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Habsburg coffeehouses in the shadow of the empire: Revisiting nostalgia in Trieste

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on Trieste's representation as 'the ghost of its Habsburg past' (Hametz, M. 2014. 'Presnitz in the Piazza: Habsburg Nostalgia in Trieste.' *Journal of Austrian Studies* 47 (2): 131–154. doi:10.1353/oas.2014.0029., 136) – a city that laments the irreversibility of time – to explore instead the ways in which nostalgic attachments to the empire have come under suspicion. Drawing on interviews, literary texts, and atmospheric data (McCormack, D. 2014. 'Atmospheric things and circumstantial excursions.' *Cultural Geographies* 21 (4): 605–625. doi:10.1177/1474474014522930), I explore the narrative and performative strategies adopted to reframe the political and cultural relations with the empire. By discussing how events and places expected to celebrate the Habsburg legacy refuse to become nostalgic, I trace the emergence of contested feelings for the empire to explore how nostalgia becomes an ambivalent sentiment that is discursively and performatively re-appropriated and mobilized to attach and detach Trieste from the empire.

KEYWORDS

Nostalgia; coffeehouses;
Trieste; Habsburg empire;
tourism

Nostalgia for the empire: an introduction

The Habsburg Empire's deposits and debris form Trieste's humus in which literature can root and bloom. Trieste is History's storage room [...] it's a city at the margins, where it becomes possible to understand how the peripheral, the removed, and the derelict are the repositories of history. —Ara and Magris (2015 [1982], 199)

Trieste's unique and charming character has been immortalized in books and movies that describe the essence of this city as 'a melancholic theatre of decline, the embodiment of the memory of a magnificent imperial project whose echoes still mark the city's identitarian discourses' (Minca 2009, 257). If this is the familiar representation of the city, it is fair to say that it coexists with harsh condemnations and re-examinations of the same imperial legacy. In this essay, I explore the tensions between nostalgia for the Habsburgs and rejection of the imperial past in relation to local discussions about Trieste's political attempts to refashion itself as a key-actor in Italian and central European politics. I explore these tensions by looking at several examples: the mobilization of shared history to create new business alliances between Trieste and Vienna based on the existence of a shared legacy; the preservation of Habsburg aesthetics in the historical cafes combined with

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their identification with Italian Irredentist experiences; the re-creation of imperial atmospheres to meet tourists' expectations; and, the dismissal of imperial nostalgia as *emotional* and arbitrary to assert and defend the *Italian-ness* of the city.

Trieste and Austria, a *sisterhood* in the making

From 12 to 20 November 2016, Trieste hosted Kaiserfest, a rich programme of events celebrating the centennial of Franz Joseph's death, the '*Eternal Emperor*' who ruled for sixty-eight years. In collaboration with the city administration, Altamarea, a local cultural association, invited citizens and tourists to photographic exhibitions about Habsburg Trieste, to taste 'typical' Viennese products in an outdoor market, to dance at a dinner with Franz Joseph's beloved Empress Sissi, and to walk the city exploring the historic coffeehouses, another important legacy of the empire. The promoters announced the event as a celebration of Trieste's cultural, linguistic and artistic bonds with Austria. Mr. Giorgi, a local councillor who delivered the opening speech, emphasized that the festival 'celebrates the *proximity* (*vicinanza*) of Trieste and Austria and their 500 years of shared history ... the history that made Trieste an important maritime node for trade and goods exchange' (TriestePrima 2016).

Kaiserfest shortens temporal and spatial distances between Trieste and Austria, the state that inherited the capital city of the former empire, by displaying their cultural similarities. In doing so, the festival mobilizes history to re-establish older connections and revivify a shared vocabulary that would make it easier to promote cultural, commercial, and leisurely exchanges. Yet, the narrative subtending the festival does not advocate the re-establishment of a supra-national territory that could contain both Trieste and Vienna (as was the case with the empire). Rather, it emphasizes their 'familiar proximity.'

