

Alexis Shotwell

Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times

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Reviewed by Elizabeth Lanphier, 2018

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While reading Alexis Shotwell's compelling and thought-provoking book *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, I was struck by a line in Hari Kunzru's novel *White Tears* in which one character remarks to another: "Why can't you accept there ain't no pure. There ain't no real. It's just people" (Kunzru 2017, 241). Shotwell implores us similarly, through careful theoretical moves, as well as tangible examination of lived cases, to accept that there ain't no pure.

Purity is material as well as theoretical. Yet Shotwell shows us how the material and theoretical are susceptible to the same faulty logic. Both material and theoretical purity, on Shotwell's account, involve a kind of "purism" or "purity politics" (7) that strives for purity, despite purity being an impossible, and in some ways harmful, ideal. Material purity (so-called "clean" eating, detoxes, avoiding chemicals like BPA) is not Shotwell's primary target, although she does devote a chapter to the question of ethical consumption, including eating. Consumption is a theoretical problem that, like many of the theoretical problems Shotwell examines, is connected to practices of forgetting colonial pasts or classificatory genealogies and failing to recognize interrelatedness or interdependence (among humans; between humans and nonhuman organisms; or among past, present, and future conditions).

Shotwell persuasively encourages her reader to accept that purity is a myth, and that if we want to live better lives--that is to say, more just lives, but also qualitatively better ones in a world that seems to be politically and environmentally deteriorating all around us--we ought to reject this myth in favor of the impure. She suggests it is impurity that is in fact real. It is just people (and animals, and nature, and perhaps robots and technology too), and it is all, in a sense, compromised. The problem isn't our complicity in this compromised and impure world. The problem is that we fail to recognize impurity as an acceptable, and perhaps even preferable state, or at least an inevitable one.

There is good reason, on Shotwell's analysis, to reject purism. She argues that striving for purity, in both philosophy and our daily lives, is a project set up to fail. The book's six chapters could each be read alone. Yet taken together they weave a compelling call to action around impurity. Though we don't often associate the terms *complicity* and *impurity* with the good, Shotwell

examines how these two concepts provide useful tools for reconciling past and present injustices and generating more ethical and just futures.

In her introduction, Shotwell suggests purity might be a way to characterize the Anthropocene. In addition to being marked by colonialism (or specifically genocidal acts that are part of colonialism), the Anthropocene could also be marked by a desire to return to or pursue a state of natural purity, prior to environmental pollution, prior to the (human) introduction of impurity in the otherwise pure and natural world (3). Yet if the Anthropocene is in part an era yearning toward a state of purity, Shotwell intends to show that this desire will remain unmet. Her assertion is that the slate has never been clean, so there is no purity to which to return: "there is no primordial state we might wish to get back to, no Eden we have desecrated, no pretoxic body we might uncover through enough chia seeds and kombucha. There is not a preracial state we could access, erasing histories of slavery, forced labor on railroads, colonialism, genocide, and their concomitant responsibilities and requirements. There is no food we can eat, clothing we can buy, or energy we can use without deepening our ties to complex webs of suffering" (4). So, instead, Shotwell asks, "what happens if we start from there?" (5).

Each subsequent chapter unpacks a thorny theoretical and practical topic that faces intractable impasses when approached through purism. Yet when approached through presumed impurity, Shotwell offers novel ways into these topics and out of their discord. By weaving together conceptual analysis with cases that include Canada's grappling with its colonial past; HIV/AIDS activism; sex research in frogs; consumption of food and energy; queer and disability activism; and speculative fiction, Shotwell's book embodies the interconnection of theory and praxis. The text enacts yet another virtue of impurity: theory and practice as co-constitutive, rather than as existing in an idealized, separate, and "pure" state.

