

## **Proposal Summary.**

### **Title**

Are We Well? An Interactive Exhibit on Academia's Unwellness

### **Abstract**

This interactive exhibit explores how academia makes us unwell. Leaning on Khúc's (2024) pedagogy of unwellness, the visual scholarship shares findings from our ongoing duoethnography via short-form prompts, journals, pláticas, and memos to invite attendees to also engage and respond with their own reflections.

### **Proposal Text**

#### OBJECTIVE

"Let me ask this another way: What would it take for you to stop pretending that you always have your shit together?" - Mimi Khúc, *Dear Elia*, p.105

The onset of Covid-19 and its continued manifestations, along with the global devastation of wars and genocide, have paralleled increased concerns about and focus on the importance of mental health. At the same time, institutional policies at state and federal levels attack diversity efforts and LGBTQ rights, all encompassed within systemic oppression and its manifestations on campuses. What is clear is that the context and conditions in which higher education and society at large operate has never truly been separated from mental health and wellness.

Disability activists and scholars highlight how these concerns of well-being, mental health, and grappling with institutional policies have existed long before the pandemic (Kafai, 2021; Khúc, 2023) and are instead enduring and endemic (Hamrae, 2017; Khúc, 2024). Mimi Khúc (2024) argues how the construction of wellness, including wellness within academia, is a myth. Instead, academia's focus on wellness and even constructions of self-care and its intertwined relationship with success and productivity create the conditions and reflect how systems make us all unwell (Khúc, 2024). Anchoring to her pedagogy of unwellness, this 75-minute visual scholarship shares the findings of an ongoing, autoethnographic collective. Moreover, we intentionally designed the presentation as an interactive exhibit where attendees can participate, reflect, and add to the continued iterative ethnography of what it means to interrogate our positions and identity in academia; disentangle ourselves from neoliberalism and academic capitalism, and reflect on the complicity of reinforcing harmful academic socialization and survival "strategies." In doing so, this virtual scholarship not only serves as a proceeding of research but also as an intentional queering against the perfectionism and performance of the academy (e.g., our epigraph) to instead foster a community rooted in collective care.

#### THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

The grounding work for this digital and visual scholarship centers on Mimi Khúc's (2024) pedagogy of unwellness. Khúc (2024) posits that wellness and more arguably unwellness are grounded in systems and structures— that everyone is unwell. Yet, because of how individuals and communities are differentially positioned in society, to oppression and marginality, people This proposal example is provided courtesy of the author and the Association for the Study of Higher Education. The information contained here remains the intellectual property of the author(s) and solely the author(s). Using this information beyond its intended purpose as a proposal example violates ASHE Ethics Policies.

experience unwellness differently (Khúc, 2024). Connecting her work to disability studies, ethnic studies, and Women of Color politics, Khúc (2021, 2024) depicts how the structures and cultures both within and around academia— neoliberalism, ableism, racism, and classism— maintain harmful constructions of success, failure, and wellness.

In doing so, Khúc's (2024) pedagogy of unwellness aligns with a larger umbrella of literature problematizing systems of schooling and academia. Most notably, the school-to-prison nexus has continued to illuminate the ways schools are violent spaces for Black students (Annamma, 2017), and this research extends to how colleges and universities create surveillance structures against students, while simultaneously creating messaging to focus imposterdom (Huerta & Britton, 2022). Existing literature on students of color, disabled students, and queer students, experience harm in the academy (see Briscoe et al. 2022; Dolmage, 2017; Duran, 2019)— and increasingly, how these are tied to mental health (Salimi et al., 2023). Likewise, from the faculty perspective, anthologies like *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012) and more recent scholarship from *Women of Color* (see Garcia Peña, 2023; Linh et al., 2020; West & Porter, 2023) have emphasized the disproportionate (emotional) labor *Women of Color* experience. Scholars like Bernal and Villapando (2010) through their conceptualization of apartheid of knowledge, Stanley's (2007) critique of the journal review process, and Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva's (2008) *White Logic, White Methods*, have all illuminated the ways Scholars of Color are more deeply scrutinized regarding the legitimacy of their research, methods, and agendas than their white peers. The emerging literature on campus staff and institutional agents like administrators have similarly revealed disparities in labor, manifestations of racism, and a weaponization of care for staff to do more with less (see Cho & Brassfield, 2023; Sanchez et al., 2023; Steele, 2018).

