

Nostalgia in Dark Academia

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Abstract

Dark academia is a fandom-created genre that draws on campus novels and thriller murder mysteries and extrapolates its aesthetic affects from the Gothic. At the heart of dark academia is a story set in a nostalgic academic fantasy that involves murder, a close-knit group of students who are obsessed with each other and detrimentally absorbed in their intellectual pursuits. Using nostalgia theory, I argue that the genre's theme of darkness in tandem with its affects of nostalgia operate as simulacra for the anxieties experienced in academia and on campuses, specifically for its student body. Dark academia as a genre is a reaction to the political threats to the humanities education, which stands for a reification of the value of a more classical education for the love of learning. But, at the same time, while some bathe academia in a nostalgic light, others have criticized how dark academia turns a blind eye to structural issues inherent in academia for generations. However, dark academia is a contemporary genre that quickly evolves in response to those criticisms. By tracing the history of dark academia and its canon development over the years, I examine how dark academia self-critiques campus nostalgia and unveils the academy's history of violence against women and racism against people of colour.

Keywords: dark academia, academic novels, campus novels, racism in academic institutions, sexism in the academy, student life,

Greek life and rape culture, humanities in crisis, neoliberal university, campus nostalgia.

Introduction

While this special issue examines campus nostalgia via the campus novel, I propose an investigation of campus nostalgia through a related, newer literary genre known as dark academia. First, there needs to be a clarification regarding campus novels, as readers and academics often use “campus novels” and “academic novels” interchangeably to describe a genre of fiction set on a college campus. However, there are recognizable differences between the two, which some attribute to a simple matter of focus. For Jeffrey J. Williams, campus novels “revolve around campus life and present young adult comedies or dramas, most frequently coming-of-age narratives,” whereas academic novels “feature those who work as academics, although the action is rarely confined to a campus, and they portray adult predicaments in marriage and home as well as the workplace, most familiarly yielding mid-life crisis plots” (561-562). In essence, campus novels fuse with the *Bildungsroman*, a coming-of-age story, to focus on the lives and experiences of the students, whereas academic novels concentrate on the perspectives of academic faculty members. Dark academia is not a *subgenre* of the campus novel – though they share similar characteristics by focusing on students and campus life – but instead is its own literary genre that developed in 2015 on Tumblr (“dark academia”) and expanded from the urtext *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt.¹ In his article “Campus Novels are What We Need,” Henry Empson writes: “As COVID-19 disrupts the quintessential university experience, here are a few campus novel recommendations that remind us of what uni life is really like.” He concludes that campus novels offer a nostalgic return to campus life during lock-downs and online courses due to COVID-19 safety measures. Therefore, I propose

an investigation of the dark academia genre in parallel with the campus novel. Dark academia is specifically a genre of nostalgic academic fantasy that rapidly gained cultural popularity during the pandemic.

Dark academia is a fandom-created genre that structurally draws on campus novels and thriller murder mysteries and extrapolates its aesthetic affects from the Gothic.² At the heart of dark academia is a story set in a nostalgic academic fantasy that involves murder, a close-knit group of students who are obsessed with each other and detrimentally absorbed in their intellectual pursuits. Using nostalgia theory, I argue that the genre's theme of darkness in tandem with its affects of nostalgia operates as simulacra for the anxieties experienced in academia and on campuses specifically for its student body. Dark academia as a genre is a reaction to the attack/political threats to a humanities education and serves the purpose of reifying the value of a more classical education for the love of learning. But, at the same time, for sometimes bathing academia in nostalgic light, people have criticized how dark academia turns a blind eye to structural bigotry and issues inherent in academia for generations. However, dark academia is a contemporary genre that quickly evolves in response to those criticisms. By tracing the history of dark academia and its canon development over the years, I examine how dark academia reflexively critiques campus nostalgia and unveils the academy's history of violence against women and racism against people of colour. The first section examines individual nostalgia and transgenerational nostalgia and shows how far people will go to protect these nostalgic fantasies. The second section details the history of dark academia to explain how the genre and subculture is an anxiety response to the threats to humanities and academia. The last section considers the criticisms of dark academia. It then delineates how dark academia is a self-critiquing genre that evolves to analyse the injustices of academic institutions and its nostalgic fantasies.

