

Complexity and Complicity

An Introduction to Constitutive Impurity

On the plane back from a conference titled “Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet”—a generative conference at my alma mater organized by Anna Tsing, a conference that made me remember why I love going to conferences—I washed my hands in the tiny, smelly, normal airplane bathroom. Then I took a picture of the soap, which was fancy soap for an airplane bathroom: *philosophy* brand, part of its “pure grace” line. It narrated, all lowercase (lowercase font is to “remind us to live life with curiosity, wisdom, and abundant joy,” as their website notes): “philosophy: with clean hands we find our grace. we realize the slate can be as clean as we allow it to be.” On the plane from San Francisco to Ottawa, using something like 5.8 tons of greenhouse gasses for my personal trip, which I had not carbon offset, although the airline offered this option to me when I was buying my ticket, I had been feeling bad about using a plastic cup to have some ginger ale—but I had had some ginger ale because airline travel is irritating, flying itself is so evil that what weight does a single plastic cup hold, and I wanted some sugar and bubbles. I had been reflecting about what it meant to travel across the continent to a state experiencing a profound drought, using fossil fuels in order to talk with other scholars, many of whom had come from further away—Europe and Australia in particular—about what it means to inaugurate a term to name the time we are living in that identifies humans as responsible for harmful planetary transformation partially through our use of fossil fuels. I had doubts about what “clean hands” could mean in this context, and also how long they’d last after I finished rinsing the pure grace soap from my hands and touched literally anything.

There have been many conferences now about the Anthropocene—what it is, what it means to name it—and many more people writing and thinking about it. Mostly the people I’ve heard talking about the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene) are aiming to mobilize a transformation in our planetary political economy. Mostly, the markers used to measure this transformation measure the effects of human behavior on the world we live in, and often these effects are externalities to economic calculations, carried as body burdens by living creatures or experienced as the entangled effects that alter or kill beings and ecosystems. Coral reefs change and die in relation to acidifying oceans, soil carries loads of lead or heavy metals from mining or automobile exhaust, new forms of rock are made out of plastic, plastiglomerates (Corcoran, Moore, and Jazvac 2014), or we acquire the radioisotope signatures of past nuclear bomb use, and we might mark these as dividing lines marking the beginning of the age we’re in. Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin suggest colonialism as an origin point, offering 1610 as a dividing line between the Holocene (the recent era that we may be leaving) and the Anthropocene. As Dana Luciano summarizes, that date

was chosen because it was the lowest point in a decades-long decrease in atmospheric carbon dioxide, measurable by traces found in Artic ice cores. The change in the atmosphere, Lewis and Maslin deduced, was caused by the death of over 50 million indigenous residents of the Americas in the first century after European contact, the result of “exposure to diseases carried by Europeans, plus war, enslavement and famine.” . . . Lewis and Maslin’s proposal is compelling because it is, as far as I know, the first proposal for an Anthropocene “golden spike” to recognize genocide as part of the cause of epochal division. (Luciano 2015)

However we mark its start, thinking about the Anthropocene makes it difficult to feel that pure grace is available through hand soap used in carbon-intensive travel across borders laid down on genocidally colonized land.

I don’t want to harp too much on philosophy—the “well being beauty brand”—but it is a little as though the person writing their marketing copy is writing directly for me in my concern about the evocations of purity and cleanliness, so let’s look at one other product: *purity made simple: one-step facial cleanser*. Here is the company’s copy:

philosophy: purity is natural. we come into this world with all the right instincts. we are innocent and, therefore, perceive things as they should be, rather than how they are. our conscience is clear, our hands clean and the world at large is truly beautiful. it is at this time we feel most blessed. to begin feeling young again, we must begin with the most basic step of all, the daily ritual of cleansing. (“Purity Made Simple | One-Step Facial Cleanser | Philosophy Cleansers” 2015)