In chapter 1, "Remembering for the Future," Shotwell considers the embeddedness of historical injustices on the present, engaging Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's concept of "unforgetting" (23). Alongside the work of Dunbar-Ortiz and Sue Campbell, Shotwell unpacks the ways in which classification and racialization are integral to colonialism, and become invisibly woven into the infrastructure of society. For example, in the Canadian context Shotwell examines, the Indian Act is on the surface a set of policies. Yet by regulating to whom the Indian Act does (and does not) apply, the policies produce a particular definition of Native identity, one that is constructed by colonial power and not by Indigenous Peoples. The chapter focuses on "healthism" as a program of individual responsibility for health that negatively interacts with the process of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission process by treating health as a "pure" and individualized endeavor not informed by history, systems, and oppression. Shotwell provides an alternate account of "health, personhood and colonization" (24) as interwoven. Unforgetting colonial classificatory systems is part of a collective, transformative process to become unstuck from cycles of assessing, attributing, or denying individual blameworthiness or harm for colonial pasts and its present vestiges, including individual blame for one's health.

Relationships of past, present, and future to memory, (un)forgetting, and purity thread through each chapter. Chapter 2, which previously appeared in *Hypatia*, dives further into the history of medical classification. The chapter examines the history of the diagnostic definition of HIV/AIDS as it was developed by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and challenged by

activist groups. The original definition of HIV/AIDS focused exclusively on gay men contracting the disease, failing to include forms of disease-presentation in women, and excluding women from meeting the criteria for an HIV/AIDS diagnosis. On the one hand, then, Shotwell shows that narratives are not separable, such as the medical, social, or activist narratives of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but are instead interwoven and multilayered. On the other hand, she shows that narratives themselves are not part of a "natural" or "pure" received truth, but are co-constructed (and can be reconstructed).

Chapters 3 and 4 look to the present. In chapter 3 Shotwell meditates more deeply on the idea that the present contains the past while shaping the future by analyzing the ways in which the toxic substances like the pesticide DDT currently in our environment are remnants of past choices. She states that "we all participate in situations and worlds unavailable for simple moral judgment" (81), a sentiment that resonates in each chapter of the book. Shotwell observes that environmental purity relies on displacing rather than eradicating toxins, and that the clean/dirty or pure/toxic divide reinscribes patterns of privilege. Some of us can afford to outsource dirty work, pay for "purifying" treatments, or live in "clean" cities. This separates us from others of us who are steeped in the "dirty work" of dealing with waste, chemicals, and toxic remnants, or who are forced to live near toxic waste sites, waste-management plants, or in locales with contaminated water supplies, soil, or air.

Chapter 3 also provides a methodological model for conscientious scholarship that parses out the difference between empirical fact and interpretive findings. Shotwell places queer theory in dialogue with Terence Hayes's research on atrazine and frogs. Hayes's research showed a correlation between exposure to the chemical atrazine and changes to frog sex-presentation. Analyzing mainstream media reports on these findings, Shotwell traces a narrative that reinforces "pure" sex classification, and anxiety about porous boundaries around sex and gender identity. Shotwell is careful to approach her analysis attuned to the complexities of a researcher's situatedness (including hers as well as Hayes's). In conclusion Shotwell suggests that naturalism, which prioritizes noticing rather than classifying the environment and other beings in it, is one route to replacing problematic purist narratives.

In chapter 4 Shotwell explores embodied consumption: how eating and other forms of energy use draw us into unavoidable "entanglement with intimate and distant others" (107). Purity is impossible when it comes to the ethics of eating, energy consumption, or climate change. We are all embodied and therefore reliant on others for the survival of our embodied selves. Shotwell considers the "conundrum eating invokes" (108) and how privilege enables some of us to appear free to make more ethical choices (such as buying "green" products). Her argument in this chapter is informed by Simone de Beauvoir's existential ethics of uncertain freedom. Uncertain freedom moves the ethics of consumption away from purity. Instead, Shotwell says that "ethics enters through the necessity to hold in view other people's projects in enacting our own," but "this *holding in view* will never be completely attained" (131) because our information and understanding at the time of acting is always incomplete. An ethics that holds together our relational, embodied, and incomplete epistemic positions rejects the purity myth in favor of an ethical impurity. Chapter 4 is less narrow than others. It makes broader claims for why morally, epistemically, and practically, ethics ought to be practiced collectively. Yet it is one of the most

