Dark Academia

Edited by Nicola Glaubitz and Martin Klepper

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The regular issues offer essays about literatures, cultures and media in anglophone (UK, USA, Canada) and German-speaking (Germany, Austria, Switzerland) countries and about New English Literatures. They expand and make accessible current research for teachers of literature at schools and universities. The essays address general aspects of literary cultures, traditions, and research fields related to literature, or they present and explore relevant problems and new approaches, methodologies, and theories in close readings of individual texts. Our book reviews critically survey recent publications.

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Introduction: Dark Academia

Dark academia is a social media trend devoted to the stylization of academic life in the humanities and is characterized by a recognizable aesthetics: Images, short text messages and video clips feature autumnal settings, Gothic façades and wood-panelled libraries, either belonging to or resembling the architecture of American Ivy League universities and British elite institutions like Oxford and Cambridge. Academics are almost exclusively white, wear preppy, dark clothing in subdued, earthy colours reminiscent of the early 20th century or pore over leatherbound books in empty libraries. Cameras point at autumnal trees and lakes across opened books. Another recurring type of image shows handwritten notes, fountain pens, candles and the mandatory coffee cup arranged in an artful mess on a scarred wooden desk. Books with traces of intense engagement are rarely absent from these arrangements—often with sticky notes, underlined phrases and quotations added in commentaries or tags. A frequently displayed novel is Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992), which turned into a reference text for dark academia after the trend emerged on the platform Tumblr in 2014. When it migrated to Pinterest, Instagram and eventually TikTok at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, it received increasing media attention as a vibe, a mood and an aesthetics: Dark academia can function as a structure of feeling, a model for self-fashioning and a fantasy of academic life (Horgan; Murray 347; Chayka; Stowell and Therieau; Therieau).

By now, there are over one million posts tagged 'dark academia' (Horgan). Contributors are mostly female and in their late teens and early twenties (Murray 349), like the young women who cultivate online reading practices and bookishness (Birke and Fehrle). The fascination for English and Ivy League elite education is shared by a chiefly anglophone yet transnational fandom (Murray 352). From the mid-2010s onwards, dark academia also became a loosely defined literary genre and found resonance in television series (*The Queen's Gambit*, 2020; *Wednesday*, 2021). Tartt's *The Secret History* is a key reference text among various others like the *Harry Potter* franchise, coming-of-age and campus narratives like Peter Weir's 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* and the morbid aestheticism of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Many of these texts offer melancholic, nostalgic dark academia vibes[1] but also use genre conventions and motifs of gothic, dark romantic, fantasy and queer texts as well as thriller and murder mystery elements. They explore the sinister and ethically dubious side of the search for knowledge, academic aspiration or close-knit academic communities. Furthermore, anxiety over being a social misfit is a key issue in *The Secret History* and Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019) alongside peer pressure and complicity in criminal acts or simply

1 Kyle Chayka defines 'vibe' as "a moment of audiovisual eloquence, a 'sympathetic resonance' between a person and her environment" and as "a concise assemblage of image, sound and movement" that serves as a medium for feeling (Chayka, no. pag.). Vibes play an important role on the platform TikTok, which enables the upload of short video clips.

in harmful behaviour enabled by institutional structures. Sexism, amorality, impostor syndrome and ruthless competition are part of academic life and so are drug excesses, transgressive sexuality and mental instability, e.g. in M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017) or (with a surreal twist) in *Bunny*. Novels as different as Suzie Wang's thriller *White Ivy* (2020) and R.F. Kuang's speculative fiction *Babel* (2022) tackle racism and the ongoing legacy of colonialism in academia and its institutions. Philip Pullman's fantasy series *His Dark Materials* (1995–2000) and the HBO adaption (2019–2022) address apprehensions about organized religion and authoritarian or totalitarian manipulation which stand in uneasy tension to the scientific methods and academic freedom practiced inside the Gothic or Baroque architecture of the Ivy League colleges.