What Makes Dark Academia Dark? A Look at Academic Fantasy and Nostalgia

On the surface, the murders that ensue in the course of the novels lend darkness to dark academia, but because the genre is not simply a campus murder mystery, the murders are not the focus of the genre and therefore not the central reason for its designation. Darkness within the genre is greatly nuanced, and for the purposes of this article, darkness is confined to an exploration of nostalgia – a central theme to this literary body. Yiannis Gabriel explains that “[i]ndividual nostalgia may be defined as ‘sentimental longing for one’s past’ (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018) brought about by experiences and memories that evoke powerful feelings” (5). Several dark academia novels such as Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992), *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M. L. Rio, and *In My Dreams I Hold a Knife* (2021) by Ashley Winstead are told in alternating timelines, with each of the narrators longing for their campus days, thereby adhering to Gabriel’s and other scholars’ definition of individual nostalgia. However, I propose a slightly altered understanding of individual nostalgia as it functions in dark academia. In my opinion, dark academia’s individual nostalgia is not necessarily a longing for one’s past but for a past that belongs to a different generation or an imagined past and a should-be present. It is a nostalgic fantasy, and when that fantasy space is threatened, what the characters are willing to do to protect it evokes the narrative tropes that give dark academia its name.

Dark academia’s nostalgic fantasy as it relates to academia is transgenerational, and the parents’ rejection or perpetuation of those fantasies has a direct impact on how the main characters – who go on to become students themselves – internalize and respond to their own fantasies of academia. In essence, I am examining how collective social nostalgia impacts nostalgia at the individual level and vice versa. Individual and collective nostalgia have a symbiotic relationship but are distinct because of the focus on individual action. At one end of the spectrum of student reactions, they create nostalgic fantasies in opposition to their parents’ beliefs about

academia. *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* capture a generation weary of the reality that an education in the arts and humanities offers no future security. The parents project their own worries and disdain onto their children who rebel by becoming students who live out nostalgic academic fantasies cut off from the realities of the world. In *If We Were Villains*, Oliver Marks's father contemptuously dismisses Oliver's endeavours as a Shakespearean actor at Dellecher Classical Conservatory. Oliver reflects on Dellecher as a space wherein "we spent four years . . . *immersed* in Shakespeare. Submerged. Here we could indulge our collective obsession. We spoke it as a second language, conversed in poetry, and lost touch with reality, a little'" (Rio 248). Dellecher makes it possible for Oliver and his classmates to live in a world where the pursuit of a Shakespearean acting degree has intrinsic value, despite its impracticality; the conservatory protects that fantasy nostalgia. The protective buffer of fantasy nostalgia also insulates Richard Papien, *The Secret History*'s main character and narrator. He is a pre-med major who "switched to English literature without telling [his] parents. [He] felt like [he] was cutting [his] own throat by doing this" (Tartt 9). His father threatens to cut off his finances should he fail to secure a prosperous career. Richard reflects: "I had looked at a picture of the building [Hampden College] called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light – different from Plano, different from anything I had ever known – a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, old books, and silence" (12). This nostalgic image of Hampden College's academic setting highlights the affects which inspired dark academia's aesthetic subculture. As Amelia Horgan argues, "at the center of 'dark academia' aesthetic is the fantasy of uninterrupted personal time and deep scholarly concentration in an elite campus setting." For Richard, Hampden's appeal lies in having a space of unfettered academic pursuits away from his parents who actively work to destroy his fantasies with their talk of a "practical" education. These characters of dark academia fiction seek out academic spaces out of nostalgia for an imagined past.

