The exhausted body of leadership: toward a phenomenology of *permeable leadership*

Le corps épuisé du leadership : vers une phénoménologie du leadership perméable



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Abstract

This paper examines leadership not as strategic competence or heroic achievement, but as a lived bodily condition shaped by migraines, muscular contractions, insomnia, withheld breath and chronic fatigue. Drawing on fragmentary autoethnography, feminist phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006; Csordas, 1994) and critical leadership studies (Sinclair, 2005; Ford, 2010), I argue that exhaustion is not peripheral to contemporary leadership: it constitutes one of its central affective and political textures, structurally produced by the neoliberal logics of contemporary organizations.

The contribution is fourfold.

- Theoretically, I propose the concept of permeable leadership, defined as a form of direction that recognizes bodily limits as organizational information rather than individual failure, redistributes invisible labor along equity rather than gender and status lines, and values slowness, incompleteness and fragmentation as conditions of possibility for quality thinking and decision-making.
- Politically, I argue that leaders' exhaustion constitutes a largely underestimated democratic, epistemic and collective cost.
- Ethically, I show that exhaustion does not remain confined to the leader's body but is transmitted to teams and organizations.
- Methodologically, I defend fragmentary writing and an epistemology of slowness as acts of resistance to neoliberal acceleration logics.

Positioning note

This paper is written from a situated body: that of a woman holding a leadership position in higher education. The autoethnography used here is not confession: it is an epistemic choice. It assumes that embodied experience is a legitimate starting point for theorization, provided it is placed in tension with analytical frameworks capable of moving beyond its singularity[1].

1. What the literature does not see: a critical state of the art

Dominant theories of leadership have largely ignored the body.

Transformational approaches (Bass & Avolio, 1994) posit a charismatic, visionary leader capable of lifting collaborators toward higher ideals, without ever asking what this costs, bodily, the person who embodies the role. Authentic leadership theories (George, 2003; Avolio & Gardner, 2005) value self-knowledge and coherence between values and actions, but presuppose a psychologically stable

and available subject, a fiction that erases the material and bodily conditions in which leadership is actually exercised. Resilience approaches, omnipresent in contemporary management literature, go even further in this direction: they turn the capacity to absorb exhaustion into a valued professional competence, thereby naturalizing the conditions that produce that exhaustion rather than questioning them.

Critical leadership studies (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Ford, Harding & Learmonth, 2008) marked an important break by interrogating the ideological presuppositions of these approaches. They brought to light the dimensions of power, gender and identity that run through leadership. But even in this critical current, **the exhausted body remains largely absent**: mentioned, brushed against, but rarely theorized as a central analytical object.

This blind spot is precisely what this paper seeks to occupy. The aim is not only to think leadership differently, but to **think it from a place the dominant literature has systematically avoided**: the tired, fragile, saturated body that is nonetheless compelled to keep leading.

2. The neoliberal university and its bodies

Before entering the fragments, the context that produces them must be named.

The contemporary university operates according to logics of competitive excellence, permanent evaluation and continuous optimization of individual and collective performance (Ball, 2003; Lorenz, 2012; Dardot & Laval, 2010). These logics do not remain abstract: they are inscribed in bodies. They shape subjectivities compelled to manage themselves as enterprises of the self: available, resilient, enthusiastic, ever more productive.

Academic leadership occupies a particularly exposed position in this configuration: it must simultaneously *embody* institutional norms and *absorb* their contradictions. It thus becomes the site of a bodily double bind: appearing in command of oneself while being traversed by the injunctions of an institution that never sleeps.

What the university makes visible, however, applies well beyond its walls. Care organizations, cultural structures, public administrations, NGOs: any environment where leadership is saturated with relational expectations and under-resourced reproduces analogous configurations. What these environments share is a *collision between vocational ethos and neoliberal logic*: one enters these professions out of commitment, a sense of service, a desire to contribute, and it is precisely this commitment that is captured, mobilized and exhausted by organizations that know it does not run dry easily. This paper starts from the university. It speaks of something broader.

3. The body as a site of leadership

Fragment 6:13 a.m.

“Before opening the curtains, I open my emails. Three unread messages marked urgent. A student in distress. A colleague asking if I could ‘take a quick look’ at a document. A reminder for a meeting I had forgotten.

👉🏾 My jaw tightens before I am even fully awake. My body goes to work before my mind does. Leadership, I have learned, often begins in the body before it reaches language.”

Dominant theories of leadership remain largely a-corporeal or non-corporeal. They presuppose a willing, energetic subject, in command of their self-presentation. Yet leading often begins in the body before it reaches language: in the jaw that clenches, in the breathing that quickens, in the hand that trembles behind the muted screen.

