Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 21: Exhaustion as a temporal and social predicament

Organizer: Mette B Risør, Ayo Wahlberg, Emily Mendenhall, Karin Friederic

Abstract: Existential exhaustion is a pervasive phenomenon in contemporary societies, affecting people of all ages in various ways. Societies worldwide are marked by social, temporal, and technological acceleration, leading to burnout, exhaustion, and complete weariness. Additionally, global issues such as climate change, war, and displacement intensify the strains of human existence. This manifests differently across life stages: adolescents experience mental distress perpetuated by forms of digital exhaustion, young women may choose not to become mothers, employees suffer from burnout, and elderly individuals become worn out, requiring care which can, in turn, generate caregiver burnout.

In these ways, exhaustion can be seen as both a structural by-product and an existential affliction, just as it may develop into a medical condition or be directly linked to the embodied effects of chronic conditions, highlighting a challenging intersection between symptoms of exhaustion and the medical system. This panel invites papers exploring questions such as: How does exhaustion affect the body, life, and social relations? How is exhaustion sensed, managed and met, considering social inequality? How does exhaustion impact or redefine ethical practices? How does exhaustion manifest in 'energy-limiting conditions' within the medical system? How is exhaustion understood and configured in everyday life, biomedical settings, and socio-cultural and political contexts?

Exhaustion challenges our daily routines and practices. It has the potential to transform lived experiences, shaping perceptions of the good life and everyday ethics. While exhaustion disrupts the temporality of life, it may also create new forms of time management and subjectivity.

SESSION SCHEDULE

17.09.2025 | Slot 3 & 4| 4-0-5

Camilla Braendstrup Laursen, Cecilie Winther Bang, Helle Løn: Embodied Well-being:

Energy, Exhaustion, and Bodily Difference among Danish School Children
strup Haslund-Thomsen, Charlotte Nørkjær Eggertsen, Søren Hagstrøm, Sine Agergaard

Karin Friederic: From Burnout to ME/CFS: Legibility, Chronicity, and the Changing Diagnostic Politics of Exhaustion in Sweden

Fred Haocheng Lai: The Night's Wound: Dementia, Care, and Ordinary Exhaustion in Extraordinary Times

Antti Lindfors: Exhaustion and Its Discontents: Functional Disorders and Therapeutic Polarization

Ida Vandsøe Madsen: Imaginal Worldbuilding: How family caregivers of people with dementia in Denmark endure exhaustion

Nana Francisca Schottländer: The Resting Lab: The practice of resting against the odds

Robert Smith: Chakkar: the embodiment of systemic exhaustion

Tanisha Spratt: Resisting Racialised Exhaustion: The Power and Politics of Black Joy

SESSION PAPERS

Embodied Well-being: Energy, Exhaustion, and Bodily Difference among Danish School Children

Camilla Braendstrup Laursen, Cecilie Winther Bang, Helle Lønstrup Haslund-Thomsen, Charlotte Nørkjær Eggertsen, Søren Hagstrøm, Sine Agergaard

The well-being of children and adolescents is currently on the global agenda. In Denmark, the government has established an expert commission (Trivselskommissionen) in response to what has been framed in the media as a well-being "crisis". In its report from February 2025, the commission described a high and accelerated tempo of life leading to "a new sensation of being out of breath" (forpustethed) among children and adolescents. Consistent with previous research, the commission emphasized physical activity, play, and engagement with "natural and diverse bodies" as beneficial to well-being.
This paper is based on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork on embodiment, well-being, and different body sizes. The fieldwork is conducted between February and June 2025 at a Danish public school, where three classes (2nd, 4th, and 7th grade) are followed and observed for 20 days each, and children and teachers are interviewed in focus groups. The children are accompanied during school days, including teaching, physical activity sessions, trips, lunch breaks, and playtime. Drawing inspiration from sensory ethnography and phenomenology of the body, the paper explores how school children with different body sizes move, inhabit, and understand their bodies in interaction with other children. It discusses fieldwork observations through the conceptual lenses of energy and exhaustion (the latter manifesting itself in forpustethed), attending not only

to the concrete, embodied, sensed manifestations of forpustethed, but also to an existential sense of forpustethed that relates to the children's well-being. Such focus on energy and exhaustion may redirect understandings of well-being from mental health towards embodied living.

From Burnout to ME/CFS: Legibility, Chronicity, and the Changing Diagnostic Politics of Exhaustion in Sweden

Karin Friederic

In Sweden, utmattningssyndrom (exhaustion disorder or burnout) has played a pivotal role in expanding diagnostic possibilities for individuals experiencing new-onset fatigue and stress-related symptoms not fully aligned with depression or anxiety. Officially recognized in 2005 in the Swedish ICD-10 diagnostic system, the diagnosis—colloquially known as burnout—has shaped both clinical and popular understandings of persistent exhaustion.

