Following the Dogs of Prishtina: Landscape as Living Memorial

Dr Jenna C. Ashton

Institute for Cultural Practices, University of Manchester, UK

Jenna.Ashton@manchester.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper offers autoethnographic storytelling and analysis, considering what multispecies framing can offer post-war memorialisation discourse and practice. During 2019, I undertook initial scoping and consultation around the potential of a new museum or memorial site for post-war Kosovo. The aim for this new site is to encourage reflection, peace building, and action around human rights. In Kosovo there are multiple and conflicting memorialisation practices enacted by war veterans, politicians, mourning widows and mothers, activists, and survivors. These all take different forms from statues to protests, oral histories and curatorial interventions. As in all wars, the physical landscape of Kosovo is the site of crime and resistance, mythologising and denial. Amidst the human memorial activity live the stray dogs of Prishtina. The dogs activated my attentiveness to the potential of a living landscape as a site of multispecies enquiry for rethinking processes of memorialisation and heritage-making.

Keywords

Kosova, memorialisation, war, stray dogs, multispecies, arts methods, landscape, heritage, storytelling
Post-War Memorialisation in Kosova

In February 2018, Kosova marked the tenth anniversary of its declaration of independence. The Kosova War started in February 1998 and lasted until June 1999; it was part of the wider Yugoslav Wars and ethnic cleansing led by the Slobodan Milošević regime (1991 - 2001). More than 1.5 million ethnic Albanians (90% of the estimated 1998 Kosova population of the province) had been forcibly expelled from their homes. 13,500 people were killed or went missing during the conflict. Approximately 20,000 women and girls were raped. Thousands of people remain missing with multiple mass graves uncovered over the last two decades. 1

In 2019, I had been invited by the Bogujevci Family Foundation to undertake a consultation with heritage and cultural professionals around the potential of a new post-war museum of memory, peace, and human rights in Kosova. The Bogujevcis (Saranda, Jehona, Fatos) were child survivors of their family’s massacre in Podujeva, a village just outside of the main city Prishtina. 2 They were among the 3000 Kosovar refugees that came to Manchester in 1999 (Brownlie, 2019). 3 Twenty years on, the Bogujevcis are resilient, beautiful and talented young people seeking to use arts and heritage in a difficult and fragile process of transitional justice. They want to use the past to imagine a different kind of future for Kosova’s very young population. The Bogujevcis are artists. They think and dream like artists. The aim of a new museum would be to evolve previous exhibition work led by the family and Manchester-based UK curator James Walmsley. Together, they had already created the acclaimed exhibition Bogujevci - A Visual History, a multimedia approach which reconstructed spaces of the victims’ experiences, including the Bogujevci family house living room, the hospital and courtroom where they testified: places of massacre, recovery and justice. The exhibition toured the National Gallery in Kosova in 2011, the National Gallery in Albania in 2012 and the Belgrade Centre of Culture in 2013. Arguably, the Bogujevci’s exhibition was a key moment in curatorial practice in Kosova seeking to engage with recent trauma, memory and narratives of witnessing, with survivors as co-curators. 4

I was invited to Kosova in response to my work in Manchester (UK) with international and refugee women artists that explored conflict, displacement, and trauma. The work resonated with the aims of the Bogujevci’s project. I am a creative feminist practitioner, working within critical heritage studies ‘that tries to understand and explain the social and political phenomena of heritage and identity, and what it does in society’ (Smith, 2020, p. 25). My work is informed by models of social practice and community arts (Ashton, Barron, &
Pottinger, 2021), and in dialogue with areas of thought on museum activism (Janes & Sandell 2019; Sandell & Nightingale, 2012; Sandell et al, 2010) and curatorial activism (Ashton 2017/2018; Reilly, 2019). My conversations with heritage and cultural professionals in Kosova specifically concerned global memorial museums and memorialisation practices (Macdonald, 2008; Saltzman, 2006; Sodaro, 2018; William 2007). Post-war heritage-making is well underway in Kosova. Notably, a number of chunky-metal “war hero” statues and monuments have been erected. Likewise, the National Museum in Prishtina hosts a celebratory nationalistic exhibition, displaying all the tools of war and military paraphernalia. Most war memorials function for those with the greatest economic and social power to represent cultural narratives (Benton, 2010; Genger & Ziino, 2011; Harrison, 2008). Kosova’s politically led “official” memorial practices do not deviate from this model. Remembrance is a political process. War memory, especially, is constituted by a struggle between a series of agents of varying levels of power,

[...] in which particular memories and identifies contend for public influence [...] That struggle is conducted through a range of physical and intangible media that facilitate expression of memories in public [and over time] (Genger & Ziino, 2011, p. 2).