Drawing on the notion of embodiment developed by Merleau-Ponty and taken up in critical organization studies, this paper treats the leader's body not as an instrument of managerial will, but as an archive of institutional injunctions. That is, a body formed, surveilled, gendered, always already disciplined to appear competent, available, serene.

If the body is the first site of leadership, it is also the first site of its cost, a point the next section seeks to theorize.

4. Exhaustion as a political condition

Fragment Corridor

“A colleague stops me between two meetings. ‘Can I ask you something quickly?’ Quickly almost never means quickly. I smile. I slow my pace. I listen.

👉🏾 My laptop strap cuts into my shoulder. I realize I have not eaten since the previous evening. I nonetheless perform attention. Leadership is often measured by availability. The open door. The warm tone. The calm face. The body that stays accessible, even as it collapses inside.”

Fatigue is ordinarily treated as individual dysfunction: poor time management, lack of resilience, personal inadequacy. This paper refuses that frame.

Exhaustion is structurally produced by contemporary configurations of leadership, which simultaneously demand constant responsiveness, continuous emotional regulation, institutional visibility and a performance of enthusiasm. These injunctions are inscribed differently in bodies according to gender, status and

position; exhaustion is not distributed equitably, but along lines of structural vulnerability.

Exhaustion, in this sense, is a political signal: it makes visible the machinery that heroic leadership exists precisely to conceal.

But exhaustion is not merely occasional. It settles in. It becomes a condition. This is what the next section seeks to grasp.

5. The body in time: the chronicity of exhaustion

Fragment Calendar

"I look at my calendar for the past year. I look for a week without an urgent meeting, without a crisis to absorb, without required availability. I cannot find one. It is not a bad moment. It is the structure."

There is an important analytical difference between being tired on occasion and inhabiting exhaustion as a chronic state. The first belongs to recovery. The second belongs to condition.

Byung-Chul Han (*The Burnout Society*, 2010) analyzes how contemporary performance societies produce a systemic exhaustion that is no longer tied to external exploitation but to consensual self-exploitation: the neoliberal subject wears themselves out in the pursuit of their own optimization. Jonathan Crary (*24/7*, 2013) extends this analysis by showing how the progressive suppression of rest time constitutes a structural attack on the very possibility of recovery.

For leadership, this chronicity has a specific consequence: **exhaustion ceases to be an exceptional state and becomes the ground against which all activity unfolds.** One no longer leads while occasionally tired. One leads from exhaustion as a baseline condition.

Sara Ahmed (*Willful Subjects*, 2014) names what this costs: *willfulness*, the constant effort of wanting to continue despite everything, of holding course when the body says stop. An effort that is not seen, not counted, and that silently accumulates in the tissues.

This chronicity is not distributed equally. It follows lines of gender, race and status, which the next section seeks to map.

6. Invisible emotional labor and its gendered and racialized distribution

Fragment Office, 6:47 p.m.

“The building is almost empty. I finally begin the work I was supposed to be doing all day. The strategic work. The intellectual work. The kind that requires concentration. The day itself disappeared into care. Emails. Students. Administrative emergencies. Listening. Encouraging. Reassuring. Mediating. Absorbing.

👉🏾 My neck hurts. I stare at one sentence for eleven minutes. I no longer know whether I am tired or whether I have simply become indistinguishable from my own exhaustion.”

To lead often means: containing collective anxieties, regulating interpersonal tensions, producing institutional optimism, absorbing organizational dysfunctions. This work, massively feminized, rarely measured, never counted in performance metrics, nonetheless leaves traces. Not on CVs. On nervous systems.

In dialogue with Hochschild's work on emotional labor and its extension in feminist organization studies (Acker, 1990; Fletcher, 1999), certain bodies become **interfaces of institutional absorption**: surfaces on which a continuous extraction of relational, affective and cognitive energy is exercised.

Fragment Conversation between colleagues

A colleague, head of department for three years, tells me in confidence: “I'm exhausted too. But I can't say it.” “Why?” He thinks for a moment. “Because if I say it, I'm no longer the head. I'm just someone who isn't up to it.”

Leadership exhaustion is not an exclusively female experience. Men in leadership positions also experience fatigue, insomnia, the pressure of continuous performance. To claim otherwise would be to substitute one essentialism for another.

What differs is **the form this exhaustion takes, what it is allowed to show, and the invisible labor with which it is associated.** Women leaders structurally carry more of the invisible emotional and relational labor. Male leaders are more exposed to the injunction of invulnerability, producing an exhaustion of silence rather than of absorption.

