

Book Review | *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, by Alexis Shotwell (University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

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Despite the negative thrust of its title, *Against Purity* by Alexis Shotwell is a joyful and optimistic book. In this text, Shotwell provides scholars in science and technology studies (STS) and adjacent fields with an affirming set of strategies for both “living ethically in compromised times” and for doing the analytical work of studying, describing, undoing, and speculating on some of the most pressing problems in contemporary biopolitics.

Shotwell’s central argument is simple: in life and academic work, discourses of “purity” present a false promise. On the one hand, purity discourses posit the unachievable hope of a future where an unblemished state might be achieved. On the other, they are premised on the fiction that such a state has ever existed at all. Purity discourses, per Shotwell, are products of “a certain formulation of modernity” (p. 14) that has proven itself to be particularly ruinous. The pursuit of purity has been the driving engine of colonial projects, genocidal and ecologically destructive understandings of medicine and technology as cleansing agents, and an array of other problems that actively shape our present reality. Given the historical fact of purity’s harms, its pursuit ought to be abandoned in favor of approaches to scholarship, politics, and living that foreground “the usefulness of thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action” (p. 5).

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Shotwell's book is timely for politically engaged STS scholars. *Against Purity* has arrived in a moment where disentangling oneself and one's scholarly practice from structures of domination is often treated as simultaneously *impossible to do* (we are always already entangled with our oppressors) and *the necessary work* of pursuing social transformation. Rather than offering a way out of this double bind, Shotwell suggests that it be embraced. In this way, *Against Purity* directly contributes to a growing body of literature in STS—and particularly feminist, queer, environmental, and postcolonial STS—that presents new methods for practicing what Donna Haraway calls “staying with the trouble.”

In her book of that title, Haraway (2016) argues that meaningfully engaging with the troubles of our world requires building projects of “generative joy, terror, and collective thinking” (pp. 3-4) that not only decenter human life in late capitalism, but which also require actively constructing new modes of kinship with animals, chemical substances, and others in the world (p. 31). Similarly, in her work on the politics of care in feminist science studies, Michelle Murphy (2015) calls upon “science studies scholars to take a more critical stance toward the politics of care in technoscience, by attending to the complexities and complicities in recent histories of care” in such a way that can adequately attend to how the notion of care itself is constitutive of “histories of persistent racisms, class privilege, colonialism, and American imperial ambitions” (p. 719). Shotwell's book attempts to “build up and sustain”—to borrow a phrase from John Law (2004, p. 94)—a literal *ethos* oriented toward doing this sort of work and living in this sort of way without becoming consumed or paralyzed by the gravity of such a daunting task.

While the argument of *Against Purity* is pithy, its archive is sprawling and as far-reaching as the implications of its thesis. Like a collection of disconnected short stories with a common narrator, *Against Purity* pulls the reader across divergent affective and analytical registers—and there is something in it for almost any scholar working in critical STS. Case studies range from Indigenous practices of reckoning with settler colonial pasts and federal Indian law in Canada (Chapter 1), the politics of reclassifying illness (Chapter 2), the effect of chemical agents on the perceived gender of amphibians (Chapter 3), the governance of disaster zones and the politics of embodiment in the nuclear fallout of the Fukushima disaster (Chapter 4), the legal appeals that ground transgender politics in the United States (Chapter 5), and explorations of how to build a world where compulsory able-bodiedness and other normative modes of living are not preconditions for one's thriving (Chapter 6 and the conclusion).

Chapter 2 is especially significant. The chapter, titled “Women Don't Get AIDS,

They Just Die from It,” documents the 1992 grassroots campaign to reclassify AIDS in the United States, which was led by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). This chapter merits inclusion on any critical HIV studies reading list or syllabus, and would be a solid addition to any literature review on biomedical classification or patient-driven activism in twentieth-century biomedicine. Its archive is particularly special, as it draws on the [ACT UP Oral History Project](#), a public humanities initiative led by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard.

The chapter describes activist engagements that centered the specific ways that AIDS affected women in order to effectuate a more inclusive set of AIDS-defining conditions. It is a notable installment in the ongoing work of historicizing radical AIDS activism and drawing attention to its pluralism. The chapter bridges gaps in multiple literatures on HIV activism that focus on emotion, affect, memory, and representations of the epidemic. It is poignantly juxtaposed against the explosion of recent cinematic treatments of AIDS activism in films such as *United in Anger*, *How to Survive a Plague*, and *BPM: Beats Per Minute*, as well as new critical HIV scholarship in the vein of Deborah Gould’s *Moving Politics* (2009), Adam Geary’s *Antiblack Racism and the AIDS Epidemic* (2014), and Kane Race’s *The Gay Science* (2017).

Chapter 3 is a reframing of the concept of “interdependence,” primarily through an analysis of the alleged “feminization” of frogs by chemical agents used in fertilizer. Its case study is situated within queer theory and opens with a discussion of queer practices of interspecies cohabitation in *Frog and Toad* children’s stories, which will be familiar to many readers. Shotwell’s skillful weaving together of close readings of cultural texts with autobiographical reflections and empirical case studies is a common thread throughout the book and an enriching methodological practice.

Chapter 4 is a deep analysis of the ethics of food consumption and embodiment in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. It is impressive and showcases the extent of Shotwell’s expertise in multiple approaches to the study of ethics in anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. In Chapter 4, Shotwell co-deploys New Materialist frameworks from STS along with ancient philosophy and insights from the canon of continental philosophy to argue for expanding understandings of embodiment to include relations with other beings and toxic substances. Chapters 5 and 6 make interventions in disability studies, playing with ideas of futurity, the literature of Octavia Butler, and methods for generating what Shotwell calls “*open normativities*: collectively crafted ways of being that shape subjectivities oriented toward widespread flourishing” (p. 139).

The book is accessible and uses minimal technical language. The full text, or excerpts, would be equally appropriate to assign for an undergraduate course in the sociology or anthropology of biomedicine and health or STS as it would be for a qualifying examinations list or advanced graduate seminar in fields ranging from medical anthropology to critical studies of nuclearity. The book ought to become part of the institutional apparatuses of undergraduate and graduate education in STS, disability studies, critical histories of AIDS, and social studies of ecological disaster and toxic environments. For feminist and queer STS scholars, *Against Purity* is essential reading. Non-STS scholars in fields such as ethics or bioethics will find a serious-yet-playful book that pushes the normative boundaries of those fields. Chapters 2 and 4 will be of particular interest to feminist ethicists and philosophers.

When read as a contribution to evolving conversations about the role of reflexivity and complicity in STS research, and from the vantage of a compromised world where both radical and reactionary tendencies in politics and scholarship continue to cling to false hopes of purity, the visions of celebratory impurity put forward by Shotwell promise something different—frameworks for living that are more affirming than the normative modes of existence offered by our present. *Against Purity* provides scholars the hope not only of doing STS differently, but of staying alive in the wasteland of what some of us call “late capitalism,” what scholars in Shotwell’s cohort call “the Anthropocene,” and which queer theorist Michael Warner eloquently calls (in an ethical reflection on his own life) “this, the last of history’s empires” (2004, p. 216).

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