' world, but we are immediately confronted again with a series of abandoned buildings, empty parking lots and a car cemetery, clear signs of the in-betweenness and related abandonment characterising the road leading to the CARA. (And, eventually, to Gradisca and its residential community). These spaces 'in-between' the camp, the Collio, the Tiare, Redipuglia and the town of Gradisca may be tentatively described as *no man's lands*. These 'lands' deserve close scrutiny since it is in these spaces, we argue, that the 'unruly' mobilities and temporary dwellings of the asylum seekers produce a series of effects: on one hand, creating anxiety and a sense of emergency among 'regular' residents, on the other, revealing a key aspect of the spatialities that generate the exopolitan fragmented landscape discussed in the previous sections.

If the Collio wines are the product of a local-landscape-sold-globally, the Gradisca asylum seekers are a crowd of displaced subjects also produced by 'local' processes including war, poverty and repression in their respective places of origin that have somehow 'gone global'. These mobile subjects are constantly redefined via the temporary geographies of 'hospitality' they are assigned to—like in the case of the Gradisca camp—geographies that mark their effective lack of recognition while at the same time fix them into the geometries of the camps and the related, particular mobilities that at once *includes and excludes them* (Rahola, 2003, p. 9). It is on these 'global-spatialities-turned-local' that we now focus to bring our reflection on the nature of this Italian exopolis to completion.

## Gradisca's no man's land: visible and invisible carceral spatialities

The presence of people walking along the road, crossing the fields or occupying with their visible presence key public spaces in Gradisca has provoked lots of concern among representatives of the local community and unprecedented debates in the local media. Their sudden visibility has, for example, raised questions about 'the invasion' of the residents' everyday landscapes and originated new forms of anxiety about the governance of the Gradisca territory (*Il Piccolo*, 2015d). What seems to have shaken even more the calm waters of this area is a series of events related to the asylum seekers freely roaming not only the town's orderly spatialities, but also the spaces in-between briefly described above.

We refer in particular to the undefined spaces surrounding the camp in which the asylum seekers have established temporary forms of dwellings and where they became partially invisible. Leshem and Pinkerton's (2016) recent work on the geographies of no man's lands is here of great significance to understand the production of the unregulated spatialities of what Dominique Moran and others have described as 'carceral mobilities' (see, among others, Moran, 2015; Moran, Gill, & Conlon, 2013).

For Leshem and Pinkerton, no man's lands are always a product of the abandonment-enclosure tension, of the simultaneous operation of abandonment and enclosure. The concept of no man's land 'offers an easily appropriated trope in the search for new vocabularies that account for spaces from which organised political power has been either intentionally withdrawn or significantly curtailed by adverse social-political or ecological-environmental circumstances' (2016, p. 43). In this perspective:

'no man's land' is applied to a wide range of spatial scales, political configurations and geopolitical dynamics. Whether the result of waning state sovereignty and its replacement by regional or international political, social and economic configurations [...]; the designation of 'ungovernable territories' or the spatio-legal limbos of the 'war on terror' discourse [...]; or environments dominated by physical fortifications that seek to reassert control over flows of labour and terror [...], 'no-man's land' is commonly applied as a referent of spaces that feature disrupted orders of governance. (2016, p. 43)

At the same time, it is perhaps useful to reflect on the relationship between these spatialities and the concept of the camp (Diken & Laustsen, 2004; see also Minca, 2015), also empirically—especially since sometimes camps are indeed transformed into no man's lands, or surrounded by no man's lands—as is the case for the Gradisca CARA (Feldman, 2011). No man's lands are indeed a product of the simultaneous operation of abandonment and enclosure, especially when they are conceived as 'dumping grounds', necessary and complementary leftovers of the production of greater political geographies. These are also spaces where, also because of their unregulated constitution, different forms of empowerment and resistance might become possible and thus worth further investigation.

Our claim is that the Gradisca camp complex is surrounded by many of these no man's lands and by several 'enclosures' (again, The Tiare, the Collio, Redipuglia). These undefined in-between spaces have gathered particular attention on the local and regional media of late, being often presented as a threat for the local community. However, despite the concerns about their impact on the landscapes gravitating around the 'Gradisca fortress', these undeclared no man's lands have been nonetheless largely left untouched and unregulated, a sort of socio-political buffer zone 'of containment' for the semi-carceral mobilities of the asylum seekers.

