Introduction: Dark Academia

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A Few Cutting Words

For academics and the readership that literary journals reach out to, there is nothing that has more potential for darkness and emotional devastation than academia itself. For those continuing education, there are countless systemic issues and other forms of frankly dehumanizing aspects of the job, the least of which is administrative work. Likewise, students are marred with their own darkness, the dead-lines and killing time in a lecture hall with a particularly monotone tenured instructor. Our special issue concerns the body of literature that rises from vacuous university halls and the sinister desires that come with higher education, i.e., the relatively new genre of Dark Academia.

Dark Academia has caught the literary world by storm. Although its Ur-text, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, first surfaced in 1992, it certainly exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic, first as an internet aesthetic (see Adriaansen), and then later on as a full-blown literary genre (see Stowell & Therieau n.p.; Murray 353). As Susan Hopkins and colleagues write, the "dark academia aesthetic assign[s] a particular elitist glamour to traditional teaching and learning" (1), one which bundles "tweed blazers, Gothic architecture and vintage books" (1), but also intertwines them with existing fictions as it transgresses aesthetic boundaries into generic ones. Our interest in this special issue is on the literary but also the filmic genre which it borders.

The contributors and editors understand Dark Academia as a literary genre at the crossroads between the New England Gothic, Detective narratives, and Campus novels. Dark Academia blends conventions from these genres, dabbling heavily in the Gothic mode, with a Neo-Romantic bent as it does so. Thematically engaging with questions of class, education, sexuality, secret knowledge, and substance abuse, Dark Academia literary works have a tradition that has blossomed into a mass of popular works. While most Dark Academia texts emerged in response to the coronavirus pandemic (see Adriaansen), we understand genres along the lines of Lauren Berlant's definition, i.e., as an expression for a need for articulation itself or for making possible new kinds of affective ground (85), but also along the lines of Caroline Levine, i.e., as "[a]n ensemble of

characteristics, including styles, themes and marketing conventions" that are changeable and require a "historically specific and interpretative act" (13) in their very recognition. It is necessarily the case, then, that we recognize the mutability, fluidity, and porosity of Dark Academia as a genre.

Since the first bloom of Dark Academia, countless novels of the genre have emerged on the literary stage. Most notably, these include *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M.L. Rio, The *Alex Stern* series (2019-) by Leigh Bardugo, *The Atlas Six* (2020) by Olivie Blake, *Babel* (2022) by R.F. Kuang, *A Deadly Education* (2020) by Naomi Novik, and *The Maidens* (2021) by Alex Michaelides. The literary genre's sibling-medial-genres in film and television have also spawned a range of Dark Academia texts, such as *Saltburn* (2023), the fourth season of *You* (2023), *How to Get Away With Murder* (2014-2020), and *The Queen's Gambit* (2020). Taken together, these texts represent two major strains of Dark Academia – the fantastic and the (more) realist. The more fantastic Dark Academia novels operate, at times, in secondary worlds, making use of fantastic conventions to address broader societal concerns of racism, colonialism, or safety seriously while harnessing speculative power to imagine novel forms of education and the academy. Realist Dark Academia novels, on the other hand, engage more heavily and intricately with our primary world's 'real' educational repertoire, featuring dense historical and intertextual references to support their claim to esotericism (see Sell). Such novels romanticize academic drive, successes, and life at a time when such facets of real-world academia might seem distant for students and staff alike.

This special issue's collection of articles is the first of two issues that select from among the best produced by a course of bachelor students from my course "Murder and Mystery at the University: Dark Academia". Their quality is above and beyond what is expected of their relative experience, and I am proud to present these articles as a result. As a practical module, I wanted to provide the students with an opportunity to begin their own descent into the dark academe, and I believe their work has sincerely earned the right to serve as the debut for *TALE: Translational Approaches, Literary Encounters*. The selected articles in this issue resonate with each other deeply in their commitment toward unveiling the structures and relations present in Dark Academia works. Tellingly, they each broach issues of elitism, of exclusion, and of the darkness that fills the corridors of the genre.

The issue begins with a foray into film, followed by Dark Academia in its literary form. The first article, written by Madita Mertens, centers on the academic pressures of Dark Academia and the need to conform, using Peter Weir and Tom Schulman's film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) as an example. She argues that the film is a precursor to Dark Academia and that, perhaps in opposition to texts of Dark Academia proper, it proffers a positive image of growth and freedom that may occur even within the confines of the academy. Theodora Charalambous's article connects Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism to Dark Academia through a reading of Damien Chazelle's film *Whiplash* (2014). Turning to the relationships between conductor Terrence Fletcher and student Andrew Neiman, Charalambous conducts a thorough examination of the way cruel optimistic attachments structure the film. In doing so, she reveals how Dark Academia orchestrates and instrumentalizes cruel optimism in relation to the pursuit of passion within academic and creative environments. The following article, written by Emma Schwesig, also turns to the relations between students and academics, investigating the toxic patterns of abuse on display in Dark Academia. In a comparative approach to Kate Elizabeth's novel *My Dark Vanessa* and Jade Bartlett's 2024 film *Miller's Girl*, Schwesig intertwines concepts of liminality and space alongside the concept of Academic Exceptionalism, which she outlines. Academic Exceptionalism, we learn, is a form of expression in attachment between teachers and students that elevates and isolates students from their colleagues. In her article, Schwesig calls attention to and cautions us of the relations of attachment that can persist in academic structures today.

Turning more fully to literature, Julia Weiser explores the intersection between Dark Academia and Horror in relation to questions of class, using a comparative approach to Mona Awad's *Bunny* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. Weiser argues that monstrosity is mobilized to produce the academic elitism and exclusion that the genre's conventions demand. In doing so, Weiser exposes some of the classist cracks in two of Dark Academia's core texts. She also reveals how the exclusivity of groups in Dark Academia might lead to self-justifying moral frameworks that result in a decline of moral practices. Similarly taking up questions of morality, the next article, written by Nadja Marek, is concerned with M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* and unearths the connections between morality and cultism in the text. Drawing on the relationship between the novel, personality cults, and theatrical roles, Marek argues that Dark Academia texts allow for an inquiry into cult structures and behaviors. In allowing us to identify cultish patterns,

the novel extends a warning to readers about the flip side of the elitist clique, and the concomitant loss of autonomy that comes along with them. Lastly, the issue closes with Olivia Sophie Schäfer's article which dives into the anti-intellectual tendencies of Dark Academia. Drawing on the digital space of BookTok, highly relevant to the maintenance of the genre, she reads Richard Hofstadter's understanding of anti-intellectualism alongside *The Secret History* to criticize how Dark Academia romanticizes academic life, elitism, and exclusivity.

Our first issue is especially indebted to the work of Post45's cluster on Dark Academia, which provided necessary critical material for our contributors, and which inspired me to head up the course and issue to begin with. Without the editors, Olivia Stowell and Mitch Therieau, and their thoughtful engagement with Dark Academia, there would have been little to get started. It is my hope that these articles will offer still more in the way of material for scholars of Dark Academia to draw upon.

That said, I hope this special issue will knock you dead, or at least the contributors will be killing it in their outstanding works.

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