



Belonging in Translation

Race, Migration, Acculturation, and the Politics of Intimacy in Interracial Relationships in Hungary

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Abstract

This paper explores how migration, race, and belonging intersect in the lived experiences of interracial couples within contemporary Hungary. Drawing on qualitative interviews with international students and their partners, the paper offers a small glimpse into how everyday acts of love and intimacy become sites of negotiation, resistance, and translation in a context marked by migration anxieties, populist nationalism, and the lingering legacies of Europe's colonial imagination. Through these intimate encounters, the paper traces how individuals navigate and reconfigure the emotional and political boundaries of belonging in a society that continues to define itself through ideas of cultural purity and ethnic homogeneity. Guided by postcolonial and decolonial frameworks, the paper interrogates how racial identity, social identity, national identity, and cultural belonging are redefined through interracial intimacy. Drawing on scholars such as Avtar Brah, Homi Bhabha, and Sara Ahmed, it conceptualises intimacy as both a political and affective terrain. It is a site where identity, power, and difference are constantly negotiated. Interracial relationships in Hungary serve as microcosms of broader transnational tensions because they expose how European whiteness is maintained and contested, how migration becomes embodied through love, and how the politics of belonging unfolds within private contexts of society. The research reveals that interracial couples often find themselves inhabiting contradictory positions as both symbols of cosmopolitan openness and as subjects of social scrutiny. They challenge dominant narratives of racial and cultural exclusivity, yet simultaneously encounter subtle and overt forms of exclusion in bureaucratic systems, social interactions, and media representations. Acts such as exploring the Hungarian language, engaging in local cultural practices, or navigating immigration policies become both practical and emotional strategies for negotiating legitimacy and home. The paper situates intimate relationships within broader conversations about migration, citizenship, and postcolonial recognition. It demonstrates how the private sphere is deeply entangled with public discourses of nationhood and race, revealing how belonging is experienced not only through legal status but through affect, care, and everyday negotiation. The analysis contributes to interdisciplinary debates on the politics of recognition and racialisation in Central and Eastern Europe. It also encourages the decolonial reimagining of identity in transnational contexts. Ultimately, the paper argues that interracial couples in Hungary inhabit 'in-between spaces'. Their experiences illuminate the tensions between love and

exclusion, belonging and otherness, and stability and displacement. In foregrounding these lived realities, the study reconsiders how intimacy itself can become a decolonial practice.

Keywords: *Migration; Acculturation; Belonging; Interracial Relationships; Intimacy, Race*

INTRODUCTION

In a world still shaped by racial hierarchies and unequal mobilities, love itself can function as a political act. To walk hand-in-hand as an interracial couple through the streets of Budapest is to occupy a visible position of difference, one that unsettles dominant understandings of belonging and national identity. Within a social climate marked by populist nationalism, migration anxieties, and a historical investment in ethnic and cultural homogeneity, intimacy becomes more than a private affair. It becomes a site where race, migration, and belonging are negotiated in deeply embodied ways.

Across Europe, the resurgence of nationalist politics has intensified public debates about migration, cultural purity, and social cohesion. Hungary has become a particularly charged context within this landscape. Political discourses that frame migration as a threat to the nation have contributed to the racialisation of migrants and to the narrowing of imaginaries of belonging. Within this environment, interracial couples, often composed of Hungarian nationals and partners from Africa, Asia, or Latin America, disrupt dominant narratives of who belongs to the nation. Their relationships highlight how private emotions and public politics intersect, and how intimacy becomes a microcosm of broader global and historical processes.

Interracial intimacy exposes the contradictions of a Europe that often imagines itself as post-racial and cosmopolitan, while continuing to reproduce hierarchies of whiteness and cultural purity. Everyday practices such as speaking multiple languages, cooking together, or navigating immigration bureaucracy become acts that are politically charged. As scholars including Avtar Brah (1996), Homi K. Bhabha (1994), and Sara Ahmed (2014) remind us, belonging is never neutral; it is continuously produced through power, affect, and historical memory.