One can either oppose the older generation's perceptions – the students in *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* – or one can perpetuate them. *In My Hands I Hold a Knife* portrays the lives of students who preserve rather than contradict transgenerational nostalgia. Winstead's novel captures the pressures that children of Ivy League graduates often endure. Jessica Miller's father "was a Harvard man with promise" (Winstead 195) who suffers from depression and falls "short" of fulfilling society's expectations of an Ivy League graduate. Jessica absorbs her father's nostalgia from his Harvard days and desperately wants to succeed where he failed so that he may vicariously live through her and hopefully overcome his depression. Unable to secure an admission spot into Harvard, she attends Duquette University, the novel's fictional version of an Ivy League equivalent. The fantasy Jessica seeks is based upon an American nostalgia, one that her father had become a part of, perpetuating a belief that the top universities will open paths to success later in life.

Dark academia not only examines the conflicting nostalgic desires that students face; the genre also explores the passive and active violence inside these fantasy nostalgic spaces and suggests the question, "what are you willing to do to protect them?" Jessica Miller, the protagonist of *In My Hands I Hold a Knife*, is a prime example of a student who is willing to cross ethical boundaries to preserve her nostalgic fantasies. Jessica has a strained relationship with her best friend Heather Shelby who is the novel's murder victim. Heather's "life had been uncomplicated, devoid of obstacles, for eighteen years. . . She didn't need to claw constantly, for what she deserved. . . It was yet another luxury, like her beautiful clothes and her purses" (Winstead 48). Unlike Heather who comes from a family of status and wealth, Jessica is constantly stressed about student tuition and credit card debt she cannot pay. Furthermore, her lack of social status means she is not rushed into the sorority of her choice and does not have academic opportunities handed to her like Heather. Jessica desperately wants a Duquette Post-Grad Fellowship to fulfil her father's nostalgic fantasy of academic success, so when her professor propositions her for sex in

exchange for a letter of recommendation she agrees. However, Heather unknowingly gives Jessica a devastating blow. Not only does Heather receive the fellowship in which she had no interest, but she also admits to Jessica that the professor who propositioned Jessica *offered* to write Heather a letter of recommendation and encouraged her to apply. During their ten-year class reunion, Jessica divulges to her friend Coop that she let Heather die. She was not the person who stabbed Heather repeatedly in bed, but when Jessica returned to their shared dorm room, Heather was still alive and begged for Jessica's help. She walked out the door intending to dial 911 but then reflected on the way that Heather "stole" all her opportunities and assumed that if she left Heather to bleed to death, the fellowship would go to her. She may not have actively committed the murder, but she passively let a life slip away so she could live out her nostalgic fantasy for her father's sake.

If We Were Villains traces a similar act of passive violence. After an evening of drunken debauchery, the close-knit cohort of friends finds their fellow classmate and friend, Richard, with his head smashed and on the verge of drowning in the nearby lake. As James rushes to save Richard, one by one each of the friends prevents him and they collectively decide to let him perish. The decision to let Richard drown is made in part in order to protect each other from Richard's uncontrollable wrath but also to protect their group dynamic. Richard, who had grown sullen over the past weeks, began abusing his friends, which included physically abusing his girlfriend and fracturing another student's arm in scene-blocking practice. As they all live together in the Dellecher castle and take the same acting classes, Richard's violence disrupts the nostalgic world they have created. He violates a space where they can all live and breathe Shakespeare with no disturbance from the outside world. Letting Richard die was a cost they were all willing to pay in order to maintain their way of life intact.

Unlike the characters of the first two dark academia novels, which rely on passive violence denoting the characters' desperation to cling on to their idyllic academic spaces, the characters in *The Secret History* deliberately commit murder. Richard Papen's

classmates accidentally kill a man during their bacchanalian rituals one evening. They initially cover up this accident but Bunny eventually discovers what they have done. He then blackmails his classmates for months, draining their bank accounts to support his frivolous lifestyle. Richard is ignorant of everything until one evening, when the rest of the group confide Bunny's blackmail to him. Despite his not being involved in the accidental murder, he eventually concurs with the group's plan to murder Bunny in order to keep him from informing the authorities. Richard's friends believe they must silence Bunny because their future and their lives are at stake. Although he does not share their motive, Richard helps his friends with the murder of Bunny. He does it to protect his life at Hampden, because without the other students of Greek, it would not be possible for him to enrol in that class, as his entire curriculum revolves around one professor and a core group of six students. Without them, his nostalgic fantasy crumbles. Much like the way the students in the other dark academia novels are willing to sacrifice the life of a classmate, Richard too is willing to exchange Bunny's life for his "sacred" academic space.