Maryann Nguyen (56) describes the literary manifestations of dark academia as inherently self-critiquing and highly responsive to the criticism of the trend as a whole. Objections have chiefly been raised against its lack of diversity (Monier) and its celebration of elitism: The social media fandom allegedly shares the desire "for ownership of the aesthetics of higher education, where such ownership has previously been confined to the upper class. This investment in class aspiration may appear to cement dark academia as a regressive, elitist fantasy."[2] Indeed, when dark academia idealises early twentieth century American Ivy League universities, it adulates institutions not then accesible to 98% of the American population (Delbanco 108). For all their scholarly excellence, they were characterized by "a strong current of social snobbery as well as an undercurrent of anti-intellectualism—not to mention outright racism and anti-Semitism" (ibid. 107) well into the early 1960s. Literary examples of dark academia can thus be considered as celebrations of dark academia on the one hand. On the other hand, they provide a running commentary on the lure of colluding with a socially privileged elite and on the social and ethical costs of a seemingly neutral quest for knowledge. The contributions in this theme issue explore these topics in more detail.

As with many other popular literary genres and social media trends, it is not easy to determine dark academia's exact symptomatic value and its real impact on the lives, choices and attitudes of their readers and creators. Since the second phase of dark academia's popularity coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, it was readily considered as a response to the social isolation of students in remotely taught classes, confined to bleak student accommodation (Horgan) or to their teenage bedrooms. The desire to be part of the dark academia online 'community' and the interest in the close-knit small groups of friends populating the fictional versions may have offered imaginary compensations

2 Cf. Taylor. He also sees a subversive and democratizing potential in dark academia, though: "Dark academia presents a world where anyone can master the aesthetics of ruling-class belonging, even if as in Bakhtin's Carnival, this subversion risks ultimately reinforcing the social order. And yet, by creating their own Oxfords and Harvards online, dark academians can laugh at those that still feel the need to worship at those altars in person." There are as yet few examples for such carnivalesque manifestations of dark academia—Mona Awad's *Bunny* can be considered as one of them.

in this situation. The sensual deprivation that accompanied social isolation also found a counterbalance in the characteristic "digital denialism" (Murray 358) of dark academia. The conspicuous absence of digital devices on moodboards and image compilations is not based on an aversion to technology, as Murray argues (358): the carefully edited and processed images and short videos require considerable technical expertise. The deliberate attempts to capture atmospheres and fragrances (studying by candlelight with coffee or tea at hand) and textures and materialities (paper, wood and fabrics) invoke 'vibes': Sounds, images and words recreate sensually and aesthetically resonant experiences (Chayka) to provide comfort during the pandemic (Monier). The feeling of missing out on the promised transformative quality of university experience (a key sales point of many US and British universities, Geiger 285) may also have sustained the dark academia trend beyond the short life span of other fads and hypes (Davidson).

The pre-pandemic beginnings of dark academia call for more far-reaching considerations, though. Amelia Horgan identifies the "neoliberal assault" on higher education in the US and the UK since the 1980s as one of the reasons why the fandom longed for "deep study, unfettered by time pressure" and distraction, why it imagined itself as a choice elite and why it was intrigued by the idea of studying the classics and the humanities for the sake of self-transformation rather than career options. The student loan crisis is mentioned as another factor. Following Horgan, the deteriorating conditions of higher education for students as described, for example, in Peter Fleming's aptly titled *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (2021) find resonance in the ambivalent, both escapist-nostalgic and gothic-sinister themes and motives characteristic for dark academia. In the literary examples, several of which were conceived and written before the pandemic, deeply compromised academics and academic institutions loom large, after all.