The processes described in this study also aligns closely with acculturation theory. Berry's (1997, 2005) bi-directional model conceptualises acculturation as a relational process shaped by interactions between migrants and host society members that are mediated through social relationships and social support. From this perspective, interracial relationships constitute key acculturative contexts in which cultural learning, emotional adaptation, and belonging are negotiated on an everyday basis.

This paper asks: How do interracial couples in Hungary negotiate belonging, identity, and love within a context shaped by nationalism, racialisation, and postcolonial legacies? Through qualitative interviews with international students and their Hungarian partners, the study traces how individuals navigate acculturation, social integration, and recognition within intimate life. It argues that intimacy functions as a political, affective, and acculturative space, like a relational 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) where translation, negotiation, and resistance unfold.

Hungary offers a significant site for this analysis. As a post-socialist Central European nation with an ambivalent relationship to Europeanness, it reproduces colonial and racial imaginaries while positioning itself as culturally distinct. Interracial couples thus emerge not merely as private pairings, but as symbolic figures that reveal how global hierarchies of race and mobility are lived through everyday intimacy. By centring these relationships, the paper contributes to interdisciplinary debates on migration, acculturation, postcoloniality, and the affective politics of belonging.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Understanding interracial intimacy in Hungary requires a conceptual approach that situates love, belonging, and identity within broader structures of coloniality and migration. This study draws on postcolonial and decolonial frameworks to analyse how power, race, and affect circulate through intimate relationships in a European context that often perceives itself as 'outside' colonial history. By integrating the works of Avtar Brah, Homi Bhabha, Sara Ahmed, and Walter Dignolo, this framework explores how intimacy becomes a political and affective terrain, a space where individuals translate between histories, bodies, and emotions while negotiating inclusion and exclusion.

1. Postcolonial and Decolonial Perspectives in Europe

Postcolonial theory has long interrogated how the legacies of colonialism persist in shaping identities, hierarchies, and knowledge systems. Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* reveals how Europe constructed its self-image through the racialised othering of the non-West. Building on this, Homi Bhabha (1994) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) examined how colonial power relations continue to structure representation and subjectivity. While such critiques have traditionally focused on Western Europe, the postcolonial condition of Central Europe demands closer attention. As scholars such as Aniko Imre (2014) argue, post-socialist Europe occupies an ambiguous position: it has never been a colonial power in the global sense, yet it reproduces Eurocentric and racialised hierarchies inherited from global colonial modernity.

This ambiguity positions Hungary within what Dignolo (2011) terms the 'colonial matrix of power'. This is a global system of political, economic, and epistemic domination that extends beyond formal empire. Hungary's aspiration toward 'Europeanness', particularly in opposition to the 'non-European other', reproduces colonial imaginaries of civilisation and whiteness. Migrants from the Global South, and interracial couples by extension, often find themselves positioned within this matrix as signs of cultural otherness. A postcolonial lens therefore allows us to examine how racial boundaries are not only imported into Europe but are also locally produced through its desire for Western cosmopolitanism.

2. Avtar Brah and the "Diaspora Space" of Belonging

Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space (1996) offers a critical entry point for understanding how migration and belonging intersect within intimacy. For Brah, diaspora space is not merely a site occupied by migrants but a relational space where multiple subjectivities, mainly where the migrant, the native, and the 'other' coexist and negotiate meaning. It is a space of hybridity, translation, and contestation. Applying this idea to interracial relationships in Hungary reveals how couples inhabit a kind of emotional and social diaspora space. Their love becomes a contact zone where histories of migration and racial difference converge and are rearticulated in everyday practices.

For instance, when a Hungarian partner learns their partner's native language or participates in their cultural practices or even vice versa, they enter a process of mutual translation that unsettles fixed boundaries of belonging. In this way, Brah's framework showcases how the politics of intimacy extends beyond physical proximity. It is also a negotiation of identity, memory, and emotion. The interracial couple's home or shared special places, their language choices, and their social interactions all become diasporic spaces where belonging is simultaneously enacted and questioned.