In dark academia, there is a double violence pertaining to nostalgia. Gabriel maintains that nostalgia "can be a feature of group identities, a source of solidarity and community and even a driving force of collective action" (7). Furthermore, nostalgia "helps people find meaning in their lives, and it does so primarily by increasing social connectedness (a sense of belongingness and acceptance)" (Sedikides and Wildschut 48). In the same way that individual nostalgia is constitutive of identity at a personal level, collective nostalgia forges group identity and offers a point of focus for solidarity. The characters commit either active or passive violence to protect their individual nostalgic fantasy, but their crimes also serve a greater purpose. They also protect a group nostalgia built through the generations before them. It is the nostalgic fantasy that the academy upholds, i.e. students who attend their institution can pursue their academic passions in a safe environment unfettered by outside forces. They can *belong* to a community.

Dark academia also examines the unhealthy obsession characters have with one another aside from their focus on academic pursuits. In this way, students become doubly isolated in their nostalgic fantasies. In *In My Dreams I Hold a Knife*, Courtney reflects on Jessica and her friends: “The insufferableness of the East House Seven. Like a damn cult, all of them so wrapped up in each other they were practically in love” (Winstead 153). At Dellecher, Oliver and his friends maintain contact primarily with each other and only rarely with other students. Oliver muses: “It was just *us* – the seven of us and the trees and the sky and the lake and the moon and, of course, Shakespeare” (Rio 128). When Richard is admitted to Professor Julian Morrow’s class at Hampden, the latter demands that all of Richard’s courses except one be taught by himself and that Richard have no other course advisors. Thus, by narrowing his course choices, Richard’s entire existence at Hampden revolves around the five classmates who attend the same classes. While Richard may have occasionally interacted with other students who live in his campus hall, they are gradually replaced by his Greek language classmates. Richard is another example of the way students in dark academia novels share a group identity that revolves around the insular environment created by the academic campus apart from their isolated group of friends on campus.

Significantly, however, all three protagonists – Oliver, Richard, and Jessica – are outsiders to the academic world and group of friends they enter. Dark academia has been criticized for its “Eurocentrism, lack of diversity, and academic elitism” (Monier). While these debates vary in validity and can be complex and nuanced, they focus on the way these “problematic” representations appear in dark academia. The insular groups of friends at Dellecher, Hampden, and Duquette represent Eurocentric elitism. Oliver, Richard, and Jessica are “intruders” who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds than those of their privileged classmates. They have managed to successfully infiltrate both these elite institutions and the institutions’ “it” groups. The main characters hide their families, or they hide their financial troubles

out of shame and to preserve the illusion they truly belong. The violence they have committed to maintain their nostalgic fantasy represents a larger invisible violence. They commit violence because structurally society and academia as a hegemonic system have acted violently on them and their families by excluding those of poorer and lower classes. It becomes a question of “what kind of violence are you willing to commit to maintain your position in an elite, white hegemonic space?” The fantasy nostalgia that these academic institutions perpetuate is built on an illusion of elite wealth and status and thus, almost always whiteness, even if it is not overtly voiced. The darkness then tests the boundaries of what someone “outside” is willing to do. What violent impulses is one willing to indulge to maintain the status quo?

The History of Dark Academia and its Rise

Dark academia has two major timelines in terms of its development and reach in the mainstream. Both of these evolution timelines pinpoint how the genre has a coexisting relationship to anxieties surrounding academia in tandem with current events. Before becoming its own literary genre with its own canon of texts, and an aesthetic subculture, dark academia began on Tumblr in 2015 as a fandom originally devoted to *The Secret History*. A brief overview of Tumblr helps to contextualize the underpinnings of dark academia. Tumblr is a microblogging platform that heavily relies on the visual – graphics, photographs, videos, gifs, and more – as its main content. Additionally, as Allison McCracken states in a “Roundtable Discussion about the Cultures of Fandom on Tumblr Participants,” “Tumblr is seen as a platform in which fandom and social justice discourses intersect” (in Klink 178). In other words, it is common for Tumblr users to simultaneously consume fandom content and social activist content related to the most current events. Michael Gamer contends, “[O]ne cannot conceive of particular genres as dynamic and heterogenous without historicizing them” (8). If the literary genre of dark academia was formed on Tumblr, it is then important to understand what current

