



**This postprint was originally published by
Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht as:**

Barua, R., & Oberländer, A. (2021). Fluid feelings: Introduction.
*L'Homme: Europäische Zeitschrift für Feministische
Geschichtswissenschaft*, 32(2), 13-20.
<https://doi.org/10.14220/lhom.2021.32.2.13>.

Terms of use:

Available under the [CC BY-4.0 license](#).



Provided by:

Max Planck Institute for Human Development
Library and Research Information
library@mpib-berlin.mpg.de

Rukmini Barua und Alexandra Oberländer

Fluid Feelings: Introduction*

Feelings and emotions are often regarded as “integral to gendered frameworks of power”.¹ Gender categories and binaries have been constructed as much on the basis of perceived sexual and/or biological distinctions as differences in emotional capabilities. Most scholars interested in emotions and gender would dispute that men are more rational or women more emotional.² Indeed, this myth is criticised for counterposing emotion and rationality in the first place, casting emotion as female, primitive and private, and rationality as male, sophisticated, and public.³ Research on gender and emotions has walked a fine line between deconstructing myths about gender while maintaining that gender is indeed felt differently as a result of discourses, expectations or socialisation.⁴ Nevertheless, certain emotions (such as maternal love, shame in women or anger in men) have been intimately linked with the constitution of gendered

* We would like to thank the participants of our “common project” at the MPIB – Max Planck Institute for Human Development/Research Center “History of Emotions”, who are published in this issue and Yaara Bengier Alaluf and Michael Amico who helped bring an idea to fruition. Thanks to Devika Dua, Kate Davison and Daniela Petrosino for the copyediting, as well as the editors and anonymous reviewers for their cooperation and comments.

¹ Sam de Boise, *Men, Masculinities, Music and Emotions*, Basingstoke 2015, 4. In this special “L’Homme”-issue we use the terms emotions and feelings synonymously. Usually emotions are understood to be more unconsciously happening whereas subjects are believed to have immediate access to their own feelings. Gender is both: deeply inculcated as well as part of a sometimes conscious performance, which is why in this special issue we do not distinguish between feelings and emotions. See John Leavitt, *Meaning and Feeling in the Anthropology of Emotions*, in: *American Ethnologist*, 23, 3 (1998), 514–539.

² See Birgit Sauer, *Politik wird mit dem Kopf gemacht: Überlegungen zu einer geschlechtersensiblen Politologie der Gefühle*, in: Ansgar Klein and Frank Nullmeier eds., *Masse – Macht – Emotion: Zu einer politischen Soziologie der Emotionen*, Wiesbaden 1999, 200–218, 208.

³ See Nicole Eustace, *AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions*, in: *American Historical Review*, 117, 5 (2012), 1487–1531, 1490.

⁴ Until this day the book which first comes to mind is probably Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Berkeley 1983. See also Eva Illouz, *Reason within Passion: Love in Women’s Magazines*, in: *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8 (1991), 231–248; Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History. Lost and Found*, Budapest 2011, 87–14.

subjectivities.⁵ But in doing so, research too often tends to reify gendered notions of emotions or feelings.⁶ This special issue of “L’Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft” challenges such a reading by mapping the fluid and malleable relationship between gender and emotions/feelings, with an emphasis on everyday life.

We identify three modes of fluidity: ambivalence, circulation and divergence. Rather than focusing on gendered emotion norms or the process of gendering emotions, we address the unstable, contingent and fluid ways in which individual actions and practices (and their representations) interact with emotion rules, blurring the binary opposition between normative structures and resistance. We ask: What are gender appropriate emotions and emotion practices in the classroom, the workplace, the home or the street? At which moments are they unsettled? And what happens when they are disturbed? Our essays focus on the 20th and early 21st centuries and explore the interface between the social and the individual, as well as the points of tension or cohesion that appear in ways of feeling (out of) gender. We argue that emotions are constitutive of gender in sustaining, underpinning and destabilising gender binaries, norms, subjectivities, and categories. In bringing fluidity to the centre of our analysis, this special issue advances an understanding of gender, emotions and their interactions as phenomena in motion and in the process of becoming, rather than static categories.

Existing scholarship often tends to reproduce prevalent perceptions of gender, which maintain that indeed: men have trouble accessing their emotions.⁷ Women, on the other hand, appear to be governed by feeling; emotions not only circumscribe women’s scope of potential behaviour, but essentially define women’s entire being.⁸ Furthermore, the division of labour by gender guarantees that women are overburdened with emotion-intensive work or care-work. In other words: patriarchal structures materialise as a gendered order of feelings, but with the caveat that, of course, all of it is socially or culturally construed. In this constructivist framework, emotions

⁵ See Clare Monagle, *Scholastic Affect. Gender, Maternity and the History of Emotions*, Cambridge 2020, see also the review of the book in this issue; Imke Rajamani, *Angry Young Men. Masculinity, Citizenship and Virtuous Emotions in Popular Indian Cinema*, PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin 2016; Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *Shame and the Anti-Feminist Backlash. Britain, Ireland and Australia 1880–1920*, New York 2018; Alexandra Oberländer, *Shame and Modern Subjectivities: The Rape of Elizaveta Chermnova in 1882*, in: Mark D. Steinberg and Valeria Sobol, eds., *Interpreting Emotions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, DeKalb 2011, 82–101.

