

## Navigating Dark Academia: Student Identity, Nostalgia, and Neo-Victorian Influences Online

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This article explores the convergence of contemporary student engagement in the dark academia community online with fictional portrayals of elite higher education institutions found in neo-Victorian novels. Using Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) as a case study, the article investigates how reference points reveal the allure of social and economic privilege as well as Eurocentric ideas. In analysing users' creative contributions to the subculture online, this study reveals how dark academia reflects, challenges, and redefines historical and contemporary academic ideals, with implications for accessibility and racial diversity and representation. Dark academia as a subculture thrives on online platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr, whilst paradoxically resisting technology. It resonates widely among users aged 14 to 25, creating a unique space for exploring the intersection of history and modernity. In this way, this study will reveal how the lines of history are indirect and fragmented through processes of mediation and remediation. Bridging neo-Victorian fiction and digital culture, the article uncovers how users collaborate to reimagine neo-Victorian themes, crafting a distinct form of student identity.

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## Introduction

This article explores what dark academia reveals about student identities through social media. Unlike the analysis of student representation on television and film through tropes and character study, social media is a self-constructive media. Users actively use screens to represent themselves, adding a sense of directness and self-consciousness to the field of representation. However, this article unpacks how dark academia relies on traditional media forms, including novels, films, and television as a site for inspiration and, arguably, for screen-based identity formation. In doing so, this article contributes to ongoing research into student identity and self-expression in the digital age (Williams 2010; Terzian and Ryan 2015; Brooks and O'Shea 2021). The juxtaposition of the historical aesthetics of dark academia and its distribution through contemporary technologies speaks to the nuanced ways in which students navigate their identity construction, interacting with the echoes of the past while crafting their digital presence. In doing so, this article considers *who* dark academia empowers, whilst exploring the consequences of invoking elitist and Eurocentric ideas as a source for both identity and belonging in our contemporary global digital context.

The article is structured as follows:

First, the article defines dark academia and offers a history of the digital platforms on which its content has been shared. Investigating user-generated content reveals how students create and reshape the dark academia subculture, shedding light on their aspirations, desires, and ideals.

Second, a case study of Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) reveals the connection between print fiction and student identities on screen. An examination of how a nostalgia for a bygone form of higher education is celebrated in the dark academia community highlights where notions of educational privilege and Eurocentrism converge.

The final part of this article questions the consequences of dark academia in terms of race and representation. In looking to students who are engaging with dark academia to address histories of whiteness in Western academia, we find wide-ranging implications for thinking about contemporary access to and experiences of higher education beyond the constructed ideals perpetuated on social media.

## Part One: Dark Academia in Context

### *Defining Dark Academia*

Dark academia is a term which encompasses an aesthetic movement, a born-digital subculture, a reading list, and a broad umbrella for various pursuits such as journaling,

collecting vintage editions of Victorian novels, adorning oneself in vintage attire, and mastering Latin. For example, eclectic household objects can help create a ‘dark academia aesthetic’, a novel might fall into the ‘dark academia’ genre, and a person can also be ‘dark academic’. These definitions are united by a shared spirit of self-cultivation but are also marked with nostalgia for a bygone era.<sup>1</sup> Dark academia is largely rooted in late-nineteenth-century Anglo-American imaginaries, with the desire for the ‘dreaming spires’ (Arnold 1866) of Oxford or elite liberal arts colleges of New England. The ‘dark’ of dark academia conceivably derives from the enclosed spaces of the Bodleian library stacks, overcast skies, and looming gothic architecture. However, the lines of reference between the 1880s and the 2020s are not direct. Instead, most of the reference points of the past are transfigured through the lens of neo-Victorian reinvention, in literature, film, and television. Scholars of neo-Victorianism have observed the patterns of recurrence of nineteenth-century culture in many places, and it certainly seems to be the case that ‘the long nineteenth century turns out to be longer than we thought’ (Stetz 2010: 306). Stetz (2010: 306) describes how ‘if we turn to the evidence of both literary fiction and works of popular culture, then it seems that we are still in it – or rather, that we have deliberately, self-consciously rejoined it’. Dark academia, therefore, offers a clear example of willful re-engagement with the past.

