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Constructing national identity in the public space. The discursive transformations of the semiotic-linguistic landscapes of Pristina, Kosovo

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on the discursive transformations of the semiotic-linguistic landscapes of Pristina, the capital of Kosovo as brought about by successive sociopolitical transformations and against the reversed power relations of the Albanians and Serbs. The study departs from the underlying assumption that the ethnic Albanian image the cityscape emits today does not coincide with the vision of civic inclusion and multi-ethnicity painted in the Constitution (2008) after the Declaration of Independence (2008). By means of a diachronic examination of successive alterations made to iconic landmark establishments at different political phases in time, it is posited that an appreciation of the contemporary discursive landscape requires an understanding of its dialogic relationship with the past. It is contended that semiotic changes reacted to the past by demarcating barriers that limit access to the previously dominant ethnic other. With reference to the ethnically segregated context of the 1990s in Pristina, attention is brought to the transgressive and invisible dimensions of the landscape for the construction of the city’s identity today.

1. Introduction
This paper is a diachronic investigation into the discursive transformations of the cultural public spaces of Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. Of particular interest in any study about Kosovo is the longstanding Albanian-Serbian dispute and the reversed power relations brought about after the interethnic conflict (1998) and the transition to independence (2008). The shifted relations of power reversed Serbian oppression and brought the Albanians to dominance. While Kosovo is defined in its Constitution (2008) in terms of civic equality and multi-ethnic inclusion, in reality, the segregated ethnic context that separates the ethnicities along ideological, spatial and linguistic lines testifies to the persistence of a latent interethnic conflict.

The close connection between the cultural geography of any given city and the ideologies of the state can be encapsulated in a wider semiotic appreciation of the sociolinguistic perspective of linguistic landscape studies (hereafter: LL). Within LL scholarship,
the term is used interchangeable with *semiotic* and *cultural landscape* (Muth, 2015, p. 78) and denotes the multimodal ‘role of signage, symbols and written text [...] in the construction and restructuration of the urban sociolinguistic space’ (Muth, 2015, p. 86; Shohamy, 2012). Against this broadened perspective to LL – or SL – the current study adopts a diachronic stance with the goal of understanding Pristina’s city center as a space of national identity construction, contestation, and renegotiation throughout Kosovo’s turbulent interethnic past. The theme of identity is not new: Various authors have examined the connection between the ideologies of the politically dominant groups by means of the cultural geography of the country. Notable examples include Krasniqi (2013), Albertini (2012), Fort (2018) and Ermolin (2014), who have each focused on different forms of spatial representation in Kosovo’s identity. By analogy, the current case study examines physical resources including architecture, statues, monuments and images that mirror the ideologies of the respective regimes. Different from the previous scholars, who have adopted a synchronic approach to understanding the post-war cultural identity of Kosovo, the current study is a diachronic examination. Its central premise is the principle of ‘diachronicity’ (Pavlenko & Mullen, 2015), which posits that we cannot appreciate the contemporary shape of the semiotic space without an understanding of its past configurations. Through case studies of iconic landmarks situated in the main trajectories of the city center, i.e. the Mother Teresa Boulevard and the Luan Haradinaj street, the central aim of this study is to demonstrate how physical changes (both semiotic and sociolinguistic) in the built environment of Pristina partook in the process of constructing national identity in accordance with the competing visions of the respective regimes in Kosovo. For this purpose, the inquiry draws on Pavlenko (2010) recent works of Muth (2015), Peck and Banda (2014) Lou (2016) and Vandenbergroucke (2018), who each in reminiscence of Scollon and Scollon’s (2003) postulations of place semiotics pay specific attention to the spatial context and location of LL objects. Resultantly, as paraphrased in Lou (2016), location is therefore not taken for granted but is central in understanding how the meaning of signage can be spatially heightened because of its setting in a particular arena of the urban space. Adding to this theoretical notion of diachronicity, each SL/LL phase of a given establishment should be read in relationship to its previous form in the past. Following the theoretical section, the text is structured as follows: in section 3 the methodology and research context of Pristina is outlined. In section 4, we embark on a diachronic journey of Pristina’s cultural landscape as they inform competing national visions. Iconic landmark establishments erected before the interethnic war are compared with their contemporary shape in the present-day cultural geography and examined as part of Kosovo’s nascent national identity construction in the post-war context.

