Secret Histories and Hallowed Halls: *Dark Academia, the University, and Contemporary Readership*

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Abstract

This thesis is the first long-form study of the new literary subgenre and online culture known as “dark academia”.

Beginning with Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992), the first chapter re-evaluates critical responses to Tartt’s work, suggesting that *The Secret History* is an overlooked early contribution to the genre turn of the late-twentieth century. I explore how the narrator, Richard Papen’s, fraught relationship with reality and adoration of the elite academic life is an examination of the conservative political turn of the 1990s.

In chapter two, I describe and explore fan participation in the online dark academia subculture which emerged from *The Secret History*’s social media fanbase. I argue that the dark academia community emulates Richard Papen’s romanticisation of the university and the canon while ignoring Tartt’s critique of elitism, and I explore how M. L. Rio’s *If We Were Villains* (2017) contributed to the adoption of “dark academia” as literary marketing term and subgenre.

Chapter three explores how changing attitudes to the university are reflected in dark academia novels from the 2020s. I examine the ways in which R. F. Kuang’s *Babel* (2022) and other dark academia novels interrogate institutions of knowledge and the power structures they reinforce whilst simultaneously participating in the romanticisation of those institutions.

Reading each of these texts in their historical contexts and tracing the development of the genre from the 1990s to the 2020s, this thesis suggests that dark academia and its accompanying subculture reveal a cultural fatigue with the inaccessibility of higher education and rising cultural anti-intellectualism. It explores how attempts at democratising academic practice have been facilitated by the emergence of the digital literary sphere, and how the production of dark academia novels accelerated from 2017 to 2022 in response to re-evaluations of the cultural capital held by traditional universities.

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Author Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references. All images are captioned and sourced in the “List of Illustrations” (p. 4).

INTRODUCTION

Opening University Doors in Fan Communities

Developing Dark Academia

In September 2025, a new trend started in the online community populated by self-proclaimed "readers" on various social media platforms in which creators revealed their plans to "creat[e] a personal curriculum" for the autumn.[1] The online community in which this trend originated, which has become increasingly visible due to their influence on the publishing industry and book sales throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, revolves around reading, talking about, and generating content related to all genres of books. This community, often referred to as the "online bookish community", operates within "online bookish spaces" on social media, such as "BookTok", the bookish subsection of TikTok.[2] Sarah Jerasa and Trevor Boffone suggest in their study of paraliterary reading communities that BookTok "facilitates young people's participation in an increasingly inclusive and democratized media culture" and "enhance[s] the opportunity for students to have agency in a digital space that is not regulated by a teacher or sanctioned by rules".[3] In her video, "Starting a Personal Curriculum in Gothic Literature", YouTube creator GlutenbergBible describes the personal curriculum trend as a way for readers to "keep up a practice of learning and research and reading outside of the academic structure".[4] The self-imposed process of curriculum creation would seem to further support Jerasa and

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[1] Ruby Granger, "Planning a Personal Curriculum for September", YouTube, 27 August 2025, 19 min., 12 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAGActRvPgs; GlutenbergBible, "Going 'Back to School' 📚 Starting a Personal Curriculum in Gothic Literature", YouTube, 3 September 2025, 18 min., 38 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qV9DeeSLN-4.

[2] "Book Sales Surge in 2020 as UK Rediscovers Love of Reading", *BBC News*, 26 April 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56893246; "Booksellers Hope Soaring Sales Will Continue as We Read More", *BBC News*, 6 October 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58802805; "Bloomsbury Sees Record Profits as Lockdown Book Sales Surge", *BBC News*, 2 June 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/business-57327371.

[3] Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 12; Sarah Jerasa and Trevor Boffone, "BookTok 101: TikTok, Digital Literacies, and Out-of-School Reading Practices", *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 65, no. 3 (2021): 221, https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1199. While TikTok has become one of the primary platforms on which readers share content, it is important not to homogenise the community under the label "BookTok", as there are many other platforms through which these creators communicate.

[4] GlutenbergBible, "Going 'Back to School' 📚 Starting a Personal Curriculum in Gothic Literature".

Boffone's conclusion that the absence of institutional regulation enhances the appeal of these spaces for young readers; yet, the very idea of the curriculum encourages readers to adhere to academic structures, from the correlation with the academic calendar to the emulation of module-specific reading lists. Certain subsections of the community, therefore, use the lack of rules and regulations to reinterpret and emulate certain academic practices within the unregulated, democratised digital space.

This trend is part of a larger cultural phenomenon which has arisen over the course of the twenty-first-century in which lay readers curate a pseudo-academic reading practice which is often presented as intellectually equal to professional readership, regardless of the creator's level of literary training or academic qualification. While the term "lay reader", taken from John Guillory's *Professing Criticism* (2022), is associated with reading primarily for pleasure and ethical self-improvement, readers in the community who perform pseudo-academic reading trouble the distinctions that Guillory presents by using their emulation of professional reading to distinguish themselves from the rest of the digital literary sphere and its more popular, lowbrow, and shallow reading habits.[5] This community is known as "dark academia", a term which appeared on social media platforms around 2014 as a descriptor used by the fan community for Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992).[6] In the mid-2010s, this fandom expanded into a new niche community under the title "dark academia", which continued to participate in the usual fan activities such as discussions about *The Secret History*'s characters, plot, and writing, but which also began to generate a lifestyle model based on the romantic, aestheticised idea of the university depicted in the novel. Moodboards from the dark academia hashtag show images with heavy brown filters of dark libraries and ink-stained pages, thick hardcover books written in Latin or Greek, and the cloistered corridors of Oxbridge or Ivy League institutions (see: fig.1 & fig.2).[7] Dark academia blossomed during the late-2010s,

[5] John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).
[6] Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, "Dark Academia: Curating Affective History in a COVID-Era Internet Aesthetic", *International Public History* 5, no. 2 (2022): 108, fn. 23, https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2022-2047.
[7] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia"; Simone Murray, "Dark Academia: Bookishness, Readerly Self-Fashioning and the Digital Afterlife of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*", *English Studies* 104, no. 2 (2023): 347–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838X.2023.2170596; Maryann Nguyen, "Nostalgia in Dark Academia", *East-West Cultural Passage* 22, no. 1 (2023): 54–72, https://doi.org/10.2478/ewcp-2022-0003.

encompassing a large subsection of the online reader community for whom subjects of discussion extend beyond *The Secret History* into literature from the Western canon, such as works of Greek epic and tragedy, the Gothic, and the Romantic poets, as well as the oeuvres of specific authors such as Dostoyevsky, Albert Camus, and Sylvia Plath. Across platforms, creators within the dark academia community romanticise obsessive insomniac nights spent poring over philosophical ideas and living an intellectual life of the mind and replace modern technology with handwritten notes and physical media such as vinyl and books.

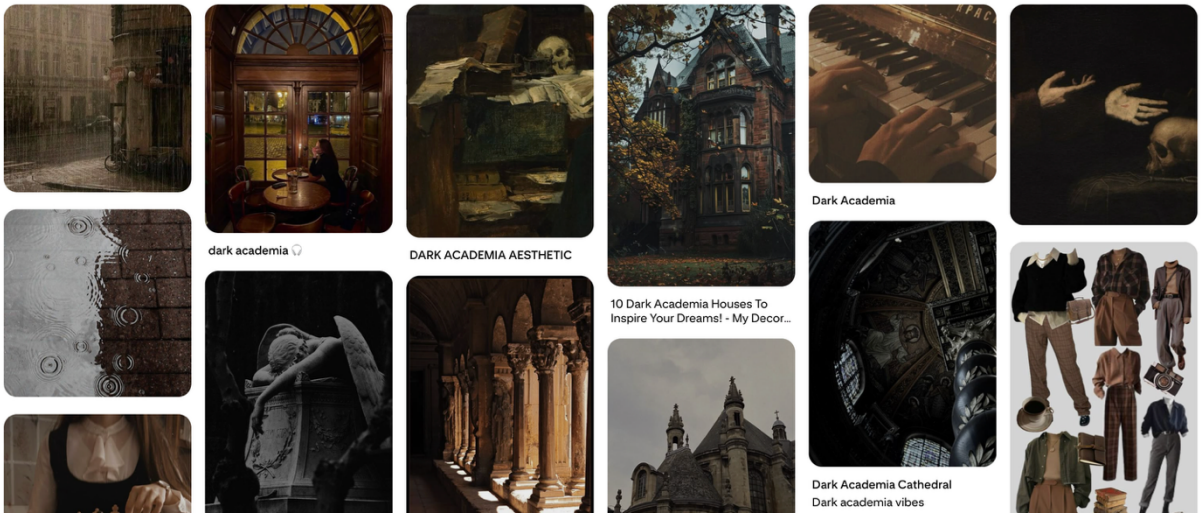

Figure 1: First result for Pinterest search term: "dark academia", showing dark images of Gothic buildings, rain, and paintings.

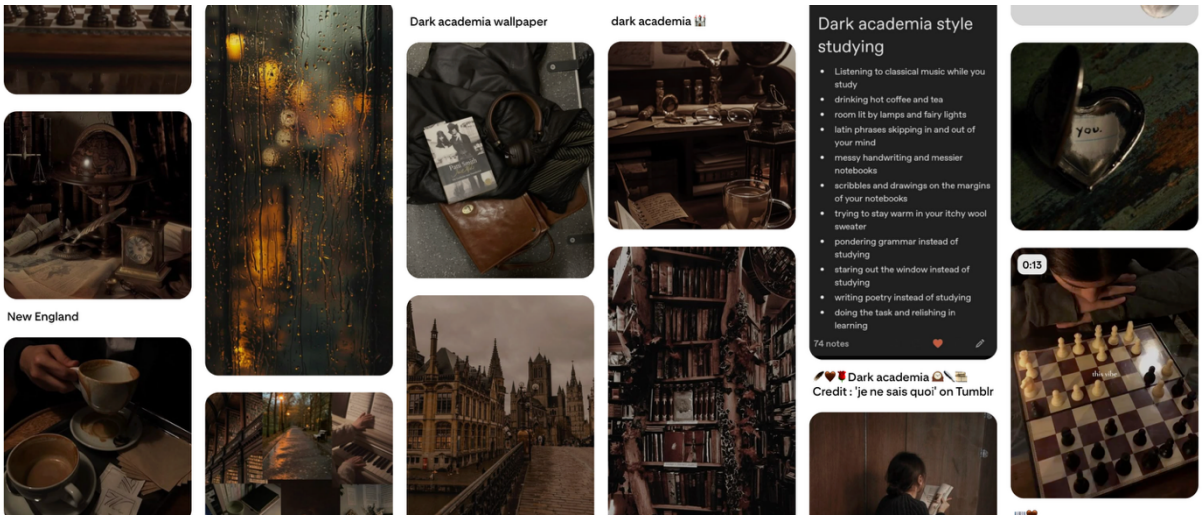

Figure 2: First result for Pinterest search term: "dark academia"; see above.

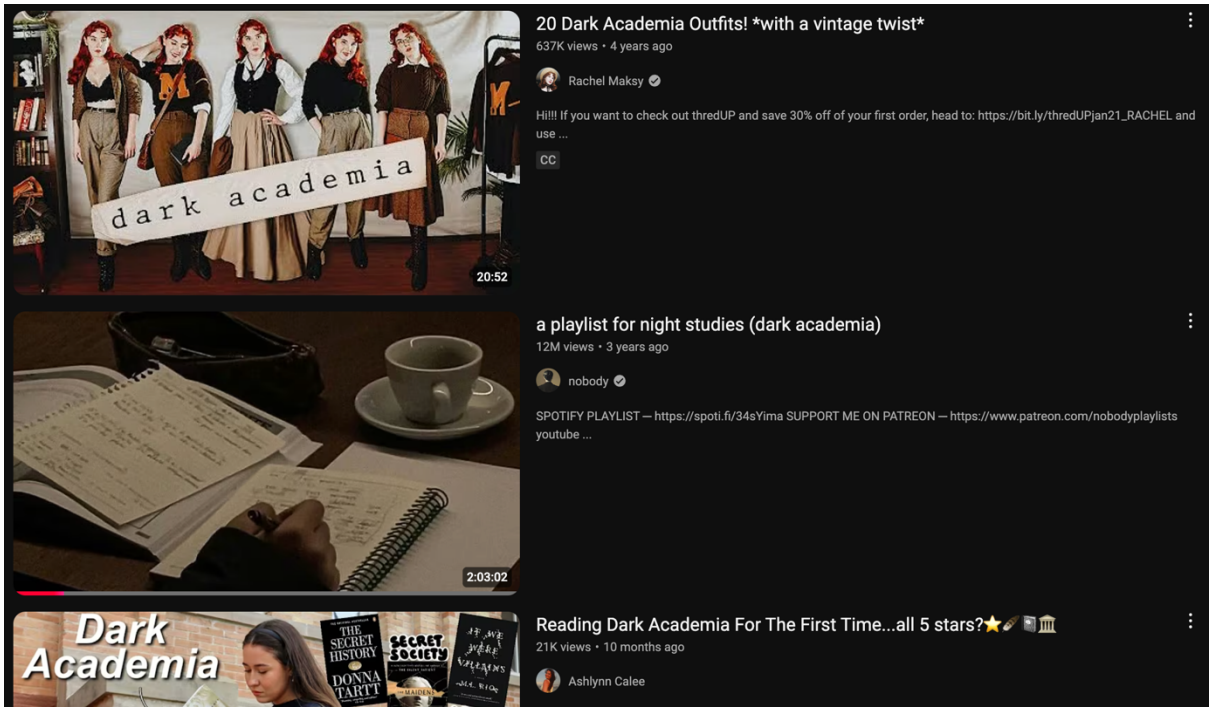

*Figure 3: YouTube result for search term: "dark academia", showing three videos: "20 Dark Academia Outfits! *with a vintage twist*" by Rachel Maksy; "a playlist for night studies (dark academia)" by nobody; and "Reading Dark Academia For The First Time ... all 5 stars?" by Ashlynn Calee.*

It can be difficult to trace the history of dark academia due to the ephemerality of digital media in the internet age, with posts frequently lost as websites update or creators stop contributing to the community and delete their accounts.[8] Adding to this difficulty is the swift evolution of online culture. Ana Alsan, an Instagram creator in the dark academia community, explained in an interview for *The New York Times* that the dark academia community has changed significantly since its inception, with a general trend of moving away from its more "gothic and classical aspects" and towards a reading list which features more contemporary works.[9] Most of the contemporary literature preferred by the dark academia community is set in or around the university, from campus novels such as Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* (2019) and Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* (2020), to the expanding corpus of dark academia novels which spans from *The Secret History* to Olivie Blake's *The*

[8] For example, Adriaansen identifies the first retrievable use of the term "dark academia" as a 2014 post on Tumblr by the account spacesweepers. Since Adriaansen's article was published, this post has become irretrievable on the Wayback Machine database, and it is increasingly difficult to search for older posts on social media sites themselves, and Adriaansen himself gives the caveat that "the specific origins of the aesthetic are difficult to establish". Adriaansen, "Dark Academia", 108, fn. 23.
[9] Kristen Bateman, "Academia Lives — on TikTok", *The New York Times*, 30 June 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/style/dark-academia-tiktok.html.

Atlas Six (2020/2021) and R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022), to the many aesthetically or thematically similar novels such as Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2022) and Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* (2020) which are sometimes counted under the label by fans, and sometimes excluded.[10] While the community tends to have a collective impression of what a dark academia lifestyle entails, conflicts arise about what is canonical or supposedly correct to read, combatted by page moderators with the instruction: "No policing what defines dark academia" (see: fig.4).[11]

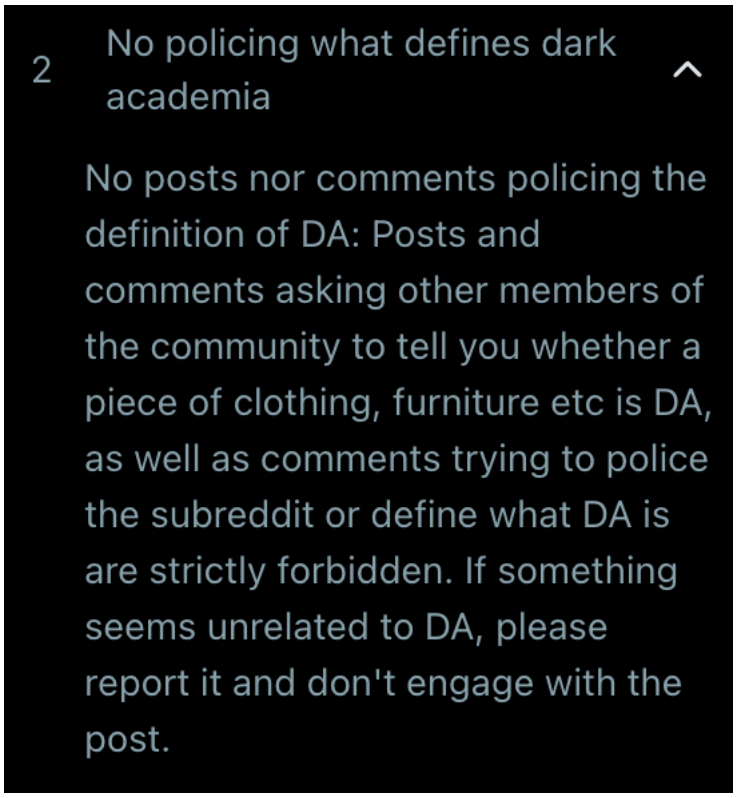

Figure 4: The second rule of the Reddit community for Dark Academia, which instructs: "No posts nor [sic] *comments policing the definition of DA".*

A Note on Methodology

Online literary culture has been analysed in recent years mostly in relation to market forces, with studies on the influence of online marketplaces on the publishing industry released by both Mark McGurl (2021) and John B. Thompson (2021), or as studies of fan

[10] For an example of videos in which readers explain which books are "dark academia", see: The Book Leo, "The Ultimate Guide to Dark Academia Books ☕🦉", YouTube, 18 September 2022, 28 min., 38 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC88ehQ14c4.
[11] "r/Dark Academia", Reddit, accessed 14 September 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/DarkAcademia/.

culture, such as Nicolle Lamerichs's *Productive Fandom* (2018) and Simone Murray's *The Digital Literary Sphere* (2018), which both offer detailed analyses of reader and fan behaviour in the digital age.[12] Research into the digital literary landscape rarely, however, explores the co-creative practices of online reader communities and contemporary authors. Their "transmedial" nature, a term which encompasses the variety of formats and media through which online communities communicate, makes traditional methods of understanding and analysing market forces and literary production inadequate when attempting to understand the generation and proliferation of new literature under the influence of the digital sphere.[13]

As I will explore in chapter two, phenomena such as dark academia are created by fans out of a love for a text with no intention of making money from the content they produce.[14] This creates difficulties for tracing and analysing the phenomenon through traditional metrics, as dark academia is not distributed by traditional means but is instead disseminated through the nebulous co-creative practices of readers and authors on social media platforms in an expanded, globalised version of "word-of-mouth" marketing. This thesis aims to ground the dark academia phenomenon in the historical context which influenced the writing of *The Secret History*, analysing its development through subsequent novelistic outputs within the dark academia genre while simultaneously analysing those novels as a product of the phenomenon and behaviours of the online community. From this analysis, I hope to understand the self-reflexive relationship between romantic fictional depictions of an academic lifestyle and the online community

[12] Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (Verso, 2021); John B. Thompson, *Book Wars: The Digital Revolution in Publishing* (Polity Press, 2021); Nicolle Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures* (Amsterdam University Press, 2018), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv65svxz; Simone Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era* (John Hopkins University Press, 2018), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5339524.

[13] For more on "transmedia", see: Renira Rampazzo Gambarato and Matthew Freeman, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies* (Routledge, 2018); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006).

[14] Tumblr, where many of these phenomena originated, is notorious as a platform which is largely anonymous and has been actively hostile towards advertisers and monetisation efforts, even as other social media platforms have adopted new financial models which have facilitated the elevation of "content creation" into a potential career.

which characterises itself by and emphasises its adherence to an image of scholarly literariness.

As this thesis takes for its subject matter the transmedial landscape of social media, specific terms are used throughout to refer to the collective activities of the online dark academia community. These activities, while performed on single platforms by individual creators, constitute a subsection of the larger online reader community. Within this community, many engage with "the physicality of the book within a digital culture", as Jessica Pressman suggests when defining the term "bookishness" in her monograph of the same name, but Pressman's focus on the physical proximity between reader and book in her definition limits the potential discussion to be had about the "renegoti[ation]" of the "proximity, interiority, [and] authenticity" represented by reading "in the digital era".[15] Simone Murray reinterprets the term in the context of the dark academia community, suggesting that the kind of bookishness practiced by this community relies upon "massively popular social-media platforms to fashion, project and reciprocally reinforce digital identities as nostalgic, high-cultural and emphatically analogue book lovers".[16] Even with the dark academia community's "deeply ambivalent attitude towards digital media", in order to achieve the desired "cumulative effect", creators in the community rely on products of the transmedial digital landscape such as moodboards and playlists to recreate the atmospheric qualities of the novels they love.[17] Their "digital identities", which are often disconnected from the creator's real life, find a home in the "online bookish spaces" within which contemporary reader communities operate. I use the term "online bookish space" in line with Murray's reinterpretation, to encompass the heterogeneous platforms and formats within which these reader communities operate, and to distinguish the posting practices specific to reader communities from the larger online landscape. To refer to individuals, I will use the terms "readers" or "creators", specifying "dark academia readers" or "dark academia creators" where necessary.