What characterizes the 'neoliberal' phase in higher education? In the UK and the US, the higher education system had expanded after the Second World War and became accessible for larger parts of the population due to larger, state-funded departments and grant systems (Fleming 15, 16). From the 1980s onwards, however, state funding was gradually withdrawn, to be replaced by financing through tuition fees (Geiger 281) and external research funding. Universities in Britain and the US had to compete for affluent students and were subjected to performance criteria and hierarchical management (Fleming 13). While the absolute number of college and university students in the US and in the UK rose constantly since the end of World War II,[3] the discrepancy in quality between elite and ordinary higher education widened considerably as

3 In the United States around 1900, "fewer than a quarter-million Americans, or around 2 percent of the population [...] attended college. By the end of World War II, that figure had risen to over two million" (Delbanco 108). The GI bill, the introduction of Pell grants and other measures further increased the number of students: "In 1975, it stood at nearly ten million, or one-third of young adults. Today [...] the number has almost doubled" and two thirds of the population have attended college (ibid. 108).

well during that time (Brim 7, Geiger 297), consolidating social hierarchies once more. In the 1980s, Ivy League universities (charging $30,000–35,000 per year) began capitalizing on their high reputation and became more socially selective by raising fees and actively recruiting students able to pay full tuition (Geiger 284, 285). Costs for tuition, room, and board at a private US university more than doubled between 2000 and 2015 (between $26,000 and $63,000; ibid. 314, 315). At public colleges, undergraduate tuition fees more than tripled between 1990 and 2018 (to $10,000) (Fleming 128). In Britain, tuition fees that had been abolished in the 1940s were reintroduced by the Labour government in 1998. Capped at up to £1,000 a year at first, fees rose continuously up to £ 9,000 in 2010. As a result, student debt grew in both countries: According to Fleming, 2.8 million Americans owe at least $100,000 while in Britain, "loans increased from just under £6 billion in 2012 to £15 billion in 2018 and are expected to reach £20 billion in 2023" (Fleming 128).

The crucial point that turns student debt into a present-day student loan *crisis* are the diminishing chances of paying back the loan off a well-paid position (Fleming 129-30). Fleming quotes an estimate calculating the chances for defaulting on repayment in the next decade at 40 percent in the US, with a risk five times higher for people of colour (128). A significant amount of unpaid debt is accumulating in earlier generations as well. As a result, confidence in the value of college education is sinking: "when asked whether they thought their degree was worth it, 21 per cent of millennials said 'definitely not' and 23 per cent replied 'probably not'"(Fleming 128). Disillusionment is probably the least worrisome consequence of this development, compared to mental health issues and growing suicide rates. If Fleming's correlations are reliable, most suicides among loan takers occur in a debt range where repayment is neither feasible nor completely impossible and thus generates constant worry (129). Without too much speculation, it seems safe to argue that the expectations and hopes attached to college education amount to cruel optimism: Cruel optimism according to Lauren Berlant involves attachment to goals or aspirations that seem worthy of realization but are unattainable and therefore have a harmful effect on individuals (Berlant 1). If and how this cruel optimism translates into the Gothic and nostalgic tropes of dark academia, however, is a question still open to investigation.

An implicit warning not to jump to conclusions can be found in Simone Murray's recent article on dark academia.[4] She emphasizes the rather loose connection between fan-created dark academia material and university life: Dark academia images "never imagine [...] the campus as an actual workplace, only as a backdrop for aestheticized photo-shoots" (Murray 351). Even its pre-pandemic forms "represented a nostalgic idealisation of campus experience already out of touch with the realities of twenty first-century university life" (351). Arguably,

4 Alongside the contributions the *Post45* issue edited by Olivia Stowell and Mitch Therieau (2022), Murray's article can be recommended for its in-depth analysis of the trend and its substantial bibliography.

nostalgia for the settings, trappings and frequently the canon of early twentieth century elite education is a longing for something that never existed in this form. Moreover, an explicit engagement with the changes in institutional structure of higher education is largely absent. Still, nostalgia is never exclusively escapist: it contains a kernel of utopia, an often implicit desire for change (Nguyen 57, Sielke 14). Being out of touch with contemporary university life may be precisely the point of dark academia, then. Rather than studying the phenomenon exclusively as a symptom or reflection of the situation of contemporary higher education, it could be equally productive to consider (and criticize) it as the creation and cultivation of a particular cultural or social *imaginary* of academic life. Seen from this angle, the discrepancies between the real forms of academic life and their desired, imagined and aestheticized forms are not faulty representations but cultural meanings whose function can be studied.