2. The semiotic-linguistic (SL/LL) landscape and the discursive transformations of the public space

The role of the public space to symbolize and consolidate the ideological constitution of a country’s aspired (ethno-) national identity requires an appreciation of the Linguistic Landscape as the ‘discursive construction of space’ (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010), i.e. the construction of a space through semiotic discourses. The notion ‘discursive landscape,’ which is defined in Hakli (1999, p. 124 cited in Krasniqi, 2013) as ‘the ways in which
geography is involved in the evolution of national identities [...] and the specific relationship between national identity, culture and space’ is encapsulated in a wider semiotic appreciation of LL (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010). In LL scholarship, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010) define the discursive construction of space in terms of the construction of a space through semiotic discourses. While in traditional LL scholarship, the LL researchers’ object of analysis was restricted to written signs in the public space, a broadened semiotic understanding examines how other semiotic modalities are involved in shaping the identities of cities (see Leeman & Modan, 2010). Rather than separating text from image, the multimodal interplay of written signage with other semiotic modes present in the built environment permits interpreting the public space from a more multifaceted, and complex perspective as all meaning-making phenomena are considered in the way they influence the potential shape and identity of a given urban setting (Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2004). In this perspective, language in LL is a contributing component to a broad spectrum of semiotic resources involved in the processes of crafting a city’s public image. In other words, various semiotic resources such as monuments, statues, images, architecture and the built environment combine with textual signage to give meaning to a city’s identity (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010). It is against this understanding of the semiotic space that Rubdy and Ben Said (2015) illustrate the significance of adopting an expanded semiotic approach to understanding LL as sites of interethnic conflict and contestation. As further emphasized in Muth (2015), a semiotic advance helps LL scholars in appreciating the urban agglomeration as a site in which the national ideologies of the state can be transmitted and identities constructed. With reference to Kosovo, Krasniqi (2013) discusses the interplay between national identity, territory and symbolic space. He posits that ‘territories are crucial elements in the development of national identity’ (31). Symbols, objects, images and even architecture can work into the built environment of a region and bring the cultural topography closer to the national vision of a politically dominant group.

Particular to Kosovo is how the discursive reconﬁgurations of space have altered in accordance with the ideologies perpetuated by government regime shifts (Demaj, 2019). The way policy makers in Kosovo actively engage in the use of visual objects, cultural symbols and text perpetuates the interethnic war (1998), and reproduces a victimization strategy in which the Albanian nationalist perceptions of the state are justified (Albertini, 2012; Morel, 2013). The way the post-war narrative has been involved in shaping Kosovo’s image to the public eye is discussed at length in other studies (see Albertini, 2012; Di Lellio & Schwandner-Sievers, 2006, Ermolin, 2014; Morel, 2013). In the current study, the aim is to understand the contemporary landscape of Pristina on a diachronic scale and as shaped by the conflicting Albanian-Serbian relationship of past and present. In what follows, I provide a brief historical contextualization of Kosovo, and detail the methodological perspectives of LL that inform this case study.

3. Kosovo: a short historical context

A historical examination of the discursive transformations of Pristina’s public spaces requires a brief contextualization of the Albanian-Serbian conflict against their turbulent history of interethnic violence. Amidst the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire (1878–1912), Kosovo was annexed into the Kingdom of Serbia in 1912. Constituting a majority
Albanian population, the dogmatic adherence of the government to the nation-state principles of ethnic nationalism brought about an ethnic homogenization process in Kosovo (Detrez, 1999). This process was characterized by anti-Albanian discrimination which lasted well after the Second World War (WWII: 1940–1945), and up until the mid-1960s (Malcolm, 1998). By then, Kosovo was reintegrated as an Autonomous Region in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY: 1945–1991). The Yugoslav government developed its guiding interethnic philosophy of brotherhood and unity in the mid-1960s. Its ideology was contoured around the common cause of socialism (unity) while enabling the ethnically heterogeneous peoples of the state loyalty towards their respective ethno-cultural identities (brotherhood, Detrez, 1996). In accordance with the decentralization politics of Yugoslavia, Kosovo turned into a quasi-independent federal entity with self-managing rights. By the Constitution of 1974, the status of the Albanians was made equal to that of the ethnic Serbs and their language was promoted to co-officialdom with Serbo-Croatian (Greenberg, 2004). Kosovo gained the right to its own parliament, banks, school system and healthcare. The civic connection resulting the equalization of ethnic rights in Kosovo created a context of interethnic integration and understanding (Detrez, 1999). Yet the period of intergroup coalescence was short-lived. The Albanian student protests of 1981 were a decisive moment that aggravated interethnic tensions. As the federal government was undergoing a series of political, economic and social crises, the Albanians demanded the titular status of a Republic (instead of Province). This fractioned into separatist scants and claims for independence from Yugoslavia. The anti-Albanian rhetoric that ensued created the ideal context for president Milosevic to rein in on Kosovo’s autonomous status by abolishing its mechanisms of self-governance (Judah, 2008). By the dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991, Kosovo was placed under the totalitarian control of Serbia. Subsequently, the decade of the 1990s was a resounding return to the anti-Albanian politics of the early twentieth century (Detrez, 1999). The status of the Albanians was reduced to an Albanian minority community, and their language was banned from official use (Greenberg, 2004). In direct opposition of the Serbian state, the Albanians established a parallel government with its own parallel institutions, school system and healthcare. The Albanians were called upon peaceful civil disobedience through means of non-participation with the Serbian state apparatus. Albanian parents pulled their children out of public schools, where the Serbian curriculum was imposed, and set up their own primitive home-schools funded by the Albanian diaspora and international humanitarian funds (Kostovicova, 2005). By the late 1990s, more violent forms of Albanian protest came to the surface with tensions eventually erupting in war in 1998. The war lasted a year with NATO military forces ending Serbian rule in Kosovo and placing the entity under the protection of the Interim Administration of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), commonly referred to as the International Community. UNMIK was tasked with providing the territory with a provisional government and legislation until the Albanian-dominant provisional government self-declared independence in 2008 (Judah, 2008). Although in its Constitution (2008) and various laws and regulations, Kosovo is defined in terms of a multi-ethnic and inclusive society, the entity is marked by the ethno-spatial division between the Albanians and the Serbs. The interethnic war reshuffled ethnic hierarchies, bringing the Albanians to dominance. Most urban Serbs either migrated to Serbia or left the cities and secluded to rural ethnic enclaves in Kosovo (Judah, 2008). Although Kosovo is recognized by 22 EU
member states, the country’s statehood remains a matter of international dispute with Serbia and other entities still contesting the validity of its independent status.