Mr. Pozenu, from the Association Altamarea, opened the festival in the following way: 'This is a *non-nostalgic* event. It is the first step to re-establish older exchanges and rapports between the city and the *sister* Austrian Republic and to plan a collaborative future' (emphasis added). To declare Trieste as the *sister* of Austria at an event commemorating Franz Joseph's death is indeed telling. Franz Joseph's body is often associated with the body of the Empire that becomes the *Vaterland* (Fatherland) in the works of Stefan Zweig (see Schlipphacke 2014, 8–10). In the process of making Austria the *sister* of Trieste, the organizers metaphorically emancipate their city from the *Father-Empire*. If nostalgia invites a re-appreciation of home from a distance (thus the longing), this non-nostalgic event affirms the need for Trieste to abandon the past of Vienna as home. Whereas the idea of having Austria as a *sister* still suggests an intimate relation between the two, it also emphasizes their equal status. This event represents an opportunity to re-discover what Trieste and Vienna have in common to take advantage of the shared heritage for future (commercial) partnerships. Kaiserfest took place in Piazza Ponterosso,¹ in the city centre. During the day, the market offered the opportunity to taste Austrian beer, eat *sachertorte*, purchase heavy woollen jumpers from Bavaria, and stop at one of the many stalls advertising short and longer vacations in Austria. The market was *Austrian* rather than Habsburg and, if not for the posters depicting the half-bust of Franz Joseph, this could have been just another Austrian Christmas market.

The advertised dinner with Empress Sissi that took place on the Saturday night of the festival was not *with* her exactly but rather *watching* her. Sitting at a central (new) cafe

(Caffé Eppinger), patrons were entertained by an amateur group performing dances from the Nineteenth century. The dancers' costumes and the music did not re-create the atmosphere of the empire to induce nostalgic attachments in the manner of, for instance, the restaurants of Central and Eastern Europe described by Narvselius (2015), where a sense of Europeanness that resonates with the Habsburg past is skilfully crafted and thus becomes perceivable. At Kaiserfest's ball, 'the emotional realism of contemporary museums and the staged 'authenticity' that forms affective bonds with the past' (Ibid., 419) were completely absent. Instead, the Empire was resurrected to become a spectacle. Patrons sat at their tables, far from the stage, and took photographs of the ball; in this way, their experience at the ball highlighted the distance between their present and the Habsburg past. Bridges (2014) argues that space enacts nostalgia when it creates the possibility to experience an 'authenticity' that has been lost. In Kaiserfest's market and at the celebratory dinner, the empire was not to be experienced but rather to be observed. Nostalgia for the Habsburg home was debunked, the relationship of dependency on Vienna demolished, and a new vision of Trieste and Vienna as business partners promoted.

Trieste's historic (not imperial) coffeehouses

On Saturday morning (19 November), a small crowd gathers in Trieste's central Piazza Unità for a walking tour of the historic coffeehouses. During the Eighteenth century, the guide explains, Trieste was transformed from a small town into an extremely wealthy city with a population of 250,000. It became the headquarters for many mercantile industries and one of the biggest insurance companies of Europe. Coffeehouses started opening at the same time, but it was in the Nineteenth century that they multiplied, mimicking the aesthetics and rituals of Viennese cafes. As Lunzer writes, 'If Vienna was ever able to imprint an atmosphere onto the empire ... a mode of being part of the empire made of rituals and habits, a remnant of it shall be found in the Caffé' (Lunzer 2014, 137). Accordingly, these cafes are often praised for their fin-de-siècle atmosphere, and they have become ideal destinations for nostalgic souls (Hametz 2014, 145–146). Today, the guide explains, only six of the hundred or so coffeehouses that existed at the turn of the century remain. To celebrate their 'authenticity,' a local association of traders awarded them with Golden or Silver Plates, which certify that their interiors and/or original locations have remained unchanged.

There are only Italians in the group of cafe patrons, and, except for myself and another couple, all the participants live in Trieste, which leads our guide to make a comradely confession: 'When I take tourists on this tour, the first thing I tell them is: in Trieste, we don't go to drink a *caffé* (coffee), we go to the *caffé* (coffeehouse).' Because the Italian language uses the same word for both coffeehouse and coffee (*caffé*), the guide was suggesting that drinking a coffee is, in Trieste, a destination rather than an activity. It transcends the need to have an espresso to become a social practice, a ritual of urban socialization that needs the intimate (yet public) space of the coffeehouse to take place. The guide comments further, explaining that locals in Trieste take the existence of coffeehouses for granted, downplaying their unique social, cultural, and historical importance. These are not just spaces where one drinks coffee as in other cities, she continues, but rather 'public living rooms' where one sits and chitchats (*dove si va per ciacolare*). They are places where one can work or read when one feels like being alone but in the company of other people.