events may have influenced its developments. In 2015, the same year dark academia was a nascent fandom and genre, Donald Trump officially announced his campaign for presidency in the United States. Henry A. Giroux asserts that “Under the Trump regime, higher education is under siege. . . For Trump and other political reactionaries, universities are objects of disdain.” Trump and the Republican party – the party under which he ran for president – have historically shown contempt towards higher education and have created anxiety for many Americans regarding its future. I am not arguing that dark academia developed as a *direct* result of Trump’s presidential campaign. However, the campaign and his victory have had heavy *influences* on the genre’s development. At the heart of dark academia is a nostalgic fantasy for academic learning for the sake of learning without the outside burdens of the real world. If fans of *The Secret History* build a fandom community around a book that romanticizes education while they concurrently consume Trump’s anxiety-inducing attacks on higher education on Tumblr,³ it stands to reason that these fans also desire more books that perpetuate their nostalgic fantasy wherein academia is ensconced in safe, appreciated spaces. This desire for more of the same has ended up defining the early phases of dark academia. Amy Gentry appropriately calls dark academia “a Trump-era Trend.” This genre trend offers a nostalgic fantasy for readers to escape the real-world anxieties related to the political dismantling of higher education. Though this genre may have begun as a specifically shared American sentiment, over the years the genre has expanded beyond the United States and is consumed in other parts of the world such as the United Kingdom. Furthermore, the anxieties within dark academia represent the expanding concerns about the monetization of higher education and attacks on the humanities on a broader scale beyond the American borders.

While dark academia⁴ may have begun in 2015, two distinct online articles both titled “The Rise of Dark Academia,” written by Angelique Chu and Brianna Carrasco respectively, published in late 2020, tracked the rise of the trend before it culminated in mass

popularity in 2021. In the same way that Trump influenced dark academia's initial evolution from fandom to literary genre, the COVID-19 pandemic was instrumental in skyrocketing the literary genre and the burgeoning aesthetic subculture beyond its niche confinement to mass consumption. While dark academia may have had its initial creation on Tumblr, TikTok served as the social media platform responsible for its second, massive rise. According to Cynthia Littleton, during the pandemic lockdowns of 2020, TikTok exploded in popularity as one of the top performing social media platforms, now outranking Instagram. While TikTok was experiencing its ascent in popular consumption, dark academia simultaneously experienced its renaissance on the platform. Horgan affirms: "The pandemic sent many students back to their family homes, often without their own spaces to study, some even Zooming into classes from inside cupboards. As has been argued elsewhere, dark academia offers a fantasy of the university experience that many students felt they were forced by the pandemic to forego." In the same instance that people were using TikTok to entertain and connect with others during lockdowns across the world, Tiktokers – particularly college students – were using dark academia to build community around an academic nostalgia and fantasy taken from them. Dark academia was the simulacra they vicariously lived through as they found a new norm during the pandemic.

However, readers both consume the literary genre and engage in a subculture wherein the aesthetic affects, or the "vibes," have transcended the novels. Dark academia has become a fashion trend and a visual aesthetic extending into home décor. Ana Quiring argues that "the real power of dark academia is the way it compresses – and thus preserves – humanistic study at a time when the humanities are under constant threat." The literary genre and the aesthetic subculture may be different mediums of consumption, but they developed out of the same impulse, as Quiring notes, to preserve humanistic study. Dark academia distils the anxieties caused by attacks on the humanities into nostalgic fantasies that envision an alternate reality. These nostalgic fantasies are signified

