LOVE IN THE SPACE-TIME OF INEQUALITY: ATTACHMENT AND DETACHMENT ACROSS UNEQUAL LIVES

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Abstract

This article examines the changing experience of love at a time of deepening inequalities. Drawing on the 'love story' of one resident of London's Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea—arguably the UK's most unequal space—it builds a relational account of love to describe the forms of attachment and detachment that accompany everyday life in an increasingly divided place. This approach signals three wider contributions. First, by tracing love through life-course and life-world, this article conceptualises the sustained and far-reaching way inequalities are lived and felt in everyday life. Second, the foregrounding of love stories as methodology highlights the roles of agency and narrative in how we tell and write about inequalities. In drawing these points together, this article thirdly conceptualises inequality as processual, situated and contested—as an emergent process of 'becoming unequal' through which we can trace shifting relations between space, time and power.

Keywords

Affect; Inequality; Love; Place; Relationality

Introduction

This article examines the qualitative effects of deepening proximate differences by bringing into conversation two key concepts: inequality, and love. Inequality refers to the forms of social and spatial difference that characterise our worlds. It has been argued that we have never been so unequal, at least in recent history, where our preceding long decade of crises—political, economic, viral—have exacerbated a world not flattened by globalised capitalism, but in which winners and losers from this process are increasingly alienated (Piketty, 2014; Savage, 2021).

When rendering characteristics of inequality over space and time, we tend to rely on a particular set of epistemological frames and methodologies: in particular, statistical coefficients, indexes and ratios that serve to map and measure difference as number (Kiely and Strong, forthcoming; Prince, 2020). Intertwined with this has been the historical emergence of economics as *the* academic discipline—and hence conceptual language and empirical technique—for examining inequality (Ramos Pinto, 2019). The production of *inequality as number* is not without service: these frames allow for comparative understanding of distributions at wide scales (Milanovic, 2005). Moreover, they can provide important rallying points for social and political change—most recently, for instance, the success of the 99% v 1% slogan that underpinned Occupy movements around the world (Hirschman, 2021). But whilst these frames dominate academic and policy discussion, they are not the only way in which inequality must be understood. Indeed, the dominance of these renderings of inequality, in the present moment at least, reveals an important enmeshment of politics with statistical knowledge (Ramos Pinto, 2019)—where numbers shape not only how we describe inequalities, but also the kinds of solutions we prescribe (Strong, 2021a).

This article poses a particular provocation: what if we chart inequality not by numbers, but by feelings? A decade ago, Skeggs (2012, p. 269) noted that the felt and affective are 'highly recognizable but little discussed aspect of class relationships.' In the time since, scholars have sought to explain widening inequalities through studies that focus on the mobilisation of stigma generally, and disgust, revulsion and loathing specifically, towards classed, raced and gendered others (Nayak, 2019; Powell and Lever, 2017; Tyler, 2013; 2020; Wacquant *et al.,* 2014). Signalling affect as an arena of class politics, this body of work draws on a conceptualisation of class 'as a *dynamic process* which is the site of political struggle, rather than as a set of static and empty positions waiting to be filled' (Lawler, 2005, p. 430, emphasis added) and has been crucial, for instance, in explaining the deepening inequalities of Austerity Britain (Strong, 2021b; Jensen and Tyler, 2015).

This article furthers this body of work whilst also widening our appreciation of the affective dimensions of social disparity. More specifically it renders inequality afresh by examining its relationship with *love*. Love, as with all emotions, is not neutral or linear: it unfolds through processes, practices and places entwined with what Ahmed (2004) describes as affective economies. Love is therefore an outcome of social relations that shift as we become more or less unequal; so too can love—and actions taken in the name of love—lead to patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Ahmed, 2003). The following sections develop a conceptualisation of love as the contested and unevenly felt relations of attachment and detachment that characterise everyday life. Love offers a different language for thinking about what inequality is—and, crucially, what it *does*—as a process of *becoming unequal.*

In considering the co-constitution of love and inequality, this article asks: what does inequality do to how, where and why we love? And how does love interact with, disrupt and reproduce processes of becoming (un)equal? Answering these questions necessitates an explicitly *relational* approach: where love and inequality are understood as concepts in the context of wider relations between time, space and power (Massey, 1994). It also requires engagement with inequality at a proximate, intimate and embodied scale, undertaken in the lines that follow through the recounting of the *love story* of a resident of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, London: arguably the UK's most unequal place.

