

FIELD NOTES  
FROM COVID TIME:  
TEACHING NORMATE  
BURNOUT CULTURE  
THROUGH ENERGY,  
DISABILITY, AND RACE



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*This is exhausting.* I can't quite remember just how many times this utterance coursed through my conversations with students, colleagues, and friends in the duration of "COVID time." That phrase—"COVID time"—brackets but one temporality: a sense of a before times juxtaposed to a haze of uncertainties. Of course, even before we were witness to the compacting crisis of COVID, institutional barriers to access, ongoing police terror, fascist insurrections, and climate barbarity, many of us were already exhausted. Reflecting on the feelings of technology frustration experienced by U.S. academics, Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman (2021) note the range of access made possible by the onset of COVID and then suggest "that all of us now are living in crip time" (246). In the early days of March 2020, when much of the United States shifted into various kinds of lockdowns or self-quarantine, Twitter embodied all of the contradictions of the moment. How to cut your hair. How to start a mutual aid network in your

neighborhood and town. Sourdough starters. Jar canning for newbies wary of botulism. How to safely protest. How to be more productive working from home. Seed shortages derail your garden plans. In the face of it all, I have a hard time letting go of *how*, as the certainty of routine became unmoored, it generated an emergent feeling that perhaps anything could be possible—these were days of despairing, but they also felt like something more that cannot be named.<sup>1</sup>

Shifting between the rank individualism of “how can you optimize this time,” and the radical potential of confronting the consequences of “normal life,” one of the struggles of the pandemic became engaging with the banal and extraordinary care labor needed to survive these ‘choose your own adventure’ crisis maps. In this moment of coronavirus capitalism, “ideas lying around” offer compasses of all kinds (Klein, 2020). In the early days of the pandemic, we were witness to the dynamics of what Naomi Klein (2007) calls “the shock doctrine,” logics of opportune exploitation of public disorientation. Still, the capacity to survive was and continues to be afforded by workers assigned to the front lines of the crisis, consigned as ‘essential.’ Where I currently reside in Iowa, many of these essential workers included migrant laborers concentrated into the assembly lines of meat packing plants. The carelessness of managers—refusing closures or relief, and some making bets on how many people would become ill—enabled COVID’s rapid spread throughout plants in Waterloo, Marshalltown, and Tama (Shepherd 2020). As some of the worst outbreaks in U.S. industrial agriculture, these struggles over working conditions also parallel a much longer history of labor and racial justice in Iowa (Yeung & Grabell 2020). At some point—and *in spite* of an *insurrection on the national g-damn capital*—it felt as if the potential for reimagining a whole way of life faded, and we were pushed back into the crushing despair of ‘normalcy.’ I get it—I, too, want again to savor tenderness and touch. But I also want so much more.

And so “COVID time” also indexes a jumble of public feelings under the sign of burnout: exhaustion, fatigue, languish, despair, and grief. In 2019, the World Health Organization newly classified ‘burnout’ as a medical condition, specifically related to chronic work stress. In a revision to the *International Classification of Diseases*, burnout encompasses “a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been *successfully managed*” (2020, emphasis mine). The entry qualifies scope and scale: as a category of medical surveillance, burnout is simply *occupational*, relating to the work space and “feelings of energy

depletion and exhaustion...mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism...a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment" (ICD 2020). From the vantage point of medical classification, the ineffectual individual management of work-related stress made for bad workers, drained of potential energy, and no longer able to produce value. During COVID-19, warnings against pandemic exacerbated burnout function as extensions of "agentic notions of bodily management," in which body minds become "bounded by rhetorics of risk that moralize everyday corporeal practices" (Bennett 2021, 350). Management, in this case, compresses medical ableism into an endless series of resilience and mental health webinars in the absence of *actual* material transformations of work. Every endless email secretly (and sometimes not so secretly) screamed: stop fantasizing about quitting your job! Resilience seminars are the participation trophies of crisis capitalism.

While I acknowledge the medicalization of burnout is rhetorically complex for reasons of access and strategic enactments of agency, let's not kid ourselves how *stress not successfully managed* functions at the level of institutions, especially Predominately White Institutions holding on dearly to the corporatization of DEI Inc. The disability exemptions structuring this definition hold worlds of meaning. Much like its historical antecedent, exhaustion as a public feeling all too often centers *normate burnout*, a kind of cultural formation that tethers historical situations of emergence and the wide array of relations that compose a transformable present. Paired with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2002) conceptualization of "normate" as "the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (10), we might think through normate burnout as a way to mark whiteness, hetero- and cishnormativity, and ableism in public conversations about the 'proper' management of stress and the cultivation of 'appropriate' work/life balance: in addition to surveillance of signs of mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion. These are biopolitical markers of the contemporary neoliberal workscape, yes; but "burnout" cultures also come with complex geographic histories that necessitate unmooring the term as a kind of millennial possession. Forces of energy production, depletion, and management compel understanding burnout culture's keywords, geographies, and legacies otherwise not immediately evident within its contemporary articulation.