Our first destination is *Caffé Tommaseo* – one of the most famous historic venues – to assess the recent renovations.² The overwhelming ivory-white colour chosen for the walls, the tablecloths, and the flowers on the tables endow the space with an aura of aristocratic pomp. There is no music and the few people sitting at the tables are reading newspapers silently. This cafe was opened in 1830 by one Tommaso Marcato. It was the first to serve ice cream in town and quickly became a favourite meeting-point for intellectuals and artists. Outside, a plaque explains that this cafe was, in 1848, the headquarters of the national Italian independence movement, Irredentism. In fact, all the locals in the group believed that the cafe was named after Niccoló Tommaseo, the hero of the Republic of San Marco (1848–49), rather than its first owner, Tommaso.

We stand at the counter, drinking espresso. In the adjacent room, a series of glass cabinets display historical memorabilia. As in a miniature museum of the bygone age, we can stare at photographs of intellectuals and artists, their autographs, and writings. The fading colours of these objects blend in with those of the interiors and the sumptuous décor. The practice of preserving history in this separate section seems to invite silent and non-participatory admiration for something that is long gone. The glass surrounding the documents not only elevates what it protects to a status of precious artefacts, it also suggests the importance of displaying evidence of the exceptionality of the place through history. Yet, in doing so, the miniature museum also amplifies the distance between the cafe's vibrant past of revolutionary struggles and the silent present of its bourgeois customers (see also Kezer 2000). The place has been renovated, the owners explain, to re-establish continuity with the Habsburg tradition, and entering the cafe, I can strongly feel the resonance of the imperial aesthetics. Yet, I struggle to identify the Tommaseo with imperial nostalgia; the story I am told emphasizes the role of this cafe in the revolution against the emperors rather than accentuating how bankers and traders loyal to the empire might have also preferred this place. The events of the Nineteenth century have been selected, arranged, and monumentalized to be observed, but we cannot *touch* them. In this way, they become distant fragments of what can never be experienced again. The cafe preserves the past but it lives in the present and looks forward, not backward.

Continuing with the tour, we arrive at Cafe San Marco. This establishment was opened in 1914, and its owner, Marco Lovrinovic, had to battle the suspicious Habsburg administration that questioned his choice to name a new coffeehouse after the patron saint of the Venice Republic (and the symbol of the Irredentists). The owner's political sympathies for the Irredentists are concealed strategically in the interior of the cafe. The marble tables, the wooden counter, big mirrors and lamps follow the Viennese style, but at a closer look, an impressive number of lions, lion legs, and representations of the Venice Republic begins to appear: 'At Cafe San Marco, you could breathe the Irredentist atmosphere' (Vinci and Vinci 2014, 46). Not surprisingly, Habsburg supporters burnt this place down a year after its opening. Here again, the history of the cafe is intimately connected to anti-imperial politics.

Cafe San Marco is a busy venue; there are people studying, writing and reading, dating, pondering, arguing, drinking, eating, and playing chess. A small bookstore opened inside the cafe after its last restoration and an intense programme of readings and book launches has become part of its calendar. As Magris has noted, the cafe is a legacy of the empire, but it is hard to discern nostalgic attachments. Even though the interior of the cafe reminds one of the Viennese coffeehouse, the Irredentist symbols re-appropriate imperial aesthetics to disrupt gestures of imperial nostalgia. Anderson argues that '[a]ffective

atmospheres are a class of experience that occur before and alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in-between subject/object distinctions' (2009, 78). Yet, atmospheres do not forcefully channel the events of the present; rather, they exist in indeterminate and unfinished ways: 'Atmospheres require completion by the subjects that 'apprehend' them [...]. They are always being taken up and reworked in lived experience' (Ibid., 79). These imperial cafes are a palimpsest of the tastes and routines of the Habsburgs, Irredentist fighters, and contemporary patrons. Their space is produced and re-produced according to those who inhabit the cafe, their desires, imagination, and volition. As Hiu writes, nostalgia is an affective atmosphere that arises from frequenting a space, to which it remains strongly linked and related (2011, 65). The portrayal of Trieste as a city longing for its imperial grandeur still materializes in efforts to conserve its Habsburg aesthetics (as in the cafes), even though quotidian re-appropriations of these spaces might not produce nostalgic atmospheres but hybrid affective practices that contest, consume, and at the same time embrace the past.