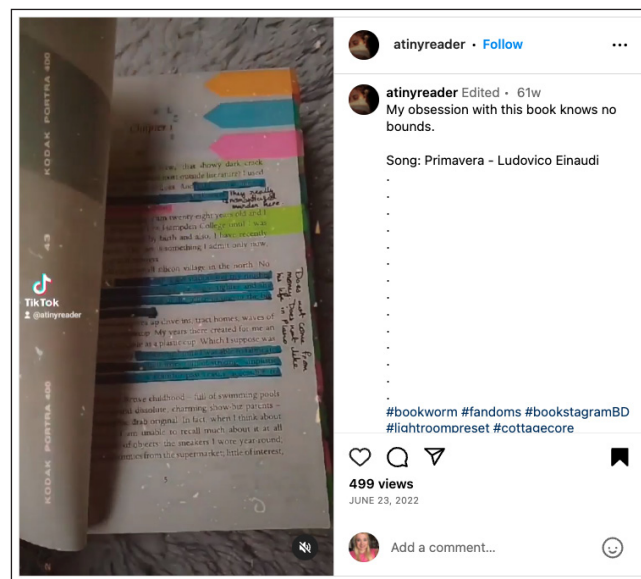
Another vital aspect of dark academia is an engagement with the experience of higher education. Dark academia as a community is represented largely, but not exclusively, by 14–25-year-olds, who create and share content on social media platforms. Given that many members of dark academic online communities are young adults, it is important to identify why these members are seeking inspiration from the past rather than the present. We might consider what is lacking in university life that attracts people to retreat into historical reference points. Many fictional reference points of dark academia celebrate anachronistic living, a sense of detachment, and general lament about the state of the present.<sup>2</sup> This article’s chosen case study, Tartt’s *The Secret History*, provides one example. Tartt’s (1992: 429) protagonist, Richard Pape, feels ‘encumbered’ by his fellow undergraduate pastimes and against his will is ‘captive to little activities they planned for me – drive-in movies and Mexican food, going to Tracy’s apartment for Margaritas and MTV’. Pape, instead, discovers the thrills of immersing oneself in the exploration of classical literature, participating in philosophical discussions, and reconstructing Dionysian ceremonies amidst the

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<sup>1</sup> I expand on dark academia in the context of decadence in my forthcoming chapter on ‘Dark Academia and Decadence: Considering the Aesthetics and Ethics of Liberal Education in the Twenty-first Century’ in *Neo-Victorian Decadence* (2025).

<sup>2</sup> In fiction see, for example, Alderman’s *The Lessons* (2010), Awad’s *Bunny* (2019); in film see, for example, *Kill Your Darlings* (2013); *The Dead Poets Society* (1989), the adaptation of E. M. Forster’s novel *Maurice* (1987); in TV see, for example, *Riverdale* (2017–); *Wednesday* (2022–).

enchanting embrace of a moonlit forest. Meanwhile online, self-identifying through hashtags (e.g., #darkacademia), dark academia users create content about *The Secret History* that reflects their shared preferences for activities other than popular television and drinking culture. For example, @atinyreader posts a flip through of her heavily annotated copy of *The Secret History* in an Instagram post on 23 June 2022 (see **Figure 1**). The video is accompanied by classical piano by Ludovico Einaudi and features scenes that include hand-pressed flowers along with carefully handwritten notes.



**Figure 1:** @atinyreader films a video flipping through their annotated copy of *The Secret History*. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CfJkpuql1XG>.

There is a clear sense of detachment from mainstream contemporary culture present within the celebrated literary canons that resonates in dark academia posts and comments online.

In opposing the mainstream, dark academia is a digital subculture. Hall et al. (2006: 7, *italics added*) define how subcultures ‘must be focused on certain *activities*, *values*, *certain uses of material artefacts*, *territorial spaces* etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture’. Dark academia *activities* include reading, journaling, learning Ancient Greek or Latin, playing and/or listening to classical music; the central *values* largely explore creative self-cultivation and the pursuit of advanced educational knowledge; the *uses of material artefacts* include coded styles of dress such as leather satchels, black turtlenecks, and tweed skirts and/or trousers, but extends to interior design objects like tea sets, old books, and entomology specimens; the *territorial spaces* are libraries, gothic buildings. However, on top of all of this is a digital layer of experience and representation. Therefore, we must add the *activities* of creating an

