

Time, Space, and Queer Grief in Postsocialist Hungary

ABSTRACT

Queer and Affect Theories, and their intersections, have focused attention on the nature and impacts of loss and grief for queer subjectivities and politics, finding them foundational to both individual and collective affiliations and agencies, and dispossessions and disassociations. These explorations have often remained within the limited spatialities and temporalities of an unmarked Western cultural studies. But what happens when queer loss and grief emerge in the fraught dis/identificatory fields of geotemporal sexual politics? What else might we see if we track such material/emotional transformations across the historical arc of event and meaning “*elsewhere*”? Drawing not on Affect Theory but on anthropological approaches to emotions and their politics, on postcolonial work on belonging’s geotemporality, and queer thinking on the politics of disidentification, this paper traces the emotional politics of queer (non)belonging and (non)futurity in postsocialist Hungary, from dreams of imminent geotemporal “normality” in the early 1990s, through growing disillusionment and shame at both national and queer “backwardness” in the early 2000s, to the current despair at the Orbán regime’s relentlessly heteronational politics, in an effort to expand the boundaries of spatiality and temporality, and thus the epistemological and political potential of current understandings of queer grief.

Keywords: Affect, emotion politics, Eastern Europe, postsocialism, queer

At that time [around 1990, at the time of the system change], there was an incredible effervescence. It's really impossible to express [what it felt like], because already at that time everyone not only thought, but knew, that some kind of change would happen. We felt that everything, everything was changing. (Laci, gay activist, 2001)

I'm very angry. Sad, sad is not ... There is a sense of mourning. I grew up, I was a teenager at the time the regime changed. And there was all this sense of hope, of "freedom," and so on. And how does it happen that, thirty years later, we are back in the dark old times, as if we were again in the 1950s, or 1960s? (Dorottya, lesbian activist, 2021)

SHAME, LOSS, GRIEF, and anger are now widely recognized as foundational to queer selves and politics.¹ Drawing upon psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as recent radical turns in philosophy, literary theory, and cultural studies, scholars have seen such affects as central to the formative dynamics of queer selfhood and relationality (Sedgwick 2007; Sedgwick & Frank 1995), the ambiguities, discomforts, and possibilities of dis/identification (Muñoz 1999), and the repressive and resistant potentials of hetero- (and homo-)normative narratives of queer "failure" (Halberstam 2011). Others have argued that the dynamics of shame, grief, and anger critically shaped both the transformative politics of HIV/AIDS and much of subsequent queer politics (Crimp 1989; Gould 2010; Cvetkovich 2003). Indeed, these dynamics and their relationships to personhood and politics have been taken as centrally significant to the meaning and import of queer historicities and futurities – both positive and negative (Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010; Love 2007; Muñoz 2009). Work on the personal and political implications of "affect" has been both provocative and contentious, and immensely productive – particularly with respect to questions of the proper relations between queer theorizing and queer activism, and queer pasts, presents, and futures.

Shame and loss, grief and anger are central to postsocialist being and doing as well. In the decades since the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, scholars of postsocialism have acknowledged that

the region's system changes brought not merely formal political and economic "transitions," but foundational transformations of cognitive-perceptual and experiential worlds, reshaping old and elaborating new forms of distinctly postsocialist Eastern European sensibility and experience (Verdery 1996), and reorienting these in space and time to produce new configurations of personal and political desires, prides and shames, disillusionments and failures, hatreds and angers (Berdahl 1999; Böröcz 2006; Bukowski 2006; Dunn 2004; Eglitis 2002; Fehérváry 2011; Graff 2006; Greenberg 2014; Kalb 2014; Todorova 1997; Wolff 1994).

Perplexingly, however, these two domains of affective inquiry, queer and postsocialist, have rarely come together analytically. This is all the more surprising in the case of postsocialist Hungary, since its initially smooth and successful shift to capitalism and multi-party democracy, and later decline, and its spectacularly stark trajectory of sexual politics make it eminently rich terrain for exploring the deep entanglements of queerness and intense emotional reaction, and for consideration of their consequences for questions of both postsocialist and queer selves and politics more broadly.² This is perhaps especially true in relation to the politics of grief.

Hope, dreams, and queer activist peers

Laci and Gábor rode the crest of a wave of late-socialist-era queer activism in Hungary. They met in the gym room of the Rácz thermal baths, where in the early and mid-1980s many gay men congregated, and soon became lovers. Gábor, a journalist, was older; Laci had left the engineering job he hated for the relative freedom of delivering newspapers. Active in the mostly gay men's social web that sprawled across Budapest's public baths, parks, cruising zones, and private house parties, in 1987 they helped found the country's first openly queer organization, the Homéros Lambda National Association of Hungarian Homosexuals [Magyar Homoszexuálisok "Homéros Lambda" Országos Egyesülete]. Years later, talking to me in the early 2000s in their comfortable flat on the Danube bank, Laci remembered the group's emergence as emotion-

ally thrilling, transformative: “There was so much interest in this, and you could feel such a buzz. And this lasted for about a year after the founding, and the whole thing just inspired everyone so much, that they said, ‘*Hú*, we have to do things here!’” For the two young men, and many others involved, these feelings came from the social and political power of the group’s publicness in a world where, despite Hungary’s reputation as “the most comfortable barracks in the Soviet camp,” queerness had remained largely subterranean: haunted by invisibility, by association with disease and criminality, or with the “Decadent West”; outside the proper space and time of Socialism. Both the lasting sadness and shame of past queer exclusion, and the thrill of a suddenly newly possible future, lay beneath Gábor’s words as he told me,

In these times [the socialist era] the press never talked about gays. It simply wasn’t a topic that existed. And you never heard the word *meleg* [“gay” in Hungarian]. In the best case only the word “homosexual” was used to refer to gays, and then only in connection with criminal matters. So this was such an astounding, completely novel thing, that they would speak about us on the radio [and on TV] in such a positive context, that it really seemed like a revolutionary change.

