

HUNGARIAN INDIGENEITY: FOLK ART AS A TOOL OF GLOBAL POSITIONING

A THESIS

Presented to

Colorado College

For the Independently Designed Major Critical Art Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Bachelor of Arts

By

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April 2024

Supervised by Jameel Paulin and Karen Roybal

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Marianne Strong. It is because of her willingness to share herself with me throughout my life that the ideas for this thesis have formed. Her support and care for me throughout my college experience has encouraged me to fully engage academically and “live it up”.

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## **Acknowledgments**

Without the support of my family, friends, and professors, this thesis would not have been possible. I am grateful for my advisors Professor Karen Roybal and Professor Jameel Paulin for the patience and time they have dedicated to helping me craft my major and thesis project. I also extend gratitude to Professor Heidi R. Lewis, Professor Kathy Giuffre, Professor Nadia Guessous, Professor Pallavi Sriram, and Lucie Raphael whos classes and guidance made this thesis possible. Thank you especially to Professor Chantal Figueroa, whos teachings and care awakened a critical consciousness in me that made my experience at Colorado College possible. Thank you also to the authors of the sources cited in this thesis. It is a privilege to engage with scholars I admire on this project.

Finally, I extend thanks to my friends and family, who have made my education possible in a multitude of ways. Thank you specifically to my mom, dad, sibling, and grandparents, as well as my close friends who inspire thoughtfulness and joy.

## Introduction

As a child, I'd listen to my grandmother on the phone in the mornings with friends living in a city nine hours ahead, speaking a language I, nor anyone else in my family could understand. I was jealous of friends with parents who spoke any language besides English and who had as a result learned how to communicate from toddlerhood in multiple tongues. I resented my grandmother for keeping Hungarian to herself so that I could only hear it in half conversations spoken into her white plastic cord phone. After traveling to Hungary for the first time at age ten, the whole family seemed to share my frustration that while we had the connection that made fluency possible, we were embarrassingly incapable of communication. While on this trip, my father brought up a news article from my grandmother's early years in the United States, in which she was interviewed by the Beeville, Texas paper about her immigrant status, since she was one of few in the small town in the early 1960s. My grandmother avoided any questions that might enunciate her difference, instead focusing on her thrill at living in the U.S. and how her move had granted her the chance to have a washer and dryer in her home.

Despite her discomfort in her otherness and her subsequent assimilation in language and in cultural practice, my grandmother's home has always served visually as an ode to Hungary. Her living room boasts a wall of decorative plates painted carefully with traditional Hungarian folk patterns, and behind a glass case above her dining table is a traditional men's folk blouse. Also displayed are clay figures of girls in traditional Hungarian wear, singing, reading, and cutting a loaf of bread. These doll-like figures have always fascinated me, and I've used them as an unspoken metric for how to be Hungarian, something that seemed authentic and desirable but kept at a distance. I hoped to be as comfortably and demurely rooted in some undefinable 'Hungarianness' as they seemed to be. These figures were the works of Margit Kovács, a well

known and widely celebrated Hungarian ceramicist who also happened to be friends with my great grandfather, a Hungarian Jew who spent his younger years in circles of artists and supported his artist friends later while he worked traditional jobs in finance.

His dedication to visual culture, along with the fact that in her initial emigration from Hungary my grandmother left on foot with few material possessions, are possible answers to why she is seemingly proud of the visual indicators of being Hungarian, but hesitant to discuss it otherwise. I am curious, however, whether her tendency might be a shared symptom of the Hungarian state's relationship to the visual, as it's clamored to self define amidst the implementation of enlightenment values and the following categorization of nations based on its standards. A visit to most places in Hungary, especially ones most inhabited by tourists, is overwhelmingly visually cohesive, in my experience more so than in other European countries. Hungarian folk patterns decorate store fronts, park benches, manhole covers, and a wide array of souvenirs like mugs and clothes, and Hungarian flags hang from many public buildings, asserting a homogenous people whose shared visual traditions denote their indigeneity to the region.

Informed by these experiences, in this thesis I examine the Hungarian relationship to their own indigeneity, and how their construction of the national self, as it relates to its histories, land, and practice, is visually asserted to maintain agency in their global positioning. The popular conception in Hungary has historically been and currently is to understand Hungary as a victim of Western imperialism. Current Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has asserted this logic and carried it to conservatively informed modern-day implications, stating that the indigenous Hungarians would be threatened by any non-ethnically Hungarian residents, most recently focused on the impossibility of hosting Arab and Ukrainian refugees (despite their generally non

Western status). Orbán and those who follow his logic clearly twist the philosophy of indigenous sovereignty which Hungarians have adopted from indigenous North Americans, using it to assert a thinly veiled desire to maintain a Hungarian ethnostate.

In the following pages, I discuss how this desire has emerged and manifested in the last century, understanding Hungary's popular visual culture as a tool for its implementation. Specifically, I'll use Margit Kovács's well received work as a case study, noting the power in the use of the ceramic medium, folk themes, Christian motifs, the human form, and maps. Additionally, I'll consider Kovács as an individual and recognize how her role in Hungary's national definition allowed for her individual autonomy, both as a woman and a Jew in the mid twentieth century. Finally, I'll use the decolonial theory that consistently informs my analysis as well as assessments of Kovács's later works to consider Hungary's potential to align with a global decolonial movement.

### **Hungarian National Identity Pre-Trianon**

In 1920, the Allied Powers of World War One instated the Treaty of Trianon, which divided the previous Austro-Hungarian Empire. Specifically, the treaty drew new borders for formerly Hungarian ruled territories, which became parts of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. Hungary's borders shrunk by nearly 70% with its implementation and ethnic Hungarians living in these newly non-Hungarian ruled territories adjusted to new governments without Hungarian plebiscites (Britannica). Art Historian Terri Switzer analyzes the development of an essential ethnic Hungarian character in the years 1860-1920, prior to the implementation of this treaty, focusing on how visual culture was employed. She theorizes that ethnic Hungarians living in the Hungarian ruled portion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire followed the European

trend of the 1800s, where traditional folk practices and visual mediums were revitalized to assert a nation's difference from surrounding others and ultimately self-define (Switzer 2002:2).<sup>1</sup>

Switzer cites the emerging German philosophy of Romanticism, the recent Napoleonic Wars, and competitive colonization projects all as catalysts for the general European inclination toward national definition through practice of and newfound pride in traditional practices.