The title of this article is a nod to another familiar love story—Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The novel traces the shifting patterns of attachment and detachment that mark the lives of several characters living in a fictional Colombian town at the turn of the twentieth century. But I wish to invoke more than just the title of Marzquez's work in this article. My allusion to the novel is a reference to the work's defiance of the model of "romantic" love that dominates in the Minority World. This is both in the sense that the novel—and, in following, this article—avoid a ("western") normative view of love as essentialist, universalist, heteronormative and monogamous (Evans, 2021), as well as offering a challenge to the conflation of love with a definition of something necessarily positive, joyous, passionate and blissful. As Marquez's novel illustrates, love can evoke a range of other affective relations that include loss, grief, shame, anger and sorrow—and material and social relations tied to class, ideology, colonialism and property.

The novel is also a study in how love *changes* over life course and life world, mapping distinctly onto shifting bodies, people, things and social relations. This article is likewise concerned with building an account of love that does not occur in a vacuum, but as 'contingent on specific spatial and temporal contexts' (Evans, 2021, p. 1)—as a process shaped by inequality, but also one that works in, against and through divides as they unfold in everyday life. The lines that follow therefore strive to write love in and through a sense of place, and how these connections between love, space and time can provide

insight not just into inequality as epistemological phenomenon, but as ontological: namely, what it means *to be* in love.

This article constructs such an emplaced account of love by centring the experiences of a single participant: Stephanie. Aged in her early-30s and self-identifying as BAME, Stephanie lives in a more deprived part of Kensington and Chelsea—and yet, as this article reveals, her love story reaches beyond her place in the city to produce forms of detachment and attachment that cut across class, location, ethnicity and gender. For Stephanie, love is lived and felt through social relations—primarily with her partner Aaron, but also the social norms and practices that characterise her connection with his family, friends and community. Rather than a romanticised connection, Stephanie's story demonstrates the love's fundamentally relational nature.

To develop this argument, this article offers three contributions. The first is a mapping of the contemporary scope of inequality in the UK that identifies the relationality of *becoming unequal* through shifting relationships between time, space and affective life. Second, it provides a detailed empirical, narrative account of love grounded in the life-course and life-world of Stephanie. Finally, this article highlights the methodological potential of using *love stories* as a way of centring agency and contestation—detailing how the narration of love and its mobilities across the life-course can provide unique and important insight into rhythms of social change.

Love in the space-time of inequality: Towards a relational account of love and its lived politics

Becoming unequal

We live in times and spaces of intensifying inequalities. Since 1995, the top 1% of the economic distribution globally have captured nearly 20 times more wealth than the entire bottom 50% of humanity (Oxfam, 2022). More recently, a long decade of economic crisis, political upheaval and the COVID-19 pandemic have seen growing gaps between the life chances and outcomes of different groups, communities and places (Dorling, 2018; Piketty, 2020). Since March 2020, when the pandemic truly erupted, Oxfam (2022) report that the wealth of the world's 10 richest men has doubled, whilst 99% of the world's population are economically worse off—and over 160 million more people have been pushed into poverty.

These global patterns of redistribution are mirrored in the experience of the UK. Between 2006-08 and 2016-18, the gap between an average household in the top decile, and that in the fifth decile, increased by 50% (Leslie and Shah, 2021). According to latest data, the wealthiest 10% of households hold 43% of all the wealth in Great Britain; comparatively, the bottom 50% hold only 9% (ONS, 2022). This has followed a period of time during the pandemic that has 'turbo-charged' gaps between the richest and poorest (Leslie and Shah, 2021). Illustratively, since March 2020, the richest 10 per cent of households have gained £50,000; the poorest 30 per cent gained just £86 (Leslie and Shah, 2021). Fifteen million people currently live in poverty in the UK (Fitzpatrick *et al.,* 2020).

In charting these links between poverty and profit, immiseration and enrichment, it is clear that 'violence is rigged into economic systems' (Oxfam, 2022, p. 8)—so that inequality literally kills: contributing to the death of one person every four seconds around the world. This framing of inequality as a form of economic violence reveals its ongoing significance as the defining challenge of our times (Gutteres, 2020). But this focus on extremes—in terms of the those at the top and bottom of distributions, and death as *the* outcome of inequality—can distract us from its slower, longer and more insidious shaping of our social worlds (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). This is in part a *scalar* issue too, given that a focus on global and/or national scales can conceal more than it reveals of the intimate workings of inequality at proximate, local and embodied levels. Put another way, inequality prompts

not only quantities of wealth and deaths, but also core questions relating to the very *qualities* of our lives and the places we inhabit. How do these trends at global and national scales filter down and shape places? Answering this question requires us to trace inequality as a process over time and space—one of *becoming unequal*.