and consumed by the vibes of dark academia, which produce a “distinctive emotional atmosphere” (Khalid). Within dark academia, the vibe affects the emotional atmosphere of nostalgia specifically via a symbiotic relationship. While I do not expand on dark academia’s fashion trend and home décor, it is important to recognize how dark academia has evolved beyond its literary genre. Dark academia is not confined to only novels. People are embodying these nostalgic experiences on the page through lived practices. They are not just imagining the aesthetic affects of dark academia; those vibes are now worn on their bodies and brought into their home study spaces. Whether people are reading dark academia novels or participating in the aesthetic subculture, they are achieving the same goal, which is to exist in a space where one can study humanities without the perils of reality. This nostalgia compressed in dark academia vibes is attractive because it is attainable by anyone, unlike an expensive degree fraught with complications, including debt and post-graduation job uncertainty. By looking at the developments of dark academia as a reaction to two major historical events, the 2016 election in the United States and COVID-19, the “dark” in dark academia is revealed as the outside world that this literary genre and its subculture are trying to safeguard against.

A Look at Dark Academia’s Criticisms

As previously mentioned, dark academia – both the literary genre and its aesthetic subculture – has been criticized for its perpetuation of nostalgic fantasies that are Eurocentric. Anuska Guin argues that dark academia is a “trend [that] has absolutely *no diversity*.” It is not that these criticisms are *invalid*, but rather they are incomplete because they do not account for the full literary canon of dark academia. Often, when people criticize the dark academia genre for its lack of diversity, they use *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*, which both lack diversity of characters, as their primary source material. However, critics do this while neglecting other texts in the canon such as *Catherine House* (2020) by Elisabeth

Thomas and *The Atlas Six* (originally published independently in 2020) by Olivie Blake. Both Thomas's and Blake's novels feature a cast of diverse characters beyond American and European whiteness. Beyond the literary canon, people also criticize the aesthetic subculture that does, in fact, favour whiteness. The hundreds of #DarkAcademiaAesthetic moodboards that dominate Tumblr feature photos of white women and men. However, in the same way that there are books within the dark academia canon that challenge the assumption that dark academia novels are entirely white-centric, there are participants within dark academia subculture who undermine the similar belief about lack of diversity. In addition to the community #BlackAcademia on Tumblr, which captures the aesthetics of dark academia but with an entirely Black cast, there are Black creators on TikTok, such as @cosyfaerie, who actively highlight diverse representations in dark academia. These superficial critiques overlook the full spectrum of dark academia as it has developed over the years.

More interesting than these superficial critiques of dark academia, however, is the way authors of the dark academia canon have used the genre's form to challenge both the genre's criticisms and other social issues surrounding campus life. Sororities and fraternities, also known as Greek life, are a significant component of the American university community life for many students. Greek life is steeped in nostalgia – the most prestigious Greek orders date back decades or even centuries – and becomes central to the nostalgic campus experience even when there is no formal housing. Like other institutions with long histories, there are dangers that lurk within Greek life. Leigh Bardugo in *Ninth House* (2019) brings to light the rampant sexism and sexual assault that occur within Greek houses, particularly in fraternity houses. She unravels the nostalgia associated with campus Greek life by revealing its horrific history of violence against women, which often gets covered up to protect the sanctity and nostalgia about these prestigious campus communities. However, Greek life is not the only experience harmful to college students. The university itself has a long history of institutional racism, which Faridah

Abike-Iyimide interrogates in *Ace of Spades* (2021).⁵ Her dark academia novel features an almost entirely Black cast of characters, and the publishing house marketed this dark academia novel as “[a]n incendiary and utterly compelling thriller with a shocking twist that delves deep into the heart of institutionalized racism” (“Ace of Spades”). The novel follows dark academia’s form of creating a nostalgic academic space while it consciously examines the academy’s history of organizational racism, particularly against Black students. Another example of addressing racism on campus is R. F. Kuang’s upcoming dark academia novel, *Babel*. On her TikTok she posts a video of herself with text overlay that reads “when you meet such flaming racists at Oxford you write a whole dark academia novel dragging them and now it’s coming out in August as a major publisher’s leading title” (Kuang). Much like Abike-Iyimide’s novel that addresses racism on campus, Kuang’s upcoming novel examines her personal experience with racism during her university campus days. What these various authors prove is that dark academia is a constantly evolving genre.