[15] Jessica Pressman, *Bookishness: Loving Books in a Digital Age* (Colombia University Press, 2020), 1.
[16] Murray, "Dark Academia", 348.
[17] Ibid., 348, 350.

Henry Jenkins points out that fan communities employ a "mixture of emotional proximity and critical distance" when discussing the subject of their fandom, a process which is reminiscent of that which John Guillory claims distinguishes literary scholarship from lay reading.[18] Rather than factoring their emotional proximity into their pseudo-academic analyses, however, the dark academia community combine typical fan behaviours, such as writing fan fiction and discussing fictional characters, with attempts to emulate the "critical distance" of the professional reader by analysing the themes and literary influences of the novels. Guillory's account of the differences between lay and professional readership in *Professing Criticism* begins with the assertion that "[l]iterary scholars and teachers [...] move reading literature beyond a merely intuitive practice", which "contradicts the assumption of lay readers who believe they already know how to read such works".[19] Content creators in the dark academia community present authoritative accounts of how to perform scholarly reading, but their impression of scholarship is largely based on an idea of academia which is fictional and romanticised, drawn along the lines of depictions of student life in dark academia novels. Rather than presenting an authentic version of literary scholarship, these readers show themselves "read[ing] in all the ways they aren't supposed to", as Michael Warner writes about his undergraduate students in "Uncritical Reading": "They identify with characters. They fall in love with authors. They mime what they take to be authorized sentiment".[20] The "authorized sentiment" which Warner says his students "mime" through identification with characters and parasocial relationships with authors is a poignant description of the dark academia community's relationship to scholarship; that is, it resembles a fresh class of undergraduate students, as yet untrained but eager to learn, and still firmly rooted in the "affectively positive styles of engagement" with literature of which the institution is generally scornful.[21] With this emphasis on the atmospheric and aesthetic qualities of the

[18] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992), 261, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=180969.
[19] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 293.
[20] Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading", in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, 1st edn, ed. Jane Gallop (Routledge, 2004), 13.
[21] Dylan Davidson, "To Be Transformed", *Post45*, Dark Academia Cluster, 13 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/to-be-transformed/; Mitch Therieau, "The Novel of Vibes", *Post45*, Dark

university, dark academia creators' idea of what constitutes scholarly reading, from annotation to thematic or historical analyses of texts, is disassociated from the realities of literary academic practice.

This does not mean that these creators reinforce "the assumption that literature is a kind of writing that does not require discipline to read".[22] Instead, they believe that they have the discipline associated with an education in critical reading, and that they are using the tools of the digital age to democratise academic practice, sharing its techniques with anybody who wishes to learn. Readers who display an expertise in the dark academia corpus are often treated within the community as authoritative voices and trusted to offer analyses of canonical literature alongside those of dark academia novels. Dark academia is therefore unique among contemporary reader communities in that it is associated with a kind of academic authority not afforded to creators reading other genres in other parts of the online bookish space. The co-creative influence of the dark academia community and resulting literary genre also offers a novel perspective when discussing the role of contemporary reader communities in constructions of cultural capital. Creators in the dark academia community distinguish themselves from other readers who might prefer fantasy or romance literature by using texts from the Western canon as a form of "social credential", or cultural capital, which highlights their scholarliness and further emphasises their performance of "academia" despite their primarily non-scholarly and "affectively positive styles of engagement" with literature.[23] As a result, critics mischaracterise and misunderstand the community by comparing its practice, as the readers do, to "real" scholarship without acknowledging the unique practices of dark academia readers which situate them somewhere in the "vernacular" landscape Guillory describes, between lay readers and the academy.[24] This community therefore offers a novel perspective through which to discuss the role of contemporary reader communities in the shifting conversation about cultural capital and the future of the humanities.

Academia Cluster, 15 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/the-novel-of-vibes/; Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 91.

[22] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 294.

[23] Ibid., 91. See also: John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

[24] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 229.

Novels following humanities students in university or scholarly settings have received massive success in the online bookish community across the late 2010s and early 2020s as the crisis of higher education has become more visible to those outside of the academy and the online book space has expanded, both in reach and in number. Maryann Nguyen separates these novels into two sister categories: the campus novel and the dark academia novel.[25] The campus novel, Nguyen writes, is grounded in a realistic depiction of academic life and its precarity, with popular examples among online readers seen in John Williams's *Stoner* (1965) and Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* (2017). This realism contrasts with dark academia novels' "nostalgic academic fantasy", which is "not necessarily a longing for one's own past but for a past that belongs to a different generation or an imagined past and should-be present".[26] Yiannis Gabriel, quoted by Nguyen, writes that nostalgia is "par excellence a mythopoetic emotion" which results in "collective fantasies, giving voice to deeper and unconscious wishes and desires" and "reflects the discontents of the present rather than the contents of the past".[27] The "discontents of the present" against which dark academia rebels are the digitisation of daily life, economic crisis, and political turmoil. Members of the dark academia community therefore "collec[t] and curat[e] signifiers of old-fashioned elite education" under the impression that the time period and educational possibilities that they represent are superior to those of the present day.[28] The nostalgic image of campus life and cultivated life of the mind as seen in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* influenced early dark academia creators to romanticise the campus as a space isolated from politics and financial difficulty, reading literature which is unmarred by the digital literary sphere and contemporary publishing market and thinking with an abstract philosophical and artistic lens which need not be applied to current affairs.

[25] Nguyen, "Nostalgia in Dark Academia", 56, 57.
[26] Deborah Thurman, "The Adjunct Complaint", *Post45*, Dark Academia Cluster, 8 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/the-adjunct-complaint/.
[27] Yiannis Gabriel, "Anchored in the Past: Nostalgic Identities in Organizations", in *The Oxford Handbook of Identities in Organizations*, ed. Andrew D. Brown (Oxford University Press, 2020), 589, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198827115.013.23.
[28] Davidson, "To Be Transformed".

The next major contribution to the genre after *The Secret History* was M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017). *Villains* draws clear inspiration from *The Secret History* with its thriller-style structure but swaps out the liberal arts college for an elite conservatoire. Nguyen suggests that the ability of *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* to "capture a generation weary of the reality that an education in the arts and humanities offers no future security" by depicting a world in which such degrees "ha[ve] intrinsic value, despite [their] impracticality" has contributed massively to their success, as they create a "protective buffer of nostalgic fantasy" which appeals to young readers.[29] However, as Nguyen points out, this suggestion of intrinsic value is only present in *If We Were Villains*, which was clearly influenced by the online dark academia community. "[T]he fantasy of uninterrupted personal time and deep scholarly concentration in an elite campus setting" beloved by the dark academia community, as Amelia Horgan writes, is a site of escape from the social, political, and economic crises of the modern day.[30]

In *The Secret History*, however, the life of the mind is not seen as intrinsically valuable, and the narrator, Richard Papen's, life-long dissatisfaction shows that Tartt, far from romanticising academia, is interrogating the idea of the university. It was not until the genre began to face increasing scrutiny in the 2020s that conversations about the inherent elitism and conservatism of the university spread within the dark academia community. Mel Monier writes that Black creators in the dark academia space became openly critical of the elitist and Eurocentric ideals of the community, noting how even in the fantasy version of academia, people of colour faced hostility and exclusion.[31] Coupled with the biases of social media algorithms, which have long been known to promote content from white creators and suppress content by people of colour, Monier and others like her began to actively seek and create dark academia content which "use[d] the dark academia's aesthetics to interrogate how whiteness and Eurocentric knowledge production have

[29] Nguyen, "Nostalgia in Dark Academia", 58.
[30] Amelia Horgan, "The 'Dark Academia' Subculture Offers a Fantasy Alternative to the Neoliberal University", *Jacobin,* 2021, https://jacobin.com/2021/12/instagram-tumblr-humanities-romanticism-old-money-uk.
[31] Mel Monier, "Too Dark for Dark Academia?", *Post45*, Dark Academia Cluster,15 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/too-dark-for-dark-academia/.

been centered in academic spaces".[32] New additions to the genre, like many of the critical re-evalutions of the phenomenon published on YouTube and TikTok, were more outwardly critical of the university, often providing deconstructions of the romantic idea of the university favoured by dark academia creators through postcolonial, feminist, and historical lenses.[33]

One of the most successful new dark academia novels was R. F. Kuang's *Babel*, which won the Blackwell's Book of the Year Prize for Fiction and the Nebula Novel Award in 2022. Kuang's self-conscious use of dark academia's aesthetic elements, as well as her open blend and subversion of genres such as the *Bildungsroman* and the historical novel, made *Babel* a key text facilitating readers' re-evaluation of their relationship to the university. Yet, with its Oxford setting and long classroom scenes in which a pseudo-academic style is used to explain the magic system, which is based on translation science, the novel frequently reinforces a sense of wonder surrounding academia's aesthetics that the novel tries to critique. As with *The Secret History,* the dark academia community ignores many of Kuang's harshest criticisms of Oxford's colonial history in favour of the romanticised image of spending long hours studying in the Bodleian library. The "signifiers of old-fashioned elite education" which form the aesthetic backdrop for *Babel* are more resonant with the dark academia community's escapist fantasy than its heavy-handed portrayal of revolutionary action.

With *Babel*, we can see what Stefan Collini calls the "contradictory attitudes that cluster around the idea of the university".[34] The simultaneous emergence of the dark academia

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[32] Kalhan Rosenblatt, "Months after TikTok Apologized to Black Creators, Many Say Little Has Changed", *NBC News*, 9 February 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/pop-culture-news/months-after-tiktok-apologized-black-creators-many-say-little-has-n1256726; Megan McCluskey, "These Creators Say They're Still Being Suppressed for Posting Black Lives Matter Content on TikTok", *TIME,* 22 July 2020, https://time.com/5863350/tiktok-black-creators/; Monier, "Too Dark for Dark Academia?".
[33] Rowan Ellis, "The Problem with Dark Academia", YouTube, 30 June 2021, 32 min., 44 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfkYXVdkUEE&ab_channel=RowanEllis; Robin Waldun, "The Dangers of Romanticizing The Liberal Arts - Problems with Dark Academia and Aesthetics", YouTube, 30 June 2022, 20 min., 8 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OS46W4l8so; Lady of the Library, "Dark Academia: Aesthetic Trend or Intellectual Movement?", YouTube, 1 March 2024, 18 min., 8 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQOIo077fNI.
[34] Stefan Collini, *Speaking of Universities* (Verso, 2017), 72, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5177422.

genre and the crisis of higher education faced by contemporary academics reveals that the enduring appeal of the idea of the university can, and has, eclipsed discussions about democratisation and decolonisation in past decades. Despite growing awareness of its colonial roots, the university is still "seen as providing the setting, in some cases the unique or necessary setting, for the realization of cherished cultural values".[35] Criticisms of the university must therefore contend with the conservative and anti-intellectual cultural turn which has become pervasive in online spaces.[36] Despite their romantic idea of the university, dark academia readers have no more access to the knowledge held by higher education institutions than any other reader outside of the academy, but they contribute to the conservative turn with the belief that this knowledge can be gained by uncritically absorbing "cherished cultural values" from reading classic and canonical literature. The ethical self-improvement Guillory identifies as the purpose of the lay reader relies, for the dark academia community, on the prestige of the literature being read. Dark academia readers use their positive relationship to texts to shift the notion that literary scholarship is a method of explaining classic texts "to a generation who were compelled to study them but had difficulty enjoying them" by reclaiming the pleasure of these classic texts and treating literature not as a site for hard labour and professionalised evaluation but as a method through which to indulge an affective artistic sensibility.[37]

To understand the co-constructive relationship between the dark academia community and dark academia novels, this thesis offers a literary critical analysis of three dark academia novels, each of which represents a key moment in the development of the dark academia genre and the online dark academia community, alongside a historical account of the genre's development from the 1990s to the 2020s. In chapter one, I argue that Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, sometimes called the ur-text of dark academia, has been overlooked by scholarship despite offering a key example of a literary response to the years between what Mark McGurl calls the "meta-genre fiction" of the postmodern

[35] Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, 72.
[36] Michael McDevitt, "Social Control of Intellect: Four Features of the Academic–Media Nexus", *Communication Theory*, no. 32 (2022): 407–28, https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtab015.
[37] Stefan Collini, *Literature and Learning: A History of English Studies in Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 37.

era and what Andrew Hoberek calls the "genre turn" of the late 1990s and early 2000s.[38] I examine how the self-conscious literariness of *The Secret History*'s narrator, Richard Papen, is used to highlight the instability of notions of cultural capital. To show this, I analyse Richard Papen and his classmates, Bunny Corcoran and Henry Winter, suggesting that each character exemplifies a different aspect of the novel's critique of cultural capital, and that the novels dissatisfied, melancholic conclusion is used to expose the limitations of intellectualism.

In the second chapter, I show how the aestheticised idea of the university depicted in *The Secret History* has influenced reader behaviour in the dark academia community, from its emergence in the mid-2010s through its developments in the late-2010s and early-2020s. Turning to the next significant addition to the dark academia genre, M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*, I argue that making Shakespeare the subject of study allows Rio to capitalise on the cultural capital associated with Shakespeare's works while also appealing to the readership within the dark academia community through her promotion of affective forms of literary study. Finally, I conclude that the embodiment of the actor as depicted in the novel reflects the performative aspects of the dark academia subculture, with the novel's ambiguous ending offering an optimistic conclusion in contrast to the pessimism and melancholy of *The Secret History*.

The third chapter examines the performative role played by the author-academic personae presented by authors of dark academia novels when interacting with readers. I suggest that R. F. Kuang's position as both an academic and an author has been instrumental in the success of her dark academia novels, and that her literary works encourage readers to question cultural hierarchies while reinforcing traditional ideas about academic authority. I argue that *Babel*'s postcolonial themes and plot detailing a revolution against the University of Oxford attempt to deconstruct the romantic idea of

[38] Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Harvard University Press, 2009); Andrew Hoberek, 'Literary Genre Fiction', in *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010*, ed. Rachel Greenwald Smith (Cambridge University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316569290.005.

the university, but that Kuang's descriptions of the university and academic lifestyle frequently undercut her deconstruction and instead reinforce those romantic notions.

This thesis aims to explore the currently overlooked role played by fan communities in the creation and reinforcement of both old and new ideas about cultural capital. By delineating the development of the dark academia phenomenon, from the period in which Tartt was writing in the 1990s to the major changes to the community and genre during the COVID-19 pandemic, I will establish how the relationship between professional and lay reading has changed significantly as a result of the increased accessibility and democratisation of literary and cultural production in the digital literary sphere. I will attempt to argue why this shifting relationship marks a significant moment – and potential turning point – in the current crisis of literary scholarship and higher education, and through my argument explore ways in which criticism can respond and adapt to the changes in the literary landscape.

CHAPTER ONE

(Not So) Secret Histories

The Secret History *and Late Twentieth-Century Literary Culture*

Donna Tartt, the Genre Turn, and Unreality in American Culture

In 2022, *Post45* published a cluster of essays under the title "Dark Academia". Edited by Olivia Stowell and Mitch Therieau and written for *Post45*'s "Contemporaries" section, the collection offers creative approaches to analysing the phenomenon which had been spreading on the internet and in contemporary literature throughout the twenty-first century, called "dark academia". Evident among these essays, whose subject matter runs from the crisis of the neoliberal university to interdisciplinary discussions of video games, is the universal understanding that the dark academia phenomenon appeared in direct response to Donna Tartt's 1992 novel, *The Secret History*. While *The Secret History* is frequently referenced in critical writing about dark academia, a genre with which it was not originally associated but which it has assigned with retrospective significance, Tartt's novel is rarely considered as a product of the context in which it was written. Rarely, in fact, is the novel considered at all, as Tartt's work has gone largely without critical evaluation despite what I would argue is its obvious relevance to several long-form theoretical studies of the 1990s literary scene. Most obviously, *The Secret History*'s careful blend of popular and literary forms makes it a clear pioneer of the type of novelistic innovation which led to the "genre turn" in the 1990s and early 2000s, but this has been overlooked in critical circles due to Tartt's treatment of her various influences, from Euripides's *Bakkhai* to Ray Milland's thriller novels, with a sense of equality rarely seen in literary works. Despite Tartt's absence from critical discourse, *The Secret History* has inspired both an online phenomenon and the development of a literary genre. This chapter hopes to correct the critical neglect of *The Secret History* by suggesting that the enduring appeal of its nuanced, novelistic interrogation of the cultural conversations surrounding relationships to history, nostalgia, and conservatism marks an early instigation of key developments in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literary culture.

The relationship between high and lowbrow forms in fiction was already the subject of critical discourse when Tartt was writing. Mark McGurl and Amy J. Elias both identify in this time the development of postmodernist "meta-genre fiction", in which popular genres were "instantiated and ironised to the point of becoming dysfunctional in the production of conventional pleasures".[1] Alongside Adornian fears about the "culture industry" and the postwar proliferation of creative writing programmes in the United States, many writers began to experiment with integrating popular genres into their work with the purpose of deconstructing them, injecting them with a characteristic post-1945 literary irony.[2] Metafiction, according to Elias, "is fiction that calls attention to its representational techniques and knowledge claims", often featuring narrators who "are clearly engaged in the act of composition", among other self-conscious forms and devices.[3] The reflexivity of these forms, when combined with what John Duvall calls "a sense of historiography", allowed authors to "create a critical purchase on the culture by taking us where the official archives of history were either silent or repressed".[4] In an age where the culture industry was instrumental in promoting official historical and social narratives, metafiction was a literary innovation in which authors began to use and subvert traditional fictional forms and genres to expose the silent, repressed archives of history.

Metafiction, therefore, was well-suited to questioning "the persistence of thinking characterized by difference, division, and exclusion" and the "reliance on particular narratives [...] shaped by ideas of the pastoral, of paradise, and of utopia" by "highlight[ing] the artificiality of historical explanations of reality".[5] In the program era, authors educated in theory became more aware of their place in literary history and of their role in constructing "particular narratives", whether official or subversive.

[1] Amy J. Elias, "Postmodern Metafiction", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, 1st edn, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521196314.003; McGurl, *The Program Era*, 217.
[2] See: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 2016).
[3] Elias, "Postmodern Metafiction", 15.
[4] John N. Duvall, "Introduction: A Story of the Stories of American Fiction after 1945", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Fiction after 1945*, ed. John N. Duvall (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521196314.002.
[5] Elias, "Postmodern Metafiction", 24.

Postmodern writings, as noted by John Guillory, came as a result of the "final phase of the old public sphere of periodical criticism" in which the conflict between "modernism and mass culture" was morphing into a conflict between the institutionalisation of interpretation and the practices of popular readers.[6] In the last vestiges of this conflict, metafiction developed into meta-genre fiction, which interrogated the presumed "stability, reproductive, or regulative functions of genre" which, in the "culture industry", had become instrumental in creating artificial explanations of reality.[7] Rather than using genre forms as they had been historically used, authors "s[aw] a correlation between Baudrillardian simulation, consumerism, and ennui in contemporary life", and used that realisation to "reve[l] in the emptiness of aesthetic forms" without reinforcing their "regulative functions".[8]

On the other side of this development, Samuel S. Cohen notes a "markedly retrospective quality" to American culture in the late 1990s.[9] In a time characterised by an emphasis on what Adam Kelly calls "individual selfhood and private interiority", meta-genre fiction's deconstruction of established popular forms accompanied revisions to accepted historical narratives amid rising nostalgia and conservatism.[10] Jeremy Rosen suggests that the assumed stability of genres relies on the belief that their ideologies are intrinsic "rather than a product of the conventional way they have been deployed in a given historical moment".[11] He notes, for example, how "[t]he detective novel enforces order and localizes criminality to ignore systemic injustice", but how it can also "expos[e] the state's monopoly on violence", just as realism can be both "conservative, legitimating a particular worldview by claiming the authority of the real" while also "enabl[ing] social critique by showing how structural forces determine the fate of the individual".[12] While genres do have historical links, and ought to be considered in relation to their points of

[6] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 298.
[7] Elias, "Postmodern Metafiction", 17.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Samuel S. Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (University of Iowa Press, 2009), 4.
[10] Adam Kelly, *American Fiction in Transition: Observer-Hero Narrative, the 1990s, and Postmodernism* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3.
[11] Jeremy Rosen, *Genre Bending: The Plasticity of Form in Contemporary Literary Fiction*, Uncorrected Proof (Stanford University Press, 2026), 35.
[12] Rosen, *Genre Bending*, 35.

emergence, Rosen explains how understanding individual uses of genre forms, particularly unconventional ones, is equally important, and is something which is often overlooked in favour of totalising interpretations. It is through this observation of individual uses of genre forms by literary writers that Andrew Hoberek comes to coin the phrase "genre turn" to describe the developments resulting from changes in meta-genre fiction over the course of the 1990s.