In the Hungarian context, this negotiation is heightened by the tension between national narratives of ethnic purity and the lived reality of multicultural connections. Brah's notion of diaspora space allows us to analyse how such relationships challenge these boundaries and reimagine what belonging can mean in a society that often defines itself through exclusion.

3. Homi Bhabha: Hybridity and the 'Third Space'

Complementing Brah's analysis is Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and the third space of enunciation. Bhabha argues that cultural identity is not fixed but constantly negotiated within spaces of

encounter. The 'third space' emerges whenever difference interacts. It is an ambivalent zone that disrupts binary oppositions such as self and other, coloniser and colonised, native and foreigner. In interracial relationships, this third space materialises in the emotional and linguistic negotiations between partners. Through acts of translation, affection, and miscommunication, they produce hybrid identities that resist stable categorisation.

Applying Bhabha's theory to interracial intimacy in Hungary reveals how love operates as a performative practice of hybridity. When a couple publicly expresses affection or navigates language differences, they momentarily open a third space that destabilizes dominant narratives of purity. Yet this space is not free from power; it is uncertain, marked by both possibility and vulnerability. As Bhabha reminds us, hybridity "unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but also rearticulates its authority" (1994, p. 112). Similarly, interracial intimacy may challenge racial hierarchies while simultaneously exposing them, as partners navigate the gaze, scrutiny, and bureaucracy of everyday life.

4. Sara Ahmed: Affect, Emotion, and the Politics of Belonging

Sara Ahmed's (2014) work on affect and the cultural politics of emotion offers another crucial dimension. Ahmed shows how emotions are not private states but social forces that shape bodies, orientations, and attachments. Whiteness, she argues (2007), functions as an orientation that determines who feels 'at home' in particular spaces. Within this framework, interracial intimacy can be read as an affective disruption of the national body. The feelings of discomfort, curiosity, or hostility that interracial couples may provoke are not individual reactions but affective economies that sustain national and racial boundaries.

Ahmed's theory helps us understand belonging as an affective achievement. This affective achievement is one that is continuously negotiated through gestures of care, desire, and recognition. When partners in interracial relationships learn each other's languages, celebrate different cultural rituals, or navigate prejudice together, they are performing emotional labour that reconfigures belonging. Their intimacy becomes a practice of orientation and a way of turning toward one another despite the affective pull of exclusionary national and social imaginaries. In this sense, love itself becomes a form of everyday resistance to the social structures that render some bodies more 'belonging' than others.

5. Walter Dignolo and Decolonial Love

Whereas postcolonial theory critiques the remains of empire, decolonial thought questions how we might move beyond them. Walter Dignolo (2011) calls for epistemic delinking. This is a conscious effort to think, feel, and relate outside the logics of Western modernity. Within this frame, love can be reimagined as a decolonial act and a way of relating that refuses hierarchies of race, culture, and knowledge. The concept of decolonial love (Sandoval, 2000; Lugones, 2010) focuses on care, vulnerability, and mutual recognition as tools for dismantling colonial forms of dominance.

Interracial intimacy, particularly between individuals from historically unequal global positions, embodies this decolonial potential while also revealing its fragility. In Hungary, where whiteness and Europeaness remain powerful markers of legitimacy, love across racial and national lines exposes the limits of the nation's imagined homogeneity. Yet it also opens small spaces of transformation. This is what Dignolo might call 'border thinking' where new modes of coexistence and empathy are imagined. This framework thus treats intimacy not as escape from politics but as its continuation through affective and relational forms.

6. Intimacy as a Site of Translation

Taken together, these theories position intimacy as a space of translation which can be emotional, cultural, and political. Translation here is not merely linguistic; it describes the constant negotiation between identities, values, and histories that characterise interracial relationships. It is through these acts

of translation that individuals navigate belonging and exclusion. The Hungarian partner might translate national norms into more inclusive understandings of identity, while the migrant partner translates their cultural world into a form that can be recognised within local contexts. These translations are imperfect, but they are precisely where new possibilities of coexistence emerge.