Dark academia can evolve as a genre because it is developed by the public and therefore belongs to the public for revisions. Criticisms of dark academia are superficial and incomplete but, more importantly, they fail to understand the core construction of dark academia. The genre and subculture’s nostalgic fantasy inherently critiques academia itself. The nostalgia quality builds off the question “what are we trying to protect and why? What is the darkness that encroaches into the space of academia?” Section one addressed this question in detail. This section has approached the question from a different angle, becoming here: “what injustices exist within these nostalgic spaces and how do we address them?” Dark academia’s inherent interest in the self-referential criticism of academia lends itself to further darkness via injustices. Writers of dark academia novels use those injustices *as* the darkness of dark academia to unravel the detrimental impacts of academic nostalgia. Their goal is not to dismantle academia but rather to envision academia where racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism are rooted out of the institutions. These authors engage with dark academia’s genre

form to unveil the insidious history of campus nostalgia while simultaneously romanticizing these educational spaces.

Conclusion

Dark academia as a literary genre has only existed for seven years yet, during this time, the genre has evolved significantly from its inception with *The Secret History*. The heart of dark academia and its campus nostalgia reflect a larger anxiety relating to higher education. Horgan points out that “dark academia is a response to the gradual devaluing of the humanities in the wake of marketization of higher education.” Increasingly, American students graduate with degrees that leave them in overwhelming student loan debt averaging \$30,000 (Hanson) but with no guarantee that their college degree will secure a stable career (Lane). A search on Google for “humanities under attack” produces 15,200,000+ results with articles – both opinion-based and academic-backed research – decrying the state of the humanities department across university campuses. Dark academia offers that fantasy space to return to a nostalgic moment in time when studying the humanities was not embroiled in crisis. “Later” dark academia books approach campus nostalgia from a different angle. These books delve into the experiences of women, particularly women of colour, attending university, and chronicle the sexism, sexual assault, and racism these women often experience. At the same time, dark academia novels also romanticize these academic spaces because they envision a nostalgic fantasy wherein women and people of colour can safely attain an education. To present the type of academic space where women and women of colour specifically can succeed, we must address the very real trials and horrors they face. Gabriel contends that “nostalgia emerges out of an experience with discontinuity and loss. . . In . . . communities, nostalgia can enhance solidarity and strengthen group identities by stressing shared qualities of past experiences and their meaning for the collective” (12). Nostalgia can be a “healing” quality that brings communities together. The darkness that permeates dark academia

becomes the lens through which readers – and even subculture communities – can witness the doubling anxiety and longing associated with campus nostalgia. The genre’s darkness critiques the existing male Eurocentric nostalgia while the affects of dark academia romanticize a vision for a better campus nostalgia: one in which the humanities are not under constant threat and where women and people of colour can safely study in an institution cleansed of sexism, gendered violence, and racism.

Notes:

¹ Dark academia is also an aesthetic subculture that developed from the literary genre.

² Here I mean the Gothic more broadly as it encompasses the genre and aesthetic rather than confined to just Gothic literature.

³ I clarify several points here. From a scholarly perspective, one might argue that there is no way to prove that Trump himself disdains higher education – after all he boasts about his Ivy League education – and the humanities versus the outward appearance he makes when catering to the Republican party whose demographic overwhelmingly mistrusts higher education and opposes the humanities learning. However, dark academia is a genre created by a public fandom; for example, what they perceive influences their reactions. Veritable evidence of Trump’s opposition towards higher education is irrelevant. Fandom communities – which is precisely what dark academia is, aside from a literary genre – are not necessarily operating by scholarly evidence. Rather, the emphasis is on their shared sentiments.

⁴ Here I use dark academia to refer to both the literary genre and its aesthetic subculture.

⁵ I do not imply that Greek life does not have problems with racism because sexism does exist at an intersection. The point is to highlight how women – white, Black, Indigenous, and other women of colour – experience sexism in university Greek life but in addition to that, women of colour battle an additional layer of racism rampant throughout the university campus beyond Greek life.

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