

Re-Imagining Hungarianness: Re-Interpreting Archival Films in the Context of Hungarian Folk Dances

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Abstract: This essay examines the role of archival ethnographic films of Hungarian folk dance and music in the production of cultural memory. Drawing on short-term, immersive ethnographic fieldwork in Hungary, I delineate the role of these films in preserving folk culture and cultivating national identity. I argue that archival ethnographic films function as a technology through which an ‘imagined Hungarianness’ is constructed, embodied, and transmitted. Through examples of contemporary folk dancing, I demonstrate how archival media continues to enforce a fixed notion of authenticity deeply intertwined with ethno-nationalism, heteronormativity, and cultural purity. However, by engaging with these archival materials through a queer lens, dancers generate forms of counter-memory that disrupt institutional narratives. Focusing on historical footage of male intimacy, contemporary choreographic reworkings of gendered dance vocabularies, and alternative, queer readings of historical recordings, I illustrate how queer and feminist dance practices question and subvert the heteronormative interpretations that dominate the field. Ultimately, this essay argues that these creative reinterpretations disrupt the archive’s regulating power, transforming it into a site of possibility where practitioners can construct counter-memories to challenge dominant narratives of what it means to embody Hungarian identity.

Keywords: cultural memory, Táncház, Hungarian folk dance, queer studies, nationalism, authenticity

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At a *tánc ház* (Hungarian dance house), it is customary for partners to thank one another at the end of a dance. The dance partners often embrace to express their elation, the man lifting the woman up in one swift motion before placing her back on the floor. However, during my ethnographic fieldwork in Budapest in the summer of 2022, a different image was brought to my attention by a colleague and several interlocutors. This image came from an ethnographic film depicting two men dancing together, who, at the end of their piece, share a tender kiss of appreciation. Inspired by this film, as well as by an LGBTQ+ folk dance session organised by three young dancers, my research investigates how queer Hungarians – defined broadly as individuals who question the heteronormative structures of their dance practice – navigate traditional dance spaces. Specifically, I examine how the teaching and practice of Hungarian folk dance become a site for performing an ‘imagined Hungarianness’ that espouses rigid heteronorms and nationalistic values.

Drawing on Jan Assmann’s framework of cultural memory, in this essay I analyse how archives function as more than just repositories of historical dance and music and how they are active resources used to construct national identity. I explore their role in producing cultural memory through their deployment in both professional and amateur dance education, spanning formal institutions and social spaces like the *tánc ház*. Finally, I present several cases where folk dancers turn to archival ethnographic films in response to the exclusions they experience in contemporary traditional dance spaces. I argue that these dancers negotiate rigid structures by subverting and reworking archival material. Through these examples, I demonstrate how ethnographic sources can become sites where memory is reinterpreted, ultimately challenging the imagined nationhood and compulsory heterosexuality that these archives were originally used to construct.

A kiss from the past

During a day-long visit to the Institute for Musicology in Budapest, my colleagues and I were shown around the archives, where recordings largely spanning the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are preserved. Containing everything from music recorded on X-ray films to the extensive volumes of György Martin’s foundational work,¹ the archive is undeniably a site of profound importance for research into the music and dance of the region. While I was working in one of the research rooms, a colleague came running into the room and said emphatically, ‘I need to show you something!’ Nearby, institute employees who were experts in Labanotation were analysing and notating dances from these archival films. One employee was playing a video of two shepherds, Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós, performing *Botoló* – a traditional dance performed with a stick. As we watched this archival footage to-

Figure 1a: An embrace, Screenshot from the ethnographic film of Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós dancing *Botoló*



Source: Felső-Tisza vidéki pásztorbotoló, 1968 (Upper Tisza Region Shepherds' Stick Dance, 1968) (Hagyományok Háza 2016), 01:54.

Figure 1b: A kiss, Screenshot from the ethnographic film of Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós dancing *Botoló*



Source: Felső-Tisza vidéki pásztorbotoló, 1968 (Upper Tisza Region Shepherds' Stick Dance, 1968) (Hagyományok Háza 2016), 03:28.

gether, the profound joy of the two men became apparent, their mutual tenderness palpable even through the aged film. At the end of their dance, they kiss.

