Invisible: Burnout and Tech

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Burnout is a foregone conclusion of a career in technology, or so many of us are told. It's the boogeyman invoked by countless tech magazines and blogs. It's a problem to be staved off with "lifehacks," or prevented by startup jobs boasting unlimited cereal, on-site pools, and "thirsty Thursdays."

Tech workplace culture makes a lot of psychological demands on a worker: it's the dark undercurrent of tech utopianism that has spread far beyond Silicon Valley and into workplaces around the world. It's an environment that demands "passion" and a high level of emotional investment as a prerequisite for success, and touts "culture fit" as a make-or-break factor in advancement. In such a setting, burnout is pretty much inevitable, the end of a cycle that quickly restarts itself with a new job at a different company, a promotion into management.

For marginalized workers in tech -- women, people of color, queer/trans people, disabled people -- that burnout comes quicker and harder. It comes from existing and being pressured to thrive in a space where your presence is seen as an aberration, and your skills are perceived as suspect. It's a burnout not easily solved by quick fixes, or even a new job; it's triggered by your own life, the very body you inhabit. It also comes without the acknowledgement and support given to straight, cis white males, whose experiences are the norm in tech culture.
What Invisible Burnout Looks Like

I've been calling it "invisible burnout," and as a black woman working in digital I worked through it for at least five years before I even admitted to myself what it was. After working for 10 years in various roles, I had the kind of career that I thought would be my "level-up" into tech legitimacy, working as the web analytics manager for a large national non-profit association.

It was the most traumatizing experience of my career.

But let me back up a bit and tell you a bit about my pre-burnout relationship to technology. The first thing to know about me is that my career in digital technology was largely an accident, and my background is best described as "tech-adjacent." I exist in that gray area between Gen-X and Millennial, old enough to remember a time before the Internet and young enough to have had it be a part of my formative years. My mom bought me a Tandy computer from Radio Shack when I was in junior high; I learned BASIC and created little video games for myself and with my nerd friends. In high school, I took the one computer science class available to me. In college, I learned HTML and PHP, and to build my own websites. I didn't romanticize my coding aptitude as the pathway to anything in particular. Frankly, it wasn't even encouraged by any teacher or professor I had.

In the discussion about diversity and hiring retention in technology, there's an assumption that academic preparation is the primary barrier for black and brown people in STEM fields. But looking back, I realize my entry point was not dissimilar from many of the white guys who eventually coded their way into Silicon Valley. But for me, the exception was that I didn't have an educational or social environment that nurtured or encouraged computer science as a career option for me. And even that wasn't a particular loss in my mind. I was fine
with it, because it wasn’t what I wanted to do for a living anyway. My point is, long before the founding of programs like Black Girls Code and other training organizations, there were tons of self-taught black and brown aspiring coders who found their way into some aspect of the field, even if some of us didn’t know exactly what the opportunities were.

But it’s knowing those opportunities and how to navigate your career path when you’re there that makes all the difference. I do know that having computer skills helped me tremendously when I graduated from journalism school. It was an opportunity for me to stand out in a crowd of grads hungry for an entry-level job. Having worked as the webmaster for the small publishing companies and non-profits I worked at, I taught myself some JavaScript and ASP so that I could understand more of the builder side of the web and eventually moved into a direction that I was passionate about but didn’t even know was an option to me: web analytics. I devoured everything I could about Google Analytics, Omniture, even logfile-based programs like AW Stats. I started by making the case for web analytics in the jobs I worked in and taught classes and workshops around the city.

Even so, I still found myself in a position where most people didn’t know what to do with the skills I had; having to defend my own participation in projects I took the lead in, while my male counterparts got most of the credit. It wasn’t even on purpose a lot of the time, just the result of being a black woman with a “soft” job title surrounded by white guys that seemed “more likely” to do such work to those in power. The optics make all the difference in an environment where certain technology skills are seen as innate for young white guys and a hard-earned premium talent for black women – it is a hard image to fight. And while I won’t presume this issue of racial optics was always a factor, for me, the possibility was always in the back of my mind, at every tech-focused job I’ve ever had. At one of my jobs, after a successful web
analytics implementation across a department's website, my well-meaning white male boss' backhand praise was "don't get too cocky," as if I was bathing in daily accolades for my work. Which, perhaps if I had been a white guy, I would have been.

**Hitting The Bottom, and Stumbling Back Up**

I know my story isn't that unusual for many marginalized people in tech, and I realize that part of the struggle for me, was working in a field and workplace environment that didn't know what to do with anyone with my skills. This was 2007, and job descriptions were rapidly changing. I didn't know of many places that hired full-time web analysts or saw the value in web analytics so justifying my own existence at a job seemed to be the only way to get through the door, but I also wasn't aware of the various opportunities at startups or even in the corporate world; I had no mentors. I struggled to find a foothold in the field, and eventually found a job position that seemed made for me: a director of web analytics position at a large national non-profit organization in the Midwest. Getting the job was the kind of legitimacy I had craved since I started working in web analytics, and a gateway to finally getting the kind of competitive salary and work autonomy that I had had to fight for most of my career.

That didn't happen. I was the only black woman in my department that wasn't an administrative assistant (which actually wasn't unusual in most places that I worked), but the hypervisibility of being in a "technical" position made me feel exposed, and vulnerable. My boss, an older white woman without technical skills, constantly undermined my work, questioning my analysis and ignoring my suggestions. A younger white man was hired as an intern, and soon part of my work started being sent his way. I felt like I had to fight even harder to be listened to and
acknowledged in the work that I did. At the same time, I was diagnosed with a vision disorder called Keratoconus, and found myself in the position of trying to request accommodations for my work, which was its own struggle as I feared coming out publicly with my disorder would be further used to undermine me, or limit my ability to find work in the future.