Instagram Story, writing a blog post about a character in *The Truants* (Weinburg 2019), and curating a perfect feed on Pinterest; *values* would involve the judgement of other content as dark academic through post-sharing; the *uses of material artefacts* include quotation and direct citation of literature, iPhone photographs tinted in sepia filters, and access to digital copies of classical music to soundtrack social media content; the *territorial spaces* are the social media platforms that record and create the digital testament of these endeavours. Hall et al.'s (2006: 7) notion that specific elements 'significantly differentiate' a subculture from 'the wider culture' is explicitly intended in dark academia. Defining dark academia, in part historical and in part digital, raises what seems to be one of the central contradictions of dark academia: the aesthetic is anti-technological and individualistic despite being digitally mediated and community focused. Many of the '*activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces*' (Hall et al. 2006: 7) require practitioners to disconnect from the digital to access forms of learning that arise from contemplation of physical antique books, oil paintings, or sublime rural vistas. However, participation in the digital subculture requires romanticising the physical processes of self-education that are both archived and aestheticised online.

### ***A Brief History of Social Media Platforms***

The historical evolution of dark academia is tied to specific digital platforms. Examining the specific locales of user-generated content reveals the intricate process through which students practice dark academia online, and how the mechanisms of social media expand acts of individual self-expression into a shared aesthetic and experience.

#### **Tumblr and the Art of Curation**

Dark academia was born on Tumblr, a social micro-blogging platform established in 2007. Fink distinguishes the platform from alternatives in the following way: 'whereas blogging implies prose, microblogging, or "tumblelogging" (aka "Tumblogging" on Tumblr), mostly involves marking and annotating, or simply reposting, content encountered on other sites' (Fink and Miller 2014: 613). Favours processes of reposting, a user's Tumblr page is constructed from content originally posted by other users, featuring literary references, snapshots from film and TV, and GIFs. Miller provides a useful portrait of a typical Tumblr:

Tumblrs typically consist of a long chain of uncontextualized short entries, which may include images, recordings, links, and text in various combinations. ... Posts aggregate visually, creating a portrait of each user that resembles the experience of web browsing – which is, in self-reflexive fashion, what generates content. ... Posts

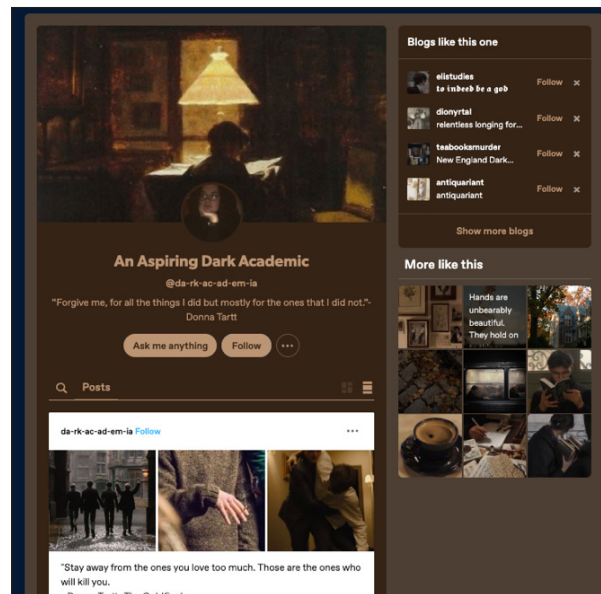
generally include a link, via the users' handles, to the original tumblr on which they appeared, along with the tumblr from which the user reblogged the entry. This platform creates a record of every image's circulation through "notes," which list each user who has posted an item to their tumblr (Fink and Miller 2014: 612).

Cho (2015: 46) describes how 'the authorial locus of Tumblr is not the act of creation, it is the act of *curation*', highlighting a reliance on 'aesthetics, intimation, sensibility, and movement' in selecting posts to add to one's feed. Tumblr is a place to exhibit aesthetic sensibilities and a sense of identity within a self-referential community. Tiidenberg et al. (2021) describe Tumblr as 'silosocial', describing how the platform encourages the creation of distinctive niches wherein 'experiential tumblrs are imagined and enacted by users as somewhat apart from each other. Silos emerge out of and are defined by people's shared interests, but sustained through shared practices, vernacular, and sensibility'. Such a platform makes a fitting birthplace for dark academia; Tumblr encourages the acts of individual self-archiving but creates a community around a shared set of practices. The platform is well suited to the blending of user-generated content, recirculated literary quotes, and common reference points involved in defining a subculture like dark academia.

