

TOXIC SCENES: Alexis Shotwell on “Shimmering Presences” and “Toxic Interdependencies”

Review by Anthony J. Gavin

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

It was almost thirteen years ago that Alexisonfire’s *Crisis* album was released, in August, 2006. Meeting lead singer and guitarist Dallas Green outside a show once was one of his favourite stories to tell. That would have been close to the age that we met—or met officially, since we had no doubt encountered each other before, at shows, or in school, on at least a few occasions. *Every scene contains its own philosophy of the encounter...* The first single, “Boiled Frogs,” was released seven weeks ahead of time, when the album was announced in July.

*I'm always wishing, I'm always wishing too late
For things to come my way
It always ends up the same
Count your blessings
I must be missing, I must be missing the point
Your signal fades away and all I'm left with is noise
Count your blessings on one hand^[1]*

Alex Shotwell’s *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (2016) argues that there is no such thing as the *pure* ethical decision, *pure* reason, the *purely* individuated non-permeable body as delineated by liberal ideology and subjectivity. We are always already complicit, because deeply entangled with other bodies in damaged ecosystems. What Shotwell calls “purity politics” refers to the autoimmune negation and exclusion of constitutive *impurity*, perpetrated materially and discursively by juridical, techno-biopolitical and disciplinary apparatuses endemic to (what might collectively be referred to as) ableist white capitalist heteropatriarchy.^[2]

In this review—which is also a reflection on a wound—I focus on a single chapter in Shotwell’s book, which was like a supportive friend to me in a time of need, as I processed death, trauma, love and toxic (inter)dependencies, with help from her motivating queer disability praxis.

“I am interested in what it means to take seriously the impossibility of telling value-neutral stories about the world” (2016, 100).

“Dose dependency is a core premise in conventional conceptions of toxicity. As the saying goes, the dose makes the poison—a little of something can be harmless, easily processed by our bodies, or even medicinal” (2016, 103).

In the third chapter of *Against Purity*, “Shimmering Presences: Frog, Toad, and Toxic Interdependencies”, Shotwell develops a phenomenology of the deeply interdependent and complicit entanglements we have with other bodies, as symbolized by the queerness of frogs and toads “mutated” by their inhabitation of industrial society’s toxic scenes. Furthermore, the very queerness of these “industrial offcasts” (2016, 96) calls our attention to “the toxic present as a kind of responsibility” (2016, 78), according to a queer disability praxis articulated throughout the remainder of the book.

What is a “shimmering presence”? Shotwell draws on the work of Mel Y. Chen to articulate the flashing up in our lives of ones “less easily bound to capital or to any other regimented time” (Chen in 2016, 78), which become

framed as queer or racial temporalities in relation to regimes of exploitation and repressive normalization. The shimmering presence calls our attention to our toxic interdependencies in the present—to the sites of contamination, exclusion, and abjection, necessary for the production and reproduction of “pure” sites of epistemic, socioeconomic, political, and ethical activity—and to the potential sites of generativity and relationality that also lie therein, in toxic pools. Anurans living in toxic pools have undergone mutations over many generations, traceable to their living near industrial sites, which secrete chemical wastes that cause hormone imbalances when absorbed through their skin. The figure of the frog is one of toxic exposure, and acute vulnerability. Stories about anurans support Shotwell’s argument specifically because of their empirico-figurative status as amphibious beings with viscous surfaces and porous barriers living in toxic soups (2016, 83). The changes they undergo naturally position frogs and toads as “indicator species” in relation to human beings. They signal to us not only that we are responsible in some way, but also, that we are always already permeated by toxicity, as we move up into ever larger pools, spreading out our toxins and filtering them into separable eddies in the swamp. However, Shotwell’s point about “purity politics” leads us to conclude that this liberal attitude ultimately feeds into the high eco-fascistic white hetero-hysteria that industrial waste products will turn “us” gay next, just like the ‘gay frogs’ (2016, 90). The heightened stakes of post-gender paranoia implied here will be abundantly familiar to anyone who recalls Alex Jones’ 2015 rant on InfoWars, remarking how “they” (some ubiquitous “they”) are “turning the freaking frogs gay!” Shotwell’s queer disability deconstruction, in sum, states that it makes no sense to assume anurans obey coded gender behaviours just like humans do, that homosexuality is a relevant construct for anuran sociality, or that ‘queerness’ and ‘trans’ identities constitute a disability even in humans, and thus, something that ought to cause us alarm, as indicated by the very idea of an ‘indicator species’ (2016, 93). Thus, a more radical framing of “shimmering presences” must strive to upset the very forces that work to prevent the flashing up into presence of toxic and interdependent others. If the encounter with shimmering presences forms a case study for our radical non-separability from toxic others, as Chen argues (2016, 85), then it impinges on us to work through the muck of entangled ethico-onto-epistemologies (Barad) responsible to a hopeful vision of complex multispecies flourishing for ourselves and others in damaged ecosystems.