However, ongoing healthcare reforms now propose eliminating utmattningssyndrom as a diagnostic category. For many patients, its legitimacy has hinged on temporality: improvement is expected through rest and a gradual return to work. When recovery does not occur, alternative diagnoses must be sought. This paper draws on interviews with 15 Swedish patients diagnosed with ME/CFS, most of whom were previously diagnosed with utmattningssyndrom. I ask: What has this diagnosis—legally, medically, and publicly recognized—both enabled and constrained in ME/CFS patients' pursuit of care, legitimacy, and support?

These questions gain urgency in light of current healthcare restructuring in Sweden, including a shift toward standardized, evidence-based models, cost-cutting within the Social Insurance Agency, and alignment with World Health Organization diagnostic standards. Patients express concern that distinct conditions—ME/CFS, burnout, and long COVID—are increasingly being grouped under a single diagnostic umbrella, a move many perceive as motivated more by cost-efficiency than clinical accuracy. Through these narratives, I examine how patients with ME/CFS articulate and differentiate their embodied experiences of fatigue and exhaustion in response to the political reconfiguration of care for chronic, energy-limiting conditions in Sweden.

The Night's Wound: Dementia, Care, and Ordinary Exhaustion in Extraordinary Times

Fred Haocheng Lai

Night is often considered a time for rest. Yet many elders with dementia become agitated, delusional, and hallucinatory after sunset, a syndrome often known as sundowning. For these elders and their caregiving families, night becomes restless and distressing, burdened by bodily exhaustion and even haunted by ghosts of relational memories embodied in dementia-induced hallucinations. In this paper, I examine such nighttime exhaustion by presenting a case study from southern China with materials drawing on 22 months of fieldwork. I describe and analyze three interlocking levels of exhaustion, situating bodily decline and home care within the exhausted regime of care in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin with the development of a bedsore on the senile

body of my elderly interlocutor with dementia, who, during nighttime, desired to return to her childhood home and fell to the ground, eventually becoming physically immobile. I consider the worsening of bedsore as a wounding process of exhaustion, embodying both spectral kinship from the past and the care crisis in the present. The latter was (re)configured by the exhaustion of the healthcare system in China during the pandemic, when physical and mental burnout became an ordinary condition in extraordinary times in the face of scarce medical resources, ruthless political restrictions, and deepened socioeconomic inequality in the clinical context. Altogether, nighttime dementia experiences and their predicament constitute a processual perspective of exhaustion, situating it in the making of temporality and sociality of care across familial, biomedical, and sociopolitical settings.

Exhaustion and Its Discontents: Functional Disorders and Therapeutic Polarization

Antti Lindfors

Functional disorders—such as chronic pain/fatigue, IBS, and environmental sensitivity—are medical conditions marked by debilitating symptoms without identifiable biomedical causes. They not only exhaust patients' bodies and lives but also strain the medical institutions meant to support them. Drawing from a new project on therapeutic polarization in Finland, this paper examines how conditions like chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) become sites of both physiological exhaustion and institutional neglect. These disorders defy conventional diagnostic boundaries and often fail to gain biomedical recognition, contributing to what might be termed "diagnostic exhaustion": a depletion of patients' energy and epistemic credibility through repeated encounters with skeptical healthcare professionals and inadequate care pathways. Clinicians, too, face a bind—unable to offer effective treatments, yet wary of delegitimizing patient suffering. This generates ethical stress, as doctors struggle to balance scientific rigor with compassionate care amid uncertainty.

The paper traces how exhaustion manifests in multiple registers within polarized therapeutic landscapes where biomedical and psychosocial frameworks of functional disorders clash, compounding experiences of abandonment, mistrust, and confusion: as debilitating fatigue; as existential and temporal disruption; as social stigma and contested legitimacy; as laborious work of self-regulation and nervous system retraining; as professional burnout and ethical stress. By situating functional disorders within the broader social and ethical terrains of exhaustion, the paper contributes to anthropological understandings of how suffering is both lived and systematically misrecognized. It argues that exhaustion—and functional disorders more broadly—are not merely internal or individual, but emerge at the intersection of medical classification, social discourse, and embodied temporal struggle.

Imaginal Worldbuilding: How family caregivers of people with dementia in Denmark endure exhaustion

Ida Vandsøe Madsen

In Denmark, the distribution of care responsibilities is shifting, and the Danish care

infrastructure is changing toward relying more on family caregivers in otherwise state-provided dementia care at care homes. During ten months of ethnographic fieldwork, I was struck by how affected family caregivers of people with dementia were: several of them described critical financial struggles, overwhelming physical and mental exhaustion, deep sadness, hopelessness, anger and debilitating memory problems, and some disclosed that they had symptoms of or were diagnosed with stress, depression and anxiety. With such considerable existential consequences of care work, I wondered how they managed to maintain their care responsibilities with the persistent force they did. The stories they told me painted dark images of Danish dementia care. These images are striking in a "universal welfare state" context known for providing care for all. In this paper, I focus on the dark images' implicit counterparts, as I aim to bring these counter-images to the forefront and unfold how they work as driving forces for endurance. This paper thus offers an analysis of how, through mental images of the family and the Danish state, family caregivers strive to build an alternative, future world of care characterised by what they perceive as better dementia care and less distress for themselves. I term this imaginal worldbuilding. The concept of imaginal worldbuilding adds to the anthropological understanding of how endurance is made possible by reaching beyond the painful present, even when efforts to create change remain largely unrealised.

