

Diversifying Syllabi 2018 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

Article/Essay Title: “Racialized Common Sense” (Ch.2 of *Knowing Otherwise*)¹

Author: Alexis Shotwell

Readability: Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

Shotwell organizes the chapter very clearly, stating her points up front and recapping their significance at the end. However, to understand the article, students will need to be familiar with several key terms (see below) that Shotwell does not define. Also, there are a few concrete examples or extended metaphors, but in class, students would benefit from developing others.

Thesis:

“If propositionality is the only option deemed worthy of consideration in thinking about [oppressive formations of race and gender], then deeply significant aspects of people’s experience, potentially liberatory spaces, and key parts of racial and gender formation are passed over in silence” (46).

Our understanding of the world is largely commonsense understanding (which is implicit, nonpropositional, shared, affective, and inchoate), and common sense is racialized and gendered, reflecting and reinforcing (typically) dominant and oppressive ideologies.

This explains why rational, propositional arguments are often so ineffective in opposing racism, and it explains how pop culture can often entrench racist and sexist tropes more deeply than argument can.

However, because common sense can be self-contradictory and multiple, there is potential to challenge oppressive common sense with other commonsensical resources.

Key Terms:

Ideology: key term, must supply own definition

Hegemony/hegemonic: key term, must supply own definition

Propositional: common term, must supply own definition (see *Knowing Otherwise* Prologue)

Common sense: Shotwell considers both Antonio Gramsci and Wahneema Lubiano’s accounts of common sense, using them to enrich each other.

Gramsci: “Common sense is an ambiguous, contradictory, and multiform concept...which has three main characteristics: it is [1] incoherent and [2] inconsequential, [3] in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is” (33).

Lubiano: Common sense is “ideology lived and articulated in everyday understandings of the world and one’s place in it” (40).

¹ Note: page numbers refer to an uncorrected proof copy, wherein the chapter ran from pp.29-46. Numbers likely vary in final book.

Shotwell's gloss: "the complex of unarticulated beliefs, feelings, habitus, inclinations, attitudes, emotions, first-pass responses, and so on, that underlie and shape racialized, gendered understanding"

Good sense: (concept from Gramsci) "the elements of our unconsidered assumptions that are 'the healthy nucleus' of common sense, 'which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent.' Good sense, is...the ground from which common sense is changed" (34)

Brief Summary

Introduction

Clear set up of argument; summarizes a variety of uses of common sense to talk about racism in the critical race theory literature.

Gramsci and Common Sense

Summarizes Gramsci's view of common sense, in particular highlighting his view that common sense can and should be articulated (and transformed into propositional knowledge). Clear explanation of the relationship between ideology, common sense, and various social outcomes; uses the analogy of blocks that are shaped in a way that *might* permit some variation, but that make certain formations more comfortable and stable than others.

Epistemologies of Ignorance

Very clear and accessible summary of various epistemologies of ignorance, including by Mills and Tuana. She then reframes these epistemologies of ignorance in terms of common sense, which normalizes certain things as known and obvious and hides others.

"As a norm, an epistemology of ignorance perpetuates the common sense it describes" (37).

Shotwell recounts criticism of epistemophilia or "the belief that more knowledge is ontologically good" (38), and reviews various approaches that feminists have used to challenge or overturn sexist common knowledges.

Common Sense and Struggle

In this section, Shotwell discusses Lubiano's work, wherein Lubiano takes black nationalism as an ideology that gives rise to certain black common sense *as* an essential form of resistance. This section is usefully concrete, as Lubiano assesses a particular image of a Black soldier returning from war to highlight the contradictions and complexity in common sense assessments of it. "Lubiano shows, in this example, how resistant and regressive common senses can co-exist and co-constitute each other and how an understanding can be consciously known but affectively commonsensical" (41).

Culture, Ideology, and Making Sense

Shotwell begins to draw together the pieces she has presented, in particular using a striking, violent example of racism, sexism, and transphobia in the murder-by-inaction of Tyra Hunter. "The concept of common sense 'is useful for expanding the meaning of racism from something that is articulate, aggressive, and blatant, or a clearly thought out ideological position...to the level of everyday life and popular culture'" (41, quoting Bannerji).

Shotwell summarizes the possibilities opened up by her suggestion that we take common sense as implicit, and common sense as racialized and gendered:

1. It gives us distance from a naïve acceptance of race, but allows us to “both call up and reject stabilizations of race” (44), and adds complexity to our “account of what it would be to contest ideological formations”(44) beyond addressing them through propositional statements.
2. “Clearly identifying the [partially] nonpropositional [nature of gender and racial formation] helps me think about ‘where’ some of the most difficult prejudice ‘lives’ when it is not visible in the world” (45).
3. “It provides openings for changing that understanding [of race and gender] in liberatory ways” (45-46).

SECTION TWO:

Article/Essay Title: Author: Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise*, Ch. 2 “Racialized Common Sense”

Possible Applications:

- Epistemology
- Philosophy of Language
- Philosophy of Race
- Political Philosophy
- Feminist Philosophy
- Phenomenology

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (1972)
 - 1977 Selections from political writings
 - 1985 Selections from cultural writings
- Wahneema Lubiano, “Black ladies, welfare, and state minstrels: Ideological war by narrative means,” In *Race-ing justice, en-gendering power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the construction of social reality* (1992)
 - “Black nationalism and black common sense: Policing ourselves and others” In *The house that race built: Black Americans, U.S. terrain* (1997)
 - “Talking about the state and imagining alliances” In *The house that race built: Black Americans, U.S. terrain* (1998)
- Dusk of dawn: An essay toward an autobiography of a race concept by W. E. B. Du Bois
- Mills, Charles W, *The racial contract* (1997)
- selections from *A Course in General Linguistics* by Ferdinand de Saussure
- Barclay 2000, “Autonomy and the Social Self” in *Relational Autonomy*
- Nabina Liebow, “Internalized Oppression,” *Hypatia*
- María Lugones, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling and Loving Perception” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*
- bell hooks, “No Love in the Wild,” at <http://www.newblackmaninexile.net/2012/09/bell-hooks-no-love-in-wild.html>

Possible Class Activities:

- Ask students to brainstorm definitions/examples of ‘common sense’
 - Look for contradictions in common sense directives
- Use examples of taboos (eating poop, entering empty opposite-gendered bathroom, etc.) to illustrate implicit understanding that goes beyond conscious knowledge