I turn to this product in part because the hand soap from my plane trip isn’t listed on the *philosophy* website, and I want to talk about ingredients. But also this copy constellates brilliantly an ethos I believe we could—if it were measurable in geologic time—use to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene: roughly, the moment that humans worry that we have lost a natural state of purity or decide that purity is something we ought to pursue and defend. This ethos is the idea that we can access or recover a time and state before or without pollution, without impurity, before the fall from innocence, when the world at large *is truly beautiful*. This is a time of youth, blessing, but also, interestingly, a natural state that precludes or resists education—we *perceive things as they should be, rather than how they are*. A piece of this ethos is perhaps also the sense that we can buy a product that brings this natural state of purity back, though particularly in certain left scenes, ideological purity seems to behave as a one-step facial cleanser.

To dig into this, let’s look at the ingredients in the “multitasking” (it cleanses, tones, *and* moisturizes!) face wash, *purity made simple*:

water (aqua), sodium lauroamphoacetate, sodium trideceth sulfate, limnanthes alba (meadowfoam) seed oil, coco-glucoside, cocos nucifera (coconut) alcohol, peg-120 methyl glucose dioleate, aniba rosaeodora (rosewood) wood oil, geranium maculatum oil, guaiac (guaiacum officinale) extract, cymbopogon martini oil, rosa damascena extract, amyris balsamifera bark oil, santalum album (sandalwood) oil, salvia officinalis (sage) oil, cinnamomum cassia leaf oil, anthemis nobilis flower oil, daucus carota sativa (carrot) seed oil, piper nigrum (pepper) seed extract, polysorbate 20, glycerin, carbomer, triethanolamine, methylparaben, propylparaben, citric acid, imidazolidinyl urea, yellow 5 (ci 19140).

Most of these ingredients are not actually so bad—other soaps in the *philosophy* line, for example, use sodium laureth sulfate, here replaced by sodium trideceth sulfate. Both are surfactants, helping to make soap foamy, and emulsifying oils. Sodium laureth sulfate has gotten a bad rap, partly because even industry classifies it as a harsh soap, and partially because it is frequently contaminated by 1,4-dioxane, which does seem to be a carcinogen; sodium trideceth sulfate doesn’t raise any particular flags in the usual databases of cosmetics toxicity. More worrying, perhaps, are the methyl- and propylparabens, both of which have studies indicating associated endocrine disruption and possible reproductive-system effects. Imidazolidinyl urea, often derived from urine, is a formaldehyde-releaser, which works as an antimicrobial agent by forming formaldehyde in our long shelf-life cosmetics without having to list formaldehyde on the ingredients list. Most of us are familiar with the smell of formaldehyde if we dissected frogs in high school biology classes. It is classified as a “known” or “potential human carcinogen.” I’m focusing on the ingredients with chemical-ish names, but of course there is no particular reason to assume that the “natural” oils are so wonderful—the entire world is chemical, after all. If philosophy, as a brand, can teach us anything, it is that in this world purity is never made simple. Aspirations to purity are, perhaps, usually exactly what this cleansing-toning-moisturizing face wash offers: misleading ad copy on one level and secret carcinogens as a cell boundary-crossing material reality on another.

The delineation of theoretical purity, purity of classification, is always imbricated with the forever-failing attempt to delineate material purity—of race, ability, sexuality, or, increasingly, illness. The imbrication of failure with attempt, as I’ll discuss, is a feature of classification itself. More significantly, the world always exceeds our conception of it. Despite this, we can still pursue changed worlds. Living well might feel impossible, and certainly living purely is impossible. The slate has never been clean, and we can’t wipe off the surface to start fresh—there’s no “fresh” to start. Endocrine-disrupting soap doesn’t offer a purity made simple because there isn’t one. All there is, while things perpetually fall apart, is the possibility of acting from where we are. 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 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. So, what happens if we start from there?