Crafting nostalgic atmospheres, or the business of nostalgia in Trieste

Thrift (2004) argues that because atmospheres can be manipulated, engendered, and shaped, they become political, while Sumartojo adds that their intensities can affect people differently (2015, 271) and Degen, Melhuish, and Rose (2015) investigate how architects have a long history in manipulating space to create atmospheres that communicate (or infer) feelings of excitement (retail), safety (street lighting design), or fear (policing). If atmospheres can be crafted through the construction of the built environment or the staging of events, they become meaningful when these atmospheres are apprehended, inhabited, and performed by moving bodies (McCormack 2013, 4). In the previous section, I reflected on the historical coffeehouses of Trieste as a material legacy of the empire that complicates nostalgic attachments to the past. If their aesthetics maintain the Habsburg connection, their discursive representations reinforce instead their affiliation to the Irredentist experience. So, if there is a commission in place to ensure that these coffeehouses preserve their interior and décor to look *authentically* Habsburg, the guided tour I joined presented these places as hotbeds for anti-imperial assembling. In this section, I explore the ways in which imperial nostalgias are crafted and preserved for the curious tourist. Nostalgia in Trieste is also a business.

Curious to learn more about the visions on offer for the touristic gaze in Trieste, I arrange a meeting with the municipal head of tourism. After a brief conversation on coffee culture and coffee trade as means to brand the city and revamp its economy, I ask how the Habsburg legacy plays a role in the advertisement of Trieste as the city of coffee. My interlocutor interrupts me, visibly annoyed. He apologises for not letting me finish my question but adds firmly, 'Trieste is not nostalgic for the empire.' 'This city,' he continues, 'it's a city that looks to the future and not at the past ... It is a city that decided to be Italian ... it is Italian! Not Austrian.' My interlocutor's understanding of imperial nostalgia implies a betrayal of one's (nationalist) loyalty to Italy. In his view, the empire shrinks to a faraway island. The five hundred years of shared history are nothing compared to the open future that invites new *Italian* adventures. He tells me that in Trieste many people are nostalgic for the empire. These are individuals with no knowledge of history, he goes on to explain:

People in Trieste are nostalgic for the empire because this was a period of economic prosperity ... Trieste was a wealthy city, very important in the empire ... and today people are struggling [financially] so they look at the a past and imagine it was better ... well, I think that Trieste can still be an important port and function as a connecting point for terrestrial trades and transports across Europe. This is what our administration intends to support ...

As the councillor's geopolitical imaginary unfolds through plans of terrestrial and maritime expansion accompanied by the drawing of new routes that will connect central and northern Europe by train, it becomes clear that even if Europe remains crucial for these plans to materialize, Trieste is well anchored within its national borders, detached from its imperial pre-national experience. But just moments later, the councillor shows me the brochure designed to launch the city's Christmas events. The image is that of Piazza Unità under the snow, enveloped in a magical, fairy-tale atmosphere that calls to mind, by the councillor's own admission, more of a Nordic landscape than Italy. He smiles and shows me a set of colourful pie charts that measure the number and origin of tourists in Trieste; the large majority are Austrians, followed by Germans and British (since Ryanair started flying here from London). Austrians, he explains, come to Trieste because here they feel at home: 'Trieste is like Vienna with the sea,' he points out. He aims to prove to me that Trieste is not nostalgic; rather its stewards (such as himself) engineer nostalgic atmospheres to match the expectations of tourists. Since the majority are Austrians and *they* are nostalgic for the empire, why not take advantage of it? Nostalgia is a successful business in Trieste.

