

Queer Heritage: Central Europe and Beyond. A Roundtable Discussion

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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 Cook³: 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 Romania⁷ 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.

queer historical figures – notable individuals that have contributed to Polish culture, history and politics, such as Polish kings, politicians, artists, writers.

I definitely feel that the queer turn is coming to Poland because over the last fifteen years or so I have noticed that many of the figures that I have just mentioned – ones whose non-heteronormativity I first discovered collecting snippets of information about them or being intrigued by their works or images – now have the whole anthologies and monographs dedicated to their lives and works; and sometimes to their queerness as well. Today, there are entire books showcasing queer visibility and so many amazing discoveries made by scholars and artists-cum-public historians such as myself that I feel that this queer turn is something real in Poland. It is happening and it is growing.

One big challenge is that our current conservative and nationalistic government has been using history and particular historical figures in the culture wars that they have been waging against LGBTQ+. For example, the poet Maria Konopnicka, the most celebrated patriotic poet of the end of the 19th century, who is cherished by football fans and nationalists alike, is at the same time being rediscovered as a bisexual or lesbian or non-normative female figure for the community. Recently I read an article that just like the 2018 bill that attempted to “defend the good name of Poland” and outlaw blaming Poland for any crimes committed during the Holocaust, some have been considering a similar kind of legislation with regard to the “good name” of Polish historical figures. It has already been labelled a “Konopnicka lie” and it means that if you state that a particular historical figure was non-heteronormative and you cannot “prove” it, you might be committing a crime. I suppose that for this government you need to have some high-resolution colour photographs of same-sex intercourse to prove that somebody was non-heteronormative.

Another problem is that homophobia continues to stay strong in Poland. So strong that the older generation – and I work mostly with gay men who are over sixty or seventy years old – is still afraid to come out. Collectors and artists who have amazing queer archives and even produced queer artworks in their 70s or 80s still prefer to remain anonymous and keep their works private. For me as a queer artist and archivist, this is a major challenge. So this queer turn has been arriving in this part of Europe as well but at a different speed.

Robert Kusek: Alison, although you are a historian, for many years you have been observing, analysing, and writing about the changes that have occurred in heritage production and preservation – particularly the shift from history to heritage, as well as the broadening of the latter category to embrace what might have been considered – and in some places still is – difficult, dissonant, or unwanted heritage, namely queer heritage. We would argue that the major difference between queer history and queer heritage is that in the case of the latter one does not only aim at remembering and reconstructing the queer past but one also wishes to creatively and productively engage with it. How do you perceive the difference – if there is any – between queer history and queer heritage, particularly with regard to the way the two terms are conceptualised and used by academics and the general public. Do you think that global/Western

queer heritage may profit from the potential contributions offered by other, often peripheral queer heritages – ones that are still silent or not sufficiently acknowledged by mainstream queer heritage studies, such as the queer heritage of Central Europe?

Alison Oram: I think in the UK there has been a movement of queer history themes into heritage, but I do not see it as a shift away from history because both fields, queer history and queer heritage, are expanding. Queer heritage (by which I mean queer public history, for example in museums, at historic sites and by local communities) is much more recent in its inception and expansion, but it is not one at the expense of the other and I think the balance is different from other places, even in Western Europe.

I think it was community heritage that expanded first, in terms of getting public funding. The Heritage Lottery Fund, which distributes money to community groups, started funding some LGBTQ projects in about 2001 and especially from about 2010, and these are often LGBTQ oral history projects or projects related to specific queer groups, such as gay choirs, older lesbians, the queer history of Plymouth, and so on. That is only a tiny proportion of the resources that the HLF has to distribute, but until the end of 2018 there were one hundred and thirty LGBTQ heritage projects funded by the HLF, and obviously many more since then. We could call this kind of community history queer cultural heritage, or we could call it intangible heritage, but in the UK, we do not use those terms very readily, apart from in the academic literature – so it is community history, but it is heritage as well.