Love in the space-time of inequality

This statistical context suggests that we live in places that are increasingly divided. But the "downloading" of inequalities to and through smaller scales is not straightforward—not least because of the intersecting nature of social and spatial difference. Moreover, assuming that these inequalities are passed down from larger scales risks reproducing a view of places as passive receptacles of processes borne at larger scales, as opposed to sites of dynamic and contested agency in their own right (Massey, 1994).

To avoid these pitfalls, different means and methods of mapping lives as they become unequal are required. One route to doing so is through a focus on *love*—grounded in an understanding of how feelings and affective lives are not natural or neutral but co-constitutive of the worlds we inhabit and build (Ahmed, 2004). I share the 'anxiety to define' love stated by others (Berlant, 2011, p. 683), given the freight of baggage the term brings—as well as the normative ways in which love is understood, practiced and experienced in different times and places (Davidson *et al.,* 2005; Evans, 2021). If relations of love serve to 'stick others together' (Ahmed, 2003, p. 4), then it is in the performance of this sticking together—as well as constituent forms of altering, breaking and 'un-sticking' relations—that I position the relationship between love and inequality. In this sense, love describes an iteration of what Berlant (2011, p. 687) terms *attachment*—where love might be understood as 'the whole field of what it takes to sustain an attachment to the world.' Thinking in terms of attachment also accentuates the emplaced nature of both love and inequality, as a phenomena that is mediated and animated by the forms and practices through which we dwell in the world (Tuan, 1974).

We can therefore chart inequality by thinking critically about 'what… the language of love [does] and how power circulate[s] in the name of love' (Morrison *et al.,* 2012, p. 508). It is in this broad understanding of love between bodies and worlds that we can begin to contemplate inequality as a lived, felt and contested phenomenon. This is because love crosses and defies common dualisms of mind and body, thought and feeling, and public and private. For Thien (2004, p. 46), just as 'our subjectivities are intensely communal,' so too is 'love one such manifestation of this publicly private state' where our measurement of the self is intimately in conversation with attachment to the world. This diffuse, non-linear and inter-subjective understanding of love reveals that it is 'always already relational' (Morrison *et al.,* 2012, p. 517)—where a relational view, following from Massey (1994), is to recognise love 'through interactions with others [and] ongoing possibilities that are unbounded and ever-changing' (Hall, 2019, p. 771).

This is not to say that these relations are simple, straightforward or equal: they are instead uneven and contested. 'How, where and what one loves is deeply political' (Morrison *et al*., 2012, p. 506). This is evident in the operation of normative scripts that govern what is deemed to be correct or acceptable forms of attachment—where practices of love are produced through a social ontology of the body (Butler, 2009). Accordingly, 'to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form,' where images, texts, discourses and performances differentiate the forms of love we can apprehend from those we cannot (Butler, 2009, p. 3; quoted in Strong, 2021a). As such, the scripting of what constitutes love is tied to the reproduction of structures of patriarchy, heteronormativity, class systems and citizenship regimes entailed in the governing of populations and guiding the conduct of individual bodies (Foucault, 2003).

This governance of love extends to governing *through* love, via its institutionalisation. In the Minority World, most prominent is the institution of marriage. These mechanisms regulate not just through norms, but tie love to legal and economic patterns of redistribution, exploitation and property (Evans, 2021). Moreover, as Ahmed (2003) reminds us, charting acts done in the name of love—as a protective impulse, for instance—can be traced in distinctly hateful practices and policies, around migration, white supremacy and policing. In other words, the construction of 'loving subjects' (Ahmed, 2003) thus relies upon *detachment*—of the removal, derision and exclusion of certain bodies by virtue of their 'embodied relationality' with love (Evans, 2021).

Thinking of love in these relational and political terms reveals the dangers of romanticising love, and the need to instead attend to the 'constitutive fissure of the geographies of love' (Wylie, 2009, p. 285) by thinking of love as a set of relations between attachment and detachment. This is not to say that love is always negative, nor that it inevitably leads to detachment. Indeed, it is in the radical potential of love that we might trace the route to systems and structures of exchange for building fairer, more equitable worlds (Berlant, 2011).