The prevalence of colonial practice during the 1800s and its guiding philosophy of Enlightenment are the most significant factors in understanding Europe's inclination toward proud and public national definition (Switzer 2002:2). Enlightenment theory, which developed the century prior in France, was used to justify imperialism, given that its values of progress, rationality, and logic were assigned as natural to the residents of some majority white nations, and others in majority non-white nations were considered essentially and undesirably 'barbaric' as is noted by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 1983:5). By reasserting their folk traditions, European Nations could position their pasts as more evolved than the current states of the countries they sought to colonize. In a time when progress was valued, they strove to assert themselves as especially and essentially more refined than their current and potential colonies. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said writes that the Occident, or the West, cannot be conceptualized without creating a 'naturally inferior' and less 'evolved' Orient (or East) as its Other. This Other cannot, because of their very nature, meet the expectations of the Enlightenment's delineated modernity (Said 1979:6). I employ Said and Anderson's theories both to clarify the original Hungarian intentions behind their national definition, and because, as I will continue to reveal, the distinction between being Eastern or Western has proved complex

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<sup>1</sup> I understand this practice for Hungarians as a discursive development of unique indigeneity, a practice which took shape especially post-Trianon, and which I will discuss in the following pages.

for Hungarians. They've found themselves "semi-peripheral" to the imperial privileges of Western Europe (Boatcă 2020:398).

Switzer argues that as Hungary participated in the European trend of revitalizing traditional visual folk practice, they naively revealed themselves as more 'Oriental' than nations such as France and Germany, and therefore became understood as its European 'Other' (Switzer 2002:2).<sup>2</sup> According to Switzer, the Hungarians revealed their past as aligning more with barbarism than progressiveness (Switzer 2002:2). Despite the fact that evidence of this was apparently found in their visual folk culture, Hungarians were really disallowed full participation in European 'progress' because of their racial categorization, with visual culture acting as later proof of their non-whiteness, rather than an independent indicator of the associated barbarism. During Switzer's period of analysis, ethnic Hungarians were decidedly not white. Perhaps based on the fact that ethnic Hungarians originally descended from the Ural region of Central Russia and likely in part because of their typical physical presentation (not as often blonde and fair skinned as their Western counterparts), census reports from the Habsburg Monarchy which labeled Germans, Czechs, Slovenes, Italians and Romanians living in the empire as European, classified Hungarians as Asian along with the additional 'Others' of Europe, including Armenians, Roma, and Jews (Csősz et al. 2016:1; Switzer 2002:10).

In *Toward a Decolonial Feminism*, Maria Lugones expands on Said and Anderson's assertions that enlightenment values were considered naturally existent in some groups of people and nonexistent in others. She delineates specifically that the created identities of whiteness, maleness and masculinity, and straightness have been attached to rationality and the ability to participate in modernity, while non-whiteness, femaleness and femininity, and queerness were equated with emotionality and an inability to move beyond the corporeal self, and therefore an

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<sup>2</sup> By thinking from a more global perspective, the idea of "European Other" becomes ironic.



inability to progress (Lugones 2009). Though the Hungarians had political control over a significant portion of land which was home to many ethnic groups under the Hapsburg Empire and had some imperial power, in their attempt to assert this further, their “not-quite-whiteness” inhibited them (Kalmar 2022).

### **Hungarian National Identity Post-Trianon**

After the instatement of the Treaty of Trianon, Hungarians developed a definite awareness of their relation to Western Europe. The overwhelming Hungarian response was to regard the treaty as a national tragedy, both because Hungarians had been separated from each other by borders, and because their shrunken domain diminished their resources during a period of industrialization in Europe as a whole, further othering them from the rapidly ‘progressing’ Western Europe (Kinchin 165:2009)<sup>3</sup>. As the treaty was enforced by the Allied Powers (made up of mostly Western countries) Hungarians felt betrayed by the West and began to imagine their national identity as specifically distinct from it. Still, however, they placed importance on advertising themselves in such a way that would prove their inherent Western progressiveness and make the Allied Powers regret their decision to enact the treaty (Nagy 2021:1). From the perspective of Zsolt Nagy, the strife for national definition after the Treaty of Trianon was informed by anxious competition with their previously controlled territories of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia and a desire to prove that Hungary had been and still was a vital European power, with significant contributions to “Western culture and civilisation” (Nagy 2021:2). Hungarians then continued to imagine and create a standard (white) ethnic Hungarian

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<sup>3</sup> It’s important to note here that the general perception of the treaty from other ethnic groups (such as the Slovaks) formerly under Hungary’s control remember the treaty as granting them freedom from their Hungarian oppressor.

for this new deliberate purpose, who shared histories, practices, and an essential spirit with their countrymen, including those who had been drawn out of the country by new border lines.

The making and publicization of this model Hungarian was politically prioritized, as evidenced by the actions of the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Culture in the 1920s. The Foreign Ministry began to promote the use of “scientific propaganda” to get the attention of the West, which, according to Nagy, promoted the “[avoidance of] conducting emotionally charged propaganda and instead focused on coordinating with other governmental and non-governmental organizations to produce historical, political and economic arguments that would justify the need for treaty revision” (Nagy 2021:5). Here, in overt language of the state, Hungary’s commitment to fall in line with the requirements for European progress become apparent. The strategies later used by the state to publicly self define, however, reveal a tension in their alignment due to their perceived betrayal by the West. The Ministry of Culture, which organized education, religion, tourism, radio, film, and art, established a reform program known as *Neonacionalizmus* (Neo-Nationalism) which thrived as the department’s budget doubled by 1923 and tripled by the year 1927 (Nagy 2021:6-7). Thanks to this increased budget and Hungary’s intentional self positioning, especially as an explicitly Christian nation, by the late 1920s the country began to be understood in the Western world as the Christian border keeping the “Mongols and Ottomans” from infiltrating a carefully balanced European landscape (Nagy 2021:8). Through this process, Hungarians began to be imagined as white, boosting their proximity to imperially successful nations.