This book champions the usefulness of thinking about complicity and compromise as a starting point for action. Often there is an implicit or explicit idea that in order to live authentically or ethically we ought to avoid potentially reprehensible results in our actions. Since it is not possible to avoid complicity, we do better to start from an assumption that everyone is implicated in situations we (at least in some way) repudiate. We are compromised and we have made compromises, and this will continue to be the way we craft the worlds to come, whatever they might turn out to be. So, I interpellate myself into Donna Haraway's modest yet difficult framing of situatedness as a place to start. Speaking about knowledge, she writes:

So, I think my problem and “our” problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness. (Haraway 1991, 187)

Thinking about politics, my problem in this book, and “our” problem in this world, is how to have *simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency* of the conditions under which we take ethical and political action, critical practices for accounting for our own situatedness in histories that have shaped the conditions of possibility for our actions, and a *no-nonsense commitment* to the kind of real, possible world Haraway describes. That world is partially shared, offers finite freedom, adequate abundance, modest meaning, and limited happiness. Partial, finite, adequate, modest, limited—and yet worth working on, with, and for.

Purity, and What the World Deserves

The not-simple “purity made simple” soap is one knot in a tapestry of products and ways of talking about the world. A hot-yoga studio franchise in my town, “Pure Yoga,” enjoins people to become “pure yogis,” offering a dizzying array of styles of yoga unmoored from any yoga tradition in particular;

the owners of the studios have also recently opened a vegan restaurant that serves killer gluten-free, vegan onion rings. Hot yoga, they say, “not only helps you to detox flushing toxins out of the skin through sweat, but heats up the muscles allowing you to approach the postures from a safe place” (“Discover Pure Yoga Ottawa” 2015). The shelves of ordinary food stores—let alone stores that self-identify as health-food stores—offer various products to detoxify our bodies. Cleanses, juice fasts, detox diets, ionic foot baths that draw poisons out through our feet, foot detox patches that you apply and that work overnight using herbs that activate “far infrared energy,” bottles that offer pure spring water (with or without fluoride), and Himalayan pink salt-rock lamps—all offer ways to manage something, something experienced by consumers as a toxin that we can be free of. There is a clear and growing concern about material toxins accumulating in human bodies even as there is little clarity about what a toxin actually is, if ionic baths actually cleanse anything, or how we practically might personally manage the complex systems that affect the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the substances we touch.

Purity politics arise not only in our response to potential physical contamination; it is also an issue for our ethical and political situation in the world. How might our response to physical and political impurity be connected? Consider. Many of us are settlers living on unceded native land, stolen through genocidal colonial practices. We feed domestic animals more food than starving people lack, and spend money on the medical needs of pets while eating factory farmed meat and spraying our lawn with pesticides that produce cancer in domestic animals. We pay for cosmetic surgeries in a time when many people can't access basic health care. We recycle but take plane trips to Alaska. We worry about global warming and turn on the air-conditioning. We think slavery is wrong, but eat chocolate and fish produced in contexts that meet every definition of nonchattel slavery. We believe that people deserve good working conditions but buy clothing produced in sweatshops and maquiladoras because we couldn't afford equitably sourced clothing even if we could find it. We cannot look directly at the past because we cannot imagine what it would mean to live responsibly toward it. We yearn for different futures, but we can't imagine how to get there from here. We're hypocrites, maybe, but that derogation doesn't encompass the nature of the problem that complexity poses for us. The “we” in each of these cases shifts, and complicity carries differential weight with our social position—people benefiting from globalized inequality are for the most part the “we” in this

paragraph. People are not equally responsible or capable, and are not equally called to respond. But however the bounds of the “we” are drawn, we are not, ever, pure. We’re complicit, implicated, tied in to things we abjure. This is a kind of impurity implied in the sense of “compromised living” that involves making concessions.