Primarily meant as a social organization rather than one pursuing an overtly political agenda, Homéros’s publicness made it at once political and emotional. Indeed, its very name breathed both: its referencing of the Greek poet Homer and the Greek letter lambda simultaneously invoking nostalgia for a universal queer past and a yearning to join in its reclaiming by Western queers. The moment’s emotional force was thus double, reflecting not only the possibilities for new openness and sociality for Hungarian queer people, and their felt belonging to transnational queer history, but also the sense that they were vital parts of more local historical transformation: the first organization registered under a new, late-Socialist law allowing for the first time the formation of civil groups outside the state, Homéros was actually a crucial pivot of postsocialist change.³ As Laci explained:

Today it's hard to imagine the atmosphere in '88. This was really right before the system change and already everyone was paying such attention to anything political: What sort of effect would it have, and how would the authorities react? And what was it possible to do? Everyone was paying incredible attention, so much so that afterwards everyone from the ground up was concerned with it. It was a lucky coincidence that this all [the founding and registration of Homéros] happened to occur just at the moment of system change. But just because of this it was incredibly important: the whole intelligentsia took it as a kind of thermometer. It was a litmus test: it was an example of the creation of civil society.

Thus, for Laci and Gábor and the other new queer activists of a soon-to-be-postsocialist Hungary, this moment was affectively overwhelming in two senses: the excitement and hope of both new Hungarian possibility – a return to a normal world, in so many senses – and the new possibility that queer people might have a central place in this world, might truly belong.

Within two years Homéros would founder on the rocks of personality conflicts and cease functioning.⁴ Yet their sense of hope and revolutionary possibility kept queer activists moving. Still amid the heady flow of societal change – “Every day something new was happening,” Laci remembered, “everyone felt that something big was going to happen. It's critical to know this because it was at this time that we began to do everything.” – Laci, Gábor, and several other former Homéros members decided that what the queer community really needed was “a magazine, a journal” that could report all the new things happening in queer life in Hungary and elsewhere, and so both pull Hungarian queer people together and reorient them to the wider queer world. Calling it *Mások* [Others], they launched publication with a classic queer clarion call: when Laci told me, with characteristic understatement, “The first issue, that was hardly anything,” Gábor riposted, “Nothing – except that we exist!” Besides sharing their feelings of new queer possibilities, they also wanted to push the new political system to acknowledge

queer people. Laci recalled, “We felt that everything – everything – was changing. And it was in the middle of all this that we asked all the new parties to tell us what they would do about gay issues if they came to power. Would they address them, or not? What would they do about them?” *Mások*, they felt, would keep queer people and politics, as well as Laci and Gábor themselves, at the center of postsocialist transformation. And it did. For many years, the couple’s intense, energetic presence – Laci smiling and voluble, Gábor serious and quiet – was at the forefront of every queer community event, whether public or private. Throughout my research, almost everyone told me how important reading (and sometimes just seeing, available in public) *Mások* was for forming both their feelings of, and practical connection to, the Hungarian queer community.⁵

Hungarian postsocialism’s queer history

The situation of postsocialist Hungary’s queer people and politics started out well – considerably better than in most other such countries. As noted, Homéros, the first publicly visible, registered gay organization, emerged before the end of socialism. Budapest’s first lesbian and gay film festival was held in 1993; its first Pride march – the region’s first – in 1997. By the early 1990s, a small group of NGOs and the region’s first gay magazine (*Mások*) joined these early successes, and Budapest boasted a vibrant queer bar and club scene, as well as a thermal bath scene renowned across Europe.⁶ While legal recognition lagged behind cultural life, unlike their postsocialist and post-Soviet neighbors (and, indeed, many Western countries), Hungarian queers from a surprisingly early date possessed some form of legal relationship status: the country’s 1996 common law legislation included same-sex partners (Long 1999). And although same-sex marriage was, and remains, illegal, and joint adoption by same-sex couples forbidden, registered partnership was legally recognized in 2009, and until recently queer individuals could adopt and couples raise children together. Indeed, the 2000s saw a rich trend in queer parenthood and families (Béres-Déak 2021). The sense of distinction from other postsocialist countries, and closeness to imag-

ined Western queer life, that these developments stimulated inspired in many queer Hungarians not only pride but hope for new queer possibilities and futurities.

More fundamentally, however, the situation was less cheering. Heteronormative nationalism (“heteronationalism”), central to Socialism’s collapse, has been increasingly visible since. As in other postsocialist countries, in Hungary the post-1989 world was in many respects built upon renewed mythologization of the “traditional Nation,” including its imagined “natural,” “authentic” gender and sexual roles and attitudes (Gal 1994; Huseby-Darvas 1996; Kürti 1991). These attitudes strengthened in the late 1990s, when open nationalism began to pervade the cultural-political mainstream, driven by growing disillusionment with system change. A key turn in this process was the rightward shift of Viktor Orbán’s once-liberal Fidesz party, marked by the overtly heteronational rhetoric and goals of its 1999 “Family Policy.” Another was Hungary’s 2004 EU entry, which drastically increased inequality and social tension. Exacerbated by the right-wing’s growing readiness to express violence in public spaces following a political scandal over center-left governance in 2006, these shifts occasioned dramatic consequences for Hungary’s queers, including mass violent attacks on Budapest Pride in 2007 and 2008 (Renkin 2009). Since Orbán and Fidesz’s 2010 return to power with a parliamentary supermajority, Hungary’s anti-queer turn has intensified. Increasingly central to the government’s expanding national project has been its vision of “traditional” gender and sexuality as key markers of national resistance – both to the imagined gender engineering of the socialist past and the too-modern perversity of what founding Fidesz member and then-president of the Hungarian Parliament László Kövér called, at the Fidesz party annual national congress in 2015, the West’s “gender madness.” This heteronational vision, then, is framed against a range of spatial and temporal Others. Fidesz’s 2012 rewriting of the Constitution not only redefined marriage as a strictly heterosexual institution – “the conjugal union of a man and a woman” – but (re)defined the family as based on the marriage of one man and one woman and “the basis for survival of the nation.”⁷ The Fidesz govern-

