

---

# Implicit Understanding and Social Ontologies: A Response to Alexis Shotwell's *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*

ANNA MUDDE

---

*... if I think someone has acted in a racist, transphobic, or classist way, and I call on them to change their actions, I am not supposing that all they need is more or different information. Rather, I am calling for a shift in how they move through the world—their inarticulate or unspoken, dynamic, generative framework of understanding. (Shotwell 110)*

*Knowing Otherwise* is a book that makes me want to tell stories, to forego traditional academic forms of expression in favour of the anecdotal, to move to the terrain of the partially inarticulate and ambiguous, to experiences best described situationally, as stories. Shotwell articulates this terrain of experience, which is both inextricable from my life—and not only mine—and woefully undertheorized (though, as she shows, not so woefully as I might have thought). Instead of reverting to anecdotes, I will consider the importance of what Shotwell is calling “implicit understanding” for the area of thinking I am calling social ontologies. And yet, reading this book strengthens, in palpable ways, my conviction that the “stories” we see told (and tell) in theory are also full of implicit understanding; the unspoken always and necessarily exceeds what can be said. The comments that follow reflect my attempt to think both about social ontologies and in solidarity with Shotwell’s work. I do this by focusing on parts of her theorization of sensuousness.

By social ontologies, I have in mind the processes through which human knowers find and give meaning to the world, as well as the study or interrogation of those processes. If the world is not immediately intelligible to us, despite the often- unquestionable experiences that it is, then that suggests a sophisticated and implicit set of categories and classes, as well as finely tuned conceptual apparatuses or instruments for categorizing and classifying the “stuff” around us: human beings *make* sense of a *real* world.

The sort of ontology I have in mind is inescapably social because ontologies shape how we deal with the world, which is necessarily of interest to others. The project of social ontology is thus ethically implicated simply by being about being. Yet, when ontologies deal directly with *human* being, as they do when we think about race (or “race”) and gender (or “gender”), their moral implications are especially immediate, and quickly weighty. How I make sense of, or how I “see” things in the world, matters, not (only) because you might care about what I think, but because what I think—how I *am*—allows the world to “world” in some (material and discursive) ways and not others. The realm of social ontology is a space for thinking about what is and about how individuals and groups make sense of what is—often implicitly, and always both necessarily and contingently.

*Knowing Otherwise* offers essential openings for thinking about social ontologies. And Shotwell highlights some important problems for thinking ontologically about the social and for thinking in social, historical, material terms about the ontological. Her work illuminates with depth and clarity both the necessity and contingency (the what is and what has become) of frameworks in human experience; she argues convincingly that such frameworks are evinced precisely in the experiences of understanding that “sometimes [call] for a political transformation” (146). We need, then, to think the ontological, the epistemological, and the

anthropological together, and the seriousness with which Shotwell reads the sensuous offers a remarkable opportunity for thinking about how human beings are intimately and necessarily caught up in materiality, in the objective world (in Marx's sense), and with the bodies and behaviours of others—that is, for thinking about the ontological weight of experience.

Following Teresa de Lauretis, Shotwell describes experience as “the engagement with the frameworks that attend and make salient various facts and events in the world” (140). I think that large parts of those frameworks are comprised of what we might call our background, or implicit, ontologies, our ways of getting around in the world, our *second* “natures”—if “nature” can ever be the right word. Ontologies, or frameworks, are second in the sense of being acquired; knowers must, in Donna Haraway's sense, “learn how to see” (Haraway 190). Read this way, ontologies are precisely “ways of seeing” *and then/thus being* in the world, and can be either salient through claim-making or propositionally inchoate, “in the bones” (riffing on Shotwell's use of Eli Clare's expression). Ontologies are apparatuses of finding and giving meaning. And they are caught up in, responsive to, a real world.

Showing the simultaneous confluences and possible ruptures of the relationship between “common sense” and the sensuous experiences of human life, Shotwell offers an important and currently undertheorized way of thinking about what is, and indeed, about being in the world. Drawing from and pushing beyond the Gramscian injunction to form a “coherent unity” (Gramsci, cited by Shotwell 34) out of the familiar and unquestioned assumptions of “common sense,” in Chapter Three of *Knowing Otherwise*, called “An Aesthetics of Sensuousness,” Shotwell takes seriously the sensuous as the terrain of human experiences. Instead of insisting that social transformation be a matter of subjecting the familiar to rational scrutiny—as philosophers will so often insist we can do (i.e., the *power* of argument)—Shotwell suggests that

if what is at the root of social change is often a particular sort of personal and collective understanding, then it is by making spaces for that understanding that we can challenge familiar if harmful, degrading, and disempowering frameworks of common sense. While Gramsci argues that one can bring the propositions of common sense to the forefront of one's own knowing, to know and articulate what one "really is," Shotwell illustrates through her analyses of raced and gendered common sense and of shame (to which I will return) that there must always be a kind of framework preceding such articulation, a way of piecing together a "coherent whole" of our knowing. Implicit understanding, as she articulates it, does much of this work. But it is also what can lead to ruptures of coherence, ruptures of intelligibility, and implicit understanding often retains the feature of unspeakability, and, perhaps, of incoherence. If I understand her, implicit understanding is often at the root of our propositional capacities for, among other things, the "but/and," and thus for political and social (that is, ontological) transformation.

