Skeletons in the national closet:
sexuality, history, and the ambiguities of belonging in post-socialist Hungary

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In her article ‘Death of a hero: Hungarian national identity and the funeral of Lajos Kossuth’, Martha Lampland describes the funeral in 1894 of the leader of Hungary’s 1848-49 uprising against Habsburg rule as ‘one of the most momentous events to occur in Hungary during the latter half of the 19th century’ (Lampland 1993: 29). As she recounts the event,

The mass of mourners – aristocrat and peasant, shopkeeper and clerk – blackened the streets of Budapest, drawn together in their grief and sorrow. The steep steps of the National Museum, the site of the funeral, were obliterated with wreaths and flowers. As the coffin was drawn through the streets, mourners were said to turn away, unable to gaze upon it. (ibid.: 31)

His funeral in Budapest alone was attended by half a million people, while all throughout the country – in every town, village, and hamlet – ceremonies were held to commemorate his passing. (ibid.: 29)

[Kossuth] was laid to rest in Kerepesi Cemetery, between the mausoleums of his great contemporaries, Batthyány, first head of the 1848 government, later executed, and Deák, 1848 revolutionary and politician responsible for negotiating the Compromise in 1867. (ibid.: 31)

A mere fourteen years earlier, another man died and was buried in Budapest, also in Kerepesi Cemetery. Like Kossuth, Károly Kertbeny (born Karl Benkert) had lived much of his life outside Hungary.
He had travelled widely throughout Europe, writing his own works and translating Hungarian literature into other languages. Kertbeny also wrote extensively about homosexuality, arguing against anti-sodomy legislation and for the rights of homosexuals, and corresponding with the leading sexologists of the time. It was in the course of this correspondence, in fact, that he coined the now almost universally used terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’. Kertbeny’s end, however, was to be rather less illustrious than Kossuth’s. In declining health, in 1875 he returned to Budapest, where he was supported in an apartment in the city’s Rudás Baths by the City of Budapest until his death in 1882. Penniless when he died, Kertbeny’s burial was paid for by the Hungarian Writers’ Poor Fund. Of his funeral, little has been said. His grave marker was soon lost; the location of his grave unknown.

Introduction

The significance of reworkings of history and memory in eastern European post-socialist transformations has been noted extensively. Reshapings of ‘the Past’ have been seen to establish new historical myths and narratives, legitimising particular groups and ideologies, distinguishing the post-socialist era and its social, cultural, and political identities from those which preceded them, and grounding new notions of the kinds of connections that are seen to hold its new societies together. However, as is true of the literature – scholarly and non-scholarly – on postsocialism in general, the place and significance of sexuality in such processes has been almost entirely ignored. Here, I want to explore one example of the intersection of sexuality and sexual politics with such reworkings of history and memory: a history-making project by Hungarian gay activists to recover Károly Kertbeny as a ‘gay ancestor’. Analysing this event, and the discourses that have surrounded it, can show us a great deal about both the current state of sexual politics in Hungary, and some of the fundamental conditions and tensions of post-socialist belonging.
In 2001, while conducting research for her doctoral dissertation on homosexuality in Hungary, the sociologist and sexual-political activist Judit Takács discovered Kertbeny’s grave in Kerepesi Cemetery. Unanimously convinced of the importance of bringing such a figure and his work – long forgotten save to a few sexologists – to the consciousness of both Hungary’s gay community and the broader public, Takács and other gay activists quickly came up with a plan to restore Kertbeny’s gravesite, by raising a new gravestone to mark the site and organising a memorial ceremony to commemorate his place in history.

The first step was a simple one. In November of 2001, the gay organisation Lambda Budapest set up a wooden grave-post to temporarily mark the site. Meanwhile, the editors of the gay magazine Mások began a campaign to raise funds for the new gravestone. Notices were published in the magazine and on the most popular gay Hungarian websites, asking readers to ‘[d]onate to the raising of a gay memorial!’ (‘Adakozz a melegemlékmű létrehozásához!’ 2001). Over the next six months, enough donations were collected to purchase a new gravestone, carved from pink granite. Contributions came from a wide range of sources, including gay-owned businesses, activist organisations, and private donors (Mások 2002: 16).