By integrating Brah's diaspora space, Bhabha's third space, Ahmed's affective politics, and Mignolo's decolonial love, this study conceptualises intimacy as both a mirror and a challenge to the politics of belonging in contemporary Hungary. It offers a framework that bridges structure and emotion, macro and micro, the colonial and the personal. Through this lens, interracial couples are not only subjects of racialisation but also agents of translation that embody what it means to belong in motion, to care across borders, and to imagine new forms of community within an age of populism and global transformation.

7. Acculturation, Social Relationships, and Intimacy

Berry's (1997, 2005) acculturation framework offers a relational lens through which to understand how migrants adapt culturally and socially while maintaining, or transforming, connections to their cultures of origin. Central to this framework is the recognition that acculturation is bi-directional and deeply shaped by social relationships, particularly close interpersonal ties.

Interracial partnerships can function as powerful sources of social support, facilitating language acquisition, cultural learning, and access to social networks. From an acculturation perspective, such relationships often foster an integration orientation, supporting psychological well-being and social adaptation. At the same time, an overreliance on intimate partners for social integration may also produce vulnerability, particularly if broader host-society networks remain limited.

Placing acculturation theory in dialogue with postcolonial and decolonial frameworks allows this study to bridge emotional life and structural power. Intimacy is thus conceptualised not only as an affective bond, but as an acculturative process shaped by uneven racial, cultural, and institutional contexts. However, this theory is often linked to psychological frameworks, this study engages with the theory critically by placing acculturation processes within wider structures of race, migration, and Postcolonial power.

8. Hungarian context for Inter-ethnic Relationships

While current discussions of race, migration, and belonging provide an important analytical foundation, empirical studies of inter-ethnic and interracial relationships in Hungary remain relatively limited. Existing research nonetheless offers important insights into how such relationships are negotiated within the Hungarian social context. For instance, Kovács (2015) explores the lived experiences of Chinese–Hungarian mixed couples and highlights the everyday cultural negotiations that shape their relationships. Similarly, research by Komolafe and Dávid (2017) examines the dynamics of Roma and non-Roma romantic relationships, revealing how social boundaries and prejudice shape intimate life. Studies by Lendák-Kabók and Örkény (2025) further demonstrate the broader social implications of intermarriage in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly regarding social integration and identity formation. Engaging with this body of research situates the present study within the growing scholarship on inter-ethnic relationships in Hungary and contributes to expanding this empirical field. These studies of inter-ethnic relationships in Hungary demonstrate how intimate partnerships often become sites where cultural negotiation, social boundaries, and processes of integration are actively negotiated.

STUDYING INTERRACIAL INTIMACY: METHODS AND APPROACHES

1. Phenomenological Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach grounded in the belief that social realities are constructed and negotiated through lived experience, emotion, and everyday interaction. Since the

paper aims to explore how interracial couples in Hungary make sense of belonging and intimacy within the context of migration and racialised national discourse, a qualitative design allows for the depth and nuance needed to capture these experiences. Rather than seeking representativeness or statistical generalisation, the aim is to understand how individuals experience, interpret, and express their lives in relation to broader social forces.

The study draws inspiration from ethnographic and phenomenological frameworks, focusing on how people feel and make meaning rather than what they do. This approach resonates with the theoretical framework, which views intimacy as a site of translation and negotiation. It emphasises everyday practices such as conversation, gesture, emotion, and habit as key sources of anthropological insight. The research therefore makes paramount the personal narratives, stories, and reflections that illustrate how love, race, and belonging intersect in lived experience.

2. Participants and Recruitment

The study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten interracial couples living in Budapest. Each couple consisted of one Hungarian partner and one partner from outside Europe primarily from African and Asian countries, as well as Latin America. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to mid-thirties, with most identifying as students, researchers, or young professionals. The sample includes couples in dating, cohabiting, and long-term relationships.

Participants were recruited through university networks, social organisations, and word-of-mouth referrals within the international student community. Inclusion criteria required that both partners self-identify as being in an interracial relationship and have lived in Hungary for at least six months. All participants provided informed consent to the researcher.

