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INTERVENTION

# On limit and love in times of environmental crises

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**Abstract**

This intervention explores whether 'love' offers a politically viable concept in times of environmental crises, despite the rationality of 'limits' dominating current moral narratives. Urban political ecology highlights that, in a capitalist society, landed property and material affordances are rigged against the have-nots; the latter are deprived not only of their aspirations, but also of their basic right to assert an embodied, material existence. How can we speak of love, or actively affirm our lives, in such an environment where any pursuit of 'abundance' essentially constitutes a social fabrication that eviscerates 'the other'? Drawing on James Baldwin's and C.S. Peirce's agent-centred perspective on love, I argue that it is the difficulty, or the difficult processes, of practising love that demand scholarly attention. Tragic conditions give minor gestures—attention and care while staying with the real—their humanistic meaning. In turn, the ideals such as love or abundance find their meaning and value by being put into practice, especially in the circumstances that undermine and negate their possibility. Through anthropological accounts of everyday life-making practices 'in waste', the intervention shows how geographies of love can contribute to the formation of new critical political subjects cognisant of the challenges posed by environmental crises.

KEYWORDS

environmental crisis, limit, love, political ecology, social reproduction, waste

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In our modern life, disposability is relational to what we value. Referring to a waste worker who lost his life in a North American landfill, anthropologist Joshua O. Reno (2016) poignantly asks: 'When a man dies while trying to bury material that others have cast aside, why is it that none of them are held morally accountable?' (p. 6). For our dreams of permanence and transcendence, which place disproportionate value on tidy homes, scenic landscapes and cleanliness, we casually risk the loss of things, lives and places considered 'ungrievable'. Urban studies scholar Vinay Gidwani (2013) discusses 'eviscerating urbanism', whereby the costs of 'a world-class city' are paid for by its unwanted inhabitants, with

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middle-class environmentalism criminalising the urban poor in the name of 'cleaning the city' (p. 179). Similarly, in discussing environmental racism in America, Willie J. Wright (2021) argues that if the social death of Black lives and landscapes is not properly addressed, then the 'life' celebrated in public policy and planning will remain at heart anti-Black: 'the disposability of a non-sovereign people, those who are not to be engaged and administered to as equals of the sovereign subject, is demonstrated in their spatialisation and annihilation' (p. 802).

In both these scenarios, the moral narrative is undergirded by the material mechanics of 'limits', whereby 'unruliness' and 'waste' constitute 'the political other' excluded by modernity and value. As such, the dejected and subjugated must pay the price for what mainstream society deems 'progress'. In this win–lose game where landed property and material affordances are rigged against the have-nots, the latter are deprived not only of their aspirations, but also of their basic right to assert an embodied, material existence. Once we add ecological/planetary 'limits' to this formula, we are left with a never-ending dystopia in which miseries—both seen and unseen—are inflicted on those whose lives are 'bound up with ours in the realm of living' (Butler, 2021, p. 65).

How, then, can we speak of love, or actively affirm our lives, in an environment where any positive experience essentially constitutes a social fabrication that eviscerates 'the other'? In this essay, I review the political ecology literature on the ethics and morality of 'limits', placing it in conversation with anthropological accounts of how love and care can bloom in unexpected socio-spatial situations. Here, I interpret love as abundance, as opposed to limits as material scarcity. Meditating on this love-limit dilemma, I spotlight how an agent-centred perspective allows us to witness what James Baldwin describes as the 'ironic tenacity' of love. In Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, love is depicted from the perspective of an acting agent's commitment to the living, or staying with the real, precisely in the contexts in which such determination is unlikely to occur. Contrary to a concept of love understood as 'unconditional' or 'absolute', Baldwin's focus on embodied tenacity and perseverance turns our attention to the difficulty of putting love in practice precisely because it is entangled with abyssal situations.

Baldwin's practical approach to love is connected to C.S. Peirce's 'evolutionary love' (Koopman, 2009), in which acting agents develop the courage to initiate something subversive or contrarian relative to their given situations. What meaning, or a political purchase, would one's commitment to love and care have, in response to the structural argument that tragic material consequences are inevitable in—or mutually interdependent with—the pursuit of 'abundance' in life?

