A Call for Feminist Critical Thinking In A Smart-Shaming Culture

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Abstract

Smart-shaming, a spin-off of anti-intellectualism, is prevalent in Philippine culture. Using the lens of feminist thinker and cultural theorist bell hooks, this paper presents a critical outlook of the smart-shaming phenomenon. It makes suggestions on how feminist critical thinking may help counter smart-shaming culture through an understanding of intersectionality as an interlocking web of oppressive structures brought about by race, class, and gender differences.

Keywords: bell hooks, critical thinking, classism, intersectionality, postfeminism, smart-shaming

Introduction

Filipino Rapper Skusta Clee, a member of the Ex Battalion hip-hop collective, has a total of more than 2.5 million *YouTube* viewers of his music video entitled "Dami mong alam". The rap hit attacks another flip-top rap battler -

with accusations of being a small fry (*utak alamang*), stupid (*parang tanga lang*), and an intellectual (*dami mong alam*). The irony of the rap song is that while Clee insults the supposed stupidity of the person, he also condemns his breadth of knowledge. In one line of the song, Clee raps that the other rapper knows too much, more so that he surpasses Google (*daig mo pa ang Google, dami mong alam*). Clee insinuates that knowing too much is faulty but knowing little is acceptable. In Philippine social circles, other phrases associated with the attack of intellectualism include "Ikaw na" which means "you're the one" and "eh, di wow" which implies a fake appreciation of the other person's novelty. Phrases such as these are sarcastic and/or made in contempt of the intellectual for being too opinionated and/or well-informed. One can be smart-shamed in the Philippines for simply stating seemingly intellectual statements.

The advent of online social media, such as *FaceBook* and *Twitter*, make smart-shaming more apparent. This can be seen in how people bash others for their opinions, especially if these opinions are couched in intelligent-sounding terms. For example, someone who uses English in one's posts rather than Tagalog (or any other Filipino language) is more likely to get bashed than someone who uses one's native tongue. The same goes for someone who uses smart-sounding words, like "*a fortiori*" or "*ipso facto*", in one's posts. However the bashing is done, be it through direct name-calling or indirect memes, one thing is for sure: such an act is implied by some form of smart-shaming. For smartshamers, ideas do not really matter, and intellectuals are deemed unimportant.

Aside from smart-shaming, there are many other forms of shaming, such as slut-shaming, body-shaming, and addiction-shaming. As feminist thinker and cultural critic, bell hooks sees it, the general phenomenon of shaming is part and parcel of anti-intellectualism. Although her critique of anti-intellectualism is focused on the confines of the academe, she asserts that critical thinking is a tool that could counter this circumstance.

Outside the academe, however, anti-intellectualism or smart-shaming is also very much rampant. There is a mistrust

of intellectuals and a dismissal of smart content. In this paper, although there are various configurations of shaming in Philippine culture, the focus is on smart-shaming and the assertion that feminist critical thinking, through awareness of oppression, intersectionality and the class struggle, may, hopefully, alter the smart-shaming culture in the Philippines.

bell hooks, Feminism, and Shame

When one discusses feminism, one cannot do away with touching on the topic of shame. As Jill Locke observes, "shame silences and excludes, rendering some citizens all but invisible."[1] In fact, one the foreseeable goals of the feminist agenda is to lessen the grip of shame. Outcasts or those who live in the shadows of shame should be able to have their own spaces where they can share their dreams and voices. Postfeminist thinker and cultural critic, bell hooks[2] or Gloria Jean Watkins, contends that shame is paralyzing.[3] It is one of the most profound tools of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.[4] Oppressed groups have a history of shame, and feminism should play its vital role in the politics of shame.

Feminism is all about ending sexist exploitation and any form of oppression. Similarly, one must investigate the disconnections and persecutions that shame causes. hooks empowers the oppressed to counter hegemonic activity through a scrutiny of the global politics of oppression and an

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[1] Jill Locke, "Shame and the Future of Feminism," in *Hypatia,* 22:4, (November 2007): 147.

[2] Gloria Jean Watkins decided to use the pseudonym bell hooks (as a form of reverence to her grandmother) in order to take away the attention from the personality and put the focus on her work and ideas.

[3] bell hooks, "Naked without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic," Ella Shohat, ed., in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (*Vol. 5.*), (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), 73.