The diversity of participants' backgrounds was culturally, linguistically, and racially chosen to reflect the evolving diversity of Hungary's social fabric. Yet, as many described, the visibility of their relationships also rendered them particularly susceptible to public scrutiny. These experiences, though specific to each couple, collectively show how migration, race, and national belonging are lived through intimacy.

3. Data Collection and Process

Interviews were conducted over a period of four months in 2024 and early 2025. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, depending on the participant's availability and comfort level. Most were conducted in English, though some included brief exchanges in Hungarian mostly between the participants, especially when participants discussed language use or local experiences to get their points across. The interviews took place in neutral, accessible locations such as cafés, public parks, or university meeting rooms to create an atmosphere of comfort and mutual respect.

The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility while maintaining thematic consistency. These were the core questions explored:

How participants met and how they experience their relationship in Hungary.

How they perceive social attitudes toward interracial relationships.

How they navigate language, culture, and family expectations.

How they make sense of belonging, home, and identity in everyday life.

Follow-up questions encouraged reflection on emotion and embodiment, for example, how it feels to be seen as a couple in public spaces, or what belonging feels like in moments of acceptance or rejection. These questions helped surface the affective dimensions of intimacy, central to this paper's focus on the politics of emotion and translation.

Field notes were also taken before, during, and sometimes after each interview to document non-verbal cues, atmosphere, and contextual impressions. These notes were later used to complement interview transcripts, helping to situate the spoken narratives within embodied experience.

4. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which is a flexible method suited for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The process involved several iterative stages:

Familiarisation: Listening to recordings and re-reading transcripts to identify recurrent feelings, metaphors, and themes.

Theme construction: Codes were grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns across participants, for example, intimacy as translation, whiteness and visibility, and love as resistance.

Interpretation: These themes were read through the theoretical lens developed earlier particularly through Bhabha's 'third space', Ahmed's 'affective politics' and Mignolo's 'decolonial love'.

This interpretive process allowed for a dynamic relationship between theory and data. Theory guided the reading of the narratives, while participants' stories reanimated and localised the theoretical concepts. The analysis prioritised participants' voices while acknowledging that interpretation is an inherently situated act that is shaped by the researcher's position, background, and emotions.

The coding process followed both inductive and deductive strategies. These themes, then, were generated from the interview data through the repeated reading of transcripts and field notes taken by the researcher. These codes or themes, captured the reoccurring metaphors, emotional responses, and expressions related to intimacy, visibility, and belonging. In the second stage these ideations were refined through the interaction of the theoretical framework with a particular focus on concepts such as acculturation. To further refine the analytical rigor, the coding process involved various amounts of revision in which the themes were compared across interviews. This approach as well as revision of the field notes ensured that the themes were indeed recurring and not isolated narratives.

5. Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Recognising the politics of knowledge production, this study embraces a reflexive stance. As a researcher situated within Hungary but shaped by transnational experiences, I occupy an 'in-between' position similar to that of many participants. This positionality offered both insight and limitation. On one hand, it facilitated trust and empathy in interviews, particularly around experiences of marginality and cultural negotiation. On the other, it required vigilance against over-identification and assumptions of shared understanding.

Reflexivity was therefore integral throughout the research process. Field notes included reflections not only on participants but also on my own reactions. There were moments of resonance, discomfort, or recognition which I had to work on while writing the paper. This practice followed feminist and postcolonial methodological traditions (Mohanty, 2003; Rose, 1997) that view the researcher not as an objective observer but as an active participant in the co-creation of knowledge. By acknowledging subjectivity as part of the analytic process, the study aligns with the broader decolonial aim of destabilising hierarchies between the researcher and the researched.

6. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of discussing race, identity, and intimacy, ethical care was central. All participants received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw, and the confidentiality of their data. Interviews were recorded only with consent and any identifiable details

were altered. Discussions of discrimination or emotional distress were approached with care, and participants were encouraged to share only what felt comfortable.

The research complied with institutional ethical guidelines and broader principles of qualitative ethics such as respect for autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence. Ethical practice was treated as an ongoing, relational process rather than a one-time approval. This approach resonates with the study's conceptual focus on care and relationality.

7. Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study is limited by its scope and scale. The sample is small and localised to urban Hungary, particularly Budapest, which may not reflect rural or less cosmopolitan contexts. Moreover, participants' relative educational privilege and fluency in English may differentiate their experiences from those of other migrants. However, the intention here is not representativeness but depth of insight, to trace how intimacy operates as a site of negotiation and belonging within specific social and historical conditions. These narratives provide a textured understanding of the emotional and political dimensions of interracial intimacy in Hungary and, by extension, in postcolonial Europe. The following section presents the core findings and discussion. This has been organised around three interrelated themes of intimacy as translation, whiteness and visibility, and love as resistance. All together, these highlight how interracial couples navigate the politics of belonging in everyday life.

THEMATIC FINDINGS

The findings of this study are organised around three interrelated themes that might clarify how interracial couples in Hungary navigate belonging, identity, and intimacy in their everyday lives. These themes, which are: Intimacy as Translation, Whiteness and Visibility, and Love as Resistance capture the affective and political dimensions of their relationships. Together, they reveal how love becomes a site of negotiation and transformation in a context shaped by migration, nationalism, and Europe's colonial legacies.

1. Intimacy as Translation

For many participants, love was described as a process of translation not just between languages but between worlds. Couples spoke of continually learning how to express affection, navigate misunderstanding, and make sense of each other's cultural and emotional contexts. This everyday act of translation was central to how they experienced intimacy. Several Hungarian partners described how language itself became a symbol of care. One participant, Anna, who had been dating a Kenyan student for two years, explained:

"I started learning Swahili phrases...small things like greetings just to surprise him. It's funny, but every time I try, he laughs and says it makes him feel like he's home."

Her story echoes Bhabha's (1994) concept of the third space which is a zone of encounter where difference becomes productive rather than divisive. Here, intimacy is not about assimilation or sameness, it is about the constant work of translation. Language learning, shared meals, and cross-cultural humour become forms of emotional labor that sustain the relationship and forge a shared symbolic space. Such practices functioned as forms of cultural mediation and acculturative learning. However, translation also involved tension. Several participants described the exhaustion of always having to 'explain' themselves or their cultures. David, a Ghanaian participant, expressed this frustration:

"Sometimes it feels like I'm always teaching her about my food, my hair, my accent, my country. It's not bad, but it can be tiring. Love becomes another kind of work."

This sense of affective fatigue highlights the uneven power dynamics within translation. As Spivak (1993) reminds us, translation is never neutral, it always involves the movement of meaning through

asymmetrical relations of power. In interracial intimacy, this asymmetry manifests through race, nationality, and language, shaping who is expected to 'adapt' and who remains the reference point.

For Hungarian partners, translation often meant reorienting themselves within unfamiliar cultural frameworks. Several described feeling both curious and anxious about 'getting it wrong'. Yet this vulnerability also opened pathways toward empathy. As Katalin, a Hungarian woman dating an Indian student, put it:

"I realised that I don't have to understand everything perfectly. Sometimes, just trying is enough. That kind of effort becomes part of love."

In these moments, intimacy becomes a decolonial practice of learning and unlearning, an act of care that challenges fixed hierarchies of knowledge and culture. Mignolo's (2011) notion of border thinking is particularly useful here. Translation across boundaries of race and culture produces a space where both partners must rethink what belonging and understanding mean. Thus, intimacy as translation captures both the tenderness and tension of loving across difference. It shows how couples navigate linguistic and cultural borders while simultaneously creating new grammars of belonging. These are grammars that defy nationalist imaginaries of purity and sameness.

2. Whiteness and Visibility

While translation occurred within the private sphere, the theme of whiteness and visibility emerged most powerfully in public life. Participants consistently described how their relationships drew attention in public spaces. In places such as on the street, in restaurants, or on public transport. These encounters, often subtle but persistent, reinforced a sense of being 'looked at'.

Samuel, a Nigerian participant, recalled:

"When we walk together, people stare and sometimes they smile, sometimes they frown. It's like we are always performing something we didn't choose."