4. Methodological perspectives and research site

In considering the central aim of this study, which is to examine Pristina’s SL/LL transformations through the perspective of national identity, I proceed in part with the same methodological advance of Muth (2015). By means of an SL/LL focus, he examines the construction of post-war Nagorno-Karabakh as ‘a distinctively Armenian cultural space’ (p. 87). By analogy, I have decided to structure the study along a similar scope. First, the canvas for investigating the spatial transformations of Pristina is the composition of the cultural make-up of Pristina as shaped by monuments, architecture, and other emblematic identity markers. Different from Muth’s (2015) examination, which is synchronic and set in key memorial sites of Nagorno-Karabakh, my own investigation is diachronic and structured on a city-centric scale. This enables mapping the transformation of space within the context of the social organization of society. Such an approach permits examining the specific ways in which the built environment may have resulted in ethnic exclusion, and influenced the intergroup relations of the community. This standpoint is also central to the study of Peck and Banda (2014), who show how certain linguistic and semiotic transformations in a particular neighborhood in Observatory (South Africa) reflect and usher in changing social dynamics. Another reason why I decided to restrict the study to the capital city is that it emblematically reflects state power. As such, it provides one of the principal sites to realize a cultural landscape that accords with the changing national identity formulations of the state (see also Krasniqi, 2013). As traditionally, Pristina’s urbanization focused on the M. Tito/Mother Teresa Boulevard, the modifications made to landmark establishments situated in and at proximity of this site serve as diachronic case studies for illustrating the capital’s identity transformation.

The methods used also align with the diachronic and multimodal approaches of Stroud and Mpedukana (2009), Peck and Banda (2014), Lou (2016), and Vandenbroucke (2018). Each advance incorporates multimodality in the analytical frame, and hence involves all visual features to arrive at an interpretation of the impact of semiotic meanings in space. Specific attention is paid to the objects’ emplacement in the streetscape. Their potential dialogical relationship with one another as well as the ‘visual geometry’ (Pavlenko & Mullen, 2015, p. 120 in reference to Sebba, 2012) of physical arrangements in space is also analyzed in the addition of images, color, fonts, etc. In Figure 1, the identified case studies diachronically assessed are labeled in the legend with their precise locations in Pristina’s city center. Photographs used to show the historical configuration of certain objects have been taken with permission from the national archive of Kosovo. Other pictures included in the study were either taken by myself, or were reproduced from open access online resources.

5. The discursive reconfigurations of Pristina’s city center

In order to compare the current semiotic composition of Pristina with the thematic focus of national identity and as the diachronic outcome of the past, we must go back in time to evaluate the official identity formation processes in the context of Kosovo’s changing
political, and ethno-national constructions. As the starting point in section 5.1, the inter-ethnic principle of *bratsvo i jedintsvo* (English: brotherhood and unity) which guided the urban reconfiguration of Pristina from the 1960s onwards turned Pristina into the mirror image of a modern socialist entity coalescent with the civic vision of identity. The narrative of brotherhood and unity translated onto Pristina’s urban environment, and should be read as the manifestation of an explicit goal to bring symbols, and objects of the cultural sphere closer to the aspired vision of an interethnic engagement between the Albanians

**Figure 1.** Map with research area.
and the Serbs. Subsequently, the disintegration of the socialist vestige that gave way for the return of competing ethnic nationalisms shaped the context in which we understand the ethnic struggle of the Serbs and Albanians over Pristina’s identity from the 1990s onwards. In the context of the parallel society of the 1990s, we must discuss the identity formation practices in terms of a struggle between the Albanians and Serbs. On the one hand, Serbian government actors committed to sanitizing the capital from its Albanian image. On the other hand, the Albanians’ illicit grassroots performances, which involved boycotting Serbian institutions, and setting up their own parallel institutions countered the prevailing Serbian narrative (Kadric, 2016) and set the contours for the shape of Kosovo’s contemporary national image in less visible spheres of the city.

5.1. The civic identity of socialist Pristina as the point of departure

The urban renewal project initiated by the Yugoslav authorities from the 1960s onwards had a twofold aim: Driven by the motto ‘Destroy the Old, Build the New’ (Krasniqi, 2013, p. 35), it first aimed to transform the city from its ‘primitive’ and ‘Ottoman-style’ image into a modern socialist Yugoslav capital. This was in part achieved by dislocating the city center core from the Tophane neighborhood to the M. Tito Boulevard (Figure 1). The socialist incentive to align Pristina’s outlook with the image of modernity befitting a reputable urban capital of Yugoslavia took presence through new socialist-style building blocks that gave the promenade its most outspoken physical features to date. The pictures in Figure 2 evidence the changing exterior of the central boulevard: The picture on top depicts the M. Tito street long before it was renewed in the 1960s – presumably dating back to between the 1920s and 1930s – whereas on the picture below a panoramic view of the walkabout after it was modernized in the 1960s is shown. By erasing the pre-socialist past of the city, and physically rearranging its cultural core in an entirely different route, a line was drawn physically between the old and the new sociocultural midpoint of the capital.