Researching love stories

If love is political and relational, then what does inequality do to love, and love to inequality? To answer this question, this article engages with a *love story*—a term I use to refer to a particular form of data and methodology that takes the narration of attachment over the life course as its starting point for understanding worlds. This approach allows for the depth and detail of loving relations to be considered and contextualised, whilst also giving space to the agency of the participant to narrate their own life-world and biography through its emotional and affective dimensions. As Thien (2004, p. 43) argues, 'love re-told offers a suitable vantage point from which to think through the spatialities of subjectivity' in a fashion that is attuned to building a relational account of love—where love is not contained in an object or purpose, but instead charts the interaction between bodies, worlds, objects, systems and feelings. Tracing love stories allows us to think in terms of space as well as time, and life-world as well as life biography, by approaching love as an emotion in motion—one that travels and 'traces a movement between us [as] a means to find our way through the intersubjective, shared spaces of contemporary life' (Thien, 2004, p. 47).

The love story I turn to in the remainder of this article comes from one resident of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea—arguably the UK's most unequal place. The borough boasts the highest mean annual household income (£140,000/year), but 23% of households earn below £20,000 and 16% of residents are classified as 'low paid' (Dent-Coad, 2017). Life expectancy varies by as much as 22 years between different wards in some of the widest proximate health inequalities nationally (Greater London Authority, 2014). These differences have not emerged naturally, nor gradually. Inequality has accrued because 'capital grows in one place to a huge mass in a single hand because it has in another place been lost by many' (Marx, 1990, p. 626). What is especially pertinent about Kensington and Chelsea, however, is that the hands that have grown and become immiserated here exist in such proximity—signalling how the processes of profit and impoverishment can be traced not just between places, but *within* this same unequal borough. Similarly of note is the relative speed at which the borough has grown unequal. Just over a century ago, Charles Booth (1902) described parts of what is now the north of the borough as the 'worst areas' in London; reflecting on his experiences living in dilapidated housing in what is now a central part of the borough during the interwar years, George Orwell (2001 [1937]) equally mourned the 'dreary wastes of Kensington.' Slum clearance projects were taking place in the area as recently in the 1970s.

The Grenfell Tower disaster of 2017 is a reminder of the distinct pockets of poverty that remain in the area, in spite of its global image as an area of the rich and wealthy—helped along the way by the Hollywood blockbuster, *Notting Hill*[1]. The proximity of affluence and penury, and the changing fortunes of parts of the borough, have led to frequent Dickensian frames of a 'tale of two cities'— particularly in the aftermath of the Grenfell disaster (Bell, 2017; Lammy, 2017; Snowdon *et al.,* 2017). Whilst such frames indicate economic divisions (not to mention making for quick headlines), everyday life in the borough is one that cannot be simply characterised by the rich and poor. Instead, the borough is alive with relations established across and within communities—of connection and conviviality, as well as exploitation and alienation.

'Unequal Lives' is a long-term ethnographic engagement with the borough that seeks to grapple with these contradictions, connections and changes. The ongoing project commenced in 2019 and has focused on working with individuals across income spectrums in two neighbouring parts of the borough—named as the 'north side' and 'south side' in order to protect anonymity. Combining participant observation, landscape analysis and volunteering for local organisations with semi-structured interviews with residents, the project has sought a wider reckoning with the everyday unfolding of proximate inequalities in the borough. In this article, I draw on an interview undertaken with one resident of the north side, called Stephanie (not her real name). Our meeting took place in early 2020, just prior to the sequence of infections and lockdowns that unfolded across the world due to COVID-19. In unpacking and examining her testimony, I draw attention to the forms of attachment and detachment that mark her account—to her place, her family, her friends, her community, her partner and her self.

To write of someone's love story is an undertaking charged with ethical dilemmas. Firstly, there is a particular politics to claiming to know and interpret the feelings of others generally (Strong, 2021b), and their loves specifically. This is not merely to do with the difficulty in defining what love actually is, but how the labelling of certain aspects of affective life relies upon, and reproduces, the uneven power dynamics between researcher and researched. It comes from a long history of (male, white, middle-class) researchers speaking of and about the emotions of women—and, often, non-white, working class women (Lawler, 2005; Rose, 1993; Skeggs, 2011). There is, therefore, a risk of enacting epistemic violence by reducing the life of a female participant to a set of feelings (Spivak, 1993). In response, my commitment to a relational understanding is key: whilst I am analysing forms of attachment, these are relations that are about far more than feelings alone, as will become clear. I have also followed directly from the language of my interlocutor herself, where utterances of love as a feeling and emotion are always placed within the wider context and relations being discussed.