The notions of the “shimmering presence” and “toxic interdependencies” lead me to reflect on the concept of *the toxic scene*. The toxic scene inhabits and is inhabited by both us and the shimmering presence: it lives in the shimmering presence as an active memory, like it lives in us as a repressed moment or permanently wounded site. The toxic scene entangles beings with toxic interdependencies, and emergence from the scene only takes the shape of death or traumatic separation: living in a toxic scene is growing up and dying together, wherever you are. Crucially—and I take this to be one of Shotwell’s central points—*all scenes are toxic scenes*. The difference between the symptomatically self-sanitizing scene of the ‘pure’ neoliberal polis and the self-consciously toxic scene that holds open the memory of the shimmering presence is that the former stigmatizes, represses and excludes all forms of toxicity, while the latter recognizes its toxic interdependencies and opens the site of the wound to transform it into a potential source of strength. The relation between the shimmering presence, toxic interdependencies and the toxic scene are illustrated by the following quote from Nietzsche, who says of “the great experimenter with himself [...] The No he says to life brings to light, as if by magic, an abundance of tender Yeses; even when he *wounds* himself, this master of destruction, of self-destruction—the very wound itself afterward compels him *to live*.”^[3] Here, the “great experimenter” is the shimmering presence, his *wounding* reflects his toxic interdependencies, and the “abundance of tender Yeses” represents the toxic scene, which flows forth as if from the wound itself.

I write this having just lost an old, close friend. Let’s call him Alex, AKA, “Black Alex.” We played music together for many years, as teenagers and in our early twenties. Alex was a couple of years younger than me. We met in high school. As long as I’ve known him, he’s fought demons and bad habits. For my part, I’ve made more questionable decisions with Alex than I care to admit. We hadn’t seen much of each other since I moved to Montreal in 2014 for my MA, but when I did see him one summer that I was back, he was clearly at a low point in his recovery. When we talked, I listened, but struggled to distinguish between what was real and what was hallucination, some demon haunting his mind and his world. Some of the things that he said to me sounded absolutely beyond belief—but then again, I had struggled to believe all along that Alex was getting into harder and harder drugs over the entire

time I'd known him, to the point of practically forcing it out of my mind entirely (albeit unconsciously). The shimmering presence in the toxic scene: where we were all permeated by toxicity, by bad relationships or toxic substances, the "porous" bodily boundaries of the "great experimenter with himself" can almost appear to transform all that toxicity into a power of life over death. Almost. He can show you how to find beauty in toxicity, but can't ever render the toxic *purely* beautiful, which would imply a logical contradiction. Still, his toxic dependencies were far from what made Alex unique in our friend group. Part of what makes the loss of a long-time friend to drugs so difficult to process is the apparent randomness of it, the thought that it could have been you or anyone else you knew from back then instead. What immortalizes Alex is the living memory we have of the ways he reached out and touched us. That Saturday night, we held a massive beach fire to celebrate his life. There were old friends, friends I hadn't met yet, friends I hadn't seen in nearly a decade, and new friends, younger than Alex, whom I'd maybe met, but who recognized me as the singer of the shitty local metal band that had been their introduction to live music, through Alex, a lifetime ago.

All remembered Alex as someone who leapt over boundaries: who dressed his guy friends up in girl jeans and helped straighten their hair or gave band tees to his girlfriends so that they could look "scene," who would sit down next to the most awkward looking kid he'd never met before on a bus just to tell him that "a wolf cares not about the opinions of sheep," who would never let his position get in the way of having the best possible musical instruments to play on; Alex was an absolute legend at stealing guitars from guitar shops and getting all the band into trouble with the cops. Holding this wounded site open as a space for healing wasn't easy: along with the love, support and singalongs, there was screaming, scuffling, and suicidal thoughts. Toxic high school hoodrat, mallrat, scene kid bullshit. Since we had grown apart over the past few years, part of the significance for me of helping hold this space open, and stepping into it myself, was to establish a timeline. Alex was notoriously hard to keep track of: as I understand it, Alex's life reflects the concept of the "shimmering presence" in its fullest sense. Both the celebration of life and the musical/social scene we grew up in were toxic scenes, which reveal our toxic interdependencies. But the life of the shimmering presence reveals how there is potential healing in (some) toxicity (2016, 103).