The dedication of the new gravestone was one of the key events of the 2002 Gay and Lesbian Festival, taking place on the morning of the Festival’s centrepiece: the Pride march through Budapest. Participants gathered just inside the main entrance of the Nemzeti Temető (National Cemetery – as the Kerepesi Cemetery is also known). After a short wait for everyone to arrive, László Láner, the editor of Mások, led us all off into the cemetery, winding past ordinary gravestones and the elaborate monuments and mausoleums of famous writers and politicians. We eventually came to a small plot with a new, shining, pink granite obelisk, which read simply ‘Kertbeny Károly – 1824-1882’.
Clustering around, our voices low as we admired the stone and its inscription, we positioned ourselves for the best view of the ceremony, giving latecomers a final chance to appear while we checked over once again cameras, recorders, and speeches. At last the memorial service began. Láner read a short speech, thanking the donors who had given to support the establishment of the monument, and praising the cooperation of the community. Then the discoverer of the gravesite, Judit Takács, spoke. Describing Kertbeny’s life, she highlighted the literary and personal difficulties of his life, the great importance for research on sexuality of his coining of the term ‘homosexuality’, and his political activism in the fight for equal rights for homosexuals. Following Judit’s speech, one of the leading members of the gay Christian group Öt Kenyér Keresztény Közösség a Homoszexuálisokért (The Five Bread Christian Community for Homosexuals), who had been a Catholic priest before leaving the order because he was unwilling to hide his homosexuality, led a short, ecumenical prayer service. He read a blessing in Hebrew, and a Christian prayer. Finally, he recited the Lord’s Prayer, in which many of those present
joined, and sprinkled holy water on the new gravestone. Several people then ceremoniously placed traditional funeral wreathes at the base of the obelisk. With this, the formal memorial ritual for Kertbeny was complete.

First celebrated in 2002, the Kertbeny memorial ceremony has been repeated in each succeeding year. On each occasion the ceremony has been performed in very much the same form, with almost identical speeches and wreath-laying. And each year, very similar articles and writings have appeared in conjunction with the ceremony itself. The Kertbeny ritual, taken as a cultural whole, thus represents a true ritual in the anthropological sense. As of this writing (in April 2006), it seems a solidly established one as well, likely to continue into the foreseeable future. The memorial’s importance also appears to be securely established. The memorial service has become a key part of the annual Gay and Lesbian Festival, occurring on the day of its central event, the Pride March, each summer. It can therefore be seen as a key element in the primary public expression of Hungary’s lesbian and gay communities.

Lesbian and gay history-making

Like other lesbian and gay history-making projects described by scholars of lesbian and gay history, the Kertbeny ritual works by constructing Kertbeny as a figure with a sexual identity commensurate with that of present-day gay people. Judit Takács’s speech, for example, while admitting that Kertbeny ‘defined himself on several occasions as “normosexual”, i.e. heterosexual,’ nonetheless strongly suggests that his doing so was perhaps over-emphatic, going on to stress the fact that “[h]e never married, had no children’ and ‘was very sensitive to male beauty.’ (Takács Judit, 2002 Memorial Speech, author’s fieldnotes) Other descriptions connected with the memorial speak, less circumspectly, simply of ‘his homosexuality’. (e.g., Magyar Narancs 2003, p13) The ritual thus connects Kertbeny to its present-day participants as someone sharing their sexual identity: a ‘forerunner’ or ‘ancestor’ figure.

Studies of lesbian and gay history-making point to the recovery of ancestor figures as critical to recovering a more accurate understanding of history itself. Lesbian, gay, and other alternative sexualities have typically been erased from dominant historical accounts; revealing specific figures as lesbian or gay thus rewrites history to reveal the presence of other lesbian or gay participants as well. As a result such history-making projects have a number of positive effects: because they depend on identifying ancestors by contemporary criteria of ‘gayness’, they create a sense of the continuity of gay identity, thus reinforcing present-day perceptions of lesbian and gay identity; because they identify famous and important historical figures as lesbian or gay, they increase lesbian and gay people’s sense of agency – the feeling that they can contribute to society; because they figure specific individuals as representative of others as well, they enable the imagining of lesbian/gay communities past and present. Further, these scholars argue, such remaking of the past is critical to the remaking of the present: because historical continuity is typically taken as a proof of present legitimacy, such projects work to
correct the exclusion of lesbians and gays from the present, suggesting that they, just like other people with histories, belong here and now.⁹

Making gay history national

These analyses of lesbian and gay history-making are important, and can tell us much about the meanings and effects of the Kertbeny memorial ritual. Yet they leave certain other – and very striking – aspects of the ritual unaccounted for. One of the most interesting things about the ritual, in fact, is that it does far more than simply construct Kertbeny as a figure ancestral to a *general* history. Indeed, the ritual and its surrounding discourses work to construct him as something quite different: a specifically national, Hungarian ancestor.

The activists involved in the memorial do this in a number of ways. First, they shape a very particular image of his identity and actions. Throughout the ritual’s discourse, Kertbeny’s identity as Hungarian is explicitly underscored, while his originally German name and family are downplayed. Thus, most writings and speeches not only render him simply ‘Hungarian’, but refer to him first (and sometimes solely) by his Hungarian name, glossing over the complex legal and political process of ‘magyarisation’ he chose to undergo as an adult, and its equally complex historical context and implications for questions of identity and identity politics. In her speech at the memorial service in 2002, for example, Takács’s phrasing: ‘Kertbeny Károly Mária – or in his original name Karl Maria Benkert’ – suggests to the listeners at the ceremony that Kertbeny’s German identity was actually the second, less real of the two. Takács went on to reinforce this message with some of Kertbeny’s own words: ‘Kertbeny was born in Vienna, his mother tongue was German, but he declared himself Hungarian: “I was born in Vienna, yet I am not a Viennese, but am rightfully Hungarian”’ (Judit Takács, 2002 Memorial Speech. Author’s fieldnotes). One of the only articles outside the lesbian/gay community to cover the memorial followed this model, mentioning Kertbeny’s possible Germanness, only immediately to dismiss it by making him ‘Hungarian’ nonetheless, calling him: ‘a German-descended, Hungarian world-wanderer.’ (Magyar Narancs 2003, p13) Interestingly – and tellingly, as we shall see below – most references within the gay community extend the assertion of Kertbeny’s Hungarianness even further: to his ancestry as well. One speech, for example, notes that Kertbeny ‘was born in Vienna on the 28th of February in 1824 … “as a son of Hungarian parents”’ (Judit Takács, 2002 Memorial Speech. Author’s fieldnotes). Additionally, elsewhere he is labelled ‘Hungarian-descended (származású).’(‘Adakozz a melegemlékmű létrehozásához!’ 2001).