relatable chapters. Anyone who ever reflects on why we do or don't eat, buy, use, reuse the things we do will be able to conjure up personal cases to which Shotwell's theory applies.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer thoughts toward the future. Chapter 5 articulates a core commitment of the book as a whole: although the present and future are shaped by the past, and specifically our (chosen) narratives of the past, the future is coming at us. That the future is coming at us (or we are coming at it) is inevitable. Yet it is not inevitable that the future must replicate or reinforce the past or present. For Shotwell, we have choices to make about the future, and we ought to have reasons that motivate these choices, but purity is not one of them (because it is a myth).

In chapter 5 Shotwell evaluates normativity vis-à-vis queer and disability theory, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and the dance company Sins Invalid. Shotwell endorses normativity. But she distinguishes between projects of normativity that foreclose possibility, and those that open possibility. Shotwell argues for "open normativities," which, according to Shotwell, allow for norms to be contested and modified. Challenges to existing norms do not reject the concept of norms; they revise what is normative.

Chapter 6 explores speculative fiction to imagine a future that is not a continuation of the past and present. Shotwell unpacks problematic ways in which disability and identity politics can be reduced to a form of purity politics. However, Angela Davis's concept of *identifying into* provides a generative, rather than reductive, approach to identity that, building on chapter 5, opens normativities *and* futures. Shotwell places feminist and disability scholarship in conversation with particular Buddhist and indigenous concepts of interdependence, and the speculative fiction of Octavia Butler, building on a wealth of theoretical resources toward her own positive argument. Toward the end of chapter 6, Shotwell remarks: "Social realities always *exceed the categories* that aim to represent them" and because of this "we work with the flux of changing vocabularies and shifting political practices, leveraging intertwined vectors of freedom" (171). It is a timely and pertinent call to conceptual, social, and political action to work *with* the flux of social and political practices in which we are all intertwined.

The readability and methodology of *Against Purity* make it an ideal text to use in whole or in part in the classroom. The text would be effective in any social and political philosophy course at the undergraduate level. It is apt for many topical courses in and outside of philosophy including environmental studies, gender studies, or health and society studies. Each chapter takes up an important social-justice topic that should be of interest to students whether or not they take themselves to be interested in philosophy. It might, in this regard, produce more philosophy majors who see the ways in which philosophy, politics, and social justice can be mobilized together. That she succeeds to make her claims without jargon or (unexplained) technical language means Shotwell's ideas are accessible to diverse readers.

Although I am suggesting that *Against Purity* ought to find a broad readership, it remains a complex and nuanced book. Shotwell upends traditional ways of understanding the discipline of philosophy, which has its own purity myth. At the same time, *Against Purity* presents a model for scholarship that challenges and enriches the discipline: centering diverse scholars including indigenous, queer, black, and women scholars, and producing broadly applicable ethical work.

I will conclude with a brief observation that is not pertinent to the core arguments of Shotwell's book. However, it is a methodological point that may be of interest to those reading this review. At various points Shotwell uses the nonbinary pronouns of scholars whose pronoun preferences are known to her. We might be tempted to say: "of course she does." It is morally and politically correct to address others by their preferred pronouns. But even as identity-attuned philosophers, we might not always know, or think to seek out, the preferred pronouns of a scholar with whom we are thinking in our writing. *Against Purity* illustrates another reason for making manifest our relevant personal histories and contexts in our writing, as Shotwell does in each of her chapters. Situating ourselves is not only in the service of our theoretical claims. It provides readers the opportunity to engage with us in the ways we wish to be known.

Reference

Kunzru, Hari. 2017. *White tears*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.