While this redefinition of their culture allowed Hungary to make strides in being taken seriously by the West, their perceived betrayal was not rectified. In the state’s increasing frustration, the work of the Ministry of Culture focused still on Hungarian folkloric practices,

while the West more heavily prioritized their modernity and industrialization. Here, I disagree with Kinchin's argument that Hungarians continued to focus on their folk traditions only for lack of resources to do otherwise. Instead, through examining the uses of the Ministry of Culture's funds, I find that Hungarians began a long tradition of asserting their indigeneity through their traditional visual practices during this period. This conceptualization of the national self as indigenous was and is still used to prolong the narrative that ethnic Hungarians have been victims of the West. Ironically, their exaggerated perception of their victimhood causes them to act in accordance with Western values that exclude and Other Europe's current minorities.

In *Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politics and the Tribal Slot*, Tania Murray Li analyzes how creations of false purity of cultures inform how states imagine official indigenous identities. This falsity is described by Homi Bhabha in his essay *Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences*. He writes that culture, rather than being a natural or inherent facet to a location or group, is built on the process of enunciation, by which he means the process of assigning meaning to symbols through repetitive "performative and institutional strategy" (Bhabha 1990). His interpretation undoes the conception of culture as "a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People" that tends to make groups one-dimensional (Bhabha 1990). In an attempt to render real this purified culture that Bhabha determines impossible, a task the Hungarian people (seemingly because of their Trianon experience) are set on completing, they must create an outline for their essentially authentic Past and determine regulations for their People.

In Li's work, she reports on state agencies and NGOs in Indonesia, revealing that each organization has created different standards that the indigenous people they work with must adhere to for their own purposes (Li 2000). She reveals the ways in which the state regulates

indigeneity, creating a particular space for indigenous lifeways and practices to exist, which she calls the “tribal slot” (Li 2000:156). The formation of tribal slots in any certain nation arises, again not because of naturally homogenous culture, but because of Bhabha’s enunciation (which Stuart Hall calls articulation) (Li 2000; Bhabha 1990). Hall writes that this process of enunciation/articulation is “subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power,” making indigeneity an identity that is negotiable based on the conditions and expectations of the state as it controls narratives of history and culture. (Hall 1990:225; Li 2000).

In Hungary’s creation of their indigenous self, they equate indigeneity with their majority population of ethnic Hungarians. As current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said in 2016, “[Hungarians] are the Indians... the indigenous, and the Natives” (Ginelli 2022:10:45). Hungary creates a unique tribal slot with this logic that differs greatly from the cases of many colonized nations such as Li’s example of Indonesia, where the tribal slot is created for a minority indigenous population with the goal of marginalizing them. Alternatively, Hungary creates a state regulated indigeneity through guidelines for its ethnic Hungarian (and those who pass as such, such as many assimilated Jews), which ultimately marginalizes their apparently non-indigenous minorities. As Li writes, “more common than sharp ethnic boundaries are patterns of continuous variation on familiar themes” in state created identities. “Therefore, when tribal or ethnic boundaries are clearly marked, they can usually be traced to specific histories of confrontation and engagement”, she continues. In the following section, I assess Hungarian histories, arguing that Hungary’s indigenous identity and tribal slot have been enforced through the aforementioned mode of enunciation/articulation in the last century for the purpose of aligning with those same imperial motivations of countries like England and France. I begin by discussing Hungary’s discursive alignment with the North American Indigenous population and

move on to discuss how visual indicators have become signs of their created indigeneity, and a method of enforcing it, focusing my attention on Margit Kovács's work.

### **The Creation of Hungarian Indigeneity**

Hungary's 1933 hosting of the fourth Scout Jamboree exemplified an early use of the Ministry of Culture's increased budget on an international scale and the related burgeoning Hungarian relationship to their indigeneity. The Jamboree was organized by the Hungarian Boy Scouts, an organization founded shortly after the American and British Boy Scouts in 1912. At the Jamboree, Hungarian Scouts hosted international representatives in order to showcase their national customs as they manifested in Scout's activities (Nagy 2021:9). While these activities were performed with the purpose of advertising the Ministry of Culture's arising victimized yet useful national character, they manifested largely as practices of what Philip J. Deloria terms "playing the Indian" (Deloria 1998; Ginelli 2022). As Hungarian (mostly men and boys) donned their imagined North American Indigenous dress and took part in practices that they imagined as facets of this identity that was largely foreign to them, they advertised the idea that the Indigenous North American and their associated experiences were vital to producing an accurate representation of the Hungarian character on the international stage provided by the Jamboree.

'Indian play', though it certainly took on a specific and long lasting meaning in Hungary, was adopted from the United States. The Hungarian Scouts, as they were established quickly after troupes in the United States, shared similar practices and philosophies. The original Boy Scouts of America arose from Ernest Thompson Seton's earlier organization, entitled the "League of Woodcraft Indians" (Hilleary 2019). Seton's goal was to teach young American boys the skills necessary for interacting with nature while rapid industrialization deprioritized this

knowledge. He found this skill to be prevalent in the United States Indigenous population, thus the organization's name. Despite this inspiration, he apparently hoped to teach these skills without the associated “evils” and “ignorance” associated with the Indigenous population and the “primitive times” he seemingly imagined them as frozen in (Hilleary 2019). As this sentiment informed the creation of the American Boy Scouts and soon after the Hungarian Boy Scouts, it also informed national practices by adults in both countries. Deloria explains the prevalence of Seton’s philosophy and the concurrent Indian Play practice in the United States by writing that the settler tradition arose from an ‘admiration’ (a nonsensical one considering their violent colonization of Native people) that the Indigenous population was not restricted by “the logical mind and the social order”, unlike the Europeans new ‘American’ settlers sought to separate from (Deloria 1998:3). While Americans' apparent admiration of their indigenous population could ultimately only exist conceptually in the country’s “spirit” because of their actual desire to either “destroy Indians or assimilate them” for their colonial benefit, in Hungary, this originally adopted practice could further develop because of physical distance (Deloria 1998:4).

