
“I don’t know how else to put it ... I’ve just got a feeling”: A
commentary on Alexis Shotwell’s *Knowing Otherwise: Race,
Gender, and Implicit Understanding*

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*Ask the colonial ghosts if they live in your bones/
Ask the colonial ghosts if they live in your bones/
Ask the colonial ghosts what they took/
Ask the colonial ghosts what they took/
They’ll say you’re dancing on it/
Oh, you’re dancing on it. (Spoon)*

On the track “Come On Forest Fire,” singer-songwriter Rae Spoon urges the listener to “ask the colonial ghosts if they live in your bones,” and to ask them “what they took.” Such a call suggests that figures from our historical past dwell within our bodies, with or without our conscious awareness of them. It suggests that the bodily dispositions, intensities, and responses upon which we draw to make sense of our experiential worlds are, to varying degrees, structured according to historically and politically specific networks of power that are deeply gendered and racialized. In *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*, Alexis Shotwell answers Spoon’s call, and in doing so creates a space to begin working through the multiplicity of forces that compose bodily and cognitive intelligibilities.

Michel Foucault stated that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* sought, among other things, to battle fascism, not at the level of the macropolitical or structural, but “the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior” (Foucault xiv-xviii). In *Knowing*

Otherwise, Shotwell adds clarity and precision to this project by focusing on the epistemological and political salience of embodied “implicit understandings” that subsist beneath, below and alongside propositional, linguistic and representational modes of knowledge.

Among other things, what this text *does* is enact a line of inquiry working toward three aims. First, it seeks to address and alleviate the psychic and physical suffering that manifests from having one’s own implicit understandings clash with dominant ways of knowing, modes of being, and structures of feeling. Second, it provides tactics and techniques to unearth and render visible the fascisms in our bodies that reside below the threshold of conscious perception. Third, it creates a picture of the self that enables a way to see the overlapping and relational layers of the being that subsist beneath explicit expressions and formulations—a view of the self that has the potential to destabilize the notion of an essential, unified self.

As a reader with a keen interest in the intersections between affect, identity, and politics, I was struck by the resonance between the projects of Shotwell and Spinoza. For Spinoza, living an ethical life involved making a conscious effort to gain knowledge of our bodily capacities, which could be done through understanding the nature of the affects. He believed that through becoming more attuned to *why* we feel certain ways (and understanding the cause) rather than accepting *how* we feel as sufficient to draw conclusions about our world, we could not only better understand ourselves but also our relations and encounters with other human and nonhuman bodies. Where the two thinkers merge is in their desire to actualize bodily “thoughts” with the intent of better understanding the social antagonisms that are at the root of much human suffering. In *Knowing Otherwise*, Shotwell extends and makes explicit much that resides in the Spinozan project, by clarifying some of the gendered and racialized specificities in implicit

understanding, and the way these understandings inform how we make sense of, and can potentially transform, ourselves and our worlds.

Throughout *Knowing Otherwise*, Shotwell demonstrates the dynamism and mutually constitutive character of the four categories of implicit understanding she provides: skill based or learned knowledge; embodied knowledge; affective and emotional knowledge; and potentially propositional knowledge. Shotwell builds a convincing case that efforts to render nonpropositional knowledge visible can potentially expose the way gendered and racial formations are deeply embodied and entwined with historical systems of power. *Knowing Otherwise* points to the ways that most people are unprepared for such exposures of nonpropositional knowledge, which makes such moments highly precarious, and thus politically and personally relevant to the possibility for change. These moments of “rupture” or “breakdown” can *create* space for transformation. However, the same moments of breakdown can (and perhaps are more likely to) *block* attempts at transformation. The unpredictability of these affective “ruptures” makes these moments fragile and fraught with a political and ethical potential that can easily be missed or misunderstood due to the plethora of affects—shock, anxiety, discomfort, confusion, anger, and shame—that accompany them. Alternately, while unearthing potentially discriminatory knowledge in our bodies is vital to doing anti-oppression work and to political transformation at both the micro and macro levels, it is equally important to validate and acknowledge that the wisdom that resides “in our bones” can be our primary access to and resource for dreaming, thinking, knowing, and doing otherwise (especially for those whose bodies, minds, ways of feeling and knowing are rejected from, or clash violently with, dominant frameworks and existing social structures). For those whose energies are dedicated to social justice issues, Shotwell’s careful unpacking of what is implicit in thought and feeling

provides a much needed toolkit, as well as a vocabulary, to start thinking about how it is we can “push back on a weight of history” and start to better understand how histories of race, class, gender and ability are wrapped up in our ways of knowing in ways that have not yet been brought to conscious reflection or thought (Shotwell xiii).

What makes Shotwell’s work on implicit understanding stimulating is the way she maintains a productive tension between the individual and the social, and how this tension raises a series of questions surrounding individual agency. Pushing the idea of the relationship between the individual and the social further, one might ask if the categorical framework that Shotwell provides for thinking through the implicit understandings of individual bodies applies to social or political bodies? Putting Shotwell’s work on implicit understanding into conversation with someone like John Protevi (2009), who (following Deleuze) views the “body” in its broadest sense and calls attention to the affective patterns and triggers of the group or population, could likely illuminate much about the inextricable relationship between individual transformations and wider sociopolitical transformations.