In addition to making ethical compromises, we are also, as a recent self-help book about responding to toxins in our bodily environments puts it, “born pre-polluted” (Lourie and Smith 2013, 3). Our bodily boundaries are penetrated and traversed by viruses, chemicals, microbes. This way of being compromised names the sense in which we are liable to danger, vulnerable, potentially or actually damaged or sickened. Under contemporary regimes dictating individualist responses to pollution, we are made responsible for our own bodily impurity; we are called on to practice forms of defense against our own vulnerability. Charting the space between complicity and pollution, between righteousness and compromise, is difficult. If hypocrisy were the problem, really it wouldn’t be much of a problem; at least on the surface, it is something we could give up. In contrast, being co-constituted with the world, ontologically inseparable, just seems to be our condition. And yet, contemporary imperatives to detox, to eat clean, to defend against pollution, or to avoid inflammation-causing foods imply the possibility that we could be pure in the relevant sense. I juggle a knee-jerk reaction to such personalized purity pursuits (individualizing, “not in my backyard”/NIMBY, capitalist, accepting of injustice in the distributions of harm) with the recognition that, indeed, there are substances in the world that none of us should, if we want to live, be coconstituted in relation to. Environmental racism is real, workers’ bodies are wrongly incorporated as the detritus of capitalism, and militarism shapes the bodies and minds of everyone involved in war in the mold of trauma.

The “moves” involved in the not-simple “purity made simple” face wash, in NIMBY politics, in avoiding BPA, in eating organic (or vegan or paleo or sugar-free), or in doing monthly detoxifying “cleanses” may seem very different from each other. And they may seem very different in turn than other practices I explore in this book—practices of forgetting in relation to our implication in colonialism or the history of disease designation, for example. There are obvious real differences involved, but they are threaded together. Let’s call the line that links them “purity politics,” or “purism.” What’s needed, instead of a pretense to purity that is impossible in the actually existing

world, is something else. We need to shape better practices of responsibility and memory for our placement in relation to the past, our implication in the present, and our potential creation of different futures.

I should say—since I try not to use the unsupported yet urgent imperatives so prevalent on the left (“we need,” “we must”), instead shifting from categorical to hypothetical imperatives—if we want a world with less suffering and more flourishing, it would be useful to perceive complexity and complicity as the constitutive situation of our lives, rather than as things we should avoid. The action that comes out of the rather undefined idea of wanting a world with less suffering is, perhaps needless to say, a moving target, and one that raises more questions than it answers. Less suffering for whom? How is suffering measured? Who has the capacity to perceive entanglement, and who has the capacity to respond? To say that we live in compromised times is to say that although most people aim to *not* cause suffering, destruction, and death, simply by living, buying things, throwing things away, we implicate ourselves in terrible effects on ecosystems and beings both near and far away from us. We are inescapably entwined and entangled with others, even when we cannot track or directly perceive this entanglement. It is hard for us to examine our connection with *unbearable pasts* with which we might reckon better, our implication in *impossibly complex presents* through which we might craft different modes of response, and our aspirations for *different futures* toward which we might shape different worlds-yet-to-come.

In this book, I argue against purism not because I want a devastated world, the Mordor of industrial capitalism emerging as from a closely aligned alternate universe through our floating islands of plastic gradually breaking down into microbeads consumed by the scant marine life left alive after generations of overfishing, bottom scraping, and coral reef-killing ocean acidification; our human-caused, place-devastating elevated sea levels; our earth-shaking, water poisoning fracking; our toxic lakes made of the externalities of rare-earth mineral production for so-called advanced electronics; our soul-and-life destroying prisons; our oil spills; our children playing with bits of dirty bombs; our white phosphorus; our generations of trauma held in the body; our cancers; and I could go on. I argue against purism because it is one bad but common approach to devastation in all its forms. It is a common approach for anyone who attempts to meet and control a complex situation that is fundamentally outside our control. It is a bad approach because it shuts down precisely the field of possibility that might allow us to take better collective

action against the destruction of the world in all its strange, delightful, impure frolic. Purism is a de-collectivizing, de-mobilizing, paradoxical politics of despair. This world deserves better.