That was one of the earliest areas of expansion, and its funding was enabled by the growing social acceptance of LGBTQ people, by civil partnerships from 2004, and then the Equality Act of 2010. Some museums followed, increasing their LGBTQ interpretation from the late 2000s, and then finally mainstream heritage institutions: the large organizations or charities which manage the historic environment, properties such as classic country houses or archaeological sites. Heritage recognition of the queer past came late to the party, as it were, but it did really take off in the years following 2015, facilitated by the commemoration in 2017 of the 50-year anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of sex between men. There was a lot of caution as well – the bigger the heritage provider, the more establishment it was, the more cautious it was on the whole. From 2015–2017 it also seemed quite easy and rapid, despite the fact that there has been pushback.

Is queer heritage difficult, dissonant, or unwanted in the UK? Yes, in many ways. There has been homophobic resistance from the right-wing press, but in the UK it is not the most difficult heritage. Currently, the culture wars in British heritage are around histories of slavery, imperialism, and British colonialism, and how they are acknowledged and represented. That is far more politicised at the moment: the toppling of the Colston statue during Black Lives Matter last year (2020) in Bristol, and so on. There has been a huge attack recently on a National Trust project called “Colonial Countryside”, and massive vilification of the academics who worked on the report, not only by the right-wing press but also by government ministers. In the UK, it is a public-facing heritage that is considerably more politicised than

other forms of history. In a very worrying development, the government is currently trying to get its own appointees onto the boards of major museums to keep an eye on what themes they are exploring and also denigrate the work of academics that they accuse of what is called “wokeness” or what used to be called “political correctness” – that is, anybody who is trying to increase diversity and inclusion, and promote minority histories.

There is certainly been a turn towards celebrating the queer past using the creative arts. I see this as a playful turn in queer heritage and history-making. As Elizabeth Freeman has written, it is a search for a sensual queer past, emphasising the pleasures of that past, rather than the shame or the difficulties. She calls it “erotohistoriography”,⁸ so it is about enjoying the past. One example is Duckie’s⁹ re-enactments of historic queer parties on a large scale. It is called their Vintage Clubbing Series, and it is a kind of participatory theatre, which disturbs chronologies by pulling the embodied past forward into the present. In 2016, for example, they recreated a 1932 queer ball in London called Lady Malcolm’s Servants’ Ball. Duckie is a long-running queer culture group, partly funded by the HLF, based in London. There are countless other examples of artists drawing on the queer past, for example, Sarah-Joy Ford, who is exploring 1980s lesbian feminism in her amazing textile work.

Robert Kusek: I am wondering whether there is some interest in non-British or non-Western queer heritage in the UK.

Alison Oram: There is certainly an interest in other queer histories, but we are pretty insular. In the *Queer Beyond London* project, which is a history project, we drew on those regional community LGBTQ oral history projects to make the argument that national queer history, in its narratives based on London, misses out on a lot of regional distinctiveness. We have been looking at peripheral queer heritages within Britain. As for non-Western queer history and heritage, I think it is very patchy. You could look at some of the major museums which have introduced queer history trails, such as the British Museum or the Victoria and Albert Museum. On those queer history trails, there are a lot of non-Western queer heritage objects and artefacts. These trails make the point that there is queer history to be found in all societies and time periods, but its form might be very different to what we are familiar with; that is, Western identity categories. I am sure we could do more, but it is starting.

Robert Kusek: Anita, you are based in the United States but your research largely focuses on queer history of Central Europe. How would you compare the status

8 E. Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham, 2010, p. 95.

9 Duckie is a collective of performance artists based in South London and operating since 1995. Heavily indebted to the tradition of Victorian music hall, they are known for organising a variety of activities such as club nights, new-mode pop, burlesque and performance events, as well as anti-theatre experimentation.

of queer history and heritage, as well as the position of queer historians in Central Europe and the US? Have you noticed any significant discrepancies when it comes to the tools and methods of investigation employed by Central European scholars and by American scholars?