The queer community can serve as an example of an existing sociopolitical “body” or entity with its own histories, and dynamic yet established patterns of feeling, knowing and sense-making. Like all bodies, it is in flux, is constantly redefining its boundaries and limits, and is vulnerable to other (social, political and cultural) bodies. How do the dominant affective narratives of pride and shame that circulate within and work to define the queer community enhance or diminish the possibilities of enacting solidarity with other groups and/or group subjects? In other words, if pride is an explicit or propositional way of knowing the queer community, what are the implicit understandings (embodied ways of knowing, “common sense,”

skills, potentially propositional knowledge) that subsist below, and nevertheless reinforce, how we know and feel pride? What is implicit in queer pride?

In Chapter 4, “Negative Affect And Whiteness,” Shotwell discusses the potential productivity of “bad feelings” such as white shame (and its related affects such as discomfort). This chapter is a careful and refreshing counterargument to the mainstream assumption that affects associated with negativity such as rage, frustration, grief, and shame are inherently divisive and/or destructive to efforts aimed at fostering political solidarity and working through difference. What is implicit in the assumption that white people “feeling bad” is the wrong way to go about achieving antiracist goals is the “common sense” conviction that positive or joyful affects (happiness, pride, excitement) are innocent and conducive to building solidarity. Sara Ahmed has demonstrated the way an uncritical acceptance of positive affects such as “happiness” can obscure unjust power dynamics, as well as histories of discursive, emotional and physical violence that are implicit in feelings of happiness. Ahmed seeks to unearth what implicit understandings lay beneath our explicit knowledge about happiness: happiness and “happy objects” are inseparable from gendered and racialized norms and expectations, common sense assumptions about what makes one happy, and the way our bodily histories or habitus has engrained a “sense” of what the path to happiness looks and feels like. If one is not made happy by the things that “should” make one happy, one is made to feel anxious or abnormal. The cognitive dissonance felt by not being made happy by the objects that should make one happy is a moment of “rupture” or possibility for the implicit to be brought to consciousness. Where Ahmed and Shotwell’s projects align is in their archaeological work that exposes the hierarchies and histories of violence and inequality that exist below our explicit ways of knowing. Ahmed thinks this project can be done with joy—that we can put the “joy” back in killjoy. However,

while one may be able to find a certain facetious “joy” in killing the joy of white people as a means to destabilize white privilege, what are the ethical implications of “killing the joy,” or the “pride,” of a subjected group? On the other hand, in what ways is it unethical to suppress the feeling that something is not right, and to turn a blind eye to “shameless” displays of power in order to maintain the pride of the group?

What Shotwell adds to Ahmed’s project on happiness is a model to break down and work through the “rupture” or feeling of cognitive dissonance that arises in the discrepancy between what one feels and what one knows they “should” feel. Following this, I want to use Shotwell’s conceptualization of implicit and explicit ways of knowing to critically reflect on the presumed positivity and innocence of “pride” as a means to work through present and past feelings of shame.

Pride is only explicitly mentioned a few times in *Knowing Otherwise* in reference to its relationship to shame, which is a theme amongst literature on affect. The plethora of work on shame, with which Shotwell is well-acquainted, leaves unanswered questions about the specificities of, and the relationship between, individual and group feelings of pride, as well as what implicit understandings enable a “knowing” of pride. Perhaps the most notable mention of pride in Shotwell’s book is in reference to Eli Clare’s essay “Freaks and Queers.” Clare discusses the overcoming of shame, in part, through re-appropriating derogatory terms into signs of pride within disability-rights struggles (Shotwell 91). However, is the kind of pride currently disseminated in mainstream expressions of “LGBTQIA” pride the kind Clare refers to in “Freaks and Queers”? Given the way current celebrations of queer Pride tend to reproduce existing hierarches of power on the bases of race, class, gender coherence and ability, and exacerbate the invisibility of the most marginalized groups and bodies (Peers 2011), I would argue that the

personal pride Clare has struggled to know has little in common with dominant expressions of Pride within the queer community. And if so, how can we begin to unpack the multiple iterations of pride, the intersecting and overlapping affects, and the power dynamics that all fall under the rainbow umbrella that is labeled “Pride”? Further, taking the gender specific tendencies of shame into consideration, we might inquire about what kinds of (gendered and racial) relations and identifications make displays of pride more inhabitable for certain bodies (Shotwell 96). Queers may be well served by asking after the ways the joy of pride obscures other kinds of privilege-related shames that need to be attended to.

As critical theorists interested in social justice efforts and systems of power, we ought to inquire into what implicit understandings make pride possible so we are better equipped to respond to the rage felt when the joy that pride fosters is threatened. How can we critically examine the powerful affective force of the pride of subjected groups without undermining or denying the way it fosters visibility, solidarity, a sense of community, and feelings of empowerment? What can we learn from our own communities, however precarious they may be, when challenging the “joy” of pride is often perceived as a threat to the stability, and perhaps even well-being, of the entire group?

Alexis Shotwell has cleared a substantial amount of ground in making “explicit” multiple and overlapping implicit lines of inquiry surrounding the embodiment, sociality and politics taking place in the academy. *Knowing Otherwise* provides an accessible account of the inextricability of bodies, power, identity, privilege, oppression, politics, and history. Speaking across and through several fields (both emerging and established), Shotwell provides the reader with a nuanced vocabulary that will undoubtedly have the effect of fostering productive discussions that are simultaneously personal, political, philosophical, and ethical. This book is a

vital read for those who seek a means to articulate the relationship between individual feelings and political sensibilities, for those looking to do intersectional analysis with depth, and for those who desire an understanding of the body that maintains a rich tension between the social and the somatic.

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