To drink coffee, like a *local*

In this section I reflect on how the experience of drinking coffee in Trieste is advertised to suggest the unique character of the city. I discuss coffee habits in relation to the broader branding strategy of Trieste as the ideal destination for coffee-lovers, which strategically silences the city's imperial connections. I also reflect on the previous section on tourism and nostalgia (or the distancing from it) to account for the need to make Trieste *unique*.

Tourists arriving in Trieste are directed to a reserved space in Piazza Unità where they can browse a catalogue of exploratory activities that invite them to learn more about Trieste and its region. The self-guided *Trieste Coffee Tour* seems to be among the most popular activities. A three-euro pass entitles one to drink a coffee in eight historical sites across the city. While drinking a coffee, tourists collect a special stamp that transforms their paper pass into a precious memory-holder. Inside the pass, a brief history in three languages explains that Trieste is the city of coffee, a status born in the Eighteenth century when, thanks to the special laws that made Trieste a free port, coffee began arriving here to be distributed across the Habsburg Empire. The coffee pass also invites the tourist to learn how to order a coffee *as a local*. People in Trieste have invented original ways to name coffee that are different from the rest of Italy (and the world). To order an espresso, one must ask for a *nero*; if one wishes to drink the *nero* in a glass rather than a cup, then one needs to specify *in B* (*bicchiere* or glass). The naming of coffee offers the possibility to experience the common practice of drinking an espresso as exotic: to mimic the local or pretend to be one. At Caffé Tommaseo with the guided tour, I learnt that workers preferred to drink coffee in a glass because it warmed up their hands during winter. Another respondent told me that these names have been developed over time to serve customers quicker. Certainly, nobody could tell me how these names originally came about, but all my respondents took pride in explaining how to order

a coffee because of the way in which this simple act is *different* in Trieste. As Covacevich writes, 'for those who are in Trieste for the first time, [ordering coffee] explains the anomaly of the city better than any worldly explanations' (2006, 32).

According to Urry (2002 [1990]), the tourist leaves home to go somewhere that is not home and this is how tourist destinations become attractive: because of the possibility offered to experience life differently from one's routine. A certain sense of distance is thus part and parcel of what it means to be a tourist (cf. Steiner 2016, 236–237). Yet, tourism also caters to the needs of the traveller who seeks traces of their comfortable life in a new unfamiliar place. Coffeeshouses are among those places tourists visit to perpetuate everyday habits, to be at home but away. In Trieste, the advertisement strategy points to the uniqueness of the city for its way of naming coffee, rather than its Viennese coffeeshouses that have survived from the Nineteenth century. The coffee pass guides the tourist to these places, but it doesn't focus on their history, nor does it suggest *feeling* imperial nostalgia. Rather it instructs tourists to enjoy the process of ordering coffee as a fun diversion. Coffee-naming disconnects Trieste's identity from both the empire and Italy, emphasizing the singularity of the city, which also makes drinking coffee here as far from home as possible.

The opposite of *being nostalgic* is being *unemotional*

In this section, I reflect further on the ways in which nostalgia is dismissed by focusing on attempts to counter nostalgic gestures because they are considered *sentimental*. I address the strategies adopted to tell history without becoming nostalgic, and I discuss how positioning nostalgia as the potential enemy of *authenticity* reconstructs memories of the empire as a contested field.

During the coffeeshouse tour, my walking companions often interrupt the guide's rehearsed narrative, which she never appreciates. At one point, a man in the group, who seems to know the history of Trieste well, asks for our guide's opinion about a recently published book on the city's glorious past. The guide stops and clarifies that the book is not historically accurate. She explains that what she is telling us is based on *facts* she has dug out from the city's archive. The book, by contrast, is based on *gossip*. The man who asked the question seems to take no offence. 'Even if these are not proved facts, the book is important because it makes us love our city and its important past even more,' he suggests. The guide stops engaging with him, pressuring us to walk faster. The man's attachment to the past is emotional, and his knowledge of history deepens his personal bond with the city – he draws on history to justify his sense of pride for being a *Triestino*. On the contrary, the tourist guide presents history as a collection of events, dates, and images that can be excavated from the archive, placed in orderly narratives, and delivered to know what happened in the past ('objectively'), rather than to celebrate Trieste. In at least two other instances, my interviewees reacted negatively when asked to comment on the much-celebrated nostalgic character of Trieste:

Those who are nostalgic are either those who don't know history and idealise the past over a present of struggles or those who are delusional and prefer to believe that something they have no experience of could be better than what they have and find this hard to handle.