ment has elaborated a regime of pronatalist state policies symbolically and financially rewarding heterosexual reproduction, and Orbán has denounced and severely restricted foreign funding of feminist, queer, and human rights organizations, imposed a model of sex education privileging strict, biological gender distinctions and heterosexual reproduction (thus erasing non-normative people and practices; see Rédai 2019), and denounced queers as shameful “aberrations” and “deviants” whose existence threatens children and thus “undermines the Hungarian Nation” and its future.⁸

It should thus come as no surprise that queer life in postsocialist Hungary has been characterized by powerful affective reactions and profoundly emotional questions of being, belonging, and possibility, as queer Hungarians increasingly confront what Paul Boyce, among others, has argued may be a critical grounding experience of queerness: the impossibility of being recognized as a legitimate orientation toward the world (2015; see also 2019) – yet do so in ways that, while similar in certain respects, nonetheless involve emotional-political dynamics distinct from those of Western queers. This fraught ontological and political dilemma raises crucial questions for thinking about the affective tensions that define and trouble queerness. It presses us to consider how we understand the sources and nature of powerful emotions, and their potentials for queerness’s diverse personal and political possibilities – as well as the import of their groundings and ungroundings, their multiple and cross-cutting rootings and rootlessnesses. What happens if we shift the typical ground of queer thinking – its usual people, places, times – about emotions such as grief? What might this tell us about the shared and divergent pleasures and pains of queer belongings, solidarities, and tensions; the frissons and frictions – pleasurable and painful, productive and destructive, global and local – between diverse queer pasts, presents, and futures, personal and political im/possibilities? What might we see, for example, if we track such material and emotional transformations across the specific arcs of event and meaning, and charged dis/identificatory fields, of a much neglected yet profoundly queer site: the West’s returned and repressed internal “Elsewhere” (Böröcz 2006; Todorova 1997; Wolff 1994)?

In this paper I draw on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, and discursive analysis, conducted with Hungarian queer activists from 1999 to the present, in order to trace a rough trajectory linking three key emotional-political moments tra(ns)versing postsocialist Hungary's history: from optimistic dreams of imminent sexual-political "normality," as early queer activists imagined a transformational movement amid the drama of 1989's *rendszerváltás* [system change], to their growing sense of disillusionment and loss at the new millennium's rightward turn, to the current grief, despair, and hope in the face of the Orbán regime's relentlessly homophobic, heteronational politics. Doing so, I believe, can reveal much about both the course of Hungarian sexual politics and queer movements, and the more fundamental intersections between queerness, emotions, and politics. It can thus help us perceive more clearly what is gained, and what is lost, by queer people's and queer politics' commitment to "keeping the past alive in the present [...] even as that which has been lost" (Ahmed 2014, 159; see introduction in this issue), and to consider more fully the significance of asking: "Whose loss? Where?" and "Whose present and past – and future?"

Anthropologizing queer affect I

Queer and Affect Theories' attention to the import of emotions for queer subjectivities and queer politics has been enormously generative and influential, identifying affects such as grief, loss, fear, shame, and anger as crucial to individual and collective forms of affiliation and agency, dispossession and disassociation. These approaches, however, have also been troubled and contentious – particularly for anthropology. While striving to distinguish them, they have often left the relationships between "affect" and "emotion," and between individual and social feelings, unclear (Lutz 2017). Often rooted in philosophy, literary studies, and psychology/psychoanalysis rather than in social theory, their arguments about affect's causes and consequences at times conflate individual/psychic and social/political emotions (Sedgwick 2007; Sedgwick & Frank 1995), read society and social process simplistically

as “the individual writ large” (Berlant 2011; Gould 2010); or, in proposing affect’s biological roots, brush close to essentialism (Sedgwick & Frank 1995; Gould 2010). For one critic, the resulting “disconnect between ‘ideology’ and affect produces as one of its consequences a relative indifference to the role of ideas and beliefs in politics, culture, and art in favor of an ‘ontological’ concern with different people’s corporeal-affective reactions” (Leys 2011, 451). These approaches thus raise troubling questions about how we understand relations between scale and causality.⁹ Naturalizing, they also threaten to universalize affect’s meanings and effects, rendering them timeless and ahistorical. Moreover, the fact that such theorizing has largely emerged from, and remains within, the specific spatialities and temporalities of cultural and queer studies’ unmarked historical home in the West further privileges a restrictive set of affects and affective interconnections (such as shame and pride, and certain moments, conditions, or processes linking them) as most salient to queer subjectivities and politics (Leys 2011; Lutz 2018; Martin 2013). Affect/emotion and its politics and histories, including grief, are thus approached in very particular ways, risking the erasure of not only of other places and times, but other emotional-political constellations and trajectories both “Elsewhere” and in the “West” itself.

Contrastingly, while attentive to the distinctive social and political conditions of the West’s “internal Other” that surround them – and to the postcolonial and neocolonial politics that render that Othering powerfully and simultaneously spatial and temporal (Fabian 1983; Böröcz 2006; Bukowski 2006; Wolff 1984; Todorova 1997) – most work on postsocialist emotion-politics has taken emotions themselves for granted, leaving them, and their relation to politics, undertheorized. Some of this scholarship risks reifying postsocialist reactions to neoliberal capitalist transformation as regional essences (Thelen 2011) or relies on traditional understandings of certain emotional relationships, such as that between class alienation and anger, as linear and inevitable (Kalb 2014). Other approaches explain the hate and anger driving the region’s much-noted “anti-gender” movements through poorly theorized concepts like “gender as symbolic glue” (Grzebalska, Kováts & Petö 2017),

or read anti-queer sentiments as mere symptoms of “more real” post-socialist antipathies (Graff 2006; Kalb 2014). Such perspectives on the one hand grant too much significance to overly limited notions of emotion, and on the other, render them mere epiphenomena of other, more significant structures and forces.