Second, the reconfiguration of a new urban environment designed to reverberate a distinct socialist atmosphere went in hand with the construction of cultural objects that translated Yugoslavia’s vision of brotherhood and unity onto the local ethnic scene. The relevance of the cultural landscape to create space for connecting the ethnically diverse population to a common identity is highlighted in Kolsto (2014), who underscores that ‘the greater the diversity of a nation [is], the more it requires to hold it together’ (Kolsto, 2014, p. 6). Against our understanding of Organsko Jugosloventsvo (Detrez, 1996), a collective cultural bond based on Yugoslav socialism and its principles of civic egalitarianism had to resonate with the local ethnicities in order to overcome interethnic contestation. Most emblematic to how the axiom of brotherhood and unity guided the active processes of urban modernization was the sculpture of the same name tactically raised in 1961 at the end of the Boulevard, where it stood (and still stands) at the intersection of the old and the new center (Figure 3). As such, the statue delayed access – at least in a metaphysical manner – to the perceived archaic image of Pristina’s pre-socialist identity. In other words, the discursive reconfiguration of space was advanced through the relocation of the cultural center of the city. The insistence of Yugoslav authorities to usher in a new socio-cultural context of interethnic coalescence was symbolically exhibited through the statue, and indexed by the three pillars extended
on top of the structure. Each of the pillars stood for the notion of brotherhood as they represented the local ethnic groups including the Albanians, the Serbs and the Montenegrins of Kosovo (Vrapi, 2010). The idea was to express how irrespective of ethno-cultural differences, they shared the same foundation a socialist society.

The construction of a new spatial identity shaped through the multimodal display of symbols, statues and monuments did not only impart the city with the outward socialist appearance in physical terms. Referencing Krasniqi (2013), it also contributed to ‘creating conditions for spatial socialization’ (pp. 31–32) on a local intergroup scale. This appreciation that the attitudes of ‘people in a certain territory are shaped by symbols found in it’ (Krasniqi 2013, pp. 31–32) aligns well in LL with Waksman and Shohamy (2010), and Muth (2015). They have comparably highlighted how authorities make way

Figure 2. Pristina’s urban transformation (Kosovo Archive, Croatian fund).
in the public sphere to devise a shared historic past that influences the locals’ perceptions of their place and sense of belonging in society. In the case of Pristina, intergroup cohesiveness was similarly forged through historical allusions that materialized collective memories and past experiences of the recent anti-fascist war. Indeed, the axiom of brotherhood and unity was initially trumpeted by the Communist Party during WWII (1940–

Figure 3. Brotherhood and unity statue in the 1960s (Kosovo Archive, Croatian fund).
1945) to implore the exercise of ethnic coalescence against the Axis Powers. Leaning on this historical coalition, the theme of the anti-fascist struggle became the common thread tying the ethnicities to a joint history that superseded on traditionally competing ethnic connections with Kosovo as their national homeland. The historical account of Boro e Ramiz, which is mentioned in a multitude of other politically oriented studies (Albertini, 2012; Fort, 2018; Ingimundarson, 2007; Morel, 2013) was repetitively displayed in the cultural landscape through various monuments, street name signs and statues. The narration was about how a Kosovo Albanian (Ramiz Sadiku) and an ethnic Montenegrin Partisan (Boro Vukmirović) sacrificed their lives for one another in the anti-fascist opposition. This narration imparted the interethnic principle with distinctive local value. Powerful in the way it aimed steering local intergroup relations towards a new civic connection was the Boro e Ramiz Youth and Sports Center pictured in Figure 4. The purpose of naming this structure built in 1964 Boro e Ramiz was arguably not only to index the socialist connection of the ethnicities. It may have also impelled the local ethnic residents to translate the civic philosophy into a genuine collective experience in practice. On the one hand, it was placed right in the middle of the city center, where it could capture the attention of the local passers-by, and therefore work the civic dogma into their daily experiences. Secondly, it was the only youth and sports center of the capital frequented by both Albanians and Serbs on a regular basis. Accordingly, this coerced the ethnic groups to communicate, and therefore socially engage with one another. Another particularly conspicuous characteristic of its façade arguably designed to remind the residents of the capital’s socialist identity and its place with the geopolitical boundaries of the SFRY was the portrait of president Tito. Not by accident, the picture was positioned right above the plateau of the building, which was (and continues to be) used as a main boardwalk. The image of president Tito symbolically looking over the capital may have arguably also served as a noticeable aide-mémoire of the president’s influence in Kosovo’s recent geopolitical advancement, the urbanization of the capital, and in particular, his endeavors to improve ethnic Albanian rights in Kosovo. According to Detrez (1999), it is by paying specific attention to Yugoslavia’s Albanians in Kosovo that the Albanians’ respect and loyalty towards president Tito extended throughout his lifetime.