Hoberek argues that authors of the "genre turn", unlike meta-genre fiction, "offe[r] at least a version" of the expected "conventional pleasures" of the genre within which they are writing.[13] Emerging, Hoberek continues, "[a]t the moment at which the drive for aesthetic innovation was rendered internally untenable and externally compromised" by the limitations of postmodernism and the absorption of innovative literary methods into neoliberal capitalist houses of production, genre was "a kind of archive of conventions capable of providing a renewed backdrop for individual artistic expression".[14] The "archive of conventions" on which these writers drew allowed them to interrogate, using genre fiction's "forms of realist plausibility", "the paradoxical theme of the encroaching 'unreality' of contemporary American reality" "to replace the official fictions with better, more creative political alternatives".[15] It also allowed authors to interrogate and, often, reject the "markedly retrospective quality" which frequently inspired the encroachment of that "'unreality'", but this often resulted in authors' attempts to distance their work from the low culture origins of the genres they used.[16] While Hoberek identifies Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) as the novel which legitimised the genre turn in literary circles, Richard Joseph suggests that this legitimising was only made possible by Lethem's "satirical and faintly superior" attitude towards the detective genre.[17] Despite Hoberek's distinction between the genre turn and meta-genre fiction relying upon the suggestion that novels in the genre turn supply the reader with the expected "conventional pleasures", the variation on these pleasures, by Joseph's estimation,

[13] Hoberek, "Literary Genre Fiction", 65.
[14] Ibid., 71-2.
[15] Ibid., 64; McGurl, *The Program Era*, 215.
[16] Cohen, *After the End of History*, 4.
[17] Richard Joseph, "Fooled You: On Donna Tartt's Genre Fiction", *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 2 October 2022, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fooled-you-on-donna-tartts-genre-fiction.

allows these authors to demarcate their work as a literary instance of the genre, often pointing out the self-conscious absence of the genre's tired clichés and "hackneyed tropes".[18]

In contrast, as Joseph points out, Donna Tartt does "not condescend to genre but takes it seriously", often deploying it with "undisguised relish" in contrast to many of her contemporaries.[19] Tartt's *The Secret History* is an addition to the number of "'scholarly' fictions" identified by McGurl in the late twentieth century which engages with the "deep well of utopian longing on the part of readers for meaningful education and the [...] hard-won pleasures of erudition" by offering a curious examination of the late twentieth-century nostalgia which resulted in meta-genre fiction and the genre turn.[20] This relationship to both genre fiction and scholarship, and its publication date of 1992, makes *The Secret History* difficult to situate as either a product of meta-genre fiction or the genre turn. Certainly, by Hoberek's estimation, the novel arrives too early to be part of the genre turn; but neither can it be considered a product of meta-genre fiction if that label relies upon the deconstruction of the genres from which it takes influence. The novel's enduring appeal, as well as its later influence on literary and cultural trends in the mid-2010s, seems to rest precisely in the bridge it creates between the associated cultural capital of scholarly institutions and the lowbrow genres which, once the product of popular culture, were being absorbed into and reconstituted by the very institutions that had for so long rejected them.

Tartt explained in an interview for *BOMB Magazine* shortly after the release of *The Secret History* that, in writing the novel, she wanted to "impose structures and conventions of the past onto the present", which she achieves by following the story of a group of elitist classics students at a liberal arts university who are surrounded by and juxtaposed against the pop cultural preferences of their student peers.[21] The replacement of "official fictions" relies on the distinctions of "folk culture" from objects of cultural capital, as the

[18] Joseph, "Fooled You: On Donna Tartt's Genre Fiction".
[19] Ibid.
[20] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 31.
[21] Jill Eisestadt, "Donna Tartt by Jill Eisenstadt", *BOMB Magazine*, 1 October 1992, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/1992/10/01/donna-tarttdonna-tarttjill-eisenstadt/.

"more creative political alternatives" must, by definition, be "alternative" to the official narrative. Paul Crosthwaite suggests that dark academia novels fulfil the desire for these "more creative critical alternatives" by framing their narratives around "the existence of a foundational practice, artefact, or text of concentrated power and beauty, which must somehow be recovered or revived in the present".[22] The reframing of historical ritual or folk practices as academic exercises performed in pursuit of aesthetic or intellectual satisfaction allows authors to "reflect historically on the making of historical narrative", both in terms of "how the times in which we live shape the way we understand the past" and in terms of how institutions of knowledge create and disseminate the "official versions of the real".[23] In *The Secret History*, the catalytic event of the novel is the class's attempt to get in touch with their "primitive impulses" by recreating a ritual Bacchanal, but they treat this ancient folk ritual as an intellectual pursuit due to the cultural capital assigned to classical history in the modern day. The drug-induced, hallucinogenic descriptions of the Bacchanal from Henry, with its "heart-shaking" timelessness which makes "the workday boundaries of ordinary existence seem" "pallid", bears striking similarity to some of the descriptions of drug-addled partygoing in the novel, in which everything becomes "soft and kind and infinitely forgiving" and time seems to vanish.[24] The past, Tartt seems to suggest, is not so different from the present; it is only through nostalgic and idealistic revisionist perspectives that we give elevated cultural capital to certain historical periods and practices and consider others to be low culture.

The Secret History's academic setting and depiction of pedagogy reflects the "utopian longing [...] for meaningful education" identified by McGurl by using the disconnection between the classics class and their university peers to critique the hierarchical systems of cultural capital which influence how we "understand the past" and how we conceive of "meaningful education".[25] The novel follows narrator Richard Papen as he joins an elusive, elite group of Classics students at Hampden College in the hopes that he will learn how to emulate their curated intellectual personae in order to achieve social mobility and

[22] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 8.
[23] Cohen, *After the End of History*, 3-4.
[24] Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (Penguin, 1993), 186, 320.
[25] Cohen, *After the End of History*, 4; McGurl, *The Program Era*, 31.

escape the melancholy echoes of his California upbringing. Once invited into their ranks, Richard participates in a dramatic series of events in which the apparent leader of the class, Henry Winter, reveals to him that they killed a stranger during an ancient ritual Bacchanal and explains that they now need to kill their classmate Bunny to prevent him from exposing their crime to the police. But Bunny's death, far from saving them, is the catalyst for a downward spiral which ends with Henry's suicide and the group's dissolution. The academic life of the mind which Richard idolises at the beginning of the novel is revealed not to be a complete fallacy, but rather to be a fantastical world which isolates its practitioners from reality, understanding the present only through a limited perspective which is situated in and influenced by the past.

This chapter will explore how *The Secret History*'s temporal structure and use of genre forms facilitates reflections on the construction of historical narratives and notions of cultural capital in American culture. I will show how *The Secret History* poses questions about intellectual capital, education, and the hierarchies of power created by the absorption and alteration of lowbrow forms into forms and institutions of cultural prestige through the contradictory literary preferences of its narrator, Richard Papen. Examining Richard's revisionism and contradictions in detail, this chapter will detail how the parallels between Richard and his classmates, Bunny and Henry, present an interrogation of how narratives are constructed and the pitfalls of believing in a fiction, in response to the conservative nostalgic turn in late twentieth-century American culture. Finally, I will suggest that the dissatisfaction and loneliness experienced by Richard at the novel's close concludes the suggestion throughout the novel that too rigid an adoration of objects of cultural capital, or too rigid an idea of cultural capital itself, may have disastrous consequences for the construction of community.

Richard's Revisionist Histories

In her essay for the *Post45* cluster, Olivia Stowell points out how the dark academia genre "think[s] [...] about relationships between and attachments (or lack thereof) to particular

pasts and futures".[26] One of the ways in which this relationship is explored in *The Secret History* is through the revisionist habits of its narrator, Richard Papen, seen as he reflects on the ways through which he creates a false image of his own childhood for the consumption of himself and others. This childhood, Richard describes as one of "drive-ins, tract homes, waves of heat rising from the blacktop", with "little of interest" and "less of beauty" to be found in his hometown of Plano, California.[27] Richard views these years as being "disposable as a plastic cup", and he creates for himself "a new and far more satisfying history" to relay to those who ask, one which is "full of swimming pools and orange groves and dissolute, charming show-biz parents".[28] This "history" is not limited to a story that Richard tells others; he finds that this alternative version of his childhood "has all but eclipsed the drab original" until Richard is "unable to recall much about" his "real childhood [...] except a certain mood that permeated [it], a melancholy feeling" and "a general sense of dread, of imprisonment within the dreary round of school and home".[29] For Richard, the past is to be manipulated and falsified, so much so that it is unclear whether Richard's determination to curate a specific future for himself has left him unable to present anything authentic about his history. This practice of falsifying narratives is emblematic of what Mark Currie identifies as a feature of postmodernist historiographic metafiction. Currie suggests that the fascination with historicism in post-war literary theory has led critics to focus upon postmodernism's relationship to the past rather than conceiving of fiction's temporal structures as a form of prolepsis, of future-making through storytelling. The temporal loops of fictional narratives, being at once in the reader's present and in the narrator's past, creates a sense of "anticipation", in which "[t]he present is the object of a future memory, and we live it as such, in anticipation of the story we will tell later, envisaging the present as past".[30] The "encroaching 'unreality' of contemporary American reality" is characterised by this kind of storytelling which, by

[26] Olivia Stowell, "The Time Warp, Again?", *Post45*, Dark Academia Cluster, 15 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/the-time-warp-again/.
[27] Tartt, *Secret History*, 5-6.
[28] Ibid., 6.
[29] Ibid., 5-6.
[30] Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1r1zgb.

Currie's estimation, conceives of every event as part of the future historical narrative which it will create.[31]

This is precisely how Richard approaches his life. His attraction to the Greek class, for example, originates in a yearning to develop the same "coolness" and "cruel, mannered charm which [...] had a strange cold breath of the ancient world" that they exhibit.[32] For Richard, these qualities "gave every indication of having been intensely cultivated", and he finds the possibility "that these qualities were acquired ones and that, perhaps, this was the way I might learn them" to be "heady".[33] This obsessive desire to learn how to cultivate himself in the image of the Greek class is essential to the development of what Crosthwaite identifies as a core feature the dark academia genre:

> an obsession with aesthetic sensibility – with how one acquires, cultivates, sustains, and transmits a capacity for heightened receptiveness and attunement to the presence of the beautiful, and the acute pleasures and gratifications yielded by such a state.[34]

Richard's relationship to history is rooted in the idea of a "*particular*" past or future; that is, in the wilful construction, shaping, and rewriting of reality, and his retrospective, self-conscious narration of events frequently sees him revisiting – or omitting – moments which he has previously described through a different angle. Tartt emphasises Richard's relationship to the past through the novel's "scrambled chronology", employing what Toni Pape calls a "loop-through-the-future" structure which "make[s] felt that the status quo is highly unstable" and that, by the time the reader reaches the novel, "it is always almost-too-late for course corrections".[35] Tartt subverts the "whodunit" using the "loop-through-the-future" structure to create a tragic temporality in which the murderer and victim are revealed in the novel's opening prologue and the reader is left in a state of anticipation until the murder occurs.[36] Tzvetan Todorov famously suggests that the whodunit creates

[31] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 215.
[32] Tartt, *Secret History*, 32-33.
[33] Ibid., 33.
[34] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 4.
[35] Stowell, "The Time Warp, Again?"; Toni Pape, *Figures of Time: Affect and the Television of Preemption* (Duke University Press, 2019), 14.
[36] Eisestadt, "Donna Tartt by Jill Eisenstadt"; Currie, *About Time*.

a double time within the novel: the original events and the narrator's process of resolving them.[37] The framing device of Richard's confessional creates a double-time in which the events are not reframed by a satisfying resolution process but rather the tragic inevitability with which they come to pass. That the Greek class will kill Bunny is not a problem to be resolved; but the cause must be uncovered by the reader paying attention to clues in the narrative.

One of these causes is Richard's propensity for narrativizing and fictionalising the events of his day-to-day life. Alongside his revisionist histories, Richard's interactions with the Greek class and descriptions of the world around him are relayed to the reader through what Paul Crosthwaite calls the "filter of his artistic learning".[38] Richard describes, for example, a scene looking "like a painting too vivid to be real", or the experience of a moment having "the quality of a memory".[39] These descriptions are most heavily used in the section of the novel in which Richard spends his weekends with the Greek class in a country house owned by classmate Francis Abernathy, a period in which Richard suggests his memory of the year "comes into a sharp, delightful focus" and the Greek class "cease[s] being totally foreign", revealing a "far more interesting [reality] than any idealized version could possibly be".[40] The extent to which these descriptions are a depiction of reality at all remains ambiguous throughout the novel, as the process of fictionalisation remains at the forefront of Richard's descriptive habits. He refers to the novel in-text as a story, labelling it "the only story I will ever be able to tell" at the end of the prologue and inserting rhetorical questions throughout which remind the reader of the novel's mediated form: "What should I tell you?".[41] Such questions subvert the reader's anticipation of the foregone conclusions associated with the genre elements Tartt employs by drawing attention to the deliberate construction of the narrative.

[37] Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction", in *Crime and Media: A Reader,* ed. Chris Greer (Routledge, 2010), 139.
[38] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 27.
[39] Tartt, *Secret History*, 108, 113.
[40] Ibid., 87.
[41] Ibid., 5, 104.

While these fictional and romantic descriptions show Richard's desire to share "the sheer sensory and imaginative delight that [he] takes in the trappings of his new, confected and derivative, persona", they also alienate the reader, for whom Richard's gleeful indulgence of his aesthetic sensibility and revisionist storytelling feels from the outset like a deliberate manipulation.[42] The "imaginative delight" which allows Richard to "become the character which for a long time I had so skillfully played" reveals the novel's fictionality, with the broader implication in response to the "encroaching 'unreality'" of American culture that individuals shape cultural memory through the deliberate reconstruction of narratives.[43] Richard's supposed attainment of these qualities is never confirmed by an outside source. In fact, it is clear from several moments that the Greek class is fully aware that Richard is lying about his childhood and upbringing, such as when prying questions from Bunny result in Richard fleeing the room and Francis delivering an indistinct rebuke to Bunny for his unnecessary cruelty.[44] Richard admits in the face of these questions that "[m]y lies about my family were adequate, but they could not stand up under these glaring attacks", and his anxiety about being discovered is so great that he burns the only photograph he has of his mother for "fear that Bunny would find it while snooping around my room".[45] The satisfaction evoked for Richard by the successful performance of his revised self, then, supersedes the comfort offered by the photograph of his mother. Much like the illusory image of his classmates which, even after describing their real selves as "far more interesting", remains "such a convincing illusion" that Richard feels "oddly comforted" by his initial impression of them, the complete embodiment of Richard's revised self is central for maintaining his place in the Greek class and in fuelling his participation in Bunny's murder.[46]

The cultivation of the "cruel, mannered charm" Richard sees in the Greek class therefore relies upon the destruction of certain aspects of Richard's real history.[47] Far from merely comforting, Richard treats the cultivation process as an opportunity to gain the cultural

[42] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 27, 25.
[43] Tartt, *Secret History*, 365; McGurl, *The Program Era*, 251.
[44] Tartt, *Secret History*, 248-9.
[45] Ibid., 246, 247.
[46] Ibid., 87, 327.
[47] Ibid., 32-33.

capital associated with the Greek class's old-fashioned tastes, such as their preference for canonical literature, as well as their more idiosyncratic tastes such as Francis's pince-nez and Henry's kerosene lamps. Unlike the whodunit from which Tartt takes structural inspiration, a second double time is layered over the double time of the "whydunit", which is created by the tension between reality and Richard's revisionist storytelling. The result of this is not a "quadruple time", as might seem a logical conclusion, but rather a matrix of simultaneous occurrences separated by interpretation, with the locus of that interpretation being the university and pedagogical influence which inspires the artistic lens of this interpretative process. Mark Currie points out that "the contemporary world that one might construct from the historiographic metafiction would be a hopelessly partial portrait" due to the disconnect between the "present world" and the "present" of the text.[48] In many ways, the "imaginative delight" of Richard's fantasies throughout the novel occupy entirely different genres depending on his surroundings; while the Greek class initially belongs to a *Bildungsroman*, fulfilling a nostalgic idea of intellectualism and promising Richard the opportunity for social mobility so that he can enter a position fit for civil society, this promise does not follow into "the contemporary world" which is represented through Richard's interactions with the rest of Hampden's student body or with Bunny's family at the funeral.

Although Currie suggests that "there are countless novels which show no concern for the paradoxes of fictional and historical representation", *The Secret History* can be interpreted as a depiction of those very paradoxes, offering through them a commentary on the dangers of trusting official narratives about history and reality.[49] Reflecting on the biases of the academic space and the insularity which allows for the construction of dominant narratives of history which are not necessarily truthful, Richard's revisionist habit shows how the development of his "aesthetic sensibility" relies upon the wilful, often destructive, reorganisation of facts into a more appealing fiction. This destructive action is encouraged in all the Greek class members by their teacher and mentor, Julian Morrow, who Richard writes:

[48] Currie, *About Time*, 26.
[49] Ibid.

> refused to see anything about any of us except our most engaging qualities, which he cultivated and magnified to the exclusion of all our tedious and less desirable ones.[50]

The cultivation process, then, requires not only the careful revision of events, but the absolute "exclusion" of qualities deemed undesirable. The image left behind, which Richard describes as "attractive if inaccurate", he nonetheless describes as the "most engaging" version of himself, and he takes a "delicious pleasure" in confining himself within the prescribed lines.[51] Part of the paradox which arises when historical representation becomes inextricable from the fictional, *The Secret History* makes clear, is the pleasure elicited by "attractive" results of the destructive process.

The comfort of the "convincing illusion" forms a key part of Richard's approach to exempting himself from guilt or responsibility for Bunny's murder. In adopting the "cool, well-mannered, rich" image from the Greek class, Richard also attempts to present to the reader the impression that he has of his classmates, that they are "absolutely beyond reproach".[52] Although Richard suggests that his understanding of the Greek class is so thorough that he can see through this image, the reader is shown that he cannot even see through the illusions he constructs for himself, let alone any external illusion. For example, when reflecting on his involvement in the murder, Richard suggests that "[a] month or two before, I would have been appalled at the idea of any murder at all", and that it was only through their obsessive theorising about how to kill Bunny that the class convinced themselves it was an inevitable outcome.[53] Yet, in that "month or two before" the murder, when Richard plays an instrumental role in facilitating Bunny's murder, he explains that "thinking back on it now, [...] I might have chosen to do something very different from what I actually did".[54] The ability to create for himself the "convincing illusion" that he was, at some point, "appalled at the idea of any murder at all" despite the evidence to the contrary, shows the extent to which the "essential falseness" of Richard's narration has come not only to overshadow his childhood, but to eclipse his entire sense

[50] Tartt, *Secret History*, 365.
[51] Ibid., 365.
[52] Ibid., 327.
[53] Ibid., 311.
[54] Ibid., 223.

of reality.[55] While the novel, according to Olivia Stowell, "mak[es] an implicit structural argument that things could not have been any other way", as Richard uses retrospective storytelling to "evacuat[e] his own agency or responsibility for what occurs", Richard's actions indicate quite the opposite: he has played an active role in things being the way they are in order to fulfil his aesthetic sensibility and gain the social mobility offered by his image of the Greek class.[56]

The Lowbrow Threat to the Idea of the University

The almost universal affinity for highbrow literary and artistic pursuits displayed by the Greek class is disrupted only by the character of Bunny whose open indulgence of his lowbrow tastes makes him an outlier. Bunny is frequently seen with a copy of *The Bride of Fu Manchu*, which he only replaces with "a volume of Homer" when the class hosts Julian for dinner, and he plays John Philip Sousa marches loudly on his speakers in the student accommodation.[57] These lowbrow tastes make sense to Richard only when Bunny's wealth is later revealed to be performative, the product of his family's "delusions of grandeur" despite them having no "money to back them up".[58] The similarities between Bunny and Richard are subdued by Richard's narration, with a major distinction between them being that Richard hides his lowbrow tastes and indulges them only in moments of solitude and distress. Richard's shame about his upbringing shrouds his lowbrow tastes, which he associates with Plano and sees as antithetical to his aspirations, whereas Bunny's tastes align with the shameless "delusions of grandeur" encouraged by his family. Habits associated with his working-class origins, therefore, are a point of soreness for Richard, indulged only when his mental state is compromised through inebriation or, as Gunner Taylor points out, "at the depths of his guilt and despair".[59]

[55] Tartt, *Secret History*, 327.
[56] Stowell, "The Time Warp, Again?"
[57] Tartt, *Secret History*, 99.
[58] Ibid., 218.
[59] Gunner Taylor, "Tweed Jackets and Class Consciousness", *Post45*, Dark Academia Cluster, 15 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/tweed-jackets-and-class-consciousness/.