Anita Kurimay: We can make some broad generalisations about the US and Western Europe in terms of how the celebratory impetus that came from the normalisation and legalisation of gay marriage led to the mainstreaming of homosexuality and in effect also paved the way to establishing queer heritage, which was not only thanks to decades-long community activism but also eventually established institutions that accepted and ended up celebrating the supposed gay liberation themes. Clearly, this has not been the case in Central-Eastern Europe.

In the US, not only progressive or liberal papers like *Huffington Post* but even the *Wall Street Journal* can regularly write about queer heritage sites to visit and exciting new places that are having exhibits on queer themes. You would not find this in Central-Eastern Europe, where queer heritage would be an oxymoron, and nationalist governments on principle would not support such reporting on queer history. For that matter, would mainstream newspapers (which often are now controlled by or in the hands of government-friendly entities) want to provide a platform for discussions about queer heritage? It is very important to think both about why this is the case and also how these conditions (anti-LGBTQ government platforms and the silencing of queer issues in the media) underline the ways in which queer histories are written, articulated, and represented in the region.

As a growing scholarship now attests, histories of queerness and sexuality more generally in the CEE do not necessarily map onto Western, specifically Anglo-American histories of sexuality.¹⁰ In addition to highlighting country-specific aspects, this scholarship illustrates how in the first half of the 20th century Central-Eastern Europe was in many ways at the forefront of the paradigm shift (which had been long claimed as a “western” paradigm) that discovered non-normative sexual identities and also made queer sexualities part of popular and official discourses. Just to give two examples, in 1919 the communist Hungarian leadership legalised male homosexuality, and also created novel ways in which it could rehabilitate homosexuals (as opposed to imprisoning them) and turn them into communist citizens. Similarly speaking, Poland left consensual same-sex sexuality out of the criminal code as early as 1931, way before most Western countries. So while on par and even at times ahead of the “West” during the first half of the 20th century, it was in the state-

10 Just to name two recent examples, see K. Karczewski, “Transnational Flows of Knowledge and the Legalisation of Homosexuality in Interwar Poland”, *Contemporary European History*, 2020, pp. 1–18; and K. Davison, “Cold War Pavlov: Homosexual aversion therapy in the 1960s”, *History of the Human Sciences* 34 (1), 2021, pp. 89–119. For a more theoretical discussion on the place of CEE see the introduction of Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska to their edited collection: R. Kulpa, J. Mizielińska, *De-Centering Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives*, London, 2011.

socialist period that the CEE region embarked on its own approach to queerness.¹¹ It did so by public silencing and the medical pathologising of queerness even as many of the countries behind the Iron Curtain decriminalised homosexuality (i.e. Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1961) well before their Western counterparts.¹² In the West gay liberation movements carve out space and become a vibrant political and cultural force from the 1970s on, which of course also helped to initiate scholarship on queerness, but you just do not have that kind of visibility and possibility for organising on behalf of queers behind the Iron Curtain.¹³ Thus, because they were less visible, in 1989 new-found possibilities for queer visibility totally played into the hands of nationalists and people who categorised queer people and culture as a non-native, Western import. Queers became an aberration to nationalists across Central-Eastern Europe. The ascendance of nationalists into ruling governments has fundamentally come to shape the ways in which history and scholarship on queerness is and can be written in the CEE.

Furthermore, in Central-Eastern Europe the subject matter of your scholarship is also associated more tightly with your identity by others, which if writing about queerness makes you delegitimised as a researcher, a scholar, or an artist wanting to objectively represent these histories. With cutting of gender programs, drying up of funds and even not being able to fund projects with the words “gender” or “sexuality”, projects on queerness, are immediately political, as opposed to just being academic. The context really conditions the ways in which thinking about queer histories is an inherently political act, and it is incredibly challenging. In this context, I feel incredibly privileged for being able to do this kind of work from afar, being able to receive funds, and feel secure about my employment.

