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# *Emotions and City Life*

*Nicolas Kenny*

It is difficult to conceive of cities without imagining the multitude of emotions that animate life on their streets and in their buildings—the excitement of a crowded shopping district, the buzz around town when the local sports team is winning, the romance of an evening stroll when the shine of streetlights glimmers in the falling snow, not to mention the frustrations of incessant traffic jams or occasional power outages, the anger over the cruel displacements on which so much urban development has been and continues to be predicated, or the fears of violence and criminality that have long lurked in many urban centres. Historians are well aware of the extent to which these emotional experiences, subjective, difficult to access, and transitory as they might be, are deeply imbricated in the way people come to interact with and feel at home in their environment. It is through these moments of encounter, when the distinct conditions and atmospheres of urban areas impinge upon the emotions in unique and indelible ways, that the city itself becomes a part of the identity and interiority of its inhabitants. Recent work has told us of the rush of exhilaration felt by a small-town young woman discovering the thrills of metropolitan life in Montreal,<sup>1</sup> of the sting of exclusion and the defiant solidarities that characterized life in immigrant communities in cities like Toronto<sup>2</sup> or Winnipeg,<sup>3</sup> of the profound emotional attachment that informs the way Vancouverites have made and remade Stanley Park.<sup>4</sup> I would even venture that I am not alone among readers of this journal to have first been attracted to urban history at least in part as a result of my own delight in wandering through different cities at home and abroad.

We know these associations to be true intuitively, but rarely have urban historians problematized these personal responses to urban life explicitly as emotional experiences.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, the rapidly growing field of the history of the emotions, while offering ever more sophisticated insights into the historical contingencies that shape emotions, have been slow to anchor their work in notions of space, urban or otherwise. This special issue of the *Urban History Review*, then, offers a timely opportunity for these approaches to meet, and the articles that follow examine the fascinating entanglement of urban environments and the emotional dispositions of their occupants. As these authors demonstrate, the relationship between city life and the emotions is reciprocal. Not only do the particular circumstances of cities in a given period produce distinct emotional responses, as Thompson shows for post-revolutionary Paris, for example, but emotional responses themselves play a significant role in moulding the political, social, and material realities of the urban environment, as we shall see in Gregory and Grant's article on highway projects in Perth and Halifax.

Undoubtedly because this is a discipline that long tended to privilege the objective and verifiable above what was perceived as the intimate and ephemeral, historians have, until recently, afforded little attention to the emotions as historical phenomena, despite a tradition of intellectual inquiry into the emotions dating to ancient times.<sup>6</sup> Yet emotions are central to human existence, and studies showing the extent to which emotions forge identities, inform values and beliefs, and govern social relations are now proliferating.<sup>7</sup> To a considerable degree, much of the preoccupation in the field has been with the challenging task of understanding how emotions function, of figuring out whether they are cognitive processes or social phenomena, or both, for that matter. “Must emotions be either cultural or biological?,” asks William Reddy, whose work on “emotives,” the emotional language and gestures he sees underpinning French politics in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, skilfully draws as much on cognitive theory as anthropology.<sup>8</sup>

As Susan Matt points out, the biological and chemical “occurrences” that produce emotions on a physiological level are also “shaped, repressed, expressed” by language and culture.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, historians are interested in context above all, and beyond the question of “what [emotions] are” is the equally challenging question of “what they do,” of “how they function as social practices in continually changing circumstances.”<sup>10</sup> While emotions originate deep within the individual, it is the broader social and cultural context in which they are felt and expressed that has most concerned the emerging historiography. The way feelings of joy or fear, love or anger, for example, are experienced and interpreted varies across time and cultures, and as such bears historicizing.<sup>11</sup>

Aware of the difficulty in bridging the gap between the way individuals actually felt, and the expression of these feelings found in the sources, historians of the emotions have concentrated instead on the “social and cultural complexity of emotions,” framing them not at the level of the individual, but conceiving of them as social phenomena that govern relationships among and between groups.<sup>12</sup> Conceptual tools like “emotionology,”<sup>13</sup> “intimate publics,”<sup>14</sup> “emotional regimes,”<sup>15</sup> and “emotional communities”<sup>16</sup> give us the vocabulary with which to explore the way differing standards of emotional deportment have taken root in various times and places, as well as the way dominant emotional styles were articulated in discourse, regulated behaviour, or were resisted by those whose emotions located them outside the established norms. Emotions are socially and culturally meaningful, these scholars tell us, to the extent that they transcend

individual experience and are shared, prescribed, or challenged by the larger group of which the individual is a part.