5.2. The (re-) development of competing ethno-national identities in parallel educational spheres: visible and invisible landscapes

The civic vestige of socialism cemented in the 1960s was reversed by the forceful processes of reserbianization that followed the reintegration of Kosovo into total Serbian rule. The vehemence of the Serbian government to redefine Pristina’s ethnic identity was exacerbated by the mass mobilization of the ethnic Albanians. They opposed the Serbian regime with equally forceful nationalist rhetoric through the declaration of an independent Kosovo Republic in 1990, which a year later, functioned through its own parallel government institutions (Detrez, 1999; Kostovicova, 2005). The dialogic interplay between the top-down Serbian imposition and the Albanian grassroots mobilization of non-violent civil disobedience (Detrez, 1999, p. 123) translated into a competition of ethnic appropriation over Kosovo. This competition unfolded in disparate dimensions of the public sphere. In particular, the emergence of separate educational platforms
demonstrates the conflicting ethno-nationalist projects of the communities. In what follows, the segregated educational realities are understood as a microcosm of the Albanian-Serbian conflict. From an SL/LL perspective, the surrounding cultural and visual imagery acted as ‘socio-symbolic’ (Trumper-Hecht, 2009) externalizations of the wider interethnic discord.

Comparable to post-war Nagorno-Karabakh (Muth, 2015, p. 87), in the Serbian authored cityscape, the legitimization of Serbian sovereignty was sought after by representing a Serb-centered past in the key socio-cultural dimensions of the capital. In this respect, the campus arena of the University of Pristina turned into a space that legitimized the Serbian claims to Kosovo while simultaneously expressing the inner dynamics of Albanian exclusion. Its cultural transformation should be understood both through a dialogical

Figure 4. Boro and Ramiz building 1970s (Kosovo Archive).
and societal lens. Namely the outside appearance of the university publicly projected the wider nationalist fictions that most assertively crystalized through the creation of parallel Serbian and Albanian educational settings (Kostovicova, 2005). Congruent with the reserbianization processes in the LL (Demaj, 2022), the new Serbian ethnic imagery that dominated the cultural environment of the university campus contrived a Serbian-only cultural and social experience by displaying the perceived Orthodox-Serbian medieval heritage of Kosovo. Key for drawing attention to the Serbian transformation of the university’s ethnic character was the location of the campus arena (see Figure 1). By analogy with Leeman and Modan (2010), who underscore that the meaning of signage is heightened spatially by means of their locality in space, the campus arena was (and remains) a cornerstone of Pristina’s urban character. Fenced in by a green parkway, the main academic bodies (including the Rectorate, the Faculty of Philology, the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Arts and the State Library) stood at the intersection of the city center and the more upscale residential vicinities of the capital. Consequently, it was also an inevitable passageway frequented by most locals to lead them outside the city center. In 1990, the university, which had since 1969 catered to Yugoslavia’s Albanian population as an Albanian medium institution was renamed to Свети Сава College after the Serbian national patron saint Sveti Sava (Detrez, 1999, p. 115). According to Detrez (1999), more than 800 Albanian lecturers were dismissed. Likewise, the Albanian language as a medium of instruction was casted off as the ‘language of shepherds and nomads’ inadequate for conveying scientific matter. The strict Serbian-only language protocol, which settled into all scales of formal learning in public schooling by 1992 impelled the creation of Albanian parallel education and discouraged the Albanian student body to continue their studies at the Serbian-controlled university. The oath of loyalty required to be signed by any Albanian in public service – including public education – was imposed to clear up the Albanian academic staff and substitute them with ethnic Serbian professors (Detrez, 1999, p. 114). An example of how the new Serbian-only dynamics protruded into the visual appearance of the university buildings can be found in Figure 5. This Cyrillic-scripted Serbian placard placed at the entrance of the Faculty of Arts read in English University of Pristina – Faculty of Arts – Pristina. What is more, the composition of statues and monuments that gave prominence to the Serbs’ perceived legacy of medieval civilization competed with the Albanian counterclaims of ethnic appropriation. Serbian authorities suspiciously regarded the university as the axis of Albanian nationalist development that led to the student protests of 1981 (Detrez, 1999). It is indeed at this place that students’ discontent with the poor material university conditions pretexted the mass mobilization of the Albanians around the national(ist) cause in 1981, further envenoming the Serbian-Albanian relations in the delicate sociopolitical milieu of Yugoslavia in the 1980s. Beside the ban on Albanian as an official language of instruction, the socio-cultural transformation of the campus invalidated the Albanians’ foregoing involvement in the autonomous socio-cultural composition of the university under socialism. By visibly redefining the cultural core around Kosovo’s medieval Serbian-Orthodox heritage, a historical-religious layer was added onto the socialist infrastructure of the campus setting that conveyed the Serbian re-appropriation of the educational domain and deprived the Albanians from an equal sense of belonging. Indeed, the assembly of Serbian-specific cultural objects were restricted to exclusive ethnic identifications with the medieval Serbian nature of
Kosovo. For example, the construction of the statue of Petar II Petrović-Njegoš (1813–1851), simply known as Prince-Bishop Njegoš, (Figure 6) brought together the ethno-religious dimensions of Serbian and Montenegrin identity constructions. On the one hand, an acclaimed poet and philosopher, Njegoš and his epic poetry were (and are) regarded canonical in Serbian and Montenegrin literature. As such, in the nationalist Yugoslav ideology of the early twentieth century, his literary work provoked the notion of the Yugoslav people as one nation. On the other hand, with reference to the 1990s, it reverberated the Battle of Kosovo (1389) as the memory of Njegoš was testimonial to the Serbs’ frequently forwarded assumption that they formed a Christian front against the Muslim, Ottoman world, and were therefore saviors of the western European Christianity. Furthermore, in Detrez (1999), it is underscored that the instigation of Islamic terror evoked in the Bosnian wars (1992–1995) draped over to Kosovo and was evoked to paint the Albanians, and particularly the leaders of the KLA, as Islamic fundamentalists. What is interesting is that the statue was placed next to the socialist architectural building of the State Library. Arguably, this choice did not come about by chance: Given that this was the only State Library of Pristina, most onlookers noticed the ethno-cultural change at one point or another when visiting the institution. Understood against the interethnic competition
of the 1990s, the statue’s symbolic meaning conflicted with the Albanians’ counterclaims of legitimacy. Left unfinished at the outbreak of the interethnic war, the Serbian Orthodox church (Figure 7) in 1995 was erected at the midpoint of the university complex. It conveyed the same message as the statue of Njegoš in the sense that it expressed Serbian

