

The Uses of Fatigue: Invitations, Impatience, and Investments

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Permit me to open with a few quotes. The first two are definitions of which you may be familiar. They are:

Fatigue, a noun referring to extreme tiredness resulting from mental or physical exertion or illness.

Weariness, a noun describing a reluctance to see or experience any more of something. (Dictionary.com)

The next quote is the opening of a recent advice essay in *The Guardian*. The letter writer states:

Ever since I made the conscious decision to live my life fully as a feminist, it has been fraught with conflict and stress. I'm determined to make a mental note of any discrimination against my gender, to open my eyes and stop editing out instances — on the television, internet, radio, and day-to-day life — of women being treated differently to men... My conflict and stress don't originate in interactions or arguments with others, but from the mental effort of attempting not to live in a dreamlike state, ignoring evidence everywhere, all the time. ("I Live as a Feminist")

This passage is the opening to an advice essay entitled "I Live as a Feminist, but I'm Tired of Being Furious All the Time." In response to this dilemma, the columnist advises the letter writer to: "stop raging," because

Solutions are not found when we are incensed... We all want a new world that's far more female-shaped. That dream will only be realized using predominantly feminine qualities, such as reason, patience, endurance, and emotional sensitivity. For that we need to be calm, rational, and ready to listen, not in a state of rage. ("I Live as a Feminist.")

A confession: in one draft of this address, I dragged this columnist and what I considered to be her antiquated advice. If there is an emotion that has characterized feminism and – more specifically – the feminisms enacted among people of color and marginalized communities, it has been rage. June Jordan once confessed that the police officers who beat and disfigured a childhood friend “hardened her” and pushed her into a “place of rage” (Parmar). bell hooks observed that “sharing rage” fosters cross-generational alliances among those groups “seeking ways to be...self-determined” and participate in... [political] struggle” (hooks 19-20). Susan Stryker maintained that in “rebirthing [their] rage... rage rebirthed [them]” in her work on trans-life (237). Brittany Cooper has helped us understand when this emotion requires what she refers to as “homegirl interventions” (5). More recently, Hil Malatino extracted an “Infrapolitical Ethics of Care,” or a “reliance on a community of friends to protect and defend you from violence, to witness and mirror one another’s rage, in empathy, and to support one another during and after the breaking that accompanies rage” through their analysis of CeCe McDonald’s letters (130). Rage has been integral to the political self-actualization of most feminists. Indeed, for some of us, rage is our brand.

Eventually, I realized that I had encountered a version of *feminist fatigue* last spring during a conversation with the undergraduates in my Black Women’s Rhetoric class. When they fell silent during our session on Ida B. Wells’ rhetoric in “Lynch Law” and I tried to coax them back into the conversation, a brave young woman spoke up and said, “we’re tired of this.”

“Tired of what?” I asked.

“It’s overwhelming,” the student said. “It’s depressing.” Others nodded in agreement. “Why do we always have to look at the past? It’s hard enough being a Black woman here *right now*.”

I don’t want to call this a failure on my part, but I had already stumbled with this class. On the first day of the semester during my customary reading of Pearl Cleage’s “Why I Write” essay, one young woman teared up and another became visibly tense when we got to the passage where Cleage describes a mass shooting. In my efforts to begin the class as I always had, I did not consider the residual trauma many of them were experiencing in the wake of the November 2022 shooting on our campus. My choice to prioritize business as usual had set the stage for them to shut down.

The contrast between public discussions of *feminist fatigue* and the one I witnessed in my classroom is an inspiration for this address. While I imagine we’re all feeling the brunt of

pandemic-related issues, inflation, anti-immigration legislation, attacks on queer and trans communities, political corruption and insurgency, gun violence, and anti-woke curricular initiatives alongside our standard diet of harassment, misogyny, misogynoir, patriarchy, the “isms” and the “phobias,” I consider my undergrads’ confession a cause for concern. If we can agree that feminism is a project undergirded by hope (Glenn 2018) and an insistence on justice, what are we to make when a group of prospective feminists and young rhetoricians are already exhibiting apathy and overwhelm? What are feminists’ *ways of making it* (Balliff, Davis, and Mountford) in *times like these*? And, finally, how can we collectively imagine feminist futures when so many of us are tired?