## 1.1 | 'Limits' in political ecology and relational geographies

Moore's (2015) full-frontal attack on the Cartesian duality between society and nature—in which he denounces 'hard limits' derived from 'the laws of nature'—is driven by a need to recognise what he sees as their *ongoing* relationality: in other words, the emergent, never fully graspable ways in which the two, through interacting, manifest new forms of themselves in specific times and places. Here, applying 'generic' principles to nature and its biophysical limits hinders understanding of how structural systems such as capitalism emerge through 'the messy and contingent relations of humans with the rest of nature' (p. 73). As Moore explains:

> … the conflation of 'depletion' with the 'limits to growth' is so deeply ingrained in our thinking. This conflation encourages an unproductive either/or discussion about how the web of life is a source of limits. The alternative recognizes that there are limits, and that these limits do not reside in Nature, any more than they reside in Society. They emerge in the ways that a particular civilization organizes—and seeks to organize—the *oikeios*.
>
> (p. 186)

It is the relationship between nature and society, or what Moore refers to as 'oikeios', that has become the subject of moral debate. From a geographical perspective, unpicking this relationship constitutes a political endeavour, as it enables us to identify how 'specific configurations of humanity-in-nature' (p. 17)—compounded by contextual power inequalities and marginalisation—manifest as situations of abjection and death. For instance, geographer Willie J. Wright's essay 'As above, so below: Anti-Black violence as environmental racism' (2021) discusses the 'vibrant materiality' of sites where there is a Black sense of place, such as plantations, lynching trees or racialised areas overburdened with toxicity and pollution. In doing so, it points to 'the fatal interspecies devaluation of Blackness and nature' (p. 805).

Such Black spatiality, or the idea of human freedom and dignity bound up within 'body-spatial association', not only disrupts the nature–society binary, but fashions a 'human ethic of justice and reciprocity beyond the current

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public policy approaches to environmental justice' (p. 800). Put another way, if we fail to grapple with the social death of Black lives and landscapes, the 'life' celebrated in public policy will remain resolutely anti-Black. Consequently, before laying out the 'policy implications' for environmental justice, a 'collective sense of mortality' (Baldwin, 1963) must be part of any discussion on what it takes to become fully 'human'. In this respect, embracing the notion that 'death is how one remains responsible to life' entails a 'complete regeneration of the understanding of humanness' (pp. 803–4).

I refer to this example as emblematic of the logic employed by contemporary political ecology, which posits that the moral authority of limits is built on certain people being forced to die in abject conditions in order to ensure the comfort of others. The relationality between life and death implied by this manifests in the geographic configurations that emerge from how society values nature (in terms of extraction/exploitation) and how nature responds (in the form of contamination/human bodily harm). In light of this, Reno (2016) argues that landfilling should be considered a social relation, from which we can determine what our culture values ('life') through what it refuses ('waste'):

> The elimination of waste exists wherever there is life, which depends on a separation between a lasting bodily form and routine expenditures of transient solids, liquids, and gases ... The experiences of those who work at or reside near waste sites demonstrate the unseen impacts of mass waste somewhere else on someone else, but also force us to consider the ways in which we all inhabit surroundings and bodies that are not wholly of our making, but partly created by someone else.
>
> (Reno, 2016, pp. 12, 28)

Thus, any celebration of life in urban surroundings is paid for by the inescapable deprivation of similar celebrations elsewhere. By their very existence, those locations where wealth, development and power are concentrated turn regional 'nowhere' spaces into sewers of capitalist urban growth (Jon, 2023).

Here, 'limits' exist not as generic abstractions but as specific, personalised human suffering and mortality. Political ecology, informed by relational geographies, highlights how 'life' is bounded by conditions of 'death', just as 'hope' is bounded by conditions of 'despair' (Anderson, 2006). Limits exist because that which is valued rests on devaluation and therefore harm and damage; this is why love is politically difficult, as any pursuit of abundance or beauty is likely to impose material consequences onto those who are currently considered embodying the opposite. But as much as limits incur personalised tragedies that are palpably real, they are equally constitutive of how situated acting agents frame, understand and enact upon their material problems in ways that are new and unprecedented (Lake, 2023; Jon et al., 2024). Following this line of thought, I argue that it is the difficulty, or difficult processes, of practicing love—interpreted as abundance, as opposed to limits as material scarcity—that demand scholarly attention.