⁶ On reification see Liz Bondi and Joyce Davidson, *Troubling the Place of Gender*, in: Kay Anderson, Mona Domosh, Steve Pile and Nigel Thrift eds., *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, London 2003, 325–343; Damien Boquet and Didier Lett, *Editorial. Emotions and the Concept of Gender*, in: *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 47, 1 (2018), 7–22, 18f.; R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*, in: *Gender & Society*, 19, 2 (2005), 829–859.

⁷ See Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Were Puritan Emotions Gendered (New England, Mid-1600s)*, in: *Clio. Women, Gender, History*, 47, 1 (2018), 67–91.

⁸ See Caroline Lutz, *Emotions and Feminist Theories*, in: Ingrid Kasten et al. eds., *Querelles: Jahrbuch für Frauenforschung* 2002, 104–121.

carry a transformative charge and an argument can be advanced that changing ways of feeling have an impact on the constitution of gender and its attendant power structures. A critical body of scholarship has questioned the application of a universal binary framework of 'male' and 'female' onto modes of allocating power.⁹ Fluidity is viewed not as an exception from an otherwise 'fixed' gender core, but rather in terms of a diversity that is constitutive of normative gender regimes.¹⁰ Extending the notion of fluidity to critique gender as a 'fixed' analytical category thus functions as a call for intersectionality – for addressing the interactive, processual and contingent dynamics of gender. In its examination of sexuality, gender and identities, the field of Queer Studies has made a formidable contribution to the understanding of fluidity.¹¹ It also highlights the need to be attentive to the intersectional dynamics of social power in any understanding of fluidity.¹²

The articles published here draw upon and depart from this body of scholarship by turning to, and troubling, the interplay between gender and emotion and tracing the dynamics of rigidity and fluidity within it. Taking a cue from Queer Studies, we move beyond an understanding of gender as a role that draws on an essential, interior self. Feminist geographers have highlighted how gender shapes the organisation of spatial and social relations and how gender, through bodily practices, produces social space.¹³ Triangulating emotions with embodiment and spatiality, the essays in this issue illustrate the fluidities embedded in the ways of feeling gender structures, relations and practices. With a geographical scope encompassing Zambia, Turkey, Soviet Russia and India, and drawing on archival histories, individual biographies, ethnographies and explorations of popular culture, we elaborate how gender categories are strengthened, disturbed or made ambivalent by emotions. The wide array of sites and diverse methodologies allow us to highlight the intersections between gender, class and race and trace the operations of fluidity across a range of social and political regimes.

⁹ See Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards. Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2005.

¹⁰ See Jeanne Boydston, *Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis*, in: *Gender & History*, 20, 3 (2008), 558–583.

¹¹ Much of our thinking about fluidity is informed by Queer Studies, see Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster. Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*, London 2001; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Ithaca 1993.

¹² See Cathy J. Cohen, *Bulldaggers Punks, and Welfare Queens. The Radical Potential of Queer Politics*, in: *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 3 (1997), 437–465.

¹³ See Nigel Thrift and Doreen Massey, *Passion of Place*, in: Ron Johnston et al. eds., *A Century of British Geography*, Oxford 2003; Martina Loew, *The Social Construction of Space and Gender*, in: *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13, 2 (2006), 119–133.

I.

This collection presents three ways of understanding fluid feelings with regard to gender. The first stems from the concepts of liminality and ambivalence. Liminal subjects and matter, conceived of as 'out of time' and 'out of place', are seen at the margins of social structures, symbolically classified in the languages of dirt and disorder.¹⁴ Liminality suggests a situation where identities are unfixed and fuzzy, and offers a realm of pure possibility,¹⁵ enabling fluidity in terms of ambiguity and ambivalence. Ambivalence foregrounds the "complexities of human existence" by highlighting the ways in which what are often perceived as binaries are enmeshed.¹⁶ That is, contradictory emotional patterns and dynamics may emerge over the same historical and social context, whereby feelings that revolve around gender are pulled in multiple directions. Stephanie Lämmert's essay examining sugar daddy relationships in postcolonial Zambia suggests that historicising and spatialising reveals an ambivalence in gender relations, roles and status. Reading sugar daddy narratives across a range of spatial sites, this genre of popular stories can be considered a mode of negotiating anxieties around social order. The fluidity and ambivalence with which these relationships are discussed and perceived hints at the gendered dynamic of class and intergenerational tensions.