My answer is that conversations about fatigue invite us to refine our approaches to listening, to deepen our understanding of relationships, and to invest in reparative practices. Black women and femmes hold no monopoly on exhaustion, but we have been talking about fatigue for a while. In the past decade, we’ve built upon the concept of “Racial Battle Fatigue” to include what Menah Pratt calls “racial and gender battle fatigue.” We have seen the emergence of groups like the Nap Ministry, and the publication of critical works such as Chanequa Walker Barnes’ *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, Marita Golden’s *The Strong Black Woman: How a Myth Endangers the Physical and Mental Health of Black Women*, April Baker Bell’s “For Loretta: A Black Woman Literacy Scholar’s Journey to Prioritizing Self-Preservation,” and public-facing works like Tricia Hersey’s *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto*. This is but a small sampling of a robust set of discourses on exhaustion happening among and about this group by Black feminist and womanist scholars that too often remain under-tapped for their broader insights about the nature of labor, work, and participation. In that vein, I devote the remainder of this address to identifying how fatigue among members of this group can be made *usable* to us as logics of participation, methods of disruption, and pathways to return.

“Truth is I’m Tired”: Fatigue as an Invitation to Listen

The first quotes I cited containing definitions of “fatigue” and “weariness” are attempts to pay homage to the late Audre Lorde, whose essay “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” is the other inspiration for this address. Lorde delivered “The Uses of Anger” as the 1981 National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) Conference keynote. By that time in her career, she had already published several poetry collections, helped to create Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and taught at Tougaloo, Lehman, and John Jay College where she fought for the creation of a Black Studies program. Although Lorde conceded that her position as an employed faculty member and one-half of a two-parent household gave her some economic stability, she used the occasion to call out NWSA’s commitment to equity, noting that the organization’s refusal to waive registration fees “for poor women and women of Color who wished to present and conduct workshops” undercut the liberatory potential of the conference’s theme of “responding to racism” (“Uses of Anger” 126). Lorde lists various racial and gender microaggressions she ex-

perienced as some of the sources of her anger, but she concludes that anger can be transformational because it's "loaded with information and energy," and, when "focused with precision, it can become a power source of energy serving progress and change" (127).

In "The Shape of My Impact," Alexis Pauline Gumbs informs us that when Lorde was diagnosed with cancer a few years later, she was not only denied medical leave, but she had to turn down a prestigious fellowship at Cornell University because Ithaca's climate was too cold for her battle with the illness. Moreover, Hunter College, the school Lorde would join just months after delivering her NWSA keynote, ultimately denied her requests to teach during the summer so she might live in climates more accommodating to her health concerns the rest of the year. Never mind that Hunter College's English Department would later hold a symposium to honor Lorde after her death. At this point, the institution was inflexible about how Lorde was to undertake the labor they expected of her (Gumbs).

I relate to these aspects of Lorde's career because at this point my situation looks different today than it did in October 2007 when I attended my first *Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference* at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock. I am now a tenured associate professor at an institution considered to be elite by some. Back then, however, I was a graduate student eager to present on Septima Clark, excited to meet fellow peers and friends that would push my thinking for years to come, thrilled to sit in a hotel lobby and chat with Dr. Royster, Dr. Logan, and the late Dr. Joyce Middleton, and unaware of how long it would take to pay off the credit card debt necessary to attend these events despite having generous mentors who let me room with them. I left that conference *invigorated and invested*. And so, when I took my first position as an assistant professor teaching a 4/4 load, I attended five conferences in less than two years, served on national committees, prepped five classes in four semesters, and published. And then, two years later, when I moved on to my next institution, a place where I would stay for six years, I dug even deeper into my reserves, attending at least twelve conferences and undertaking six campus visits, sitting on yearly hiring committees too often as the requisite person of color, prepping and piloting at least nine new courses, surviving two different tenure hearings, serving on executive boards, chairing committees, and planning one wedding and one funeral. I don't share these last details to elicit sympathy or to downplay the good outcomes I have experienced. The truth is, though, I'm tired because the road from Little Rock to Atlanta has been an exhausting one.

I am not alone here.