Hungarians outside of the Boy Scouts progressed past an ‘admiration’ of this population and began to imagine themselves *as* the ‘Indian’, as exemplified Orbán’s recent speech. As Indian Play in the United States was motivated by a desire to separate from European identity for the purposes of building a newly imagined nation, it served a similar function in Hungary. This practice of national definition, however, was informed by “Post-Trianon Trauma” rather than colonization efforts<sup>4</sup>. After the border redrawing in 1920, playing and ‘becoming’ the Indian was an outlet for Hungarians to express their perceived victimhood. They imagined themselves actually *as* Indigenous North Americans because they perceived their Trianon experience and the

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<sup>4</sup> This trauma was in part the “trauma” of being unable to colonize. Indian Play in both the United States and Hungary is rooted in the same colonial motivations.

violent colonization Indigenous North Americans experienced as equal acts of violence by the Western Empire (Ginelli 2022:18:00). The popularization of their replication practices was accompanied by songs and poems which positioned the ‘Indian’ as morally superior to the Westerner and continued to assert ethnic Hungarian commonalities with them (Ginelli 2022:17:30). As this national argument has progressed, Hungarians have had to utilize new symbolism to express their perception of sameness with Indigenous North Americans. To engage in Indian Play was a practice they shared with other nations, but in order to position their specific oppression long-term, Hungarians had to make a national identity centered around their own indigeneity and its related oppression. I return here to my claim that Hungarians continued to use folk motifs more than other more Western European nations for the purposes of creating this indigenous identity. Visual indicators of folk tradition functioned not as stand alone evidence of their national customs, but now as proof that their unique practices were specific to the land they’d inhabited since their original migration, including the land they had ‘lost’. To root in a homogenous history of indigeneity that could be evidenced by visual cues provided the groundwork for the country to represent itself as victim, leading to their current xenophobic and colonially informed policies.

Easily identifiable Hungarian textile patterns proved useful for this purpose. Magyar Cserkész (Hungarian Scout), was a publication created by and for Hungarian Scouts around the planning of the Jamboree and beyond as they helped to define a national Hungarian character. In an issue published around the time of the Jamboree, a rare image of women is shown. In the image, four women stand in line wearing white dresses embroidered with a traditional pattern, Kalocsa (Magyar Cserkész 1933) (See Figure 1). While Hungarian men and boys largely participated in ‘Indian play’ as a visual indicator of their victimized national identity, Hungarian

women aided in making the connection between already existing folk customs and a shared indigenous identity rooted in victimhood clear.



Figure 1. Sourced from Magyar Cserkész (1933) in 2024.

Textiles have historically functioned as a method for storytelling and historical documentation. Guna scholar, Sue Haglund, theorizes that the indigenous weaving traditions of Panama “capture a piece of history and a moment in time, passing them down from one generation to another, [engaging] an evolutionary movement that is reciprocal between both the artist and the image itself . . . [and] show[ing] the intrinsic relationship among the Dule land and nature” (Haglund 2019:63). Traditional textiles and the processes of their makings ability to represent artists throughout time and their relationship to a sense of place and culture has been drawn on by the Hungarian state since the aftermath of the Treaty of Trianon. While Haglund describes that indigenous Panamanian textiles prompt intimate generational communication, Hungarian textiles community significance has been deprioritized by the state, while it opts instead for showcasing them flatly and publicly for the purpose of national promotion. When these patterns like Kalocsa are pasted onto souvenirs and shop signs, they function only as



signals to promote a nation that (as will later be exemplified) is able to keep up with Western expectations of nationhood (see examples in figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3. Photos taken by the author in Budapest, November 2023.

Gloria Elizabeth Chacón agrees with Haglund’s understanding of the use of indigenous Panamanian textiles, and asserts that this function is similar throughout Mesoamerica (Chacón, 2020). In her article *Material Culture, Indigeneity, and Temporality*, she argues that because textiles act as a form of indigenous literature, they too deserve the same copyright protections as indigenous writing, noting that they’ve been conceived of as folklore, and therefore legally treated as public domain (Chacón 2020:55). Chacón writes that this practice “contrasts with the way indigenous communities perceive their practice of communal living, one that involves reciprocity” (Chacón 2020:63). The way mainstream western culture disrespects these indigenous practices is a symptom of Noah Tamarkin’s “state indigeneity”, a manifestation of Li’s “tribal slot” which is relevant primarily in settler colonies. According to Tamarkin, settlers

view Indigenous peoples and their practices as part of the larger national community simply as a result of the ‘coincidence’ that they reside on the land the state has established as their own (Toha et al. 2022:8). So, in the cases that Chacón describes, this “tribal slot” becomes the space in which colonial settlements engage with indigenous art and traditional visual manifestations in a way that assumes they are inherent to the land, yet not worthy of protection. It becomes a facet of the settler state’s conception of self, while removing the artist and their community from it (Chacón 2020:62).

In Hungary, communities and individuals are also stripped from their work, but in this case to the supposed benefit of those indigenous Hungarian artists. While colonized indigenous populations are marginalized and minoritized, ethnic Hungarians, because they are the national majority and because their works have been used to position the nation that represents them as globally useful, they ‘benefit’<sup>5</sup> from this structure. This state commodification of traditional folkloric symbols has provided grounds for asserting an ethnostate where those who are not represented by the visual symbols of this indigenous majority are unwelcome. Throughout time, and as I find represented in Margit Kovács’s works, Hungarian indigeneity has become associated further with Western values, ensuring that the enemy of the hopeful ethnostate is to the East/South. Her work acts as a salient case study to uncover Hungary’s national definition, as informed by folk themes that, before and during her activity as an artist, became equated with indigeneity. Margit Kovács was active from the 1930s nearly until her death in the mid 1970s, creating ceramics that were consistently celebrated both on a popular and a political level (Kinchin 2009). I understand her work as one significant tool in a larger tradition of creating and regulating an essential and indigenous ‘Hungarian spirit’.

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<sup>5</sup> This benefit, however, removes Hungarians from communing with their textile works in a reciprocal and community focused manner. In my opinion, having textiles represent global prowess is not a benefit at all.

### **Margit Kovács: Life and Works<sup>6</sup>**

Kovács was born in 1902 in Győr, Hungary, and was raised by her mother after her father passed in her early childhood (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum 2019:11). She likely grew up in a middle class, assimilated Jewish household where she had access to the arts education prioritized by the cultural policies of her youth (Kinchin, 2009:165). As a young adult, Kovács's uncle financed her education at the Royal Hungarian School of Applied Arts and Álmos Jáschik's independent school in Budapest, each of which she studied at for a year (Kinchin 2009:165; Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum 2019). As Kovács developed as an artist, she trained outside of Hungary, in more 'successfully' modern cities such as Vienna, Munich, Copenhagen, and Paris, building her skills both in graphics and in ceramics (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum 2019:11). Despite her education in more Western Europe, her professional practice took place nearly exclusively in Hungary, where she eventually established her Budapest studio (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum 2019). In the process of her permanent reintegration to Hungary, which began in 1934, Kovács joined the National Hungarian Society of Applied Arts and the Council of Ecclesiastical Art, which were both supported by the same official cultural policy that organized the Scout's Jamboree and other events (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum 2019:11).

