Impure Dialogues

Review of:

Alexis Shotwell. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016. 248 pages.

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To be against purity is to start from an understanding of our implication in this compromised world, to recognize the quite vast injustices informing our everyday lives, and from that understanding to act on our *wish that it were not so*. (Shotwell 204)

The closing lines from Alexis Shotwell's recently released monograph, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, ring true with a kind of prescience. From the initial engagement with the work, to the various layers of argumentation throughout, its remarkable timeliness is striking. As Kitty Chandler recently tweeted, "The Year is 2017. America is a tire fire. The resistance is led by Teen Vogue, Badlands National Park, and the Merriam-Webster dictionary" (@mightybattlecat, 2:37 PM 24 Jan 2017). And while it doesn't endeavour to offer a manifesto, *Against Purity* nonetheless provides a compelling way forward in thinking through the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties of the current historical moment.

Critically reflecting on pressing contemporary social and political issues, Shotwell weaves together a diversity of systemic ethico-onto-epistemological challenges within a praxis of relationality: settler responsibility in light of the wrongs of colonialism, the articulations of medical classifications and HIV/AIDS activism, the socioeconomic distribution of pollutants and toxins, the co-production of race, ability, and heterodoxy. These are all persistently explored through a relational analysis of the metaphysics and material realities of purity. This could not come at a more fitting time.

Early in the work Shotwell describes her project saying that for one to be against purity is not to be *for* harm, sickness, pollution or the

like, “it is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogeneous” (15). And although Shotwell describes the work, writing, “it doesn’t do much except say things” (18), her quip brushes past the fact that the book as a whole engages with, and offers theoretical tools for, important collective social and political action. While *Against Purity* pauses to give space for holding significant suffering (past and present), there is also an aspect of the work that is optimistic about how we might live in a better world that is nonetheless full of complexity and complicity. This is a welcome corrective to the nihilism that can sometimes accompany critique.

The book’s structure warrants comment, both for its novel quality and the manner by which it mirrors and supports the larger methodology and argument. On one level, there is a linear trajectory through the book—past, present, and future—that corresponds to each of the first, second, and third parts, respectively. But the linear narrative is ultimately queered: the past is shown to involve both present (ch. 1) and future (ch. 2); the present engages both past and future (ch. 3 and 4), and the future argued to rest on the past (ch. 5) and be made possible only within the present time (ch. 6). This spiral narrative structure makes for an iterative working of the themes, and is both demonstrative of them and an argument for their cogency. This is particularly true regarding the relationality of remembering, the concomitant ontology of embodiment and entanglement, and the necessity and complicity of interdependence.

As Elizabeth Freeman has articulated, narrative detours are a way of putting the past into meaningful and transformative relations with the future (Freeman book jacket). To my mind, the structure of *Against Purity*—its movement away from a linear narrative—is an integral part of its philosophical argumentation. The structure resonates with its orientation toward theorizing that is in aid of politically transformative action. Throughout the work, little is explicitly said about the methodology and the relationship between narrative structure and the arguments that are presented. That said, Shotwell’s methodology is accessible, and thinking through it would be a welcome project for those taking up the book, as methodological questions of *how* one works through and beyond standard narratives to expose, explore, and generate such detours is fruitful for feminist theorizing more broadly.

Moving deeper into the chapters of the book, a few points are worth highlighting. As described above, “Part I: Reckoning with a Fraught Past,” connects the past with both the present and the future. In Chapter one, Shotwell argues for a relationship between memory practices, practices of classification, and racialization within colonialism. Classification is argued to be a central technology of colonialism, which imbricates with purity politics and the social organization of forgetting,

staging a false dichotomy between a harmful “then” of colonial practices (presumed to be past) and a clean “now.” Drawing on Sue Campbell’s relational theorizing of memory practices and notion of “forward-looking responsibility” (Shotwell 46), Shotwell articulates the ways in which memory practices might be politically transformative and part of an infrastructure of resistance to colonial oppression.

This theorizing is taken up in depth in Chapter two, through a detailed analysis of the work of the ACT UP Women’s Caucus to change the CDC definition of AIDS-defining illnesses. The classification system historically excluded many of the opportunistic infections experienced by women living with HIV/AIDS, leading to an inability to access needed medical and social supports. Working through the material effects of the CDC classification, Shotwell demonstrates how these are the products of very particular struggles (59), ultimately becoming invisible *as* infrastructure. It is through the depth of this case analysis that the reader can appreciate some of the ways in which remembering practices are part of medical and social conditions of possibility that have dramatically shaped certain futures. At the same time, these practices are central in taking responsibility for our present and for crafting liveable futures (67, 74). Shotwell’s work in this chapter holds important methodological value and, as described above, could be explored further by those wanting to extend her project. Combining document analysis, oral history, and philosophical theorizing with significant depth and detail, Shotwell provides a demonstration of how one might expose and circumvent the standard narrative—the very narrative that has already *become* part of the infrastructure—to generate a detour of sorts. It’s this kind of narrative detour that opens up both theoretical insights and an imperative for collective responsibility.