It was Friday evening when I found out Alex had died of an overdose. I had spent a particularly frantic day facilitating the year-end project presentation symposium for this year's Cultural, Social and Political Thought (CSPT) cohort, which included securing catering, setting up the off-campus venue downtown ahead of time, etc. Only myself, my supervisor, and a new friend—someone I'd met on the fringes of the interdisciplinary program—were still around by the time I stole a moment to check my text messages in the bathroom. After my supervisor left, with some warm parting words, this new friend also became a tremendous support for me—which was all the more remarkable, considering that we had known each other for only such a short while. However, we found that we did have one, unshakeable thing in common: both of us come from *toxic scenes*, hers being the punk scene of some depleted industrial town in Ontario. It's hard to shake the muck very much: it tends to wobble a little, but quickly regains its form—though not without causing minor disturbances in the smaller pockets of life scattered throughout its molten core. We talked about "survivor's guilt"—a coping with the aforementioned randomness of a toxically interdependent old friend's death that thinks, 'it could have been me', and maybe should have been—which I take as a somewhat dark example of what Shotwell means by "holding in mind the ethical necessity for response that [...] attends human complicity" (2016, 100). Survivor's guilt is one way of recognizing that toxic interdependencies can never be completely buried. They can only be opened, through queer practices of relationality, as spaces of possible healing, which imagine futures that denaturalize productive "fitness" and model "something more interesting about what it might be to survive and thrive in disrupted landscapes" (2016, 86). Trauma can't be buried completely (which would be a form of purity politics), but only performatively reinscribed with coping rituals whenever our active memory is seized by a shimmering presence, or we find ourselves immersed (back) in a toxic scene.

Finally, Shotwell discusses the "art of noticing" (Tsing) cultivated by the naturalist, in comparison with the purely quantitative metrics and scientific data gathered on, say, "mutant" frog populations (2016, 97). Importantly, her model naturalist is someone who has helped Shotwell navigate terrain that would otherwise be impossible for her to access, owing to a physical condition, which is constructed as "disability". Shotwell repositions her "disability"

as a quiet ability to take notice of this “art of noticing” in her guide, and thus, to cultivate it herself. As mentioned above, Alex was someone who cultivated an art of noticing what was beautiful in people, especially “mutants” and “offcasts,” scene kids and starving artists. I always thought of our relationship as one where I was the stabilizing influence and consistent friend in his comparatively more fucked up life. Now that Alex is gone and I’m still here, I have to question which one of us was pushing the other along. This loss has resulted in an explosion of intensely affective encounters—both buried in me and excluded from my life (as I live it nowadays—the only way one can make it out of the toxic scene alive, and out into a larger pool, is by carving out erasures in their skin)—that I am now thinking through in light of Shotwell’s queer disability deconstruction. In retrospect, Alex helped me cultivate that “art of noticing” life’s potential beauty in toxic scenes, in queer and racialized others. Now, Alex *loved* women (and they him)—but friends and lovers alike would agree that our relationships with him could often look like something straight out of *Queer Eye*, with him looking out for our aesthetic, and us basically ripping off his style (before we even knew he owned it). Shotwell glosses this epistemic and ethical shift in disposition with the slogan, “*To the Frogs Themselves!*”, alluding to Edmund Husserl’s motto for a transcendental phenomenology (“*to the things themselves!*”), which was lovingly adopted by Heidegger. This “art of noticing” can thus be interpreted as the philosophical methodology of a queer materialist phenomenology, which finds beauty not in transcendence (which would accord the puritanical, Kantian schema of the transcendental aesthetic), but in toxicity—not just as a toxic waste, but as a possible site of generativity and gleaming life. Alex basically gave us the courage to fit in to our own style of expression, which we adopted, in many ways, as a form of aesthetic resistance to a bland conformity, which was only ever as real as it was *intimate* and interconnected.

I find hope in this art of noticing, of making myself accountable in other toxic scenes, to toxic others—since all are entangled—by living from the wound of my own. And I recognize the toxic scene as a site where reconciling spectral presences can potentially occur, by navigating our enduring toxic entanglements with dead matter and toxic others and finding potential remedies therein. One might say, paraphrasing Artaud (and doing irreparable damage to Derrida), ‘the history of the *pharmakon* is the history of the remedy as shit.’ Or, at the very least, the adage might bestow us the gift a memorable slogan, a flowing metaphor and a (de-)toxifying philosophical contagion. In about so many words, this is what I take to be Alexis Shotwell’s ultimate conclusion, reduced to a (problematically) “pure” form, in what is an honestly delightful, highly contagious, timely and incisive philosophical intervention that cuts across multiple disciplines. I cannot recommend *Against Purity* enough, to colleagues and friends alike—since we are all, in a sense, entangled, like mutant frogs struggling to move up into ever larger toxic pools (or else, die trying).

Bibliography

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Notes

1. Alexisonfire, “Boiled Frogs”. *Crisis*. Metalworks Studios, Mississauga, ON. 2006.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioadFzq_6n0
2. In using such polemically charged words, I realize that I, too, am in the position of expunging bile, against a set of sanctimoniously uninterrogated institutional bodies which these at once toxic and purifying remedies

(“ableist white capitalist heteropatriarchy”) seek to make real, as *abjection*. This was the trick that Artaud cultivated in his recurring and truly devastating metaphor, ‘God is shit. The history of the work of art is the history of God as excrescence.’ The discourse is a game of refusal on both sides, in which the very specter of there being an opposition is itself a fading presence, which collapses into further complexity and multispecies entanglements. I thank Dr. Nina Belmonte for turning my attention towards the implications of this rhetorical ambiguity—of using bilious words—both *necessarily*, and *strategically*.

3. Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On the Genealogy of Morals.” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Random House, Inc., 2000: 557.

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