When many of my interlocutors learned that my research focused on how queer Hungarians navigate traditional dance spaces, this film was frequently the first example they invoked due to its local popularity. For many, this kiss – a gesture of male intimacy that would be considered highly taboo in contemporary conservative Hungarian society – was an exciting piece of history to share. For others, the film's mere existence, and our shared awareness of it, served as a profound source of collective joy. While the sight of men embracing the women they have just danced is commonplace, I have never witnessed men embrace each other so tenderly – let alone kiss – during a social dance.

Communities often look to the past for historical precedent or validation. In my home country of India, for instance, scholars and activists frequently turn to ancient temple sculptures depicting non-heteronormative sexualities and genders. Similarly, for many of the interlocutors I spoke with, this archival film functioned as a vital historical resource, allowing them to subvert and question dominant state narratives about traditional gender roles and essentialised national identity.

Cultivating Hungarianness

The geopolitical aspects of the Hungarian folk-dance tradition are visible even in educational spaces. In every classroom I visited at the University of Szeged, a map of the country was displayed featuring two distinct state borders: the contemporary borders and those of so-called 'Greater Hungary'. As I began attending various *táncház*– social dance events held in culture houses or local bars – I observed how these informal spaces facilitated both the transmission of dance technique and the active performance of national identity. Dancing into the dawn, we were all immersed in the rich dances and music of the region. However, it was only later that I realised many of these dances did not originate within the nation's current borders, but rather in Romanian Transylvania and Moldova. Even within the formal historiography of Hungarian ethnography, much of the archival footage we studied had been recorded in Transylvania.

This geographical disconnect stems from Hungary's extensive history of ethnographic documentation of folk culture, which began long before the 1920 Treaty of Trianon redrew the region's borders, placing Transylvania outside the jurisdiction of the modern Hungarian state. The Hungarian Academy of Sciences began systematically collecting and publishing folk songs as early as 1832, aiming to institutionalise scientific preservation and cultivate a distinct national taste (Sárosi 1993; Taylor 2021). By the 1970s, as rapid urbanisation triggered anxieties over the loss of rural folk her-

itage, revivalists found themselves equipped with a vast wealth of material from the collections of Béla Bartók, Zoltán Kodály, and László Lajtha.

The first urban *táncház* was organised within this revival movement in Budapest in 1972 by György Martin, Ferenc Novák, and Sándor Tímár. Modelled on traditional village dance events in Szék, Transylvania, the movement rapidly grew in popularity and remains highly influential today. The archival films collected by ethnographers like György Martin serve as primary sources of authority for the transmission and pedagogy of these dances. This archival learning is accompanied by attendance at dance camps organised in rural Romania, particularly in Transylvania, which retains a significant Hungarian-speaking or ‘ethno-Hungarian’ population. As Mary Taylor observes, the *táncház* movement ‘took shape by adopting village forms as part of the aesthetic pursuit of authenticity and related ideas of function. Táncház adopted certain forms of etiquette from the village – for example as related to gender roles, even as it adapted or abandoned other things’ (in Kőszeghy 2023). It was only after studying this history that I realised how the *táncház* commemorates an idealised

Figure 2: Verbunk, originally danced by Szuromi Mariska on the left, and more recently danced by Alma Tóth on the right.



Source: Akkor és most – Tyukodi asszonyverbunk (Then and Now – asszonyverbunk (recruitment dance) from Tyukod (Hagyományok Háza n.d.), 00:17.

'Hungarianness' that inherently carries a colonial imagination, functioning to reify an ethno-linguistic state that transcends contemporary political borders.