I internalized a lot, in the way that you do when you’re ashamed. The pressure to “suck it up” and present myself as a high-achiever, even while continuing to prove myself and hide my weaknesses, wore away at my self esteem. When I had days when I had trouble with my eyesight, I would hide out in the bathroom, or in offices that had better lighting, which didn't necessarily help in an open office, “butts-in-seats” oriented workplace culture; I was criticized during review time for “not being a team player.” As a result, I started to call in sick a lot more, sometimes because I actually was sick (or just emotionally exhausted), but sometimes so I could actually get work done in an environment more conducive to my vision problem. All the while, though, I felt like a failure, that the career that I had tried to build for myself was unraveling at the seams. In addition to feeling out of place as a black woman, my disorder made my feelings of isolation even more acute. I didn’t feel like anyone could help me even when I asked, and it made me depressed, angry, constantly exhausted at work and at home. In making the choice to fight for advancement and fight for accommodation, I felt powerless.

Burned out at my job and frustrated with feeling trapped by my day gig, I started a small business with a friend to do web analytics implementation, but even that didn’t last long. I am not a business person by nature, and many of the companies I pitched needed more help in learning about web analytics than implementation, so my work was mostly focused around training, which of course people sought to pay less for.
Even in all of this, I was desperate for guidance that I couldn't find. A lot of what I learned about both web analytics and tech work culture was through trial and error. I went to conferences, made the rounds at tech meetups, even did some moonlighting at a startup, trying to connect with someone who could help me navigate my professional path, and how to hold on to my sanity. I didn't find a lot of help, and the advice from those who knew me were assurances that I could “write my own ticket” with my skills. But my skills were not the roadblock, and they weren't enough to help me write my own ticket. Recognizing that was even more demoralizing for me.

After a decade of stumbling my way up the tech workplace ladder with little guidance, I abandoned web analytics with an eye toward my original career path of writing and editing. Part of that decision was made for me; my vision problem made working in code and on spreadsheets for hours a day impossible for me, but I also ran out of steam. I wanted a career path where I didn't have to hurt myself to succeed. That transition took awhile, too. To pay the bills, I did a lot of social media marketing work that wasn’t my passion but paid decently. The transition wasn’t easy, but I felt happier and more fulfilled doing writing and editing than I ever felt doing more technical work, even though for years it was my professional “calling card.”

Ironically, it was when I fully embraced a full-time career in writing and editing that I finally started to locate and connect with other marginalized people in tech fields and found more outlets to share my own experiences in the field as well as others. I started to write more specifically about issues that I was passionate about: technology, music, online culture. I started to invest more time and energy on a pop-culture critical theory blog that I started with a friend, and I stopped hiding my disorder and talked about it openly, especially on days when I felt frustrated about what I couldn't do. I actually still do some training and classes in web analytics when asked,
but on my terms and usually for non-profits and community groups.

I’m still in flux, though. I don’t know exactly what my career will look like in the next five years or so. I’d love to find a place where I can advance professionally without having to deny any part of myself, but I don’t know any other person like me who is doing that right now. I’d still love to find a mentor, even though I’m technically “mid-career” and expected to mentor others. I have spent so much time trying to find my own way in this field and even a little bit of guidance would help me.

The Chasm

The daily demands of tech workplace culture are very real. The ability to be constantly in contact with one’s job, an expectation of constant engagement with one’s work and the pressures of hitting revenue or output goals with few resources and a short amount of time is a reality for everyone in this field. But it’s also grossly exacerbated by structural racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia. The constant need to prove, and re-prove one’s basic competence at the job that you were hired for is a chasm created by broader inequities of race and class, as well as those structural oppressions that marginalize people from economic opportunities before they’re even fully aware of what they are.

Whether it’s a teacher that neglects to encourage a promising black or brown student to pursue math or computer science, or a bank that rejects a woman, minority or queer-led business for loans, it’s these barriers, this fundamental lack of structural support that discourages many marginalized workers long after the initial hiring process. It starts early, and I think it’s a factor that accelerates burnout from the moment you walk through the door of your first job. I’ve long wondered how many people in tech -- women, people of color, queer, disabled
-- purposely opt-out of applying for a job experience or a promotion, not because they doubt their own ability to do the job, but because they don’t want to deal with the emotional stress of fighting for respect, fighting off abuse, or justifying their own existence eight to twelve hours each day. I know I’ve done it, multiple times.

How do marginalized workers in tech balance the stressors inherent in tech workplace culture along with the additional stressors of being the “only one” on a team? I don’t have an answer, because I’m still working through my own burnout, and after all this still looking for the opportunity to “write my own ticket” ostensibly promised by my skills and background. I do know that higher education isn’t enough, training programs aren’t enough, “the pipeline” isn’t enough. And diversity programs aren’t enough. Most of them pay lip service to some marginalized groups in technology but don’t offer any tangible resources to support us when we feel attacked, abused, or isolated in our own jobs, and reticent to leave or speak out in fear of losing our shot to advance.

The upside, if you can call it that, of working through my own invisible burnout is that I’ve been able to articulate and write more about this experience, and trying to have it make sense to myself, if no one else. And most importantly it’s started me down the road of self-care and community building, which is my primary defense and lifeline in this field, and probably the only way I’ll thrive.