In addition to the politicisation of their work and constraints on academic freedom, another obstacle for historians of sexuality in CEE is the lack of archives. Without romanticising what happens in Western Europe, the UK, and the US, we need to acknowledge the real investment in creating LGBTQ community archives that have been taking in major Western European and US cities, which over time has also translated into institutional/governmental investments and larger well-funded archives. This is just unheard of in East-Central Europe where while there are some community-supported LGBTQ archives, there is absolutely no governmental and large institutional investment in queer archives, which has profound implications for trying to write queer histories.

Finally, it is not only that the state-socialist period was crucial in terms of changing the trajectory of East-Central Europe in this larger Western or global history of queerness, but it was also crucial in terms of the erasure of historical documents

11 Just to reiterate existing scholarship also emphasises the important differences among the CEE countries in terms of queer history.

12 For an overview see J. Takács, “Legalizing Queerness in Central-Eastern Europe”, in: *Routledge International Handbook to Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, eds. K. Fábíán, J. Elise Johnson, M. Lazda, Abingdon-New York, 2022, pp. 246–254.

13 On state-socialism and queerness, see publications of Tomasz Basiuk, Anna Borgos, Łukasz Szulc, Judit Takács, and Věra Sokolová.

around queerness. What I found, for instance in the Hungarian context, is how the homosexual registry and its surrounding documentation, which had been operational throughout every political system since the Dual monarchy including state socialism, disappeared during the transition in 1989. Likewise, important court documents involving homosexuality from trials in both, the interwar and state-socialist eras also vanished. The retroactive destruction of historical documents during and the end of state socialism creates an added burden for writing queer histories as well as an added obstacle in legitimising queer heritage.

Wojciech Szymański: Valentina – in your work and research you focus mostly on Romanian art and queer art phenomena in Romania. However, one of the topics that you investigated in detail is the Bulgarian city of Balchik. This multicultural city was occupied by Romania between 1913 and 1940 and became a very important place for Romanian artists and especially feminists. Karol, your research and projects prioritise Polish queer culture; however, just like Valentina, you also explore transnational or regional queer history: you often travel across East-Central Europe, gather materials, and organise Queer Archives Institute exhibitions in the countries of the region.

It seems to us that you both move beyond your national perspectives and replace them with regional ones. What does this enlarged or wider perspective offer to you? How do Romanian queer history and heritage extend the Polish perspective, and how do Polish – or Bulgarian, Hungarian, etc. – queer-narratives contribute to the Romanian vision of the past? Can you identify some similarities and/or differences between various countries of the region?

Valentina Iancu: I do indeed hope to expand my research onto the entire region and I look around with curiosity; but for the moment my focus is on the local and on how the local queer narratives are produced. My current research is concerned with contemporary Romanian culture, i.e. post-2001, but I also try to identify its “queer ancestry”. Last year, I worked with Karol Radziszewski because he is one of the first artists who came to Romania and introduced the idea of queer heritage to my country. The *DIK Fagazine*¹⁴ issue on Romania is among the first works that have documented the period after the legalisation of homosexuality. One history I have been engaging in right now is the history of the Romanian occupation of Balchik, a Black Sea coastal town that is now part of Bulgaria. I have been writing about the Romanian perspective on this period and what took place when Romanians invaded the territory and acted like colonisers. They replaced street names, built their own statues, and tried to erase the Bulgarian and Turkish cultures that had existed in the area to create a Romanian identity-oriented culture. Balchik became a very powerful symbol in the inter-war Romanian culture that was explored by many far-right intellectuals.

¹⁴ *DIK Fagazine* is a queer zine that unearths and investigates queer representation and queer history – with special focus on visual culture of Central and Eastern Europe.