The Resting Lab: The practice of resting against the odds

Nana Francisca Schottländer

By Nana Francisca Schottländer – artist and practice-based researcher. Artistic director of CRITICAL MASS and co-developer of The Resting Labs.

Since 2020 I have conducted embodied researched in landscapes exhausted by extraction and production, leading to the realization that the same extractive logics shaping these environments are embedded in us.

From depleted landscapes to depleted bodies and minds, systems of growth, consumption, and productivity define how we relate to ourselves and the world—as resources to be used. Exhaustion is inevitable. Rest, then, becomes a powerful and necessary act of resistance—personally, communally, ecologically, and societally.

The Resting Labs (Edition 1: Dec 2023–Mar 2024, Edition 2: Nov 2024–May 2025) are seasonal, transdisciplinary inquiries into rest as an embodied, artistic, and political practice.

In a world in acute un-rest, the labs frame rest not as luxury, but as urgent care—and as a practice to be trained and reclaimed.

Each lab is developed around a theme, in collaboration with institutions and practitioners across academic, artistic, and health-related fields.

Through talks, collective resting practices, and artistic interventions, we explore how rest can challenge dominant logics of extraction, production, and acceleration.

The labs test and share protocols for resting within academic, institutional, and public contexts—(re)learning rest as a practice of resistance and reparation at multiple scales.

Inspired by Silvia Federici and Tricia Hersey, The Resting Labs offer rest as a form of activism and collective world-making—not retreat, but presence. Together, we build stamina for rest as a radical, restorative force.

Chakkar: the embodiment of systemic exhaustion

Robert Smith

This essay traces how the idea of a ‘chakar’ is a common idiom of explanation both for the circuitous pathways that patients must follow while navigating Delhi’s healthcare system as well as a symptom of disease that is presented clinically. In Hindi, chakar literally means a ‘journey,’ or a ‘bend’ or ‘curve,’ but it also means ‘confusion’ and ‘inconvenience,’ and in clinics it refers to ‘dizziness.’ Based upon 2 years of ethnographic work in public, primary healthcare clinics (PHCs) in Delhi, I conceptualize chakar as a form of exhaustion. Chakar is both an experience of a healthcare system as well as an embodiment of it: patients’ journeys through healthcare system chakars lead them to clinically present with chakar.
Following the story of Aishwarya’s chronic uterine bleeding from 2019 to 2025, I show how she went through the chakar of continuous consultation with different public healthcare practitioners in Delhi only to come back to the PHC where she started, complaining of chakar. The chakar of the healthcare system exhausted her to a point that made her be treated for chakar. Ultimately, Aishwarya chose to forego a hysterectomy – the procedure offered for her ‘cure’ – and continued to take medicines from the PHC for symptomatic relief. However, foregoing treatment also cured her chakar. The concept of chakkar helps to understand how health becomes possible only insofar as its pursual does not lead to further affliction, and how the limits of cure are reached within contexts of resource-strained, exhausting public healthcare systems.

Resisting Racialised Exhaustion: The Power and Politics of Black Joy

Tanisha Spratt

This paper explores Black joy as a powerful response to the exhaustion produced by anti-Black violence and structural racism. In the context of societies marked by systemic dehumanisation, racial injustice, and chronic social stressors, Black joy emerges not simply as an emotional state but as a form of embodied resistance—a way of reclaiming vitality and agency amid pervasive weariness. Often expressed through humour, cultural pride, and collective celebration in Black diasporic communities, Black joy challenges dominant narratives that reduce Black life to Black suffering. When shared and enacted through digital technologies, it opens up affective and imaginative spaces that resist the temporal pressures and psychological toll of racial capitalism, offering alternative ways of being, relating, and enduring. Positioning Black joy within broader discussions of existential exhaustion, this paper considers how Black joy can be understood as an anti-racist health intervention. While it can offer moments of relief, healing, and collective empowerment, it is also vulnerable to appropriation and commodification within neoliberal wellness cultures. When framed through individual self-care and productivity, the radical potential of Black joy risks being diluted, placing the burden of healing on individuals rather than addressing the systemic conditions that produce racialised exhaustion. By situating Black joy within broader discussions of health, exhaustion, and systemic injustice, this presentation asks: how do practices of joy function as everyday

forms of care? How do they intervene in dominant understandings of health, resilience, and recovery? And how might they reconfigure what it means to survive—and thrive—under conditions of racialised fatigue?