Living after Disturbance, Being Already Polluted

All of us on this earth are part of what Anna Tsing calls a *disturbance regime*—we're all living in *blasted landscapes* (Tsing 2014, 92). As she argues, referencing mushroom-growing in the shadow of the 2011 nuclear meltdown at Fukushima: “We need to be able to differentiate between forms of disturbance that are inimical to all life and those that offer multispecies opportunities. One place to start is by recognizing that not all human-shaped landscapes are as deadly as those spread by the Fukushima power plant. It is in the patchy difference that we can look for hope. Blasted landscapes are what we have, and we need to explore their life-promoting patches” (108).

Living in a disturbance regime means that we are all living after events that have changed, and frequently harmed, ecosystems and biospheres. Change is not the same thing as harm, and harm is not evenly distributed—famously, many forms of plant life only grow in the wake of forest fires, and the example Tsing engages is that matsutake mushrooms require disturbed forest to flourish—but mushrooms also happily take up radiation, and that is part of their response to the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima. They are signals for “exploring indeterminacy and the conditions of precarity, that is, life without the promise of stability” (Tsing 2015, 2). The question becomes, for Tsing and for me, how to delineate forms of disturbance in relation to what forms of life they sustain or proliferate. In the last section of this book, I offer normative guidance for life-promotion with the concept of flourishing—situated, historically placed, contingent. *How* we pursue flourishing, as I argue there, will always involve an in-process, syncretic, speculative fabulation, an improvisational engagement with emergence. The blasted landscapes of disturbance regimes are part of our everyday experience, and aiming for a more open field of the patchy differences where we might find hope is also going to have to be an everyday practice.

As I explore further in chapter 3, responses to herbicides and pesticides are very much like responses to radiation; though they are disparate discourses, they articulate a kind of purism. In these contexts the desire for purity is understandable and even politically activating. These examples show that being against purity does not mean being for pollution, and they illuminate

key reasons we might sympathize with in the urge to find purity. The question is going to be *how* we conceive of and practice our relation to a world and a self suffused with otherness. Coconstitution with parts of the world we might want to protect ourselves from—parts of the world like radiation or herbicides or parabens—is difficult to disentangle conceptually or practically from coconstitution with the microbial others that populate our gut and allow us to digest food or the viral others whose descendants allow human placentas to function. We are in and of the world, contaminated and affected. As Eula Biss argues:

If we do not yet know exactly what the presence of a vast range of chemicals in umbilical cord blood and breast milk might mean for the future of our children's health, we do at least know that we are no cleaner, even at birth, than our environment at large. We are all already polluted. We have more microorganisms in our guts than we have cells in our bodies—we are crawling with bacteria and we are full of chemicals. We are, in other words, continuous with everything here on earth. Including, and especially, each other. (Biss 2014, 75–76)

Being continuous with everything on earth is a starting point for critical inquiry, rather than an explanatory end. That we are coconstituted and thus polluted and impure hails us to make continually contingent and unsettled decisions about how to be in relation to the world, with no predetermined answer.

Biss's generative book *On Immunity: An Inoculation* is on one level about vaccination, starting from her thinking about vaccinating her own child, which always involves a decision about how to be in relation to the viral world and the other bodies who live here with us. On another level, it is a book about the impossibility of purity, and about how to reckon with realizing our entanglement and vulnerability in the world. Biss's book came out in a moment of increased attention to questions around vaccination and contagion in 2014 sparked by the rapid spread of Ebola and by a spike in measles cases that started with purposefully unvaccinated children at Disneyland. There is, as yet, no vaccine that protects against Ebola, and so responses to its resurgence centered not around who ought to be vaccinated but instead on the questions of whether (and how) to close borders to travelers who had been in infected areas (often framed simply as “Africa”), and

what steps people could take to protect themselves individually against infection. Measles, by contrast, is an illness against which we have a standard and effective vaccine. Bundled with vaccines for mumps and rubella, it is one of the vaccines parents in North America first confront when they have young children. Biss begins by reflecting on her own process of deciding which vaccines to give her child, but she turns quickly toward a complex discussion of toxicity and purity.