## 1.2 | Evolutionary love

In 'Evolutionary Love' (1893), C.S. Peirce outlines three different forms of evolution: evolution by fortuitous variation, evolution by mechanical necessity, and evolution by creative love (Peirce, 1893, p. 187). In attempts to move beyond both Darwinianism and the 'unconditional love' (essentialised under the logic of Western Christianity), Peirce argues that 'creative love' should be regarded as something that is moveable, only observable in real-life situations in which it is practiced. Paralleling growth of mind with growth of body, Peirce argues that an ideal (such as love) must be put into practice to realise its true meaning:

> Growth by exercise takes place also in the mind. Indeed, that is what it is to learn. But the most perfect illustration is the development of a philosophical idea by being put into practice. The conception which appeared, at first, as unitary, splits up into special cases; and into each of these new thought[s] must enter to make a practicable idea.
>
> (Peirce, 1893, p. 188)

In making this argument, Peirce highlights the role of 'the environment', and how the acting agents' intentions and habits are formed in conversation with their external surrounds that evolve in unexpected directions: 'the first step in the Lamarckian evolution of mind is the putting of sundry thoughts into situations in which they are free to play' (ibid., p. 187).

The idea of 'evolutionary love'—as in an ideal realising its meaning and value through creative practices of the enacting subjects—is resonant with the trends in contemporary environmentalist thought. For instance, Pierre Charbonnier (2021) argues that it is possible for human subjects to develop and nurture a new identity geared towards the land's changing affordances—what he calls the formation of 'a new critical political subject' (Charbonnier, 2021, p. 207). More substantially, Neil Roberts re-conceptualises 'freedom' as a political concept through the fictional and non-fictional work of Édouard Glissant, who he sees as providing a unique answer to the conundrum of whether freedom should be determined by self-consciousness (individual flight) or geographical sovereignty (mass relocation). Choosing neither, Glissant regards freedom as a relational concept, involving an ongoing process (of becoming free) that is inherently tied to the abyssal conditions of historical unfreedom. Seeking a positive reformulation of the concept, Glissant inserts 'landscape' as a variable. Situated landscapes—encompassing physical environment domains (geographical locale); embodied cognition (an agent's integration with a landscape's functioning); and the metaphysical presuppositions of agents (myths, gods and deities; timeline-jumping interpretations of a landscape's relevance to our past, present and future conditions; Roberts, 2019, p. 158)—are continually evolving in new, uncertain directions. As such, our notion of freedom should embrace this understanding of landscapes as an important actant, rather than confining ourselves to universal ideals (e.g., 'we are born to be free') or the absolute conditions of unfreedom that provoke a yearning to be free. Ultimately, in order to become free, we must harness situated sites of ongoing natality ('constant metamorphosis'): 'Human and nonhuman vitalistic agents have the capacity for becoming, and human agents can emerge or devolve from antecedent conditions' (p. 165).

If we consider love and care to be the equivalent of 'freedom' (as a worthwhile ideal), then geographers can make substantial contributions to this dialogue by attending to the difficult and ambiguous moments of putting love into practice. Building on the work already produced by political ecology and relational geographies, they can contribute to our historical knowledge on how tragic conditions of subjection are materialised via the relationality between people, places and more-than-human others. Moreover, as is the case for Glissant's positive reconstruction of 'freedom', they can help detail how minor gestures in anticipation of a better future—that is, coping with short-term problems in the hope of one day being in a position to address more enduring structural forces (Harney & Moten, 2021)—can cumulatively realise the ideal that they pursue. In these moments of 'affective present' (see Anderson, 2021), everyday actions of love and care take on a political hue, as it becomes subversive to continue believing in 'affluence' when the world appears to be telling you to think otherwise.

## 1.3 | Love and care 'in waste'

In this section, I draw on the stories relating to waste and waste work. Waste is useful to rethink the relation between abundance ('love') and scarcity ('limits') because its material presence evidences how value regimes and epistemologies are constantly in interaction with what is external to their internalised developments. As Butt (2023) put it:

> Waste work is a prominent social activity in which persons and bodies potentially come into close proximity, touching the same objects as they move in a sequential way, from the object (i.e., commodity) used up and discarded as a waste product to its collection and exchange, which will remake the object into something of use once again. The social nature of waste work draws our attention to those forms of relatedness that are reproduced as waste materials are disposed of and/or circulated.
>
> (p. 117)

While the sites of waste and waste work are often associated with deprivation, poverty or unworthiness, anthropological accounts of social reproduction 'in waste' reveal the movability of 'love' and 'limits' both as concepts and performed realities, as situated acting subjects continually put them into practice.