[4] bell hooks differentiates patriarchy from imperialist white capitalist supremacist patriarchy. The latter refers to the intricate web of oppressive factors enacted by the dominating system in place.

examination of culture through an analysis of mass media representations. She puts forward a cultural criticism theory, like her feminist theory, that looks at multifaceted avenues in which layered oppressions take effect. These layered oppressions force one "out of feminism and back into some patriarchal mode of thinking."[5] The aforementioned system of oppression can be attributed to media representations which are not just limited to mass media anymore but rather to social media as well. Representations highly influence how one lives and the influence and power of popular culture is undeniable and powerful.

hooks has been publishing works on feminism and cultural criticism in the past thirty years. She refrains from using complicated philosophical jargon, which is probably one of the reasons her work has not been widely studied in the academe. She challenges the way theory is presented in the academe and insists that limiting discourse to mainstream ideas inhibits the growth of theory. Her works are easily understandable as she hopes to reach a mass of individuals who do not have tertiary educations, who can barely read nor write, who have been the victims of oppression, exploitation, and/or shame. One of the notable characteristics of early cultural critics is the emphasis on praxis. Though philosophy delves into race, ethnicity and gender, it does not discuss these topics in a subversive manner (perhaps just to update the curriculum as need be).[6] Discourses on intersectionality should be discussed in philosophy through comprehensive, critical, subversive and non-superficial methods.

In her essay on shame and the naked black body, hooks states that black naked female bodies are portrayed as shamed bodies. She refers to this framing as "patriarchal, pornographic, racialized sexualization."[7] The shame is linked

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[5] bell hooks, "Naked without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic," 65-73 .

[6] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 146.

[7] bell hooks, "Naked without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic," 65-73.

to the history of slavery and shame is inherited both through reinforcement, internalization and continued representations of such. The marks of shame may only be countered through a provocation of these oppressive constructions. As hooks further notes, "the shame will never leave us until we begin to engage in collective resistance."[8] Critical intervention of these representations of shame may be done through both theory and praxis.

Cultural Criticism and Shame

Shame is defined as the negative self-evaluation of one's self in a certain socio-cultural context. One sees oneself as worthless, and in a position with a lack of "self-relevant value".[9] Shame is a self-directed, painful feeling of disgrace. It is when one perceives oneself as being perceived by others as devalued. The social self is self-evaluated and "informed by social approval".[10] One has the feeling of shame if and only if it is within cultural and social contexts, and these contexts vary.

The goal of cultural criticism is the investigation and criticism of "values, practices, categories, and representations embedded in cultural texts and surrounding institutions."[11] As praxis, part of cultural criticism's advocacy is to investigate the contexts in which shame is embedded in. Cultural critics have given mass, popular and everyday materials their due attention in recent decades. At the the turn of the century, social media now joins "television, cinema, advertising, rock music, magazines, minority literatures and popular literature."[12] The production, distribution and consumption of

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] Anita Kasabova, "From Shame to Shaming: towards an Analysis of Shame Narratives," in *Open Cultural Studies*, 1:1, (January 2017): 99-112.

[10] Anita Kasabova, "From Shame to Shaming: towards an Analysis of Shame Narratives," 99-112.

[11] Vincent Leitch, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.), introduction.

[12] *Ibid.*, 26-27.

these discourses are the cornerstones of the critique. In the 21st century, where there are more than two billion social media users, cultural critics cannot help but explore the ways in which shame is lodged in social media.

Cultural criticism may also be grounded on feminist theory. Through critique and analysis that disrupts and deconstructs cultural productions, investigating the reinforced systems of domination is the fundamental principle of feminist cultural criticism.[13] Representations and images that show racist and sexist stereotypes are also tackled. For example, "who gets to speak to (who), with and for us about culture."[14] It is important to stress though that popular culture is the central location of the resistance.[15] A prevalent issue in popular media, for instance, is fat-shaming. An example of this is how plus-size models in the fashion industry are often ridiculed. Feminist cultural critics dissect the phenomenon and illustrate the deep-seated sources of the hate. They claim that plus-size bodies are not seen as feminine enough. Critics also try to interrogate standards of beauty through these bodily representations.

A cultural critique is not always negative. A critique is supposed to illuminate and enrich one's understanding through critical insight. It should also not hinder appreciation.[16] The critique of images or representations in culture must move the people towards more liberal standpoints. Unfortunately, the body of writing of critical cultural analysis cannot "keep pace with the proliferation of images."[17] Cultural criticism should be in no way engaged in just because it is "trendy". If critics write about certain materials only because it is trendy, but with no link to a

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[13] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Massachusetts: South End Press, 1990), 3.

[14] *Ibid*., 9.

[15] bell hooks, *Salvation: Black people and Love* (New York: Harpercollins Publishers, Inc., 2001), 84.

[16] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, 5.