It is easy to analyze vaccination discourse in relation to purity. Consider a report from CNN on a measles outbreak in Arizona, focusing on a pediatrician (Dr. Tim Sacks) who was appealing for people to vaccinate their children in part in consideration of his own child, ill with leukemia and thus with an immune system vulnerable to illnesses like measles and who could not be vaccinated. CNN focused on a doctor, Jack Wolfson, who argues against vaccination. In the interview, Wolfson affirms his commitment to not vaccinate his children, even if that refusal spreads diseases that make other children very, perhaps fatally, ill. He says: “I’m not going to sacrifice the well-being of my child. My child is pure. . . . It’s an unfortunate thing that people die, but people die. And I’m not going to put my child at risk to save another child” (*CNN Report on Measles in Arizona 2015*). The belief that vaccinations introduce toxins that would make a child no longer pure is here closely allied with a species of defensive individualism, the sense in which the self is imagined as a fortress, separable from the world and requiring defense against the world.

Though she is not talking directly about this case, Biss articulates the two sides of thinking about impurity that Wolfson invokes here. She writes:

Fear of contamination rests on the belief, widespread in our culture as in others, that something can impart its essence to us on contact. We are forever polluted, as we see it, by contact with a pollutant. And the pollutants we have come to fear most are the products of our own hands. Though toxicologists tend to disagree with this, many people regard natural chemicals as inherently less harmful than man-made chemicals. (Biss 2014, 39)

Toxicity is often framed as dose-dependent; the classic formulation is that the “dose makes the poison.” In purity discourse, pollutants are rendered as a different kind of toxicity—mere contact makes the poison. As Biss notes, the conception of the violable but delimited individual body that undergirds

this conception of a being who can be pure and protected from pollution is long-standing. She writes:

Our contemporary belief that we inhabit only one body contained entirely within the boundaries of our skin emerged from Enlightenment thinking, which celebrated the individual in both mind and body. But what defined an individual remained somewhat elusive. By the end of the Age of Enlightenment, the body of a slave was allowed to represent only three-fifths of a person. Some people remained parts of a whole while others enjoyed the novel illusion of being whole unto themselves. (125)

As I’ll explore below, in this way as in others, possessive individualism is densely racialized; the core idea that our selves are owned by us functions as a categorical move to lay out a map of who can own others.

I follow Biss in understanding the desire for purity as a wrong-headed response to the understanding that toxicity might just be our condition. This wrong-headedness is expressed in Wolfson’s fiction that his child is pure, and his ready acceptance of the possibility that his faithfulness to that imagined purity might cause children to die. This move toward purity, as Biss frames it, appears in many other contexts:

Purity, especially bodily purity, is the seemingly innocent concept behind a number of the most sinister social actions of the past century. A passion for bodily purity drove the eugenics movement that led to the sterilization of women who were blind, black, or poor. Concerns for bodily purity were behind miscegenation laws that persisted more than a century after the abolition of slavery, and behind sodomy laws that were only recently declared unconstitutional. Quite a bit of human solidarity has been sacrificed in pursuit of preserving some kind of imagined purity. (Biss 2014, 75–76)

I am concerned about the sacrifice of human solidarity in pursuit of purity, but I am concerned also with what we might think of as political solidarity with ecosystems, critters, bugs, microbes, atoms. Elsewhere I have forwarded a conception of aspirational solidarity—a “solidarity based on collective conceptions of worlds that do not yet exist”—as a norm that might guide action toward humans but also toward worlds in which all sorts of beings flourish (Shotwell 2013, 105). I explore this conception further in chapter 6.