Interestingly, during the occupation, one hundred and fifty Romanian painters went to work in Balchik. All the famous Romanian artists went there so an enormous part of the inter-war Romanian culture was in fact produced not in Romania but in Balchik. Many of them were of course well-known gay figures and feminists, and they all found their own place there. In the case of women, particularly women architects and visual artists, it was in Balchik that they could escape patriarchy, misogyny and discrimination. In Balchik, they could design and erect buildings, as well as have their works exhibited. Quite paradoxically, the birth of the Romanian feminist movement took place not in Bucharest but in Balchik. But this is a very complex, intersectional history. For example, this is mainly a class history. Most people who could go there were aristocrats. For example, the Queen herself, Queen Marie of Romania, had a palace built there. With the help of collectors, aristocrats and rich people, those artists could thrive there.

My interest lies in an attempt to queer this history – one that has been claimed by Romanian nationalists. But this needs to be done carefully. I have recently discovered a set of photographs showing affection between women, showing body language that goes outside the normative. I have found notes in the diaries describing interactions between women as being more affectionate and intimate than typical. For the moment I have more questions than answers regarding Balchik. But my hypothesis is that far away from the conservative society of Bucharest there was a place where non-normative friendships and interactions were possible. The place was Balchik.

This is just the beginning. But from my point of view this is hugely important. I think it will be interesting to have this history recovered and confronted with the official version of history that was written from a nationalist standpoint: the narrative about a new territory being discovered, integrated, and celebrated as part of Romanian culture. I want to step a little bit forward and queer these narratives and give them some complexity. To create a kind of “uncomfortable” history. I am also looking forward to connecting all this with a Bulgarian perspective.

Even if I am interested in the whole region, my focus or, in fact, my obsession is with Romania and with the Romanian local. What I am trying to understand is the local outside the national because the local is not constituted only by inhabitants who were born and raised here but also by travellers, by people who lived here temporarily, and so on. I question how limiting my approach to researching queer culture inside the national context, in fact, is because I believe that queerness should be linked to international networks: it should represent a broader transnational approach. But considering how unique the local experience is (given, for example, that homosexuality was a criminal offence until 2001), I find it difficult to build a more international approach to the existing history. Therefore, in order to address those limitations, I have started to expand my research by considering queers who visited Romania and worked here: the likes of Karol Radziszewski, Kjersti Vetterstad, Shannon Woodcock, Jimmy Robert, or, in the inter-war period, the actress and dancer Loie Fuller (1862–1928), who visited Balchik a few times. In particular, working with Karol Radziszewski helped me enormously. It was an amazing learning experience

that I am grateful for because with his help I saw some new materials and I was able to learn about other Central European countries and understand that Romania is indeed an exception because of this long criminalisation of homosexuality. I started wondering why homosexuality was decriminalised so late in Romania. It had always been criminalised, but the specific laws changed through time. The communist criminalisation was basically a Nazi-era law that was adopted in 1937 and it was inherited and used against homosexuals by the new regime. I think Anita has mentioned the challenge of gay people becoming informants for the secret services. Gay people were both oppressors and the oppressed because some were arrested and they had to choose between going to prison or collaborating with the system.

Karol Radziszewski: I started by focusing on Poland and it is a typical case for most activists or researchers in the region because the language is really a basic barrier. When I work, I can delve deeper and be more precise, especially with regard to written documents, when the materials are in Polish or are deposited in Polish archives. But since I started my archival work, it has become clear to me that it would be more interesting and also more queer to adopt a larger perspective. Instead of focusing on the nationalistic way of building our Polish queer heritage, I would rather talk about queer heritage as such, as well as about queer geographies and queer temporalities. My approach to queer heritage – one that I have practised in the Queer Archives Institute¹⁵ and in my other art projects – is to carry out some basic research with regard to specific countries or phenomena and then collaborate with people who have been involved in some more scholarly or in-depth research. Connecting all this information and juxtaposing various materials is crucial for the installations and exhibitions that I create. But I also want to use them as a springboard for local researchers and for future research. When I regularly travel to Ukraine, Belarus, or Bulgaria, I constantly hear that activists are slowly starting to be really interested in the past, but at the same time, they are very focused on the written sources and materials that they can have access to.