[17] *Ibid*., 4.

liberation struggle, it defeats the purpose of critique itself. The primary goal of critique is to transform oppressive structures of domination.[18]

In this way, the past is also vital in the process of critique. Discovering one's history of shame is also vital to cultural criticism. Some cultural critics, for example, tackle the way parents shame their children, thus influencing their self-esteem. hooks terms this as "inappropriate criticism".[19] Accordingly, there must be "an effort to remember…where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering and triumph in ways that transform present reality."[20]

Shame and Critical Thinking

One who wishes to engage in cultural criticism should first be literate or have the capacity to read and write and be able to engage in critical thinking. Information comes from reading, and if people are incapable of reading or writing, they do not have access to such bodies of knowledge.[21] One can only participate freely in a democracy if one has the intellectual capacity to do so: "they must be able to think free, undictated thoughts, to discover and learn with others."[22] All humans have the potential to become intellectuals.[23] One just needs to be open to learning. One barrier to learning however also happens to be shame.[24] When one deems oneself of being

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[18] *Ibid.*, 12.

[19] bell hooks, *Salvation: Black people and Love*, 85.

[20] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*, 147.

[21] bell hooks, "Naked without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic."

[22] Brooke Ackerly, *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7-8.

[23] Isaac Asimov, "A Cult of Ignorance," in *Newsweek*, (1980), 19.

[24] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 93.

unworthy to learn and/or unconfident enough, learning is hindered.

It is sometimes taken for granted that literacy alone encourages learning. The inability to be a critical thinker is seen as laziness or indifference, when in fact, it can actually be a function of shame. When one has feelings of shame, one sees oneself in state of inadequacy and defectiveness thereby not exactly a *full* human being.[25] Through the self-evaluation of the shamed individual, this state renders oneself as not being incapable of critical thinking but rather unworthy of learning through critical thinking. Sometimes, society takes part in this instigation of this unworthiness to learn through systems of domination, family dynamics and/or, most especially, popular culture.

Social critics must seek to educate the future generations by encouraging them to be critical thinkers. While it is necessary to reflect thoughtfully on the existing or emerging values, practices, and norms of society, they must first, however, address the issue of shame. The task of a cultural critic involves the fostering of a system that teaches critical thinking so that people can free themselves of dogma, think for themselves, and consider alternative views.[26] The task is also to free themselves from shame. Critical thinking is also being self-critical of one's attitudes towards learning. It could be matter of letting go of the collective history of shame, and acknowledging one's potential for brilliance and the capacity to learn.

Critical thinking can move one beyond shame. Critical thinking enables people to transform their lives. A person who thinks critically despite material disadvantage may find ways to transform one's life deeply and meaningfully, in the same way that someone who may be incredibly privileged materially and in crisis in one's life may remain perpetually unable to resolve one's life in any meaningful way if they do

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[25] bell hooks, Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, 94.

[26] Brooke Ackerly, *Political Theory and Feminist Social Criticism*, 8-9.

not think critically.[27] That is, "without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow."[28] For Moore and Parker, "critical thinking is thinking that *critiques...*(it is) thinking that abides by the criteria of good sense and logic."[29]

hooks contends that critical thinking can be learned through reading theory and actively analyzing texts.[30] No matter what a person's race, class or sex is, critical thinking leads to liberation. Unfortunately, society tends to be anti-intellectual and discourages critical thinking. Anti-intellectualism, for example, is prevalent in African American settings. Despite the worthiness of some black individuals in theory-building, they are not given due notice in academic venues. Women of color are discouraged from exercising their intellect since their work is branded as not theoretical enough and/or their work is silenced and censored.[31] For instance, hooks talks about her experience of feminist theory in graduate class, wherein the course reading list "had writings by white women and men, one black man, but no material by or about black, Native American Indian, Hispanic or Asian women."[32] Theory-building hugely contributes to intellectualism. Some deny the importance of theory building. They claim that production of theory is irrelevant to the plight of liberation movements. Anti-intellectualism is prevalent amongst those who declare that theory is worthless, for example, some activist groups insist on reinforcing a split between theory and practice.[33]

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[27] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 20.

[28] *Ibid.*, 202.

[29] Brooke Noel Moore and Richard Parker, *Critical Thinking*, (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2016), 3.

[30] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, 20.

[31] *Ibid.*, 68.

[32] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1984), 12.

[33] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 70.