In *Life Beyond Waste*, Wagas H. Butt (2023) discusses how residents of Lahore's urban periphery not only make a living through waste-sorting work, but turn 'wastelands' into places of meaning and value. Urbanisation in Lahore's neglected peripheries is driven in part by the fact that agricultural landowners can make higher profits renting out undesirable land to waste workers. Having made their plot of land inhabitable, these waste workers can then build a family home. The value of their work, motivated by care, is evidenced by what happens when the real estate market—or 'official' urbanisation—extends its reach into previously overlooked peripheries. Such encroachments are inevitably accompanied by changes to land-use zoning, inducing owners to sell their land to capital investors at an inflated price. As a consequence,

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the 'temporary' residents (i.e., waste workers) are pushed out and must find new land to inhabit. This difficult, repetitive, care-driven work of attending to presently neglected land goes unacknowledged by the mainstream land economy paradigm, despite the fact it was the waste workers' physical presence that made the land inhabitable in the first place. While Butt's narrative is dominated by the tragic conditions of waste workers being forced to uproot themselves, the story can also be read as these workers' performative refusal to disappear, continually turning what is dejected and devalued into a source of regeneration and value. For instance:

> The *jhuggī* in which Manzoor resides and the middle-class homes from which he and his kin collect waste are differentiated by construction materials, household commodities, perceived cleanliness, occupation, and wealth, and any number of asymmetrical markers of difference. Though appearing as separate, the quotidian construction and repair of these *jhuggīān*, and all the items that make them up, demonstrate their actual dependence on one another. Not only does removing waste ensure the cleanliness or tidiness of one household, it also facilitates the building, maintenance, and reproduction of another as different in urban Pakistan. The social and spatial differentiation—through households, occupations, and lifestyles of the middle classes and those of waste workers—clarifies how both groups mutually, though unequally, depend on each other.
>
> (p. 129)

The affective and material relationships through the medium of 'waste' permeate the sprawling urbanisation of Lahore, as what is rejected somewhere becomes a valued object elsewhere. This way, waste work becomes

> instrumental to the reorganization of urban life … despite enduring associations between waste and caste, these materials are a source of monetary worth that offers at least the prospect for upward mobility, which in turn shapes the relationships that individuals form to their own self, waste materials, work, and others with whom they share a world.
>
> (p. 119)

Similarly, in *Garbage Citizenship*, Rosalind Fredericks (2022) disrupts the existing narratives on 'waste work'. Contra stories of waste workers being perpetually stigmatised and devalued, Fredericks discusses the everyday attitudes and ritualistic gestures of those who regard their work as sacred:

> Babacar's practice of piety through cleaning broadens the definition and geography of worship beyond conventional worship practices (e.g., praying, fasting). More provisional and subversive than conventional conceptions of piety, piety through cleaning is the everyday work of bricolage. As a mode of piety, cleaning labor becomes a way of living one's religion, developing personal capacities to endure suffering, and persevering in the face of difficult conditions. Brought to life in the vibrant spaces of the everyday, it involves a moral geography that is centred on the body and deeply rooted in the corporeal practice of laboring. Framed as a collective resource, it becomes a performative practice to lobby for fair labor and better state protections.
>
> (p. 145)

Rather than exceptionalising such instances as characteristic of a particular culture, I would argue they should be seen as workers exerting agency—particularly through minor gestures of everyday care and attention—in order to shift their perceived realities. While it is easy to assume these workers cannot possibly 'enjoy' their work, let alone think of waste work as being aligned with their identities, from the perspective of the acting subject, things are not so clear cut. When 'waste work' is considered a ritual for spiritual gain rather than simply a tool for subsistence, the time spent doing it becomes ontologically processual. In other words, the process is not hastened or compressed in pursuit of other goals, but earnestly attended to as fundamental to one's subjectivity. Over time, this embodied, processual value generation can bring about change in the sociopolitical climate. Here, 'love' is practised through paying attention to the gestures workers engage in when attempting to transform their surrounds by way of transforming themselves. In such circumstances, the subject's realignment of their relationship with their everyday material surroundings is suffused with a sense of abundance. Given the stark contrast with mainstream understandings of the workers' supposedly abject condition, this can be understood as a performative act of self-assertion (see also McFarlane, 2021; Simone, 2010).