- A queer historian who has spent the first decade of their career assembling a groundbreaking archive and fighting to secure funding to house it receives an email soliciting their participation on yet another organization's Awards Committee. When they respond explaining they have just finished their third committee appointment in five years, they are told "but we need people like you to do this work."

- The sole woman of color on the editorial board of a scholarly journal receives an urgent request to write a piece for the journal's late summer/early fall 2020 issue. When the scholar tells the editor that she is committed to other projects and has *no new work* she can contribute at that time, the editor immediately writes back requesting the names of other scholars "who can provide the Black perspective." When the scholar sends the names of two other scholars who may be able to contribute, the editor circles back again and states: "I assume you can at least find the time to review these essays."
- An energetic young scholar agrees to become a section editor for an established journal despite teaching a 4/4 and carrying a considerable load of other service obligations. In less than two years, the scholar steps down from the position. When asked about her decision, she confesses "There was *no structure* in place, and I was just tired."
- An award-winning interdisciplinary scholar and researcher arrives two days early to the university where she will co-lead a week-long summer institute seminar. As she is catching up with her co-leader and finalizing their plans for leading the seminar, she begins to cry, saying: "I am tired. So tired."
- An associate professor and journal founder posts an apology on social media to the people to whom she "owes something," explaining that she has been overwhelmed and unable to deal with all of the obligations.

Patricia Hill Collins' (2016) work on *Black Feminist Thought* - and specifically her discussion of oppositional knowledges – arose from her study of the labor exploitation Black women experienced. Krista Ratcliffe's theory of "rhetorical listening" and her work to figure out how to "stand under" discourses developed as a response to the resentment and resistance Lorde's critique and truth-telling inspired among some white readers (Ratcliffe 2015). While I am sure many of us benefit from these valuable concepts, feminist rhetoricians still need frameworks to identify the kinds of assumptions, logics, and discourses that position Black women and other typically under-represented populations adversely within these spheres of labor and service. Said differently, in addition to "standing under" the discourses of others, how do we account for the discourses that inform how we "stand among" each other?

Fatigue narratives like these become *usable* when they push us to listen for what I consider as the "**seat at the table**" logics that position some of us for burnout and make inordinate labor requests seem reasonable. As Sara Ahmed observed in *On Being Included*, the longstanding challenge to creating diverse and equitable working environments is a compulsory atmosphere of "happiness" where workers, and particularly members of under-represented groups, feel that they are expected to appear agreeable or perform gratitude for the opportunity to labor

(2012). Conversely, as Carmen Kynard explains in “All I Need is One Mic,” there is a distinction between the “job,” or the compensatory tasks or acts of service individuals undertake, and the “work,” or the labor that should emerge from a person’s convictions and commitments, that is too often confused in these labor conditions. “Seat at the table” logics are the claims and assumptions about work, duty, and membership that Black women, and truly any number of historically under-represented groups, internalize and navigate that lead to such confusion.

Three of the prevalent logics that circulate in our contemporary moment are: 1) the scarcity/gratitude logic which says “there are limited seats at this table, so you must demonstrate willingness and gratitude to be there”; 2) the “*when and where I /you enter*” logic which says: “I am/you are the only one of your group at this table, so I/you must represent for my/your community;” and, finally, 3) the “change is slow and institutions are firmly built” logic which says you “must put in present work for future gain.” The latter is a particularly potent logic that not only makes change and accountability subjective or invisible but can also absolve those who are inhibiting progress of said accountability by amplifying the message that it is hard to undo tradition. Some of these logics have originated as survival mindsets designed to protect groups attempting to enter previously closed spaces from surveillance, disappointment, or exclusion. In these ways, they are not altogether dangerous, and they do not prevent individuals from being vocal or critical during a working or collaborative effort. These logics simply become dangerous when they justify unfair critiques or inordinate expectations placed on others.