These claims of identity are further buttressed by assertions of the nationally-specific character of his actions. He is described as having ‘devoted his life to serving his country, even when he was living abroad. He publicised our glory there amongst foreign peoples. … [H]e brought light to Hungarian literature for foreign people.’ (Judit Takács, 2002 Memorial Speech. Author’s fieldnotes). Tellingly, this is not a reference to just any
‘Hungarian literature’; the memorial speeches explicitly underscore the fact that the works that Kertbeny translated were those of the foremost icons of Hungarian national writing, Sándor Petőfi, János Arany, and Mór Jókai (‘Adakozz a melegemlékmű létrehozásához!’ 2001). The ritual’s rhetoric thus suggests that, despite Kertbeny’s perhaps unusual sexual habits and interests, he was nonetheless in his deeds a true Hungarian patriot, a representative of Hungarian culture to the rest of Europe.

These national meanings are further reinforced by the deep, symbolic significance of the memorial ritual’s setting. Indeed, one of the most powerful, and immediately obvious, indications of the national character of the Kertbeny ritual was its location in the spatial-symbolic context of Budapest’s Nemzeti Temető. This is made quite clear by the map of the Cemetery included in the 2002 Lesbian and Gay Festival programme, directing participants to the meeting point from which the memorial ceremony proper would begin.

Map of Budapest’s Nemzeti Temető – from the 2002 Gay and Lesbian Festival Program (arrow in left corner points to Kertbeny’s gravesite).

The map clearly situates both Kertbeny himself and the participants in his memorial firmly in the symbolic geography of official Hungarian history. Indicated on it are the monuments and memorials of many of the founding icons, political and artistic, of the dominant narrative of Hungarian national history. Within this one small area lie the crypt of the family of Sándor Petőfi (the Hungarian national poet who was one of the central sources of inspiration for the 1848-49 revolution against Habsburg rule, and who remains one of the primary symbols of Hungary’s historic struggle for national independence.)
the mausoleum of Lajos Batthyány (president of the revolutionary republic, and executed for his role in it); the tomb of Endre Ady (one of Hungary’s most famous poets, sometimes called ‘the conscience of the Hungarian nation’); and the monument to Mór Jókai (massively popular mid-19th century novelist and journalist). Nearer to Kertbeny’s now emphatically marked gravesite is the resting place of Mihály Munkácsy, arguably Hungary’s most revered painter. By the main entrance, where those who had come to dedicate Kertbeny’s new gravestone gathered, stands what is, perhaps, the most powerful symbolic marker of Hungarian post-socialist history: the grave memorial to Imre Nagy and the other martyrs of the 1956 revolution, themselves rediscovered and reburied here in 1989.

Scholars of nations and nationalism, and of the political uses of history and memory, have pointed to the critical roles played by official ‘Places of Memory’ in imagining the nation and its boundaries of community. In this sense, the National Cemetery can be understood as a particularly salient Place of Memory for Hungary and Hungarians, a highly symbolic space which mirrors the chronological space of the national-historical genealogical narrative, manifesting in public space the same milestones that mark out the national timeline – the lives (defined as periods of time: Petőfi Sándor, 1823-1849; Ady Endre, 1877-1919; Nagy Imre, 1896-1958) upon which Hungarian national genealogy pivots.

Thus, as we walked through the cemetery, past the tombs of these famous national figures and ancestors towards Kertbeny’s own grave, it was impossible to avoid the feeling that we were walking through the guideposts of Hungarian history. As participants in a ritual intended specifically to recover, recognise, and honour a hitherto neglected gay man, and through him present-day gay Hungarians, we were all very conscious of our presence in a symbolic space from which lesbians and gays were traditionally excluded – of the transgressive nature of our openly proclaimed presence as gays, engaged in a gay-centred ceremonial, in these hallowed avenues of Hungarian history.

Through its use of the cultural-political meanings of space, as well as its rhetoric and discourses, then, the Kertbeny ritual locates Kertbeny himself, and through him, all gay Hungarians, within the terrain of Hungarian national history. Taken together, these characterisations and associations appropriate Kertbeny as an unequivocally Hungarian figure, part of a clearly and specifically Hungarian past, and firmly located in the places of its remembrance. As a ‘gay ancestor’, his presence has critical implications for the relationship of lesbians and gays in general to this national past. It suggests that they were part of it as well – that they, too, belong to this history.