Loss, grief, and two queer activists’ years

By the time I met Laci and Gábor at the end of the 1990s, their early hopes for a Hungarian future at once queerer and more geotemporally “normal” were beginning to turn to a sense of loss and grief, as queer people and politics were increasingly not only written out, but crucially *felt against* both the new realities of postsocialist queer life and heteronationalist sentiment’s rising tide. In addition to Orbán and Fidesz’s increasing rightward shift, the years around 2000 saw the emergence of the openly anti-queer, heteronational Jobbik party [*Jobbik Magyarorszá- gért Mozgalom*].¹⁰ The early positive attention accorded the queer movement was succeeded by several highly visible panics over imagined queer threats to children and heteronational futurity (Rédai 2020; Solymár 2002). Not only had Homéros collapsed, but a new effort to form a queer umbrella organization, the Rainbow Association for Gay Rights [*Szivárvány Társulás a Melegek Jogaiért*], had also failed.¹¹ With this, Hungary’s queer movement shattered into several smaller, more narrowly focused groups and NGOs. Both the rightward trend and the movement’s splintering left many of those who had seen so much queer possibility a mere ten years before with feelings of tremendous loss and bitterness. In contrast to his and Laci’s excited memories of early queer possibilities (see epigraph), Gábor now emphasized disappointed hopes and a renewed sense of sexual-political shame:

At the beginning it was like that. They really paid attention [to queer people]; there was such a revolutionary mood. And after that there was an immediate decline. That’s my feeling. You could say a lot about this. But I really believe that we’re headed back towards a conspiracy of silence.

Laci, too, expressed a distinctly sexual-political, and geotemporal, grief and bitterness at the actually-existing postsocialist world, so far from his early dream of a queer Hungarian future:

Democracy... well, for anyone who lived their life in a one-party system, the mere fact that there are more parties is already the pinnacle of democracy – what do they care about a [human rights] ombudsman, or [whether gay people have rights]? This is democracy, done; it's enough.

Yet their grief and loss also referenced a rapidly vanishing queer world of shared practices and intimate solidarities – the world from which these activists' senses of queer identity, as well as their dreams for queer and Hungarian possible futures, had emerged. By the early 2000s, Laci and Gábor were painfully aware of how younger queers, awash in a sea of newer, more global possibilities for queer being and doing, were drifting irrevocably away from the knowledges and practices of a shared queer past, and thus the possibility of a shared queer future. Rather than bringing queer sociality and politics to the center of Hungarian life, postsocialism had torn queer people, and what had made their queerness, apart. As Laci lamented, "There's a special kind of solidarity under oppression, and now that's gone." The result of the intimately linked places and practices so crucial to socialist queer life, and the connections of otherness they enabled, that solidarity was now, like the places and practices themselves, increasingly neglected and forgotten. Reminiscing lovingly about Budapest's thermal bath scene, Laci emphasized how it had altered in the face of postsocialism's new, queer values:

Years ago, when I used to go [to the baths] a lot, and there weren't the bars or anything else, people would go in, sit there, and just sit around and talk, sometimes for hours. And you know, a kind of social life went on there. Just while everybody was sitting in the water. People would say hello, szia [Hungarian for a casual "hi"], and hang out with all their friends, and do whatever they wanted; it was like being in a club. They've all changed now. Now it's all about sex. Everything.

Gábor agreed that the same was true of other once-foundational queer sites:

In the old days, those were the only places you could go. If you wanted to find someone, or meet someone, you had to go to a park, or the baths, or a public toilet, or a train station – train stations were especially good for meeting people. Young people today meet on the internet, and organize their parties there, or just hang out there. It's public, but you can leave any time. They don't know these cruising spots. For some of them, it's almost as if they don't know their own cities. We always had the feeling, when we met with these younger gays, that you simply couldn't get any further. Because they didn't know anything.

Saddest for both, however, was that this loss of shared knowledge and practice had resulted in a profound disconnection between younger and older queers: in the disorienting impossibility of feeling, and thus being, queer together across different queer times and spaces. Laci, as usual, put the grief of this dilemma – mirroring so ironically both heteronormativity's and postsocialism's dehumanizing narratives – with bleak elegiac grace:

Even back then we loved one another. Gay people lived and loved and were happy and knew one another and came together. It wasn't as if some different species lived here; gays then were just the same as they are now; they loved one another the same way. Do they [young gays today] think that twenty years ago there were monkeys running around here, or something like that?

Faced with such divides, exacerbated by the triple blow of increasing legal restriction of sexually explicit images, competition from ubiquitous online queer content, and Hungary's declining post-2004 economy, by the end of 2008 *Mások* was forced to cease publication, and Laci and Gábor slowly withdrew from the forefront of queer Hungarian activism.

Anthropologizing queer affect II

Luckily, the rich tradition of social, feminist, and anthropological investigation of emotion and its politics can help us transverse the borders of queer theoretical analysis. Such work strives to grasp “the meaning of human social practices as inextricable from their social context and from their subjectivity” (Martin 2018, 150), and so untangle “the work that emotion and emotions do as forms of sociality and embodied experience” (Lutz 2017, 188). Harkening back to Durkheim’s (1895) groundbreaking theorizing of collective sentiments as preeminently social, yet also profoundly personal and practical, at the center of these intersecting approaches is the effort to see emotions/affects not as “things in themselves” but rather, in Ann Stoler’s words, as “not metaphors for something else but instrumental as ‘dense transfer points of power’ in themselves” (2005, 7).