Burnout discourse fundamentally revolves around residual and intensifying cultures of energy management, comprised of relations between an ecological body of latent energy in addition to belief about how that energy should be acquired and converted and *used* to generate value. Under conditions of capi-

talism, “energy” offers an entry point into the forms of value actualized through the transformation of environments. Energy, as those in the energy humanities argue, *is the transformation of matter so it can be used*. Indeed, as Imre Szeman (2007) instructs us, “what if we were to think about the history of capital not exclusively in geopolitical terms, but in terms of the forms of energy available to it at any given historical moment” (806)? And as I argue in my forthcoming book, *Violent Inheritance: Sexuality, Land, & Energy in Making the North American West*, energy also brings us toward multi-scalar jumps between vitality and debility, nature and culture in shaping modern forms of extractive world-making.

Acknowledging the normate as a figure that structures ongoing concerns about burnout fundamentally challenges the ability to naturalize burnout as a millennial condition, incessantly occupied by a cacophony of white cisnormative failure (Peterson 2019). In her incisive critique of the whiteness of “millennial burnout,” Tiana Clark (2019) reflects: “No matter the movement or era, being burned out has been the steady state of Black people in this country for hundreds of years. There’s too much to cover, and my buffering, Black millennial brain is short-circuiting the litany of inherited trauma—or should I say inherited burnout?” Moreover, the logic of burnout ‘management,’ largely centered within the knowledge cultures of occupational psychology, fails to envision more radical imaginations of what kinds of worlds we might inhabit otherwise. Hil Malatino (2020) captures these dynamics of burnout as a scarcity mentality that negates “basic facts of interdependency, mutuality, and subject interwovenness” (25). Without a critical analysis of energy, the normate lurks and disallows the possibilities of radical imagination.

We need conversations that shift from individual management to burnout *culture*, or the underlying values, norms, and ideas about time, energy, work, and ability that structure the meaning of productivity. Burnout’s temporal orientation is rooted in a much broader web of relations ordering the contemporary world: capacity, productivity, individual mastery and comparison. Alison Kafer (2013) calls these the temporality of late capitalism. Normate burnout brings attention to a conjuncture of a world made possible through racialized labor, extractive world-making, and the modern obsession with the differential actualization of bodily energy. Sure, we can move through and beyond “work” and hating on millennials, but the stakes of mapping exhaustion in time and space are so much more. Exhaustion is a feeling, but moreover it is a process and racialized logic of capital that lives in a liminal space of making and un-making.

Believe it or not, these are conversations made possible by a collective of undergraduate students at a public university in the Midwest. Teaching a capstone course about burnout and productivity regimes bookended my instructional experience during the pandemic. Our crises maps took us through burnout as a feeling and object of public discourse. Tracing such maps and their underlying productivity regimes, we considered the ways that organizing the world often transpired through a demand to produce things to be evaluated and used: from the array of stressors in our mediated lives (the everyday labor of vigilance and code switching), to experiences of racism at all scales, to care work, homophobia, trans antagonism, and the seemingly endless news cycle of catastrophe.

The course provenance is quite simple: in Spring 2018, I taught an undergraduate capstone on rhetoric and the body, surveying a broad range of theories of embodiment and corporeality rooted in feminist, queer, and disability studies. With this foundation, we shifted our focus into an inventory of *optimization*, a belief in the infinite potential of the body for energy management and actualization. In this course iteration, I found two readings resonate most deeply with students: Anna Katharina Schaffner's (2016) cultural history, *Exhaustion*, in addition to Kristin A. Swenson's (2010) essay "Productive Bodies: Women, Work, and Depression." Student excitement for engaging otherwise isolating emotions paralleled my own need for *Violent Inheritance* to think with others through the frameworks of queer and disability studies alongside colonial orders of energy and extraction.

Why not an entire capstone dedicated to the culture of burnout? By the time I taught a revised version in Spring 2020 and 2021, public conversations about burnout seemed to be everywhere, especially related to pandemic life. But most of these conversations typically focused on drawing discrete lines between depression and languishing, burnout and exhaustion, as if typifying emotions could invent new modes of mastery. In its most recent iteration, I had to confront two central challenges. First, how do you create a course interrogating the culture of burnout while also designing a space and flow that minimized the potential for added exhaustion? Second, how do you hold the contradictions of institutional expectations, the political environment of public universities, and a course invested in ideas that often challenged our lived reality of assessment, evaluation, and productivity? For example, how could I forget, in the week focused on the "social body" and surveillance, students pointing out the paradoxical demands of many of their course's camera policies, wherein "engagement" would be

measured by some requirement of showing up for inspection. In our collective space, they knew and appreciated our syllabus “policy:” “you have the right to make a decision about your visual presence.” And so amidst the groans, I interjected with a throughline from lecture: “Do you remember that image I talked about? With the tower and the cells? It sorta feels like, in this zoom room, your name/image boxes are cells and I’m the tower. What do you think about that?”