Funerals, kinship, and national legitimacy

In order to understand the significance of this particular framing of history, however, and to go beyond what studies of lesbian and gay history have to say about such projects, we need to turn our attention more closely to the specific form of the ritual involved – that is, to the fact that it is a funerary ritual.
Much work has been done in both anthropology and history on the cultural-political significance of rituals of burial and reburial in eastern Europe. Interestingly, much of this work has focused on Hungary – perhaps because, as historian István Rév has famously noted, as ‘the history of Hungary is one of battles lost, the normal public rituals are therefore funerals and burials rather than victory parades’ (Rév 1995b: 31).

These studies point to the ways in which such rituals have been used to shape and reshape specific kinds of history, particularly national-historical narratives, for political purposes. Thus, in her article on the reburial of Kossuth, quoted earlier, Lampland (1993) argues that the commemorative rituals surrounding Kossuth’s 1894 reburial, by foregrounding interpretations of history that implied both the legitimacy and political independence of a specifically Hungarian nation – functioned as a critical moment in the constitution of Hungarian national identity. Looking at more recent Hungarian history, Susan Gal has argued that the reburial of Béla Bartók in 1988, although orchestrated by the Socialist State and intended to support its legitimacy, evoked long-standing cultural debates about national identity that actually served to undermine the moral authority of Socialist rule, and instead bolster an oppositional vision of national-political community (Gal 1991). Similarly, a number of analysts have commented on the central role played by the 1989 reburial of Imre Nagy, Prime Minister during Hungary’s brief 1956 uprising against Soviet domination, in solidifying political opposition to the socialist state. Through their participation in the public ritual of Nagy’s reburial, certain members of Hungary’s emerging opposition to the Socialist regime connected themselves to a specifically imagined national past, centred on the interpretation of 1956 as a ‘revolution’, rather than a ‘counter-revolution’, as it was officially defined by the regime. They thus gained a powerful cultural legitimacy, which in fundamental ways contradicted that on which Hungary’s socialist regime had for decades sought to ground itself. The reburial therefore shaped in critical ways the cultural-political structures of both the last days of Hungarian socialism and its post-socialist period (Benziger 2000, 2002, Gal 1989, Kürti 1990, Rév 1995b, Verdery 1999).

Katherine Verdery has argued that these kinds of rituals make especially effective claims for national-political legitimacy because they are anthropological kinship rituals par excellence – the core rites of social kinship. As such, they confirm kinship status by connecting actors in the present to the web of kinship relations extending into the past. In anthropologically traditional societies this web demarcates the structure and boundaries of society itself. Funerary rituals thus locate people in their societies, positioning them as ‘proper’ members, with stakes in the society’s past, and therefore its present and future (Verdery 1999).

Verdery suggests that this is important because, as Benedict Anderson and others have argued, like more anthropologically traditional societies, national communities are imagined as kinship communities – based on the belief that the imagined national community of the present stands in a specifically genealogical relationship to the imagined national community of the past. Both the coherence of the present-day national community and the inclusion of particular individuals and groups within it depend on this imagined genealogical embeddedness. 13
This makes funerary rituals particularly significant for national meanings. These kinds of genealogical relationship are often signalled precisely through the ritual recognition of ‘ancestor figures’, through connection with whom their participants insert themselves into the grid of national-genealogical relationship. Such rituals, then, do more than merely reshape history (or even, more specifically, national-historical narratives), they reshape it in ways that position certain identities and communities as more continuously connected to the past, and past communities, than others – as the rightful inheritors of the nation’s history, and therefore as its most rightful present members. They are, in other words, critical legitimating devices for national community.

Thus, by writing and performing gays into history in this particular way, through a funerary ritual with details that invoke a specifically national history, Hungarian gay activists are arguing not merely that gays existed in the past but, much more significantly, that they, like other Hungarians, are deeply interwoven in the webs of national genealogy that bind past and present national communities.

Framing assertions of inclusion in this way is especially important given the widespread hegemony of nationalism and nationalist historical narratives in post-socialist Hungary, as in many other post-socialist countries. The collapse of eastern European socialist regimes was, almost without exception, attended by fundamental crises of cultural-political legitimacy, due in large part to pervasive popular disillusionment with official interpretations of the past – and of the relationship between past, present, and future – on which much of the claims to such legitimacy of those regimes had been grounded. As the Hungarian historian István Rév has described this disenchantment and its consequences:

In the context of the political events, the received, lived, remembered past seemed just not to make sense anymore. In the face of this dead end, the past lost its meaning both for the believers and for the skeptics: for the perpetrators, the collaborators, and even for the dissidents. An alternative story was needed, in the context of which the mosaics … of the past could be rearranged and given new, proper places in the chronology. (Rév 1995a: 9)