In “Part II: Living in an Interdependent Present,” there is a shift away from the emphasis on relational remembering and a focus on thinking about the “toxic” present through practices of queer and racialized temporalities (78). Here again there is a place for understanding classificatory schemas within a metaphysics of purity, but classification is mobilized rather differently than in Part I. Once more, the careful attention that Shotwell pays to her particular cases is instructive for feminist theorizing as a whole. Chapter three juxtaposes, in a side-by-side fashion, practices of attending that are carried out within a naturalist vs. bioscience approach to changes in anurans. This is mobilized to explore the ways in which tropes regarding sexuality, sex, gender, and disability may be propagated (even if inadvertently) within bioscience.

But rather than evoke a pre-technoscience nostalgia (this would be more purity politics), Shotwell highlights the role of *attending* in establishing a more complex, less predictable narrative of environmental impacts on creatures such as frogs and toads. Summarizing this at the

chapter's end, Shotwell writes, "we need to make different agential cuts that allow us to generate different narratives and different nodes of attention" (106). In part, it's the careful side-by-side analysis and juxtaposition of the two ways of attending (naturalism, bioscience) that rhetorically enable the different narratives to interact politically, allowing the reader to access a different "cut," so to speak. Attending is therefore one way to generate a narrative detour—what is foregrounded and what is backgrounded shift, and the detour is made accessible to the reader.

Chapter four more deeply connects Shotwell's central thesis with feminist materialism and the work of Karen Barad. Engaging deeply with enmeshment and bodily entanglement (117), Shotwell employs a relational analysis around food and eating in our current context of climate change and toxic landscapes. This chapter displays the reach of the book, and the way in which one of its major strengths is in the conversations and ideas it can bring together. This is a fruitful chapter for theorists of many stripes. My thoughts frequently landed with what work one might expand on from a Foucauldian lens. Shotwell's analysis offers a grounded and material engagement with concepts such as biocapital and biovalue, free from much of the jargon that can obscure the relevance and immediacy of this sort of work. There are resonances here between Shotwell's analysis and the work of Denielle Elliott, who has explored the way in which suffering amongst the urban poor has become a critical commodity in research and therapeutic economies, and how a *lack* of vitality and the presence of disease is itself a source of biovalue (Elliott 1-20). In addition to thinking through the distributions and economies of therapeutics and disease, numerous intersections and convergences might also exist between Shotwell's work and other institutional domains of suffering, such as with the carceral state. *Against Purity* provides a wealth of intellectual resources for those interested in such themes.

Moving us toward a future that can only be realized in the non-ideal present, Part III weaves together issues of racialization, disability theory, and gender-based oppression (themes throughout the earlier chapters), in a particularly satisfying way. In a second side-by-side comparison, Chapter five follows the work of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), Sins Invalid, and the standard narrative of gender voluntarism. Again, this rhetorical move allows the exemplars/cases to be dialogically engaged with one another, a demonstration of the underlying relational theorizing that Shotwell is doing throughout the work.

Chapter five also introduces the concept of "open normativities." This concept begins to more explicitly engage with issues of collective action and "doing" that hover in the background in earlier sections of the book. "Open normativities" are a way of thinking about ethics that is *itself* a detour from the standard western philosophical tradition—a move toward ethics as collective action and political projects grounded in

relationality. And while the theorizing that is offered in this chapter shares some similarities with intersectional theorizing, I find Shotwell's work to be more compelling than the sometimes mechanistic way that intersectional analyses can be mobilized. These topics are both timely and significant, and would be welcome areas for interested readers to take up and explore further.

Chapter six fills out the discussion of collective action and thoughts of how we might create a better world within the imperfect present. Dynamic and engaging, Shotwell gives an excellent discussion of SF—science fictions, speculative fabulations, scientific facts (Shotwell 165)—drawing on an extensive understanding of the work of Donna Haraway. Particularly important for disability praxis, this chapter works with and through challenges within the SF literature (focusing on Octavia Butler) to move the reader beyond identity politics and toward ways of thinking about envisioning and building a more equitable, responsive future that takes seriously ontological multiplicity and interdependence. Here, Shotwell demonstrates the ways in which the future is always in dialogue with the present (186), articulating beautifully that “the new world we carry in our hearts is always a world grounded in the actually existing present in all its impurity, responsible to the past in all its complexity” (193).

Ultimately, I expect that readers will find *Against Purity* to be timely and important, drawing together distinct but nonetheless congruent strains of theorizing that enable and facilitate new modes of collective action. The work is deceptively optimistic while still grounded in an understanding of complicity, complexity, and compromise. Even if (as Shotwell writes) the slate has *never* been clean, despair will not suffice as a response.

Works Cited

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- FREEMAN, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.