The Bogujevci’s survivor-led intervention in 2011 was unique in this context, shifting power from politicians to civilians. However, other “unofficial” practices led by activists are also evident in Kosova, such as the association of mothers, Thirjet e Nenave (Mothers’ Cries) based in Gjakova, who work to put pressure on Kosova parliament to continue searching for the estimated 2000 Kosovars that are missing. Their memorialisation foregrounds action and memory that is living, rather than representational. Likewise, the Kosovo Oral History Initiative (started in 2012) works to ‘to record everyday and negated life stories’. Artist-activists also reclaim spaces across Prishtina for memorialisation work. The last place I visited in Prishtina was the Grand Hotel (opened in 1978) with Saranda and James. Our guide was Zana – head of a feminist arts collective, FemArt. Situated on the Mother Theresa Boulevard, the Hotel is both a monument to communist bravado and an architectural symbol of atrocity. During the war, the basement was used as a rape and torture cell. Directly opposite the basement opening is the current local gym and macho “fight club”. Along with women survivors, the feminist collective reclaimed the basement for an installation. The aim was to remind the Kosova government not to abandon its promises to seek justice amidst its
new nationalistic swagger.

2019: We head down in the hotel lift. The basement is damp and claustrophobic, but areas are a sparkling clean white. Zana comments,

We scrubbed and scrubbed the walls and floor. The first cleaning company refused to come back and help. So we women artists and activists got on our knees and scrubbed the filth. We cried. It was painful. It was cathartic. (Author’s fieldnotes, 2019).

My three visits in Kosova (namely to Podujeva and Prishtina), and separately to Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are dominated by narratives of place-based abuses in the streets, houses, hotels, and markets. A wrenching human pain saturates the cities and villages. This trauma hovers on the surface in my encounters with people. There is no conversation that does not eventually settle on the topic of the war. An outsider to Kosova and war, I am overwhelmed by the complex politics at play nationally and internationally. Every day I walk to and from my hotel, between relevant landmarks, and undertaking long conversations with cultural professionals and artists salvaging histories and evidence of Albanian Kosovars. My body and psyche are heavy with frustration, anger, and sadness. Amidst this activity and the weight of emotion, I begin to notice the stray dogs of Prishtina.

Dogs, a New Perspective

The dogs in Prishtina are free roaming yet rely on collective human care to survive. Admittedly, they had not been included in the planned approach for analysing memorial practices in Kosova. As the complexity of the consultation became more evident, the movements of the dogs in the city shifted from my periphery to being of equal concern to my encounters with people. Dogs are also part of the story of struggle, of expression and construction, of identity. There is a vast body of scholarship on animals in war and also as subjects of memorialisation, but little on the post-war afterlives of animals specifically in Kosova aside from journalistic reporting. As these dogs came into view, so too did the significance of landscape outside of museum walls: landscape as a site of movement, displacement, atrocity and resistance echoed in what I was encountering (but not yet understanding) of the free-roaming dogs in the city. I began following the dogs, taking notes and images, exploring and analysing the patterns of care and co-existence. I realised I was
witnessing an animal-human entanglement as part of post-war healing. This demanded the ‘arts of attentiveness’ (Tsing, 2011 & 2017) to better understand the specifics of this example of ‘different forms of life caught up in diverse relationships of knowing and living together’ (Van Dooren, Kirksey, & Munster, 2016, p. 5). In the context of my post-war Kosova consultation, focusing on entangled species resonated with the need to ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016) and navigate complexity. In my work I am committed to storytelling as the art of witnessing that engages ‘with the multitudes of others in their noisy, fleshy living and dying’ (Rose & Van Dooren, 2016, p. 91). However, I had not anticipated the presence of non-human agents (the stray dogs) to be so affecting as to open up and disrupt my assumptions and readings of Prishtina. This disruption offers alternative perspectives for memorialisation processes and analysis that to-date have been stuck in an anthropocentric museological frame.

By and large, the stray dogs in Kosova are written about as objects to be controlled, contained, managed by the human populace. No one poses the question: how do the dogs make places? How do residents understand the lived stories of the dogs? How can ‘lively ethnographies’ of these dogs be written? (Rose & Van Dooren, 2016, p. 1).