If the guiding principle of hospitality and detention of the Gradisca camp, like that of many other similar institutions, is that of providing care, cure *and* control (see Agier, 2008), the camp may be seen a set of spatial political technologies aimed at disciplining the inmates' mobilities (Minca, 2015). Instead of integrating the asylum seekers into the local life, camps like this one are institutions 'protecting' both the local residents and their 'guests' (Pinelli, 2014, p. 72). Accordingly, since surveillance is comprehensive and tightly regulated via a rigid application of the established schedule of who enters and who exits, control and discipline appear as paramount in the life of the asylum seekers. This is thus presented as the only possible response to a state of humanitarian emergency, a response that often translates the victims (who seek protection after having escaped their homes) into detainees, constrained into semi-carceral regimes of mobility.

To overcome this sense of displacement, the Gradisca camp 'guests' often try to use the time of relative free mobility during the day to create sites for social aggregation. One of these sites is found along the Isonzo riverbank, a spot nicknamed 'the jungle' by the asylum seekers themselves. Here, initially, a few guests resided illegally and established a temporary campground; now this 'place' is used as a field for socialisation and leisure, where asylum seekers mainly from Afghanistan and Pakistan go to eat, play cricket or simply hang out (*Il Piccolo*, 2014c). A second spot is the empty parking lot of a former supermarket, dismissed after the opening of the Tiare. According to the Gradisca mayor:

We are not in favour of the CARA, since such presence does not make the best interest of the local community. [...] Indeed, the CARA has created several problems in the past years, for example with the guests getting together at the riverbank. Every year in the Spring we warn the guests that the river waters are perilous and that they should not swim there. However, other times, they select other sites where they have their picnics and leave all the garbage. Now we have organized things in ways that they are asked to clean the areas they used. (interview: 17/04/2014)

Despite the complaints of residents and local authorities, the former CIE has remained active in order to host new asylum seekers that cannot be accommodated in the CARA, some of whom recently ended up camping, again, along the Isonzo River, in the 'jungle'. More and more asylum seekers have been arriving recently either from Slovenia overland or relocated by the first assistance centres in Southern Italy after having crossed the Mediterranean. In an area radically transformed by the new massive transportation infrastructure related to the Tiare, it is thus not rare to see individuals or small groups walking along the main roads with no apparent destination and purpose, while the residents zoom in their cars to their next destination: new fragmented landscapes of mobility of this late modern Italian exopolis. On the bridge connecting Gradisca to Redipuglia, the sight of asylum seekers wearing the *kurta*, a typical male dress in Afghanistan and Pakistan, is not infrequent, like the presence of small groups of exotic-looking individuals hanging out at the margin of the green areas of the Gradisca central square.

More riverbank informal campgrounds were established between Summer 2014 and Spring 2015 by migrants waiting to be accommodated into institutionalised camps in Gradisca or elsewhere. However, with the coming of the Spring the fires and the tents have sparked new protest on the part of politicians and residents (*Il Piccolo*, 2015a). The Gradisca municipality has accordingly asked a private company to clear the area along the river and especially to get rid of large amounts of asbestos recovered by the asylum seekers (but previously dumped there by someone else, of course) to build some shelter. In this no man's land of the Gradisca exopolis, only when the asylum seekers presence and temporary dwellings become visible and considered unconventional, they are condemned as inappropriate by many residents, and eventually 'cleared'. When instead, while being perfectly visible from the busy road connecting Gradisca to the Collio region, these same people play cricket and even establish an open-air mosque in the abandoned supermarket parking lot mentioned above, they remain fundamentally unnoticed (Figure 6).