Secondly, there is an unavoidable tension in writing about relations from a single empirical vantage-point as offered by Stephanie's account. Whilst the sections below highlight love as situated and processual, they are narrated from only one particular subject(ive) position. In presenting a love story often characterised by pain, hurt and shame, the judgements that emerge can appear as one-sided where other parties involved have no ability to reply or present "their side of the story." Thus, in striving to make space for Stephanie's love story, and to allow it to unfold narratively through her vernacular, it is at the same time important to caution against the straightforward acceptance of the terms that emerge—including as expressed towards her partner, his family and residents of the south side more broadly. Widening inequalities demand a nuanced approach, both conceptually and empirically, that avoids homogenising accounts and judgements of different people, places, classes

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[1] Much of the filming for the 1999 movie, directed by Roger Michell, took place along Portabello Road, which cuts through the north and south sides of my fieldsite. Tourists often re-create parts of the film, posing outside the travel book shop, private gated gardens, or main character's front door.

and processes. To do so, I have deployed a range of narrative devices to contextualise the emotional responses—both presented by Stephanie and felt upon reading—that accompany this love story.

Given the highly personal and emotive nature of this topic, thirdly it is vital not to betray the trust in which the intimate feelings of love were shared with me through the testimony that follows. Anonymity and confidentially are crucial, therefore, and significant steps have been taken in order to protect the identity of Stephanie. This has included more than merely using a false alias for both Stephanie and the area she lives: I have also changed some of the cursory details of her love story in order to hinder identifiability without altering the significant nature of the content. Informed consent was also gained through a detailed pre-amble, that was read, agreed and signed before our interview took place.

A love story in three parts

(Dis)placing love

Stephanie is aged in her early 30s, self-describes as BAME, and has lived in the north side of Kensington and Chelsea all her life. Indicative of the 'mutual constitution of place and love' (Morrison *et al.,* 2012, p. 512), a narrative strand running through our interview is attachment to home—where home describes an inherent connection between urban domesticities and domestic urbanism (Blunt and Sheringham, 2019). Her home-city geography (Blunt and Sheringham, 2019) is one that centres on a sense of community folded in with a sense of place—marked by fond memories of social connections and relations when growing up. Stephanie still lives in the same house she was born—with her brother and parents, for whom the latter has been home for over 40 years. It is part of a large social housing block in the north side. Her recollections display a blurring of the boundaries of home, out from the borders of her family's flat and into the surrounding environment:

> 'In my flats, people have grown up together. Everybody knows each other and it's really safe […] How we used to communicate, you used to shout out the window – "hey, are you coming out today?" That's what we used to be like. *That* was a sense of community.'

When speaking of home, Stephanie's social and spatial relations become enmeshed (Hay, 1991). She speaks fondly of her freedom to be herself in this environment—evoking the affective bond between people and place. Tuan (1974) terms this attachment as *topophilia*, or love of place. But a sense of home is not inevitably positive and affirming (Blunt and Dowling, 2006): indeed, it is Stephanie's attachment to her place that amplifies the real and impending threat of gentrification and being "priced out" of her local area (Rozena, 2022). Stephanie recalls regularly receiving letters and in-person visits from estate agents trying to influence the intentions of residents. Moreover, as a higher proportion of residents have sold their properties privately, Stephanie speaks of a general sense in which her local area is being transformed to service private buyers and renters:

> 'It's become more upmarket. And I think it's even, like, a brand name now. Although we've got people in the south side[2] thinking it's a crap place, agents are now like "did you know it's a hot property, a hot area, at the moment? A lot of people really relish to be here." And I was like: "oh? We haven't bought it, and you're not buying it, because we have rights." The agents – they actually wanted to get us out of it, not because of the property itself, but because of the area, the locality.'

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[2] In our discussion, Stephanie names the particular places in Kensington and Chelsea. To preserve anonymity, I have changed these to either the north or south side throughout.

Stephanie's love of her area, under threat as it is from these processes, is thus accompanied by anxiety. This folds into her sense of care and obligation to her family members, including her elderly parents and her sibling who lives with a disability:

> 'My worry is that our flat is going to be next. Where will they put my mum and dad and brother? I mean, we're not going! And, we're panicking now. It's what we've really noticed, fliers going through the door. They've done it to many properties. And we know it could be us next, because we don't own it.'

