Sensuousness and Social Change

An Encounter with:

Alexis Shotwell. *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*.
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Sensuous knowledge is precondition, ingredient, and result of a mutual transformation of the self and social worlds (Shotwell 126).

Epistemology is a broad field, including analytic, naturalized, feminist, and other formulations, and overlapping with social, political, and moral philosophy, philosophies of language, science, medicine, and cognitive science. It is broad enough to allow those who write in one field to remain unaware of claims made in others. For this reason, questions historically neglected in philosophical epistemology can remain underexplored for much longer than they should, when only a few scholars see the need to pursue them. The question of how to characterize the non-articulated, non-propositional knowledge which shapes our political lives and motivates political action is one example of such a neglected area. Such neglect is pernicious when it means that more formulated aspects of knowledge, like the ways in which agents form, articulate, and debate beliefs about how we ought to act, become dominant, seeming like the only or most relevant aspects of knowledge for moral and political action. Of course we do form, articulate, and debate beliefs about how we ought to act, and doing so can be necessary for individual and joint moral education and action. But we are also, for example, regularly

disturbed to find ourselves, even when motivated to act well against racist injustice, re-embodying racist norms in ways that express and perpetuate implicit rather than explicit understandings of whites as superior to other racial groups. It seems some kinds of racist knowledge are explicit and can be confronted and uprooted explicitly. But other kinds of racist knowledge are woven and knotted into the ways we act without thinking and into the understandings that go without saying. These kinds of knowledge may persist even in the face of confrontations with statements of fact or new suggestions for belief.

In *Knowing Otherwise*, Alexis Shotwell intervenes at the overlap of epistemology and social, political, moral, and anti-oppression philosophy to present a sustained consideration of how implicit understanding shapes possibilities for both oppressing and acting against oppression. With the goal of creating an account of non-propositional knowledge for social movements to work alongside other accounts of more speakable forms of knowing, she notes that, “[i]f propositionality is the only option deemed worthy of consideration in thinking about ... systems of power, then deeply significant aspects of people’s experience, potentially liberatory spaces, and key parts of gender and racial formation are passed over in silence” (Shotwell 46). The book is quickly striking in two senses.

First, it stands out for its adamant awareness of claims in a remarkable array of fields of scholarship, within epistemology and without. It bridges and brings into conversation theorists across diverse traditions: Robert Audi, Tina Chanter, Wahneema Lubiano, Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, Hans-Georg Gadamer, John Searle, Susan Babbitt, Hubert Dreyfus, Karl Polanyi, Sue Campbell, Deborah Gould, Audre Lorde, Richard Shusterman, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Charles Mills, Nancy Tuana, Leslie Feinberg, Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse, Avery Gordon, Friedrich von Schiller, Immanuel Kant, Eve Sedgwick, Naomi Zack, Sandra Bartky,

Minnie Bruce Pratt, Eli Clare, Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, Jay Prosser, Kate Bornstein, Susan Stryker, Viviane Namaste, and others. The style of the text is natural and intellectually honest as Shotwell starts conversations among these diverse thinkers, then shows how such conversations helped generate her analysis. So the arguments grow out of multiple, often unexpected archives rather than springing in full form from any one. One of the accomplishments of the book will be in granting theorists and moral, social, and political philosophers not positioned as epistemologists more access to questions of how knowledge conditions, motivates, and sustains action toward justice.

Second, the book is striking for the originality and challenge of its claims. Shotwell's project is to argue that "various forms of knowing otherwise than propositionally are vital to current possibilities for flourishing, expressing dignity, and acting ... they are crucial to personal and political transformation" (ix). Her aim is to clarify forms of sensuous knowing as until now undertheorized in philosophy, including where they are deeply relevant, in philosophical accounts of the relation between knowledge and social change. As she puts it:

Without being able to think and talk, to feel and move through various forms of implicit understanding, we are not able to work explicitly with and on our implicit, affective, tacit, and embodied experience of the world. If such work is central to the political transformations individuals experience, it is equally central to broader political change. (Shotwell xxi)

Shotwell organizes the analysis around two parts: first, an outline and clarification of implicit knowledge through epistemology, theories of common sense, and aesthetics; and second, an application of this analysis to questions of social transformation, in contexts of racist, sexist, and transgender-phobic injustice.

To begin, Shotwell draws on epistemologists and theorists of understanding to clarify how implicit knowledge has so far been positioned and described in philosophy. Noting the

connection others often draw between implicit knowledge and Searle's conception of the "Background" (i.e., capacities, dispositions, and know-how that make it possible to express propositional knowledge), Shotwell troubles Searle's (and others') contentedness with broadstrokes over this complex part of knowing. Turning to Dreyfus and Polanyi, she endorses connections of implicit understanding to practical knowledge, and to a knowledge that exceeds and pre-conditions what can be said, but aims to carve more space than either Dreyfus or Polanyi does for theorizing the *experience of implicit knowledge* itself, focusing on the somatic more than they have. Drawing out aspects of Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, Gadamer's understanding of prejudice, and Wittgenstein's concept of hinge propositions, Shotwell considers the realm of potentially propositional but currently unspeakable forms of knowledge. And working finally from philosophers of emotion Gould and Campbell, she highlights the complexity of the expressive resources needed for making public and political points of contact out of heterodox feelings. Shotwell highlights Lorde's conceptions of the erotic and poetry, through which she says: "Lorde sets out a politically motivated picture of the relationships among our skills, *habitus*, currently unspoken knowledge, and affective understanding" (28). This mapping introduces the intricacy, wide-referencing, and border-crossing character of Shotwell's arguments throughout the text.