Consequently, reproducing dances exactly as captured in ethnographic footage has become standard practice in contemporary Hungarian dance instruction, serving as the most accessible method for acquiring folk movement vocabularies. These films are routinely treated as a 'pure source' (Hooker 2008: 92). 'The goal was and is to collect documents of "authentic folk dance" into an extensive archive and to distribute the knowledge systematically in the form of academic monographs, compendia, type-catalogues and motif-indexes' (Felföldi 1999: 55). Over time, these canonical recordings have inscribed a rigid understanding of what it means to embody and perform 'authentic' folk dance within the public consciousness. The repeated social practice of this 'authentic' dancing turns cultural memory into everyday performance. These mimetic routines operate as secular rituals, allowing participants to relive and embody a romanticised 'lost past'.

Jan Assmann (2011) deploys the term 'cultural memory' to describe the externalisation and transmission of shared meaning across generations. Folk dancing in Hungary can serve as a prime case study for the construction of this cultural memory: it is formed through the systematic deployment of archival ethnographic films to forge a unified national identity. This process explicitly privileges specific historical narratives, rigid gender roles, and naturalised ethno-linguistic borders. This 'institutionally and artificially' created idea of Hungarianness – sustained by ethnographic methodologies of collection, transcription, and technological storage – extends the initial cultural practices and their intended meanings far beyond their original temporal and communicative contexts. Consequently, the application of ethnographic materials in both contemporary dance instruction and the broader *táncház* movement 'encompass[es] all such functional concepts as tradition forming, past reference, and political identity or imagination' (Assmann 2011: 8).

Challenging 'authenticity'

In a typical *táncház* one would rarely, if ever, witness two men dancing together. Equally, one would seldom see a woman perform the *legényes* – a highly virtuosic men's solo dance. When questioning these boundaries, a common response from practitioners is that such transgressions are simply not 'authentic'.

To challenge this exclusion and create safer spaces for expression through movement for the LGBTQ+ community in Budapest, three young Hungarian dancers organised an LGBTQ+ inclusive folk-dance workshop on 6 November 2021, titled *OMOH MOVES 001: LMBTQ Néptáncműhely / Turbina*. The initiative provoked immediate institutional and social anxiety, prompting prominent professional folk dancers and

conservative commentators to publish disapproving articles in online media outlets. One prominent critique argued that introducing an LGBTQ+ framework alters the essential character of the tradition to such an extent that it can no longer be considered the same language or culture of self-expression. Ironically, while this writer mislabelled the event a *táncház*, the organisers had explicitly framed it as a folk-dance workshop rather than a traditional social dance house.

Further articulating this institutional backlash, another writer asserted that ‘at the heart of things is the problem that the image of people and society in the world that creates and lives up to folk traditions is completely different from that of the LGBTQ movement. The two are incompatible’ (Szilvay 2021). Szilvay’s rhetoric highlights how deeply notions of folk authenticity are entwined with ideas of and anxiety over cultural purity. Within this conservative imaginary, if traditional gender roles are not mirrored exactly, the dance and the broader heritage it represents lose their right to the culture’s name.

Furthermore, folk culture is explicitly framed as a national ‘mother tongue’ (Taylor 2008: 10). The conflation of Hungarian identity with the embodiment of state-sanctioned culture is historically rooted and is legitimised by the often-cited assertion of Pál Teleki – Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Hungary during the interwar period – that the public must be taught ‘to speak Hungarian, to sing in Hungarian, to dance in Hungarian. Because one who does that, also thinks in Hungarian’ (in Pálfi 1970: 124). When the identity of the nation is so inextricably bound to folk culture and the Hungarian language, it poses an added challenge for queer Hungarians, particularly because terms such as queer, gay, lesbian, and transgender originate in the English language and are often framed by domestic conservative rhetoric as foreign imports. Indeed, the organisers of the LGBTQ+ folk dance session highlighted that it was the very introduction of this Western acronym into a traditional cultural practice that triggered the controversy. By introducing the LGBTQ+ label, something can be considered fundamentally simple as role-switching in partnered dances or a woman performing the traditionally male *legényes* was condemned as a direct violation of the nation’s linguistic and cultural heritage.