As someone raised by the feminist classroom and formally trained in the dispositions of cultural studies, those felt contradictions cannot be resolved *by me*. Rather, my feminist mentors taught me “learning” takes many forms, contradictions are meaningful and generative, and part of my role as a participant/facilitator/mentor is to name them *as such*, highlight their historically constructed nature, and create an environment that made space for all sorts of questions and push back. I get feedback from students that echo their appreciation: *I am vulnerable but I feel safe*. Providing the opportunity for these affective encounters, in any classroom (virtual or otherwise), is seemingly basic yet profound. As I told my students during our last meeting, “I really think we can bridge our own experiences with hard ideas—that’s learning, too.” We departed again, with big questions, after a semester of foregrounding mutual consent conversations about pace and flow, what capacity we had to talk, and more specifically, how we could center care as a way of doing things interdependently. To riff from a student’s final project, we were finding a way to inhabit a *Declaration of Interdependence*. We reflected once more, with a few big questions and statements:

Who are you outside of attempts to define your value?

When was the last time you asked for help?

Are you resilient? What does that word mean for you in the pandemic?

Students, specifically, held all the big feelings as they reflected on our space where we held each other, and fostered a space of vulnerability:

This class made me feel less isolated from the difficult time of pandemic, knowing others felt similar struggles.

This is the most connected I have ever felt.

## Lectures

“Genealogies of ‘Burnout Culture’: Energy, Optimization, Neurasthenia”

“The Social Body: Malleability, Social Control, Rebellion”

“Does Burnout Culture relate to American Eugenics? How to Ask Questions about Cultural Formations”

“Writing the Burnout: Embodied Writing and Standpoint Reflection”

“Productivity Regimes: Scientific Management Theory, Mechanization, Waste Motion”

“All about the Self: Wellness Culture, Self-Help, and the Politics of Rest”

“Radical Dreaming: Seeds, Roots, & Imagination”

## READINGS & THEMES

### Demystifying Burnout, Contemporary and Historical Discourses

Anne Helen Peterson, “How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation,” *Buzzfeed* 5 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennials-burnout-generation-debt-work>.

“Colleges are turning students’ phones into surveillance machines,” *Washington Post* 24 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/12/24/colleges-are-turning-students-phones-into-surveillance-machines-tracking-locations-hundreds-thousands/>.

Tianna Clark, “This is what Black Burnout Feels Like,” *Buzzfeed* 11 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tianaclarkpoet/millennial-burnout-black-women-self-care-anxiety-depression>.

Anne Helen Peterson, “Here’s What Millennial Burnout is Like for 16 People,” *Buzzfeed* 9 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/annehelenpetersen/millennial-burnout-perspectives>.

## The Social Body

Mary Douglas, "The Two Bodies," from *The Body: A Reader*, ed. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, London, Routledge, 2005, pp. 78–81.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26, 2011, pp. 591–609.

## Productivity Regimes

Mellissa Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

## Critical Responses to Productivity

Audre Lorde, "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer," in *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*, Ithaca, NY: Ixia Press, 1988.

Sara Ahmed, "Self-Care as Warfare," *feministkilljoys blog* 25 August 2014. Available at: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/>.

Nick Martin, "Against Productivity in a Pandemic," *New Republic* 17 March 2020. Available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/156929/work-home-productivity-coronavirus-pandemic>.

*The Nap Ministry*, Available at: <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com/>.

## Interdependence & Care

Mia Mingus, "Interdependency." *Leaving Evidence* 22 January 2010. Available at: <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/interdependency-exerpts-from-several-talks/>

Dean Spade, "What is Mutual Aid?," from *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)*, London: Verso Books, 2020.

The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto*, London: Verso Books, 2020.

## Endnotes

1. Much has been said (largely in the Twitter sphere) about the uses and abuses of comparisons between COVID-19 and the early years of the HIV crisis. Though we should be wary of the comparisons in terms of etiology and transmission, I do believe larger lessons might live in cultures of intimacy (particularly amongst imagined communities of queer and trans people who have always developed lived theories of intimacy in a world of various kinds of “social distance”) in addition to the intensity of political emotions. For example, I often thought of Deborah Gould’s recollection of hope and despair in ACT-UP organizing. The “something that cannot be named” might be some kind of feeling oriented toward futurity but not about linear progress, where crisis is an opening and a set of possibilities to organize and imagine. Mariame Kaba’s mantra of “hope is a discipline” best captures this complexity for me.

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