A Story to Make You Sad: On Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*

BETTINA BERGO

In 1892, when the Jewish sociologist Max Nordau published his work *Entartung*, a study on “the dusk of the nations” that passed through “the psychology of ego-mania,” “Parnassians and Diabolists,” “decadence and esthetes,” he was seeking “to create better conditions for the human organism” by teaching it a different approach to pleasure within the framework of evolution (xvii). In 1897, the physician and student of criminality and anti-Semitism, Cesare Lombroso, published his chef-d’oeuvre *Genio e degenerazione*. At the same time, in 1896, Magnus Hirschfeld published his *Sappho und Sokrates* about masculinity and femininity.¹ He would found the *Archiv fur Sexualforschung*, which lasted thirty years, until the Nazis destroyed it. The book burnings captured on cellulose were, as we know, the destruction of Hirschfeld’s vast library. In 1903, Hirschfeld published the definitive investigation into male homosexuality, *Der uranische Mensch (The Uranian Person)*. In the same year, Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character* appeared, arguing for a thesis largely received from Hirschfeld, arguing on the basis of the embryology and zoology of the time that sexuation could not be limited to the genitals. Rather, sexuation occurred at the cellular level, in some material that remained mysterious to us—related to the observed coloured bodies within the nucleus. As a result of this, every cell was a blending not of two bonded strands of DNA, but of two physico-chemical elements of sexuation. This meant that every living organism was a republic; the republic was not composed

of two sexes, but of a spectrum of sexuation. What one became socially, as far as identity was concerned, was a matter of socialization and the medical gaze, cast initially upon the genitals.

Sexuality—its meaning, its origin, its relation to genetic degeneration and criminality, indeed its fundamental relationship to the most vilified minority in Europe at that time, Jews—was the decisive question of the *belle époque*. It was also the most frightening, and elicited the most violent responses. Weininger's book was a plea for four things: 1) the intrinsic intersexuation of every living being; 2) further research into the dynamics of sexual attraction and orientation based on the calculation of M or W factors in a body (*Mannlich* and *Weiblich*, male or female); 3) for understanding Jews as a group of people possessed of a larger quantity of femininity in their genes and geniuses as select individuals possessed of greater quantities of masculinity; 4) and finally, a plea to German-speaking intellectuals to espouse an ethos that combined Nietzscheanism and Kantism in the form of self-overcoming and in the refusal to treat women as sexual objects or implements. In 1905, socialist feminist Rosa Mayreder published her *Zur Kritik der Weiblichkeit (Toward a Critique of Femininity)*, a critical response to Weininger. The feminist movement at the time, in Germany as in the United States, was either socialist-syndicalist or it was a *Schutz der Mutterrecht*. Feminism as such, like the homosexual movement, was coming into its own, fraught with opposition, and opposed on all fronts from philosophy to pseudoscience.

Weininger never read Mayreder. He had committed suicide in 1903, shooting himself in the chest in the hotel where Beethoven died. His book was a hybrid of extensive cytology, evolutionism, and zoology, married to a philosophical framework that synthesized Nietzsche, Kant, and Schelling (particularly the latter's treatise on human freedom). The two parts did not go together, because, as George Canguilhem argued about the quest to define pathology relative

to a unitary static standard of normalcy, Weininger defined the poles of the masculine and the feminine—between which all of us are situated—in Idealistic terms. Predictably, or tragically, the masculine was aligned with activity, positivity, and given the valence of one: unity, singularity. The feminine was aligned with inactivity, but also *Kuppelei*, a curious German word hovering between copulation and coupling, the “-ei” being pejorative. The female was passive, but the female was *eros*, in a relational sense; that is, she came into her function of *Kuppelei* under the masculine gaze, without which she was essentially nothing. Upon his suicide, the book flew off the shelves. It influenced Wittgenstein, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Heinrich Boll, and a host of others. Karl Kraus, the editor of *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*), defended it for years, against Freud and against other German intellectuals. Kraus is the satirist of whom Adorno said that we are wrong not to study his monumental oeuvre, and *Die Fackel* was printed from the late 1890s until Hitler’s election in 1933. Kraus defended Weininger because he believed the fundamental thesis of the multiple sexuation of the body. He defended him against the more traditionalist, *Biedermeyer* theses on sexuality in Freudianism.