During my fieldwork, a *táncház* participant observed that despite former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán never having been a folk dancer or participant himself, his administration successfully constructed an exclusionary discourse of ‘we are this, and you are us’. Here, ‘this’ refers to the traditional folk dance and music culture that the revivalist movement embodies, particularly in urban environments. This deliberate construction of ‘us’ by the Fidesz government shaped the community identity within the *táncház*. The Hungarian state excelled at deploying heritage as a form of soft power to construct collectivity and systematically regulate national culture through

cultural institutions (Carbó-Catalan, Roig-Sanz 2022; Dubois 1999; Thièsse 1999). Such regulation relied heavily on framing external influences as existential threats. As Benedict Anderson (1991: 149) famously noted, '[n]ationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contamination'. In contemporary Hungary, where queerness is routinely disparaged as a corrupting Western influence – with Orbán himself characterising migration, gender, and wokeism as viruses from the West (Losonczi 2023) – Anderson's conceptualisation can be applied to view this homophobic social sphere. While racism and homophobia are distinct forms of structural oppression, I propose that within a homophobic and xenophobic nation-state, any imprint of queer desire on folk heritage is similarly treated as a form of cultural contamination that violates the imagined ethos of the nation. 'When examining the idea of culture, we find ourselves in the domain of the immaterial, the intangible, and the imaginary, but culture has material, tangible, and real effects.' (Carbó-Catalan, Roig-Sanz 2022: 34) Cultural houses, archives, and tangible responses such as those presented above are proof of the tangible effects of the power of culture and contribute to the continued cultivation of Hungarian culture and cultural memory, just as the continued popularity of dance houses does.

However, as deeply politicised as the discourse of 'authenticity' remains, it is not an entirely sealed concept. During a conversation with another interlocutor, he expressed deep scepticism towards treating ethnographic films as the sole, or even the primary, source of cultural identity. He pointed out that there could be an alternative, deeply personal definition of 'authentic' within the culture: 'if I am honest' he says, 'I think honesty means authentic ... What is in the film is still authentic because it's *hiteles* [honest/credible]'. Conceptualising authenticity as credible due to its honesty offers a radical counter-narrative; it suggests that the value of archival footage lies not in its capacity to enforce rigid choreographic discipline, but in its preservation of and access to some instances of raw expression.

It is precisely this internal honesty that renders the archival recordings of the *Botoló* performed by Horpácsik János and Rózsa Miklós so remarkable and memorable. In their movement, the severe bodily curtailment and hyper-gendered policing seen in contemporary *táncház* performances are entirely absent. Instead, the footage captures a moment of profoundly uninhibited dancing, characterised by a visceral expression of joy and shared connection. By reclaiming *hiteles* (authentic/credible) as an affective, emotional state rather than a regulatory standard, queer practitioners can look to the archive as a site where the essence of movement practice – and thus a historical precedent for bodily freedom – can still be found. The archive is transformed from a prison of tradition into a repository of the very materials necessary to subvert, invert, and reimagine traditional choreographic boundaries.

In her movement research project titled 'Leányos', professional folk dancer Szívós Kata explores the dynamics of the traditional female and male dances. This negotiation is visualised in the short documentary film *Leányos* (directed by Noémi Varga in co-production with Dominika Trapp for Trapp's solo exhibition *Don't Lay Him on Me* at Trafó Gallery). The film opens with archival ethnographic footage of a woman performing a solo dance, providing the literal, historical foundation from which Szívós draws to mount her contemporary, subversive choreography. This visual baseline is accompanied by a narration in which Szívós reflects on her relationship with both women's and men's dance traditions. Reflecting on her training, Szívós notes, 'I only felt constrained by female dances in retrospect. I just never felt entirely fulfilled by women's folk dances' (in Varga 2020). By translating this somatic dissatisfaction onto the contemporary stage, Szívós liberates her practice from traditional gatekeeping, using the vocabulary of contemporary dance to cultivate choreographic transformation. Driven by her own desires within the medium, she expands the physical possibilities of what female-read bodies can experience. Yet, even as she blurs the boundaries between masculine and feminine vocabularies, she simultaneously navigates the enduring weight of the gender binary: 'The idea was to stage male parts of folk dances, which I love to dance, in a way where it is not only a woman dancing a man's piece' (in Varga 2020).

