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# Alexis Shotwell, "Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times"

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**Alexis Shotwell.** *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times.* University of Minnesota Press 2016. 248 pp. \$94.50 USD (Hardcover 9780816698622); \$27.00 USD (Paperback 9780816698646).

To Alexis Shotwell, purity is one of the great antagonists of our times, a potent and damaging framework through which individual responsibility and insularity are compelled at the expense of a potentially more entangled existence. Traversing historical memory, ecology, toxicity, disability, and freedom, Shotwell's work expounds on the ontological, ethical, and epistemological implications of the 'terrible mess' we seem to have found ourselves in, offering instead a means to confront our imperfect world by embracing that which we have so often demonized, impurity. Encompassing a three-part structure of past, present, and future, she connects a diverse array of source material to arrive at a new way of doing responsibility.

Shotwell begins this endeavor, necessarily, with a rejection of essentialism. She writes, 'Being against purity means that there is no primordial state we might wish to get back to, no Eden we have desecrated, no pretoxic body we might uncover' (4). In this opening salvo, Shotwell sets the stakes for the rest of the book, opining that the many pasts we conjure, whether to, with superiority, juxtapose our contemporary selves against, to safely ground our actions in a natural state of being, or simply to waylay collective responsibility, are themselves a harmful fiction. In this way, purity operates as a kind of philosopher's stone, alleging its ability to transmute the myriad violences of contemporary society into self-interested gains, all while delivering nothing but harm itself.

The ability of those vehicles of purity to accomplish this, including, but not limited to, the forces of the state, capital, and coloniality, to Shotwell, is manifested most often through an over-determination of individualism. She means this not only in the political-legal-judicial sense of rights, but its more capaciously discursive mobilization as well. In the first two chapters, this means reckoning with the legacy of historical memory, both to keep notions of truth and recollection aligned, but to also understand the powerful capabilities that memory wields. Charting both a colonial legacy of the Americas and feminist rearticulations of the AIDS crisis, Shotwell unpacks the concomitant violences of a stridently individualistic historiography.

While the dominant response to oppression has been a steadfast reliance on individual rights, both as the primary mechanism of legal redress and the reification of individual identity as *de facto* political vehicle, Shotwell sees viable alternatives. Some of the most prominent of these are indigenous perspectives on the relationship between land, sovereignty, identity, and resistance. As



scholar Glen Coulthard argues, ‘Place is a way of knowing, of experiencing and relating to the world and with others; and sometimes these relational practices and forms of knowledge guide forms of resistance against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase or destroy our senses of place’ (51). To Shotwell, the legacy of boarding schools, stolen land, and reconciliation shortfalls operates not only in their historical iteration, but also in their mobilization as memory, a means of attempting to purify the colonial conscience through obviating the past.

Thus, for Shotwell, political resistance cannot cohere through some arbitrary delineation of a hermetically sealed self as its sole purveyor. Instead, a recognition of mutual constitution becomes the grounding for both understanding and undermining the world as it currently exists. This is not only an exercise in understanding being and/or knowledge, but necessarily an ethical imperative as well. Memory is one early site of responsibility making in the text, operating as a classificatory regime, a ‘spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation of the world’ (66). It is through an analysis of the activist campaign to change the Center for Disease Control classifications of HIV and AIDS that Shotwell sees one particularly potent segmentation of the world, as well as the grassroots potential to envision and actualize something different.

If memory forms for Shotwell one mechanism of world-making that all too often succumbs to the dictates of purity, then present existence sees that misapprehension beginning to be unwound. It is in these middle chapters that she wrangles with the ecological implications of purity, their toxic antagonists, and an ethics that aims, to borrow Donna Haraway’s terminology as Shotwell does, to stay with the trouble. Here too, however, is where the limits of Shotwell’s analytic frame come to the fore.

For probably obvious reasons, toxicity is rarely figured as a net social good. Instead, that which we deem as being toxic is explicitly seen as being directly antagonistic to that which is healthy and therefore in many ways that which is morally virtuous. Shotwell attempts to reorient this outright condemnation as merely reinforcing the kinds of lionized ideals of independence and individuality that continue to uphold colonial frameworks of gender and racial hierarchy. In their place, Shotwell asserts, we should see our contemporary world through a different lens, viewing instead, ‘the present situation as *interdependent*, manifesting a kind of toxic connectedness’ (77). Toxic, in her use of the term, shirks its idealized purity connotations and instead offers us something more practical: we are all impure, riddled with microplastics, constantly mutating, never quite able to attain those ideals of health, beauty, or gendered perfection we are supposed to. Here, to Shotwell,

frogs and toads are instructive in their porosity, beholden to the chemical runoff soups they often exist in, yet nevertheless ‘a usable case study of a mode of being in which it is not possible to stably distinguish between the experiencing subject and some imagined ontologically separate “other” that affects the subject’ (84). If we aren’t separate from the world, indeed if we are substantively constituted by it, we become beholden to each other in a way we couldn’t be otherwise.

Yet it is here in the text that the ethical and the individual come into direct friction with one another in Shotwell’s text. As much as the text goes to great pains to make space for entanglement, it does so to such an extent that seemingly any individual action becomes poisoned by dint of its alleged association with the ills of purity. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the fourth chapter where the ethics of eating comes to the fore. In charting a consumption of suffering, Shotwell excoriates a politics of what she terms ‘personal behavior.’ She avers that ‘while it might be possible to aim for personal ethical purity at the scale of the individual, when we understand our relation to the broader contexts of our embodiment, it’s clear that purity is an incoherent and impossible aim’ (112). Social circumstance, Shotwell argues, often limits our abilities to make wholly independent ethical decisions, thus, living with the inevitable toxicity of ourselves is an inevitable outcome of a flawed existence. Yet, it becomes unclear, with this exception built into Shotwell’s ethical frame, which toxic traits are the ones that are inevitable, and which are not? Her notion of responsibility here seems little more than an exhortation of there being ‘no ethical consumption under capitalism’ yet providing no mechanism to meaningfully to resist it. To this, Shotwell’s entanglement ethics can’t be anything other than a relativistic rejection of ideological purity and so instead becomes embodied by the Japanese rice farmer Naoto Matsumura who, in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster has no ideological attachment to vegetarianism, but cares for and refuses to slaughter the remaining roaming cows because ‘why slaughter them for no reason’ (134)?

Shotwell closes out her text by thinking about disability, its relation to transformational potential, and lessons we can learn from the world of speculative fiction. What are the worlds to come? How can we best manifest them in a way that is attentive to those who do not conform to hegemonic ideals of embodied purity? Shotwell’s answer to these questions is to look to both the real-world politics of activist group Sins Invalid and the speculative fiction works of Octavia Butler for answers. Each of these works confronts an extant oppressive world and performs an entangled

one that they aim to bring into existence. If interdependence is the mode best suited to Shotwell's formulation of how to live ethically in compromised times, then these speculative futures 'can configure a practice that welcomes the selves to come' (193). What we can learn from these examples, is the means through which freedom becomes unmoored from its stereotypically individualistic conventions and instead wields potential in and through an embrace of the diverse messiness of contemporary life. Here, Shotwell ultimately succeeds in showing us the detrimental effects of purity across a wide swath of cultural, ecological, and political terrain, a way to live and indeed thrive in the mess. What we still might require, however, is a way to nevertheless clean things up a bit.

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