People who are nostalgic are ignorant of history ... they don't understand that the context has changed. Yes! Trieste was a major city of the empire, but even then, things were not perfect ...

Nostalgia is the malaise born from the impossibility of experiencing a past that seems more attuned to one's inclinations and aspirations. It materializes the ultimate fantasy of time travelling to take part in social, economic or cultural relations from which we are excluded but feel we could contribute to. Nostalgia manifests as the need to re-create meaningful personal connections to the past, as it did for the man in the walking tour. The insistence with which my respondents dismissed nostalgia for not being factually supported indicates a need to explain why one must distance oneself from an emotional attachment to the past of the city (its imperial grandeur) and decide instead to believe that the future holds even better possibilities. Thus, the tour guide who explains history to locals (rather than *foresti*/foreigners) addresses ever-present popular nostalgia and rectifies it by teaching history through facts.

Kaiserfest brings back the memory of the empire to reposition Trieste as a potential partner (and not subject) of Vienna. To reconnect the two entities as equals requires voiding the city of nostalgic attachments and writing their relationship anew. History is celebrated because there is a need to make it objective, to reorder it, and to explain that surely there is evidence of a shared culture ('shared ethics' as one of my interviewees suggested) that we need to understand to encourage increasing profits. A 'rational' approach to history serves to redefine the proximity to and distance from the empire. Whereas nostalgia creates intense connections between individuals, places, and times that might even be unknown, history grants a perspective from which to understand what can be salvaged from the past to build a more prosperous future. We don't become nostalgic for documents kept under glass boxes, or while watching women in corsets dancing at a safe distance from us. We become nostalgic when we experience affectively the possibility of participating in practices from which we are excluded but we believe we could engage with if circumstances were different (in this case historical circumstances).

Hui argues that the place and time from which people evoke nostalgia is as important as the space and time nostalgia evokes (2011, 65). In the same way, the fact that nostalgia is so fiercely refused is indicative of the desire to stay in the present and look forward. If Trieste explores its Habsburg infrastructures to exploit tourism, the need to distance itself from Vienna forbids becoming emotional about this same past.

Conclusion

Trieste remains a city of contrasts whose *raison d'être* is in the attempt to solve them. —Ara and Magris (2015 [1982], 4)

This paper has departed from popular representations of Trieste as a nostalgic city longing for the empire to discuss how contemporary cultural and touristic events attempt instead to create distance from the Habsburg past, often conflated with Austria. Exploring the meanings of pervasive Habsburg nostalgia, Schlipphacke (2014, 5) asks how we can understand the emotional pull of the empire. She argues that this is the desire to inhabit a supra-national state (cosmopolitan, progressive, multi-ethnic and wealthy), 'a longing for a feeling of home that transverses cultural and ethnic spaces' (5–6). This article complements such an analysis – which still reflects more leftist political positions in Trieste – by showing how this persisting nostalgia for the empire is also confronted by opposite political narratives. Accordingly, I have explored emerging feelings

of aversion to the Habsburg Empire that match, support, and broaden nationalist discourses that reclaim Trieste as an Italian (rather than cosmopolitan) city, 'a city that chose to be Italian' as one of my respondents emphasized. The need to detach Trieste from its imperial history and legacy corresponds to the need to create new narratives in which the city is no longer a peripheral (to Italy or the Empire) or marginal player but rather where it becomes a key partner in designing, developing, and guiding new economic ventures in Italy and central Europe. These anti-nostalgic narratives and practices locate home squarely in Trieste and ask for its citizens to stop looking outward and concentrate on what the city might offer for a prosperous future. In other words, to reposition Trieste far from Austria (and the empire) requires contesting nostalgic attachments to the past and revealing their inauthenticity through a 'factual' narration of history.