Numerous analysts have convincingly argued that, in the vast majority of post-socialist countries, what compensated for this lack of a vision of the past which could support new claims to cultural-political legitimacy was a resurgence of specifically national historical narratives. Thus, in Hungary as in most other eastern European countries, what determines the most meaningful forms of post-socialist cultural and political legitimacy is the ability to situate particular identities and groups within such narrative frameworks, and so to be included in the national communities they establish. Successfully (re)positioning themselves in relation to the resurgent national-historical narratives of post-socialism is, however, especially critical for lesbians and gays and their struggle for inclusion into post-socialist societies. As scholars of nationalism and sexuality such as George Mosse have argued, the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and the commingled denial and fear of homosexual participation in society, have been fundamental to constructions of nationalism and national identity.
These researchers have demonstrated the concrete ways in which men, women, and their relationships are figured in national ideologies as modular ‘sub-units’ of the nation, reproducing in their gendered and sexual practices the body/bodies of the nation and its community. In their central manifestations as reproducers of the nation, these national forms of masculinity and femininity are – critically and specifically – heterosexual, and depend for their maintenance as such on forms of regulation and discipline that rigorously exclude, often by foregrounding as foreign and other, homosexual identities and behaviours. Such work has indicated how specifically sexual distinctions have underpinned in key ways the inclusions and exclusions which national projects and their discourses have made according to ethnic, linguistic, and religious criteria, thus defining the borders that demarcate national communities. In these national discourses, then, lesbians, gays, and other sexual minorities have been systematically excluded not just from history in general but, more specifically, from the very forms of kinship relationship that drive the genealogical processes central to imaginings of both national histories and national communities (Mosse 1985).¹⁸

In this context, the assertions that Hungary’s gay activists are making through the Kertbeny ritual constitute a powerful – and revolutionary – argument for inclusion into Hungarian society. In performing themselves into the national past in this way, they are proposing a vision of history that counters some of the most fundamental exclusions of the dominant narratives of post-socialist society, defiantly suggesting that they are equal and legitimate members of the nation’s past, and that therefore they belong, as legitimate and equal members, in its present as well.

Making transnational gay history

Once again, however, this is not the whole story of the Kertbeny ritual. These specifically national histories are not the only forms of historical narratives which the memorial invokes – and thus connections to specifically national communities are not the only connections it strives to imagine and legitimate. Besides the national connections it constructs, the Kertbeny memorial locates Kertbeny within an explicitly transnational context as well. It thereby weaves both him and the gay historical narrative he grounds into a wider fabric of global history, identity, and community at the same time as it links them to their specifically Hungarian counterparts.

Here, too, the memorial achieves this effect in several distinct ways. First, its speeches, writings, and comments repeatedly stress Kertbeny’s international involvement and renown. Along with noting his literary patriotism and friendships with the giants of Hungarian literature, they point to his reputation as an ‘internationally renowned author’ (László Láner, 2003 memorial speech. Author’s fieldnotes). Additionally, his connections with many of the established icons of a broadly European cultural history are underscored: ‘[a]mong his personal friends were Heine, George Sand, Alfred Musset, the Grimm brothers, and [Hans Christian] Andersen.’ (‘Adakozz a melegemlékmű létrehozásához!’ 2001).
Moreover, both speeches and writings assert Kertbeny’s critical contributions to the developing European discipline of sexology. Every available speech and writing concerning the memorial, for example, makes mention of the vital contribution made by Kertbeny to research on sexuality by coining the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’, and how these terms soon became part of a universal discourse on sexuality. Indeed, the ritual and its discourses consistently highlight Kertbeny’s involvement in this emerging international discourse, emphasising his correspondence and collaboration with better-known sexological researchers such as Karl Ulrichs.

The memorial and its discourses do far more than link Kertbeny to transnational literary and scientific histories, however. They unvaryingly foreground his political activism, citing, for example, his 1869 publishing of pamphlets arguing against Prussian anti-sodomy legislation, and stressing his arguments that states should not interfere in the private lives of homosexuals. Indeed, they explicitly connect Kertbeny’s scientific significance to its specifically political context and consequences, stating, for example, that ‘Kertbeny introduced the word homosexual in the course of the struggle for homosexuals’ rights’. (Takács Judit, 2002 Memorial Speech. Author’s fieldnotes) The ritual thus constructs Kertbeny not merely as someone engaged in research on sexuality, nor even a person representative of a particular sexual identity, but as someone central to this context, and to the emergence of an international sexual-politics movement.

Participants refer repeatedly to his ‘surprisingly modern human rights argumentation’ and claim that ‘[l]ooking back almost one and a half centuries we can state that the case made by Kertbeny helped a significant, modern social movement – the struggle against the discrimination of those who enjoy same-sex relationships – to emerge.’ (Ibid)

Similarly, the opening speech of the memorial ceremony in 2003 labelled Kertbeny’s letters and pamphlets ‘precedent-setting writings’ (Láner László, 2003 Memorial Speech. Author’s fieldnotes) for the international study of sex and sexuality. Here the past constructed is that of a universal ‘modern’ movement, in which Hungarian gays were not only involved, but had an important role.