To this gender asymmetry is added a racial dimension that this paper can only sketch but that it would be theoretically irresponsible to ignore. Work on *racial battle fatigue* (Smith, 2004) documents the specific exhaustion produced by the permanent negotiation of institutional racism, continuous vigilance, the management of microaggressions, and the effort of representation and legitimation that racialized leaders must deploy simply to occupy positions that others inhabit without apparent effort. This exhaustion overlays the others without being reducible to them, producing bodily configurations of a complexity that leadership theories have barely begun to theorize.

Gender and race thus structure not *who* is exhausted, but **how exhaustion is organized, distributed, silenced or spoken**, and what institutional resources are available to name it without paying the price.

This invisible labor does not unfold in a technological vacuum. It is amplified, accelerated and made permanent by the digital tools that redefine the boundaries of work, which the next section examines.

7. Technology as an amplifier of exhaustion

Fragment 11:14 p.m.

A notification. Then another. A message marked “urgent” on the institutional messaging system. An email from the dean's office, copying me on something that concerns me only half. I reply. Because not replying is also a decision, one that will be paid for tomorrow. I wonder since when “being available” has become synonymous with “being competent.”

Digital tools have brought about a **structural recomposition of what it means to be available**. They have removed the temporal and spatial boundaries that once separated work from non-work, turning permanent connectivity into an implicit norm of professionalism.

Byung-Chul Han names this phenomenon forced transparency: the obligation to be always visible, always reactive, always traceable. This transparency produces a specific exhaustion: that of having nowhere to disappear, no moment in which not to be the leader. The body no longer knows when it is allowed to stop being one.

If technology amplifies exhaustion, organizations offer responses to it, responses that deserve careful examination, so great is the risk that they produce exactly what they claim to resolve.

8. Recovery as a new injunction

Fragment Institutional email

Subject: Take care of yourself - staff well-being resources.

The message contains a link to a meditation app. And a reminder about Thursday's stress-management seminar. It was sent at 7:23 a.m. By someone who, I am certain, did not sleep either.

Well-being has become an additional performance. Organizations that exhaust their leaders simultaneously organize mindfulness retreats, resilience workshops

and burnout-prevention programs. In doing so, they do not resolve exhaustion; they turn it back toward the individual as an additional personal responsibility.

This dynamic constitutes a form of the **depoliticization of exhaustion** (Cederström & Spicer, 2015): by naturalizing stress as a personal challenge to be overcome through individual practices, one carefully avoids questioning the organizational conditions that produce it. Corporate yoga does not shorten meetings. Meditation does not redistribute invisible emotional labor.

This depoliticization has an equally powerful individual counterpart: the guilt of taking care of oneself in environments that have made availability a moral norm.

9. Self-*care* as transgression

Fragment - After class

A student says to me on her way out: “You always give us energy.” I thank her. Then I lock my office door and sit in silence for twenty minutes because standing up suddenly seems impossible. Those twenty minutes feel like a fault. As if stopping were already a failure toward something.

The literature on the ethics of care (Tronto, 1993; Gilligan, 1982) has largely documented how care given to others constitutes a central moral value in feminized environments. What it has explored less is the **specific cost of the impossibility of self-care** in those same environments.

Closing a door. Sitting for twenty minutes in silence. Declining a meeting. Saying “I can't.” These elementary gestures of self-preservation are experienced as **moral transgressions** in the organizational cultures of contemporary leadership. This reversal reveals how certain organizations have **internalized the exhaustion of their members as a resource**. Self-care then becomes a political act as much as an act of survival.

If taking care of oneself is already a transgression, structurally refusing the demands of leadership constitutes an even more radical form of resistance, which the next section seeks to theorize.

10. Silence and exit as embodied resistance

Fragment Meeting

A senior colleague repeats an idea I disagree with. Normally, I would intervene. Today, I stay silent. At first, the silence feels like failure. Then, unexpectedly: relief. My body relaxes slightly. I begin to wonder whether silence can also be a form of leadership. Or perhaps a refusal of its demands.

Fragment Stepping down

I announce that I will not renew my term. The reactions are of three kinds. Some understand immediately and without explanation. Others look for the real reason, the hidden failure, the unspoken conflict. Still others seem slightly offended, as if leaving were a form of abandonment. No one asks me how I am. I realize that my departure disturbs more than my exhaustion ever did.

Silence in a meeting is not passivity. It is a **deliberate economy of a rare energy**. Radical exit — not renewing a term, declining a promotion, deliberately choosing to reduce one's institutional visibility — constitutes the most accomplished form of this embodied resistance. It is increasingly documented, notably among women executives and racialized people who leave leadership positions not through failure but through a **refusal to keep paying the bodily price** (Hewlett, 2007; Wingfield, 2019).