The recent invocation of *Mitteleuropa* in Triestine projects to revitalize the port has focused the city's gaze away from Italy and toward the territories with which it once shared a common fate.³ This was also achieved by referencing the empire as a sort of connecting tissue that needed revitalizing, clearly displeasing Italian nationalists, who produced alternative narratives to justify seemingly profitable European enterprises. If there was an agreement that the future of Trieste depends on its rapport with central Europe, which could be facilitated by their shared customs and history, this is presented as a rational business move that is exploitative rather than *nostalgic* for the legacy of the Habsburg Empire. The same rhetoric is used to justify conservation projects that protect Habsburg aesthetics and infrastructures, which are necessary to meet tourists' expectations rather than celebrate the empire. Accordingly, tourism in Trieste is designed to offer the opportunity to experience Habsburg atmospheres in the preserved coffeehouses, museums, and walking tours, but those managing the touristic offerings emphasize the lack (and refusal) of nostalgic engagement with this part of history. Hutcheon (2000) argues that the power of nostalgia comes from the juxtaposition of an inadequate present and an idealized past. Accordingly, the local administration and the tourist offices strongly reject nostalgia as a proof of the adequacy of the present and the possibility of recovering wealth and power in the future (without the empire).

This essay does not dismiss the sense that Trieste is a nostalgic city. Rather, it shows how nostalgia is produced as multi-faceted, hybrid and ambivalent. If empires are formations in becoming, whose life does not cease with their historical demise (Stoler 2013), we can trace the afterlife of the Habsburgs in Trieste's built environment, spoken languages, trade history, and everyday practices, the modes of 'textured historicity' that Jeremy F. Walton outlines in the Introduction to this volume. Imperial nostalgia materializes as an affect that transforms and intensifies or retreats through bodies in movement that apprehend, inhabit, perform or silence it. The Habsburg cafes take pride in Viennese aesthetics, which differentiate them from the newest coffeehouses in town. Yet, their history often suggests their incompatibility with repressive imperial rules and their roles in attaching Trieste to the Italian republic. Inside the cafes, history is preserved and displayed, but it doesn't invite imperial nostalgia. The historical cafes embrace the two myths of Trieste, the Habsburg metropolis and Irredentist hotbed, which are both extreme versions of the same (hi)story.

Overall, this essay complicates the portrayal of Trieste as nostalgic by showing how nostalgia is directly attacked and displaced to redefine the identity of the city, creating contested readings of the past, the present, and the future. It reflects on how Trieste as a palimpsest

encapsulates multiple and contradictory stories that never achieve to expunge one another, so that celebrations of the Habsburg past coexist with the Irredentist spirit of the Italian city. If the concept of the palimpsest ‘embraces the totality of time compressed in a given monument of site while extracting a series of legible and meaningful episodes’ (Aksamija, Maines, and Wagoner 2017, 13), in this essay I have extracted a number of stories that represent multiple modalities of engaging with the imperial legacy to re-orient Trieste towards expressing a more Italian identity or, on the contrary, embracing its imperial/cosmopolitan potentials. Crucially, this essay has pointed at contrasting (and yet complementing) attitudes towards imperial *nostalgia* in Trieste to reflect on how this sentiment remains crucial to navigate the city-palimpsest. Nostalgia (or its refusal) instructs readings of imperial traces to order and assess them but also with the editorial mission of normalizing a specific narrative that legitimizes political projects that veer towards Italy or Europe.

Notes

1. Piazza Ponterosso, at the core of Karl VI’s and Maria Theresa’s urban development plans in the Eighteenth century, has remained as a popular trading space throughout the centuries since. It is often remembered as the ‘largest department store for Yugoslav people’ who came here to buy goods at a cheaper rate (see, for instance, the movie *Trieste, Yugoslavia* [2017] by Alessio Bozzer).
2. Apparently, the place had already lost ‘its colours’ during its first makeover in 1987. A journalist writing at that time commented on the fact that the old customers, ‘captains, strict members of old cultural elites, artists (more or less understood), students, and even punks’ had disappeared (La Repubblica 1987).
3. On the concept of Mitteleuropa and the roles it played in shaping Trieste’s cultural and economic aspirations see also Ballinger 2003a; Ballinger 2003b; Baskar 2007; Vidmar-Horvat and Delanty 2008.

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