This hypervisibility reveals how whiteness functions as an organising principle of belonging in Hungarian society. As Ahmed (2007) argues, whiteness operates as an orientation, it often determines who feels 'at home' and who becomes 'out of place'. For interracial couples, this orientation becomes painfully visible. The Hungarian partner's whiteness is constantly recontextualised in the presence of a non-white partner. These experiences highlight how whiteness operates as an affective orientation shaping whom is perceived as belonging.

Eszter, a Hungarian woman dating a Black partner, described this experience vividly:

"When I'm alone, I'm just another Hungarian. But when I'm with him, suddenly people notice us and by extension, me. It's strange how love can make you visible in ways you didn't expect."

Her reflection underscores Ahmed's (2014) point that those emotions such as discomfort and curiosity are not personal feelings but affective economies that bind bodies together and shape social worlds. The gaze directed at interracial couples is part of an affective economy that maintains racial boundaries and national identities. To be seen as an interracial couple in Hungary is, therefore, to inhabit a form of embodied difference that both disrupts and reaffirms dominant power structures. Brah's (1996) concept of diaspora space also provides insight here. Even within their home country, Hungarian partners often felt like they had entered a diasporic position, a space of negotiation between the familiar and the foreign. As Bálint, a Hungarian man dating a Brazilian woman, explained:

"People sometimes ask if we met abroad or if she's a refugee. It's as if our relationship doesn't fit in their mental picture of what Hungary is."

This questioning reveals how interracial couples destabilise national imaginaries. Their visibility exposes the fragility of a homogenous vision of Hungarian identity. Which is one that depends on racialised exclusions to define itself. Yet the same visibility that challenges these boundaries can also produce vulnerability. Participants recounted experiences of microaggressions, from unsolicited comments about their future children's appearance to bureaucratic challenges in registering residence permits or accessing healthcare. These institutional and social encounters re-inscribe racial hierarchies, reminding couples that their belonging is conditional. Still, many participants resisted framing themselves as victims. They emphasised resilience, humour, and the importance of creating their own spaces of comfort. For example, Aisha, a Tanzanian student, noted:

"We choose where to go. There are places we feel welcome, and places we just avoid. We've learned how to read spaces. Like where it's safe to hold hands, where it's better not to."

Her comment reflects an embodied geography of belonging that mixes love, fear, and strategic navigation. In this sense, interracial intimacy exposes not only social boundaries but also the spatial and emotional contours of contemporary Hungary's racial order. Visibility also functioned as both exposure and risk. It shaped how couples navigated public space as an acculturative strategy of caution and adaptation.

3. Love as Resistance

Despite the challenges of translation and visibility, participants repeatedly described their relationships as acts of resistance, not in the militant sense, but through the quiet defiance of care, persistence, and joy. In an environment where difference is often politicised, simply loving across racial and cultural boundaries becomes an assertion of possibility.

Mariana, a Latina participant, put it succinctly:

"Sometimes I feel like just existing together by cooking, laughing, and arguing is already political. We're proving that it's possible."

Her words align with the concept of decolonial love (Lugones, 2010; Sandoval, 2000), which frames love as a transformative force that resists domination and reclaims relationality. By choosing intimacy over fear, these couples reimagine belonging beyond the confines of nation and race. Their relationships model an ethics of connection grounded in mutual vulnerability rather than hierarchy. Acts of resistance were often subtle and deeply personal. By choosing to speak a mix of languages in public, celebrating multiple cultural festivals, or supporting each other through encounters with racism. Jonas, a Cameroonian participant, described how his Hungarian partner defended him in a workplace incident:

"Someone made a joke about my accent, and she called it out immediately. I didn't even have to say anything. That's love, not just words, but standing beside me."

Such acts of solidarity transform intimacy into a site of social critique. They reveal how private emotions can challenge public exclusions. This echoes Ahmed's (2004) notion of the politics of emotion and the idea that feelings of love, shame, or anger can circulate to sustain or disrupt social hierarchies. In these relationships, love circulates as a counter-affect, reorienting both partners toward inclusivity and empathy.