The key place of a specific *imagination* of college experience in American culture and literature is a possible object of study here. Unwittingly using a number of stock dark academia tropes in a nonfictional assessment of the contemporary university, Andrew Delbanco observes that

> College is our American pastoral. We imagine it as a verdant world where the harshest sounds are the reciprocal thump of tennis balls or the clatter of cleats as young bodies trot up and down the fieldhouse steps. Yet bright with hope as it may be, every college is shadowed by the specter of mortality—a place where, in that uniquely American season of 'fall and football, weather and the new term,' the air is redolent with the 'Octoberish smell of cured leaves.' (11–12)

Delbanco adds that this "bittersweet place"—or heterotopia—is far removed from actual college experience (12). Nevertheless, given the commonality of 'having been to college', the fantasy of a sheltered idyll of youth, sports and learning with the harsh realities of career, aging and death lurking at the edges, is relevant *as* a fantasy that guides the expectations, aspirations and the (cruel) optimism of many Americans. Harvard and other Ivy League universities have a prominent and, according to Kathryn Roberts, an "outsized" place

> in the cultural imaginary. They set the pattern for American college at large, from curriculum, to admissions and financial aid, to the pageantry of graduation, athletics, and reunions; and they are over-represented in the halls of government, business, and media. (Roberts 69)

Not only the brochures and promotional activities of universities but also popular culture capitalize on the fantasy of college experience and elite education. They also make it available to transnational audiences. Dark academia thus draws on aspirations and aesthetic elements that are already pre-fabricated by universities'

promotional materials and popular culture at large. The report of a former 'dark academic' from India in Stowell and Therieau's *Post45* issue on dark academia is hardly representative but captures, in one example, the ambivalent effects of this cultural imaginary: For Amatulla Mukadan, the attractiveness of Oxford's and Cambridge's collegiate gothic architecture (and colonial replicas of this architecture in her home city of Mumbai) and the atmosphere and prestige conjured up by dark academia on social media served as a motivation for applying to a liberal arts college. As she reports, it clashed hard (and in the end productively) not only with the hypermodern concrete-and-glass architecture of her college but also with the work-intensive course (Mukadan; see also Alpert-Abrams and Bosu).

Dark academia fans and creators involved in related fandoms that cultivate bookishness (Pressman), for example on BookTok, are a substantial, potential group of present and future students in the humanities, as Murray reminds us (362). Students and teachers of literature do well to acknowledge the trend, therefore. This does not rule out working against its lack of diversity and its dubious promises. The articles in this theme issue can be considered as a contribution to this goal, engaging with various aspects and manifestations of dark academia and offering methodological models for studying, criticizing and teaching the phenomenon.

The theme issue begins with an article on Oscar Wilde's use of gothic elements and his depiction of a decadent life style in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This novel is often invoked as a precursor of a dark academic aesthetic. *Marie-Claire Steinkraus*' article presents Wilde's complex position on aestheticism and uses it as a point of comparison to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Wilde's protagonist Dorian Gray, Steinkraus argues, endorses his mentor Lord Henry's amoral aestheticism, striving for a self-realization that puts its entire trust in artificiality rather than 'natural' morality or masculinity. Dorian's failure to live up to aestheticism, symbolized by his decaying portrait, is based on his mistaken assumption that crime and social injustice can be aestheticized—without taking into account that they, in turn, 'gothicize' the aesthetic. Steinkraus highlights the critique of British imperialism and classism conveyed by Wilde's use of the gothic and can thus identify the novel as an instance of self-critiquing aestheticism—a position that Tartt's *The Secret History* rehearses with a different accent, this time in an academic setting. Six young classicists at an elite Vermont college bond over their fondness for beauty and vintage style and their sense of intellectual superiority, instilled by their charismatic, amoral lecturer. Their desire to live an academic life in the nostalgic setting and trappings now identified as the epitome of dark academia eventually motivates and justifies two murders. The novel's focalization by the one lower middle class member of the group sheds light on the dynamics of complicity and at the same time throws into relief the group's sense of entitlement to sacrifice lives for the sake of preserving their own life style. Steinkraus therefore argues that the novel's use of thriller conventions already spells out the consequences of romanticising the elitism of nostalgic academic culture: it seemingly endorses the idealization of elitism only to subvert it.