Whilst love is rooted in Stephanie's attachment to the place of her home and dwelling, it is this same attachment through which her potential *detachment* is felt and experienced. These twin feelings—of emplacement and displacement, love and the threat of loss—have been throw into new relief by a juncture in her love story: meeting her now partner Aaron. Aaron is from the south side, where he lives with his father. After a chance meeting at a local bar between their respective groups of friends, Stephanie and Aaron struck up a relationship. But even in this first meeting, the sense of difference was prominent:

> 'When my partner met me, there was definitely a class division. How my people were, how his people were.'

Even as they were beginning to form an attachment, thoughts of detachment formed a backdrop to Stephanie's affective life at the time. These came to a head when Aaron dropped Stephanie off at her house after the two had been out for dinner at a local restaurant. Stephanie recalls a tense exchange between them as they sat in his car that evening:

> 'He brought me home and he saw some boy on a bike going down my road. He said to me: "there's some boys going down there with a bike." There was nothing with it, but he was like "it's such a dangerous area. Don't get out the car 'til they're gone!" And I was like: "excuse me, it's just some boys going home. It's night-time." He judged it based on the look of the area, you know, because it's council houses.'

It could be argued that Aaron's warnings, prompted by a growing sense of attachment to Stephanie, emerged out of a protective impulse—itself fashioned by patriarchal norms. But it also reflects the north side's territorial stigmatisation, in 'discourses of vilification [that] proliferate and agglomerate [in marginalised spaces], "from below", in the ordinary interactions of daily life, as well as "from above", in the journalistic, political and bureaucratic (and even scientific) fields' (Wacquant, 2008, p. 44). Speaking generally about this experience, Stephanie speaks of 'a shame put upon us'—where shame, too, is rooted in social and spatial relations (Strong, 2021b)—and speaks more broadly of the lived and felt consequences of the stigmatisation of social housing (Atkinson, 2015; Strong, 2014; Watt, 2021). This politics of stigma and shame masks a set of economic processes aimed at bringing stocks of social housing and the land they stand on, such as Stephanie's home, back into market circulation (Minton, 2017; Slater, 2018). It is this context of derision that encourages Stephanie to take Aaron's comments about her place as a personal slight—and to meet this blemish on her place with an angry rebuke:

> 'I told my guy: "Am I bad, then? I grew up here, and I'm fine. Better than you and where you've come from." I had an argument with him about it. I was like "how dare you!"'

Rather than harmonious, Stephanie's emergent attachment to Aaron compromised her attachment to her place. Her various forms of love appear intermingled with anger, anxiety and shame. Stephanie's disagreement with Aaron indicates that although love can exist across inequalities, it can

also reproduce and re-inscribe divisions. Love is not only a source of attachment: it can also produce breakages, pains and detachments.

Out-of-place in love

After a "cooling off period" following their argument, Stephanie continued her relationship with Aaron. But as their attachments grew stronger, Stephanie had to come to terms with a new set of geographical relations that were physically, socially and economically manifest through a multi-faceted sense of *out-of-placeness*. This was firstly in a literal sense of feeling lost in an unfamiliar place. As she travelled to visit Aaron's place of residence in the south side for the first time, for instance, Stephanie ventured into an area she had never previously been. She recalled her experience of asking for directions from someone in the south side:

> 'When I was lost and trying to get to his dad's place – everyone there just thinks I'm a beggar, like: "she's a weirdo, what does she want?" I was trying to find the hospital to get my bus and I was asking this lady, and she thought I was going to mug her!'

Stephanie's experience of being lost reveals a deeper sense of being out-of-place, therefore—of her embodied identity transgressing the normative coding of place (Cresswell, 1996; Sibley, 1995). By virtue of her classed, gendered and racialised position, Stephanie did not "fit" in the south side; her clothes, accent and comportment seemed to mark her out as different. Despite a sense of attachment to Aaron, his local area made her feel discomfort. When Stephanie recounted this, her sense of love for the north side emerged as a cartographic counter-point:

> 'They think they're higher K and C and we're lower K and C, like. You see a big difference, you know – even how they approach you, how they talk to you, their mannerisms. In the north, no one judges us because we're all in the same village. But, I can already see that in the south side, there's always going to be something.'

The inscription of these differences also occurred through the broader social relations Stephanie began to form that extended through Aaron. Identifying specifically the normative scripts that shape what is deemed appropriate forms of attachment and loving relations, Stephanie speaks of the different expectations and ideas of love she found being voiced by Aaron's friendship group:

> 'They've got the same status, same class, same things they do: like what they look for in a man. I mean, I look for heart, kindness. They look for "gotta be rich, gotta be blond, gotta be this, gotta be that." I'm like: "wow!"'