Drawing on this relational understanding of the emotions, this volume seeks to ask how cities, in their density, diversity, and movement, constitute a setting around which emotions coalesce in particular ways. Urban historians can take an important cue from geographers who remind us that the “mediation and articulation” of emotions is not only a social process, but a spatial one as well.<sup>17</sup> Although, as historian Barbara Rosenwein suggests, a “crowded street” does not in itself form an “emotional community,” we can nonetheless ask how the interactions of the people in that crowd and their shared emplacement in that street can mobilize the emotions in particular ways, and create the conditions and the “common stake, interests, values and goals” in which emotional communities can indeed take root.<sup>18</sup> Commentators have in all periods used deeply emotional language to celebrate or condemn the city, and urban dwellers have had to contend with a host of positive and negative emotions generated by the fact of living in these dense and busy milieus. How did these emotional experiences shape urban dwellers’ memory, attitudes to, and knowledge of the city? And how can we bring the diverse emotions present in the sources to the fore of our analysis, shedding new light on the profoundly subjective implications of life in this eminently public setting?

This volume begins with travellers crossing the English Channel during the nineteenth century, an era to which historian Thomas Dixon traces the English-language use of the word *emotion* as “a category of mental states that might be systematically studied,” emerging from a centuries-long process of linguistic borrowing from the French *émotion*.<sup>19</sup> Victoria Thompson analyzes the powerful feelings of sadness, fear, and anxiety experienced by British visitors to post-revolutionary Paris. As Thompson points out, their understandings of identity were rooted in sites located both inside and outside their nation, and the upheavals of the Revolution were seen as having had a traumatic effect on the British psyche. Laying eyes on the areas of the city that most strongly evoked the events of the Revolution, what Thompson refers to as “emotional landmarks,” these travellers, steeped in a “highly emotional culture” in which strong emotional states were considered pleasurable, recounted the deep stirrings they felt inside. In emphasizing the shared sense of distress and trauma produced by their interaction with the Parisian urban environment, Thompson explains, these travellers were affirming their own belonging to an emotional community they defined along national lines. In so doing, she shows, they distinguished their own feelings from the seemingly less intense feelings of the locals they met. The contrast between French and British emotions, then, reinforced a differentiation of national character “on the basis of sentiment.”

Noting that much of the literature in the field offers a top-down examination of emotional standards and codes, historian of the emotions Clare Langhamer has called for a “history of feeling ‘from below’” that might help us better understand the “messiness of actual emotional practice” among more “ordinary

people.”<sup>20</sup> As the focus of the next three articles shifts to the twentieth century, the contributors to this volume explore original source material that offers unique insights into the way urban dwellers navigated the particular emotional conditions generated by the material and social conditions of the contemporary city. We cross back to England with Lucy Faire and Denise McHugh, whose examination of film, photography, and individual testimonials emphasizes the importance of “mundane activity and experiences” in the way urban dwellers forged a connection to their city. Using Nottingham and Leicester as case studies, Faire and McHugh consider the “‘intermesh’ of urban knowledge and identity,” discussing how people’s daily use of the streets, their movements and behaviour, their patterns of work and leisure, and the sensory and emotional connections they forged in the process were central not just to the way they conceived of their environment, but to the formation of their own identities as city dwellers. The intimate significance of these urban spaces, they argue, lay very much in the tensions and contractions between the uses intended by planners and authorities, and the actual ways in which ordinary citizens moved through and appropriated these cities.

Elise Chenier, for her part, brings us into the heart of Toronto, where she examines relations of sex and marriage “between men of Chinese heritage and women of non-Asian heritage,” during the period 1910–50. Contrary to common perceptions, these relationships occurred frequently. Chenier shows that far from being “bachelor societies” in which members lived “sexless, loveless lives,” as such expatriate communities are sometimes characterized, this was a place of varied and complicated relationships, some romantic and long-lasting, others more temporary and fleeting. In the culturally diverse and socially marginalized Chinatown of Toronto, men and women alike fled not just norms governing intimate relationships, but police crackdowns against their unions as well. The anonymity of the big city’s homes and restaurants afforded refuge to those who were stifled by convention, allowing their sexuality and emotions far greater freedom of expression. The lived experience of these relationships, Chenier demonstrates, reveals the fluidity of categories of identity like “working-class,” “sex worker,” and “Chinese Canadian.”