What the reaction to departures reveals is just as instructive: an institution that takes more offense at the departure than at the exhaustion that preceded it says something important about what it truly values in its leaders. **It values availability, not the person.**

Exhaustion, however, does not remain confined to the body that lives it. It spills over. It spreads. It affects those who work under the direction of someone exhausted, which the next section seeks to bring to light.

11. The transmission of exhaustion: what we do to others when we are exhausted

Fragment Team meeting

I am in a meeting with my team. I know I am only half listening. I answer faster than usual. Shorter. Fewer questions. After the meeting, a colleague says to me: “You seemed rushed. Did we miss something important?” I realize that my exhaustion has already made decisions in my place.

A leader's exhaustion does not remain confined to their body. It is **transmitted**.

Research on emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1993) shows that affective states spread within groups through largely unconscious mechanisms: micro-expressions, postures, quality of attention, rhythm of speech. A chronically exhausted leader transmits their emotional state to their team, involuntarily producing what the literature calls **passive toxic leadership**, not out of malice but through the depletion of the attentional and emotional resources that make quality leadership possible.

This dimension raises a **fundamental ethical question**: can one be a responsible leader when one is structurally exhausted? Not to add guilt to fatigue, but to show that leaders' exhaustion is a **collective and organizational** problem, whose effects spread well beyond the body that first absorbs it.

If exhaustion is transmitted to teams, it also affects the quality of collective decisions, with consequences that go beyond individual well-being to reach the democratic functioning of organizations.

12. The democratic and epistemic cost of exhaustion

Fragment Decision

In a meeting, a proposal is put to a vote. I know it deserves to be questioned. I know the arguments. I developed them mentally the night before. But voicing them now, in this state, in front of these faces, would require an energy I no longer have. I vote yes. Tonight, I no longer know whether it was wisdom or capitulation.

An exhausted leader no longer thinks the same way.

Research in cognitive science converges in documenting the effects of chronic fatigue on decision-making: reduced divergent thinking, increased confirmation bias, conflict avoidance, preference for known options (Kahneman, 2011; Baumeister & Tierney, 2011). Exhaustion produces **cognitive conservatism**, not out of conviction, but out of energy economy.

Chronically exhausted leaders make more conformist decisions, avoid necessary challenges, and reproduce existing norms rather than interrogating them. **Exhaustion is therefore also a democratic and epistemic problem**: it impoverishes the quality of collective deliberation and structurally favors the reproduction of the status quo.

Treating leaders' exhaustion as a matter of individual well-being is not only insufficient; it is also an analytical error. It is a question of the **quality of collective decisions** and of organizations' capacity to transform rather than reproduce themselves.

Given these findings, it is time to propose not only a critique but an alternative. That is, a conceptual framework capable of imagining a different leadership.

13. Writing differently: fragmentation and an epistemology of slowness

Methodological note

This paper refuses a fluid narrative structure. Fragmentation is not a stylistic decoration. It is a methodological necessity. Fatigue is not linear. It scatters attention. It destabilizes memory. It creates discontinuous forms of presence. The fragments do not merely describe exhaustion. They attempt to reproduce its rhythms: interruption, accumulation, compression, repetition, saturation. Writing differently is here inseparable from thinking differently.

In line with the renewal of academic writing forms (Richardson, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Sparkes, 2002), this paper assumes that **the way one writes is inseparable from what one thinks**. Conventional academic prose produces coherence retrospectively. Applied to exhaustion, it would do violence to what it claims to describe: it would reconstitute a mastery where there is precisely none.

The defense of fragmentary writing belongs to a broader project: that of an **epistemology of slowness** as resistance to neoliberal acceleration logics. Berg and Seeber (*The Slow Professor*, 2016) proposed rehabilitating slowness as an intellectual practice, not as laziness, but as a condition of possibility for deep and truly original thought.

This paper is itself a demonstration of this thesis. It refuses formal optimization. It accepts incompleteness. **The form is the thesis**: writing slowly, in fragments, from bodily experience, is already an act of epistemic resistance to the norms of the neoliberal university that this paper questions.

14. Permeable leadership: definition and shifts

Fragment Night, 2:11 a.m.

I wake up remembering an email I forgot to send. My body no longer distinguishes the urgency of ordinary life. I think of all the invisible ways in which institutions inhabit us. The calendar enters sleep. The meeting enters the muscle. The deadline enters the breath. When did we decide that this was normal?

