

THE GAZE OF THE YELLOW CLOG MAN

By Sarah Latimer

I had knotted a silk scarf at my back, a triangle over my navel, as a sort of bandana-bra (here is the answer to the burning utterance: ...what were you wearing?). But what I later realised I wore, and was entangled in, is the fabric of internalised sexism. And it was as pleasant as crawling into a discarded snakeskin. What was most unsavoury was that my disgust at being visually violated boomeranged back to me and became self-directed, internalised. The leer of Yellow Clog Man was a gross, tentacular source of deep disgust.

I'll give an autoethnographic account of the incident to set the scene:

Last June I found myself once again barefoot, boogying down on the wooden floor under the yellow-striped canopy that marked my hometown Clearwater's beloved dance tent. It was the annual weekend of the local Great Hudson River Revival Festival. A weekend of family folk music and environmental activism at Croton Point Park that embraced the start of summer and attracted all the hippies far and wide who had survived the 60s long enough to settle down with little free-spirited families of their own. As it also happened to be Father's Day, I was spending some quality father-daughter time with my dear old dad. We were doing some type of old-geezer-sidestep-jig dance you see at these types of gatherings while ol' Lee from Buckwheat Zydeco Ils Sont Partis Band was playing the spoons on the vest frottoir like there was no tomorrow.

As I was engrossed in this rare moment of contented happiness with my usually very

irksome father, I only noticed the intent gaze of the Yellow Clog Man until when he was all about to nose-dive into my chest.

I was caught off guard to say the least. I hadn't imagined that I would need to be on guard. You see, Yellow Clog Man was a Clearwater regular! I had been seeing this squat old man tapping his obscenely large yellow wooden clogs all my life to the point where he was my immediate mental reference when the seven dwarfs were brought up in conversation. So to see the aroused glint in the unbroken stare of this once congenial dwarf initially paralysed me. I was horrified, then mortified. The synesthetic tingles of revulsion crept up my back to my chest as I visibly shuddered to protect the sensation of my (I now felt) exposed body.

I would duly classify this experience of sexual harassment as one of relational disgust as I felt physically repulsed at the realisation that a friendly foxtrot was not what Yellow Clog Man had in mind when he intersected between me and my dad. Sexual harassment entails the "behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another" (UN Women 2013), and I can attest that Yellow Clog Man's unwanted proximity and advantages at my body on the dance floor were fully demeaning and repugnant (UN Women 2013).

The "profound instinctive dislike" I felt at the way he seemed to be undressing me with his eyes further invokes what Deborah Durham in *Disgust and the Anthropological Imagination* describes as "the sense of finely tuned social interactions, of social ruptures, linked with moral revulsion" (2011: 136, 142). I felt that this relational experience between myself and Yellow Clog Man utterly violated certain social boundaries that should be deeply embedded within the

“relational ways of being” when a young woman encounters older males (and the archetype is that of the creepy old man) (ibid.: 148).

More revealingly, these gendered relational ways of being reflect the wider phenomenon of internalised sexism: this experience of disgust at the objectification of my body was a manifestation of the “internalised sense of powerlessness” I felt at the expense of Yellow Clog Man’s enactment of his internalised sense of gendered power (Bearman, Korobov and Thorne 2009: 10).

Further drawing from Durham’s analysis of the dynamic transgressive and transcendent nature of disgust, it was the way in which I could experience the imagined intimacy of the intentions behind his predatorial gaze, that the sexual taboos I had been conditioned to be aware of for the safeguarding of my integrity and more became ever more ingrained in my moral compass (Durham 2011: 142).

Through relational disgust, the “outside (sexist) observer [became] internalised” in my physical impulse to shield my now-vulnerable body (Bearman, Korobov and Thorne 2009: 17). It was thus from the affective dimension of this relation of intimacy, that my internalised sexism came to the fore and the disgust I felt towards him was redirected towards myself.

Through considering this experience of disgust as a bodily repulsion induced by both a sense of transgression and on the other hand of almost ritualised gendered relational ways of being, internalised sexism rears its ugly head, – is given the limelight; , bBut here it can be interrogated. The physical sensations of repulsion I felt from Yellow Clog Man’s grievously inappropriate behaviour are a sad testament to the ways in which internalised sexism transcends the subconscious mind to manifest in the performing body. What I can take forwards from this unfortunate experience of relational disgust is that I have the power to identify and breakdown the impulses of internalised sexism. It’s high-hanging fruit but it’s worth reaching for – enlightened, active thought processes. Analytically interrogating the imaginative impulses of intimacy is the first step in harnessing my disgust for the behaviour of creepy old men, metamorphosing it instead towards becoming an articulated response that challenges the occurrences of everyday sexism. However, in this particular case, I wish I had just punched him right in his little dwarf face.

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