This dialectic between archival constraint and creative subversion was further illustrated by another interlocutor, who introduced a historical dance ritual from the region of Csíkszentdomokos (located in the Székely Land of Transylvania, which is known as Sândominic in Romanian). He shared a video recording of a traditional wedding performance in which two men mimic a mother and father bear engaged in a sexual act. In the footage, the women standing in the background can be seen chuckling, indicating that this playful, animalistic mimicry operates as a form of ribald, carnivalesque satire. However, the aggressive parody with which these sexual acts are performed can also be read as fundamentally sexist and homophobic, framing same-sex intimacy purely as a grotesque punchline for a heterosexual audience. In response to this archival erasure, my interlocutor expressed a desire to choreograph a contemporary piece featuring naked, moustachioed male dancers to intentionally highlight the latent homoeroticism of these movements. His creative vision seeks to reclaim the dance's kinetic vocabulary, stripping it of its homophobic humour in order to re-interpret the choreography without the heteronormative assumption that gay intimacy is inherently ridiculous. Yet, the material consequences of state-enforced homophobia severely limit the execution of such artistic research; when asked if this performance would cause a scandal in contemporary Hungary, my interlocutor admitted that he would be forced to stage the project abroad due to a pervasive and justified fear of hostile public reactions.

Figure 3a: Still 1: Feeling constrained by female dances.



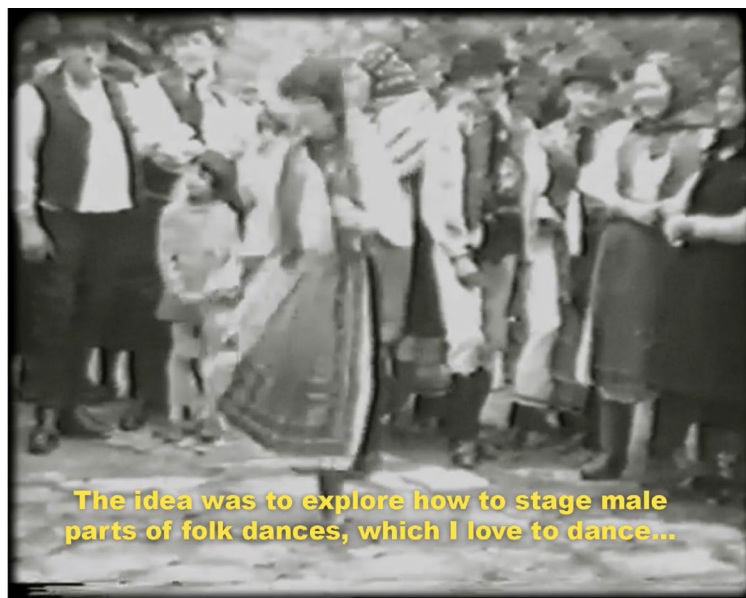
Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:04.

Figure 3b: Still 2: An urge for fulfilment.



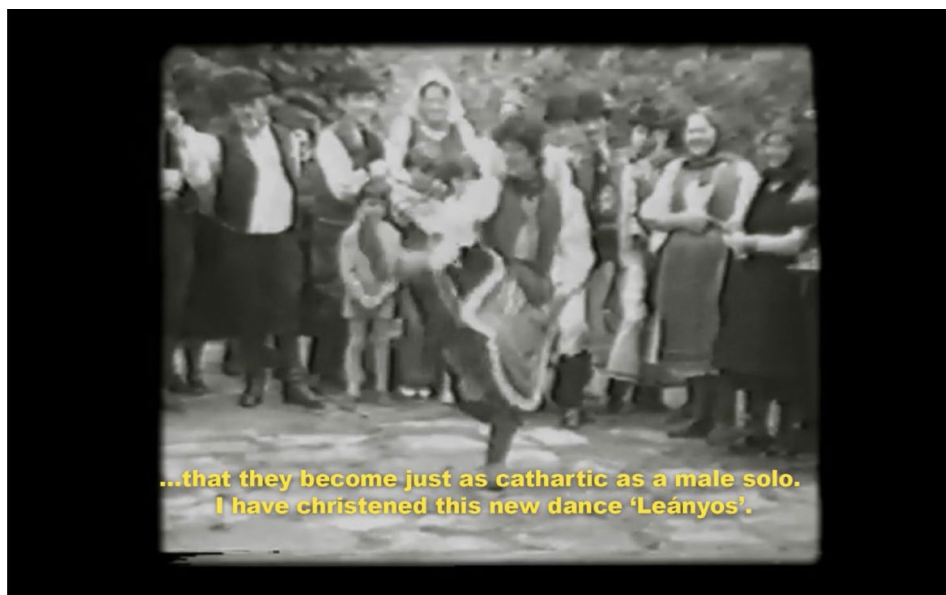
Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:05.