Let’s consider again the narrative about the scholar of color who was approached to write for the special issue. While it is likely that this woman joined the board to help promote more diversity in the journal, the editor does not acknowledge the lack of representation on their board but expects her to perform multiple forms of labor. In this instance, the scholar ultimately chose not to undertake the labor expected of them, but “seat at the table” logics enable us to hear the lines of thought and largely unspoken messages at work when underrepresented groups feel obligated to take on tasks *time and time again*. These logics also highlight the mechanisms that contribute to the state of the Black Rhetorical Condition, or what Elaine Richardson describes as a state of being “desired and devalued” (33). Imagine if we, a body of feminists and rhetoricians, built these forms of fatigue and these logics into our approaches to mentoring, organization, and engagement. Imagine if we thought about the assumptions that we internalize about the duties we should uphold or the labor expectations we project onto others. Imagine if we thought more about rest as we are thinking about representation.

“Get Somebody Else to Do It”: Impatience as Resignation

Fatigue does not always look like lethargy. Sometimes it looks like confrontation or disruption. Such was the case when Civil Rights Attorney and activist Nekima Levy Armstrong interrupted a February 2022 press conference about Minneapolis Police Officer’s shooting of Amir

Locke, a 22-year-old Black man who was asleep on a sofa when officers entered Locke's cousin's apartment thinking they had located a suspect in a different crime. Locke did not survive the shooting and the protesters and city leaders who spoke out on the murder condemned the police's use of a no-knock warrant. When the city's mayor and Police Department officials took to the podium during a press conference a few days after the subsequent protests, the Police Chief acknowledged how "everyone knows" the kinds of threats officers face and how "quickly" the officers had to make the decisions that culminated in the shooting that transpired ("Anatomy"). Minutes into the Police Chief's remarks, [Levy-Armstrong – who was co-chairing a public safety task force at the time – stood up and interrupted the speaker](#), approaching the podium while opening her coat and facing the cameras to indicate that she did not have a weapon (see Figure 1). In the eight-minute remarks that followed, Levy-Armstrong pivots between directly addressing the mayor and the Police Chief as she calls out what she describes as the "anatomy of a cover-up," or the organizational structures and decision-making practices that enabled the Police Department to absolve themselves of responsibility in Locke's death. Exasperated, she declares that she is:

expecting strong leadership, I'm expecting integrity, and I'm expecting accountability. You guys aren't going to waste my God damn time... I can be used to come speak the truth about what needs to happen, but when it's time to call out these inconsistencies, these inaccuracies, the lack of information, I gotta sit in the back? Or not even be invited? I'm not here for it. ("[Anatomy](#)")

In an interview with Levy-Armstrong shortly after the press conference incident, journalist Roland Martin introduced the activist by saying that she was "sick and tired" of listening to excuses ("[Anatomy](#)").



Figure 1 : Attorney and activist Natasha Levy Armstrong turning to cameras to indicate that she does not pose a threat during a February 2022 Minneapolis Police Department press conference following the shooting of Amir Locke.

Obviously, there is a difference between the service-inspired burnout I illustrated with the previous fatigue narratives and the activist burnout Levy-Armstrong articulated during the press conference. In this latter instance, fatigue becomes usable as a way of understanding how Black women rescript the terms of their working engagements and advocacy. Within her eight-minute

remarks, Levy-Armstrong moves deftly through several significant rhetorical tasks. In addition to creating an opening to speak in a moment that is assumed to be closed by generic conventions and articulating her commitments and personal convictions as a civil servant and the mother of a Black son, she redirects the ethical responsibility of service back onto the city's leadership with her actual threat of quitting the working group. These moves of employing spectacle, articulating an unapologetic stance, and calling out how the working group was wasting her time are all emblematic of the *rhetorics of impatience*, or discourses and performances of urgency and exasperation used in pursuit of equity and control (Carey 2020), Black women use as forms of resistance and discipline in the interest of self-care and wellness.

As I explain in "Necessary Adjustments," these rhetorics operate as resistance against forms of *temporal hegemony*, or structures and systems that converge and push equity further and further out of reach (270). Although the Police Chief was not attempting to push or delay any particular goal away from Levy-Armstrong, her reference to the "speed" in which her officers were forced to make their decisions suggests that the chief felt licensed to rush past the questions about accountability that would understandably follow. Had Levy-Armstrong subscribed to the "seat at the table" logic that suggests change happens slowly and that it's difficult to undo traditions, she might not have been as possessive over the currency of her time or the way the city leaders seemed fine with exploiting her activism when it served their purposes. To disrupt and discipline the leaders away from these lines of thinking – lines of thinking that could result in the loss of a life – Levy Armstrong brings her "whole self" (Lorde) to this moment, embodying indignation and calling for reciprocity. Fatigue channeled as impatience becomes usable when it shows us how people like Levy Armstrong reject any attempt to make them complicit in their own oppression or the disregard of the communities for whom they labor. At this point, resignation is the only option.