Perhaps it is worth saying that these unregulated spaces were abandoned after the supermarket 'Isonzo' of the COOP—Cooperativa Consumatori Nordest—was shut down following the opening of the Tiare. This may be seen as an interesting way in which exopolitan no man's lands sometimes work. On the one hand, the new commercial hub enclosure made this site redundant, with its abandoned spaces temporarily occupied by the refugees to new use. On the other, this unplanned buffer zone represents for the Gradisca detention camp an important 'spatial complement', since it allows its guests to socialise and spend some good time while waiting to be assigned a status and displaced again (*Il Piccolo*, 2014c, 2015c). This is also illustrative of the interplay between abandonment and enclosure, and of how they operate to produce the no man's lands of this exopolitan landscape, which become unregulated spaces exposed to the authorities' intervention, but also sites of potential silent resistance, improvised spatialities of play and even prayer.

## Conclusion

On 8 May 2015 security cameras detect the presence of a young bear roaming the Tiare's vast parking lot. The media a few hours later broadcast a video where the bear is seen exploring the



empty lot and then disappearing into the no man's land from which he came from (*Il Piccolo*, 2015e). This highly unpredicted 'visit' nicely reflects the interplay of enclosures and abandonment in the Gradisca exopolis, with disciplined attention given to the bear presence only when he trespassed the border to the Ikea enclosure and became entirely visible: a true irruption of untamed nature into the exopolitan spatial regime of this corner of Italy. The 'bear episode' in many ways provides space for reflection on other similar 'irruptions', something that relates also to more general debates in Italy and Europe about the presence of asylum seekers, illegal migrants and the management of their corporealities, a topic we have no space here to adequately discuss. However, something may be said on the 'unruly' roaming of individuals with no clear status in the Gradisca exopolitan landscape, matched by the presence (and agency) of the above-mentioned enclosures in no apparent relation to each other.

First, the somewhat exaggerated concern for the presence and the (carceral) mobilities of the asylum seekers in the Gradisca landscape raises important questions about the complementarity of enclosure and abandonment in its formation, and about how those mobilities contribute to making exopolis work as a postmetropolitan regime of spatial discipline. For instance, are the no man's lands and their temporary dwellers a constitutive element of the spatial formation making this exopolis working as such? Or merely a by-product of exopolis, re-appropriated by its temporary visitors/inhabitants?

Second, if exopolis requires the presence of functional and impenetrable islands, but also semi-unruly spaces-in-between—the spaces engaged by the (until then invisible) bear, of which any track was lost in the aftermath—then the bear appears as a useful, albeit deliberately provocative, metaphor for the asylum seekers of which we continuously lose track in this kind of fragmented landscape (see Gatti, 2015 on the disappearance of about 100 000 asylum seekers in the past few years).

Third, in line with Leshem and Pinkerton's work, we would like to argue that the no man's land here described may perhaps be understood as a buffer zone necessary to implement the spatial discipline of the camp, but also of the landscapes made of the commercial centre, the Collio region, the Gradisca fortress. Does the camp need a buffer zone to manage the uncertain status of its guests, and to claim that these latter cannot be entirely controlled, which may explain the mixed strategy of abandonment and arbitrary intervention, for example, when these invisible presences suddenly reappear in the media as being 'out of place'? Remarkably, the asylum seekers' dwelling in the no man's land is often presented as a sort of 'return to nature' (i.e. the 'jungle' metaphor), making them appear as uncontrolled werewolves (see Agamben, 1998; Minca, 2007, 2009), as threatening inhabitants of the spaces-in-between of this Italian exopolis, normally absent from the official representations of the Gradisca landscape.

Finally, is this Italian exopolis a new kind of fragmented landscape deserving further scrutiny in order to understand its implications for place, space and identity—whatever they mean in the local public discourse—for particular areas involved in a seemingly endless post Cold War and postmetropolitan transition? We would suggest that it is important to understand the interplay of abandonment and enclosure characterising many other marginal areas of Europe today, spatial laboratories where the production of new spatialities of visible and invisible mobility are matched by deliberate deregulation, but also by arbitrary policing interventions and by political speculation about the temporary materialities that emerge in the spaces-in-between of the grand capitalist 'enclosures' of exopolis. Perhaps it is in this sense that the Gradisca case supports Leshem and Pinkerton's (2016, p. 44) claim that rather than dismiss the critical significance of no man's land altogether, we should reassert its analytical precision in the study of these spaces—also to understand, we argue, the working of postmetropolitan landscapes and their power geographies.

## Disclosure statement

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