Anti-Intellectualism and Smart-shaming

Anti-intellectualism is a worldwide phenomenon present not only in Philippines but in first world countries as well. In New Zealand, an essay was released three years ago with the outrageous heading "Why are New Zealanders so fucking intolerant of anyone with a brain i.e. intellectuals?" While in Australia, a headline read "We love being dumb and dumber". Referred to as intellectual-barrenness, anti-intellectualism is seen as a virus. It spreads easily from one host to another, with attackers targeting either a person's polished accent, profound words, or academic credentials.[34]

There is a difference between questioning experts and mistrusting the intellect. Questioning truths and science may lead to progress but having no trust in intellectuals can be counterproductive. Anti-intellectualism can result to social problems. In the United States, for example, the following is highly associated with the anti-intellectual phenomenon: "strongman politics, anti-immigration sentiments, anti-globalization, local protectionism, anti-women, anti-environment thoughts."[35] Anti-intellectualism is intimately connected to racism, regionalism, sexism, classism, and etc. The refusal to evaluate statements based on reasoning or argumentation and relying on belief, biases and/or emotions contributes to oppressive tendencies and patriarchal modes of thinking.

In Philippine popular and/or social media, anti-intellectualism is evident through trendy phrases such as "Ikaw na matalino!", "Nosebleed", or "Dami mong alam!"[36] The intention of these phrases is to shame the person who seemingly expresses a trait of intellectualism whether it be

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[34] Michael A. Peters, "Anti-intellectualism is a virus," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Online First (April 2018): 1-7.

[35] *Ibid*.

[36] Raphael D. Rodriguez, "E, di Ikaw na ang Matalino! Isang Pagsusuri sa Penomenon ng Smart-Shaming sa mga Pilipinong Gumagamit ng FaceBook," *DIWA: E-Journal*, Tomo 5 (November 2017): 126-162.

deep insight or "smart content". When one talks of matters on politics, philosophy, current issues, these are considered as smart contents. Similarly, when one quotes or cites experts and uses the English language to comment (be it in social media or everyday conversations), one tends to be smart-shamed by anti-intellectuals.[37] In a nutshell, smart-shaming is telling the individual that being well-informed is worthless in the current context. Intelligence or intellectualism is disgraceful. The smart-shamer calls for the shamed individual's negative evaluation of oneself, it is an attack of the person's self-relevant "smart value". Ironically, though, while one's smart value is attacked, one's lack of smarts is also ridiculed. Christopher Lao, a man who drove his car into a deep flood, was cyberbullied years ago for his lack of information. His statement, "I was not informed" is treated as comic relief. Apparently, one cannot be too smart and too uninformed at the same time in Philippines. For further understanding, should take a look at the values, practices, categories and representations of smart-shaming in the Philippines.

The concept of *hiya* is a dominant Filipino value. Expressions such as "mahiya ka naman" or "walang hiya ka" exhibit the need for Filipinos to be conscious of showing too much confidence in something such as one's intelligence. For example, when one starts to post opinionated statements online on smart-content topics, people start to smart-shame. One should be shamed for knowing too much, people should at least try to foster a sense of false humility when it comes to the intellect. This goes in tandem with the idea of crab mentality wherein one puts down an individual who seems more intelligent so that they may not surpass others.[38] If one is not *nahihiya* or embarrassed to flaunt one's knowledge, and be involved in supposedly intellectual discourses, then one is embarrassed or one's feelings are hurt for doing so -one is smart-shamed.

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[37] Raphael D. Rodriguez, "E, di Ikaw na ang Matalino!", 126-162.

[38] *Ibid.*, 113.

The practice of smart-shaming in the Philippines is evident in popular culture and social media. Television sitcoms, variety shows, songs, radio shows, and of course Facebook and Instagram all have their share of smart-shamers. In these platforms, common lines hurled at the smart, include "ikaw na top 1" or "pabibo ka masyado". Flaunting one's intellectualism is a function of being a show-off, thus, the term "pabibo". Individuals who are *bibo*, or mentally-alert, are also oftenly smart-shamed as well in everyday conversations and events. In beauty pageants, for example, when a "smart" candidate gives an intellectual answer to a question, her answers are mocked on social media. When Miss Universe winner Pia Wurtzbach answered a political question about the United States bases in the said pageant, some commenters on social media were defending Wurtzbach for being diplomatic, others were smart-shaming her -but most especially, they were smart-shaming the other commenters on the political issue.

Feminist Critical Thinking

Since shame is an "internal critical perspective,"[39] the shamed and the shamer must be critical of not only of themselves but the social contexts that surround them. While critical thinking calls for clear and rational thinking, feminist critical thinking calls for the reevaluation of the systems of domination. To shame is to render someone worthless, in this case, to smart-shame is to render the supposed intellectual and the intellectual's thoughts/ideas as worthless. Through feminist critical thinking, one is invited to reevaluate perspectives other than their own thereby reconsidering the consequences of certain positions. In the case of smart-shaming, there is a need to rethink why one ridicules or insults individuals who exhibit smart-content.