One of anthropology’s classic engagements with emotion, Renato Rosaldo’s 1984 “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage,” demonstrates how emotions such as grief can be vastly powerful – not in and of themselves, but as conductors for, and connectors to, other emotions, thus constituting new configurations of feeling. They also serve as hinges – dense transfer points – for relations of power between people, emerging from and also producing new constellations of desires, community, and politics. Striving to comprehend both his own unexpected constellation of emotions at the sudden death of fellow anthropologist and wife Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, and the emotional complexity of Ilongot men’s reactions to death, headhunting, and the end of headhunting, Rosaldo compares grief’s diverse meanings, entanglements, and effects. Emotions like grief, he argues, are fundamentally relational, taking form and meaning through connection to other emotions: anger and shame, loss and disorientation. Indeed, only in and through such interconnections do emotions exist, and so shape and reshape, veil and reveal, complex webs of social and political (dis)connection. Critically, for Rosaldo, neither feelings nor their entanglements are universal or stable: they emerge in relation to specific cultural structures and histories, and to their relationships – hierarchies of age, masculinity, and

social power mediated by Ilongot precolonial headhunting; colonial constrictions of these, Ilongot resistance to them, and postcolonial reconfigurations of both; Ilongot mens' grief for meanings, practices, relations, and identities once everything, now forever lost. They are also profoundly ontological: existing – and perceptible – as deeply, bodily felt relationships. Indeed, it is only Rosaldo's own complexly embedded and embodied experience of grief and rage that allows him to at last grasp the same kind of rooted complexity in Ilongot men's emotions – and vice versa. These are at once social and individual, personal and political – in (social) fact, they weld these “things” together even as they make them seem, feel, separate. It is precisely for this reason, Rosaldo insists, that these feelings' specific temporal and spatial contexts, specific and concrete histories and relationships, and particular embodied, ontological impacts – their affect-effects – must be traced and mapped if we are to understand their distinct mingled emotional-political meanings and consequences: in his own case mingling grief at the loss of his wife and anger at what feels like her abandonment of him working together to drive his fused ethnographic/personal analysis; for Ilongot men grieve at the lost meanings, powers, and solidarities of their now-outlawed systems – at once emotional and political, social and personal – of war, head-hunting, and manhood and anger at the colonial structures responsible blending together in tears of rage, mingled despair, and resentment at their current disempowerment.

Some postcolonial perspectives on postsocialism, too, have explored its complex emotional matrices with great sensitivity, highlighting its deep – and profoundly geotemporal – relationality. Documenting postsocialism's production of new sensibilities, they have noted the foundational grief and shame of Europe's constitutive internal Other: always already dis-located and dis-oriented, the place and people in and for which “Goodness,” democracy, and citizenship are inevitably “Elsewhere” (Böröcz 2006; Bukowski 2006; Wolff 1994; Todorova 1997, 2018). They have traced yearnings – mingling past loss and future hope – for postsocialist “returns” to the spatial and temporal “normality” of “Europe,” “Europeanness,” and modern history (Eglitis 2002),

and to the economic “normalities” of Western lifestyle (Fehérvári 2011); revealed the pain and shame of re- (and de-)valued social sensibilities positioning Polish workers as “failures” – backward Eastern Others – of proper Western, capitalist citizenship (Bukowski 2006; Dunn 2004); excavated the profoundly ambivalent feelings of former East Germans caught not merely on political but also on deeply fraught emotional borders between East and West, past and future – between nostalgic pride, mingled grief and shame over personal, social, economic, and political lives now erased, and pride and hope for newly possible future lives (Berdahl 1999, 2009) – and uncovered disillusionment, anger, and nationalist hatreds in the face of rapidly changing economic and social orders (Graff 2006; Greenberg 2014; Kalb 2014; Svašek 2006).

All these perspectives ground and temporalize both emotions and their mingling, co-constituting personal and political significances across a range of scales and borders. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, they have consistently failed to engage with sexuality – let alone queerness – and its potential for understanding not only emotions and their politics but also the larger concerns of both anthropology and post-socialism. Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed’s work, however, resonating with Rosaldo’s stance yet re-orienting it, offers us suggestions for pulling these diverse perspectives together to address this affective absence and rethink the queer politicality of emotions.

Ahmed proposes that we approach emotions like fear, hate, and grief, and their effects, political and other, through the very Durkheimian position that it is not “that there is a psychic economy of fear that then becomes social and collective: rather, the individual subject comes into being through its very alignment with the collective” (2004, 128). Against queer Affect Theory’s anti-social perspectives, then, here affect “is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (2004, 120). Instead of being a fixed center, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space” (2004, 119). Ahmed’s emphasis on circulations, doings, and alignments means that emotions have specific histories: “the movement between signs does not have its origin in the psyche, but is a trace of how histories remain alive

in the present” (2004, 126). Indeed, it is these dynamic, relational histories, rather than emotional essences, which both “surface” and “bind” subjects together (2004, 117–118).

Critically, Ahmed draws attention to “the affective potential of queer” (2014, 146) and the particular significance of emotions to sexual identity and politics, noting that “heterosexuality functions powerfully not only as a series of norms and ideals, but also through emotions that shape bodies as well as worlds” (2014, 146). Emotions thus become the mingled terrain and tools on and with which both sexual and political (im)possibilities are founded. Grief especially, has a key, if Janus-faced, role in queer life and politics. Drawing on Judith Butler, Ahmed agrees that “grief supports, or even forms, the heterosexuality of the normative subject” (2014, 155). Yet grief also offers queer people alternatives to (hetero)normative emotional relations, in which “Queer feelings may embrace a sense of discomfort, a lack of ease with the available scripts for living and loving, along with an excitement in the face of the uncertainty of where the discomfort may take us” (2014, 155). Critically, this excitement can be shared. Thus, for Ahmed, the question for queer thinking becomes not simply “How do emotions work,” but “How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others?” (2004, 1), and “The challenge for queer politics becomes finding a different way of grieving, and responding to the grief of others” (2014, 159).

