Queer Heritage: Central Europe and Beyond. A Roundtable Discussion

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Moderators:
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Robert Kusek: The idea that lies at the heart of this debate is that we – or at least some of us in some parts of the world and in some communities – live in the age of the "queer turn", i.e. the time when a major revaluation and re-interpretation of the past from the point of view of gay and lesbian, as well as queer studies has been taking place; and that the meaning, scope, as well as politics and performance of this "queer turn" differ considerably given a number of variables, including geographical and cultural factors. In 2007, during a roundtable discussion, Carolyn Dinshaw was asked about the phrase that she used almost a decade earlier in her seminal work Getting Medieval, i.e. "a queer desire for history".[1] She explained: "In that phrase 'a queer desire for history', I meant a desire for a different kind of past, for a history that is not straight".[2]

We would like to start this discussion by asking you about your own explorations of queer history – about your understanding of that phrase and the very principles or "desires" that guide and inspire your attempts to unearth LGBTQ+ histories – histories that are so often embedded in historic buildings, museum collections, artworks, urban/rural landscapes. Do you see yourself as belonging to the

1 C. Dinshaw, L. Edelman, R. Ferguson, C. Freccero, E. Freeman, J. Halberstam, A. Jagose, C. Nealon, N. Tan Hoang, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13 (2–3), p. 179, 2007.

2 Ibid.

before-mentioned "queer turn" or, perhaps, to some version of it and, if so, what are the challenges that you face as practitioners or theorists of queer history, especially taking into account the position from which you approach it.

Alison Oram: In the UK, lesbian and gay history developed quite strongly from the 1980s onwards. I was involved at an early stage, teaching, as far as I know, the first lesbian history course in the mid-1980s. We called it "lesbian and gay" history then and it was a kind of recovery history. Recovery history is sometimes seen pejoratively by queer theorists, as simply looking for people like us in the past – which we were doing, but we were already using more exploratory definitions and theories of how and where to look for same-sex desires, and we had an awareness that we were using anachronistic categories.

In the UK, the queer turn in history came in the early 2000s, and it meant that historians drew back from the idea of stable sexual and gender identities. This often meant emphasising the difference of the past, even the recent past, from the present day: its unknowability, as well as its familiarity. Colleagues including Laura Doan, Matt Houlbrook, and Brian Lewis have written on UK history from a queer history perspective: and indeed, I would place my own work on women's cross-dressing as part of that queer turn.

There is also a more practical meaning of queer history that I use, as does my co-author Matt Cook[3]: that using "queer" as an umbrella term serves to include a range of different identities and is also a sign of inclusivity and diversity in terms of genders and racialised and class contexts when we are looking at the past. I think "queer" in "queer history" has been accepted even in public history, and we certainly got Historic England to accept the term back in 2015.

My heritage turn came from a desire for a more material past, beyond the archives. Like many lesbians and gay men, I was frustrated that all this queer history that had been published for thirty or forty years was not being represented in public-facing heritage sites. I wanted to use a different quote from Carolyn Dinshaw about queer history, which is "the touch across time".[4] For me, that is redolent of the materiality and physicality of the past and of our interest in the politics of representation. It speaks to how we look at and theorise the ways in which histories are encapsulated in historic sites and the challenges that we, from queer history, are posing to that mainstream.

When Justin Bengry and I were hosting "Pride of Place"[5] roadshows, I would talk about feeling the queer past in the streets on which we walked and emanating from the buildings; that sense of having the queer past all around us. That queer

3 M. Cook, A. Oram, *Queer Beyond London*, Manchester, 2022.

4 C. Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern*, Durham, 1999.

5 "Pride of Place: England's LGBTQ Heritage" was a project developed by Historic England (the government agency for the historic environment) and run in partnership with Leeds Beckett University which was concerned with identification, documentation of LGBTQ+ histories and heritage in relation to England's buildings and landscapes. One of its aims was also to increase awareness of the significance of LGBTQ+ heritage.

histories have been embedded everywhere in our material surroundings and over many centuries, not just in our heads and on our screens.

Finally, the challenges – there are many, but as a historian, for me, it is about the parts of queer history that are difficult to reach, the bits in-between heteronormativity and queer experience. For example, even if we are only going back as far as the 1950s and 1960s, how do we find the kinds of queernesses that were tolerated in, for example, amateur dramatic societies? We assume that they were somewhat queer, and it is a bit of a stereotype, but how do we get to that as historians? Or how do we interpret two women who lived together in the further-back past? Those methodological debates have been going on for some time and will not easily be resolved, but how do we look for evidence about the non-heteronormative? One of the frustrations of *Queer Beyond London* is that there is a lot of source material about people and their lived identities in the fairly recent past, but it is that more hidden, indeterminate area of queer history that is harder to get at.

Anita Kurimay: For me, queer history similarly to how Alison discussed it, means locating non-normative gender and sexual behaviours in the past. In thinking about the "queer turn", which I also consider myself a part of, I think it is also constructive to consider the differences and trajectories of queer histories and scholarship in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and queer histories in Western Europe and the U.S.

In my research, queer history means historicising queer discourses and discourses around queers, official and popular attitudes towards queers, as well as queer experiences from the late 19th century onwards.[6] This fits into the recovery aspect, and it is crucial to me that there have been queer and non-normative identities in the past, but we have not really had histories about them in Hungary. I also take this scholarship as a responsibility in the current historical time, which I feel demands that we have these kinds of recovery histories that refute the narratives of nationalists and fascists, who make the argument that queers are a product of liberal democracy and/or that queers were Western imports (Poland and Hungary are a great example).