Figure 6. Statue of Prince-Bishop Njegos (Youtube).

Figure 7. Serbian Orthodox church at the University Campus in 2019.
appropriation while at the same time excluding the Albanians from participation at the university structures. From a discursive understanding to the semiotic space, the transformation of the university was indexical for symbolically reclaiming Serbian appropriation. Arguably, the emergence of an Albanian intellectual class attending the university after it opened its doors under socialism provided the historical context, in which to understand Serbian efforts at erasing traces of the Albanians’ presence. Indeed, it was assumed that the local Albanian nationalists responsible for the Albanian student demonstrations of 1981 regularly convened here. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that the serbianization campaign of Pristina targeted the university of Pristina, as the Serbs symbolically reclaimed the space as their own. In this light, the absence of Albanian text in the Serbian-Cyrillic placard shown in Figure 5 was conspicuous, and illustrated the totality of Serbian claims over the building and the imposition of Serbian-only as the language of instruction (Demaj, 2022).

At the opposite end of the reserbianization of the capital, which played out in the Serbian-authored visible landscapes, stood the illicit acts of Albanian grassroots resistance that developed in the transgressive dimensions of the capital. On the one hand, protest actions temporarily transformed the public space into a site of overt resistance through the student demonstrations of October 1997, which demanded that the university of Pristina would be reopened for the Albanian-speaking population. At the time, Albin Kurti, a popular political figure in Kosovo as the leader of the grassroots movement and political party Vetevendosje! and presently Prime Minister, spearheaded the largest Albanian student demonstrations of the 1990s (Shahini, 2016). These protest actions temporarily reinvented the Serbian-authored space bringing to the surface the competing voice of Albanian defiance that developed in the underground Albanian parallel system. In Figure 8, a picture of the Albanian rallies depicts a powerful message that seemingly addresses the consequences of being deprived from quality education. The 1997 student protests led to the reopening of the University of Pristina for Albanian speakers in their own mother tongue in 1998. Yet, around the same time that lectures resumed back to normal, the interethnic war broke out (1998–1999).

While not visible to the publicly authored SL/LL, the distinct Kosovo Albanian identity shaped through the parallel society was equally driven by an exclusive ethno-nationalist perception of Albanian autochthony (Kostovicova, 2005). The Albanian response to the totalitarian imposition of Serbian rule in 1989 came with the Declaration of an independent Republic of Kosovo in 1990, which gave further impetus to the reserbianization of all stages of the education system, and the segregation of primary schools (Detrez, 1999; Kostovicova, 2005). Resulting the imposition of Serbian curricula by the Ministry of Education in Belgrade, the creation of an independent Kosovo Albanian Republic with its own functioning parallel government was nurtured in the private sphere of Albanian education. Rather than abiding to Serbian oppression, the coordination of civil disobedience entailed the Albanians’ mass dismissal of the existence of Serbian authorities. The Albanian home-schools were organized in private houses offered by individuals, and financed through self-imposed Albanian taxes, the Albanian diaspora and international humanitarian funds. The Albanian home-schools ushered in a transgressive space of society existing solely by virtue of Albanian willpower. While undistinguishable in the visible socio-cultural panoramas of the capital, the Albanian countermovement of the
1990s was central for the future development of a distinct Kosovo Albanian national identity, which crystalized after the interethnic conflict. Albanian resistance was effective in the sense that it succeeded in withholding around 400,000 school-aged Albanians out of the Serbian-authored educational system. The teachers were paid by the self-imposed Albanian taxes and while the home-schools themselves were continuously raided by Serbian police this organized form of non-violent Albanian disobedience subverted the Serbian government. It effectively impaired the Serbian stronghold over the Albanians of Kosovo, and undermined its attempts to factually succeed in ‘reserbianizing’ the entity.

Figure 9 is an example of the basic learning settings established through Albanian parallel education. As the picture illustrates, the home-schools took place in private flats, and houses and lacked basic learning facilities. While invisible in the public domain of the 1990s, the Albanian countermovement became central for Kosovo’s identity after the interethnic war. In the present-day SL/LL, the experience of Albanian defiance has transformed the outlook of the city, turning its cultural landscape in a distinctive Albanian-dominant entity. Today, Pristina breaks with its Yugoslav, and Serbian past. In direct opposition to Serbian counterclaims, the cultural landscape legitimizes and commends the Albanians’ methods of grassroots resistance.