It has already been mentioned a few times, but in East-Central Europe Poland decriminalised homosexual acts as early as in 1932. However, Belarus did it in 1995 and Romania in 2001. In the case of the latter, the oldest trace of queer life – be it letters, photographs, books, notes – is always a proof of crime. I was investigating this phenomenon with regard to Belarus and there was a lack of any materials because of the law that could have you imprisoned – even in the early 1990s. In Poland, however, Ryszard Kisiel – one of the early activists who lived in Gdańsk and was particularly active in the 1980s – recalls a series of conversations that he had in the 1970s with his friends. When they heard about the Stonewall Riots, they all discussed how they could react to it and what exactly they could fight for. At the time homophobia was still a great problem, but it was rather connected with

¹⁵ Founded in 2015, the Queer Archives Institute is a non-profit artist-run organisation dedicated to research, collection, digitalisation, presentation, exhibition, analysis and artistic interpretation of queer archives.

the teaching of the Catholic Church and not with actual laws or any kind of state oppression that they could openly fight against and form an organisation or kind of movement.

What I find quite interesting is that most of my archives and research materials are related to gay men. Early zines, the oldest early zines from the 1980s and the 1990s, were starting in Central Europe because of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Sometimes their history starts only with those few, AIDS-related pages. Everywhere – in Prague, in Warsaw, in Kyiv – people wanted to spread the information about the pandemic and then slowly started adding more articles and reprinting photographs and materials from Western gay publications. However, very few magazines dedicated to lesbians are to be found: in Poland, they show up only in the 1990s. The earliest are from Slovenia and date back to 1984 and 1985. Slovenia in itself is a very interesting case to study. For example, because of the discussions which are not to be found in other countries of the region, namely how the gays and lesbians could collaborate, and how they want to have their own publications and their own distinct visual representation, for example lesbian photographs, Also how they want to create some local versions of the existing lesbian images and not to follow the mainstream straight pornography that exploits lesbians. I do not have enough time to talk about the zines and the cruising areas but with the help of the Ryszard Kisiel's archive, I have gained access to the notes and photographs from the 1970s and 1980s which document the cruising spots, baths, and parks – with their detailed locations and descriptions. His photographs, even though they show different places in different parts of Poland or East-Central Europe, show some extraordinary degree of similarity between various queer places and spaces.

This more international approach helps me to fill in some major gaps in queer visual narratives. Let me give you one example. There are beautiful photographs by Libuše Jarcovjáková documenting gay and lesbian parties in the 1980s, e.g. in the T-club in Prague. But there were no images of these queer places which were taken from the outside. And suddenly Ryszard Kisiel's archives allowed me to fill in this gap because in his collection I found the photographs of the very buildings where the parties took place. He took them during his travel to Prague which he visited as a kind of gay tourist. I myself travel a lot and try to maintain a network of people who work with me and then I can bring their different stories together. This is something very exciting because you literally can see how these things are connected, how people were travelling, and how this queer heritage goes well beyond the national borders.

Wojciech Szymański: What happens when archives are not available or do not exist or are mute with regard to the queer past? How do you act when you want to tell the story of queer lives and queer past but you have no factual evidence or tangible proof of their existence?