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[39] Anita Kasabova, "From Shame to Shaming: towards an Analysis of Shame Narratives", 99-112.

One's knowing is seen as arrogance and an attack against the "class" of the shamer. Similarly, smart-shaming is also a way to ridicule others who are not part of the same circles, it is a way of "othering" those who have divergent points-of-view. The shamer insults the shamed by making it appear that the shamed individual's view is irrelevant or of no value. Take for example a conversation on a political issue such as the Philippine drug war. When one criticizes President Duterte, one can be a recipient of statements such as "kayo na maging Presidente", or "masyado kang magaling"[40]. While the statements are ad hominem, they also imply a condemnation of the shamed individual's political leanings and one's being a part of the elite class. If one reviews the topics considered as smart-content (politics, philosophy and etc.), these are the topics that are traditionally engaged in by the intellectual elite. The use of the English language is also smart-shamed or demeaned, since it is supposedly considered as the language of the educated and/or economic elite. Since the link of American imperialism is not a big issue with the use of English in the country, the political and economic elite use English as the language of choice (or even because they have no choice) for daily conversations.[41] Thus, the term "nosebleed" as another word for smart-shaming.

Feminist critical thinking calls for progressive standpoints and intervention through the opposition of ideologies of domination. One must reassess the world one lives in and reevaluate imperialist, race, gender and sex issues.[42] In this case, the class issue and possible intersectional issue of smart-shaming. Remember that those who are in the masses see themselves as less powerful. In their minds, smart-shaming is a way to regain that intellectual power that they perceivably lack. While the supposed intellectual elite should

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[40] Translated to "why not just replace the President?" or "you are too good".

[41] Théry Béord, "An Analysis of the Filipino-English Diglossia through Social Representations of Languages," *An International Multi-Disciplinary Graduate Conference of Terengganu (GraCe)*, (2016): 410-414.

[42] bell hooks, "Moving beyond Shame," 8.

be more inclusive to those who perceive themselves to be less intellectual, smart-shamers should reevaluate their own worth themselves. The masses should be made aware of the power that they have. Through critical analysis, they will uncover how their limited powers may be exercised in ways that do not necessarily have to be through shaming. While those who are shamed should be working towards inclusivity or contemplation on the inclusion of others and engaging with others "passionately", be it through the use of non-academic jargon (or non-intellectual jargon, if there is such a thing) or moving the discourse to the margins, the smart-shamers should also affirm their own individual potentials. There is strength in the mass intellect and it can be used to revolutionize social structures.

Smart-shaming is a function of the systems of domination. Anyone who is considered "smarter" or "more intelligent" is seen as a threat to one's own class standing or even power. In fact, anti-intellectualism is part and parcel of the modern day class struggle, and it is a social condition.[43] While feminist cultural critics survey culture for sex, gender and race issues, class is a topic that is not really seen as that fashionable.[44] The subject of class makes one nervous even if there are obvious differences between the rich and the poor, the elite and the masses. People are scared to talk of class matters. One reason is that they are scared to lose their class status or to remain in a certain class status. To show affinity for certain classes may affect the status of their class.[45] hooks defines class as more than the Marxist definition with regards to production: "class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel,

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[43] Michael A. Peters, "Anti-intellectualism is a virus," 1-2.

[44] bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), vii.

[45] *Ibid.*, 8-10.

act."[46] Understanding the shamer's class or behavior, values, expectations etc. should be addressed before one can fully decipher the nature of smart-shaming.

This is why feminist critical thinking calls for class consciousness. There should be an awareness that the intersectionality of race, sex and class may be used to understand certain features of society. In the case of smart-shaming, the relationship of class to the system of shaming. It should be pointed out that classism, or the prejudice and discrimination on the basis of class, is very much the foundation of smart-shaming and only when it is acknowledged can the issue be confronted.[47]

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hooks, bell, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, New York: Routledge, 2003.

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[46] *Ibid.*, 20.

[47] I started working on bell hooks nine years ago for my PhD dissertation. This paper is based on one of its sections, specifically on literacy and critical thinking. The idea of working on smart-shaming is a product of one of the many random conversations I had while in transit, when I myself unknowingly smart-shamed others. My thanks go to this journal's reviewers for their inputs and to a particular reader for valuable insights on this matter.

____, "Naked without Shame: A Counter-Hegemonic Body Politic," Ella Shohat, ed., in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (*Vol. 5.*), (2001).

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