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In *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine*, Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2019) details Jenin's *rabish* market. Under tragic conditions of 'waste siege'—the inundation of unwanted goods and toxic chemicals caused by immobility—*rabish* market vendors and buyers prolong the 'life-cycle' of abandoned goods and objects:

> Meanings people attribute to the *rabish* help deepen our view of the experience of waste siege as a sense of uncontrollable loss of time, money, and safety derived from unreliable goods flooding regular markets. They also explain why *rabish* shopkeepers express pride in their work as a form of service provision. Though most of Abu Mahmoud's interactions with customers were about prices, the purpose of the *rabish* was about more than money for shopkeepers, who made little of it. Abu Mahmoud expressed satisfaction, for example, that each time he offered a low price to a customer he offered what he called a service (*khidma*). He touched a forefinger to his chest and told me, 'They say: "I buy shoes from Abu Mahmoud for 10, maybe 20 shekels. And they serve me (*bikhdimuni*) for a year, two years! Instead of going to a store and buying them for 100, 120, 180 shekels, and they don't even serve me for a week ' Objects serving means lasting and functioning. The *rabish* offers an antidote to precarity that takes the form of anticipation of new objects' unreliable temporalities.
>
> (p. 93)

It should be noted that Stamatopoulou-Robbins does not shy away from the ongoing violence perpetrated by settler colonialism. In terms of the example given, it is debatable whether 'self-determination' can ever be properly conceived of when the management of your sewage and landfills is dictated by your enemy's interests. Nevertheless, it is precisely because of this tragic condition that everyday attentiveness—even the 'vanity' of homemakers choosing an imported carpet in anticipation of a visitor—possesses a humanistic quality. As Hartman (2019) puts it in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, referring to the everyday defiance apparent in Black girls' spatial presence: 'Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of *too much*' (p. 33).

New users of salvaged goods experience cosmopolitanism 'in secondhand' through the affective handling of objects that embody a geographical mobility far removed from their own 'stuckness'. In doing so, they enter a processual time of tragic pleasure: burdened, yet not entirely dominated, by the timeline of global capitalism. The salvaged goods, in return, prove their durability and usefulness long after they have fallen out of the timeline of purchase-and-discard. Tragic conditions give minor gestures—attention and care while staying with the real—their humanistic meaning. In turn, the ideals such as love or abundance find their meaning and value by being put into practice, especially in the circumstances that undermine and negate their possibility.

## 2 | CONCLUDING NOTES

James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) gifts us a difficult riddle. Recounting his visit to the Chicago mansion of Honourable Elijah Muhammad—who led a political movement demanding a separate Black nation and economy—Baldwin becomes nostalgic about the beauty of love under tragedy, evidenced in the lives of those he encounters. Baldwin's narrative is peppered with minute details concerning the bodily movements and material surrounds he observes during his visit: women occupied with a beautiful baby, the sunlight reminding him of early childhood; other women 'in the background' preparing dinner for the men while carrying on their own conversation in low tone. 'What will happen to all that beauty', he asks, when the revolution is complete and 'God's vengeance is achieved' (p. 88)?

Care ethics are derived from the feminist practice of paying attention, or applying 'autistic perception' (Manning, 2016) to the details and gestures of everyday life. It is about 'valuing knowledges of the particular and the concrete, rather than the "rational" and the "abstract" that were the traditional orientation of a Western, masculinist intellectual perspective' (Jackson, 2010, p. 171). In making this point, Jackson draws on the work of ethicist, political philosopher and public intellectual Jean Bethke Elshtain:

> Why should a personalised, localised, particular female subject be brought into the more abstract, rationalised, universal mode? ... The private world also exudes its own values and imperatives in part because it is the theatre of particularity and everyday concrete meaning. If that mode were suppressed altogether in

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favour of the exigencies and demands of abstract personhood and the pull towards rationalization, … who would tend to the little world, keeping alive its life-redeeming joys and tragedies?

(ibid.)

Practicing love requires perseverance, a commitment to staying with the real, even when its tragic circumstances may seduce us to retreat from the world we share with others; 'to love is to deal with what's here amid the noise of projected out pasts, futures, and states' (Berlant, 2011, p. 683). In *Life Beyond Waste*, workers continue to claim their spatial presence through the labour of building 'homes' in 'wastelands'; in *Garbage Citizenship*, 'waste work' is a form of piety, inseparable from how workers make sense of their lives and surrounds; in *Waste Siege*, we witness subversive experiments in meaning-making amid abandoned objects previously owned by the enemy. The three thematical threads that lie at the heart of these geographies of love—situational contrasts; the agent-centred accounts on the difficulty of practicing love; and everyday landscapes and material problems that constantly reshape how we understand and identify ourselves—offer a means of moving debates around environmental crises beyond 'hard limits' and their space-compressing logic. Moreover, the 'lively' spatial materialities highlighted in this article provide a platform for discussing which values and aspects of personhood we collectively recognise as worth protecting. Ultimately, a focus on geographies of love contributes to dialogue on how best to nurture a new political subjectivity capable of embodying and mediating the transitional forces of the environment.

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