When placing these experiences against existing literature on wellness, Khúc (2024) describes its undergirding relationship to productivity and the ability to contribute. Scholars like Hannegan-Martinez et al. (2024) have similarly troubled the construction of wellness, care, and trauma, building on the (longstanding) scholarship on healing from *Communities and Scholars of Color* (see Dillard, 2011; hooks, 1994; Mac et al., 2021; Mohanty, 2003). Wellness is not simply about making decisions or isolating strategies of self-care; it is deeply rooted in interrogating both the immediate institutional and positional structures of marginality and oppression, as well as the larger systemic and cultural constructions of society. Khúc expands with the following:

“Academic hyper productivity across university strata is a kind of unrelenting dehumanization that relies on the conflation of that productivity with wellness... Wellness becomes conflated with success, structures of access and inaccess conflated with individual merit.” (Khúc, 2024, p.92)

By grounding this visual scholarship to the theoretical construction of unwellness, we challenge not only the isolation experienced in academia (that in turn reiterates the imposter phenomenon); but also center the necessity to collectively reimagine a different relationship to the academy, to ourselves, and our identities as scholars.

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## DESCRIPTION OF SCHOLARSHIP PRESENTATION

The scholarship will be presented via visual engagement as an interactive exhibition. Attendees are not merely the audience but are active participants as the interactive exhibit is an iterative construction of people's reflections on the findings and discussion prompts. This process, modeled in part by Fernández and Aguilar's (2024) photovoice exhibit and wellbeing, centers on scholarly identity, interrogating our own understanding of success, the day-to-day and intimate encounters of (un)wellness within the academy, and our efforts to disrupt academic capitalism towards the end of prioritizing our wellness and humanity. This format and intentional cultivation of engagement, reinforces the necessity of collectivism, in the wake of unwellness and the isolation of feeling like "the only one." Moreover, as a visual exhibition, we are concretizing our introductory epigraph by showing what it looks like to not "always have your [and our] shit together" (Khúc, 2024, p.105).

Spatially, the walls of the conference space will have large visual images (both photos and created art) and select text from the findings, similar to a gallery walk. Next to these spaces will also be large-texted prompts from Khúc (2024) which serve as the narrative auto-ethnographic findings and research design. Interspersed within the space will include round tables with table tents, markers, post-it notes, and copies of Khúc's (2024) *Dear Elia* for attendees/participants to reflect, engage, and discuss.

As two points of consideration, given the potentially heavy and deeply reflective questions, we explicitly mark tables that are meant for collective discussion and others that allow for silent, individualized journaling and reflection. Likewise, recognizing the potential precarity of interactive exhibits, we will construct a QR code for people to share their answers anonymously and have the posts written by the proposal authors so attendees/participants do not need to connect their responses physically.

## DATA SOURCES AND ANALYTICAL PLAN

The research design for this project started as a duoethnography between the authors, leaning on the feminist praxis of memory work and narrative analysis. Duoethnography builds on auto/ethnography with observations and reflections of both self and in relation to one another (Ashlee & Quayle, 2019). Intersected within this duoethnography is memory work, or a reflexive praxis to consider norms, positionality, self, and systems (Bryant & Livholts, 2007; Ingleton, 2007). In doing so, the combination of memory work and duoethnography offers a collective form of research that is deeply personal, political, and critical of systems, policies, and organizations to reclaim transformation (see Dillard, 2021; Mohanty, 2003).