“We” Has Never Been Pure

Purity practices—in ideology, in theory, and in practice—work to delineate an inside and an outside; they are practices of defining a “we.” Mary Douglas’s 1966 book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* remains an important touchstone for thinking about purity. Fifty years on from its first publication, the book does throw up frictions for the anti-oppression critical theorist; Douglas refers consistently to “primitive cultures,” by which she means mostly Indigenous non-Western cultures, and there are certain hiccups in her discussion of gender and sexuality. The book is usable in part because Douglas applies an ethnographic eye also to purity practices of the Christian Bible and critiques contemporary texts that attempt to use “primitive cultures to buttress psychological insights” (Douglas, 115). Douglas’s investigation is at least in part structured around the idea that observing practices of purity can help us understand the symbolic work of social relations that stitch together society. She writes, “I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (4). This imposition, in her analysis, is contingent and shifting—she does not think that cultural practices of purity indicate a timeless or iron-clad set of classifications. Rather, on her account, “rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. . . . By their means, symbolic patterns are worked out and publically displayed. Within these patterns, disparate elements are related and disparate experience is given meaning” (2–3). She frames managing “dirt” as a key move in creating these unities:

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread or holy terror. Nor do our ideas about disease account for the range of our behavior in cleaning or avoiding dirt. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment. (2)

Concepts and practices of purity and impurity, in relation to dirt as well as other things understood as dirty, tell us something about how people understand the world they live in, and thus how they can imagine the world becoming. In other words, purity practices are also productive normative formulations—they make a claim that a certain way of being is aspired to,

good, or to be pursued. Concepts matter for what we do and how we are in the world. As Donna Haraway puts it, “Ideas’ are themselves technologies for pursuing inquiries. It’s not just that ideas are embedded in practices; they *are* technical practices of situated kinds” (Haraway 2008, 282). While current practices may well be connected to the forms of primarily religious purity practice Douglas discusses, in this book I am more concerned with the practices that characterize and structure key modes of life today. Both sorts of practices, though, deploy a particular idea-as-technology of parsing, cleansing, and delineating.

We can trace these practices back to a certain formulation of modernity, and from there to the practices of racialization that emerged with and in some ways coproduced the age of colonialism as in part a project of monitoring and managing the newly discovered realm of microbes and their effects. John Law, Geir Afdal, Kristin Asdal, Wen-yuan Lin, Ingunn Moser, and Vicky Singleton offer a productive manifesto for what they call “Modes of Syncretism,” a way of being against purity (and, indeed, a way of being against the purity implied in being against purity!). They read Bruno Latour’s claim that “we have never been modern” as in part a set of claims about the production of purity practices. They say: “[Latour’s] argument is that modernity presents itself as gleaming, consistent and coherent; as something that is *pure*. Not fuzzy” (Law et al. 2014, 172). Law et al. argue that for Latour purity is a quintessentially “modern apparition”; the impossibility of purity is one reason that we have never been modern. So, “modernity presents itself as pure” even as “*it isn’t pure at all*”—rather, “*modernity is a both-and*” (173). I follow one strand of the STS (Science and Technology Studies) genealogy which they characterize as cultivating “a *bias to impurity or fuzziness*; or if not a bias, then at least a *sensitivity* to that which doesn’t cohere; and, as part of this, [STS] has a high degree of tolerance of mess” (175). Syncretism names a way to understand the way that different ways of being, traditions, priorities, and practices come to get on together—syncretisms are, for them, necessary to thinking about all practices in the real world, because practices always manage constitutive noncoherence—the fact that the world is made up of things that seem to hang together but that require work to hold in place. In chapter 5, I explore further implications of the normative conclusions they offer; for now, I affirm the possibility that attention to the various modes of syncretism by which noncoherence is lived “will be useful in a world in which it appears that the will to purity—and the conditions of possibility for

purity—are in decline” (177). The stakes of purity discourses, and the theoretical conviction that things are more coherent than they actually are, remain significant, even so.