Moreover, love as resistance extends beyond interpersonal dynamics to broader questions of community. Several couples described forming informal networks with other interracial or migrant couples, sharing advice, and creating safe social spaces. These communities, though small, represent emergent forms of transnational solidarity. They blur the boundaries between 'local' and 'foreign', contributing to what Bhabha (1994) might describe as vernacular cosmopolitanism, which is a lived experience rooted in everyday practice rather than elite discourse. Yet, it is important not to romanticise

this resistance. Participants were acutely aware of the emotional toll of constantly navigating exclusion. As Nia, a South African woman, observed:

“Love doesn’t erase racism. It doesn’t make the bureaucracy kinder or the stares stop. But it gives you someone to face it with.”

Her statement underscores both the power and the precarity of love as resistance. Intimacy cannot undo structural inequality, but it can offer a form of care that makes endurance possible. It is this fragile, persistent hope that Berlant (2011) calls *cruel optimism* that sustains interracial intimacy as both a personal and political project in Hungary. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that love does not automatically overcome structural inequalities. Participants repeatedly emphasised that emotional support within relationships coexists with broader institutional barriers, including bureaucratic challenges, labour market discrimination, and racialised public scrutiny.

4. Synthesis: Intimacy as a Decolonial Practice

Across these themes, intimacy emerges as a decolonial practice that reconfigures how belonging, identity, and emotion are lived. Through translation, couples navigate and redefine cultural boundaries and through visibility, they expose the racialised foundations of national identity, and through love as resistance, they embody alternative ways of being together in an age of populism and exclusion.

In Hungary, where discourses of national purity and ‘defence of the family’ dominate political rhetoric, interracial intimacy challenges who is imagined to belong to the nation. These couples’ everyday negotiations reveal that belonging is not only a matter of citizenship or legality but also of affection, recognition, and care. They demonstrate what Brah (1996) terms the politics of difference. This is the possibility of living with, rather than despite, difference. Through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial thought, their love stories become small acts of epistemic rebellion and gestures that question the hierarchies embedded in both public and private life. Therefore, intimacy can be read as both a mirror and a critique of Europe’s ongoing struggle with race, migration, and modernity.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that interracial intimacy in Hungary operates as a political, affective, and acculturative practice. Through everyday acts of translation, emotional labour, and care, couples navigate racialised boundaries of belonging while negotiating social integration within an exclusionary national context. Intimate partnerships often function as crucial sources of social support, facilitating acculturation and emotional resilience. At the same time, reliance on these relationships can expose structural vulnerabilities when broader networks of inclusion remain limited.

By integrating postcolonial and decolonial theory with acculturation research, this paper demonstrates that belonging is not solely a matter of legal status or cultural assimilation, but is related to relational recognition, affective orientation, and social support. Interracial couples decode both the constraints and possibilities of belonging in contemporary Hungary, offering insight into how love becomes a fragile yet meaningful site of resistance in an age of populism and migration anxiety.

This study contributes to emerging scholarship on interracial intimacy in Central and Eastern Europe by foregrounding the lived experiences of couples navigating race, migration, and belonging in Hungary. By integrating acculturation theory with postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, it demonstrates how intimate relationships operate simultaneously as emotional support systems, sites of cultural translation, and spaces where broader racial and national hierarchies become visible.

At the same time, the research has several limitations. The sample is relatively small and largely composed of highly educated international students and young professionals living in Budapest, which may not capture the experiences of interracial couples in other social or geographic contexts within

Hungary. Future research could expand this work by examining interracial relationships across different social classes, migration statuses, and regional settings.

Despite these limitations, the findings highlight how intimacy reveals the everyday politics of belonging in contemporary Europe. Interracial couples illuminate the tensions between inclusion and exclusion, demonstrating how love becomes both a deeply personal relationship and a lens through which broader social transformations can be understood

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

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Compliance with ethical standards

All interviews were conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation, and confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. The research design respected the principles of autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence throughout.

Conflict of interest

I declare that there is no conflict of interest or competing interests.

Author contributions

I was solely responsible for the conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this paper.

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