To paraphrase Haraway (2003, p. 20), I start to file dog stories in my notebooks:

I’d like to introduce you to The Dogs of Prishtina.
They hang around,
Near the cafes, the bars, the bins, in the shade of the unfinished church.
The locals give them water, leave them food,
On street corners.
They dig themselves holes in the ground
To keep cool. To keep safe.
They’ll be walking
Alone, or in pairs, of two or three.
Mischief, play, sleep, eat,
This city of dogs keeps people curious, responsive,
Responsible.

As noted by Haraway (2003, p. 64), ‘there are myriad origin and behaviour stories about breeds and kinds of dogs, but not all narratives are born equal.’ The stray dogs of Kosova are
one such example, with their story being of rejection and an undesired collective presence. I make the case for their presence and companionship as valued, required and meaningful for the geographies and societies they inhabit in Prishtina. I stretch this case for what we think of as memorialisation work within the frame of heritage as a social practice. In response to Haraway’s *Manifesto* (2003, p. 3), I want to take dog-human relationships seriously. I wondered if the dogs of Prishtina and their relations to space and people, and their material lives, could enable me to reach a better understanding of the politics and trauma of a city still grieving. In Kosova, the physical debris of war has been cleared, but the emotional shards are stacked high and wide around every street corner, café, library, school, church, home, field and mountain. In Prishtina, human culture is enmeshed in wanting to both remember and forget, to rebuild and pause, progress and regress, to celebrate and mourn, to modernise and heritage, to assemble and postpone, to love and hate. People and politics and institutions are living in the moment of the in-between “*and*”. Stray dogs, too, always exist on and within that liminal space between survival and extinction (and not *just* exist, but they wander, negotiate, settle, rest, play, grieve, observe, listen, follow). The situation of the dogs characterises the wider situation of Kosova society transitioning. The legacy of human and non-human population massacres; the obliteration of infrastructure and education; the denial and eradication of knowledge and people’s history: it all results in a confusing and potentially suffocating “*and*”. But, there is still promise and opportunity. Creativity was not destroyed during the war, and reveals itself in the human and non-human ecologies of Prishtina. The “*and*” is significant in a society *becoming*. Unexpected modes of reciprocity, repair, caring, connectivity catch us unawares whilst we’re waiting on the “*and*”. A multispecies storying lends new tools and ethics for understanding the richness of the transition and its beautiful-ugly mess.

The summer has arrived; the usually grey-brown grass is now a vivid green, and the limited floral displays are wonderfully garish. The dogs of Prishtina cool off in the shade of the National Library. They’re smart; they have found the air-conditioning outlet. The nearby café will provide them with water (Author’s fieldnotes, 2019).
Dogs in Kosova

Within its post-war repair Kosova is also learning ‘how to inherit the consequences of co-evolution in natureculture’ (Haraway, 2003, p. 12). Together, human and more-than-human citizens ‘inherit in the flesh the turbulent history of modern capitalism’ (Haraway, 2003, p. 24). The presence of stray dogs in society provokes certain issues to be aired. The usual tropes of dangers to the health and safety of people frequently manifests in the media and political discourse, and in the literary and artistic imagination (Beck, 1973/2002; Pearson, 2017). On the reverse side, activists articulate the dangers posed to the dogs by human negligence and cruelty. Other scholarship and practice offers a more complex narrative of co-living between humans and dogs in society (Bhattacharjee et al, 2020; Huff & Haefner, 2012; Kirk, Pemberton, & Quick, 2019; Leep, 2018; Sykes et al, 2020; Wischermann & Howell, 2018; Zahara, & Hird, 2015).