It is commonplace now to understand the idea of natural purity as a racialized concept, particularly if we trace debates about the nature of human races back to questions that animated and justified the Atlantic slave trade—questions of monogenesis or polygenesis. These questions are of whether humans all descend from a single gene line (in which case some of us are less pure expressions of the line than others) or from many origins (in which case some of us may be made by nature for enslavement). As many philosophers have articulated, Kant’s lectures on anthropology and race laid out one founding expression of racialization as centrally a project of purity, and to the extent that they forward a conception of pure reason as accessible only to the white race, they also delimit a racialized understanding of not only personhood but also rationality, descent, and the conditions for counting as human (Bernasconi 2000; Mills 1998; Eze 1997). But the formulation of racialization can be read, following Denise Ferreira Da Silva’s generative work, in part through the tools (the “knowledge arsenal”) used to measure the racial, which, as she writes, “institutes the global as an ontoepistemological context—a productive and violent gesture necessary to sustain the post-Enlightenment version of the Subject as the sole determined thing” (Silva 2007, xiii). As Alexander Weheliye argues, in line with Da Silva’s point, “There can be no absolute biological substance, because in the history of modernity this field always already appears in the form of racializing assemblages” (Weheliye 2014, 65). Markers of racial purity are in turn entangled and coconstituted with biopolitical practices aiming to reduce or eliminate disability, poverty, and queerness at the population level.

To be against purity is, again, not to be for pollution, harm, sickness, or premature death. It is to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous. With and following María Lugones, I am “firmly planted against the logic of boundedness.” I follow her argument “for intercommunalism from the midst of impure subjects, negotiating life transgressing the categorical understandings of a logic of binaries that produces hard-edged, ossified, exclusive groups” (Lugones 2003, 35). Lugones critiques a metaphysics of purity, understood as separability, fragmentation, and standing outside culture and situatedness. The Man of purity, as a figure, “shuns

impurity, ambiguity, multiplicity as they threaten his own fiction. The enormity of the threat keeps him from understanding it. So, the lover of purity remains ignorant of his own impurity, and thus the threat of all impurity remains significantly uncontaminated” (132). The metaphysics of purity is necessarily a fragile fiction, a conceit under constant but disavowed threat—to affirm a commitment to purity is in one move to glance at the entanglement and coconstitution, the impurity, of everything and to pretend that things are separate and unconnected. Kim Tallbear’s important critique of the politics of DNA testing as a guarantor of Native American identity begins from the claim that “of course, mixing is predicated on the notion of purity. The historical constitution of continental spaces and concomitant grouping of humans into ‘races’ is the macro frame of reference for the human-genome-diversity researcher” (TallBear 2013, 5). Speaking of queer disability food politics but in a mode that we could take up more broadly, Kim Q. Hall argues instead for a “metaphysics of compost” since “there are no pure bodies, no bodies with impermeable borders. Because reality is not composed of fixed, mutually exclusive, or pure bodies, a metaphysics of compost is more conducive to food politics that remains accountable to real bodies and real foods/relationships” (Hall 2014, 179). As I’ll argue in this book, a great deal of harm is done based on a metaphysics of purity; since it is false and because it is harmful, we do better to pursue metaphysics that do not aim to preserve fictions of integrity.

The Plan of the Book

This book is organized around a predictable narrative line, tracing linear time—starting from the past, looking at the present, imagining the future. But time here is, as I hope to show, much less linear than this line seems to allow. The past involves the present and the future, the present entangles the past and outlines what is to come, bringing the future into the past, and the future rests on a situated past and can only “happen” in the present; tense intermingles. Part I, “Reckoning with a Fraught Past,” focuses on disavowed or difficult histories. The central question I pose in this section is: What does it mean to think about those histories that are difficult to remember well—either because the present in some way requires erasing what happened in the past or because particular past events have become so taken-for-granted that it is hard to imagine that the world was once different, and how. This first part has two chapters. Because where we live and how we came to be