Tumblr is also a social platform that emphasises users' lived experiences beyond the digital. For example, Ehlin (2014: 3) describes how Tumblr attracts thematic content about 'the duality of escapism from and dealing with reality simultaneously'. A study conducted by Hillman et al. (2014, 288) found that 'users felt they were more themselves on Tumblr than in the "real world"'. Tumblr is recognised, especially in its early years, as being a principal online platform for LGBTQ+ youth (Byron 2019; Cavalcante 2019). In a 2017 study, Byron and Robards argued that Tumblr 'can be seen as the "weird" cousin of ... major platforms. This makes it a perfect venue for queer and questioning youth to hang out'. Theorists note the platform's functions of semi-anonymity (Hillman et al. 2014: 288), or as Byron (2019) precisely discerns – pseudonymity – is attractive for queer young people who are finding their identity, sexual and otherwise (see Fink and Miller 2014; Haimson et al. 2021).

Connecting this to the subculture of dark academia, Tumblr offered an online space for students to escape from their limited or underwhelming experiences or expectations of education in the twenty-first century. In this way, dark academia on Tumblr aligns with Pugh's (2005) definitions of fan fiction, as 'the democratic genre'. However, dark academia is not only a fictional mode or genre, but also a sense of and tool for self-identity. Significantly, to understand student identity on screen, Tumblr not only offers an escape from 'real life', but its mechanical structures and user cultures of reposting formed a space to collectively create what might be considered to be a meaningful alternative (see **Figures 2 and 3**).





**Figure 2:** The start of @da-rk-ac-ad-em-ia Tumblr feed, features an epigraph from *The Secret History*. Source: <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/da-rk-ac-ad-em-ia>.



**Figure 3:** @decademia reblogs a photomontage of dark academia content from another user, @academia-lucifer. Source: <https://www.tumblr.com/blog/view/decademia>.

### ***Beyond the Niche: Dark Academia Across the Web***

While a devoted userbase continues to engage with dark academia on Tumblr, the subculture's popularity witnessed substantial expansion through YouTube's vlogging community and the rise of 'BookTube' from 2013 onward. Beyond Tumblr's distinct ambience, the 2010s saw the emergence of dark academia across platforms, particularly on visual and video platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. The spread of the subculture across multiple social media platforms and growing popularity has meant that 'dark academia' is now a familiar phrase to many young adults. As of August 2023, for example, there were over 2.28 million posts are tagged with #darkacademia on Instagram (Instagram 2023) and on Reddit the group r/DarkAcademia had 68,9000 members (Reddit 2023), placing it in the top 5% of groups on the platform (for further analysis of popularity see Everett 2022). Finally, its communities have also continued to grow on newer social media platforms – TikTok, for example, where posts tagged with the dark academia moniker have attained over 4.7 billion views (searching in English, TikTok 2023) since 2018.<sup>3</sup> Such an expansion across different platforms and media forms has led to a consolidation of its aesthetics, in particular the recurring theme of student identity formation.

### ***Dark Academia in the Popular Imagination***

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the subculture's wider public and intellectual reception. Doing so clearly frames dark academia as a specific response to contemporary higher education.

Many international news publications have reported on the rise of dark academia, reinforcing the presence of the subculture in the popular imaginary.<sup>4</sup> In 2020 a 'new wave' of dark academia content coincided with the global Covid-19 pandemic (Foulston 2021; Horgan 2021). With specific framing around contemporary higher education reform, the co-editors of the recent *Post-45* essay cluster on 'Dark Academia' theorised how

dark academia, both as online phenomenon and as literary category, acquired conceptual solidity around the mid-2010s, the era of the neoliberal university's post-financial-crisis tailspin. As universities scrambled to enact austerity measures,

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<sup>3</sup> To defend the idea of dark academia as a somewhat niche movement, in terms of the view counts of other 'identity' related hashtags on TikTok, #sneakerhead (34.3 billion), #egirl (32 billion), and #witchtok (45.3 billion) rack up much higher views.