In Kosova, the typical state solution to street dogs was to shoot and cull. An alternative method of managing stray dogs in Kosova has now been implemented, with a committed action plan from 2017 for CNVR: Capture, Neutering, Vaccination, Release. To-date, 14,000 stray dogs have been treated and release, with another 12,000 to be managed in this way. Kosova does not have the economic capacity for ethical and well-funded dog shelters, and arguably shelters do not attend to the causes but simply hide so-called undesirables in a manner akin to prison or detention centre incarceration. The CNVR programme enacts direct control over the surveillance, monitoring and reproduction of the dogs. Arguably, the neutering primarily benefits the freedoms of bitches as they no longer carry the burden of gestation and birthing. Dogs and humans in this context weave and braid in and out of each other’s existence and consciousness through actions and technologies. The CNVR programme has not been without complications or corruption. Animal rights organisations argue the programme should include wider education on dog training and treatment, registering dogs and owners, as well as the licensing of breeders and regulating private dog shelters. These latter aspects have received less investment, which is detrimental to embedding cultural change. The root of the “dog-problem”, as it is perceived, is the abandonment of domestic dogs with the likely cause being poverty and cycles of neglect. This is actually a human-problem.
There is little information that elaborates the situation and role of dogs in people's lives before the 1998-99 war. A narrative emerges of disinterest in pet dogs in the Balkans and a lack of knowledge around dog welfare in general. It is acknowledged that dogs have been a part of Kosovar people's lives for a long time before the war, mostly used for sheep herding or for guarding property. In this regard, dogs have been of great help to people, especially in remote areas. Interestingly, my NGO correspondent writes, ‘only in the past decade has the number of companion animals grown in Kosova households.’ In contrast, Haraway’s expanded concept of ‘companion species’ (2003 & 2008) moves beyond this interpretation of domestic pet to include companion species that grow and become, together, through work.

The film KOSOVO: Man's best friend becomes embroiled in debate over national identity (Reuters, 20 April 2008) briefly documents a specific dog breed caught-up in the cultural identity politics of the region. Registered by the World Canine Federation in 1939, the breed has a long history of contention, with name changes along the way. The Shar Mountain Dog, one of the world’s oldest breeds, was once also known as the Illyrian Shepherd dog, a name deriving from the ancient word for present-day Albania. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, Macedonia changed the breed’s name to the Macedonian-Yugoslav Shepherd Dog. Since Kosova's declaration of independence from Serbia, breeders and owners in Kosova believe that the dog should reclaim its original title as the Illyrian Shepherd Dog. Dog breeder Miftar Shabani, who features in the film, states:

We were never accepted as an equal partners, therefore we have never dared to raise our voice and say that these dogs belongs to Albanian people. The fact is these dogs are from Kosova. I believe and I hope that one day we will become a member of FCI and the dogs can be presented as they are indeed the Illyrian dogs, which are being bred in Kosova mountains.

The film witnesses a Pastori Ilir (Illyrian Shepherd Dog) competition filmed in 2005. The judge is a man wearing a Purina Pro Plan badge (representing the USA-founded international pet food company). In the film footage, men and boys of different ages trot several mature dogs around a patch of gravelled ground. A large standing audience of local adults and children have come to witness the show. The judge checks the walking gait of the dogs, their temperament, and teeth hygiene, awarding “first place” to a family of dog-breeding shepherds consisting of a grandfather, a son and three male grandchildren. They proudly show their
wooden-framed awards to the camera. Another shot of dog-chin stroking evidences affection between the handlers and the dogs. Other footage shows the Illyrians in action shepherding. Other clips show a large group of dogs happily greeting a young boy bringing water to them. An older boy takes time to groom a dog with a slicker brush. Miftar, the breeder and shepherd, is shown sitting on the grass in the quiet company of one of his dogs.

This archive is somewhat incongruous to other narratives about dogs in Kosova. It counters what might be considered an urbanite attitude towards rural knowledge and practice of living differently with animals as companion species. They are not pets, but these are not dogs likely to become strays. Their lack of aggression towards each other, people and the mountain sheep suggests an everyday flow of connectivity within this rural ecology dependent on farming, dependent on an embedded relationship with the land. The unexpected presence of Purina Pro Plan at the competition suggests an international recognition of the dog care undertaken by the shepherd families of the Dobrigje village. The film post-dates the war and pre-dates the Kosova declaration of independence. Dobrigje is only 30 minutes drive from the town of Gjakova, in the West Kosova Municipality of Gjakova. This is where the first NATO bombs hit on 24 March 1999: the day the Alliance finally launched its campaign against Milošević's regime. The town and the surrounding villages in the Gjakova municipality were ruthlessly targeted for ethnic cleansing, with executions and house burnings. I can only assume that the Albanian-Kosovars of Dobrigje shown in the footage continued to dedicate themselves to their dogs’ welfare, despite the war.