Kovács seemingly had a heavily career focused adult life. She shared an apartment with her mother for most of her working years and never married or had public romantic relationships. While Kovács is remembered by Kinchin as a Catholic woman, the museum which houses the majority of her works understands her as an assimilated Jew (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum 2019). Hungarian Jews, notably more so than other European Jews throughout Kovács's lifespan,

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<sup>6</sup> In my discussion of Kovács, it feels important to note that sources, especially those in English, about her are limited and often translated from Hungarian. Much of the information I utilize comes from the Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum, which houses much of her work and makes her story available to the public. While I approach thinking about Kovács from a critical perspective, I acknowledge that the Museum's purposes of disseminating knowledge may be swayed for the same nationalistic purposes I discuss in this paper overall.

tended to be highly assimilated into the mainstream culture of their country, so she could have conceivably been Jewish yet not consistently remembered as such<sup>7</sup>. Much of the reason for this group's assimilation was because they tended to, like other Hungarians, be invested in building their national identity. Before those elsewhere in Europe, Hungarian Jews began to identify first with their nationality rather than their ethnicity and religion. Despite this trend often being conceived of as a purposeful choice by the Hungarian Jewish population, their assimilation was in part a survival mechanism in a state which made indigeneity synonymous with being ethnically Hungarian, then made indigeneity hegemonic. For Kovács to be a vessel of Hungarian border making through her art likely allowed her personal autonomy as a woman and, more significantly in my research, as a Jew in the statewide process of making one way to be Hungarian.

Throughout her career, Kovács was consistently highly regarded nationwide, despite Hungary's ever changing regimes<sup>8</sup>. Kovács's first commission was made in 1931 for the Tourism Bureau of Budapest in Vienna, and she went on to create many more commissions for the state, which were often placed along Hungarian borders and in public centers. Her career was consistently supported by cultural policies, and she specifically developed a friendship with the Minister of Culture from 1957 to 1967, György Aczél, who ensured her works would continue to maintain attention in the later part of her career. Kovács created molds of many of her sculptural works so they could be easily reproduced, and many of these more accessible pieces were purchased by the Hungarian public and became decorative features in their homes. Her work was displayed at many exhibitions across Europe meant for international consumption, and she won

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<sup>7</sup> Importantly, this assimilation would not have been possible without white-passing features.

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this essay I do not focus in detail on the specific political landscapes which Kovács worked under, as I understand her work in defining Hungary as a nation to be strikingly consistent. Hungary's political alliances, first with the Nazis and then with the Soviets, could interestingly be interpreted as symptoms of the country's national definition in further research.

the Kossuth Prize in 1948, awarded to Hungarians who had made significant contributions in science, culture, and the arts (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum). With Aczél's help, a museum designed to house only her works was established in Szentendre, Hungary, in the years before her death in 1977. Kovács's importance to the national development that took place throughout her career is exemplified in the words of Gedon Gerlőczy, who wrote after her work was displayed at the Brussels World Exhibition in 1958 that Kovács's figures garnered "everyone's" attention with their "Hungarian dresses" (Magyar Építőművészet 1959:1-2). The excitement around her work was often qualified by her ability to display 'genuine' Hungarian culture, and is indicative of her influence and role in and outside of Hungary.

In the following sections, I examine Kovács's (and the state that commissioned her's) role specifically in developing the outline for the indigenous Hungarian and offer insight into how, based on what is known of her personal life, she might have related to this role, prompting an eventual reimagining of how Hungary might situate indigeneity anew in order to align with global decolonization efforts, breaking from the state's current insistence on acting on imperial mindsets from their "semi-peripheral" perspective (Boatcă 2020:398).

### *Making National Identity at the Paris Exposition*

An early official celebration of Kovács's work took place at the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life in Paris in 1937. Zsolt Nagy, in his analysis of national definition in the interwar period, cites this Paris exhibition as similarly significant as the Scout's Jamboree in its influence on advertising Hungary to the West as a plea to revise the Treaty of Trianon.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the exhibition was to showcase technological advancements that

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<sup>9</sup> Notably, the West, in the eyes of Hungarian political officials, was now represented by the early German Nazi party (Nagy 2021:12). Hungarians aligned with Germany until 1944, when an unsuccessful attempt to switch sides resulted in the country's occupation (Office of the Historian). While I argue in this paper that Hungary's alignment



aligned with still emerging implementations of the Enlightenment, and Hungary showcased artists who they believed to “epitomise Hungarian modernity on the one hand and to depict the country’s long historical and cultural traditions on the other” (Nagy 2021:13). According to Nagy, the Hungarians did not focus on the technological theme of the exhibit as much as they took the event as the chance to provide publicity for their cultural achievements more generally, and to assess the work of their former territories, attempting to position themselves as useful (and more useful than Austria, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia) to the modernizing Western world (Nagy 2021:14).

Margit Kovács, filling a role that became typical for her, was selected, among other artists, to complete this mission for the Hungarians. Kovács’s mural, titled *Budapest, Queen of the Danube* (See figure 4), was installed at the exhibition, showcasing features of the Hungarian landscape and Hungarian figures participating in activities in it, often wearing clothing with Hungarian embroidery patterns on them (Kinchin 2009:168). The figures surround an image of Budapest, asserting their relatedness to the landscape. This relatedness can be interpreted as the indigenous Hungarian domain over their new borders, and imply that their lifeways exist beyond the known landscape, as they surround the explicit representation of Hungary. The themes that are visible in this work are representative of the themes Kovács continued working with throughout her career and which continued to be celebrated both officially and by the Hungarian public (Kinchin 2009). Consistently, Kovács utilized visual indicators of folk tradition, the ceramic medium, Christian themes, the human form, and maps in her highly publicized works. In the following pages, I assess each of these themes, understanding how they maintain the assertion of Hungarian indigeneity I’ve previously defined as vital to Hungary’s self definition.

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with different regimes was catalyzed by a consistent goal, it is vital to note the severe consequences of its political alignment, in this case its support of the Holocaust.