Once again, as in the case of its construction of national meaning, the ritual’s use of images of space and place is important to its framing of transnational connection. Writings about the ritual represent the very act of establishing a physical memorial to a gay ancestor in ways that suggest both that Hungarian gay activists are part of a larger tradition of the monumental preservation of gay history, and that the Kertbeny monument is an important part of this tradition. These writings explicitly relate the Kertbeny project to others of its kind elsewhere. In one article’s account, this places Hungary on the same plane – albeit in a somewhat qualified manner – as iconic western European sites of lesbian/gay activity and tolerance:

Whoever has been to Amsterdam already knows that the Dutch have their own gay memorial to the homosexual victims of the Holocaust. In our country since last year there has been a pink obelisk in the Fiume St. Cemetery [yet another name for the Kerepesi Cemetery] at which, although it has a different character, those who want to cautiously lay a wreath can do so. (Magyar Narancs 2003, p.13)
Others representations in this vein suggest in their phrasing that the rarity of such memorialisations, ‘even internationally’, situates Hungarian activists as central participants in this form of global sexual-political activism:

Even internationally we can find very few monuments which stand as memorials to ‘the tragedy of gays’ poor, deprived lives. Perhaps the most famous are the three pink marble tombs of the Amsterdam Homo Monument, and the memorial plaque to the martyrs of Mauthausen [a concentration camp in Austria]. Now there is the possibility that in Hungary too we can plan a place of pilgrimage [zarándokhelyet] for gay tourists. (‘Adakozz a melegemlékmű létrehozásához!’ 2001)

Here, being a part of a European tradition of monumental recognition of a gay past also implies being a part of that same past, as well as the common present-day community engaged in its memorialisation.19

The representations of the Kertbeny memorial, then, work to construct Kertbeny not merely as a ‘gay ancestor’ in an abstract sense, nor solely as a specifically ‘national’ Hungarian figure, but also as an ‘important founder of international gay history’ and especially of its history of political activism (‘Adakozz a melegemlékmű létrehozásához!’ 2001). As a result, as well as its other connections, the ritual works to link imaginatively both past and present-day Hungarian lesbians and gays to a global gay history and politics, and therefore to its descendents, the present-day global gay cultural and political community.

The ambiguities of post-socialist belonging

Examining the Kertbeny memorial ritual can expand our understanding of post-socialist reworkings of history and memory, and their cultural-political effects – and therefore of post-socialism itself. Most research on this topic has focused on how such reconfigurings of history establish or contest particular national, ethnic, or religious aspects of the past, and the meanings of these for present-day inclusions and exclusions on the basis of national, ethnic, and religious identities. Making visible reshapings of history and memory that centre on sexuality reveals other domains of exclusion past and present, and angles of challenge and contestation to them – thereby cross-cutting our usual lines of interpretation, which commonly ignore the place of sexual identity in the reworking of history, and thus its repositioning in the postsocialist moment.

By looking at this case of gay history-making we can see that what such histories – and the sexual-politics movements which produce them – propose is not merely presence in history per se, and therefore stronger identities and communities, as well as an unspecified validity in the present. Instead, we can see that the Kertbeny memorial ritual and the history it creates also argues for the inclusion of gays in Hungary’s present-day national community by inserting them into its national history, and therefore its national-
historical community. Even more than this, however, as we have seen, the ritual creates a history that produces and legitimates senses of identity and connections of community that are transnational in character.

Thus, when analysed closely, the Kertbeny ritual appears to construct a history that legitimates complex and multiple identities, with correspondingly complex and multiple connections of community: gay, national, and global. This presents a far more complex picture of history-making projects, and their effects, than either studies of lesbian and gay history or national history-making, considered separately, have typically allowed for. Such a picture increases our appreciation of the range of meanings such projects can and, perhaps often, do create.

Indeed, the very complexity of the identity constructed through the Kertbeny memorial ritual, and of the connections of community it creates, may have certain unexpected consequences. On the surface, at least, these different forms of identity and community produced by the ritual – gay, national, and transnational – appear contradictory. There is therefore the danger that their differing meanings may in fact serve to undermine one another: the transnational meanings making the claims of Hungarian gays to legitimate membership in the Hungarian national community less sustainable, and the specificities of their engagement with Hungarian national-historical narratives compromising their abilities to imagine themselves, and be imagined by others, as members of a global gay community.

Yet it is also possible that these very ambiguities and seeming contradictions are actually grounds for optimism about the potential for real inclusion of lesbians and gays within the boundaries of national community which are – despite the ambiguities mentioned above – still so dominant in post-socialist Hungarian society. For it seems that, in two critical ways, the Kertbeny ritual shows us a reworking of history that is more fundamentally transgressive and contestatory of dominant historical narratives – and thus of the dominant boundaries of legitimacy that they certify – than are more commonly-recognised forms of history-making. First, in constructing an image and sense of identity and community that is simultaneously national and transnational, it challenges the boundaries of national distinction itself. Second, by asserting gay presence in both the past and the present of the nation, it challenges the denial of homosexual presence and participation that has been central to nationalism and national identity, and critical to their other, more commonly recognised exclusions.