Karol Radziszewski: I think that visual arts have this particular magic, I would say, to create visuals that could reimagine some memories, some small thoughts,

some anecdotes from the past. When I started to work at the Queer Archives Institute, I thought I would be focusing on zines, some texts, and then films, but recently I got back to painting only because of that – because some queer histories could be reimaged through this particular medium of painting when you do not even have the original photographs. The base for me is always oral histories. For most of my research, my trips are summarised in long in-depth interviews that I try to conduct with the oldest possible representatives of the local LGBTQ community. And what has to be mentioned here is that throughout this discussion we have not mentioned non-binary or transgender people because there is an even bigger lack of this representation in the archives. So my focus now is also on those voices. Through oral history we can recall memories – sometimes they are very specific and sometimes they take the shape of fantasies about the past. But that is queer to me! Certainly, it is a different approach, and the more space you can give to such diverse voices, the more “real” queer heritage becomes. Even if for other people that is a mistake; an approach that is not proper, not professional, and so on, that is absolutely queer to me. I believe that we have to be queer with regard to the form, not only the content. That is what I find missing in some conferences, panels, presentations, etc. Sometimes people are trying to be very normative in the way they are researching and then presenting their research.

Robert Kusek: What is the future of queer heritage – in Central Europe, the UK, the US, and other parts of the world. Will it remain dissonant or difficult heritage par excellence? Or, alternatively, will it undergo the process of musealisation, globalisation and, finally, commodification? Will it ever become part of the national heritage and national past – what are your thoughts on that?

Alison Oram: I think it is beginning to be recognised in the national past, if tokenistically. “Pride of Place” got maybe twenty new sites listed – and listing is a kind of gold standard for heritage recognition – as part of the national heritage on the basis of their queer histories, but that is a drop in the ocean.

I think in the UK there is tension and there are difficulties, but there is also a huge surge of interest and activity around queer heritage. It goes back to Anita’s point, about the attitude of the state. I worry that the years between the early 2000s and around now will turn out to be good years and that things will get more difficult, but there are really large numbers, of curators, museum professionals, and heritage professionals who are taking the opportunity to push queer heritage in mainstream locations. There are networks being set up, such as The Queer Heritage and Collections Network, but at the same time, there is less government support.

Commodification and musealisation are not necessarily bad things, and in the UK we cannot escape them anyway because heritage and museums are so market-driven. There is some awareness that the pink pound can be a driver – that LGBTQ visitors are a significant number of people who are interested in the queer past and the past generally. That, alongside the mission to make heritage more diverse, will hopefully sustain heritage and museums in the years to come. Even ten

years ago, you could buy “his and his” cufflinks at the Benjamin Britten Museum. There is also a problem with fashions – 2017 was a commemorative year, the 50th anniversary of partial decriminalisation, and a lot of museums host exhibitions based on those sorts of key dates. Many of those exhibitions are short-term and then they disappear, so that is one challenge for museums and heritage, to keep queer history and heritage in the mainstream.

Finally, I think we need to keep an eye on homonormativity in Britain. Is it only the acceptable forms of the queer past that get recognised in heritage? Interestingly there has been quite a lot of trans heritage, and I think that is partly because drag cultures in Britain are part of popular culture anyway, so it becomes a bit more acceptable, but there are certainly huge parts of the queer past that would not be seen as acceptable, for example, intergenerational sex. How do museums deal with that with the artists they show and the representations they show? It is the queerest stuff we need to make sure gets a hearing in more mainstream forms.

Anita Kurimay: I feel like commodification is already here, particularly in the US, in tandem with homonormativity, and of course homonationalism.¹⁶ Who is accepted, whose histories within the queer communities are valued enough to be commemorated – it is an ongoing process and contestation. In terms of Central-Eastern Europe, I think what happens in future elections will be incredibly important. And I hope that uniting behind queerness (and its belonging to the CEE’s past and present) will become a meaningful way to oppose current nationalist governments. Since I am based in the US, I am cautious to make any statements on the near future, yet I do think that as the result of anti-LGBTQ policies and rhetoric and using queerness in such a blatant way for nationalists’ causes, has actually led to a more popular acceptance of LGBTQ people, which hopefully will also translate into more room to be queer.