Figure 4. Queen of the Danube, 1937. Sourced from Hungarian Pottery, Politics and Identity: Representing the Ceramic Art of Margit Kovács (1902–77).

As I've discussed throughout this thesis, symbols and practices of folk traditions were continuously connected to Hungarian indigeneity, cyclically establishing their interrelatedness. With this already existent symbolism, Kovács's use of visual indicators of folk practice position her work as representative of the Hungarian state and its people. Like the women displayed in the Hungarian Scout publication, her figures (who are also mostly female) don Kalocsa and other similar embroidery patterns thought to be continued manifestations of Hungary's past. In 1962, Kovács was asked about the folk motifs she employed. In response, she said "[the folk wear] are from no region and every Hungarian region: I'd like to show ... the soul of the Hungarian people that creates tales and songs" (Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum). In this quote, her intentional assertion of these motifs as visible indications of a Hungarian "soul" becomes apparent.

In addition to the use of these symbolic visual elements, Kovács's inherent connection to Hungary was established through her use of the ceramic medium. In Kovács's early public facing years, she was celebrated by the cultural policy on account of her use of "Hungarian soil".

According to Kinchin, the “physical constituent of ceramics—the nation’s soil—was viewed as emblematic of Hungary’s ‘natural’ inalienable right to the territories surrendered”, aligning the ceramic medium with claim to a historical relation to the land that would strengthen the indigenous Hungarian identity, despite its lack of genuine consistency of place (Kinchin 2009:169).

By using the already established indicators of Hungarian indigeneity of folk motifs and Hungarian soil consistently in her works, Kovács became established as a harbinger of Hungarianness. When she paired these aspects with other themes such as Christianity, the human form, and maps, her works became emblematic of and useful to the state's process of national definition. Kovács’s pieces function as symbols of a cohesive indigenous identity which she learned both indirectly as a Hungarian citizen and directly through her collaborations with the state. Her works act as visual indicators of Hungary’s attempt to create an impossible pure “People” rooted in a pure “Past” (Bhabha 1990).

### *Use of Christian Themes*

In many of Kovács’s public works, she depicts Christian narratives. Her involvement in the Council of Ecclesiastical Art likely helped establish her as a representative of Hungarian culture in the late 1930s and early 1940s, as the Ministry of Culture continued to establish Christianity as a feature of Hungarianness. Kovács included visual indicators of folk traditions with Christian themes in her commissions for prominent churches, cementing this connection in tangible place. Her frequent renderings of Saints, Adam and Eve, and a multitude of Madonnas routinely incorporate folk visuals. One religiously associated work that stands out depicts Saint George slaying the Dragon (see Figure 5). According to original depictions of the tale, Saint



George only agreed to do this heroic task if the villagers the dragon was killing would convert to Christianity. In Kovács's representation, both George and his horse wear traditional Hungarian patterns that mimic those of her female figures. Through his wear and his assumed Hungarian clay makeup, Saint George becomes an indigenous Hungarian. From this Hungarian positionality, his dedication to Christianity becomes a feature of this identity. If he represents the indigenous Hungarian, the threat he plunges to its death represents a threat to both Christianity and his representational ethnic identity. Based on Nagy's report that Hungarians were positioning themselves on the border of Christianity, protecting Europe from its "Other", the dragon represents the non Christian "Ottomans" and "Mongols". Their position as negatively aligned with natural elements is reasserted as the Hungarian Saint George drives them away from the golden sheen that surrounds him. This use of light/lightness (which will appear as a consistent tool for meaning making in Kovács's works) appears to symbolize Hungarian alignment with being literally enlightened, and in opposition to 'barbarism'.



Figure 5. Saint George and The Dragon, 1936. Photo taken by the author at Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum in November, 2023.

### *Use of the Body*

Kovács also utilizes the human form beyond religious figures consistently, often indicating that these folk associated people were “peasants” in the titles of her works. Through associating these peasants with consistent markers of ‘evolved’ physicality, Kovács enunciated physical requirements for Indigenous Hungarians. Because of a rare occurrence of a depiction of non Hungarians in her body of work, her typical Hungarian figures’ alignment with imperial philosophy becomes clear through comparison. A decorative fountain produced in 1950 during the Soviet era, which was displayed in a department store in Budapest, shows Kovács’ and her commissioners perspectives of peoples from non-European and non-Soviet continents (see Figure 6). Those people shown on the Soviet portion of the map (assumedly representing and including ethnic Hungarians) are standing up straight and appear to be engaging in expansive and comfortable motions. Extending below the Soviet portion, assumedly Asian figures are also depicted in standing motion, though it appears slightly more constricted than those physically above them. The person placed geographically in India is hunched over working and those placed on the continents of Africa and Australia are all also hunched over, wearing minimal clothing, and painted with a dark brown color. This variance in body positioning appears to indicate a difference in which people, based on their geographic placement and physical appearance, deserve space to expand both physically and metaphorically past the confines of the laboring body. As Lugones asserts, a focus on the body alone is an indication of ‘barbarism’ (Lugones 2009). This interpretation is again supported by the use of light. Those on the European continent exist in close proximity to a large sun, denoting their inherent alignment with enlightenment. Alternatively, the non-white and apparently physically focused figures in the

Global South are placed on the same physical level as the sealife, associating them visually with literal animals, indicating their not completely human status.



Figure 6. Decorative Fountain, 1950. Photo taken by the author at Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum in, July 2022.

With this map exemplifying the Hungarian state's differing perceptions of people based on their physical global positioning, the implications of Kovács's other presentations of indigenous Hungarian bodies become legible. Like the Soviet characters in Figure 6, Kovács's Hungarian figures are visually aligned with this same natural deservingness of existence beyond the body and its erotic desire. Firstly, they read as white in contrast to those who are clearly meant to be depicted as people of color. Additionally, they tend to have similarly straight postures and elaborate dress as the all-deserving Soviets depicted in the fountain. As their Hungarianness is asserted alongside these indicators of rationality, once more because of the presence of folk motifs, these folk/peasant figures perpetuate the original pre-Trianon idea that even the ancient traditions of Europeans maintained an inherent rationality, and continue to insist that after Trianon Hungarians be viewed as long-term natural and rational Europeans. As

Kovács's sculptures don established Hungarian traditional wear, and participate in activities such as dances, weddings and feasts that are defined as folk or peasant by their titles or visual cues, the connection between indigenous Hungarianness and inherent progressiveness continues to cement. Figures 7-10 exemplify these interrelated features, also revealing the prevalence of colonially approved womanhood.