Stephanie did not feel she fitted with these norms as voiced by her partner's friendship group—which were fundamentally normative frames surrounding aspirations for and imaginations of romantic love. They came with particular classed and racialised imaginations which, by virtue of her embodied identity, Stephanie felt she could not meet—nor did she desire to. Nevertheless, this did not stop Stephanie from internalising these expectations:

> 'I have a lot of anxiety about who the class is that I will be with. We shouldn't have to think about social classes, but we do. When I go [to the south side], I have to think "right: can I be honest? How do I behave?" Because I can't behave normally. The social classes that he hangs around with, I just don't feel comfortable with. I have to change my mindset. When I first went, I felt like I had to change everything – my dress sense, how I am, to fit in with that social class. "Do I have to put on a posh voice? What do I do?" I put up a wall.'

Stephanie's experiences speak to how norms are scripted across proximate inequalities in the borough. The performance of different values, embodied identities and comportment reveal a particular process of *classification*—of class distinctions emerging through a set of normative scripts around value, worth, appearance and accent (Bourdieu, 2003). But class also punctured her relations in a more traditional sense, through scrutiny of Stephanie's occupation—specifically, her role working for a charity:

> 'His friends ask about my job, because they're all corporate, it's all about social class. I say "I'm in charity," and they're like "oh, corporate?" And I'm like "no, *charity*! We don't get any bonuses!"'

Stephanie's wider habitus was also dissected as a political identity too (Bourdieu, 1990). She recounts conversations taking place around a recent set of political elections. Stephanie is a committed Labour voter, a Centre-Left political Party that holds sway in the north side. But in the south side, the area is highly Conservative-voting—a Party that has a track record of low tax rates for the richest, and policies of austerity that immiserate the incomes of socially and economically marginalised groups (Strong, 2020; Blyth, 2013). When Stephanie explained her decision as to why she was voting Labour—grounded in a sense of love and anxiety around her disabled brother—to Aaron's father, she was derided:

> 'I told them why I voted Labour. His dad said: "you know, if we were to go with Labour, they'd put our taxes up really high. And we pay for your brother's benefits." How can you say that? He said it at the dinner table, freely, without thinking […] But I can't say anything because it is my partner's dad. I would have gone at him! I would have brought out the north side in me! They just label me now as "the Labour girl."'

It is significant that Stephanie meets such reproach through a specific reference to her place—giving it a particular internal location inside her, and as a source of strength and rebuke to being infantilised. In spite of experiencing these multiple layers of feeling out-of-place as she deepened her attachment with Aaron, Stephanie sought to re-assert herself through a re-*placing* of her social and spatial identity.

Re-placing love

Stephanie's experiences reveal the intertwined relations between love and other feelings—anxiety, worry, anger, loss, and so on. Love therefore emerges in a distinctly relational manner: as a social relation between Stephanie and Aaron, between her people and his people and between the north side and the south side. It is within these wider relations that we can recognise love not merely as an outcome of inequality, but as operative of it. Despite love reaching across these relations to attach Stephanie and Aaron, these contexts also result in the re-inscription of difference.

Put another way, Stephanie's story reveals the role of love in a wider process of *becoming unequal*. Stephanie's experiences of being belittled, mis-placed and derided illustrate a form of symbolic violence via renderings of what is deemed valuable, acceptable, tasteful and normal in social space (Bourdieu, 1987). Crucially, what we are desirous of and affectionate towards is not natural but a product of unequal social relations (Ahmed, 2004), so that the ability to assert and circulate ideas about one's own value are unevenly distributed. Those positioned as abject, faulty, degenerate and undeserving 'have few outlets for symbolic challenge' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012, p. 473).

In spite of this, becoming unequal is a process that is always contested in which love plays a pivotal role. Thought of as a site of struggle, love not only re-inscribes and realises difference: it is also a means through which proximate inequalities might be challenged. For Stephanie, this involves an

iteration of love that re-connects her with her roots, and re-places her subjectivity in a position of *self-love*. Rather than narcissistic ends, Stephanie expresses her love for her self in order to re-classify her worth and value—and, in turn, to maintain her sense of self as her relationship with Aaron has become more serious:

> 'Now I've gone into that environment, I've learned to be myself with whatever comes my way. If I'm going to be with him, I have to be myself. So now I don't change. I think it's because I've been brought up to respect myself, you know. When I'm around them and they say "where are you from," I now say: "the north-side." I say it with proudness!'