Valentina Iancu: I do dream about the future of queer heritage and history in our region. I used to think that perhaps having homosexuality decriminalised so very late can be a chance for the production of knowledge about the queer past to start anew. From this point of view, it can be more easily negotiated so as not to leave anyone behind, not to have the problem that is traceable in dominant cultures, in dominant narratives, like in Western Europe or in the States, where white gay men dominate queerness. Here, queer is a periphery and in this periphery, the narratives develop together. There are lesbian histories together with stories about polyamory, about sex workers, about the rise of the Roma movement. The production of knowledge is difficult but since it has started on so many levels, then perhaps the constructions of future institutions, archives, and museums that I think will eventually happen will be less discriminatory than in the places where it started much

¹⁶ For the original argument on homonationalism see J. K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, 2007.

earlier. I hope for a more inclusive future, and I wish to see fewer and fewer people left behind.

Karol Radziszewski: I agree with Valentina. I think it is an interesting point that maybe we are too peripheral to be afraid of commercialisation. The young generation is starting things related to that new queer approach so there is hope that it will be more inclusive. But everywhere I go, especially in Poland, I see that everybody wants their museums. Everybody wants to have an LGBTQ museum. That is a dream in every Polish city. Every time I happen to talk to students, young activists, or older people, they talk about their desire for their museum. As I mentioned earlier, I am interested in how to be queer without space, be queer in a more performative manner, be queer by questioning oneself constantly. But people want museums. My friends from Prague, from the Society for Queer Memory,¹⁷ or from Bucharest keep renting apartments to start a museum and it is even a competition between them who will be the first to turn it into a museum-like space. I think it is just the beginning and there is no way back, but I am not sure if it is likely to reach the public institutions quickly.

Last week I was at a show opening at the Museum of Art in Łódź, one of the oldest museums of modern art in Europe or in the world. After many years it is the first time the institution introduced three, or maybe three and a half, queer works in their collection. Two works are made by white gay men, including myself, so it took some time to introduce these works to the three floors of the permanent exhibition of the collection. And they chose my work that is related to the 1980s and to the AIDS pandemic so it is safe that they are introducing it in a museum as a historical reference.

About the contributors:

Valentina Iancu is an art historian and art critic based in Bucharest and Berlin. Her practice is hybrid, text-based, and split between editorial, educational, curatorial and management work. Her research interests include personal transhistorical traumas, marginalised histories, and queer art. Between 2008 and 2017 she worked at the Art National Museum of Romania where she curated research-based modern art shows such as *Crossroads. Jewish Artists During Holocaust* (2010) or *Equal. Art and Feminism in Modern Romania* (2015).

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¹⁷ Established in 2013, the society's aim is to collect records of and raise awareness about Czech LGBTQ history, as well as to facilitate transgenerational dialogue between various members of Czech LGBTQ community. One of its objective is to establish a museum similar to the Schwules Museum in Berlin, the QWien in Vienna, or Queer Britain in London.

Her main research interests include the history of sexuality, women's and gender history, conservatism and the politics of the far right, the history of human rights, and the history of sport. In 2020, she published *Queer Budapest*, a ground-breaking history of nonnormative sexualities in Budapest from the 1870s to 1961.

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Alison Oram is a leading LGBTQ+ historian. Professor Emerita at Leeds Beckett University where she was based before joining the University of London's Institute of Historical Research as a Senior Research Fellow. She wrote *Her Husband was a Woman!* (2007) and co-edited the landmark *Lesbian History Sourcebook* (2001). With Matt Cook, she wrote the National Trust's first LGBTQ guide book *Prejudice and Pride* (2017) and, most recently, *Queer Beyond London* (2022).

Karol Radziszewski is a visual artist who works with film, photography, painting, and installations and creates interdisciplinary projects. His archive-based methodology crosses multiple cultural, historical, religious, social and gender references. The publisher and editor-in-chief of *DIK Fagazine*, as well as founder of the Queer Archives Institute. His work has been presented in institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, Whitechapel Gallery, Kunsthalle Wien, New Museum, VideoBrasil.

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