Weaving these anthropological and postcolonial perspectives together helps us move beyond rigid mystifications and restricted localizations, and grasp how queer emotions are not “things” that escape or freely traverse time and space, places and histories, and relations, but rather profoundly relational, connective and disconnective in and of them. Interwoven with and through specific moments and patterns of sociality and politics, individual and collective embodiments, emotions nonetheless act – queerly – to transverse these, and thus tangle (and divide) them, and us, inextricably together (and apart) across a range of scales: personal and political, spatial and temporal. Ironically, in doing so they, and their analysis, allow us to make history at once more ethnographically and anthropologically “solid” – tangible, material, empirical,

and real – and more “queer” – fleshly palpable; tangibly yet intangibly persistent beneath, across, and beyond its (and our) apparent surfaces; in/visible (and, as we shall see, in/divisible) in and across past, present, and future (see also Renkin 2024). They can also, thus, help us to meld together disciplines and analytical terrains – Anthropology and Queer Studies, queer and postsocialist being and politics, East and West – which have often seemed (and frequently functioned as) both divergent fields of emotion-thinking and distant sites of emotional-political experience, despite feeling so right for each other – and so, in George Eliot’s wonderful and prescient words, to more effectively “conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects.”¹²

Tales of grief, wonder, and hope

Fast forward roughly a dozen years. Hungary’s heteronationalist politics has intensified, with the last few years bringing new laws preventing same-sex parents from having children and forbidding trans and intersex people gender identities inconsistent with biological sex registered at birth. Along with the broader authoritarian trend, these events have crystallized many queer people’s sense of the erasure of hopes for a country whose past they could share, whose present they could participate in, and whose future they could contribute to. Grieving collapsing possibilities, full of rage and loss, many queer people left Hungary for possibilities elsewhere. As Márta, a long-time Hungarian lesbian activist in her thirties, put it, frustration taut in her voice as she told me she was leaving the country in search of deeper knowledge of gender and sexuality, “Now there is nowhere in Hungary for me to go to learn these possibilities!”

Yet these same feelings of the deepening erasure of queer possibilities, of belongings past, present, and future, have also resulted in fusions of grief and anger that – as in Rosaldo’s account – have been politically productive, pushing activists to rethink and refeel relationships between present and past, thus stimulating renewed hope and struggle. One notable consequence has been the 2020 publication by the Labrisz Lesbian

Association [*Labrisz Leszbikus Egyesület*] of *Wonderland Is for Everyone* [*Meseország Mindenkié*], a book of inclusive, non-normative fairy tales for children. Reworking traditional Hungarian fairy tales with non-traditional “heroes”: a young girl who becomes a giant-slayer, a deer who cannot grow his own antlers but finds others, a three-eared rabbit who discovers that he is the forest’s perfect protector, and a prince who finds happiness with another prince, the narratives recognize “the diversity of the world.” Offering “stories that show as possible and lovable figures or paths different from the traditional,” the book envisions a society in which “although we are not the same and walk different paths, when we arrive, the gate stands open for all of us.”¹³ As for Laci and Gábor years before, this political project was fundamentally emotional: for Dorottya Rédei, the book’s project coordinator, a gender studies scholar and core Labrisz member, directly “related to the fact that the system is becoming less democratic and wants to control more and more,” and the impact of this on queer people, youth, and others. As Dorottya explained, “The basic idea was to make a storybook because, on the one hand, the social mood is getting worse, people are becoming more intolerant, hatred is increasing, and this is affecting children at an early age.”¹⁴ The book thus challenges not only Orbán and Fidesz’s post-2010 heteronationalist politics, but postsocialist Hungary’s entire emotional-political trajectory, and the anti-queer, sexist, ableist, and racist boundaries through which it renders both pasts and futures im/possible.

The emotional-political power of this queer repudiation of post-socialist heteronational (im)possibility was abundantly clear in the right-wing’s violent response. Dóra Dúró of the far-right Our Country [*Mi Hazánk*] party – notorious for her public performances of young, national motherhood – quickly held a press conference at which she physically destroyed a copy of *Wonderland Is for Everyone*, demonstrating that, in her party’s view it – and Hungary – was most definitely not. Angrily accusing Labrisz of “smuggling an abnormal way of life into storybooks,” she insisted that, whatever might happen elsewhere, “homosexual princes are not part of Hungarian culture,” and that this kind of “Homosexual propaganda attacks both the healthy development

of children and Hungarian culture.” Rather than such “aberrations,” Dúró proclaimed, “the future of the nation must be built on Hungarian [i.e., “normal”] families.” Viktor Orbán responded publicly, underscoring Hungarian heteronationalism’s normative discipline, warning that while Hungarians treat the “phenomenon” of homosexuality “with patience and tolerance,” “There is a red line that cannot be crossed: leave our children alone!” The heteronationalist response to *Wonderland*, however, went beyond threatening rhetoric and melodramatic performative spectacle: Orbán and Fidesz quickly passed another piece of anti-queer, anti-democratic legislation (modeled on Russia’s notorious 2013 anti-“gay propaganda” law) banning all media depiction of homosexuality or transgender people.