Ambivalence and ambiguity can also have an underlying spatial dynamic.¹⁷ Thresholds, doorways and pathways for instance connect even as they separate spaces. Drawing attention to the emotional fluidity of social spaces also involves going beyond the spatial binaries of outside/inside, private/public. A rich body of scholarship has addressed the place of emotion in the making and remaking of social geographies, across a range of spatial scales – from the body, as the most immediate site of emotional experience and expression, to wider environs of the home, the street, schools, workplaces, and so on.¹⁸ Conversely, spatial settings shape emotional repertoires, "feeling rules" and "emotional

¹⁴ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London 1966; Victor Turner, *Liminality and Communitas*, in: idem, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, New York 1969, 125–130.

¹⁵ See Shail Mayaram, *Rethinking Meo Identity: Cultural Faultline, Syncretism, Hybridity or Liminality?*, in: *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 17, 2 (1997), 35–45; Farha Ghannam, *Mobility, Liminality, and Embodiment in Urban Egypt*, in: *American Ethnologist*, 38, 4 (2011), 790–800.

¹⁶ Sudhir Chandra, *Ambivalence of Social Consciousness: Inter-Community Relations in Modern India*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly*, (2006), 397–402.

¹⁷ See Georg Simmel, *Bridge and Door*, in: *Theory, Culture & Society*, 11, 1 (1994), 5–10.

¹⁸ See Joyce Davidson and Christine Milligan, *Embodying Emotion Sensing Space: Introducing Emotional Geographies*, in: *Social & Cultural Geography*, 5, 4 (2004), 523–532; Joyce Davidson, Mick Smith and Liz Bondi eds., *Emotional Geographies*, Burlington 2012; Bondi/Davidson, *Troubling the Place*, see note 6.

styles”.¹⁹ The notion of emotional styles – which encompass the experience, display and generation of emotions and their oscillation between discursive structures and embodied practices – takes the liminal character of emotions (occupying the threshold between individual/social, inside/outside, discourse/practice, body/language, and so on) seriously.²⁰ In unsettling these binaries, our articles advance an understanding of the spatially variable and fluid ways in which gender and feeling are enmeshed.

In considering the fluid relationship between gender and emotion, it is crucial that we take into account the shifting connections between the subject and the environment.²¹ Several of the essays in this issue address the spatial logics of gender and emotion. Margrit Pernau investigates how distinct spaces were marked by specific emotional styles of masculinity in the Indian princely state of Hyderabad throughout the twentieth century. Emotions were not only central in the constitution of spaces but also in the reconfiguration of the hierarchies between them. The fluidity of emotional styles and spaces of masculinity, Pernau suggests, were historically situated and had political implications. Stephanie Lämmert, Rukmini Barua and Alexandra Oberländer examine spatial settings such as the home, the workplace, the school and the national stage to trace the ways in which emotional styles and practices in one space were linked to emotional dynamics of other sites. Lämmert demonstrates how the fluid feelings linked to sugar relations varied across different sites and suggests that they mirrored the unstable social hierarchies in 20th century Zambia. Barua illustrates the ambivalent feelings around feminine domesticity by tracing the impact of women’s waged work in India and argues that normative domesticity amongst the working classes appears a mode of negotiating women’s feelings toward work and the home. Considering the interplay of romance with workplace dynamics and gender relations in the late Soviet Union, Oberländer shows how women’s professional success was discursively linked to domestic unhappiness and how fluidity was ingrained in the way this tension was resolved. Esra Sarioglu approaches the question of space more obliquely, focusing on the impact of feminine propriety on working-class women’s waged labour in twentieth century Turkey. In doing so, she offers a reading of the historical transformation of shame in light of changing labour regimes and workplace dynamics.

¹⁹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, in: *American Journal of Sociology*, 85,3(1979),551–575; Benno Gammerl, *Emotional Styles–Concepts and Challenges*, in: *Rethinking History*, 16, 2 (2012), 161–175.

²⁰ See Gammerl, *Emotional Styles–Concepts*, see note 19.

²¹ See Andreas Reckwitz, *Affective Spaces: A Praxeological Outlook*, in: *Rethinking History*, 16, 2 (2012), 241–258.

II.

Rhythm, circulation and movement form the second way of reading fluidity in this issue. The links between actors and spaces, reflected in the gendered constitution of environments as well as the socio-spatial and temporal mediation and articulation of emotion, are not fixed and absolute. The notion of rhythm allows us to encompass both social structure and fluidity and conceptually connect the body, space and time. Rhythm involves repetition in space and time, yet “something new and unforeseen is often introduced into the repetitive”, in the form of difference.²² Focusing on rhythms as a form of fluidity enriches the notion of emotional styles by drawing attention to everyday temporal and spatial variations. Rukmini Barua’s essay highlights the way in which the quotidian rhythmic dynamics of feminine domesticity amongst the Indian working classes illustrate both the fluidity of emotional styles as well as the porosity of social space.