Lucas Mattila explores to what extent unhealthy attachments establish a relation of cruel optimism in Mona Awad's 2019 novel *Bunny.* The Bunnies, Mattila argues, are not so much attached to old paintings or books, but rather to selfies. Nevertheless, they partake of a relation to their school, which is fundamentally unsustainable and thus shares a generic feature with other novels discussed under the label dark academia. Academia, in these novels, amounts to the promise of a (benign) withdrawal which cannot be realized. In *Bunny,* the withdrawal or the isolation of Samantha is itself a symptom of an academic creative writing program that neither meets its social obligations nor its promises of a future career. Instead, the program fosters conformity and unity, symbolized by the groups of Bunnies, which become Samantha's last refuge. The practice of the Bunnies to "kill your darlings" is a literalization of the (meanwhile) commonplace metaphor in creative writing. Thus, Mattila argues, the form of the novel itself becomes a tribute to cruel optimism: the creative writing program produces monstrosities (and monsters), and visibly so in Mona Awad's novel. The Gothic fantasies and yarns which Samantha spins attempt to repair her attachments, but actually, increasingly spin completely out of control.

One angle that is often overlooked or underrated in discussions of dark academia is the aspect of gender and sexuality. As *Sydni Zastre* points out in her paper on *The Secret History* (1992), Tartt's novel is by no means inconspicuous or innocent in its negotiations of heterosexual reproductivity and queer futurity. Zastre confronts the novel with theoretical perspectives taken from Lee Edelman, Elizabeth Freeman, Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz. Her central suggestion is that one might read the Greek students' retreat at Francis' great-aunt's house as a vision of a queer utopia. This queer utopia eventually excludes Bunny (whose all-American masculinity and heterosexuality never fits in with the non-normative behavior of the others), but it is also, in the end, a failed utopia. To be sure, each character, Zastre argues, 'fails' at performing the binary gender roles and heterosexual identities expected of them at Hampden (or American society in the 1980s at large). Moreover, Zastre points out, gender roles and sexual orientations intersect heavily with class in the novel. Just as there are (partly botched) attempts at performing masculinity or femininity, Richard for instance engages in what Zastre calls "class drag"—desperately trying to fit in. But the main (failed) attempts at passing concern the performance of compulsory heterosexuality and reproductive futurity. The Greeks only feel at home in their retreat, even though, as Zastre concedes, in the end the "pressures of heterosexual time, of consumer capitalism, of the status quo, are too strong to allow for the utopia's realization" (208).

The discrepancy between the 'Oxford myth'—its reputation as a prestigious centre of academic excellence and site of political power—and the somewhat lacklustre reality of a modern higher education institution is one of the points of departure for Rainer Emig's contribution. In the multiverse setting of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000), two of the worlds are an

Oxford set in a steampunk-inspired alternative 19th century reality and in modern Oxford. Characters travelling between these worlds highlight analogies between the (political) power wielded by the church in the alternative reality and the dependence of research on economic power (i.e. funding) in real Oxford. Like several other dark academia narratives, Emig argues, Pullman's Gothic angle on a close connection between the search for knowledge, secrecy and sex raise the question to what extent power/knowledge formations forge class hierarchies by encouraging (often) transgressive sexual desire. Furthermore, the romance conventions favoured by dark academia narratives (a prominent example is the *Harry Potter* franchise) heighten the excitement and adventure of the pursuit of knowledge, Emig argues, while frequently avoiding any engagement with the pitfalls of these educational imaginaries: their conservatism, their injustice and their dubious and often excluding ethics.