However, when Taylor suggests that “Bunny’s coarse literary tastes all but seal his fate”, he simplifies the threat that Bunny poses to the romanticised academic lifestyle that Richard wishes to inhabit.[60] The idiosyncrasies of the Greek class, far from turning Richard away, are part of their charm, and this includes Bunny’s more “coarse literary tastes” and the “crackpot prejudices [...] which I found so amusing” but never imagined were “deadly serious” and not “ironic”.[61] The threat that Bunny poses is not housed in his literary tastes but in these prejudices which, through the jealousy he seems to harbour towards Richard, make Richard the target of a variety of probing questions which serve to undermine and unravel the image that Richard has curated for himself. Richard’s acknowledgement that he “would not have been nearly so quick to cast in my lot with the rest of them had [Bunny] not turned on me so ferociously” makes it clear that the threat Bunny poses to Richard’s cultivated personal image far outweighs Bunny’s “coarse literary tastes” as a driving factor behind Richard’s participation in his murder, and indeed that the preservation of Richard’s cultivated image is more important to him than Bunny’s life.[62] Given that Richard is not at risk from the possibility of Bunny telling the police about the Bacchanalia and resulting murdered farmer, the choice to involve himself in both the planning and execution of the murder, going so far as to join the rest of the class at the ravine when he had been asked to stay away, indicates not only that the murder is an act of self-preservation, but that being involved in such a dramatic series of events will contribute to the continued cultivation of Richard’s image. That is, the act of murder offers an opportunity, just like Hampden, “for transformation”, supplementing an “aesthetically and intellectually satisfying life” constructed through both the isolation of the university space, the intellectual subject of study, and the performance of actions not permitted to the rest of the populous.[63]

The life-of-the-mind encouraged by such liberal arts education is associated with a romantic, idealised image of the university on which the dark academia genre has

[60] Taylor, "Tweed Jackets and Class Consciousness".
[61] Tartt, *Secret History*, 245.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Stowell, "The Time Warp, Again?".

capitalised. This kind of liberal arts education, explored by Elisa Tamarkin in *Anglophilia* (2007), is:

> a life that does not apply its energy with close economy but tolerates the loss of time, money, and effort in favour of the delights of amateurism and the willingness to live together comfortably with the little we know.[64]

That is, the university idolised by dark academia is modelled on "a philosophy of intellectualism" in which "aimlessness" and a "ritualized and symbolic devotion to college life" is reflected by the "theory" proposed by Julian Morrow, "that pupils learned better in a pleasant, non-scholastic atmosphere" which treats classroom activities as "the most glorious kind of play".[65] A key feature of this intellectualism is the devotion to the humanities and the belief that the purpose of an education in the humanities and literary studies is the refinement of the individual through social and intellectual indulgence.[66] Paul Crosthwaite points out that "Wilde and other figures of fin-de-siècle aestheticism and decadence" and the notoriously queer Bloomsbury group form a major inspiration for "what it means to live aesthetically" in dark academia.[67] This aesthetic living is informed by the philosophy of intellectualism in which the "delights of amateurism" are tolerated as the students also came to reflect the "newly affluent student culture, reflected in [the] elegance, fashion, and leisure" of the "sharply gentrified" university in the early nineteenth century.[68] While Crosthwaite assigns major inspiration to the nineteenth-century aesthetes and the Bloomsbury group, the extent to which Tartt's alma mater, Bennington College, played a role in the construction of *The Secret History*'s university culture and the subsequent dark academia representations of the university, ought not be understated. In an article for *Esquire*, Lili Anolik writes that the era in Tartt attended Bennington has become defined by a "mythology" about "the baroque wickedness, the malignant glamour, the corruption so profound as to be exactly what is meant by the word *decadence*", a mythology that Tartt hyperbolises in *The Secret*

[64] Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 252.
[65] Ibid., 252, 253; Tartt, *Secret History*, 34.
[66] Tamarkin, *Anglophilia*, 259.
[67] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 4-5.
[68] Tamarkin, *Anglophilia*, 261.

History by suggesting that the refined individual Richard hopes to become is "absolutely beyond reproach" as a result of the transformative qualities of intellectual pursuits.[69]

Tartt's Greek class therefore seems to reflect the demographic and sensibilities of these cohorts which became the norm in American liberal arts education, whose wealth put them absolutely beyond reproach for misdoings or for neglecting their education in favour of pursuing their passions. The "corruption so profound" that it becomes "decadence" amid the "glamour" and "wickedness" of Bennington seems to have been instrumental in constructing Richard's idea of the university and Tartt's exploration of the consequences following Bunny's murder. While they are free from consequences while at the university, it becomes clear near to the end of the novel that Richard's performance of the decadent intellectual still relies upon financial security. Although for the rest of the class "[c]ollege was [...] only a way station, a sort of youthful diversion", for Richard it "was my main chance, the only one", to escape into the life he has so carefully curated.[70] The realisation that "none of the others seemed to care" that their degrees will be forfeit after Julian abandons them angers Richard, as he realises that "this didn't make the slightest bit of difference" to them despite its detrimental impact for him.[71] True refinement, for Richard, comes with the ability to both indulge one's most decadent impulses and avoid consequence for that indulgence. Therefore, his pivot into English Literature and away from the devolving Greek class offers an escape route through which to avoid the consequences of his actions and achieve the refinement that his classics education has not fulfilled.

Taylor is not wrong about how the lowbrow infiltrates Richard's life as an indulgence in times of distress. Rather than presenting these texts and references as lowbrow, though, references to "lurid genre fare" such as "Ray Milland in *The Lost Weekend*" and "a Zsa Zsa Gabor movie", which are frequently accompanied by Richard's inebriated or insomniac states, are part of Tartt's exploration of the affective response to art which is often

[69] Lili Anolik, "Money, Madness, Cocaine and Literary Genius: An Oral History of the 1980s' Most Decadent College", *Esquire*, 28 May 2019, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/a27434009/bennington-college-oral-history-bret-easton-ellis/; Tartt, *Secret History*, 327.
[70] Ibid., 583.
[71] Ibid.

neglected or looked down upon in literary critical circles.[72] Another aspect of Richard's personality which must be excised in order to embody the refined image Julian has created for him, Richard's relationship to the lowbrow comes to a dramatic conclusion when he is confronted with Bunny's favourite poem at his funeral and violently denies the poem's appropriateness for the occasion, expressing a preference for something more refined. This response is utterly irrational, with Richard's internal angry outburst including a rare expletive. It is, of course, not the poem itself which causes this response, but the fact that it was Henry who chose to read it. Henry, on whose image of unemotional intellectual purity Richard has been modelling himself, deconstructs the false reality on which Richard has begun to rely by revealing his affective, and therefore unintellectual, side. Where lowbrow literature is used to represent states of irrationality and emotion, we can see the reflection of tensions which were rising in response to the neoliberal university in the late twentieth century, that an affective disposition towards art is appropriate only when executed with a level of scrutiny and disconnect.[73] For Henry to read "With Rue My Heart is Laden" at Bunny's funeral is not only a betrayal of the image of Henry that Richard has constructed; it is a betrayal of the very idea of cultural hegemony and intellectual purity to which Richard subscribes and around which his worldview revolves. Thus, when Richard's exclaims that Henry ought to have chosen "something you would think he would pick, for Christ's sake, from *Lycidas* or the *Upanishads* or anything really", he is angry that the violence that Bunny's presence wrought upon Richard's curation process has not ended with Bunny's death but has instead infiltrated, and therefore ruined, the purest intellectual figure in his life.[74]

This reading of Richard's response explains many of the implications of Tartt's interrogation of the idea of the university as a bastion of intellectual and cultural purity. After all, once the Greek class leaves the isolated, oneiric space created by Hampden College, they are plagued with conflict, guilt, and uncharacteristic displays of emotion. Bunny's funeral is neither romantic nor aesthetically satisfying, and the transformation which Richard expected to undergo after the murder does not seem to happen outside

[72] Tartt, *Secret History*, 327, 332, 331.
[73] Collini, *Literature and Learning*; Guillory, *Professing Criticism*.
[74] Tartt, *Secret History*, 466.

the university's walls, when he is confronted so sharply with intense feelings of grief and guilt that result in his anger at Henry's choice of poem. The image of Henry is marred throughout the days the class spends at the Corcorans' while preparing for the funeral, in which Henry is plagued by persistent migraines, for which he is constantly on some cocktail of medication. This physical manifestation of Henry's guilt culminates in a moment of "terrible composure" when, at the graveside, he throws soil onto the casket and then "dragged the hand across his chest, smearing mud upon his lapels, his tie, the starched immaculate white of his shirt", an action which causes the rest of the class to "star[e] at him [...] with a kind of shocked horror".[75]

This harkens back to a lesson from Julian early in the novel, in which he points out that:

> All truly civilized people have civilized themselves through the willful repression of the old animal self. [...] The more cultivated a person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses he's worked so hard to subdue.[76]

The "terrible composure" with which Henry pollutes the front of his shirt represents how the "old animal self" breaking through has created a *miasma* which was "channel[ed]" by the violence of the Bacchanal and Bunny's murder and polluted Henry's soul. The pollution is accompanied by Henry's explanation to Richard that the Bacchanal opened his soul and allowed him to "'do what I've always wanted most. [...] To live without thinking'".[77] What at first seemed to be an act of intellectual self-improvement or anthropological interest, recreating an ancient ritual to understand classical descriptions of maenadic madness and the Dionysian mysteries, results for Henry in the realisation that "'th[inking] too much, liv[ing] too much in the mind'" had left him "'immobilized'".[78] Here, the disconnect between intellectual purity and reality is hyperbolised, and the critique of the university's combined isolation and arbitration of cultural capital is shown in the extremes of the cultivated person, to which Richard aspires despite the revelation from Henry that such cultivation is emotionally stifling. After the funeral, Henry abandons

[75] Tartt, *Secret History*, 474.
[76] Ibid., 43.
[77] Ibid., 556-7.
[78] Ibid., 557.

his cultivated persona, receding from the Greek class and the image he has curated in favour of recovering "'a thing or two'" which "'matters'" from the myriad detritus left behind by his intellectual prowess which, in the end, seems not to have mattered at all.[79]

It is shown in the novel's funeral scene that the complex emotions arising from Bunny's death are, for Richard, linked to the confrontation with reality that the funeral invokes. Henry's sudden display of unfettered emotion is followed by Richard's realisation that Bunny is to be buried in "a big cemetery, windy and flat and anonymous", in which "[b]its of litter chewed up by the mowers lay scattered on the grass" around the grave, which "was almost unspeakably horrible [...] a barbarous thing, a blind clayey hole".[80] As much as the build-up to the murder and subsequent investigation was described by Richard as an exciting, transformative process, the realisation that they are to "get rid of [Bunny] like a piece of garbage" throws into sharp relief the consequences of seeking that transformation through the life of the mind.[81] This contrasts with Richard's musings in the wake of the murder, in which he writes that the memory of the murder is "cloudy because of some primitive, numbing effect that obscured it at the time" and "too terrible to grasp at once", leading to the suggestion that, through the experience of a terrible incident, one can "fin[d] oneself – quite to one's surprise – in an entirely different world".[82] This would be an indictment of his actions if it had not become clear throughout the novel that Richard *wants* to be "in an entirely different world" from the one he grew up in. Richard's aggressive response to Henry's poem reading and the funeral is therefore the result of the "entirely different world" not being one of aesthetic and intellectual purity, but instead one in which Bunny's funeral is "*stupid*" and "barbarous", leaving Richard guilt-ridden and unsatisfied.[83]

In the weeks following Bunny's death, Richard spends very little time with the rest of the Greek class. Instead, he attends parties in which, high on pills given to him by his flatmate, Judy Poovey, he has the revelation that the rest of the Hampden student body, who he has

[79] Tartt, *Secret History*, 557.
[80] Ibid., 471-2.
[81] Ibid., 472.
[82] Ibid., 312.
[83] Ibid., 472.

until this point largely derided as inferior to him and the Greek class, "were good people, common people; the salt of the earth; people whom I should consider myself fortunate to know".[84] This revelation, which occurs to him on the night after Bunny's murder, is never instantiated beyond Richard's reliance on Judy and her friends for convenient favours, for a sense of community which is not supplied by the Greek class who, in many of Richard's moments of distress, are distant or inaccessible to him. The care that Judy shows to Richard is constantly juxtaposed against both the callousness of Henry, who hangs up on Richard rather than offering him comfort in the wake of Bunny's death, and Richard's constant dismissal of Judy, who he describes as a "savage" who is "unable to understand [the] true purpose" of her desk after seeing it turned into a dressing table.[85] Like the Greek class, Judy is merely of use to Richard, a tool in his arsenal whose value only seems to become clear to him when he is under the influence and in distress. Judy, in other words, is the human equivalent of the lowbrow literature to which Richard turns, which has utilitarian but not intellectual value to him.

In the period following Bunny's funeral, though, the value of either form of interaction seems to disappear, as Richard declares that he "was in need of neither company or comfort" and "[a]ll I wanted was to be alone".[86] In response to the broken façade of the Greek class, Richard isolates himself and begins indulging in a new fantasy about "living in a city – any city, especially a strange one", populated by "thought[s] of traffic and crowds, of working in a bookstore, waiting tables in a coffee shop".[87] The mundanity of this seems at first to contrast with Richard's earlier fantasies about Hampden, but it ends up being very similar, with the "long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence" merely transposed onto a different location.[88] This reinforces how Richard views the people around him as mere actors with whom he interacts solely to fulfil his fantasies and who he is willing to leave behind when they stop delivering. Far from being the community effort it had once seen, Richard's transformation relies on his attraction to people whose lifestyles he wishes to emulate, but the maintenance of his new image requires him to

[84] Tartt, *Secret History*, 320.
[85] Ibid., 318.
[86] Ibid., 479.
[87] Ibid., 487.
[88] Ibid., 10.

return to his “odd, solitary life”, avoiding both those who knew him before his transformation and those who may point out its falseness.

Nonetheless, his year with the Greek class at Hampden is a “crucial interval in [Richard’s] life when character is fixed forever”, and he retains the products of his “adolescent emulation” of them for the rest of his life.[89] After graduation, Richard has embodied his falsified childhood and curated image so thoroughly that he can return to California but, rather than associating it with his terrible childhood experience, is now in the academic position he has long wished for, studying the Jacobean plays as a researcher. The pollution of his childhood may remain, but the veneer of his romantic, solitary academic life protects him from it. In “becom[ing] the character which for a long time I had so skillfully played” by replacing his lowbrow tastes with objects of cultural capital, Richard represents the process through which popular forms were being adopted into literary fiction in the 1990s. Near the end of the novel, Richard quotes Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*: “I’faith, he looks much like a conjurer”.[90] This quote summarises the novel’s exploration of how ideas about intellectual refinement and assigning cultural capital reflect the culture created by conservative historical revisionism in the late twentieth century, in that they perpetuate a “conjured” reality whose basis lies not necessarily in fact, but in official, often fictionalised, narratives. Gaining cultural capital and achieving social mobility through it, in *The Secret History*, is a Faustian bargain which requires the destruction of oneself and others and results in an unsatisfying “simulacra of the life of the mind” which is neither wholly fiction nor wholly reality.[91]

Despite Tartt’s clear critique of the “simulacra of the life of the mind” depicted in *The Secret History*, the second wave of popularity which the novel has experienced in the twenty-first century has revolved around the adoption of Richard’s romanticised idea of the university. Using the visual media which proliferate on the internet to represent Richard’s lush descriptions of the academic space and lifestyle, fans of the novel have found comfort in the fictions presented by Richard amid the political turmoil and crisis of

[89] Tartt, *Secret History*, 92.
[90] Ibid., 616.
[91] Tay, "Killing Our Darlings".

higher education in the 2010s. As online bookish culture began to take off in the mid-2010s, the fanbase for *The Secret History* found in media such as moodboards the perfect avenue to perform their own simulacrum of the Greek class's lifestyle. In doing so, many readers came to occupy a similar role to Richard himself: that of the aspirant, the performer, the outsider trying to find a way in by performing an idealised life of the mind which is associated with the same objects of cultural capital to which Richard becomes attuned. Discarding popular literature in favour of the Western canon has become increasingly important for readers constructing their identity around this idea of academic intellectualism as digital publishing and marketing trends make more visible the proliferation of lowbrow forms and genres into the contemporary literary market. In distinguishing themselves from readers of lowbrow literature, readers of dark academia frequently perform the same role as Richard, adhering to the romanticised institutional ideas about prestige and cultural capital without engaging with the class critique in Tartt's novel.

Using the democratised, globalised social media platforms at their disposal, the dark academia community uses the aesthetic trappings of *The Secret History* and the idea of scholarly reading to assist, as Dylan Davidson suggests, with the construction of "this romantic fantasy of education [...] from above and below, simultaneously".[92] Readers and authors of dark academia choose instead to reinforce ideas of cultural capital in order to maintain distance from and superiority over their popular fiction reading peers in the online bookish space. We see in the dark academia community and genre that the "deep well of utopian longing [...] for meaningful education and the [...] hard-won pleasures of erudition" identified by McGurl has only grown more acute as the financialization of the university makes education less accessible, and that readers are taking it into their own hands to recreate the idea of the university in the transmedial social media spaces upon which they enact their performance of intellectual refinement and pseudo-academic practice.[93] The next chapter will explore how the development of the dark academia community and the dark academia genre in the 2010s relied upon the aesthetic and

[92] Davidson, "To Be Transformed".
[93] McGurl, *The Program Era*, 31.

romantic ideas explored in *The Secret History* but has almost entirely ignored the political and cultural critique made by Tartt. I will analyse how this has resulted in the creation of a contradictory lifestyle which wishes to reinforce elitist notions of capital through a performative facsimile of academic life while also seeking out contemporary fiction within the dark academia genre, which is perceived by those outside of the community as low-brow and "pulpy", similar to the genre fiction read by the readers from whom the dark academia community wishes to distinguish itself.[94] In doing so, the dark academia community comes to embody the very tension Tartt explores in *The Secret History* between institutions of cultural capital, folk reader practice, and the arbitrary assignment of prestige.

[94] Davidson, "To Be Transformed"; Therieau, "The Novel of Vibes".

CHAPTER TWO

Bringing Back the Western Canon

The Afterlives of The Secret History

Social Media and Genre Formation

In the mid-2010s, the spread of social media platforms around the globe and the accompanying growth of fan communities on these platforms began to alter the cultural perception of popular genres. Once confined to niche "nerd" communities on platforms like Tumblr and Reddit, genres such as fantasy and science fiction began to gain new cultural capital with readers and viewers outside of their historically niche audiences through the success of popular novels such as *Twilight* (2005-2008) and *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), and high-budget television shows like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022). Online forums had been a popular venue for the construction of fan communities since the early 2000s, with individual fans contributing to community spaces by producing fanfiction, art, and sharing theories with likeminded folks. Fanfiction platforms such as Fanfiction.net, Wattpad, and Archive of Our Own have since gone on to launch the careers of several high-profile contemporary authors.[1] As is explored by Henry Jenkins, Nicolle Lamerichs, and Kristina Busse, fan culture prior to the digital age relied heavily upon in-person community events and physical media, but writing fanfiction has been a persistent form of fan expression at least since the 1970s.[2] In the digital age, though, fanfiction communities have become spaces where what Kristina Busse calls the "fandom's gift economy" and "industry's capitalist economy" converge, with publishers seeking audience engagement as a metric by which to identify potentially lucrative emerging authors.[3] Critics like Busse operate within a framework which differs from traditional sociological studies, integrating their personal experience into examinations of fan culture, a move which becomes necessary as fan operations and

[1] Notable examples include E. L. James, Ali Hazelwood, and SenLinYu. See also: Kristina Busse, "Fandom's Ephemeral Traces: Intertextuality, Performativity, and Intimacy in Fan Fiction Communities", in *Framing Fan Fiction*: *Literary and Social Practices in Fan Fiction Communities* (University of Iowa Press, 2017), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q22s2.10; McGurl, *Everything and Less*.
[2] Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*; Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*; Busse, "Fandom's Ephemeral Traces".
[3] Busse, "Fandom's Ephemeral Traces", 140.

cultural practices remain difficult to trace due to their ephemeral and ever-evolving nature. In doing so, Busse is able to identify with the fan spaces as lived-in communities of practice and experience; in the case of bookish online spaces, this is what Simone Murray calls "an online bibliophilic community" whose "self-fashioning" is aimed towards finding "a global audience of presumably like-minded types".[4] This "global audience" is precisely what has encouraged new and emerging writers to contribute to online fan communities as part of their literary "self-fashioning", often drawing upon pre-existing genres and tropes – or even pre-existing properties, as with fanfiction authors – popular in the digital sphere to inform the development of their work. Where fans were once, as Nicolle Lamerichs suggests, "prone to be stigmatized" as "deviants" in opposition to "other types of audiences, such as those of the high arts", they are now an important part of contemporary literary development for genre and popular fiction writers and publishers.[5]

Dark academia, and broader trends in online bookish culture, troubles the distinction between the popular and the literary by blending elements of prestige literature and popular genre fiction, and democratising literary culture through online fan participation. While these cultures are not new, as noted before, the size of the online communities through which fan participation is performed has swelled with the uptake of social media in the 2010s. The subsequent "convergence culture", a term taken from Henry Jenkins's study of fan communities in the early years of social media, has resulted in increasingly niche microgenres being generated by platform users and adopted by publishing due to their circulation and popularity.[6] Likewise, distinctions between literary fiction and genre fiction have been complicated by this "convergence culture"; while, as Jeremy Rosen points out, authors who create "genre-bending" literary fiction "mark their literariness by deploying literary techniques and by differentiating themselves from, often by denigrating, the lion's share of popular culture's voluminous output", these attempts at distinguishing their work from the popular often fall short due to a misunderstanding of

[4] Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere,* 14.
[5] Lamerichs, *Productive Fandom*, 13.
[6] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.

the role played by the digital literary sphere in the formation of popular culture.[7] There are many examples of literary fiction which has been drawn under the label of "BookTok book" in recent years, from Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) to Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011). The concept of what a genre is has also changed within online bookish spaces, with many creators coining niche microgenres are based on tropes and themes that are common among literary fiction texts; one popular example of this is "sad girl fiction", into which *Normal People*, Coco Mellors's *Blue Sisters* (2024), and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) have been fitted (see fig. 5).[8] While traditional avenues for defining cultural prestige might have overlooked Rooney, online bookish culture offered a different way to categorise the cultural capital of literature.[9]

Figure 5: Post by @pagesofblonde on Instagram. Caption reads: "oil painting covers + sad girl fiction = my roman empire", a reference to a popular meme and post format circulating on Instagram and TikTok in which one's "roman empire" is something that they think about at least once a day.