In this volume’s closing article, Jenny Gregory and Jill Grant compare protests against postwar highway developments in Australia and Canada. Like many other cities, Perth and Halifax embarked on modernist planning to facilitate automobile use and displace vulnerable populations, and both drew on the expertise of British planner George Stephenson. Emphasizing the “role of emotion in protest history,” the authors show how the plan to build a freeway into Perth and to demolish Halifax’s Africville neighbourhood threatened the deeply emotional sense of place felt by many residents in these cities. Rationalist planners sought to diminish the weight of protesters’ emotional arguments, arguing that progress and modernity should trump sentimentalist nostalgia. But protestors fired back, ultimately modifying the Perth project as it was being implemented and

obtaining a measure of redress for Africville, though it came decades after the demolition. While governments tried to ignore these “tactically” wielded emotional responses, Gregory and Grant show that whether or not the protests were successful, it is impossible to discount the centrality of deeply held emotions to the way the city is lived and represented, to the political, social, and racial tensions that shape it, and ultimately to the way its very materiality is rooted in competing emotional claims.

The range of themes and approaches offered by the contributors of this volume reflects the boundless possibilities for analyzing the city through the lens of the emotions. In their readings of specific localities, the authors collectively bring to light the emotional variable that more broadly underpins the convergence of urban space and the social dynamics that animate it. These links are further reinforced by the comparative perspective present in several of these pieces, whether the question is considered in terms of different cities in the same country or on the other side of the world. While these comparisons reveal the way local circumstances or cultures produce variations in the emotional meanings attributed to city environments, what remains constant is the way the construction of cities, both physically and socially, is fundamentally dependent on the interior and intimate connections urbanites develop with their surroundings. As the study of the emotions gains purchase among historians, the authors of these articles make an important contribution in showing how sentiments that might once have been dismissed as subjective, ephemeral, or unknowable are ultimately essential to a fuller understanding of the ideas, actions, and relationships that make urban life such a compelling object of inquiry.

### Notes

- 1 Magda Fahrni and Yves Frenette, “Don’t I long for Montreal’: L’identité hybride d’une jeune migrante franco-américaine pendant la Première Guerre mondiale,” *Histoire sociale / Social History* 41, no. 81 (2008): 75–98.
- 2 Jordan Stanger-Ross, *Urban Change and Ethnic Life in Postwar Toronto and Philadelphia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 3 Royden Loewen and Gerald Friesen, *Immigrants in Prairie Cities: Ethnic Diversity in Twentieth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 4 Sean Kheraj, *Inventing Stanley Park: An Environmental History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).
- 5 An important exception is Élodie Lecuppre-Desjardin and Anne-Laure Van Bruaene, eds., *Emotions in the Heart of the City (14th–16th Century)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).
- 6 Keith Oatley, *Emotions: A Brief History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004).

- 7 For a candid discussion among six prominent figures in the field on the objectives and challenges defining history of the emotions, see “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1487–1531. As this issue goes to press, new conferences and publications on the history of the emotions are being announced daily. See, in particular, Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, eds., *Doing Emotions History* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014), as well as a recent introductory webinar available online: “Emotions in History: An Introduction,” *H-France Salon* 6, no. 1 (2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFdDKOYDrps>.
- 8 William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 9 Susan J. Matt, “Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out,” *Emotion Review* 3, no. 1 (2011), 5.
- 10 Jennifer Harding and E. Deidre Pribram, eds., *Emotions: A Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.
- 11 On these different emotions in particular, see Joanna Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History,” *History Workshop Journal* 55 (2003): 112–33; Linda A. Pollock, “Anger and the Negotiation of Relationships in Early Modern England,” *Historical Journal* 47, no. 3 (2004): 567–90; Adam Potkay, *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Carol Zisowitz Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America’s History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).
- 12 Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History: Lost and Found* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011), 23–4.
- 13 Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *American Historical Review* 90, no. 4 (1985): 813–36.
- 14 Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- 15 Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*.
- 16 Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 17 Joyce Davidson, Liz Bondi, and Mick Smith, eds., *Emotional Geographies* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005), 3.
- 18 Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, 24.
- 19 Thomas Dixon, “‘Emotion’: The History of a Keyword in Crisis,” *Emotion Review* 4, no. 4 (2012): 339.
- 20 Clare Langhamer, “Everyday Love and Emotions in the Twentieth Century,” *History of Emotions Blog*, 2 September 2013, <http://emotionsblog.history.qmul.ac.uk/?p=2777>. See also Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).