In chapter two, Shotwell turns to an examination of conceptions of race as implicit knowledge, often in the form of Gramscian common sense, being "incoherent, inconsequential, and in conformity with the social and cultural position of the masses," and involving "unarticulated beliefs, feelings, *habitus*, inclinations, attitudes, emotions, first-pass responses, and so on" (33; 32). Gramsci gives grounds for seeing our notions of race as commonsensical—pervasive and not readily altered through logical reasoning. Shotwell connects this to recent

work in the epistemology of ignorance, reading common sense as reflecting what it serves dominant groups well to know, and as obscuring whatever knowledge would threaten their positions, if it became common sense. Common sense is grounded in and enforced by culture, both in the state-regulated realm and in the popular realms of media and advertising, but (luckily) it is not uniform. Because there are different forms of common sense, there is the potential for movement from more to less harmful ones.

In chapter three, Shotwell grounds sensuous understanding for political transformation in the history of aesthetics, linking Gordon, Marcuse, and Marx to surface the liberatory power of sensuous experience from another direction. Making *The Aesthetic Dimension* accessible, Shotwell's reading of Marcuse's three characteristics of the aesthetic form makes clear their political potential to shift social realities (53) and to counter the non-transformative ease of nostalgia (57). She then reads Schiller for his understanding of the aesthetic condition as involving more connection than conflict between sensual and reasoned knowledge in play. Shotwell seems to suggest that, taken together, Marcuse's account of the aesthetic as struggle for political transformation and Schiller's recognition of sensuous knowledge as integrating with propositional knowledge provide a way of seeing sensuous knowledge as political catalyst. She concludes that "the field of aesthetics offers a multi-layered, playful, sensuous account of the experience and transformation of implicit understanding" (Shotwell 69-70).

Chapter four begins the second half of the book, focused on starting with concrete contexts of social struggle against race- and gender-based injustices, and here Shotwell makes a point in conversation with various strands of current feminist and politically-toned moral psychology, about the political promise and problems with white guilt and shame. Shotwell argues that guilt and shame form two negative affects that can be felt by white-identified

individuals as beneficiaries of ongoing racism. Whereas Shotwell finds compelling criticisms of guilt in antiracist contexts for being immobilizing, individualizing, and/or reassuring of white people in the face of our racist actions and complicity, shame is seen as having the potential to “make unspeakable things viscerally present—things that seem too horrible to talk about or that are so assumed that they ‘go without saying’” (77). Shame has the power to foreground the broad social existence of racist norms, to create feelings which are in relation to others rather than isolating (i.e., shame is always a relational feeling), to highlight that racism will not be eradicated by each racist person learning to simply think and behave better, and to disrupt rather than maintain habitual action in the moment. That is, shame highlights racism’s power structures, racists’ relationality, and the non-voluntarism of anti-racist action, while also providing actual breaks in social interaction to allow for shifts toward less racist modes.

In chapter five, Shotwell builds on the account of the potential promise of shame in providing a sustained focus on sensuous knowledge from the perspectives of activists working to create conditions of solidarity, especially around white anti-racist projects—a context where, if diversity is to be maintained among the group of people working together for a joint cause, there may often be moments of confrontation, shame, and discomfort. As in the example of Pratt, the need to confront one’s own history when confronting a harmful system with other activists can unearth various forms of implicit knowledge. Critically reading Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Shotwell argues for the need to move past an “expanded us” sense of solidarity to a model based on “feeling-with that maintains distance,” which is to say, to some extent on sympathy in Bartky’s terms: “The idea here is that building solidarities across lines of politically demarcated difference requires a special framework of understanding ... This kind of understanding of another’s circumstance—this kind of sympathy—might be the grounds for

responsible solidarity” (Shotwell 110). Such solidarity is likely to involve some forms of negative affect, including shame, as part of the ways that activists come to know better. As Shotwell puts it, “Negative affect might signal success in attempting solidarity rather than its failure ... the distance and difference felt through affects like shame, failure, misunderstanding, anger, and so on, paired with political commitments to solidarity work, might defuse the dominative habits expressed through ascribing sameness and empathetic identification” (123). At this point, we might ask about the extent to which sensuous knowledge can not only pair with but also motivate the political commitments in the first place, and particularly those political commitments which do not stem from our own embodied needs or the needs of those we are close enough to interact with in daily lives.

In the final chapter, Shotwell considers sensuous knowledge in the context of transgender politics and in light of work on the part of trans authors and activists towards better conditions for trans individuals to flourish. In response to the problem of social worlds in which trans people are, through multiple forms of violence and hatred, denied possibilities for feeling comfort in their bodies, she claims that a transformation of the world is required in order to make living as trans more possible. Offering a careful and close reading of Clare’s *Exile and Pride*, she claims, “Trans stories offer a lodestone for some ways of being where, in order to reclaim a body, the world has to change—and where in order to change the world one has to complexly incorporate a body” (Shotwell 143). Here, Shotwell points toward the complex relation of sensuous knowledge and social movements—how such knowledge can be, as in the quote we began with—“precondition, ingredient, and result of a mutual transformation of the self and social worlds” (Shotwell 126). Sensuous knowledge, alongside other forms of knowledge, is a condition of selves and our relations in social worlds; we see it as ingredient in social change in

the case of trans activists and those working with them, who know sensuously that the world must change if it is to become liveable; and we see it as result of such transformations in the memoirs of Pratt, Lorde, Feinberg, and others.

So to know otherwise in movements for social change will mean to know in a way which involves more than those forms of knowing that can be articulated, and more vibrantly involving affect and somatic experience. It will also mean to know with and about others in ways distinct from knowing *as* them, to know in a way which can feel bad, including shameful, without collapsing us into the despairing or arrogant sense that we are alone in such knowledge or in the call to act, and without deceiving us into the sense that we can simply will ourselves to know in less racist, less trans-phobic, or less oppressive ways.