As Audre Lorde suggests in *Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power*, women, especially those who've been typed as non-white by the colonial imaginary, will find agency to resist oppression by following the desires of their bodies and feelings (Lorde 1978). This form of resistance is meaningful because colonial oppression works by regulating bodies, turning people away from erotic desire and toward rationality (Lugones 2009). With this awareness, it becomes clear that Kovács's (mostly female) Hungarian bodies are displayed for the purpose of maintaining a disalignment from the emotional experience. Kovács's standalone female characters participate in feminized (and typically heterosexual) activities such as singing, nurturing children, and cooking. Through associating her female figures with visual indicators of rationality, straightness, and whiteness while they wear traditional Hungarian clothing, Kovács ensures their alignment with imperial expectations. If indigenous Hungarian women (who are considered more naturally irrational) can meet the standards of rationality, Hungarian men assuredly will too, granting indigenous Hungarians as a whole agency on the national stage.



Figure 7. Settenkedők (Sneaking Girls), 1949 and Figure 8. Családi fényképalbum (From the Family Photo Album), 1953. Both taken by the author at Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum in November, 2023.



Figures 9 and 10. Both Title and Year Unknown, author's family collection. Photo taken by the author in Fremont, California in August, 2023.

### *Use of Cartography*

Kovács's figures are also present on her public maps, commissioned pieces which gained her significant recognition and most explicitly show her usefulness to the state in positioning



Hungary in a global context. Notably, she produced *A dolgozó népe a Balaton* (Balaton Belongs to the Working People) in 1950, which showed Hungarians playing around the Balaton lake, a significant summer vacation destination. In 1953, the work was placed at a heavily trafficked railway station. In 1950 Kovács also made *Magyarország Térkép* (which translates to Hungarian Map) which was installed at Hegyeshalom, a prominent border control station on the Western border of Hungary (See Figure 11).



Figure 11. *Magyarország Térkép* (Hungarian Map), 1950. Sourced from [www.kozterkep.hu](http://www.kozterkep.hu) in 2024.

In response to this work, an architecture publication called *Építés-Építészet* sung Kovács's praises:

“[she] presents the abundant riches of the Hungarian soil, the multitude of medicinal baths, the major centres of industry and agriculture, the distinctive sights of the cities [...] a peasant woman in a Hungarian dress and a workman hold flowers and a bread, and welcome those who enter the country [...] the picture is brought to its coda by the blazing disk of the sun that fills the extreme right, spreading cheerfulness and light across the country, over the signing youths who march before the flag”. (translation from Hungarian done by Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum).

Magyarország Térkép clearly contains the same themes that indicate a specific Hungarian indigeneity with the use of dress and activity that I've discussed in previous sections. Nearly a decade and a half later, it closely mimics the motifs present in *Queen of the Danube* that align indigenous Hungarians with a natural tendency toward industrialization and progress even in their traditional presentations. Similarly to previously discussed works, the Hungarians proximity to light makes their worthiness to colonial values clear (this time explicitly stated by Építés-Építészet's report that the proximity to the sun symbolizes that Hungary is a favorable nation with light always shining upon it) While sharing many of the same themes as Kovács's other works, *Magyarország Térkép* utilizes them anew with the presence of Hungarian border lines. Because the viewer sees the borders of the map from an aerial perspective, they need not engage intimately with its contents. The aerial perspective, Ronak K. Kapadia suggests, provides a sense of "God-like vision", given that 'all' can be seen in one frame (Kapadia 2018:202). Kapadia writes that imperial nations utilize aerial views to create one-dimensional understandings of the countries they surveil (Kapadia 2018).

In *Magyarország Térkép*, the aerial frame suggests a Hungary that is both permanent and similarly one-dimensional to allow for a simplified understanding of its essential culture (Bhabha 1990). While figures and features of the landscape are approached from a more head-on perspective, that fact that they are blown up in size and placed on the aerially viewed landscape implies that they and the indigeneity they represent are ever-present facets of the country, contributing to its impenetrable Western identity. Like these crucial representations of Hungarian people, the immensely important and symbolic sun must also be constant, implying the lack of perspectival shifts.

In *The World and All the Things upon It*, David A. Chang offers a way of understanding geography through which I draw a critique of Magyarország Térkép's aerial focus. Chang offers perspectives from the Native Hawaiian Kānaka, who, in their understandings of geography pre-colonization, focused on it not "as an abstract truth, but as a world seen from a perspective" (Chang 2020:20). Instead of the use of absolute and cardinal directions, Chang cites that Kānaka documented directions based instead on the "coming [of] the sun" and the "entering [of the] sun" (Chang 2020:21). These perspectival indicators have been cardinally translated to East and West, but according to Chang, North and South were wholly informed by the viewer themselves. In Chang's words, geography was based on "individual perspectives ([and] even remembered perspectives)" (Chang 2020:21). This way of perspectival engagement provides, unlike Kovács's aerial perspective, an opportunity for the viewer to more intimately engage with the features of their environment informed by their relation to it. To not see all at once, directly from above, provides a possibility to depart from the Western relationship between seeing and knowing (Kapadia 2018:206). If all is seen, as it is perceived to be from an aerial perspective, then in the Western imagination all is known because the eye has become "the privileged organ of knowledge and authority" (Kapadia 2018:206). For imperial nations, knowledge and authority are crucial features that inform 'logical' domination.

Through this line of theorization, Magyarország Térkép reveals that Hungary's public facing mission is to visually assert *itself* so that it, following this Western mindset, can also claim to know and therefore dominate understandings about its culture and national character. While Hungary claims to be victim to Western hierarchies, its relative privilege in the global sphere is revealed through its ability to manage its own public image. The country's ability to self define through visual means seemingly goes unquestioned by more Western (Core) Europe. Hungary is



consistently included on maps of Europe with no indication of its difference from the rest, leaving it room to advertise, as Kovács's maps do, its national character itself.

