How Alexis Shotwell Changed My Life: On Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*

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Let me tell you how Alexis Shotwell changed my life.

I first met Alexis at a *Canadian Society for Women in Philosophy* conference in 2008. The theme for that year was: “Reason, Activism, and Change.” At the time, I would not have recognized myself in any of these big words, with the possible exception of “change.” I had just moved to the United States, and my research was taking some unexpected turns. Before moving to Nashville, I wrote about babies, animals, and women. After the move, I became obsessed with questions of torture, slavery, racism, and shame—but I didn’t yet know how to write about these questions, or even how to think about them. Frustrated with my own inability to work through these issues in my accustomed ways—by reading books (alone), thinking about them (alone), scribbling a bunch of notes (alone), and trying (alone) to pull it all together into a coherent essay—I was starting to become cynical about what philosophy could do, and what I could do with philosophy, to address the questions that I felt *in my bones* like a dull ache that made everything else just a little bit more difficult.

To be honest, I don’t recall the details of the paper that Alexis presented at CSWIP that year, although a bit of sleuthing tells me that the topic was sensuous knowledge, and so it likely forms part of this book. What I do remember is the conversation we had about shame, which

continued over email, and which allowed me to catch a sneak preview of chapter 4, which is now called “Negative Affect and Whiteness,” but was then called, more provocatively, “Shaming Whiteness.” In the chapter, Alexis makes a compelling case for the productive and transformative power of shame as a personal and political affect. In conversation with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sandra Bartky, Naomi Zack, and others, Alexis develops an account of shame as a relational affect which, although “negative” to the extent that it expresses a difficult, painful, and even unbearable relation to others, also (perhaps for this very reason) plays a productive role in the constitution of identity-in-relation. Shame is, in Alexis’s words, “an expression of pained feeling-with and a failure of solidarity” (95). As such, it may be the predominant affect of whiteness, particularly in its “liberal” forms as an unwilling, but defeatist complicity in structural racism. Alexis argues that, although there are many good reasons to be critical of white shame as a substitute, or even a strategy, for anti-racist action, there is something important to be learned from the feeling of shame, and even from the difficulty of confronting, understanding and working through one’s own shame.

Because just as shame expresses the failure of solidarity, it also expresses the urgency of enacting solidarity as a way of transforming shame into mutual empowerment and joy. This is not a simple matter of changing your mind or “turning a frown upside down.” What Alexis makes clear, both in this chapter and in the rest of the book, is that feelings such as shame and joy are not just accessories for the self; they are not just things that we “have” or ornaments that add colour to our experience of the world. Rather, feelings are one of several ways of knowing the world sensuously, before or beyond propositional knowledge. They are a way of knowing that resides *in our bones*, and as such they are both *material* or embodied, and also sites of *mattering*, of signification and value.

So how did all of this change my life? In the four years that I have known her, Alexis has become for me a model of how to trust the feelings that preoccupy you, to face them with as much honesty as you can muster, no matter how painful, embarrassing, or annoying they may be, and to engage with these feelings philosophically, politically and personally. Take, for example, the final chapter of *Knowing Otherwise*, “A Knowing that Resided in my Bones.” In this chapter, Alexis gathers together lines of argumentation and exploration from previous chapters: the epistemology of implicit understanding, the politics of solidarity and social movements, the concreteness of intersectional identities, the aesthetics and erotics of imagining and desiring social transformation, and the everyday lived experience of bodies that feel suffering and joy, that dance and limp and ride bicycles. The specific “archive” of this chapter (a word that Alexis taught me to say) ranges from Foucault and Avery Gordon to Eli Clare, Vivian Namaste, and the trans activism of Sylvia Rivera. Alexis is careful to situate her own embodied voice, and her own theoretical and political desires, in relation to the trans narratives, events, and ongoing social movements with which she engages—not as colourful “examples” to embellish her own arguments, but as interlocutors to be engaged with respectful attention. She writes:

It is too easy to mine trans stories, in particular, to back up academic points. I am leery of participating in the ongoing hip academic concern with trans issues, narratives, and (sometimes) actual people. I am not trans, and I am conscious of some of the dangers associated with writing about trans memoirs in support of an argument about sensuous knowledge. No number of trans friends and lovers can mitigate those dangers. But it is important that how I think about sensuousness, and a reason that it is a compelling analytic category for me, is a result of reading and talking to trans writers and activists. I mean what examples and analysis I offer as a form of respect. (128)

This careful, honest, and—I dare say—*unashamed* examination of the embodied, social situation of her own discourse makes Alexis’s work a compelling model for anyone who is committed to the possibility of facilitating and sustaining mutually-enriching conversations between

philosophers and activists. As a model, this work does not leave behind the specificity of its “home” conversation with trans writers and activists in particular; rather, the model travels, while leaving traces, as what Alexis calls “a resource for change, a site of praxis, an unspeakable but deeply political social and ethical mode of being” (151).

This is how Alexis changed my life. My conversations with Alexis and her work have opened up for me a new way of *doing philosophy*, not just as a solitary theoretical meditation, nor as a praxis opposed to theory, but as a practice of sensuous knowledge and action in concert with others. Without having to leave behind the babies, animals, and women of my previous work, I feel inspired and provoked by Alexis’s work to engage with the issues raised by torture, slavery, and prisons, and some of the people most deeply affected by them, in a way that both admits my complicity in these sites of oppression, and also engages with others with respectful attention, in an effort to think and act our way through the potential impasses of shame and its disavowal. If there is any hope for us in this crazy world, then surely it is in “knowing otherwise.”

Works Cited

Shotwell, Alexis. *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011.