5.3. The reconfiguration of Pristina as the diachronic outcome of the past

The post-war public décor reveals profound discrepancies between the civic politics of the international community based on ethnic reconciliation, and multi-ethnic inclusion
and the local ethnic Albanian identity practices that contend Serbian interactions via the built environment (see also Ermolin, 2014 for similar observations). In light of our appreciation of Pristina’s preceding socio-symbolic transformations, the markedly ethnocentric Albanian image the city emits today is interpreted in relationship with the diachronic dynamics of the past. In this regard, it is important to underline the central controversy in the post-war identity construction of the territory. Namely, the aim of the international community was to lay out provisions for civic power-sharing arrangements by which an inclusive society could be developed. Yet, this civic vision overlooked the recent history of the 1990s which constituted the basis of the Albanian-Serbian antagonism. Consequently, the local Albanians, who were driven by a coextensive sense of revenge and post-war euphoria took charge of the identity processes in the cultural landscape. They unrestrictedly developed the distinctive Kosovo Albanian identity that took shape in the private, parallel dimensions of the 1990s. In terms of its content, the construction of a new perception of Pristina’s public image relies today both on the ‘Albanian master-narrative’ (Di Lellio & Schwandner-Sievers, 2006) that chronicles the Albanian struggle of grassroots defiance and struggle for national independence and pro-western discourses that corresponded with Kosovo’s transition to independence and orientation towards EU integration.

At the outset for reinventing the capital’s cultural and socio-symbolic spaces in accordance with this twofold assignment, the foregoing Yugoslav, and Serbian national image of the capital was erased or ascribed with new symbolic meanings befitting Kosovo Albanian ideologies. The post-war shift, which resulted in the removal of the Serbian government, and the Serbian people from the urban centers of Kosovo,7 gave the Albanians unrestricted access to reconfiguring the cultural landscape in accordance with their national vision. Socialist symbols, Serbian statues, street name signs and virtually all cultural artifacts reminiscent of Kosovo’s prewar past were either demolished or painted over with visual Albanian imagery. The resulting landscape demonstrated the local Albanian experience of defiance against Serbian oppression and their struggle for national independence. The inclusive symbolism associated with the brotherhood and unity principle under the socialist phase made way for the creation of an exclusivist ethnic Albanian topography.

Figure 9. A home-school in Albanian parallel education 1990s (YouTube).
In this respect, we may interpret the statue in Figure 10 as highly symbolic of the fragmentation of unity into ethno-centric practices of national belonging. It shows the decapitated bust of Ramiz Sadiku, which in its original setting in the city park of Pristina was sculpted in 1961 beside the figurine of his Montenegrin comrade Boro Vukmirović. The sacrificial bond that the preceding Yugoslav socialists set out to impel by means of their anti-fascist comradeship conflicts today with the association of hostility and conflict that the demolished statue represents. While the bust of Ramiz Sadiku has been preserved, that of Boro was destroyed after the war. The contrast of the cultural environment with the multi-ethnic framework of the international community strengthens the exclusive Albanian character of Kosovo’s post-war identity. Equally emphatic in this respect is the surrounding landscape of where the brotherhood and unity monument once depicted the ethnicities’ civic bond. Attempts to disengage the site of its former Yugoslav symbolism have resulted in officially authorized spray-paintings that convey the historical path the Kosovo Albanians have undergone to achieve national independence. The socialist construction, which was placed right in front the Brotherhood and Unity statue in the 1960s (Figure 11), has been redecorated with different flags of the countries that have endorsed Kosovo’s transition to independence (Figure 12).

Understood in the context of the cultural space as a physical arena of national identity construction, the public space depicts the unambiguous theme of ‘victimization and oppression’ (Albertini, 2012; Ingimundarson, 2007). By association with the Serbian Milošević regime, this narrative has also entailed anti-Serbian connotations. On the one hand, repetitive inferences to the shameful actions of the Serbian regime have symbolically preserved interethnic strains on a societal scale. As cemented in the built environment, the memory of the interethnic war symbolically towers above any attempts at ethnic reconciliation. The recurrent image of Albanian suffering casts a shadow on endeavors to
neutralize the Albanian-Serbian relations. The latest memorial that reinvigorates the narrative of Albanian victimization was sculpted in 2015. Titled *Heroinat* (English: heroines), it pays tribute to the sacrifices made by the female protagonists of the Albanian struggle against Serbian oppression. Its founding was pretexted by municipal authorities to offer a balanced image of the past, where women contributed equally to men in the road to Kosovo’s independence. Across this physical display of recent Albanian history, the *NEWBORN* monument is located (Figure 13). This structure has served internationally as perhaps the most emblematic image of Kosovo’s transition to national independence.
On the one hand, it advertises Kosovo as the newest country of Europe, while on the other, it brings to the fore Kosovo’s young demographic population as a potentially valuable commodity for economic growth. Yet, given the multi-modal interplay of the monuments of Heroinat and NEWBORN, the site conjures up ethnocentric Albanian processes of national appropriation as the symbolic representation of the Serbs and the other ethnic minorities are excluded.