Meanwhile, Europe's colonies are disallowed the same neutrality that allows for self-definition. Manuela Boatcă points out this phenomenon using the the Euro banknote. On it, while the European continent is surrounded by a halo of stars (including "semi-peripheral" nations like Hungary and those just to the East and South of it), the European Union's colonies exist only as specks on the corner of the bill (Boatcă 2020). Some, according to the European Central Bank, are too small to be "accurately reproduced" and are therefore not included (European Central Bank: 2024). While Europe's "Core" (which Boatcă defines as England and France) determines whether these fully peripheral nations will even be shown within Europe, Hungary, despite its semi-peripherality, has consistent visual inclusion by this Core, allowing it autonomy to visually self-define within (and on the edges of) its borders to other nations (Boatcă, 2020). Historically and still, the Core of Europe tends to look *at* other nations with a colonial motivation, determining what and how they are from this detached aerial view. Seemingly, Hungary has not been viewed as an object of conquest, explaining its visual autonomy and revealing the ways in which it is not a victim of the West but rather an accomplice in its continuing imperial mission.

While colonized nations are stripped of their humanity through European cartography, Hungary can display figures through their ability to self-map within Europe in Magyarország Térkép. These figures, however, are essentialized characters displayed in an effort to pander to the West, leading me to consider examples of Hungarian humanity that depart from advertising whiteness, straightness, and rationality, and how they might prompt a new global alignment for Hungary.

### *Later Works and New Possibilities*

Toward the end of Kovács's life, we find non-state commissioned pieces that align more closely with personal documentation. In her later works made surrounding the time of her beloved mother's death, her figures gain explicit emotionality for the first time. These works, which deal with themes of birth and death, somewhat abandon her manicured style. Their texture is rougher and their paint colors are muted, if they are painted at all. These works appear to be prompted by her mother's old age and death, and the ones that depict her mother strikingly inform the rest of the related collection. In her depiction of her mother's bust, as well as those pieces in which she and her mother are depicted together, Kovács ventures seemingly for the first time into creating personal work, abandoning the folk motifs and refined physical positioning that previously defined her state supported style. In the absence of these themes, she turns her focus to the expressiveness of her figures, depicting them for the first time with erotic alignment. In these pieces, the expectation of advertising a nation falls away, and so too does the visual alignment with enlightenment standards.

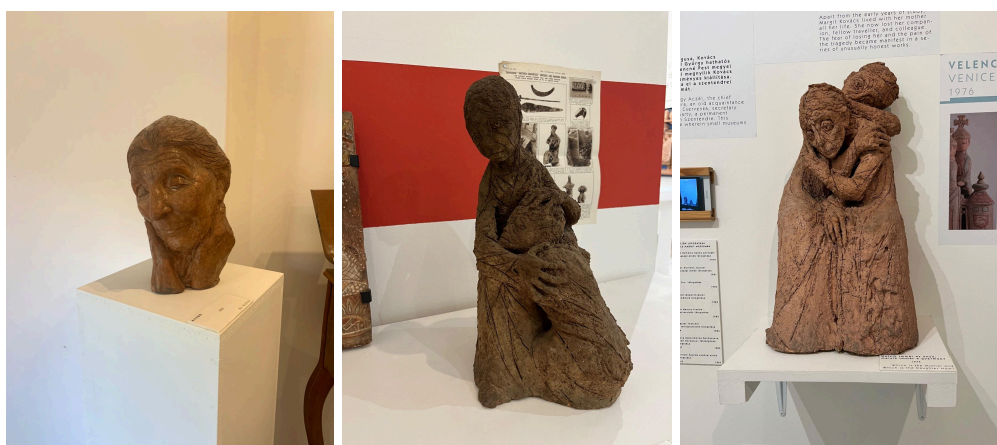


Figure 12. Anyám (My Mother), 1951; Figure 13. Anya és lánya (Mother and Girl) 1968; Figure 14. Melylk immár az anya, melylk immár a gyermek? (Which is the Mother and Which is the Daughter Now?) 1974. Photos taken by the author at Ferenczy Múzeumi Centrum in November, 2023 and July, 2022.

In these works, I find the possibility of Kovács's resistance to the state regulated Hungarian identity she spent her career helping formulate. By documenting her own family through her art, Kovács could express emotionality in a state that steered its official (indigenous) identity away from it. Especially as a presumably Jewish woman, disaligning with these standards could act as a move of resistance in line with Lorde's suggestion. As I conclude this thesis, I assess how this period of Kovács's work might act as a guide toward rethinking Hungarian identity.

### **Conclusion**

In my assessment of Margit Kovács, both of her ability to align with crafting a state regulated indigeneity and the later possibility of her freedom from it, I note that, despite her Jewishness, she would effectively 'pass' as the imagined indigenous Hungarian, who was white and aligned with imperial movements. In Hungary's history of authenticating the indigenous Hungarian, those minorities who have shared Hungary's current borders for generations, particularly the Roma and the non-passing Jew, are considered non-Hungarian. Throughout time, the narrative has been built, now culminating with Orbán's fascist policies, that those non-indigenous Hungarians did not experience the 'trauma' of Trianon in the same way and therefore were not the same as Indigenous North Americans, as ethnic Hungarians apparently were. Not only has this narrative been developed, but non-ethnic Hungarians have since been imagined as the oppressors of Hungarian lifeways and expressions. Despite the reality that Hungary's Roma have been consistently and brutally oppressed, Hungary's imagined necessity of an ethnostate to protect their indigenous from further 'traumas', the state has imagined groups such as the Roma as a threat to the victimized and 'Indian' Hungarian. This logic has extended to

those seeking refuge in Hungary as well, particularly Arab immigrants, but also including Ukrainians.

As I conclude, I imagine an unraveling of Hungarian indigeneity that might include authentic expressions of self and community such as the ones Kovács made at the end of her life, that are accessible not only to those who can be read as ethically Hungarian. I hope too for Hungarian craft to find significance in community and family documentation, as Haglund and Chacón suggest indigenous craft has the possibility of doing. Much like I imagine a diasporic future for the Jewish people of the world that unites not only in remembrance of the past but in support of their varied futures and the futures of oppressed peoples in response to the genocide currently being carried out in their (our) name in Palestine, I imagine a future for Hungarians that acknowledges the complexity of their origins and celebrates a multiplicity of traditions with freedom from imperialist expectations. In this future, I imagine Hungarian solidarity with those who have been oppressed (not only in mindset but tangibly and historically) by the logics of Western Europe and its subsequent colonization efforts.

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