[7] Jeremy Rosen, "Literary Fiction and the Genres of Genre Fiction", *Post45 Journal*, 7 August 2018, https://post45.org/2018/08/literary-fiction-and-the-genres-of-genre-fiction/.
[8] Maria Couto, "Essential Sad Girl Literature", Penguin Random House, n.d., accessed 21 August 2025, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/the-read-down/sad-girl-books/.
[9] For an in-depth exploration of how bookish online culture and contemporary publishing intersect, see: Bronwyn Reddan et al., *Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok* (Routledge, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003458616; Padmini Ray Murray and Claire Squires, "The Digital Publishing Communications Circuit", *Book 2.0* 3, no. 1 (2013): 3–23, https://doi.org/10.1386/btwo.3.1.3_1.

Dark academia is among the earliest and most participatory examples of a genre generated by fans and readers, and it has had a consistent identity in terms of the themes, story elements, and "vibes" required for a novel to be counted among the genre. Primary to the construction of dark academia is a response to the aesthetic and atmospheric qualities of *The Secret History*. The community's participatory nature emphasises an intermedial practice among its content creators who, rather than limiting their work to the promotion of books within the genre, frequently display themselves engaging with activities similar to those depicted in the novels, particularly self-education, sitting in libraries, and cultivating the "vibe" inspired by the aesthetic elements of *The Secret History*. Unlike many other contemporary genres, dark academia practitioners have created a cultural ecosystem which envelops not only literature, but also fashion, music, film, and art. The community encourages participants to listen to music, engage with art, read novels, watch films such as *Dead Poets Society* (1989; dir. Peter Weir) and *Kill Your Darlings* (2013; dir. John Krokidas), and play games such as *Strange Horticulture* (2022; Bad Viking) which evoke the same form of intellectual affect inspired by the dark, Gothic architecture of Oxbridge libraries and obsessive academic study (see fig.6 & fig.7). These interactions between fans and the aesthetic properties of dark academia are a form of what Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse call "transmedial role-playing".[10] Free from the limited interactions permitted by fanfiction and in-person fan communities, contemporary fans become performers within an "absorptive aesthetic encounter", using the various media at their disposal to participate in a new form of cosplay in which, rather than embodying a specific character from a series or novel, they role-play within the familiar confines of the lifestyle depicted in the dark academia novel.[11]

[10] Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, "Fan Creativity and Performance", in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 197.
[11] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 10.

Figure 6: Screenshot from Strange Horticulture *(2022; Bad Viking) showing a shop filled with plants, worn paper, strange artefacts, and rainy weather.*

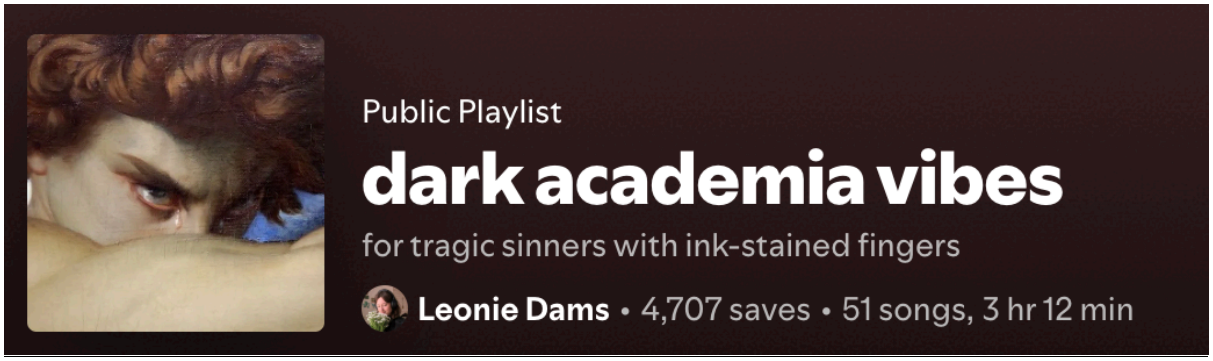

Figure 7: Screenshot of a Spotify playlist titled "dark academia vibes", created by user Leonie Dams and captioned "for tragic sinners with ink-stained fingers", with Alexandre Cabanel's "The Fallen Angel" as a cover image.

One of the major difficulties with analysing the development of dark academia as a genre is its ties to online readership and fan communities. Paul Crosthwaite, whose analysis of dark academia focusses solely on its proliferation as a literary genre, includes three novels from the 2010s in his dark academia "core" which have no notable legacy in the dark academia online space and are rarely, if ever, mentioned in online articles or by fans. Only Naomi Alderman's *The Lessons* (2010) has any notable legacy, and this is likely related to the popularity of Alderman's science fiction works.[12] Crosthwaite describes his

[12] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia". See: Amy Gentry, "Dark Academia: Your Guide to the New Wave of Post-Secret History Campus Thrillers", *CrimeReads*, 18 February 2021, https://crimereads.com/dark-academia-your-guide-to-the-new-wave-of-post-secret-history-campus-thrillers/; Robin Moreno, "20 Dark Academia Books You'll Be Totally Obsessed With", *Reader's Digest*, 19 August 2024,

list as one of "twenty novels that *can* be taken to constitute the core body of DA fiction", rather than presenting them as a definitive corpus, and explains that his selection "corresponds to key features of what is universally recognised as the genre's key progenitor", *The Secret History*, being the campus novel and the thriller-style plot.[13] As a result, Crosthwaite consciously excludes "a significant number of texts often referred to as works of DA" due to their "extensive speculative fiction elements", conceiving of the genre's primary derivation being from "the conjunction of 'literary' fiction and mystery/thriller modes".[14]

This derivation, I would argue, both simplifies the "never-fully-rationalized hints of the supernatural" present in *The Secret History* and ignores the significance of the fan community in the genre's construction.[15] Crosthwaite's acknowledgement of *The Secret History*'s "hints of the supernatural" and his inclusion of Mona Awad's *Bunny* (2019) in his corpus, despite its "deliberately schlocky version of supernatural horror", suggests that dark academia is not a genre which can be encompassed by a definition which uses only two of its many constitutive genres.[16] The supernatural elements, much like the thriller form, constitute an important part of the genre's exploration of unreality and subjective consciousness, as well as being another genre through which authors of dark academia frequently question hierarchies of literary genre and prestige. Additionally, fantasy and fantasy-adjacent additions to the genre have become some of the most popular novels among readers, with *Bunny* (2019), Leigh Bardugo's *Ninth House* (2019), Olivie Blake's *The Atlas Six* (2020; 2021), and R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022), all of which use urban fantasy settings and magic wielding as part of their exploration of dark academia's themes of hierarchy and power, becoming bestsellers soon after their publication and maintaining their places as favourites among dark academia readers. The use of unrealistic and speculative genre elements in later dark academia novels, therefore, reflects the range of generic inspirations visible in *The Secret History*. Rather than focussing solely on dark

https://www.rd.com/list/dark-academia-books/; Katie Russell, "12 New and Classic Dark Academia Books", 5 March 2024, https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2024/03/best-new-dark-academia-books/.
[13] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 3; emphasis mine.
[14] Ibid., 36.
[15] Ibid., 37.
[16] Ibid.

academia as a literary phenomenon, this chapter will explore the relationship between what Crosthwaite calls the "novelistic genre obsessed with *the aesthetic*", its accompanying "literature-inspired online 'aesthetic'", and the community which has been instrumental in the construction of both.[17] Using M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017), the next significant addition to the genre after *The Secret History*, I will attempt to understand the development of the genre throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s by analysing how *Villains*'s thematization of empty performance as an expression of cultural capital resonated with the online community who emulated Richard Papen and sought new objects for projection.

Experiential Fan Participation in the Dark Academia Community

If We Were Villains (2017), through a thriller-style plot modelled along the lines of *The Secret History*, tells the story of a group of final-year drama students at an elite, isolated conservatoire who specialise in performing the works of Shakespeare and find themselves embroiled in a murder mystery when one of their classmates is found dead in the lake. This novel received an extremely positive response from the dark academia community in what became a catalytic moment for the expansion of the dark academia genre within the publishing landscape, and it remains one of the core texts within the genre to this day. It is thanks to the structural and thematic similarities between *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* that *Villains* was quickly and enthusiastically adopted by the dark academia community upon publication. There is subsequently a clear correlation between *Villains*'s commercial success and the sudden interest from the publishing industry in the dark academia marketing label, as publishing houses soon began capitalising on the guaranteed readership within the dark academia community, with the use of the term "dark academia" for marketing purposes beginning in earnest around the publication of *Bunny* in 2019.

[17] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 2.

Simone Murray points out that, while universities are increasingly "characterised by austerity measures, vocational instrumentalism and public-impact mandates", dark academia promotes "an ethos of slow self-cultivation" encouraged by "the atmospherics of an elite university system never designed for mass participation and entirely comfortable with that fact".[18] The intrinsic value of the humanities in dark academia is directly connected to the aristocratic origins of the canon, and the community maintains a similarly restrictive overview of what constitutes appropriate forms of content creation. Despite the apparently democratic platforms on which the community operates, and despite the best efforts of Reddit moderators (see fig.4), "[s]tatus" in the dark academia community "is not a given but actively earned and maintained through constructive contributions to the online community", and such status "can therefore equally be lost through perceived poor posting practices".[19] The internal policing of dark academia's guidelines is flexible and it can be difficult to accurately determine what will be deemed appropriate, given the influence of algorithmic determination over individual feeds. As Robbert-Jan Adriaansen writes:

> dark academics function as curators of their own posts and pages [...] generat[ing] a specific mood or atmosphere of melancholia, nostalgia, spleen, and solitude – often brought into connection with the [COVID-19] lockdown and the physical absence of campus life – while at the same time striving for intellectual sublimation.[20]

Amatulla Mukadam writes in her essay for the *Post45* cluster that the appeal of the dark academia community results from the practice of "shar[ing] reading lists and reviews of dense, classic literature, and philosophy" which "made academia more inclusive and inviting".[21] In lockdown, when Mukadam and many others found comfort in the online community, Adriaansen writes that "dark academia functioned as a digital and idealized replacement of academia [...] with new intellectual and historical worlds to explore".[22] With its focus on the "rediscovery or reinvention of Western humanism and its literary

[18] Murray, "Dark Academia", 351.
[19] Simone Murray, "Picking Your Professor: Bridging Scholarly and Popular Bookish Publics in the Digital Age", *Poetics Today* 45, no. 4 (2024): 601, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-11393858.
[20] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia", 106.
[21] Amatulla Mukadam, "A Touch of the Picturesque", *Post45*, Dark Academia Cluster, 15 March 2022, https://post45.org/2022/03/a-touch-of-the-picturesque/.
[22] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia", 108.

canon", the dark academia community treats "the past" not as a "historicized [...] object of knowledge", but "as sediments of time that have constituted the present, as cultural and intellectual traditions that facilitate the aesthetic".[23] Readers for whom the present political and social situation was intolerable were therefore able to emulate the intellectual distance associated with academia by reading novels which were either written in another time, from the Western canon, or promoted a nostalgia for the past, as is the case for *The Secret History* and later dark academia novels.

Mitch Therieau suggests that the dark academia community and early dark academia novels isolate and promote *The Secret History*'s atmospheric qualities over its political commentary. In doing so, they ignore the "sharp preemptive critique" that Tartt makes of Richard's "love affair with ambience", instead adopting Richard's habit of treating history, culture, and politics as merely "traditions that facilitate the aesthetic".[24] The literary and artistic tastes and intellectual performance made by dark academia creators is therefore rarely contextually or historically informed. Ana Quiring points out the paradox in the dark academia community, that it "idealizes narrow and Eurocentric standards of education" whilst also "democratizing their trappings and texts" through transmedial production on globally accessible platforms.[25] Simone Murray pushes back against the idea that dark academia is democratic at all, with its lack of explicit condemnation of "the class hierarchy which underpins" these "narrow and Eurocentric standards of education"; certainly, it is not until the genre's developments in the 2020s that the novels "reckon frankly with sexual harassment and abuse, class disparities, homophobia, and systemic racism", with R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022) and Olivie Blake's *The Atlas Six* (2020; 2021) being two major additions to the genre which feature multiracial casts and offered explicit examinations of the Western university's colonial history.[26]

Interim additions to the dark academia corpus reckon somewhat with the discussion of class disparity and social mobility central to *The Secret History*'s Richard Papen, but such

[23] Adriaansen, "Dark Academia", 111.
[24] Therieau, "The Novel of Vibes"; Adriaansen, "Dark Academia", 108.
[25] Ana Quiring, "What's Dark about Dark Academia", *Avidly*, 31 March 2021, https://avidly.lareviewofbooks.org/2021/03/31/whats-dark-about-dark-academia/.
[26] Gentry, "Dark Academia"; Murray, "Dark Academia", 357.

criticisms are often shallow and derivative. For example, when *If We Were Villains*'s protagonist, Oliver Marks, is confronted with the possibility of having to drop out of Dellecher Conservatory in order for his parents to fund a recovery programme for his sister, the problem is swiftly resolved with a few phone calls to Dellecher staff, who indicate that arrangements will be made, loans taken out, and work-study opportunities supplied to get Oliver through the remaining term of his degree.[27] Poverty in both *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* is a romanticised form of financial hardship, one in which the individuals facing difficulty must adopt, as Richard does, a "bootstraps" mindset which is consistent with the idea of the "American Dream". To achieve aesthetic and intellectual prosperity, the protagonists must work for it. Subsequently, the reader who must also work for intellectual affirmation is encouraged to identify with the struggles faced by these protagonists in entering academic spaces. In other words, as Crosthwaite writes, dark academia novels "provide models that invite imitation by readers". Simone Murray explains that, despite the "rhetoric of selfhood and individuality" which is commonplace on social media sites, online identity performance relies upon cultural conformity, with creators reducing their production to a set of labels curated to improve algorithmic marketing.[28] By identifying with the dark academia label, readers situate themselves within a community which aims to create "opportunities to assimilate 'common' cultural goods" which are usually "confined to a narrow, economically privileged and secure elite", but the adherence to structures of cultural capital reinforces the way in which universities "tur[n] common knowledge into specialist expertise" by isolating the "educated and well-capitalised 'bibliophile'" from the rest of the online reader community.[29] The popularity of dark academia novels reveals the contradictory desires within readers to integrate into university spaces and study canonical literature while also valuing affective engagement with art, freed from the restrictions of professional academic practice.

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[27] M. L. Rio, *If We Were Villains* (Titan Books, 2016), 227, 228.
[28] Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*, 14. For more on the wider implications of internet aesthetics in self-creation, see: Kyle Chayka, "TikTok and the Vibes Revival", *The New Yorker*, 26 April 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/tiktok-and-the-vibes-revival; Guilherme Giolo and Michaël Berghman, "The Aesthetics of the Self: The Meaning-Making of Internet Aesthetics", *First Monday* 28, no. 3, (2023), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i3.12723.
[29] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 14; Jeremy Rosen, "An Insatiable Market for Minor Characters: Genre in the Contemporary Literary Marketplace", *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015): 144-5, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24542662.

An emphasis on the affective value of art is thematised by Rio through her choice of a conservatoire setting and actors for protagonists. While *If We Were Villains* capitalises on the cultural capital associated with studying Shakespeare, the novel presents the educational process as one of affective, rather than scholarly, engagement with Shakespeare's works. One can see reflected in this process Rita Felski's reader-response theory, in which she suggests that readers frequently identify with protagonists and that the reading process can leave readers with "a sense of breaking away from one's everyday life and entering a different kind of reality", so much so that the influence of the text can bleed into their everyday life.[30] Oliver Marks describes the actor's experience thus:

> We felt all the passions of the characters we played as if they were our own. But a character's emotions don't cancel out the actor's - instead you feel both at once. Imagine having all your own thoughts and feelings tangled up with all the thoughts and feelings of a whole other person. It can be hard, sometimes, to sort out which is which.[31]

Felski points out that usually, "[i]dentifying" with characters "does not mean obliterating or overriding differences", and that "we can care or feel for a character without experiencing their emotions or mimicking their affective state".[32] Readers may use the aesthetic aspects and character habits in dark academia novels as a way to "revise [their] sense of who [they] are" after "being struck by some kind of insight about the self", "mimicking [the] affective state" of the protagonists as depicted in the novels. While Richard Papen attempts to "obliterat[e]" his old self in order to adopt a persona of refined intellectualism, Oliver and the acting cohort in *Villains* instead come to coexist with their object of study, "mimicking [the] affective state" of the characters they are playing so thoroughly as to lose any distinction between their own emotions and those they are emulating.[33] The desired outcome for the acting cohort is constructive where Richard's is destructive but, just as Richard's reconstitution has been emulated and idolised by the

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[30] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 25, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/york-ebooks/detail.action?docID=6351386.
[31] Rio, *Villains*, 187.
[32] Felski, *Hooked,* 82, 105.
[33] Ibid., 83, 100.

dark academia community, the melodramatic notion of the actors' absorption into their characters has a similarly romantic quality which seems to encourage the performative practices of the dark academia community. This is exacerbated by the fact that the absorption of archetypical role assignments into their personalities often leaves the characters in the acting cohort feeling flat, which in turn makes them the ideal objects of projection for readers in the dark academia community.

Echoes of *The Secret History* in *If We Were Villains*

It is unsurprising that fans of *The Secret History* quickly attached themselves to *If We Were Villains*, seeing in it the familiarity they craved. The two novels have various distinctive similarities in narrative and structure, with perhaps the most notable of these being the temporal "loop-through-the-future" structure prominent in Tartt's novel and adopted by Rio. *Villains* begins on the night that its narrator, Oliver Marks, is released from prison, having spent ten years behind bars for the murder of his conservatoire classmate, Richard.[34] There, he meets the detective who oversaw the case and who, on the eve of his retirement, wants to know the truth about what happened a decade earlier. Like *The Secret History*, *Villains* is a confession narrative, but these confession passages are peppered throughout the novel and separated from the linear story as prologues to each section, unlike *The Secret History*'s integrated and signposted storytelling. As a result of these similarities, *If We Were Villains* often feels like a hollow caricature of *The Secret History*, favouring a facsimile ambience which fits the expectations of the dark academia community over a deliberate deployment of form and structure.

This facsimile ambiance relates directly to the transmedial productions of the online community which, according to Mitch Therieau, promote the "[o]ntology of the vibe" and suggest that literature can be reduced to "the mood it elicits", rather than its characters, plot, and structure.[35] Therieau suggests that traditional literary forms been replaced in

[34] It seems coincidental that, out of a cast of eight characters, Rio would choose one to have the same name as *The Secret History*'s protagonist. It is impossible to say why this choice was made.
[35] Therieau, "The Novel of Vibes".

online spaces by "ambient media", which "take on a mood-regulating function" by "placing the watcher/listener/user in a fictional space suffused with an overall *vibe*".[36] In a brief reading of Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, Therieau notes that the novel form itself is a weak facsimile of the "unified world of the epic", a "star projector" to the epic's "'starry sky'".[37] Similarly, the texts which imitate the progenitor of a new genre can feel like "star projectors", capitalising on the aesthetic and marketing value of the original without including or interrogating any of its depth or themes. It is easy to be cynical about the influence of the internet on contemporary literary production, but we must acknowledge that similar criticisms have been levelled at novels and the proliferation of genres for as long as the novel has existed as a form.[38]

Instead of creating a "whydunit", Rio employs a typical murder mystery structure to *Villains*, framed by Oliver's confession to the arresting officer. Avoiding explicit reference to the events of the novel in the prologue, Oliver thinks to himself:

> We did wicked things, but they were necessary, too – or so it seemed. Looking back, years later, I'm not so sure they were, and now I wonder: Could I explain it all to Colborne, the little twists and turns and final *exodos*?[39]

Rio's prose echoes that of *The Secret History* here: "I don't know why we did it. I'm not entirely sure that, circumstances demanding, we wouldn't do it again".[40] But in order to maintain tension, Rio refuses to reveal the murder victim or the murderer to the reader, diverting from Tartt's "whydunit" structure to create a double time in which the novel's narrative revelations occur in tandem with the confession. This distinctive aspect to the narrative structure is explained by Oliver, who explains that "'[f]or us it was just one day'",

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[36] Therieau, "The Novel of Vibes".
[37] György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (M.I.T. Press, 1971), 29; qtd. in Therieau, "The Novel of Vibes".
[38] Such publishing trend cycles have operated since the inception of the Gothic novel. Eighteenth-century publishers, according to Yael Shapira, "emphasise[d] the similarities between different titles, signalling that they belonged to the same 'type' of fiction" to engage repeat customers, and the Gothic was famously derided as a pulpy genre designed to capitalise on market forces with little thematic or intellectual merit. Yael Shapira, "The Gothic Novel Beyond Radcliffe and Lewis", in *The Cambridge History of the Gothic: Volume 1: Gothic in the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 324, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108561044.016.
[39] Rio, *Villains*, 11-12.
[40] Tartt, *Secret History*, 311.

meaning the day of the murder, "'and every single day that came after'".[41] Rather than suggesting that he has experienced the same kind of stagnation that Richard Papen does, Oliver indicates that, despite the murder marking a moment of change for him and his classmates, they carried the weight of the murder forwards, rather than remaining beside the lake where it took place. This gives *Villains* a more optimistic outlook which may explain some of the appeal of the novel to dark academia readers in the late-2010s, as it suggests that the academic experience was not detrimental to the cohort's futures but that they, unlike the Greek class, can continue indulging their intellectual obsessions beyond the confines of the university. As we see in the prologue, Oliver is still in the habit of quoting Shakespeare despite his decade-long stint in prison, which "simultaneously amuse[s] and annoy[s]" Detective Colborne.[42] That is, intellectual refinement is treated as a charming aspect of Oliver's personality, in sharp contrast to *The Secret History*, in which Richard's performance of intellectualism relies upon the university setting.