In this way, Stephanie performs a 'value reversal' (Skeggs, 2011)—meeting the symbolic and affective violence of inequality with a re-articulation of her own forms of attachment, notably to her home. This harking back to her up-bringing, and to her roots in the north side, has become all-the-more important to Stephanie at her present juncture. She is moving in with Aaron, to a place in the south side:

> 'I'm just sad about changing my environment. At the end of the month, I will be moving over there, and I don't want to. Because, you know, you need to be familiar with your territory. Here you know what you've got to deal with. You just know it. I can easily walk at 12 o'clock at night and it feels fine. Over there, I am scared. It's quieter. And people, they stigmatise me there. So, there's no real community, no real community effort.'

These allusions to sadness and fear reveal a growing sense of grief for a stage in her life that is ending. These absences are a constituent part of love—indeed, as numerous scholars have noted (Evans, 2021; Maddrell, 2016), 'the story of love is most powerfully narrated when the object is missing [...] love becomes a form of defence against the loss of the object' (Ahmed, 2003, p. 4). As well as looking back, love also maintains a power in and through ideas of the future—and the prospect of new and novel relations of attachment that Stephanie hopes to achieve:

> 'I would love to raise my kids in the north side. He's still got that mindset of "this is no way to bring up children." But I'm like: "is where you're living good to bring up children? In the south side?" In every place, there's the same people. It's just a different postcode [...] Someone in a suit gets more respect than someone in a tracksuit.'

Stephanie's sense of rootedness to the north side is projected into the future, illustrating again the utility of love to work connections across both time and space. Love helps Stephanie stay attuned to her past—even when on the precipice of moving away—and serves as a way of *re-placing* her subjectivity in a set of wider challenges precipitated as she navigates inequalities.

Conclusion

Stephanie's story illustrates that love does not unfold in a vacuum: there is no "romantic," pure or universal place from which to understand experiences of attachment and detachment. Instead, this article has highlighted the emplaced, *relational* nature of love—and, specifically, its intertwinement with the process of becoming unequal. Stephanie's love story is inseparable from her life-world and life-course, and grounded in her classed, gendered, racialised and geographical position in a world of growing disparities.

This article began with a provocation: what if we tell the story of inequality not by numbers, but by feelings? Responding to this question has brought three contributions to the fore. The first is *epistemological*. By centring critical attention on micro-sociological accounts of the everyday effects (and affects) of inequality, this article has highlighted its features that extend beyond what can be known through quantities of income, life expectancies, deaths, and so on. Instead, inequality is pivotal

to the qualities of the lives we lead and the fabric of the spaces we experience. Whilst love has been shown to offer one conceptual route to charting these aspects of inequality, there are others that warrant investigation—such as grief, shame, pain, taste, and so on (EG: Strong, 2022a, 2022b).

To track these novel conceptual routes, this article has secondly offered a *methodological* approach to studying inequality as it emerges and shapes relational worlds. This is through exploring, telling and analysing love stories that trace the (re)production of the subject through life-course and life-world. By providing a deep account of love, this narrative style can foreground the agency of participants and situate attachment within the wider affective landscape of everyday life (Stewart, 2007). It is not an approach without limits, however: the love story in this article comes from just one subject position. This does not allay its importance or undermine its significance, but rather highlights the potential of scaling up this method in order to engage with loving relations as they clash and coalesce in time and space—including potentially aiding scholars to orientate themselves within these relations.

Finally, this article has re-centred the *ontological* aspects of inequality by charting what it means to *be* and *become unequal*. Inequality is not merely a descriptor of difference: instead, it constitutes and enacts divisions on a daily basis that are material, social, emotional, symbolic and embodied in nature. Approaching inequality as a process also clarifies that it is not an inevitable externality, but a site of active and fervent contestation. Whilst this article has emphasised the ability of inequality to shape how love is felt, Stephanie's story consistently demonstrates the inverse too: that love can challenge the process of becoming unequal through its radical potential for re-working our worlds. This leaves us with a final provocation: how can we progress from these individual and intimate moments to a consideration of the wider encounters and identifications love might provide in challenging inequality? Such an undertaking is crucial if we are to take seriously Berlant's (2011) vision of love as the latent potential through which we might strive to build fairer and more equitable worlds. In a world of deepening disparities, the need to do so has never been more urgent.

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