Haraway offers useful critique of Western pet-dog ideology, suggesting instead that working dogs offer a different model of equitable and interactive relations:

Being a pet seems to me to be a demanding job for a dog, requiring self-control and canine emotional and cognitive skills matching those of good working dogs. […] The status of pet puts a dog at special risk in societies like the one I live in – the risk of abandonment when human affection wanes, when people's convenience takes precedence, or when the dog fails to deliver on the fantasy of unconditional love […] the importance to dogs of jobs that leave them less vulnerable to human consumerist whims. (Haraway, 2003, p. 38).18

Let society think of the stray dog, then, as partaking in a work role in companionship within
everyday life and everyday spaces. The shepherd dogs of the mountains are respected for this
work, ‘their value does not depend on an economy of affection’ (Haraway, 2003, p. 38). Let
society proceed on the basis that a stray dog’s value and life does not depend on ‘the humans’
perception that the dogs love them.’ Rather, ‘the dog has to do his or her job’ (Haraway,
2003, p. 38). So what is that job? ‘Respect and trust, not love, are the critical demands of a
good working relationship between these [working] dogs and humans’ (Haraway, 2003, p.
39). However, the challenge is for the human to craft a relationship and bondage with those
dogs that have no clearly defined breed traits or working roles (such as the Illyrian). To
rethink this: the strays can be perceived as a plural grouping; I want to unpick the “work” that
is done by the stray within the landscape. What motivates the partners in this companionship?
What are the moments and opportunities of exchange and sharing? In what space(s) and
time(s)? What happens when the companion species of human and stray meet? And, what is
this doing for memorialisation – and for shaping queer, feminist, anti-racist futures of equality
and equity?19 Making kin and ‘becoming-with’ through multispecies environmental justice
‘can be the means not just the end towards partial healing and flourishing on a damaged
planet’ (Haraway, 2018, p. 103). Living with stray dogs contributes to an ontological shift in
the public imaginary of who and what has equitable participation in making spaces and
places. The dream of the Zoopolis is for animals human and non-human to find ways,
together, to undo the violence of the city (Wolch & Emel, 1998).

Encounters in the City Landscape

The CNVR programme aims to manage the numbers of stray dogs in public space. Success
would likely be measured by the extinction of the strays as a category (or species). The
complete absence of the stray dogs would reduce certain identified risks (for humans and the
dogs), especially in terms of movement and unwanted encounters. Similarly, it would remove
the requirement of responsibility from humans and their behaviours to share the city with a
species non-human, and not to claim them as “owned.” People’s attitudes towards
anthropocentric power and hierarchy are overtly revealed by, and in, the presence of the dogs
and how they react.

I take seriously the stray – or free-ranging dogs – as a companion species in the city, part of
an urban ecology practicing care, repair and reciprocity. It is a form of collective public
responsibility and respect that informs an ethos of post-war society, ‘a multispecies
achievement’ (Rose & Van Dooren, 2012, p. 2).
The stray dogs of Prishtina continuously renegotiate their physical presence and meanings in and upon public space, shaping and influencing human psychological states as they do so. What follows is a selection of short storied encounters with the dogs of Prishtina, to engage meaningfully in writing ‘lively etho-graphies […] that draws us into conversation with a host of different ways of making sense of others’ worlds’ (Rose & Van Dooren, 2016, p. 85). In doing so, I attempt a different kind of heritage-making in post-war landscape that embraces space as ‘stories-so-far’ (Massey, 2005, p. 95). Space as always ‘under construction, a product of relations between […] it is always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed’ (Massey, 2005, p. 9). My conclusion will consider what emerges for post-war memorialisation.

Outside the Library
The exact moment of a focused attentiveness with the stray dogs of Prishtina is fixed with my encounter with “Spot” (or number 7372). Spot (as I named them) has a beautiful white and grey spotted smooth coat. I came upon Spot on a grassy bank, outside the National Library in Prishtina. Prior to Spot I had taken other images or made notes on the dogs. In creating a photo-triptych (Fig.1), I realised a greater commitment was needed to analyse the stray dogs as agents in this city. The hole in the ground Spot had dug; the chewed boot as an object of relevance and meaning; the tolerant participation in my close image-making; the option to settle and rest in a location frequented by people moving between buildings; the strategic close proximity to the nearby side-street cafes. All these aspects of interest were decisions and actions led by Spot. The dog emanated an air of complete contentment in this moment of being. My presence and observations neither disturbed nor especially activated curiosity. The dog was comfortable with me but did not need me in this moment for reassurance, pleasure, satisfaction or protection. We were just in each other’s company without expectation. The warm sun roasted us both, as we rested on the same patch of scorched earth.