For Dorottya and the *Wonderland* activists, such anti-queer rhetoric and restrictions (and their inspiration) powerfully underscored Hungarian heteronationalism’s geotemporal brutalities – its anti-Western drift, its foreclosure of queer historicity and futurity – and provoked powerful emotions. Yet, critically, what Dorottya characterized as “the horrific abuse of power, hostility, exclusion, discrimination that really drives politics and that the whole society feels” produced not grief resulting in disengagement, but grief inspiring anger, grounded in the restorative mourning of lost pasts (see epigraph), and driving them to greater action, engagement, and connection. Awakening old, and forging new, networks with international media, queer, and human rights activists, they built on outside awareness of Hungary’s anti-queer, authoritarian atmosphere to mobilize support, thus aligning themselves more strongly with global circuits of both liberal and pro-queer outrage. Combined with local support, this has meant that despite efforts to remove the book from bookstores (and to not only require it be labeled as containing “behavior inconsistent with traditional gender roles” but also to have it displayed only in opaque wrappers), the book has become a runaway bestseller, with multiple printings and translations into multiple languages.¹⁵ Perhaps more importantly, these connections, emotional yet deeply practical and political, have also helped to turn grief and loss, and their co-circulating links to anger, into other, more hopeful

emotional and practical political connections. Márta's frustration with the spiritual dilemmas facing queer people in Hungary, for example, led her to pursue a degree in religious studies outside Hungary, in hopes of finding better ways of thinking about and feeling amidst the (dis)connections between queerness and a religiosity so often national and conservative in today's Hungary. Full of new knowledge, newly hopeful, she now plans to return to Hungary. And when we spoke in the fall of 2021, Dorottya had just told me that, in the wake of the whole *Wonderland* scandal, "Personally, I just feel totally burnt out. I mean, the past two years was just too much. So I will try to do a little less now." But then she perked up:

Yesterday, you know what happened? I woke up, checked my email, and this all-out petition came saying that they are preparing a [similar, anti-queer] propaganda law in Poland. And if they pass it, it will happen at exactly the same time as *Wonderland* is coming out in Polish – what a "coincidence".... And I, I was crying. I was thinking of those poor Polish activists, and all the shit they will also have to go through, and how terribly exhausting it all is. But then I sent them a message, asking them if they want some international media [contacts], because now I'm so "influential." [She laughed, then became serious.] I want to use this power.

Conclusion: grief, hope, and a queer activist's tears

Each drop of blood and each teardrop matters.

– Sándor Bertalan, memorial for Károly Kertbeny, Budapest, 2002.¹⁶

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed argues that "To grieve for others is to keep their impressions alive in the midst of their death," and that this is a profoundly ethical act (2014, 160). Yet Ahmed's account of "the psychic and social costs of unrecognised loss" (2014, 159) and its ethical potential for queers revolves around what has become a hegemonic stage for queer thinking about sexuality and affect/emotion: the self- and Western-centric questions of what it means to "lose another"

(2014, 160) in relation to AIDS/death, love, and the events of 9/11. Yet many other things besides queer lives can be lost: one can grieve for a politics, a revolution lost, worlds of possibility denied. How, then, do we understand queer grief, and what happens with and because of it, when it is not a life or a loved one that is lost, but a dream of personal, social, economic, and political transformation and possibility? The emotional-political dreams explored here are different from those queer people in the West face, with critical ramifications for not just queer selfhood and belonging, but for queer communities and activism. While central tenets of heteronormativity and heterosexism, and the pressures and affective responses positive and negative they involve for queer community and politicality, are shared with Western queers, others remain distinct queer experience: Hungarian queers' sense of socialism's specific silences and alienations, their experiences of fundamental social and political transformation following its collapse, their awarenesses of completely new worlds of queer possibility, and their reactions to that world's subsequent collapse and foreclosure in the face of both resurgent heteronationalism and reemerging Western neo-Orientalism.¹⁷ How do we read grief's import when it is experienced not only across the sexualized boundaries of emotional and political, individual and collective, past and present, but also across the contrasting im/possibilities of East and West? As anthropologists like Rosaldo show us, like postsocialism and queerness themselves, emotions are born in and suffused with the tensions of history and culture; the particular forms they take are inevitably shaped by them. It is therefore no surprise that the politics of such emotions are as well. To understand the whys and hows of emotional politics, then, we cannot essentialize, generalize, or individualize them, but must trace their fine and cross-grained past, present, and future socialities empirically as well as theoretically.

Such perspectives also reveal that emotions and their effects are profoundly transversal – moving and being moved, connecting and disconnecting, orienting and reorienting across borders individual and collective, social and political, spatial and temporal. Indeed, emotions such as grief, loss, shame, and anger become personally, socially, and

politically consequential precisely because they traverse categorical boundaries; it is such traversal that makes these categories not separate but mutually constitutive. In her 2009 book *Feeling Backward*, historian Heather Love suggests that queer grief and loss, ever renewed in the enduring struggle with heteronormativity, constitute a particular, specifically queer relationship to both past history and to the futurity that that history, struggled against, struggled with, makes im/possible. If so, it is perhaps queerness, and seeing (and perhaps feeling) “queerly,” that allows us to see – and, as for Rosaldo, to finally understand – clearly the critical and constitutive presence of these transverse traversals: the shifting and cross-laid webs of identity and politics; the interwoven textures of being and doing, or *not* being and *not* doing; the manifold continuities and ruptures of (dis)identifications, (dis)orientations, and (dis)connections. In this way, perhaps, we may also at last grasp that grief’s most profound consequences for queer activism and politics may not lie in its *rejections* (as the compensatory emotional politics of both heteronationalism and traditional sexual identity politics, so relentlessly “proud” and “joyful,” would have it), but in its *incorporations*: not only its ontological-political binding together of individual, feeling people into affective communities, and different communities into solidarity with others, but also its equally ontological-political opposite: our incorporation into powerfully felt oppositions to, and enmities with, others. Grief, then, is *socially* ontological: a social yet personal fact un/binding us profoundly across both time and space.