<sup>4</sup> See examples: Bateman, for *The New York Times* (2020); Armstrong, for *The New Stateman* (2021); Andrew, for *CNN Style* (2022).



ruthlessly cutting tenure-track faculty lines while luring students with promises of a deluxe consumer “educational experience” – at the cost, for many, of a lifetime of student debt – there was perhaps an especially acute sense that the “life of the mind” aestheticized in dark academia was unevenly distributed at best, and pure fantasy at worst. ... [T]he further the idealized vision of campus life slips out of reach for academic workers and students alike, the more acolytes dark academia gathers (Stowell and Therieau 2022)

Here Stowell and Therieau frame dark academia as an explicit reaction to the simultaneous processes of exclusion and marketisation present within contemporary higher education environments.

The online expansion in interest and access, across multiple social media platforms and in the popular press, reveals that dark academia is not as exclusive as the prestigious past it reimagines. This matters even more when understanding who is participating in the subculture (see part three). Furthermore, there may be signs that this escapism inherent in the subcultural origins on Tumblr are felt more widely as an ‘idealized vision of campus life’ (Stowell and Therieau 2022) is lacking in the opportunities offered in contemporary higher education. The dark academia enthusiast Quiring suggests that the ‘online community gives you the instructions and access to participate in an aesthetic and intellectual world otherwise out of reach’ (2021). The popularity of the subculture offers strong evidence for this argument, but what does participation in dark academia *actually* enable access to? There is undoubtedly a fascination with higher education as a site of social and economic power in dark academia. Burton has noted how the aesthetic ‘revolves around symbols of whiteness, economic and cultural privilege, conservatism and nationalism’ (qtd. in Elan 2021). To unpack these dynamics, this article will turn to a discussion of *The Secret History* to explore dark academia as both a democratising experience and a celebration of elitist ideals about higher education.

## **Part Two: Case Study of *The Secret History***

Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992) provides a case study that allows this article to examine how a nostalgia for a bygone form of higher education is celebrated in the dark academia community, highlighting where notions of aspiration and Eurocentrism converge. *The Secret History* is one of the most popular and enduring literary reference points in the subculture (Garrett 2019; Abdi 2020; Robertson 2020). For example, López Millán conducted a survey of 1000 members of the dark academia community, and when asked, ‘What are the books you associate with the Dark Academia aesthetic?’ *The Secret History* was the most popular book, mentioned 511 times (López Millán 2022:

116).<sup>5</sup> In terms of translating this popularity to social media, content analysis of the top 100 videos on TikTok hashtagged with 'Dark Academia' found 14 videos explicitly referencing Tarrt's book, 'whether showing the book cover in close-up, strategically displayed in the background, reading the opening sentence in voiceover, citing it in the video title and hashtags, or showing a rare television interview with Tarrt' (Murray 2023: 350). The following section investigates the appeal of the text for dark academia contexts.

### ***The Appeal of Elitism and Anachronistic Living***

*The Secret History* tells the story of an unlikely individual who is granted access to an elite educational community in New Hampshire, USA. Tarrt's novel creates a keen sense of nostalgia for an untenable experience of higher education beyond the reach of even those granted contemporary access to Oxford or Cambridge, or the elite liberal arts colleges in the USA. For example, the central protagonist, Richard Papen, a student and outsider, admires the clique of classical Greek students from afar. He describes how the students in Professor Morrow's class are of a 'very limited number' (1992: 13) and that 'he and his students have virtually no contact with the rest of the division'. The students establish an insular community of peers that stand outside the college experiences of other undergraduates.

Throughout the novel it becomes clear that a sense of detachment is not solely academic; Tarrt's classics students are also living out of both time and place. In their fascination with the classical world and its rules concerning morality, fashion, day-to-day activities, and mannerisms, the group 'shared a certain coolness, a cruel, mannered charm which was not modern in the least but had a strange cold breath of the ancient world' (Tarrt 1992: 32). Tarrt's descriptions of the students span from antiquity and Greek scholarship, through modernism, and to a dandyism modelled after the Bright Young Things. However, most often, descriptions of the group are associated with late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetics. For example, Francis Abernathy dresses 'like Alfred Douglas', wearing 'magnificent neckties; a black greatcoat that billowed behind him as he walked' (1992: 17–18). The glamorous twins, Charles and Camilla Macaulay, are introduced as 'long-dead celebrants from some forgotten garden party; and Harry Winter, wears 'dark English suits and carried an umbrella (a bizarre sight in Hampden)' (1992: 17). Collectively, the group of students