I regret the decision to not stay longer in this moment, and commit more being-with time to Spot. Driven by a sense of “losing” time, I moved on with my human companions to continue our discussion and planning. I was here for and with them, not for and with the dogs. The distinction in my mind (at this point) between attentiveness for humans above the dogs emerged from an anthropocentrism that currently drives memorialisation discourse and practices.
I also regret not asking my Kosovar hosts during our conversations what they considered to be their relationship with the stray dogs of Prishtina. At the time it felt a ridiculous question in light of our agenda. I now understand what those answers could reveal for action around care, repair, connectivity and memory in light of historical and contemporary violence (Bristow, 2014; Crosby and Adams Stein, 2020; Hodgetts, 2017; Van Dooren, 2014). The dogs are also agents in a difficult process of healing. The strength of feeling by activists in Kosovo and elsewhere in the Balkans against the killing of street dogs is by no means symbolic: it is a commitment to anti-violence against all species. A country emerging from destruction to replicate destruction is antithetical. This activism is led by a younger generation who grew up during or after the wars. They communicate a responsibility to wider environmental needs tied to wider issues of equality and justice. The dogs are fundamentally informing this dialogue.

Figure 1. Spot Triptych, no.1, photograph by author.
**At Breakfast**

I was staying in the Hotel Sirius located in the centre of Prishtina. After a total of 25 nights in the hotel across the months it came to feel wonderfully familiar, homely even. Breakfasts consisted of a diverse offering of flan, eggs, cereal, pizza, an array of puddings, breads, fruits and honey, to be washed down with the famous Kosova macchiato. Directly across the road I would occasionally see people rummaging in the bins. Prishtina is full of contradictions. Great displays of wealth sit cheek-by-jowl with extreme poverty. One morning as I looked out of the seventh-floor windows, I noticed a group of stray dogs playing near cars. Five or six varying breeds and sizes, they were chasing each other around, under, behind a very large and very expensive looking Range Rovers; several of them were always parked in the reserved bays at the front. International diplomats, politicians and NGOs frequently stay at the hotel. It tickled me to think these dogs were using the vehicles of UN envoys to play hide and seek. I watched them. It was a completely unexpected and joyful. No one else seemed to notice. Even the doorman ignored them. After they finished their game, they all trotted off down the street, towards the centre of the city and its main retail outlets.

**To the Hotel**

To follow the dogs of Prishtina you have to go on foot. Walking raises issues for ethics, the bodily, the sensory; it is a form of education, knowledge construction, of movement, of storytelling. Walking is a social activity (Ingold, & Vergunst, 2014). On my first visit to Prishtina I had to learn quickly how to cross the road and survive. The zebra crossings are a joke played on the pedestrian. You wait, and wait. No cars slow down. You have to confidently step out into the road and signal!, I was told. You have to be more brazen than the car driving at you at 50 miles an hour.

One time, a confident and hopeful dog of Prishtina followed me back to the hotel, accompanying me across the busy roads. This was an incident that confused and embarrassed me, as I was unprepared for how to react and interpret the action. It was my first one-to-one with a stray dog in Prishtina. I had the combined public narratives of risk and care running simultaneously in my mind. The dog kept close, at one point rubbing against my coat, pushing its weight against me like a pet dog does. Was this an initiation of affection, a desire for an exchange of touch? I stifled what would be my usual response to a dog in this situation; I did not actively touch back. As we walked up the street we looked like we belonged to each other. We even had the same honey-coloured coats. We reached the front of the hotel. I turned
and looked into the dog’s eyes: ‘I’m sorry’, I said, ‘you cannot come in here.’ I swiftly moved forward through the automatic doors. Of course the dog knew it couldn’t come inside. It inhabited these streets; it knew the rules of human spaces in Prishtina better than I did. If it wanted to follow me in, it would have. The automatic doors could not inhibit the dogs. That was the role of the door guards. Nearing the lift I turned back to look at the dog to meet its gaze. It was sitting opposite the doors, with, rather comically, a “reserved” parking sign close by. The dog’s posture was relaxed. I quickly took a photo so not to forget the dog (Fig. 2). I got into the lift and got out on the first floor. I looked out of the window and saw the dog had moved off along the road.