Colborne is one of the few characters in the novel through whose eyes the reader gets a sense of the idiosyncrasies of Dellecher and the acting cohort. As very few people, including Rio, have attended a conservatoire during their education, Rio takes liberties when creating an isolated world which does not authentically reflect the experience of attending a conservatoire. Dellecher and the process of theatre training are romanticised and aestheticised by the students within the novel and by Rio, who creates through her descriptions and the students' acting classes a perfect representation of the elite, isolated university community beloved of the dark academia community. Oliver describes the location thus: "Dellecher Classical Conservatory occupied twenty or so acres of land on the eastern edge of Broadwater", and continues that "[w]e, the fourth-year theatre students, lived on the far side of the lake in what was whimsically called the Castle (not really a castle, but a small stone building that happened to have one turret [...])".[43] Not only, then, is Dellecher isolated on its twenty acres of land; the fourth year acting cohort are even further isolated in an aesthetically pleasing, slightly strange feature of the university which reinforces the sense that the fourth-year acting students are particularly

[41] Rio, *Villains*, 11.
[42] Ibid., 10.
[43] Ibid., 12-13.

special, having survived what Oliver describes as a rigorous training process which eliminates a large swathe of the student population at the end of each year. The Castle's "whimsica[l]" nickname shows how revered it is, even within the institution, giving it a fairytale feeling which is slightly out of place and invokes the idea of chivalry which aligns perfectly with the fourth year acting students' focus on the works of William Shakespeare.

The focus on the works of Shakespeare in *Villains* operates similarly to that of the Classics in *The Secret History*, facilitating a hyperbolic and melodramatic engagement with literature which heavily influences the emotions of the students. The debauchery of Dellecher is described as a "strange fanatic religion where anything could be excused so long as it was offered at the altar of the Muses", encouraging an obsessive performance of devotion to "the Muses" and to Shakespeare himself.[44] Of this obsessive, destructive artistic influence, Oliver explains:

> It was just *us* - the seven of us and the trees and the sky and the lake and the moon and, of course, Shakespeare. He lived with us like an eighth housemate, an older, wiser friend, perpetually out of sight but never out of mind, as if he had just left the room.[45]

The omnipresence of the object of study is key in constructing the dark academia "vibe": the aesthetic encounter must be all-encompassing and a driving force behind the plot, offering a reason behind the melodramatic actions of the students in both *If We Were Villains* and *The Secret History*. The isolation of the academic community is not only spatial, but also psychological and, by extension, temporal, and the way that this isolation draws the community together is one of the major appealing factors of the dark academia community for readers. Indeed, Oliver's indication that Shakespeare walks among them is very similar to a passage in *The Secret History* where Richard describes the sense of community that he gains from reading classical literature:

> In a certain sense, this is why I felt so close to the others in the Greek class. They, too, knew this beautiful and harrowing landscape, centuries dead; they'd had the same experience of looking up from their books with fifth-century eyes

[44] Rio, *Villains*, 69.
[45] Ibid., 156-7.

> and finding the world disconcertingly sluggish and alien, as if it were not their home.[46]

Insularity and academic rigour isolate these students and, in the hyperbolic genre trappings of dark academia, causes them to put their intellectual exercise into practice. Unlike the Greek class, the murder committed by James in *If We Were Villains* is mostly accidental, but it is also foreshadowed through the casting choices made for each actor at the beginning of the novel: "[O]bviously", says classmate Alexander, "Richard will be Caesar" in the final production of the year.[47] Richard is cast as the tragic hero not really because, as James jokes, "we all secretly want to kill him", but because his death is an inevitability in the narrative, and they cannot separate him out from the tragic role in which he is placed.[48] When asked by the police detective Colborne whether he "'blame[s] Shakespeare for any of it?'", Oliver smiles and replies, "'I blame him for all of it'".[49] Like Richard Papen, Oliver displaces blame for his actions onto his literary influences. The similarities are so clear that, for fans of *The Secret History, If We Were Villains* offered the perfect new venue upon which they could place their aspirations of aesthetic and intellectual stimulation.

Facsimile intellectual stimulation is achieved through Rio's heavy use of direct quotation from Shakespeare throughout the novel, which allows readers to feel that they are developing a familiarity with Shakespeare's plays and gaining the cultural capital associated with them during the process of reading a piece of genre fiction. Rio deploys these quotations frequently at pivotal emotional moments which, rather than engaging thematically with Shakespeare's work or influence, serve to speak for the characters. A moment of tension between Oliver and James is told through *King Lear*, for example:

> [Oliver]: "Despite thy victor sword and fire-new fortune,
> Thy valor and thy heart, thou art a traitor,
> [...]
> Somewhere in the middle of my speech, James's wry amusement faded from his face and was replaced with a cold, ugly look. When it was his turn to

[46] Tartt, *Secret History*, 224.
[47] Rio, *Villains*, 15.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 186.

> speak, I watched him closely, uncertain whether he was acting only, or if he and I both were gnashing secrets between our teeth.
>
> James: *"What safe and nicely I might well delay*
> *By rule of knighthood, I disdain and spurn.*
> *Back do I toss those treasons to thy head!"*
>
> He may as well have spat at me.[50]

Rio uses the conservatoire setting to bring the affective response to art to the forefront of the novel's academic practice, creating in Oliver a doubled self in which he feels that he has been "struck by some kind of insight" about his emotional state through the Shakespearean dialogue and cannot extract his own individual emotions from the character he is playing at any given moment. If, amid the dialogue and the acting, Oliver himself feels that James "might as well have spat at me", it impossible either for the characters or for the reader to distinguish Oliver's feelings from his character's. Likewise, the origin of the "cold, ugly look" on James's face remains unclear, and this results in the characterisation throughout the novel feeling unstable and, as mentioned before, slightly flat, even if the archetypal and acting-driven expressions of emotion are purposefully done. It often seems that Shakespeare's work is more alive in the novel than Rio's original characters, since it lives on *through* the actor's as they embody their roles. What is unsaid by the individual characters in the novel is expressed by the Shakespearean dialogue and, therefore, Shakespeare's work becomes almost a living thing for the actors, contrasting with the traditional academic scholarship practice of analysing dramatic texts on a textual level without necessarily taking into account the performance aspect. With this, Rio uses Shakespeare's written format and dialogue for its cultural capital while also depicting a style of interpretation which is more embodied and represents the affective response of the lay reader.

This process is reflected in John Guillory's reading of an anecdote from Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, in which Samuel Johnson celebrates a young boy's willingness to "give what I have" in order to learn about the Argonauts:

> Assuming his financial resources to be minimal, a safe enough assumption, the only thing he really has to offer is the effort, the pain, of acquiring

[50] Rio, *Villains*, 326, 327.

> knowledge. This pain is what everyone must "give" in order to get at least one of the "advantages" this kind of learning promises, the pleasure of reading a story.[51]

Guillory explains in this section of *Professing Criticism* (2022) that "literacy" is now not only a skill required in all professions, but "also a means of deriving pleasure", a means by which to consume and enjoy all stories.[52] The institutionalisation of reading "move[s] reading literature beyond a merely intuitive practice" into a discipline, and "the assumption of lay readers who believe they already know how to read such works" is disproved by the rigid requirements and expectations of professional literature.[53] Dark academia, in response to such institutionalisation, instils readers with the belief that their intuitive response to literature is equally significant to the disciplinary practice of literary study. That is, readers can use online bookish spaces as a form of conference through which to share interpretations of their favourite novels. So, when Rio regurgitates lines of Shakespeare as part of her prose, readers take this to be an act of interpretation from which they can gain the cultural capital associated with "understanding" Shakespeare without necessarily undertaking the "*educated* experience" and training upon which Guillory writes that "the possibility of aesthetic pleasure depends".[54] As Paul Crosthwaite points out, "there is very little indication that [the protagonists of dark academia novels] are drawn to the overtly politicized interpretive processes that have been at the forefront of academic study in the arts and humanities over recent decades".[55] *Villains* prioritises the "intuitive practice" of lay readers over the disciplinary restrictions of "scholarly" literary study.[56]

The "pain [...] everyone must 'give'" in the pursuit of both knowledge and pleasure lies at the centre of the dark academia phenomenon. The idea of "losing oneself" well established in *The Secret History* through Julian's teachings about the "old animal self" and the Bacchic ritual is best exemplified in *Villains* through the character of James and

[51] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 291.
[52] Ibid., 292.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid., 378.
[55] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 17.
[56] Felski, *Hooked,* 101.

his role as the novel's murderer.[57] James, who is cast as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, Macbeth in *Macbeth*, and Edmund in *King Lear*, represents how the marriage between the "cognitive and affective gratifications" of humanistic study which Crosthwaite says dark academia prioritises can be a cause of great distress when these two sides cannot comprehensively coalesce.[58] James's role as the murderer, while premeditated by his various castings, is nonetheless contrasted against the fact that he is "the most serious student in our year, which (probably) explained why he was also the best actor".[59] The brutality of the murder, a vicious attack in which James bludgeons Richard over the head with a boat hook, reveals that James's ability to embody the contradictory characters of the Shakespearean roles he is assigned stems from, or fuels, his own internal conflict between the emotions of the student of literature and those of the tragic hero. This is the role that Oliver steals from James, in his role as the sidekick, taking the fall for James's actions and confessing to the murder in his stead.

The cumulation of James's grief and guilt, both for the murder and for Oliver's arrest, is his apparent suicide, revealed to Oliver on the evening he leaves prison. But James's fate is left ambiguous, as Oliver is given a letter left for him by James in which James quotes a passage from *Pericles*, and it is revealed to the reader that James's body was never found. *Villains*'s conclusion therefore leaves the reader with a sense that the story is unfinished. The ambiguity surrounding James's death makes him into a symbol of potential, allowing Oliver to turn his mind towards the future rather than remaining entrenched in the past as he has been for the last decade. There is no sense that things could have been different, as the assignment of archetypes at the beginning of the novel sealed the fates of each student, but *Villains* opens the potential for a second life with "what would have been Pericles's last words – if he had not asked for *help*".[60] That is, things may have been different if James had confided in Oliver, which it seems he may now be planning to do. Rio seems to suggest that the damage dealt by obsessive education can be undone with

[57] Tartt, *Secret History*, 47.
[58] Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 18.
[59] Rio, *Villains*, 14.
[60] Ibid., 422.

distance and time, and this imbues the ending of *Villains* with a sense that change, however difficult, is still possible for Oliver and James.

If We Were Villains's success among readers informed the publishing industry that the dark academia community, which was becoming increasingly visible in online circles, constituted a consistent consumer base seeking similar properties to Tartt's *The Secret History*. Depictions of the literature-inspired life of the mind in these novels fulfilled for readers what Jeremy Rosen calls "a self-deprecating intellectual pride along with the solitary pleasures of recognition"; but, with the community's expansion, this pride was not necessarily as self-deprecating or solitary as Rosen suggests.[61] As the genres popular in online bookish spaces tend to be those which are traditionally lowbrow, like fantasy and romance, dark academia fans promote their tastes as highbrow, associating themselves with the cultural capital of the Western canon. In order for their intellectual pride to be maintained, dark academia fans must reproduce class distinctions, since prestige literature only retains its prestige status thanks to the reinforcement of hierarchies of cultural capital in contemporary culture.[62] *Villains*, and the rise of the dark academia phenomenon, is a response to the political situation of 2017, one year into the first Trump presidency in which funding troubles were growing throughout the humanities disciplines in higher education institutions. However, Rio's attempt to instil some hope into the novel's allows her, and readers, to explore the possibility of new beginnings and change in the face of anti-intellectualism and the crisis of education.

The need for change has subsequently fuelled the reinforcement of literary hierarchies in online communities, with creators rejecting the anti-intellectual turn and proliferation of official narratives on social media by promoting canonical literature and self-education. Alongside readers' attempts to self-educate, authors in the early 2020s have used the dark academia genre to interrogate and critique universities for their role in dictating the official narratives of history and making knowledge inaccessible. There is an obvious

[61] Rosen, "An Insatiable Market for Minor Characters", 153.
[62] For more on the necessity of belief in creating literary hierarchies, see: Rosen, *Genre Bending*, 23-30; Pierre Bourdieau, *The Rules of Art* (Polity Press, 1996); Pierre Bourdieau, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Columbia University Press, 1993).

tension between the idea of the university in these novels and the criticisms they make. The next chapter will explore the role played by the author persona in marketing dark academia novels through the case-study of R. F. Kuang, and her 2022 novel, *Babel*. This novel attempts to deconstruct the romantic idea of the university by exploring the role played by the University of Oxford in upholding the British Empire, and tackles the problem of loving the university while simultaneously wanting it to change.

CHAPTER THREE

Babel

Responding to the Dark Academia Mythos

The Author as Academic

In the 2020s, amid the pandemic which facilitated the rise of TikTok as a mainstream global social media platform, the subsection of TikTok known as "BookTok" grew at an astronomical rate, as did the variety and proliferation of internet "aesthetics" with which content creators on the platform identified themselves.[1] After *If We Were Villains* had secured its position as the second major instalment in the dark academia "canon", readers sought other texts which evoked the same aesthetic affect as *The Secret History*. Many looked backwards to the campus or academic novel for inspiration, adopting texts as far back as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) which had academic settings and subject matters. But they also began to look forwards, as the pandemic brought with it not only the rise of TikTok, but an explosion in at-home study culture. Quoted in an article for the BBC about the rise of "StudyTok", Dr Leigh-Anne Perryman states that the pandemic made it "impossible for many people" to find the "low level of distraction" associated with studying in cafés or libraries, and suggests that study livestreams on TikTok and YouTube "offer an easily accessible and safe alternative" which, rather than disappearing after stay-at-home orders were lifted, "appear to have continued".[2] The popularity of "StudyTok" streams reveals that the increased consumption of books during the pandemic was accompanied by a wider desire to find academic communities as stay-at-home orders prevented students from having their expected university or secondary school experiences. It is this desire that dark academia fulfilled, offering a

[1] TikTok, originally a Chinese social media app, had a steady rise in the UK and US markets from 2017-2019, with a surge of downloads in 2020 at the beginning of global lockdowns. See: Kari Paul, "From Dance Videos to Global Sensation: What You Need to Know about TikTok's Rise", *The Guardian*, 23 October 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/oct/22/tiktok-history-rise-algorithm-misinformation; Sarah Perez, "TikTok Surpassed Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat & YouTube in Downloads Last Month", *TechCrunch*, 2 November 2018, https://techcrunch.com/2018/11/02/tiktok-surpassed-facebook-instagram-snapchat-youtube-in-downloads-last-month/.

[2] Hazel Shearing, "Why Half a Million People Watch Me Study on TikTok", *BBC News*, 4 May 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/education-61305442.

fantastical online community which encouraged the emulation of obsessive study and recreating the academic space in one's own home.

Mona Awad's *Bunny*, published by Viking Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House, in 2019, was the first in a new swathe of dark academia novels which swelled rapidly during the early 2020s. Awad's novel has been highly successful among both literary fictional and dark academia online communities, with its careful balance of generic and literary elements as it details a surrealist Gothic body-horror plot in which its narrator, Samantha, is unwillingly absorbed into the ranks of the young, rich women in her Creative Writing MFA class whom she refers to as the "bunnies". The tension between the desire to belong to and rejecting elitist circles is a core facet of dark academia in the 2020s as authors writing in the genre became more openly critical of universities, their isolation, and their colonial histories. Another major dark academia novel released in the early 2020s was Olivie Blake's *The Atlas Six*. Initially self-published through Kindle Direct Publishing in 2020, *The Atlas Six* follows a group of students specially selected for entry into the secret Alexandrian Society thanks to their unique, specialist magical abilities. Blake explores ideas of power and knowledge by following these students as they are offered access to all the knowledge in the world – including "lost" knowledge, which has merely been hidden – in return for killing one member of their cohort by the end of the year. The idea of sacrifice is important for Blake's discussion of the university system, as is the emphasis on forbidden, hidden, and stolen knowledge, through which she brings out questions of empirical power with her mixed-race cast of characters. *The Atlas Six* gained such success when it was self-published that it was picked up by Tor Books for republishing after a seven-way auction.

Ritual, sacrifice, and secrecy remain core themes of the genre, carried over from *The Secret History*, and most of the dark academia novels published in the 2010s and 2020s are set in the present day or near-future, ranging from the 1990s with *If We Were Villains* to the mid-twenty-first century in *The Atlas Six*'s alternative future. Maintaining these core themes but taking a different approach to the genre, R. F. Kuang's *Babel* (2022), which she calls "historical dark academia", presents the reader with an alternative nineteenth century Oxford in which the British Empire is powered by a complex magic system which

is administered by the fictional Babel Institute. The Institute uses silver bars as a medium through which to enact their magic, which is based on linguistics and translation science.[3] Kuang is the only dark academia novelist who is also a working academic, and her experiences in higher education in both the UK and the US are visible in her work, as her standalone novels are all explicitly critical of the industries in which she works and self-consciously interrogate her position as a successful person of colour in historically racist and imperialist industries. *Yellowface*, the 2023 satirical novel which followed *Babel*, is a fast-paced thriller which Alexandra Alter calls "a scorching indictment of the publishing industry's pervasive whiteness and racial blind spots" in her interview with Kuang for *The New York Times*.[4]

Babel is Kuang's response to institutional racism and the legacies of colonialism in the universities she attended throughout her career. Kuang's postgraduate education started at the University of Cambridge, where she completed an MPhil in Chinese Studies on a Marshall scholarship, before moving to Oxford for an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies, after which she finally returned to the US for a PhD in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University.[5] In an interview at University College, Oxford, shortly after *Babel*'s publication, Kuang explained that the novel's complicated relationship to Oxford reflects her own, which Hari Bravery describes in his article about the event for the college website: "Oxford is simultaneously a place of great beauty and deep learning, held back by its locking away of knowledge", and the "notion of a Bod card enabling access to Oxford's innumerable libraries is the very antithesis of the university's commitment to furthering knowledge [...] act[ing] as a barrier, preventing the uninitiated from accessing the university's plentiful resources".[6] *Babel*'s interrogation of the university as a site of locked-away knowledge aligned perfectly with the self-proclaimed democratisation practices of the dark academia community, despite, as was pointed out

[3] Blackwell's Bookshops, "An Interview with R.F. Kuang, Author of Babel, Blackwell's Book of the Year 2022", YouTube, 20 December 2022, 14 min., 34 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoFHouBp-TQ.
[4] Alexandra Alter, "She Wrote a Blistering Satire About Publishing. The Publishing Industry Loves It", *The New York Times*, 12 May 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/12/books/yellowface-rf-kuang.html.
[5] "R. F. Kuang: About", R. F. Kuang, accessed 2 July 2025, https://www.rfkuang.com/about.
[6] Hari Bravery, "An Evening at Univ with Rebecca F Kuang", University College Oxford (Univ), 5 November 2024, https://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/news/an-evening-at-univ-with-rebecca-f-kuang/.

in the previous chapter, the surface-level nature of these attempts at democratisation. Because the dark academia community has long been critical, as Kuang is, of the barriers to entry implemented by universities, and because of the concurrent re-evaluation which followed universities' poor handling of student welfare during the pandemic, they adopted and promoted *Babel* as representative of the conversations happening within the community, while at the same time often misunderstanding the critiques Kuang makes of dark academia's inherent elitism.[7] In addition to her derision about the closed doors of universities, Kuang has expressed frustration with the racial hierarchies built into Western universities, many of which have been built upon financial gain from colonial exploits, and in many of which students of colour still face high levels of prejudice from fellow students and university staff.[8] One example of this built-in discrimination is seen in the University of Edinburgh's 2025 EDI Staff Data report, which shows that only 14% of the university's staff population and 20.5% of the academic staff population were from a BAME background in the 2023/24 academic year.[9]

While "keenly aware of how she has benefited from publishing's hype machine", *Yellowface* was Kuang's response to being tokenised by the publishing industry, promoted as a "diverse" voice rather than solely on the merit of her work.[10] Kuang's work is frequently promoted through the production of special editions, including a recent reprint of her debut trilogy for the fifth anniversary of its final instalment; this reveals the value of authors like Kuang, who have "a devoted following" and therefore are a secure and consistent stream of revenue, to the publishing industry. Kuang's consistent

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[7] See: "Students in England Should Apply for Refund If Unsatisfied, Says Minister", *The Guardian*, 22 January 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jan/22/students-in-england-refund-if-unsatisfied-with-course-michelle-donelan; 'Home', Student Group Claim, accessed 6 August 2025, https://studentgroupclaim.co.uk/.