In 1906, Paul Julius Möbius published a work in neuropsychiatry titled *Über den physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes* (*The Physiological Feeble-Mindedness of the Female*). In France, from 1880 to the turn of the century, the extraordinary Jean-Martin Charcot was carrying on his practice in neurology at the *Salpêtrière*, effecting a triage between epileptics and epileptoid hysteria, looking ongoingly for a physiological seat in the brain for hysteria, but arguing all the while that hysteria was the result of physiological degeneration and a mysterious “*chose sexuelle*.” Of course, Charcot was Freud’s teacher, along with Wilhelm Fliess, the Berlin ear, nose and throat doctor who worked out a calculation of periodicity in man as a parallel to feminine hormonal cycles.

This is a long and terrible time over which something like a wave of forgetfulness has washed. No doubt because it came to a screeching halt, for better or for worse, with the rise of Fascism in France, Italy, Germany, and Austria, a political movement that drew significant energy from persons nostalgic for an age of clarity in which hierarchy and binaries were left undisturbed. Very good work has been done in the past 30 years on the logic of the *fin-de-siècle*. What I am emphasizing here is firstly how, as the very question of sex, reproduction, and sexuation was being brought to light, it was from the outset tied to anti-Semitism, colonialist racism, and theories of hereditary degeneration as leading to delinquency and criminality. It is the signal contribution of Alexis Shotwell's book that she interrogates the question of sex and sexuation in many of its intersections, from gender to race to inter-gender. We can see, from the "neuroscience" of the time—much more clearly than we can see today—how cultural values and implicit knowledge shaped and oriented research like that of Nordau, Möbius, and Lombroso. But the researchers were so much more numerous. And in a sense, Freud quite deliberately held himself apart, because he recognized in theories of degeneration, *Entartung*, for *Judenhass*. Kraus held himself apart, on the basis of his opposition to all psychiatric attempts to determine, diagnose, or treat "sexual dysfunction." I am arguing, in unmitigated homage to Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise*, that the intersection of discourses of race, class, ethnicity, and gender represents one of the most dangerous points of intervention into philosophical and scientific discourse. She has taken up that challenge and, given the courage and uncompromising quality of her arguments, I can only hope that her work will find an echo in philosophy and in scientific discourses less naïve than that of Deborah Rudacille's *The Riddle of Gender*.

I had originally written an appreciative study that stayed closer to the book, in which I recalled Shotwell's four domains of implicit understanding: "foundationally non-propositional

knowledge, embodied understanding, potentially propositional knowledge currently held as tacit or distal, and affective or emotional knowledge” (Shotwell 48). I praised her extraordinary synthesis of Hubert Dreyfus, Michael Polanyi, Hans Georg Gadamer, Richard Shusterman and Pierre Bourdieu, and I examined the way in which art and literature allowed us to extend Susan Babbitt’s “dreaming different futures and worlds.” I suggested that Shotwell’s exploration of the implicit understanding sustaining and structuring racist forms of common sense, and feeding what she calls (following Himani Bannerji) “epistemologies of ignorance” (31), would be well served by Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s investigations into embodied passive syntheses, memory, and the multiform phenomena of association and intersubjectivity. But rather than going in that direction, I chose to review how it is that work being done today is indebted to, yet very different from, the anguished investigations of the turn of the century into sexuality and civilizational decline. The two periods cannot and should not be amalgamated, and we must hope, faintly, that the openness, contestation, and destabilization in art, literature, and philosophy does not lead to a call for a political crackdown comparable to that of the 1930s. But we must draw courage also, I think, to pursue these questions knowing that anti-racism, anti-queer phobia, and feminism were born together, if not always seeing eye to eye, and that for a brief moment, debates in Europe ventured into metaphoric uncharted waters, before being silenced by nostalgia, fear, and shame misunderstood.

Notes

¹ The text *Sappho und Sokrates: Wie erklärt sich die Liebe der Männer und Frauen zu Personen des eigenen Geschlechts* (*Sappho and Socrates: How is the Love of Men and Women toward Persons of the Same Sex to be Explained*)? was originally published under the name of Theodor Ramien.

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Note: The number of works mentioned as part of this historical survey is too great to be cited in a review essay. I will therefore cite only the ones that played a role in the arguments I developed.

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