By comparison with the socialist substructure that survives in the capital’s architecture and few remaining monuments, virtually all relics that testified to the pre-war existence of a Serbian community that shared the same social spaces with the Albanians in the city center have been eradicated. These include the Serbian language and its Cyrillic alphabet on shop signs as well as cultural objects including most Serbian statues, symbols, and flags discussed above. The cultural transformation of the campus site at the University of Pristina unmistakably reflects the inversion of Serbian power. Understood in the context of Albanian discrimination in the 1990s, the university site should be viewed as a reflection of ‘the role of space as both a symbolic and physical resource’ (Kostovicova, 2005, p. 3) for ethnic appropriation. Symbolically, the history of Albanian suffering at the hands of Serbian oppression has legitimized the deconstruction of the Serbian-authored space, and its subsequent reconstruction into a new Albanian-centric landscape. The examples shown below in Figures 14 and 15 capture the moment in time that Serbian statues previously erected during the period of the 1990s were capsized and subsequently thrown next to the garbage container. The demolition of these Serbian identity markers powerfully expressed the extent of revenge involved in the Albanian response to the foregoing anti-Albanian politics of the Serbian regime. As denotative of the ‘social reinvention of space’ (Peck & Banda, 2014, p. 316), the outward transformation of this site reflects and replicates the ethnic divisions of the past, which have crystallized in
the institutionalization of ethno-spatial segregation (Kostovicova, 2005). With 40,000 registered students, and 1,000 academic staff members, the university of Pristina is the largest public institution of higher education in Kosovo, and exclusively caters to Albanian speakers. Today, no Serbian-medium classes are offered at the university nor are curricula devoted to the subjects of Serbian history, literature or culture.8 Comparable to the Albanians’ parallel forms of resistance in the 1990s, ethnic Serbs have set up their parallel

Figure 14. Capsized statue of Prince-Bishop Njegos in 2001 (Kosovonet).

Figure 15. Capsized statue of Vuk Karadžić in 2001 (Kosovonet).
Serbian-exclusive university in the city of North Mitrovica. Divided by a bridge that separates it from the Albanian-inhabited south, this city transformed after the war into an urban Serbian enclave. Similar to the Albanian experience of the past, the parallel Serbian university is funded by the Serbian government in Belgrade and officially known by the name UPKM or the University of Pristina in Kosovska Mitrovica.

6. Conclusion

This paper addressed the cultural landscapes of Pristina’s city center as sites of national identity formation and interethnic contestation. The study showed that in order to grasp thoroughly the contemporary cultural dimensions of Pristina in the ethnically disputed context of Kosovo, we must bring to the fore a diachronic awareness of the cultural landscape as a canvas on which cultural artefacts have been symbolically related with the historical struggle over ethnic identity in space. This rivalry surfaced in full force in the 1990s and continues to influence the cultural configuration of present-day Pristina. Interpretations as to the contemporary landscape as a space shaped by Albanian visions of national identity cannot be acquired in depth without approaching the built environment as a historical phenomenon, dialogically shaped in relationship with the past. An examination of the role of the past required also looking at the peripheral dimensions of the public space, including the private and ‘invisible’ spaces of Albanian parallel society in the 1990s where distinct ethnic voices opposing the prevailing ideologies of the government emerged manifestly. Although we could not assess the socio-cultural dynamics associated with the private spheres of Albanian parallel society through manifestation in the historically visible LL, it is precisely at this level of hidden contestation that the Albanians nurtured the ethno-national identity as key for the further development of Kosovo’s post-war identity. Accordingly, the study highlighted how despite outward appearances the visible manifestation of the interethnic dispute is still dynamically being battled out in the symbolic spaces of the capital city.

Notes

1. Translation from Dutch in Detrez (1999, p. 115) based on an anecdote: ‘de nieuwe Servische rector van de universiteit van Pristina vertelde me ooit dat de serbiserings van het onderwijs gebeurde omdat het Albanees als ‘taal van herders en nomaden’ nu eenmaal ongeschikt is voor de overdracht van wetenschappelijke kennis.’
2. According to Detrez (1999, p. 115), by 1998, 19,000 students were enrolled at the university of whom only 2000 came from Kosovo with the remaining 17,000 students comprising ethnic Serbs and Greeks, many of whom obtained their university degrees through bribes.
3. Prince-Bishop Njegoš was an important historical poet and philosopher, whose work is considered canonical in Serbian and Montenegrin literature.
4. As Detrez (1999, p. 129) emphasizes religion never featured in Albanian national identification processes. Specifically, in the 1990s, he states that Albanians of both Catholic and Muslim faiths drew the same line against Serbian oppression and acted as a unified force of Albanian defiance.
5. Through international mediation in 1996, a ‘principle educational agreement’ (Detrez, 1996, pp. 132–134 and 154) was signed, but not implemented between the Serbian government and the leader of the resistance movement, Dr. Ibrahim Rugova.
6. In 1991, the Ministry of Education in Belgrade decided to segregate schools in Kosovo ‘under the pretext that the ethnic tensions […] were making Serbian students feel unsafe’ (Shahini,
Serbian pupils went to school in the morning whereas the Albanian pupils attended classes in the afternoon.

7. The post-war regime shift resulted in the ethnic Albanian homogenization of the capital of Pristina and other cities. Most urban Serbs of Kosovo left the entity while others, most of whom are rural Serbs, settled in Serbian-exclusive enclaves.


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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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