[8] See: David Batty, "Oxford Academics Drank from Cup Made from Human Skull, Book Reveals", *The Guardian*, 22 April 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2025/apr/22/oxford-academics-drank-from-cup-made-from-human-skull-until-2015-book-reveals; Nadine White, "Cambridge Uni Said Student Who Made Racism Complaint Needs To 'Understand UK Customer Service'", *HuffPost UK*, 17 February 2021, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/cambridge-university-racism-complaint-customer-service_uk_60116558c5b61cb953501580; Wilf Vall and Anuk Weerawardana, "Peterhouse Students Warned against 'Racist' and 'Misogynistic' Behaviour", *Varsity Online*, 23 March 2025, https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/29373.

[9] University of Edinburgh, "EDI Public Accessible Reports | Equality, Diversity & Inclusion", 6 March 2024, https://equality-diversity.ed.ac.uk/about/reports/edmarc.

[10] Alter, "She Wrote a Blistering Satire About Publishing".

engagement with popular genres and topical cultural and political discussions adds to her value as an author, and what Alexandra Alter considers her "deeply researched and thought-provoking fantasy novels" situates Kuang not only as an author, but as an author-academic. Kuang's academic career and online presence contributes to the impression among readers that her novels are filled with intellectual detail and subtle hints, to be found only by the most studious of observers. Kuang's upcoming novel, *Katabasis*, is a philosophy-inspired romance in which two Cambridge PhD students follow their professor's soul into hell. Due to its inclusion of philosophical dialogue and inspiration from works such as Dante's *Inferno*, *Katabasis* has inspired a trend among bookish creators of showing which books they are reading to "prepare" for the novel.[11] The impression of learnedness that Kuang brings to her work is reinforced through the inclusion of academic material in some special editions, such as an annotated bibliography in *Babel* and an essay about Asian American representation in fiction for *Yellowface*, and the way in which she inspires the creation of reading lists is unique among contemporary authors.[12]

In other words, Kuang's author-academic persona is supplemented by her real-life academic career and forms a major element of the marketing for her fictional output. As a result of the digital literary sphere, Simone Murray suggests that readers have "simultaneously amplified traditional Romantic concepts of authorial genius" while authors face "the counterintuitive effect of reinforcing extant offline celebrity".[13] Various critics, Murray notes, have lamented the process by which the author's online presence has created a cult-following of the author persona rather than the work itself, which is exacerbated by the tokenisation which Kuang derides. However, it is nonetheless the case that the success of dark academia authors is often directly related to how well they curate the correct "vibe" and offer "constructive contributions" to the community.[14] For

[11] azhangia, "KATABASIS: Spoiler-Free Review & Reading Guide (New Favorite r.f. Kuang Book!!)", YouTube, 5 February 2025, 17 min., 4 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vsQUGwBpYI&t=25s; piareadz, "'You Read All That?!' 🤍God Forbid a Girl Preps for Katabasis🤎", YouTube, 16 April 2025, 11 min., 37 sec., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GquyA5v-rYQ&list=PL3zQfMA0ZfJp2NsBdmtn5IH4o4knpI45S&index=4.
[12] Alter, "She Wrote a Blistering Satire About Publishing".
[13] Murray, *The Digital Literary Sphere*, 24.
[14] Simone Murray, "Picking Your Professor: Bridging Scholarly and Popular Bookish Publics in the Digital Age", *Poetics Today* 45, no. 4 (2024): 601, https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-11393858.

authors of dark academia novels, these "constructive contributions" show the author as an authority on the artistic and intellectual process behind literary production, whether through lectures, talks at author-specific and book events, frequent public appearances, and written, verbal, or social media posts which explain the author's research process when writing. Kuang frequently appears in public, primarily as an author but often with her academic process closely following her; alongside high-profile author events, such as presenting the 2022 J. R. R. Tolkien Lecture for Fantasy Fiction and giving a talk at the British Library Fantasy Worlds day in 2024, one of Kuang's academic lectures can be found on YouTube, in which she explains the historical and literary influences in *The Poppy War* trilogy.[15]

This author-academic persona predates the dark academia authors of the digital literary sphere. In an article for *The Baffler*, Maura Mahoney derides the literary personae of Donna Tartt and her contemporaries for their reliance on "publicity packages" which "appeal to glossily literate, expensively educated consumers" by deploying "strategically chosen literary references" which "consistently smack of café conversation – they're deep but not too deep. They entice, rather than challenge".[16] Like many of the critics quoted by Murray in *The Digital Literary Sphere,* Mahoney is highly critical of the "reification of the writer" who, in "establishing an aura of painstakingly consumer-friendly intellectual sophistication", is able to "convey some sort of demonstrable Girl Scout badge of intellectual virtue".[17] Unlike most contemporary authors, who feel the pressure of remaining in the public consciousness in order to keep their place in the community, Tartt's persona relies heavily on her absence from the public eye, with no online presence,

[15] Dr Erinnerung, "R.F. Kuang Lecture 'The Poppy War in Context: Asian American Speculative Fiction' (Oct 28 2020)", YouTube, 31 Oct 2020, 1:26:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9xxcOh6Rg0&t=21s. For examples of dark academia authors giving lectures in a non-academic context, see: British Library, "Discussing Dark Fantasy: Olivie Blake, Lucy Holland and Elizabeth May", YouTube, 16 Jul 2024, 1:27:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vC81K4RDoO8; Library of Congress, "Olivie Blake on Secret Societies and Forbidden Knowledge", YouTube, 26 Jun 2024, 54:33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H44Dl2CBfw0&list=PL3zQfMA0ZfJp2NsBdmtn5IH4o4knpI45S&index=3; "Fantasy Worlds: A Day of Talks - Rebecca F Kuang in Conversation", YouTube, 26 Jul 2024, 57:51, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clNof5kV_uk&list=PL3zQfMA0ZfJp2NsBdmtn5IH4o4knpI45S&index=11.

[16] Maura Mahoney, "The Packaging of a Literary Persona", review of *The Secret History,* by Donna Tartt, *The Baffler*, March 1993, https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-packaging-of-a-literary-persona.

[17] Mahoney, "The Packaging of a Literary Persona".

rare interview appearances, and only three novels released in her thirty-year long career, in comparison to Kuang's six-and-counting in seven years. Tartt's secrecy has bolstered, rather than diminished, her devoted readership, with many readers flocking to consume snippets of information about her.[18] Tartt's secrecy, coupled with her consistent personal image of a sharp black bob, red lipstick, and gender-neutral clothing, has caused her to become something of an idol within the dark academia space, separately from but related to her work. So, too, has Bennington College in the years of Tartt's attendance gained a mythological status, not only due to the parallels between her literary classmates and *The Secret History*'s Greek class, but also due to the large number of wildly successful artists and authors it produced.[19] Tartt is, as Mahoney suggests, "what every swooning English major wanted to be – she's intellectual, and she's hip".[20] Leading up to the publication of *The Secret History*, Tartt's press circuit featured long interviews in which she extolled the artistic and intellectual virtues of Greek literature and culture, performing the same aesthetic sensibility and intellectual refinement which is so beloved by fans of *The Secret History*.[21]

Another avenue through which authors perform this intellectual refinement is through the inclusion of bibliographies or academic material in their novels. Like the Barnes and Noble special edition of *Babel,* the final instalment of Blake's *Atlas* trilogy, *The Atlas Complex*, features a reading list in the back, as does the latest novel from poet and critical darling, Ocean Vuong, who includes in his acknowledgements a list of works of academic theory which "aided my thinking and being while writing this novel".[22] The value of learning and research in facilitating the creative process, both for writers and readers, appears to have transcended the confines of the dark academia community, and it is

[18] See: Lili Anolik, host, *Once Upon a Time … At Bennington College*, Audacy Podcasts, 28 September 2021-8 December 2021, https://open.spotify.com/show/1N0mypcTuJ5FWlh3y1HSTG?si=ec9a8d72674148d7; Jo Livingstone, "Did a Podcast About Donna Tartt Go Too Far?", *The New Republic*, 22 October 2022, https://newrepublic.com/article/164092/podcast-donna-tartt-go-far-bennington-college-review.
[19] Anolik, "Money, Madness, Cocaine and Literary Genius".
[20] Mahoney, "The Packaging of a Literary Persona".
[21] The John Adams Institute, "Donna Tartt on The Secret History", YouTube, 8 August 2017, 1:35:46, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VlfDiV85joo; Charlie Rose, "Donna Tartt — Charlie Rose", 19 October 1992, 14 min., 10 sec., https://charlierose.com/videos/14910.
[22] Olivie Blake, *The Atlas Complex* (Tor, 2024); Ocean Vuong, *The Emperor of Gladness* (Penguin Random House, 2025).

becoming more commonplace for authors to pay homage to their education in theory, history, and literature, as well as to offer readers information to facilitate their own research after completing the novel. This practice concretely situates these novels in conversation with literature and history, presented as intellectually stimulating and produced with care, and contributing to the sense of democratised education which is central to dark academia online spaces. This chapter will explore how, in *Babel*, Kuang continues her performance as an author-academic through her use of historical forms such as the footnote. I will examine how these forms are reworked by Kuang in her response to the colonial practices of Oxford, and consider how *Babel* is an exemplar of how dark academia authors discuss the tension between loving institutions of higher education and acknowledging their violent histories.

Historical Forms in R. F. Kuang's Babel

Babel tells an alternative history where the seat of the British Empire's power is the silver-smithing Translator's Guild at the University of Oxford, based at the academic institute known as Babel.[23] Using a complicated system of magic which relies upon etymological distinctions between translated words, the scholars of Babel are native speakers of languages from around the globe whose linguistic prowess is core to powering the ships, trains, and bridges which support British infrastructure and warfare.[24] The novel follows Robin Swift who is plucked from his home in Canton, transferred to London, and trained to be a Babel scholar under the guardianship of Professor Robert Lovell. Despite Robin's desperation to attend, and love for, Oxford, the dream falls apart when he and his cohort are confronted with the realities of colonial operations in Canton – opium selling, the silver trade, and secret war plans – and Robin decides to stage a revolution against the

[23] Not to be confused with the tower from Biblical myth, Kuang's Babel Institute is named as such in reference to the translation practiced within.

[24] For example, thieves use a bar engraved on one side with the Chinese word "wúxíng", made from the constituent parts "wú", 無, meaning "negative, not, without", and "xíng", 形, meaning "appearance, form, shape", and on the other with "invisible", the closest English translation. The slight differences in the translation of the two words allows the thieves to use the silver bar to walk around unseen. R. F. Kuang, *Babel* (Harper Collins, 2022).

British Empire and the University of Oxford by destroying the tower of Babel and the hundreds of years of research inside.

Academic forms are a key feature of *Babel* which distinguish it from other dark academia novels. Rather than employing many of the usual aesthetic and affective engagements with specific pieces of art or literature, Kuang presents her novel as a historical account, allowing the Oxford setting to carry the aesthetic qualities of dark academia while the novel follows a straightforward third-person perspective account of the life of Robin Swift and his path to revolutionary action. The historical account is prefaced by an "Author's Note" in which Kuang lists some of the non-fictional texts she consulted when making the novel and pre-empts possible criticisms of her authorial choices:

> The trouble with writing an Oxford novel is that anyone who has spent time at Oxford will scrutinize your text to determine if your representation of Oxford aligns with their own memories of the place. Worse if you're an American writing about Oxford, for what do Americans know about anything?[25]

Kuang notes historical guides which informed her writing, such as James J. Moore's *The Historical Handbook and Guide to Oxford* (1878), as well as primary sources which supplemented the construction of Victorian "rhetoric and the general texture of life", such as G. V. Cox's *Recollections of Oxford* (1868), W. Tuckell's *Reminiscences of Oxford* (1908), and novels such as William Makepeace Thackeray's *The History of Pendennis* (1850).[26] This author's note comes across as a defence, particularly since it is absent of many of the texts which Kuang cited as influential during the press circuit for the novel – the works of Dickens, *The Secret History*, and Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2005) among them. These novels, unlike the texts in the author's note, are more clearly influential of *Babel*'s structure and themes. The three-part title, "Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translator's Revolution", and the author's note bear an aesthetic similarity to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels which were being produced at the time in which *Babel* is set, as do the structural

[25] Kuang, *Babel*, 1.
[26] Ibid.

features of the novel which emulate a Dickensian *Bildungsroman* while also employing features of the fantastical romances of R. L. Stevenson and Daniel Defoe.

Kuang continues her author's note by pointing out the major inconsistencies of which she is aware in the novel, such as her creation of a fictional pub called "The Twisted Root"; the inclusion of a café which did not exist until 2003; and the deliberate alteration of dates of construction for the Oxford-Paddington railway line, which not only "makes sense given the altered history", but was done "because I needed to get my characters to London a bit faster".[27] Given the expression in the author's note of Kuang's extensive research process, her acknowledgement of the historical inconsistencies throughout the novel serves to further cement her intellectual position – these are not mistakes, they are informed choices. Thus, when Kuang finishes her author's note by suggesting that any reader who finds other historical inconsistencies ought to "feel free to remind yourself that this is a work of fiction", Kuang capitalises on the authority of her author-academic persona whilst also exempting herself from critique. However, she also participates in the early novelistic practice of writing an author's preface which explains the moral sensibility or truthfulness of the story. Both Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson frequently included prefatory notes which, in the voice of the "author" who was separate from the writer himself, explained the lesson of the novel. Indeed, Kuang's closing suggestion echoes Defoe's preface to *Moll Flanders*, in which he writes that, in a society so "taken up of late with novels and romances", the author cannot control the reader's interpretation and therefore "must be content to leave the reader to pass his own opinion upon the ensuing sheet, and take it just as he pleases".[28] Rather than exempting her, then, Kuang's author's note may in fact serve the purpose of directing the reader towards a particular reading practice, one which is intellectually minded but still able to enjoy the novel as a piece of fiction and not an academic text.

For an alternative history, one can only be so critical of inconsistencies, and Kuang maintains her authority as an author-academic by using footnotes throughout the novel.

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[27] Kuang, *Babel*, 2.
[28] Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, Project Gutenberg, accessed 7 August 2025, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/370/pg370-images.html.

For the twentieth anniversary edition of Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, Kuang penned a blurb which reads "[t]he book I wish I'd written", a statement which becomes instrumental in understanding some of the formal choices made when writing *Babel*.[29] Much like Clarke, Kuang uses footnotes to elaborate on aspects of her false – or, indeed, the real – history of the British Empire. There are distinct differences between the two authors' footnoting habits, particularly in the respective formats: Clarke's are mainly citations, often for in-universe academic texts, while Kuang's footnotes are written and distributed in a format which more closely resembles earlier footnoting styles from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical-historical texts. In an interview with Blackwell's Bookshops, Kuang points out how "the narrator of the footnotes is different from the narrator of the main text", implementing a footnoting practice which acts as third-person omniscient narration separate to Robin's narration:

> The personality of the footnotes is this person who is situated differently in space and time and has the benefit of hindsight and is able to see more clearly the web of structures and relationships that Robin and his cohort are in that they can't see themselves.[30]

The footnotes offer opinions on the philosophical and historical debates expressed by the novel's characters, elaborating on wider historical contexts and reflecting on contemporary misunderstandings of certain historical events or figures. For example, when the character of Ramy derides the work of Schlegel with the rhetorical question, "'How do you write a definitive text on the "language and wisdom" of India from Paris?'", the footnote tells the reader:

> This was only the beginning of the multiple flaws of Schlegel's work. Islam he considered a 'dead empty Theism'. He also assumed that Egyptians were descended from Indians, and argued Chinese and Hebrew were inferior to German and Sanskrit because they lacked inflection.[31]

These reflections occur frequently, such as when Robin first discusses the brutal consequences of the silver trade with his half-brother, Griffin, who refers to the

[29] Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, 20th anniversary edn. (Bloomsbury, 2024).
[30] Blackwell's Bookshops, "An Interview with R.F. Kuang".
[31] Kuang, *Babel,* 193.

"indigenous miners you can't be certain were paid fairly for their labour", the footnote for which reads:

> An understatement. A few short decades after Potosí's 'discovery' in 1545, the silver city had become a death trap for enslaved Africans and drafted indigenous labourers working amidst mercury vapour, foul water, and toxic waste.[32]

The footnote narrator's historical reflections are not confined to broader issues of empire, though; they also offer insight into scenes from the novel which are exempted from the body text. This habit often feels egregious, revealing a distrust from Kuang towards her readers, as these footnotes frequently spell out the internal emotional developments of her characters which were visible in the novel's subtext. When the footnotes expand upon the brief mention of "special receptions* with the politicians, aristocrats, and the unimaginably wealthy who made up the lobby clientele", they do so by explaining:

> These receptions were entertaining at first, but quickly grew tiresome when it became apparent that Babel scholars were there less as distinguished guests and more as zoo animals on display, expected to dance and perform for wealthy donors. Robin, Victoire, and Ramy were always treated as national representatives of the countries they appeared to hail from. Robin had to put up with excruciating small talk about Chinese botanical gardens and lacquerware; Ramy was expected to elaborate on the inner workings of the 'Hindu race', whatever that meant; and Victoire, bizarrely, was always being asked for speculation advice in the Cape.[33]

All of these microaggressions feel as though they could have been included in the body text, and Kuang's explanation about how the cohort feels as though they are "zoo animals on display, expected to dance and perform" is unnecessary, as this feeling is easily inferred by the reader from the events depicted.

Footnotes in *Babel* do not serve as a form of academic citation but rather delve into subjective and overtly critical ruminations on the university and its colonial origins, ensuring that it is impossible for the reader to misread Kuang's social and historical

[32] Kuang, *Babel*, 176.
[33] Ibid., 141.

commentary. While the footnote, according to Anthony Grafton, has historically served to assign "legitimacy" to the author's position in the "guild membership" of the intellectual, "convinc[ing] the reader that the historian has done an acceptable amount of work" in constructing their argument, *Babel*'s footnotes serve to express in no uncertain terms the message of the novel.[34] In a review of *Babel* for *The Guardian,* Natasha Pulley writes that Kuang's footnotes are "not the usual whimsical ones, in the style of Susanna Clarke or Terry Pratchett, but academic notes, hectoring and preachy in a parody of the 19th-century tomes Swift and his friends at Oxford must study".[35] But this "hectoring and preachy" style places them at a remove from the "academic not[e]", giving the facsimile experience of reading an academically robust text while in fact giving the reader the precise conclusion they must take away from it. While this is the purpose of the footnote in academic writing, as they are frequently used to reinforce the argument through selected evidence, Pulley's assessment that Kuang's footnotes are "academic" in nature is determinedly false. They are not academic footnotes, but novelistic footnotes, which are "whimsical" by nature but which provide no concrete citation nor the opportunity for the reader to read further into the subject matter beyond Kuang's explicit argument. If Kuang is using the footnotes as a form of legitimacy, this may also be an attempt to subvert the suggestion that popular fiction associated with the "'BookTok' label" is "not as intellectual or high-minded as other books of [their] kind".[36] This is what Olivie Blake said about *The Atlas Six*, whose critique of the university she felt was overshadowed by its success on BookTok and the subsequent association that created. Footnotes in fiction can afford novels an academic image which, in the case of *Babel*, may have been an attempt to legitimise its themes and educated critique of the university so that the novel could transcend the cultural confines of the BookTok label.

It is possible that this desire to escape the confines of the BookTok label also resulted in what one reviewer calls Kuang's highly "didactic, unsubtle" presentation of imperialism.[37]

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[34] Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Harvard University Press, 1999).
[35] Natasha Pulley, "Babel by RF Kuang Review – an Ingenious Fantasy about Empire", *The Guardian*, 10 September 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/10/babel-by-rf-kuang-review-an-ingenious-fantasy-about-empire.
[36] Everett, "'It Is Plotless Drivel – There's a Lot of Soul'".
[37] Publishers Weekly, "Babel by R F Kuang", review of *Babel*, by R. F. Kuang, accessed 2 July 2025, https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780063021426.