I considered that the dog simply wanted food. Yet, the stray dogs have knowledge of where to find it, which cafes are likely to offer extra morsels and at what times. It was clear in my lack of physical exchange that I was not likely to give something. Yet, perhaps my lack of aggression signified something else. The rubbing and pressing against me: my coat likely carried a smell of UK dogs, so perhaps this attracted it. The majority of the stray dogs are not “natural”, so not born as a stray. Most were once domesticated pets and therefore they have a memory of human affection and modes of eliciting reciprocal behaviour. The question then is why? I wonder if I am misreading the behaviour, again from an anthropocentric perspective that deems this dog needed me in some way. This encounter prompts the question: ‘who benefits when species meet?’ (Haraway, 2008, p. 16).
At the Church

Prishtina is a city stifling its trauma of the missing and dead. This materialises in blank spaces where seemingly nothing happens, or spaces which the dogs only dare to occupy. These are in-between places: between knowledge, superstition, oppression and liberty, the new and the old. The land around and on which the Serbian Orthodox Church of Christ the Saviour is located is one such example. The construction of the Church began in 1992 during the regime of Milošević but was never finished due to the war (Ejduš, 2020). The land is situated directly between the University of Prishtina and the National Library. The unfinished Church dominates the site, and for many it is a continuous reminder of the regime and its destruction of Albanian knowledge and intellectual institutions. It is, perhaps, the most obvious of symbolic monument in the context of memorialisation. It is an unfinished shell materialising both regime success and failure, and continued traumatic presence. Two other “monuments” complete this site: the satellite dish sculpture by artist and architect Eliza Hoxha, and a
clumsily positioned Coca Cola sign. Both add to an incongruous space of plural meaning and aesthetics (Fig. 3).

A multispecies reading of this place complicates Ejdus’ reading of this so-called ‘abjected ontic space’ (Ejdus, 2020), given the site hosts ontic enactments of nonhumans (Tsing, 2018). I noted how the land surrounding the University and the Library is always neatly mown. The grassland around the Church is not (a reading of deliberate abandonment and neglect could be imposed here). The lack of mowing and human intervention contributes to the ‘curated decay’ of the site (DeSilvey, 2017). Leading this curation is a non-human ecology. For the most part, a rich biodiversity of flora is largely absent in the city centre. In the summer, a thick scrubland of grasses, wildflowers, weeds and conifers surround the Church. A whole host of insects and minibeasts have a ball, as did the birds that fed upon them. “Kosovo”, meaning of the blackbirds in Serbian, lives up to its name with winged swooping in and out of the vacant windows. Who knows what else might be making a home under the roof. Amongst the tall grass, bobbing ears and heads will be seen. The dogs have made a claim to this space too. The tall walls of the Church provide wonderful shading, and the grass a sensory cool cover and matting. This site is abject for humans but not for the non-humans who have little concern for cultural symbolism of brick and stone. Unconsciously, the local human population have gifted a rewilded habitat perfect for urban nature, of which the stray dogs are a part. A contested site of war heritage, this moment of accidental reciprocity facilitates Prishtina’s thriving, not just surviving of and between companion species. The Church becomes a beautiful and productive multispecies space asserting life and countering the memory of death.
Conclusion: Landscape as Living Memorial

My learning from the dogs of Prishtina holds significance for rethinking heritage-making and memorialisation practices in the post-war city landscape. The exchange with the dog at the hotel requires me to address varied motivations and perspectives. The short encounter with “Spot” demands a re-evaluation of time shared with whom and why, within practice. The proactive inhabiting of liminal or contested sites by non-human agents transforms binary interpretations of use and value. The counterpoint of plentiful breakfasts with nearby poverty requires me to acknowledge and situate all this thought and activity within conflicting capitalist agendas. The work of the animal rights activists runs in parallel with the work of anti-racists and feminists. In the city I was witnessing a complex sharing of space, ‘the meeting the other in all the fleshly detail of a mortal relationship’ (Haraway, 2003, p. 34). The model of companion species that begins to emerge in Prishtina is one of awkward co-habiting.
It exists on the inter- and the intra-relating ‘of fleshy, significant, semiotic-material being’ (Haraway, 2008, p. 178). Importantly, I witnessed human society ‘learning to be affected, and so perhaps to understand and care a little differently’ (Van Dooren, Kirksey, & Munster, 2016, p. 6).