As the introduction to this special issue argues, queer grief over lost pasts (and so, inevitably, lost futures) is not, then, as it seems to be for queer approaches to Affect rooted in Freud, necessarily a pathological emotion, rooted personally in “melancholia,” and politically to apathy; something to move past or transcend. Grief emerging from and sustaining queer attachment to the past – its subterranean, resistant communities, its emergent (sexual) political alternatives – can certainly result in despair and disengagement. Yet it can also produce renewed connections, persistent struggles, and new possibilities, sustained precisely through the affective convergences and divergences, the emotional con-

nections and disconnections, that arc, binding and dividing them, across space and time. In and across these arcs, grief and loss create, but also destroy, queer solidarities and connections, stimulate, but also numb, queer activism and politics. Crucially, both paths are consequences not of detachment, but of persistent attachments to social, political, and sexual visions binding pasts, presents, and futures. For Laci and Gábor, queer grief mediated a complex range of intersecting (dis)connections – to a known socialist past and an imagined queer, democratic future; to an (imagined) sexually tolerant West and heteronational East; and to queer generations old and new – shaping both engagements with and disengagements from activism. For Dorottya and *Wonderland's* activists, and Márta, Hungary's heteronationalism renewed their mourning of past, present, and future queer possibilities, and the sense of profound personal and political grief and loss that they shared – though differently, transversally – with Laci and Gábor's generation. But these same transversal relationships to past and present heteronormativities and heteronationalisms – their very sense of emotional/affect arcs, both positive and negative, queer and anti-queer – also fueled their anger and determination to fight on, and to build new sense of shared queer struggle regionally and globally: new sadnesses, but also new hopes in the face of heteronationalist power. Profoundly emotional, these responses and their histories reveal the powerfully political potentials of grief, its far-ranging, arcing, cross-cutting and dis/connecting queer possibilities: for sharing diverse pasts, presents, and futures; for solidarities rooted in the solidities of un/common queernesses; for grieving-hoping belonging across space and time.

HADLEY Z. RENKIN received his PhD in anthropology from the University of Michigan. He is Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Central European University, Vienna, Austria. His research and writing focus on the intersecting sexual and trans/national belongings shaping Hungarian sexual politics; the histories of East European sexual geotemporalities and sexual science; and the (dis)connections between anthropological and queer theories.

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NOTES

1. In this article I use the term “queer” purely analytically, and provisionally, to reference the wide range of subjectivities and practices (dis)connected by these emotional-political relationships. I recognize the problematic nature of this – or any other – convention.
2. Researching affect and emotions ethnographically is notoriously complex and difficult (Blackman 2015; Martin 2013; Rowsell 2024). Most such difficulties, however, pertain to the problems of grasping correctly affects in their (imagined) presocial or preconscious forms. My purpose here is not to dwell on such complexities, but to foreground how people themselves express and interpret them, and what these understandings’ shifting relationships to time and space accomplish.
3. The law was a key element in the late-socialist state’s desperate attempts to regain national and international legitimacy by offering the possibility of popular participation in political activity (Kurimay & Takács 2017).
4. The organization would exist formally until 1998.
5. Many lesbians were critical of *Mások’s* distinctly male focus and eroticism. Nonetheless, almost all mentioned its vital community-building function in their own and others’ lives.
6. While Hungary’s Pride march was the first in the region, and its social (and commercial) scene unusually rich and visible in these years, organized groups emerged earlier in East Germany and Slovenia (McLellan 2011; Kuhar 2001).
7. Fundamental Law of Hungary (25 April 2011), Foundation, Article L, p1.
8. Fidesz also replaced the field of Gender Studies with a “counter-discipline”: the “Economics of Family Policy and Public Policies for Human Development” [*Családpolitika és az emberi fejlődésre vonatkozó közpolitikák közgazdaságtanában.*] Anti-queer and anti-“gender” politics (a term “now frequently used to describe the transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life” (McEwen & Narayanaswamy 2023, 4) – converge here. They are not, however, homogeneous. Their shifting intersections produce unequal impacts: some moments and situations target heterosexual women, others lesbians, still others focus on threats posed by gay men or transgender people.
9. I thank Paul Boyce for pointing out the fundamental (cross-)disciplinary concern here. This issue has been central to anthropology since (before) its beginnings (see e.g., Durkheim 1895; Moore 2007). Indeed, though not expressed in these terms precisely, my argument is very much about the need to consider both the scope and variability of such scales (spatial and temporal) in exploring relations between queerness, affect/emotions, and politics.

10. In Hungarian, *jobb* means both “better” and “right.” Jobbik has since been replaced by the even more extreme and homophobic *Mi Hazánk* [Our Nation] party.
11. In a bitter betrayal of the early promise of *Hómeros*’ groundbreaking registration, *Szívárvány*’s registration was blocked by Hungary’s new postsocialist government.
12. Eliot, George. 1875. *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*. Blackwood & Sons.
13. https://labrisz.hu/irodalmi_rovat/labrisz-konyvek/meseország_mindenkie?fbclid=IwARoUqWNLzzCrdX3ZssCDZcLN4CkpG6OXdHiHi1gcrPjq82qX9_V_LNAPa6s, <https://litera.hu/magazin/interju/meseország-mindenkie-interju.html?fbclid=IwAR35WGvJwCrKAecvpxoYetayXrUupIoVbU9zLvA1schgMJfKa q4-8UoSUPQ>
14. https://rebellive.net/?p=2512&fbclid=IwAR1VshzFcE71oj9JwsoAIXe4de_Es6Rp-g4N24nYecfDVOG-3y928ZejjAoY
15. It has also meant that, to her own and other queer Hungarian activists’ mingled pride and bemusement, Dorottya was named one of *Time* magazine’s “100 Most Influential People” in 2021.
16. German-Hungarian writer-activist Károly Mária Kertbeny first coined the terms “homosexual” and “heterosexual.”
17. See also Renkin, Timár, Popa & Katerina Kolářová 2024. On the profound sexual-temporal implications involved see, Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011.