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What are you reading?

Khúc, M. (2024). *Dear Elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*. London: Duke University Press.

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> 'I had come to learn, as a daughter of refugees, as Vietnamese American, as Asian American, as woman of color, as queer, as disabled, that the world makes us sick and we were not meant to survive it.' (Khúc, 2024, p. 1)

This striking opening line sets the tone for Mimi Khúc's *Dear Elia: Letters from the Asian American Abyss*, a book that is anything but a conventional academic book on mental health in higher education. This sentence stirred a complex mix of emotions in me: sadness, anger, and, most of all, defiance. To me, Khúc powerfully acknowledges the pain experienced by students and university staff who exist outside of the norms. Yet, in doing so, she also offers a sense of hope, a vision of survival and resistance.

Blending critical analysis with personal narratives of herself and others in higher education, Khúc challenges dominant paradigms of wellness[1] and reimagines a future in which survival itself becomes an act of resistance. Written as a plea, a prayer, and a letter, this book bridges academic discourse and intimate storytelling, asking readers to confront the systems that constrain their lives while imagining a world worth living in. As part of this effort, Khúc has toured across universities in the United States, engaging students and staff in open conversations about their differing capacities and needs. Through reflective prompts such as 'What does wellness look and feel like to you?' (Khúc, 2024, p. 32) and interactive exercises, like listing five things you appreciate about yourself that are unrelated to productivity or achievement (Khúc, 2024, p. 92), she encourages a definition of wellness that moves beyond institutional expectations toward personal and collective care.

At its core, *Dear Elia* addresses the following question: 'What hurts? And how do we go on living while it hurts?' (Khúc, 2024, p. 4). From her standpoint as a disabled, unwell, Asian American adjunct, Khúc explores how existing models of wellness in higher education perpetuate harm. She describes these models as compulsory wellness in which wellness is an ideal of productivity and usefulness to strive for, by being in constant performance. 'The world tells us what wellness looks like, and marks it as normal. Moral.' (Khúc, 2024, p. 14). She critiques the dominant medicalized frameworks of mental health that pathologize individuals, by highlighting the structural forces at play. For instance, she interrogates the World Health Organization's definition of mental health, which ties well-being to productivity and societal contribution.[2] Khúc observes how such frameworks equate personal worth with labour output, erasing the experiences of those who cannot conform to these standards.

This critique resonates with my research on burnout narratives from first-generation university students in the Netherlands. Burnout, framed as a work-related phenomenon by organizations like the World Health Organization, is stripped of its broader social and structural dimensions. By focusing on burnout as 'resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed' (WHO, 2019) burnout is individualized as only a workplace stressor that could be personally managed, ignoring social and structural context. Interviews with first-generation students reveal the ways in which burnout is rooted in systemic exclusions: juggling informal caregiving, navigating inaccessible institutions, managing imposter syndrome, and resisting stigmas. Khúc's work highlights how the

[1] These dominant paradigms of wellness are shaped by a 'focus on productivity, individual coping and functionality, and the ability to contribute' to society' (Khúc, 2024, p. 33).

[2] When Khúc wrote *Dear Elia*, the WHO's definition of mental health was: 'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community'. Now a slightly different version is online, in which structural factors influencing mental health are taken into account. See World Health Organization, 'Mental Health'.

emphasis on productivity as a marker of mental health fails to account for these lived realities, perpetuating the myth that burnout is an individual failure rather than a structural one. This resonates with the purpose of my research.

Khúc calls for a reframing of wellness that acknowledges collective and structural unwellness. She introduces the concept of a 'pedagogy of unwellness' (Khúc, 2024, p. 219) as a reframing, which posits that we are all unwell – albeit in different ways, at different times, and shaped by intersecting structures of power and privilege. To Khúc, this understanding demands *cura personalis* (Khúc, 2024, p. 151) that is attuned to the unique needs and circumstances of individuals. It is a profound care and responsibility for one another, grounded in attention to the needs of the other, being attentive to their unique circumstances, particular gifts and limitations. This concept of *cura personalis* resonates with what Khúc calls 'nonnormative temporality', (Khúc, 2024, p. 140) a concept inspired by Ellen Samuels and Elizabeth Freeman's *Crip Temporalities* (2021) and Alison Kafer's *Feminist Queer Crip* (2013). In the chapter *The Professor is Ill,* Khúc critiques academia's culture of hyper productivity, drawing on disability studies and ethnic studies to foreground the intersections of giving space to your needs, rights to rest and resist. Although Khúc speaks from an Asian-American context this observation resonates strongly with experiences explored in my research in Dutch Higher Education. For many first-generation students I interviewed, acts of resistance against neoliberal academic norms manifest in small but significant ways: reframing projects as opportunities for degrowth, collaborating with colleagues to critique elitist traditions like the High Tables at Cambridge and Oxford colleges, working together with colleagues to meet impossible financial thresholds required of knowledge migrant students, or simply carving out moments of rest and care within an unforgiving system, by not following normative time schedules of nine-to-five.

Khúc underscores the need to reject the moralization of productivity and embrace the inherent worth of unproductive bodies and minds. As she writes:

> *Cura personalis* means you deserve care, at all times, not because you are excellent, not because of your achievements, but because you are human. That means that you are allowed to hurt. Allowed to say life is hard, too hard. Allowed to need things, to ask for what we sometimes call accommodations, without shame. (Khúc, 2024, p. 224)

By centering love, joy, and meaning, Khúc offers a vision of care that transcends the oppressive logic of productivity. Her work challenges us to reimagine well-being as a shared, collective pursuit, and to recognize the radical act of simply living as deserving of value.

Caro Suringar

Caro Suringar is a PhD candidate in Humanities at the Open University in Heerlen. Her research focuses on burnout among first-generation students. By analyzing autobiographies and conducting in-depth interviews with first-generation students who have experienced burnout, she aims to understand the complex interplay of factors contributing to their stress and exhaustion. Her specific interests include resilience, intersectionality, and meaning-making, with a focus on how these elements shape the lived experiences of students whose experiences deviate from the conventional academic path.