There are implications of this sharing and caring for post-war healing and a transitional society that is remaking its democracy and its lines of ethical and moral behaviours. Kosova human citizens could remember and care with humans the way they are learning to care and remember with the stray dogs citizens of Prishtina. As Haraway (2008, p. 39) notes, ‘caring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning’. The landscape – and attentiveness within it – can be (perhaps already is) the memorial for the disenfranchised: struggling, connecting, sharing, repairing, remembering and witnessing. Landscapes hold a multiplicity of stories and knowledges outside of museum walls; it counters the static singular vision of monuments. The work that is done through memorialisation lays the ground for cultivating equitable and inclusive societies. In Kosova, whose human memory, whose human heritage (Hall, 1999), is an ongoing site of contestation. It is a political battle. I argue that paying attention to non-human actors in the landscape offers an alternative ethical framework for working through the complexity of trauma and loss and re-making shared worlds. This work is never applied but always emergent (Van Dooren, 2019, p. 10). Arguably, heritage practitioners should spend less time with museum artefacts, buildings and statues, and give time to supporting the flourishing of place-based living cultures, in all their forms.

Endnotes

1 For information on Kosova and war statistics, impact, and transitional justice see sources:

2 See Saranda Bogujevci, 2014, Why I choose to relive my family’s massacre, TEDxPrishtina: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTj78ZYm978

Piece on women in Kosova Parliament and Saranda Bogujevci’s career as an MP: https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/06/world/europe/Kosova-women-parliament.html

3 See Manchester Aid to Kosova: https://makonline.org/

4 See documentation: http://cargocollective.com/jehona/BOGUJEVCI-Visual-History
See also international NGO, *Cultural Heritage without Borders*, which works to connect heritage agendas with human rights issues: [http://chwb.org/Kosova/](http://chwb.org/Kosova/)


The group sits alongside other international mother-led movements. See Altinay & Peto (2016) for extensive analysis on gender and war.


Oral History Kosovo: [https://oralhistorykosovo.org/](https://oralhistorykosovo.org/)

FemArt: [https://femart-ks.com/](https://femart-ks.com/)

I have consulted with the leading animal organisations in Kosova, and none could offer any scholarship on animals or dogs.


See docu-film Mondo Stray by Fiona Cole and Carlo Cesario, 2021, Filo Films, which interrogates the challenges of managing and living with stray dogs in Italy – issues comparable with Kosova.

With thanks to activists from StrayCoco, Animal Rights Kosova, Gaia Kosova, and to Elizabeth Gowing from the Ideas Partnership Kosova, for correspondence on this issue of dogs in pre-war Kosova.

Reuters Archive Licensing, *KOSOVA: Man's best friend becomes embroiled in debate over national identity* (20th April 2008), [https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/826978](https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/826978)

See also Puurunen et al (2020) on the negative impact on dog welfare of “pet” environments.

Building on the call in Haraway’s *Manifesto* (2003, p. 64).
Acknowledgments

Thank you to the Bogujevci family and James Walmsley for welcoming me to Kosova, and for our time together in 2019. My thanks to StrayCoco, Animal Rights Kosova, Gaia Kosova, and to Elizabeth Gowing from the Ideas Partnership Kosova for correspondence.

Funding

Funding support was provided from GCRF - HEFCE Partnership Develop Pump Priming, University of Manchester, 2019.

ORCiD

0000-0002-2778-6950

Notes on contributor

Dr Jenna C. Ashton is an artist, curator, and producer, and Lecturer in Heritage Studies at the Institute for Cultural Practices, University of Manchester. She is the Research Lead for Creative and Civic Futures with the University's research platform, Creative Manchester. Jenna's interdisciplinary research contributes to community and civic practices for social and environmental change, and to evolving arts-based and mixed-methods research within heritage studies. Her work is often site-specific, highlighting experiences and knowledge(s) of place. Jenna leads the project, "Community Climate Resilience through Folk Pageantry", AHRC, UK Climate Resilience Programme (2020-2023), and is a Co-I on “Creative Adaptive Solutions for Treescapes of Rivers (CASTOR)”, funded by NERC Future of UK Treescapes programme (2021-2024). Previously, she was a Co-I on project: “Green Infrastructure and the Health and Wellbeing Influences on an Ageing Population (GHIA)”, NERC, Valuing Nature Fund (2016-2020).

References


Ingold, T., & Vergunst, L.V. eds. (2014). *Ways of Walking*. Ashgate.


**Figures**

Figure 1. Spot Triptych, no.1, photograph by author.

Figure 2. To the Hotel, photograph by author.

Figure 3. At the Church, photograph by author.