Because of the very ambiguities and potential contradictions of identity and community they produce, then, such constructions of history propose a radical expansion of the boundaries of past and present at once broader and farther-reaching: a vision of history, identity, and society that challenges the most foundational and hegemonic assumptions about the boundaries of both nation and national community. If, as Martha Lampland (1993: 33) has stated, the process of creating national identity through national-historical narratives depends ‘upon a radical destruction of historical and cultural complexities drawn from the past,’ then the history made by the Kertbeny ritual offers to restore some of those complexities. It proposes that we recognise not just the presence of gays, lesbians, and other erased and excluded figures, in history and the nation, but the
ambiguous and multiple nature of identity and community themselves. And in proposing to expand the boundaries of history and nation, it thus proposes wider and more complex contours for the borders of present-day Hungarian identity as well.

Indeed, it could be argued that, in this sense, the complexity and ambiguity of these constructions of identity and community have another, deeper significance as well. For the contradictions the Kertbeny memorial ritual produces for gay identity, between national and transnational identifications and connections, in fact mirror some of the central tensions of post-socialist Hungarian society in general: the contradictions of a country and people caught between renewed attachment to national meanings on the one hand and increasingly transnational connections and involvements on the other. This is, of course, a situation given particular force by Hungary’s new position as a member-state of the European Union. And it may well be, in fact, more than anything else, this particular blending of identities and connections that makes it clear that Hungarian lesbians and gays are actually what they claim to be and demand recognition as. Facing the same dilemmas of identity and community as do all Hungarians, and responding to them in very similar patterns of ambiguity and contradiction, lesbian and gay Hungarians clearly reveal themselves to be absolutely normal members of their society.
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Presumably the location was chosen because of Kertbeny’s ill health, and the therapeutic atmosphere of the thermal baths. The humorous irony of this arrangement, however, is hard to ignore – and is certainly not ignored by the present-day lesbian and gay community: like many of Budapest’s numerous thermal baths, the Rudás are notorious within the gay community as one of the city’s primary centres of gay male cruising.

Sources of biographical information about Kertbeny are remarkably limited, particularly in English, for such an influential writer. The information presented here derives largely from two English translations of works originally published in German: Feray and Herzer (1990) and Herzer (1985). From the GLBTQ Online Encyclopedia (http://www.glbtq.com/social-sciences/kertbeny_km.html) (accessed 7/15/04), and from Takács 1997, 2003, 2004a, 2004b.


Indeed, the literature on sexuality and its involvement with post-socialist transformations is still surprisingly limited, with the notable exception of research into the ways in which post-socialism has changed gender relations, and thus significantly impacted certain aspects of the sexuality of women. For some of the very few works published on the subject of non-heteronormative sexualities and their political meanings in post-socialist or post-Soviet societies, see Essig 1999; Long 1999; Baer 2002; Moss 1995; Sándor 1999; Takács 1997, 2004a.

The Hungarian term of closest equivalence to the English ‘gay’ is meleg (which, literally, means ‘warm’), while the word for ‘lesbian’ is leszbikus. These terms have their own complex meanings and histories. For brevity’s sake, however, I translate them here simply as ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’, hoping that this purely practical gesture will be understood as it is intended. It should be noted here that the Kertbeny project and its history-making, despite the critical participation and presence of Judit Takács, has been almost entirely the province of gay men’s activists, with effectively no involvement by lesbian activists. So far, at least, participants in the ritual too have almost all been gay men. This is a situation with important implications of its own which, for reasons of space, I have been unable to go into here. In the past few years there have also been several lesbian-organised history-making projects in Hungary. Elsewhere (see Renkin 2007), I describe these, and discuss the surprising separation between the history-making efforts of lesbians and gay men.

Pink – rózsaszín in Hungarian – is the official colour of lesbians and gays in Hungary, as in many other places.

For more information on Öt Kenyér (as it is commonly known), see http://www.otkenyer.hu.

Anthropologists typically see rituals as specifically formal types of cultural behaviour. They are repetitive, stylized, and stereotyped, and performed in special places at particular times (see, for example, Rappaport 1974). As should be clear from the rest of the discussion in this paper, my conception of ritual also follows closely that of Victor Turner (1969).

For just a small sampling of the by now vast literature on lesbian and gay history and history-making, see Bérbé 1990; Cook 1979; D’Emilio 1992; Duberman 1991; Duberman, Vicinus, and Chauncey 1989; Eaklor 2001; Escoffier 1985; Freedman 2001. In this particular case, it is perhaps telling that Kertbeny himself is rarely recognized for his contributions – most obviously, but not limited to, the coining of the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ – to sexological discourse. Because he first coined the terms in a private letter to the German sexologist Karl Ulrichs, both within and outside Hungary credit for the terms’ creation is often given to other figures who had more to do with their public dissemination and popularization. The “recovery” of Kertbeny effected by the memorial ritual is thus multiple in its implications.
10 As the Hungarian historian István Rév put it, Petőfi ‘personified 1848 in the historical consciousness of the Hungarians’ (Rév 1995b: 18). Interestingly, and ironically, it turns out that besides his significance as an icon of Hungarian history and the location of his memorial in the Nemzeti Temető, Petőfi shares still one more characteristic with Kertbeny: the rather insecure foundation of his national identity. As Rév mentions, though only parenthetically, Petőfi ‘had a Slovak mother and a father […] with a Slavic name, Petrovich, which he later changed to the more Hungarian-sounding Petőfi’ (Rév 1995b: 19).