A crucial way in which fluidity emerges in the essays that form this “L’Homme”-issue is through emotions themselves and the processes by which they become attached to or detached from people. Sara Ahmed has argued that emotions are produced as “effects of circulation”, rather than as aspects of interiority.²³ However, instead of viewing emotions as free floating agents of contagion or contact, she argues that emotions produce the “surfaces and boundaries” that delineate the individual and the social, thus marking distinctions rather than dissolving them.²⁴ In Ahmed’s conceptualisation, emotions such as happiness also become attached to certain social objects and circulate as “social goods”.²⁵ This form of production and circulation of emotions works through an erasure of the labours involved. Barua and Oberländer examine the gendered processes through which these ‘happy’ objects are constituted, actualised and desired across different social and historical contexts, while Sarioglu introduces a new mode of viewing emotional circulation by analysing emotions through the lens of embodiment. Sarioglu reflects on corporeal dimensions of shame and chastity as manifestations of gender hierarchies, arguing that emotions shape the gendered body’s capacity to be rigid or fluid by the manner in which they imbue or leave it. Fluidity here appears as a bodily mode of being, hindering or easing the body’s movements in space. Circulation also appears in another sense in these essays – by way of the physical movement of bodies across spaces and the emotions embedded in this mobility. Each essay uses the idea of mobility to examine the relationality of emotional patterns and practices, as well as the possibilities of subversion of or divergence from dominant normative structures.

²² Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythm analysis. Space, Time and Everyday Life*, London 2004, 5–6; Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh 2014, 93.

²³ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, see note 22, 8.

²⁴ Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, see note 22, 10.

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, NC 2010, 21–49.

III.

This brings us to the final way in which these essays approach fluidity – as a form of divergence and dissent from norms. Studies of emotions have focused to a great degree on norms, structures and institutions. The theorisation of emotional communities, for instance, views social groups as bounded by adherence to emotional norms.²⁶ William Reddy's understanding of emotional regimes (as a set of normative emotions and practices that underpin political regimes) and emotional refuge (that which offers some release from prevailing emotional norms), tempers the norms-based understanding of emotional life somewhat.²⁷ However, in placing the regime and the refuge on a spectrum, Reddy seems to suggest the implausibility of their simultaneous co-existence and co-habitation. Benno Gammerl and others have since reflected on what it means to fall out of the normative frame and feel differently.²⁸ "Feeling differently", they suggest, is a process that emerges in relation to norms and spaces as well as to the dynamics of subjectification. While this view of emotional divergence is understood by the authors in this special "L'Homme"-issue to be quite crucial, we further draw attention to the possibility of several competing emotional styles and spaces, with fluctuating (and often ambivalent) positions of dominance and subordination/resistance. By following the trajectory of one historical actor through the spaces of the Mughal court, political mobilisations on the street and the negotiating table, Pernau demonstrates the simultaneous co-existence of multiple (and sometimes diverging) emotions of manliness. Oberländer observes the hybridity and fluidity of feelings in the representation of gender relations in a Soviet blockbuster movie released in 1980, suggesting that the male character's divergence from normative structures of emotions paradoxically fortified notions of masculinity, while emotional divergence by women in the film diminished their femininity. Sarioglu shows how prospective shame served as a framework for regulating gender relations in twentieth-century Turkey and was intimately tied to bodily and emotional practices: bodily rigidity was (unconsciously) adopted by working-class women in the workplace in order to avoid the social consequences of diverging from gender norms. Barua traces the importance of normative models of feminine domesticity in framing women's expectations and experiences of waged work, and suggests that the fluidity of emotional practices of gender subtly reaffirm social norms rather than subverting them. The ambivalence of gender relations in the tropes employed in sugar daddy narratives that Lämmert discusses reveal the dual dynamic of

²⁶ See Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, Ithaca 2006.

²⁷ See William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Cambridge 2001, 125–130.

²⁸ See Benno Gammerl, Jan Hutta and Monique Scheer, *Feeling Differently. Approaches and their Politics*, in: *Emotion, Space and Society*, 25 (2017), 87–94; Benno Gammerl, *anders fühlen. Schwules und lesbisches Leben in der Bundesrepublik. Eine Emotionsgeschichte*, München 2021, see also the review of the book in this issue.

order and disorder, which speaks to the anxieties posed by fluidity in relation to dominant gender norms. The many diverse voices in our contributions attest to the fluidity of emotions when it comes to gender categories. Recognising emotion and gender as useful categories of analysis, our task as scholars is to track their changes with full awareness that categories, too, are fluid.