The central data source was drawn from Mimi Khúc's (2024) newly-published book, *Dear Elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*. Khúc includes journal prompts, mad-lib style exercises, and written exercises. The authors read through the book and related literature to theoretically ground themselves to understand unwellness as a concept better and engaged in reflective activities both within and beyond the book to connect and concretize our understanding of unwellness to our own positions and realities within academia. Additionally, the duoethnography included several pláticas, or relational conversations based on care, intimacy, and reciprocity (see Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023), as well as memos about the exercises. The This proposal example is provided courtesy of the author and the Association for the Study of Higher Education. The information contained here remains the intellectual property of the author(s) and solely the author(s). Using this information beyond its intended purpose as a proposal example violates ASHE Ethics Policies.

initial data “collection” or more aptly series of reflections occurred over three weeks (in March 2024 immediately after the book’s publication).

Our analysis, aligning with memory work emphasized, “the complexity of moving between the subjectivity of their collective experiences, emotions and interpretations, and the more academic and distanced processes of theorising the meaning of those experiences” (Ingleton, 2007, n.p.). Given how the study is grounded on concretizing unwellness, analysis focused on determining examples and exploring manifestations of how unwellness continues to show up in our day-to-day activities. We then connected these examples to neoliberalism, hyperproductivity, and mapped them back to the tenure-track advice both of us have received as pre-tenure Women of Color faculty. Discussing the book, our reflections, and emergent themes with one another and with faculty colleagues and graduate students prompted and initiated this visual scholarship— a desire for a communal reflection and what will become an ongoing collective ethnography (which, uncoincidentally aligns with the collective care Khúc emphasis in her book). As such, while the initial findings within this proposal are based on the duoethnography, the visual scholarship will fold into a larger understanding of an iterative, collective, ethnographic construction of how we understand unwellness and ourselves.

#### SELECT EMERGENT FINDINGS AND RELATED DISCUSSION

One of the predominant emerging findings is grounded in the relationship between the tenure track ambition/dream and how tenure is “worth it” with the day-to-day realities of what this means for our calendars, relationship with others, and our bodies. With one of the exercises interrogating the dichotomy of “good/bad professors” and a reflective question asking “A Good Professor will always \_\_\_\_ [blank],” findings not only connected the pressures, perfectionism, and desire to support students against the structural realities of institutional divestment, low-program support, and lack of resources. As a result, the view of “worth it” of tenure is a masked discussion regarding sacrifice: what have we sacrificed, willing to sacrifice, and where does it end? The theme of persistent sacrifice towards a messaged greater good ties into not only the neoliberal university (Museus & LePeau, 2021), but also the weaponization of care towards ideal worker norms (see Sallee, 2016).

For author\_A, a groundbreaking shift in her understanding of her own wellness was closely examining her calendar. Within the back-to-back conferences within March, on top of the meetings with students, classes, allotted time to attempt to write, and overwhelming amount of service, she realized her schedule left “no margin for error.” Living— unexpected doctors appointments, taking care of family, or for author\_A, needing to attend a funeral of a friend— would be “disruptions” to a calendar that looks right for tenure. What this translates into is that for many of us in academia, the unwellness of academia means we are scheduling a life that has no room, no margin to live.

#### SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPORTANCE TO THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The conference theme for ASHE 2024 is “I am a scholar,” and what the purpose of this visual scholarship offers are the words in between— the pressure from academe that to survive, one must only be a scholar, and the resistant ways communities, particularly Communities of Color, This proposal example is provided courtesy of the author and the Association for the Study of Higher Education. The information contained here remains the intellectual property of the author(s) and solely the author(s). Using this information beyond its intended purpose as a proposal example violates ASHE Ethics Policies.

have reinforced how one is more than a scholar. Utilizing the “performance, visual, digital session” option is a way to not only share these findings, but also radically embrace and share the vulnerability to name the unwellness within academia. As Khúc (2024) describes in the opening chapter:

“But if unwellness were not failure, if it were not measured by productivity and societal contribution but simply by how unlivable life feels, then perhaps we would be allowed to be as unwell as we need to be— and then ask for as much care as we need to make life feel more livable.” (p.21)

## **Research Methodology**

Duoethnography

## **Keywords**

Un/wellness, Mental health, Academic culture

## **References**

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### **Logistical or Technical Needs**

Microphone, display boards, projector/screen. No stage place. Includes 4-5 round tables with 6-8 chairs each.

### **Research Methodology**

Qualitative

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