Figure 3c: Still 3: Exploring male folk dances.



Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:11.

Figure 3d: Still 4: Movement that leads to catharsis.



Source: *Leányos* (Varga 2020), 00:33.

By reinterpreting the folk archives to serve their own creative visions, these artists actively disidentify with the majoritarian public sphere. They employ a strategy of reading and embodying ethnographic films that ‘works on and against dominant ideology’ (Muñoz 1999: 11), thereby fracturing the imposed alignment of folk culture with heterosexual Hungarianness. Through this somatic subversion, they directly challenge a highly cultivated, institutionalised cultural memory. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for an alternative collective memory – one that arises because contemporary socio-political realities inevitably reshape and contest historically fossilised cultural practices (Halbwachs 1992: 101).

Concluding remarks

In one conversation, an interlocutor recounted rumours of an elusive archival film held in an unnamed private collection, which reportedly depicts a tall, slender woman performing *legényes*. An interlocutor who was aware of the film mentioned that the dancer might have been transgender. Within a heteronormative framework, such accounts are often dismissed as exceptions or heresay. However, the hope of marginalised communities, that these hidden archives might yield material proof of queerness shows how they engage with the past. By searching for historic precedents of gender and sexual fluidity within the archival record, these willing publics craft a counter-memory that disrupts the myth of an eternally ‘pure’, heteronormative national history.

Ultimately, this essay demonstrates how archival ethnographic films – and their contemporary application in dance transmission and performance – form the bedrock for a state-sanctioned, ethno-nationalist, and heteronormative cultural memory centred entirely around the romanticised figure of ‘the folk’. By tracing the historical trajectory of the *táncház* movement, this study delineates the role of archival media in the institutional governance of bodies and the policing of gendered norms within contemporary social dance spaces. It examines the interventions made by practitioners seeking to reclaim these spaces for marginalised identities excluded by dominant heteronormative structures. As this essay illustrates, these subversions manifest as a ‘queer reading’ of existing ethnographic films. Driven by the very curtailment and disciplining regulations that govern traditional archives, practitioners subversively repurpose these historical records. In doing so, they dismantle the restrictive definitions of ‘Hungarianness’ derived from these collections, transforming a heritage designed to bind them into an accessible site of choreographic liberation and counter-memory.

Furthermore, these interventions expose the strategic silences embedded within the ethnographic film archive, highlighting how ethnographers can curate and present traditional dances. Control is established not merely through preservation, but

through the subsequent interpretation of what counts as national culture. Thus, excavating archival moments that can be read beyond heteronormative ideals operates as a potent form of political dissent against institutional soft power. By reclaiming these suppressed histories from the margins of the frame, queer practitioners fundamentally rupture the dominant cultural memory.

Embodying non-heteronormative movement – whether in public spheres or private spaces – challenges the regulatory regimes of majoritarian spaces. These practices necessitate the following enquiry– what if we allow our bodies to forget their nationalist and heteronormative conditioning? What if we grant ourselves an honest form of expression? In doing so, queer practitioners dismantle the rigidity of the archive, reminding us that the ethnographic films weaponised by nationalist institutions are merely culture frozen in time – a single, static realisation of human movement masquerading as an eternal, idealised national subject.

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