Some of these aspects resonate in *Melissa Schuh*'s and *Anneke Schewe*'s article on another alternative Oxford. They present R.F. Kuang's *Babel. An Arcane History or The Necessity of Violence* (2022) as a speculative fiction novel that puts established tropes of dark academia to subversive use. The novel uses gothic and fantasy conventions in order to sketch an alternative history of the 1830s in Britain in which Babel is the name of a fictitious Oxford college for translation studies. Translation, in the novel, is far from being a pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (or for beneficial, philanthropic purposes). Linguistic and etymological expertise chiefly in non-European languages literally powers the British empire: translation magic embedded in silver bars is a source of energy, and linguists are highly privileged, sought-after experts and at the same time—as native speakers of languages other than English—targets of racialization and marginalization. Three of the four protagonists, hailing from British and French colonies, struggle with the question of how to cope with their complicity in the imperial project and how to use their privilege in order to support the oppressed. As Schewe and Schuh argue, the novel raises and answers the questions critics of the dark academia aesthetic have asked all along, namely if there is more to its sense of melancholy, anxiety and angst than self-indulgent nostalgia. The authors read *Babel* as a critique of the historical implication of the humanities in the project of British nationalism and imperialism in the early nineteenth century and as a commentary on the presence of the colonial legacy in the humanities.

Katja Anderson and *Natasha Anderson* delve into the aspect of detection, which is implicitly or explicitly part of the generic set-up of most, if not all, texts in dark academia: "investigations of foul play and murder in scholarly settings" (231). Starting from Olivia Stowell and Mitch Therieau's suggestion that dark academia merges facets of detective fiction and Gothic novels, Anderson and Anderson take a closer look at Christopher J. Yates's *Black Chalk* (2013), Faye Kellerman's detective novels *Murder 101* (2014), *The Theory of Death* (2015) and *Bone Box* (2017) as well as Leigh Bardugo's novels *Ninth House* (2019) and *Hell Bent* (2023). They first highlight the cyclical interconnection of knowledge, crime

and violence in these novels, they trace spatial details with reference to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, and (thirdly) they explore the specific temporalities in the novels, including the interdependencies of past, present and future. For Anderson and Anderson, the key to these novels is the play with well-kept secrets unsealed, often combined with a precarious entanglement of scholarship and immorality. The setting is typically made up of campus centers, dormitories, graveyards and waterways. As a background to the detection of these secrets, a critique of social conditions is part of the message. The temporal atmosphere is very often characterized by a longing for the past and fear of the future.

Dark academia is a transmedia phenomenon, manifesting in various forms—from a vibe that is better felt and experienced than articulated and explained, to the display of a loosely defined but recognizable style of fashion, interior decoration and consumption, to a literary genre. *Carolin Wachsmann* gives insight into the as yet latest manifestation of dark academia on the platform TikTok. Users of this platform for sharing short video clips also share experiences with books and reading (BookTok has by now superseded BookTube as a discussion, self-display and marketing site). Online platforms and their active users have been mainly responsible for creating and sustaining the dark academia trend. Wachsmann draws on fan and celebrity studies, Bourdieu's theory of the literary field and on the study of the platform's algorithm in order to show how readers' online discourses shape the contemporary literary field. With reference to her first case study, Tartt's *The Secret History*, Wachsmann traces negotiations of what belongs to the dark academia aesthetic and how readers position themselves in online book reviewing. Her second case study is R.F. Kuang's bestselling novel *Babel. An Arcane History or The Necessity of Violence* (2022), which presents a postcolonial angle on dark academia and exposes its racializing and elitist blind spots. As Wachsmann demonstrates, the social identities of readers and author play a major role in debates about literary gatekeeping: who can claim authority over the book in a new field of mass production that is open to amateur critics—and what is the role of the elusive TikTok algorithm in this matter?

Kiel/Berlin *Nicola Glaubitz, Martin Klepper*

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