12 See also Lukács 1988.


14 The widespread nature and effectiveness of this kind of recognition has been brilliantly analysed by the scholars of the Invention of Tradition school. Foundational of this tradition is the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), who examine in detail the establishment and ritualisation, for specific – and typically national – political purposes, of a number of ‘hallowed’ western European cultural traditions. Interestingly, Verdery seems to argue that, in addition to their deeply-rooted social meanings, the effectiveness and power of these kinds of rituals depends as well on certain innate properties of the body, notably their immanent and indisputable corporeality. While a more extensive discussion of this issue is not really central to the purposes of this paper, I feel that such a position is contrary to the fundamental philosophical perspective employed here, and am thus compelled to note my disagreement. I would argue instead that it is more useful to explain how the power of even objects of apparently ultimate and irreducible physicality or corporeality actually emerges from the cultural construction of their meanings - especially through practices such as the oft-repeated (again, especially in eastern Europe/Hungary) use of bodies as the ritual foci of performances which are, as Verdery herself so clearly points out, so richly and effectively invested with cultural and political meanings by the concrete and specific actions of their participants. Such explanations are more in conformance with a practice-centred approach to anthropological (or other) analysis, as well as with the arguments of a wide range of feminist scholars who strive to treat the body as a sign constructed within a system of signs, and the work of performance theorists and philosophers of embodiment such as Judith Butler, who emphasise that even the most basic meanings of bodies are constituted precisely through the practical and repeated performances in which they engage. For these theorists, bodies – like other objects such as, for the case at hand, the other central objects of funerary rituals: gravestones, and cemeteries themselves – are constituted as having special symbolic power through the ways in which they are given meaning in the course of these kinds of performance, instead of having any particular inherent meanings of their own (see, for example, Butler 1990, 1993). Indeed, it seems to me that this is the position that Verdery’s own argument actually supports, despite her own remarks.

15 I use the term ‘legitimating’ here advisedly, and despite the fact that in her 1999 book, *The political lives of dead bodies*, Verdery herself states that she prefers not to use this term. It seems to me, however, that it is the most accurate descriptive term available.


17 This is not to say, of course, that there are not, and have long been, parallel – and indeed, often fundamentally entwined – historical narratives stressing Hungary’s place in ‘Europe’ and ‘the West’, and therefore producing rather different forms of legitimacy based on conformity with and connection to ‘normal’, global, and European society. Important though these narratives are, however, I would argue that in Hungary, as in most other post-socialist countries, the culture and political power of specifically national historical narratives has been, and continues to be, preeminent. For discussion of a specific case in which such primacy is amply demonstrated, see Verdery 1996, ch. 5, ‘Civil society or nation? “Europe” in the symbolism of post-socialist politics’. More recently, as well, the continuing power of national narratives and politics in post-socialist countries has been strongly attested to by the emergence in several of these countries of a certain degree of popular and political backlash against the perceived impositions of the European community of which they are now members – a backlash most commonly framed in specifically national terms.
See also Berlant and Freeman 1992, Berlant 1997; Edelman 1993; Kürti 1991; Munt 1998; Parker et al. 1992; Theweleit 1989. Indeed, taking such arguments even further, Queer Theorists have argued that the heteronormative boundaries on which such exclusions depend have been and are critical to the ways in which the structures and relations of past and present-day European social communities are organised and maintained in general. Here I am thinking of the arguments of Butler 1990, 1991; Rubin 1975, 1984; Sedgwick 1985, 1990.

It is interesting and, perhaps, useful to note that while in their discourses surrounding the Kertbeny memorial gay activists do refer to Kertbeny’s contact with and involvement in European culture (as evidenced by the mention of European authors and artists above, and in the specific mentions of what are clearly specifically European monuments to lesbian/gay presence, also above) they at no point refer to the notion of ‘Europe’ or ‘European history’ as such. Instead they speak consistently of ‘international’ connections and influence. In other contexts and utterances both activists and non-activists make it clear that this internationally-imagined community very centrally includes lesbians and gays in the United States, as well as many other places. Thus, in their use of a post-socialist spatial symbolism to express their ideological proposals for a more inclusive society, they move both within and beyond the primary emphasis on the symbolism of ‘Europe’ that Katherine Verdery has described for other post-socialist activists concerned with the building of ‘civil society’ (see ch. 5, ‘Civil society or nation? “Europe” in the symbolism of postsocialist politics’ in Verdery 1996).