We will not all end up on the frontlines of efforts against state violence, nor will we all take active roles in racial and other social justice campaigns. As feminists, however, the minimal amount of work we should feel compelled to undertake is the task of learning to see, hear, and respond accordingly to the calls for accountability rhetoricians like Karma Chavez (2013), Eric Darnell Pritchard (2017), and Elliot Tetreault (2018) have made to advise us on how to responsibly show up for each other in our coalitional work. Imagine if the pedagogies we developed in our classroom spaces amplified these moments of impatience and fatigue as exemplars of activism rather than leaving them unengaged or misread as forms of incivility. Imagine if we did more to cultivate the kinds of emotional literacies necessary to stand among and stand up for each other in crisis.

"No Ways Tired": Fatigue as a Call to Invest in Homecoming

I began this address by identifying *feminist fatigue* and how I had observed it, but I want to

close by returning to the definition of weariness, or the reluctance to see or experience any more of something. The case studies I have discussed are extensions of my current projects on urgency and risk, but it is the project I did on healing that has yet to let me go. That project has taught me that too often we skip the stage of grief that happens between trauma - by way of microaggressions or bigger systems of violence - and healing. The impulse to rush back to “business as usual” is understandable if we have the fear that taking time for ourselves will result in us giving up or falling apart, but it can be shortsighted when some of us are still weary. Well before the pandemic, I began to notice how many dynamic feminist scholars and or women of color have experienced have experienced fights with cancer. Indeed, I have worked alongside some of them and consider them among my dearest friends. Again, I don’t share these details lightly. Instead, I am convinced by scholars like Jenifer Nash (2022) who writes of “slow loss” and Black feminist endurance that we must sit with and grieve how heavy the weight of fatigue has been on us, particularly on women and people of color.

Yet, as we’ve gathered here at Spelman College, an institution with an esteemed history and a beacon within an HBCU culture, I am inspired by the concept of a homecoming and how our opening session between Dr. Bachelor-Robinson and Dr. Royster launched us into this conference. Growing up in the Black Church, I understand homecomings as reunions and gatherings that should replenish us. As someone who studies healing though, I also see the concept of homecoming as a potentially radical reparative project. In her recent book *Homecoming: Overcome Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self*, psychologist Thema Bryant explains that fatigue is a sign of disconnection, an indicator that a person is out of touch, burdened down, and cut off from the sources that give them life. Among the solutions that Bryant offers is a project of reparenting. The logic is that we can extend to ourselves the care and support we have not always received. Ideally, these intentional practices will enable us to counteract weariness by being compassionate to ourselves first.

As I close, I want to imagine several *homecoming* practices we might invest in as a coalition. Imagine if we made the restorative circles and other inclusive efforts intentionally built into this conference part of the coalition’s legacy. Imagine if the organizers of the next conference *kept that same energy* as the organizers of this year’s conference exhibited and built in mechanisms for the rest and repair of their attendees. Also, imagine if we did more by way of recognition and self-actualization to combat the harmful “seat of the table” logics that position so many of us for exhaustion, perhaps through compiling or archiving fatigue narratives such as the ones I shared. Imagine if we as a coalition invested in or partnered with restorative training efforts such as Beth Godbee and Candace Epps-Robertson’s recently developed “Pathways Through Burnout” cohort program to stop the trend where we suffer through fatigue in “isolation” by joining spaces for “discussion, reflection, processing, and guidance” (“Pathways”). Imagine if we remixed the logic that change is slow and we rebuilt ourselves with the affirmation that our work, as a coalition, as scholars and teachers, as feminists, womanists, and as citizens, *is and has always*

been necessary and that our presence is valuable. Imagine if we took rest in the fact that even as so many of us are tired, we are still here.

Thank you.

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