I propose to shift the dominant normative framework toward what I call **permeable leadership**.

Definition: permeable leadership is a form of direction that recognizes bodily limits as organizational information rather than individual failure; that redistributes invisible labor along principles of equity rather than gender and status; that values slowness, incompleteness and fragmentation as conditions of

possibility for quality thinking and decision-making; and that treats leaders' fatigability not as an exception to be managed but as a structural given to be integrated into the very architecture of organizations.

This concept is operationalized through five shifts:

1. **Making exhaustion sayable.** Create institutional spaces where fatigue can be named collectively, without being sent back to the individual as a symptom of their inadequacy.
2. **Redistributing invisible labor.** Make tasks of care, mediation and emotional absorption visible. Count them, recognize them, share them otherwise than along lines of gender, race and status.
3. **Protecting fragmentation.** Stop treating bodily limits as dysfunctions to be corrected with more resilience, and start reading them as information about the state of organizations.
4. **Recognizing self-care as an organizational competence.** Value self-preservation as a condition of possibility for leadership that is durable, lucid and democratically responsible.
5. **Interrupting the transmission of exhaustion.** Recognize that leading in chronic exhaustion is a collective risk, and create the structural conditions that allow leaders to withdraw, slow down and hand over without this being experienced as failure.

Perhaps we need less resilient leaders and more permeable ones, able to acknowledge limits rather than transcend them indefinitely. Able to let fatigue become a political resource rather than a private shame.

Closing note: toward a research program

This paper constitutes a first theoretical and methodological mapping of a largely unexplored territory: that of **the exhausted body as a central analytical object** in critical leadership studies.

The questions it opens call for a research program organized around five axes.

The first is **comparative**: how does leadership exhaustion take shape differently across sectors, organizational cultures and national contexts? Testing the robustness of the concept of permeable leadership in environments as diverse as the hospital, the school, public administration or business is an empirical priority.

The second is **intersectional**: ethnicity, class, disability, age and statutory precarity produce specific bodily configurations that deserve to be theorized in their articulation. A rigorous research agenda on the exhausted body cannot dispense with this complexity.

The third is **neurobiological and clinical**: research on the long-term effects of chronic stress, changes in cortisol levels, the impact on the hippocampus, and the sensitization of the autonomic nervous system (McEwen, 2007) suggests that chronic exhaustion leaves lasting, sometimes irreversible traces. A dialogue between critical leadership studies and the neuroscience of stress would be a necessary interdisciplinary contribution.

The fourth is **organizational and political**: institutions often maintain a strategic ignorance in the face of their members' exhaustion, seeing without seeing, knowing without acting. Theorizing this organizational denial, its mechanisms and its functions, would help us understand why technical solutions systematically fail to resolve what they claim to treat.

The fifth is **conjunctural**: the Covid-19 pandemic was an extraordinary revealer of the dynamics described in this paper. A period during which leaders had to lead simultaneously amid exhaustion, collective mourning and radical uncertainty. The empirical data accumulated in this period provide an exceptionally rich corpus for testing and extending the theoretical propositions advanced here.

Permeable leadership is not a managerial utopia. It is a **working hypothesis**: that organizations capable of making fatigue sayable, redistributing invisible labor, interrupting the transmission of exhaustion and protecting their members' fragmentation will, in the long run, be fairer, more durable, and paradoxically more effective than those that continue to extract in silence.

This paper does not claim to have exhausted the question. It claims to have opened it.

Notes

[1] On the epistemological legitimacy of autoethnography, see Ellis & Bochner (2000), who defend the analytical value of personal experience as a theoretical starting point, provided it is placed in dialogue with conceptual frameworks capable of moving beyond its singularity. For a response to the classic criticisms of subjectivism and the impossibility of generalization, see Chang (2008) and Anderson (2006) on analytic autoethnography.

#Keywords: leadership · exhaustion · body · emotional labor · autoethnography · feminist phenomenology · race · neoliberal university · technology · care · embodied resistance · exit · transmission of exhaustion · fragmentary writing · epistemology of slowness · permeable leadership · intersectionality · democratic cost

Theoretical corpus: Ahmed · Csordas · Hochschild · Acker · Fletcher · Sinclair · Ford · Alvesson & Spicer · Bass & Avolio · George · Merleau-Ponty · Ball · Lorenz · Dardot & Laval · Puwar · Smith · Han · Crary · Tronto · Gilligan · Kahneman ·

Baumeister & Tierney · Cederström & Spicer · Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson · Hewlett · Wingfield · McEwen · Berg & Seeber · Richardson · Ellis & Bochner · Chang · Anderson · Sparkes

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