Shotwell notices that some political and social theorists, like Marx and Marcuse, turn to aesthetics, finding that doing so offers them "a rich account of the political valence of implicit understanding," the epistemic dimensions of aesthetic experience (49). The ontological structures of works of art, we might say, remind us of the possibilities for thinking things otherwise, of *seeing* otherwise, and thus the possibilities of knowing otherwise, of having different ontologies, as much as they remind us of the understanding that is unspeakable. In this context, then, Shotwell's invocation of Audre Lorde's work on community, difference, and poetry, which can be both utterly expressive and utterly non-propositional, seems to enliven an interesting possibility for crafting a methodology that can, for instance, "take whiteness as its object without moving to formulaic white guilt, imperialist empathy, or the fantasy of being not really white" (119), a methodology for reading ourselves as situated by and in social ontologies. This is a

possibility of *poiesis*, as human ways of expressing understanding of how the world is (and can be) livable, as ways of “moving through the world,” going back to Shotwell’s words with which I began.

To be in the world, to move through it in some ways and not others, is precisely a feature of our unspoken, and perhaps unspeakable, understanding(s). Yet I also wonder about the promise of thinking of (non-propositional) articulation in our movements through the world: those movements reveal ways of seeing, our implicit understandings, and perhaps the contingencies of those movements, in extra-linguistic ways. To move through the world, to negotiate it, is to understand it in certain ways, perhaps deep in our bones; it is to categorize the things one encounters and to understand (in contingent and acquired ways) how to deal with or treat them. I am suggesting that doing is inherently a kind of *poiesis*, a kind of craft or technology, that doing expresses ontologies which are inherently social by being part of the objective world through our actions, words, and ways of being. I am suggesting, perhaps with Lorde, that reading those poetics between and among us might be one way to read our differences of implicit understanding to one another, but also, and so importantly for Shotwell’s project, to find processes of objective “mutual evaluation,” where objectivity is a matter of the good *we can be* to one another (127-8).

There is space for such evaluation since the ontologies with which we move through the world, our poetics, are not simply different from one another. Ontologies exceed our mental world and extend, through our sensuous access to the world, to the others in it. Ontologies of slavery, for instance, see some bodies as machinery; when those ontologies have sway, they make some bodies into machines, make them comport in particular ways, producing a world in which some bodies are (akin to) machinery. The most worrisome ontologies of transphobia do

not allow for the existence of trans people at all: the trans person, in a very real way, *is* not in the world for the person who experiences transphobia. One's particular ontology can account for one's particular experiences of the world, but it also allows the world to "world," that is, in some ways and not others, at some points and not others.

Similarly, the *poiesis* I am imagining is very much a kind of praxis, a productive nexus of intimate relations between the world and oneself. And to be sensitive to such relations is to take a particular attitude about solidarity and to make a particular commitment to trying, with others: it is difficult to build solidarities with people who *are* some ways in the world, ways that are not good to oneself or to others. Sometimes, one's own ways are those "not good" ways, which can produce, using Elspeth Probyn's term, "white-hot shame" (Probyn 71). To craft a methodology of poetic analysis, here, is then to root oneself onto a particular ontological terrain, to take a particular stance toward oneself and one's ways of being: it is to articulate, of one's actions, of one's behaviours and affects, "What or who [one] was. (*And ... did not need to be. Yet, was, is.*)"<sup>1</sup> (Frankenberg, cited by Shotwell 89).

To begin the work of enacting solidarity—a central theme in *Knowing Otherwise*—is to be willing, to use Nancy Bauer's phrase, to risk letting others "teach me who I am" (Bauer 236)—letting others find and give me meaning. It is to open oneself to the explicit understanding(s) of others and to acknowledge that one is the product of the implicit understanding(s) of others. And it is, especially when one is situated in a relation of identifiable social power, to open oneself to the possibility of shame, or to be willing to admit it when it happens. It is, I think, to take shame seriously, but also to take seriously the need for help in articulating that shame. Shotwell's careful consideration of shame as a sensuous signal of what is and what needs to change in the world—those structures, injustices, indignities, and pieces of

common sense that make ourselves as they currently are—shows both how powerful shame can be and how much we need solidarity with others to deal with the “what is” that shame highlights, expresses, poeticizes.

In addition to thinking-with Shotwell about the possibilities and promise of implicit understanding, I have also been positioning her work on a particular terrain of contemporary thinking (she gives an excellent account of how her thinking “fits” with and is part of a palimpsest of philosophical thinking). Yet I see this book as having strong ties to the history of Western philosophy. Her subject matter is the subject matter of philosophy in the traditional sense: that which is most familiar. She reminds me, and those who both do and want to know otherwise, that by paying attention to implicit understanding, to the processes of common sense, to that which is so familiar that it receives little notice or is disqualified from, inaccessible to, thought at all, we end up doing *philosophy*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is is underlined for emphasis in Showell’s quoted text, but not in Frankenberg’s original writing.

### Works Cited

Bauer, Nancy. *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Frankenberg, Ruth. “When We are Capable of Stopping We Begin to See: Being White, Seeing Whiteness.” *Names We Call Home: Autobiographies on Racial Identity*. Eds. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi. New York: Routledge, 1996. 3-17.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Probyn, Elspeth. *Blush: Faces of shame*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

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