The other important aspect of queer history is that having recovered these non-normative histories and having reinserted non-normative sexualities and discourse around them into the politico-social and cultural history of Budapest, Hungary, and East-Central Europe, also leads to the idea of queering history. We can challenge the long-established and existing historical mainstream narratives about the political history of Hungary or the relationship of Central-Eastern Europe to Western Europe. In this sense, queer history also means rewriting history through the lens of sexuality and gender.

To make this more tangible, I want to give you two examples that show the approach of both reconstructing and challenging existing narratives through queer history. Having located discourses about queers and non-normative sexualities and historicising their legal and police treatment in early 20th century Budapest (the

6 A. Kurimay, *Queer Budapest, 1873–1961*, Chicago–London, 2020.

new capital of the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), I could establish that Budapest had a growing homosexual subculture whose visibility was subsequently written out of history. By looking at this over time, I could see how this subculture and visibility actually expanded during the inter-war years at the time when Hungary increasingly turned towards a conservative and authoritarian political regime. By placing discourses about queer people alongside those about contemporary state-building and attempts to make Budapest a modern capital, I could make an argument about how queers and the regulation of non-normative sexualities were at the heart of the project of Hungarian modernity and provide a new narrative where queers were actually at the centre of political history, as opposed to on the margins.

Another example that I looked at was the scandal of Cécile Tormay (1875–1937) and Eduardina Pallavicini (1877–1964), two conservative women visionaries of the inter-war era, who were charged with female homosexuality. In recreating the scandal of the trial and looking at both the trial records and contemporary press reports, on the one hand, I could show that it was a serious and full-blown sexual scandal around female homosexuality, but I could also show that ultimately, the trial did not damage these women's reputations or halt their political aspirations. Using this amazing case, I was able to reconstruct inter-war discourses about female homosexuality, which is still a rarity in queer histories, particularly in the East-Central European context and historiography. What is also important is that this scandal is a remarkable example of the co-existence of conservative politics and tolerance of certain forms of queer sexualities in inter-war Hungary. This challenges narratives about conservatism and its intolerance towards queer sexualities.

Valentina Iancu: I feel that I belong to the queer turn because my ambition is to carry out research regarding queer subjectivities in Romania – particularly how they are constructed through the language of visual arts. Aware of my own queer subjectivity, I have been trying to better understand myself by searching for queer heritage – even if I cannot see its manifestations in present-day Romania. When I think of myself as a part of the queer turn, I also need to acknowledge a contradiction: because around me, in Romania, there are very few traces of the queer turn at the moment. Indeed, there is a rise in queer activism and some contemporary artists try to challenge the normative construction of culture but the country's institutions are still very immune to it. Both public and academic history is very conservative and sexuality remains a taboo subject. Literary studies are somehow more advanced in their investigation of queer subjectivities – suffice it to mention the recently published studies by Ramona Dima or Mihai Iovanel. However, in my field of expertise, i.e. art history, I am the first to use queer theory, alongside critical race studies and decolonial critique. Monographs on queer theory or histories are rarely translated into Romanian language, while local researchers and their findings remain invisible in most fields of cultural production. When art historians start addressing sexuality, they stick to a very narrow heteronormative interpretation. There are no researchers trying to queer the existing narratives or create a better understanding of the

past, but from my point of view, this draws attention to alternative modes of the production of knowledge, as well as to various individuals who have started collecting and researching history on their own. For example, the activist Florin Buhuceanu, who is an art collector and archivist and who was involved in the movement for decriminalising homosexuality in the 1990s, has just created with his partner a small museum for the display of his collection to promote research regarding male homosexuality. In Romania, homosexuality was criminalised until 2001 and I think the absence of queer thinking is a direct consequence of this. It makes queer research in Romania very difficult because illegal bodies do not produce artefacts; they do not document themselves and do not express their subjectivity in order to make their sexuality conspicuous. So we face an "absence" of information that could be provided by the community, except for state surveillance.

My desire for queer history started in the context of the 2018 referendum in Romania[7] because I found myself to be the only openly lesbian intellectual in Romania and became quite vocal about the threat posed by the new constitutional bill. Consequently, I started receiving phone calls saying "I am sorry, I am not homosexual, but I will go to the referendum and vote against it". The whole incident provided me with some motivation to stop what I was doing at the time and to start looking into queer histories and queer culture; thus, attempting to produce different narratives in order to challenge the dominant assumptions and beliefs.

Karol Radziszewski: For me, it started when I was growing up in the 1980s, obviously without the Internet and in a small city in the north-east part of Poland. For a long time, I did not meet any queer person, and I constantly heard that this "thing", i.e. homosexuality, was coming to Poland from the corrupt West or from some weird artistic circles. Even when I came out, it was still the same kind of narrative going on. When I started to travel, I heard the same statement again and again – be it in Romania or Bulgaria. When Central European countries were applying to become member states of the European Union, there was this propaganda movement, usually supported by the Church and the conservative politicians, which warned the public that the new Sodom would arise with the country's access to the European Union. So I felt it was my personal challenge to prove that Poland had a queer history and there were queer stories to be told.

In 2005, I organised the exhibition *Pedały* that was later called the first openly gay exhibition in the history of Poland. We had artists who were non-heteronormative in the past, but they never talked openly about their sexuality in or via their work. For me, it was something new and refreshing and when I started my inquiry I quite quickly decided to focus on historical research as well. And that is how I started to work on several projects that were slowly rediscovering the figures from the past, like my series of paintings titled *The Gallery of Portraits* which showcases

7 The 2018 Referendum held on 6–7 October was concerned with the definition of the family in the Romanian Constitution and could result in the prohibition of same-sex marriage. The referendum failed due to insufficient turnout.