One reader, in a review on the online platform, Goodreads, writes "while i [*sic*] could certainly believe she is a brilliant academic, [...] i [*sic*] do not believe that kuang [*sic*] has pushed herself to learn beyond the scope of her own research, or to ballast her skillset as a novelist outside of it".[38] *Babel* sometimes reads more like a research project, over-explained and under-nuanced, which reveals Kuang to be a skilled academic but perhaps a lacklustre novelist. Kuang's didacticism, however, is clearly not unpopular, as seen in the success of both *Babel* and *Katabasis*; in fact, a great number of readers appreciate the perceived pedagogical intentions of Kuang's novels, engaging with their historical and parodic features as a sign of Kuang's "deep familiarity with and affection for" the genres she uses, "as well as an eagerness to push stale genre formulas into new permutations to keep representations fresh".[39] Innovations to the dark academia genre in the 2020s often operate within this parodic tilt, with Blake saying that she doesn't "want to reject [...] that the book is pulpy, because it is", and suggesting that the lowbrow inspirations behind the book allow her to "hide the medicine", a habit which she admits can make the novel – and the dark academia genre as a whole – "very easy to dismiss", just as Mahoney dismisses *The Secret History* for an over-romantic image of the university while missing its satirical and critical elements.[40]

The idea of "hid[ing] the medicine" has become central to the dark academic genre, in which critiques of the university are housed within hyperbolic ad fantastical plots. A consequence of this hiddenness, however, is not only the dismissal of which Blake speaks, but the consistent misinterpretation of critical themes by readers. *Babel*'s explicit explanation of its critique through over-explanations and footnotes, therefore, adds to the "new permutations" of the dark academia genre which, through their historical and philosophical reflections, reinforce the distinctions between "high" and "low" culture which are already divisive within the online bookish community. Both universities and traditional journalism outlets are struggling under increased "[c]ompetition for public attention", according to Michael McDevitt, with time and resource constraints leading to

[38] Goodreads, "Babel", review by user idiomatic, https://www.goodreads.com/user/show/45908187-idiomatic, 20 Aug 2022, accessed 2 July 2025, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/57945316-babel.
[39] Murray, "Picking Your Professor", 602.
[40] Everett, "'It Is Plotless Drivel – There's a Lot of Soul'"; Mahoney, "The Packaging of a Literary Persona".

"principles of selection in the way problems are defined, promoted as important, and contested" such that "[o]peratives work to fit social problems into slick, little packages, that crisply present issues in authoritative and urgent tones".[41] With *Babel,* Kuang performs this selective process, offering an avenue through which the social problems of the novel are explained in "slick, little packages" for the reader. *Babel* and other novels in the dark academia genre therefore offer an avenue through which readers can enjoy the fun, romantic, and "pulpy" plots while also engaging with contemporary sociopolitical and historical issues. The limitation to this engagement is seen when reading, for example, *Babel*'s Schlegel footnote, which forces the reader to agree with the postcolonial political stance on Schlegel offered by not equipping them with the tools to interrogate Schlegel for themselves, as there is no citation for where in Schlegel's works these opinions are expressed, nor any further reading offered. Unlike academic writing, *Babel* does not encourage the reader to form their own thoughts but rather establishes a clear political stance on the nature of historical revisionism for the reader to follow through Kuang's attempts to deconstruct the hierarchies of Western thought upon which institutions like Oxford have been built.

Loving and Leaving Oxford

Rather than unsubtle, then, Kuang's presentation of Oxford could be deliberately obtuse. *Babel* is heavily influenced by Kuang's academic career, both in its relationship to Oxford and its interrogation of historical record. In the aforementioned interview at University College, when asked about her focus on institutional and university settings, Kuang explained that "in such institutional settings we find ourselves more emotionally vulnerable than in other parts of our life", with a "self-conscious" performance informed by a "desire for community".[42] Indeed, Kuang frequently and effectively shows the contradictory experience of loving Oxford while being aware and critical of its role in

[41] McDevitt, "Social Control of Intellect", 409; S. Hilgartner and C. L. Bosk, "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arena Model", *American Journal of Sociology* 94, no. 1 (1988): 62, https://doi.org/10.1086/228951.
[42] Bravery, "An Evening at Univ with Rebecca F Kuang".

global situations of oppression and, by referring to her own influences from *The Secret History* and academia, embodies the paradox of the socially aware dark academia fan. Her critique of scholars is particularly poignant when considering this paradox. The isolation offered by education allows Robin, despite being aware from a young age of England's colonial efforts and of potential discontent arising in the colonies, to "f[all] completely out of touch with matters outside Oxford or Babel", to "ignore the life of the world" and "liv[e] only the life of the mind" in "the city of knowledge, the city of dreaming spires" to which he has been taught to aspire since his youth.[43] This blissful isolation continues until the political discontent reaches the doors of the Babel tower, bringing Robin face-to-face with the worker's union protests about how silver-working is putting them out of work. In a clear parallel to the Luddite revolutions of the prior century and to twenty-first-century fears about the automation of work, Kuang forces the doors of the ivory tower open and makes it so that "[t]he vicissitudes of the world outside had now become impossible to ignore".[44] Her cohort nonetheless persist in their ignorance, "bend[ing] their heads over their books and focus[sing] solely on their research" which, in a line that exemplifies Kuang's frustrations with the university, is "what scholars always did" when faced with the realities of the outside world.[45]

Kuang's frustrations with the university come out through the character of Robin frequently throughout the novel, which presents Oxford at once as a perfect place of community and as a hostile environment which aims to keep the Babel cohort ostracised. After an encounter that Robin and Ramy have with a group of white men at a pub, they realise that "[t]hey were men at Oxford; but they were not Oxford men", and this realisation is "so devastating, such a vicious antithesis to the three golden days they'd blindly enjoyed" after matriculation that they conclude: "It was so much easier to pretend; to keep spinning the fantasy for as long as they could".[46] This fantasy is a common feature of speculative fiction which tackles historical racism; as noted by Ramón Saldívar, the blending of realism and historical fiction, from the *Bildungsroman*

[43] Kuang, *Babel*, 172, 46.
[44] Ibid., 213.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 70.

and the campus novel, and fantasy is "required to account for the new persistence of race" through "a new racial imaginary".[47] Coupled with the use of traditional historical and academic forms which have been a tool of empirical violence, Kuang asserts with her "new racial imaginary" the injustices in how people of colour are alienated by institutions which have profited from their labour. The fantastical device of translation magic is then used to explore the ways in which racial identity is "'shaped as a consequence of' imperialism and racism", with Robin's mixed-race heritage being central to the complicated position he occupies as someone who simultaneously benefits from and is exploited by the system which oppresses him and his people. When the cohort travel to Canton for the first time since Robin's childhood, they see the realities of British colonial rule with their own eyes and realise that "[t]here was no pretending anymore, no hiding in their supposedly safe corner of the world while unimaginable cruelty and exploitation carried on beyond".[48] The complexity of the relationship between these students and the university resides in how each has been taken from their home and farmed for the magical possibilities of their native language in a city and country which neither respects them nor cares for the countries from which those languages originate. Rather than removing the racial hierarchies of nineteenth-century Oxford, Kuang uses the contradiction of the cohort's acceptance into the university to represent the historically exploitative practices of institutions of knowledge and the governments they uphold. This is even more explicit in the case of Robin, who is one of many sons fathered by Professor Lovell with the goal of farming native Chinese speakers for the benefit of the Babel Institute and the British Empire. The contradictions in Robin's identity, which are informed by the disdain he is taught to hold for the people of Canton and his proximity to whiteness which exempts him from the worst of the racism faced by his classmates, are shown when Robin summarises that "he hated Babel, and wanted to live forever in its embrace".[49]

The confusing romance Robin feels towards Babel is explored in more detail when Robin is presented with the opportunity to rebel against Babel through the Hermes Society,

[47] Ramón Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction", *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 575.
[48] Kuang, *Babel,* 352.
[49] Ibid., 321.

helmed by Robin's half-brother, Griffin. When Robin is caught stealing silver, Professor Lovell accuses him of "consider[ing] yourself the hero of one of your little stories – a regular Dick Turpin, didn't you? [...] A weary student by day, and a dashing thief by night?'".[50] Robin, whose internal monologue reads at various times throughout the novel with the aesthetic sensibility expected of a dark academia protagonist, nonetheless does not display the same pervasive romanticism as Richard Papen or Oliver Marks. More pragmatic, as is common for dark academia protagonists in the 2020s, Robin's romantic notions of Oxford are constantly at war with the reality of his position, and Lovell's suggestion that Robin views himself as the "hero of one of your little stories" reveals Kuang's direct engagement with the fictionality of dark academia's impractical romantic fantasies.[51] Like Richard Papen, Robin enjoys romances and adventure fiction, pulpy genres which do not align with the sensibility of the Oxford scholar. Hence, Lovell suggests with some disdain that Robin's aspirations to revolution are the product of these low brow novels, rather than the result of intellectually refined political or social reasoning. To Lovell, Robin's revolution is not only irrational, but pointless; Babel's operations as a part of the empire are, to Lovell and the British government, inevitable and morally correct due to the perceived barbaric, uncivilised nature of the colonised peoples.

For Robin and his cohort to participate in that colonisation is therefore a privilege. As Lovell points out, "'if you are indeed so disgusted by the ways Babel enriches itself [...] how is it that you seemed delighted, always, to take its money?'", leading Robin to the reflection that he "was fine with resistance as long as it didn't hurt him. And the contradiction was fine, as long as he didn't think too hard about it, or look too closely".[52] Such is the paradox at the core of dark academia novels which respond not only to *The Secret History*, but to the notion of romanticising the university altogether: in order to democratise academia, one must first participate in the corrupted system, and therefore the benefits of elite education are accompanied by a simultaneous feeling of alienation

[50] Kuang, *Babel*, 264.
[51] Paul Crosthwaite notes how, despite the romantic and beautiful landscape described by *Bunny*'s protagonist, Samantha, she nonetheless resists their charm due to her background as an outsider; Crosthwaite, "Dark Academia", 1.
[52] Kuang, *Babel*, 267.

inspired by institutional origins and practices. The trip to Canton is transformative for Robin, who realises here that he cannot continue to have "no convictions whatsoever" in the face of such rampant inequality. Yet, Robin does not become a full revolutionary until forced to do so, when he accidentally kills Professor Lovell on the journey back from Canton – that is, when his own existence is threatened. Therefore, killing Lovell represents Robin's choice to rescind his status as an "Englishman" and attempt instead to undermine the system which has caused him and causes others so much suffering. It is, however, only when the suffering becomes personal and circumstance forces his hand that Robin chooses to act, and he does so with a swift dive into the melodramatic extremes that characterise the dark academia genre.

The paradox is explored further when Robin and his friends are exiled from Babel after the Lovell's death, as they are introduced to the headquarters of the Hermes Society, which are hidden in an unused library. Robin describes the space as "magical" and expresses surprise at its existence: "how impossible it seemed that a place like this could exist, a distillation of all that Babel promised".[53] The realisation is that Robin's fantasies of what Oxford could be are not only possible, but exist in this real space which makes real the possibilities that Robin had dreamed of from the beginning. The Hermes Society is described as "quintessentially collegial", from its fireplace to the way the students sit around and eat dinner together, as it is populated by many of the Babblers who are secretly participating in the revolutionary effort while still operating as Oxford academics during the day. In the library, they recreate their college lives in a safe space which preserves the "life of the mind" but cannot recreate the tower's "completely unhindered" practice of translation.[54] The appeal of the academic space is further shown through Robin's half-brother, Griffin, who, after his expulsion from Babel for murdering another student, recreates almost exactly the student room he had occupied while still a member of the university. Rather than rejecting Babel conceptually, the students create "a distillation of all that Babel promised", attempting to sever the academic process from empirical violence.

[53] Kuang, *Babel*, 387-8.
[54] Ibid., 466.

Of course, even in the fantasy, they fail in this goal. Violence is brought to the doors of Hermes, resulting in most of their deaths, and Robin responds by staging a coup of the tower and putting the translators on strike. Without the upkeep of the silver bars, parts of the empire begin to crumble, including Westminster Bridge. Yet, the British government does not acquiesce to the Babbler's request to stop the coming war with China, and so Robin's final motion is to burn down the Babel tower with all of its research inside. The violence of colonialism, Kuang suggests, can only be repaid with more violence; and yet, the novel's ending does not theorise about what comes after the tower falls, whether this action truly destabilises the British Empire's power or not. It is one of the major limitations of Kuang's alternative history, that she does not build her alternative world up enough for the reader to truly evaluate the consequences of the plot. The hypothesis that the machinations of empirical power can only be disrupted by taking a torch to their roots is left inconclusive. Perhaps it is an invitation for the reader to speculate on the possibilities of postcolonialism or non-Western-centric academic practice. The question of the democratic university has become central to the dark academia trend in the mid-2020s, with many novels focussed on the disenfranchisement of marginalised peoples in the university space begging the question of whether the romanticisation of the university can ever really be interrogated from within its walls. Beyond doubt, though, the shifts in the dark academia genre of the 2020s reflect a growing unease with the romanticisation of the university, as well as a social fatigue with the constant defunding, devaluing, and inaccessibility of the Western education system. *Babel* marks a major turning point in the discussions surrounding the purpose and value of higher education in the humanities disciplines amid a wave of revisionist histories and conservative political values returning to the fore.

CONCLUSION

Dreaming of Literary Study in the Post-COVID Landscape

The romantic idea of the university has not yet died. R. F. Kuang's *Katabasis* became an instant bestseller upon its release in August 2025, selling over 40,000 copies in its first five days.[1] Kuang described the novel on her book tour as "a love letter to the power of what the institution could be" which explores the highs and lows of academic life through the eyes of two PhD students in the fictional "magick" department at the University of Cambridge as they travel into hell to retrieve the soul of their recently deceased supervisor.[2] In a review of the novel for *The Guardian*, Beejay Silcox writes that "[i]n *Katabasis*, hell is not a roiling pit of fire, it's worse: 'Hell is a campus'". The novel is set in the 1980s, at a time when "post-structuralism is eating meaning and theory is eating itself", and at the very same time when Tartt was writing *The Secret History*.[3] "Scathing about the institution, faithful to the ideal", Silcox calls Kuang "a campus novelist to the core".[4] *Katabasis,* as Elyse Graham writes, "draw[s] from [the] specific experience" of Kuang's academic career while "being marketed primarily to readers who haven't had that experience".[5] When Graham begs the question of whether Kuang's "Gen Z readers" will "be interested in the question of whether the magic of academia is worth it", she runs the risk of falling into the same trap as many critics before her: assuming that the generation who have grown up in the midst of the current crisis of higher education aren't well aware that the idea of the university that they love no longer exists.[6] In the face of such a realisation, these readers have attempted to use the digital literary sphere to recreate the magic of academia outside of its historical institutions by emulating and projecting onto fictional characters and stories. Just like Kuang, her audience are "faithful

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[1] Alex Call, "RF Kuang's Katabasis Launches Straight into First Place in the Charts", *The Bookseller*, 2 September 2025, https://www.thebookseller.com/bestsellers/youre-the-kuang-that-i-want-katabasis-launches-straight-into-first-place.

[2] "An Evening with R.F. Kuang at Tempest Anderson Hall, York", interview by Simon Savidge and Waterstones, 23 August 2025, Live Event.

[3] Beejay Silcox, "Katabasis by RF Kuang Review – a Descent into the Hellscape of Academia", *The Guardian*, 14 August 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2025/aug/14/katabasis-by-rf-kuang-review-a-descent-into-the-hellscape-of-academia.

[4] Silcox, "Katabasis by RF Kuang Review".

[5] Elyse Graham, 'Dark Academia Grows Up', *Public Books*, 4 September 2025, https://www.publicbooks.org/dark-academia-grows-up/.

[6] Graham, "Dark Academia Grows Up".

to the *ideal*" rather than the institution itself, and *Katabasis*'s success shows the continued resonance of that representation in the dark academia community.

As I have illustrated throughout this thesis, the dark academia community does not necessarily wish for involvement in the contemporary university. Instead, they adhere to what Stefan Collini calls the "true idea of the university", rather than the "fashionable commercial distortions of that idea".[7] The idea of the university on which the dark academia community's pseudo-academic practice is modelled is one which was the reality of wealthy Ivy League students in the eighteenth century, as explored in Elisa Tamarkin's *Anglophilia*: free time, an aesthetic sensibility, and a decadent indulgence in all the wonders of life.[8] This image, no longer representative of the reality of academic life, is an attractive part of a fictionalised lifestyle modelled on the constructed life of *The Secret History*'s hyperbolic, melodramatic, and Romantic narrator, Richard Papen. As I showed in the first chapter of this thesis, *The Secret History* marked an important moment in American literary culture in the 1990s, responding to the sense of unreality and social change which resulted from increased conservatism in official political narratives and revisionist histories. The novel's subsequent adoption in the mid-2010s by young readers in the newly emerging digital literary sphere reveals a similar feeling of unreality and cultural nostalgia rising amid the political and social turmoil which resulted in, and expanded in the wake of, the first Trump presidency.

The dark academia community which developed across social media platforms in the 2010s and 2020s used digital transmedial forms to fuel a belief in the idea that life was better in the past. Creating content based on their nostalgia for a university experience which is no longer possible, regardless of whether it ever was possible, readers in the dark academia community perform their idea of what academic life and practice are. This performance is supported by representations of scholarship as depicted in Rio's *If We Were Villains*, which associates academic life not with the criticisms levelled at hierarchies of cultural capital in *The Secret History*, but with the notion that Richard's

[7] Collini, *Speaking of Universities*, 61.
[8] Tamarkin, *Anglophilia,* 247-324.

aspirations are valid and achievable. As universities are increasingly motivated by profit margins, Richard's anxieties about social mobility have resonated with young readers who have similar aspirations towards a life of the mind, but for whom the financial cost of higher education is a barrier to the pursuit of an arts or humanities degree. With the belief that they "already know how to read", the dark academia community is a "formally organized" and participatory "scene of communal reading" which, far from requiring effort to enter, is widely and globally accessible to anybody with social media.[9] Responding to the problems with open access and barriers to knowledge highlighted by Kuang in her interview with University College, Oxford, the dark academia community has created for themselves a space in which they can inhabit a facsimile of contemporary academic life, a space which is inspired by and inspiring the publication of novels in which the university structures which uphold the Western canon are uncritically adored.

As I explored in my third chapter, during the re-evaluation of the dark academia phenomenon in which it faced heavy criticism from people of colour for upholding historically racist and colonial institutions, readers transposed their adoration of the idea of the university onto the authors they associate with dark academia's form of intellectualism. R. F. Kuang's *Babel* perfectly encompasses the complicated relationship between the idea of the university and what it means for students to love the institutions which contribute to global oppression, sometimes of people just like them. In the dark academia community, people of colour frequently create their own spaces within the majority white-led content, much like Robin Swift and his cohort find solace in each other's company among the oppression they face from fellow Oxford students. Dark academia therefore offers an alternative for those seeking an academic space outside of the traditional, colonial universities which have upheld and continue to uphold systems of oppression.

What dark academia also indicates, though, is that despite decreasing admissions rates and reduced funding across the humanities disciplines, young people are eager to find their own forms of education. They seek out what they perceive as expertise, and they

[9] Guillory, *Professing Criticism*, 293, 302.

read and share thoughts on literature from fiction to philosophy. So, while it may be presumptuously optimistic to suggest that dark academia and the community that surrounds it has a chance of saving literary scholarship, it is evident from both the size and the preferred practices of the dark academia community that the desire to read, explore, and understand literature remains strong, even as formal study in the discipline undergoes a crisis. This thesis suggests that the dark academia community uses the transmedial possibilities of the digital literary sphere to adopt their preferred aspects of *The Secret History* and its descendants and reshape the genre to their tastes as they go. With the inclusion of author-academics in the dark academia sphere, the community offers an excellent case-study for the contemporary lived-in experience of literature encouraged by digital platforms and the vast, globalised communities they host. These communities are now a major influence helping to shape the publishing industry and drive the market forces of literary production, and the digital literary sphere has, I have shown, become essential for understanding the production and dissemination of new genres in the twenty-first century.

One of John Guillory's major misunderstandings when it comes to lay readership is the suggestion that "scenes of communal reading are seldom formally organized but rather occur by chance or by virtue of the considerable effort it takes to overcome the condition of solitariness" and that lay readership is necessarily irreconcilable with the professional practice of reading.[10] In staking this claim, Guillory overlooks the large communities which have developed within the digital literary sphere who emulate the academic processes depicted in fiction without much care for the reality of contemporary scholarly life. Simone Murray points out that "[t]he search for affective engagement has long constituted amateur readers' primary motivation, but academic literary studies has lacked a conceptual vocabulary to acknowledge this desire".[11] While literary scholarship has interrogated the impact of the digital literary sphere on market forces and within fan communities, its influence on authors and the process of producing new literature has yet to be fully examined. In this thesis, I have attempted to show that the digital literary

[10] Guillory, *Professing Criticism,* 302.
[11] Murray, "Picking Your Professor", 608.

sphere offers researchers a new angle with which to view and explore the social pressures driving literary innovation. Further, I have shown how the dark academia community opens up a fascinating conversation about the tension between professional literary scholarship and lay reading amid a crisis of higher education in which the future of literary studies is uncertain, and the future of literature troubled by rapid change, digital innovation, and new factors influencing market forces.

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