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<sup>5</sup> When it came to naming examples from film and television, López Millán's survey saw a wider range of references, with 150 films and 72 television series identified. The most mentioned films are *Dead Poets Society* (653 mentions) and *Kill Your Darlings* (270 mentions). The most mentioned television series are *The Queen's Gambit* (97 mentions) and *Peaky Blinders* (26 mentions).

presents a vision of Englishness out of place and time.<sup>6</sup> Kakutani (1992) observes how the students in *The Secret History* are reminiscent of figures such as Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford, known as wilful aesthetes, dedicated to the ideals of beauty and art, who attended Oxford in the 1920s. In this way, these student characters assume a pre-existing aesthetic responsibility to act as role models of an anachronistic life.

### *Finding Student Voice*

Tartt's cast of elusive and elitist campus characters provide appealing subject matter for replication in the digital community of dark academia. As the platform's history presented in part one attests, there is a mirroring in dark academia celebrating a self-selective clique. However, there is also a major difference here: the fictional Hampden College presented in *The Secret History* is a restricted world, but its access through the online community of dark academia is far more open. The content of the digital community might celebrate elite educational status, but the community's existence and growth as a subculture runs contrary to the idea of exceptionalism.

How then does the community navigate the contradiction inherent in idealising the world presented by *The Secret History*? I argue that narrative voice is an essential component, which speaks to student identity and agency within dark academia. First-person, self-conscious narrative voice is the dominant mode. Rader (2015: 315) observes how 'Tartt's novels are monologues narrated by the narrators, for themselves. Secret deeds, these monologues act as the raconteurs' artistic legacies, revealing what is both absent and present: a self-portrait'. *The Secret History* is a classic example, opening with Papen wondering:

Does such a thing as "the fatal flaw," that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs. (Tartt 1992: 5)

The signifiers of a dark academic atmosphere are certainly being conjured by the gothic sense of foreboding, or sublime awe, in 'that showy dark crack'. Equally, the 'morbid longing for the picturesque' is good enough to be a general rationale for the subculture (Melvin 2021; **Figure 4**). This playful sense of identity construction should not be underestimated, on Tartt or Papen's part. Tartt's narrators are slippery and, as Rader notes, their stories 'testify to the power of art and beauty to sustain life, but

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<sup>6</sup> For further discussion of *The Secret History* in these terms, see Bulaitis, 2020.

also their power to sustain illusions about the paradoxical construction and loss of self through representational narratives' (2015: 315). As such, readers of the novel are left unsure: 'are their stories confessions, or is the confession a ruse to paint a self-portrait through their medium of words and art?' (2015: 317). In *The Secret History* this 'wondering' arises, in part, from the age and social position of the protagonist. Papen is looking for a sense of certainty about himself and confirmation of his belonging within the elite clique in which he finds himself. Young adults taking part in dark academia share this sense of self-questioning.

Beyond mere aesthetic connotation, Tartt's narrative mode sets up a framework for a kind of self-conscious and introspective musing. Papen's declarative – 'mine is this' (Tartt 1992: 5) – either indicates or imitates a confidence of self-knowing. **Figure 4** shows dark academia user @nekohrine mirroring the book's narrative, in declaring their interest in rereading *The Secret History*. Dark academic writing often indulges in the 'I' of first-person narration, both in the source materials and in online social media discussion (see **Figures 1, 4, 5, 6**). Tartt's novel has become a central reference for 'fitting in' in dark academia, and **Figures 5** and **6** feature screenshots of TikTok videos where users claim a role for themselves within the novel's setting.

From interpersonal interactions with characters as love interests (**Figure 5**) to acting out the action of the plot (**Figure 6**), posts use *The Secret History* as an inspiration for content centered around their individual identities as represented online. With this immersive and participatory function, it becomes important to consider who is permitted to be part of dark academia. To this end, I conclude this article with a reflection on the question of access to representation in dark academia, and to real educational opportunities. Doing so entails considering the ways in which dark academia's idolising of the elite and the arcane in *The Secret History* intentionally draws attention to the conditions of exclusion present in higher education institutions, rather than simply perpetuating their myths.



**Figure 4:** Tumblr user @nekohrine offers an example of first-person connections to fictional worlds. Source: <https://www.tumblr.com/nekohrine/721451354850279424/my-fatal-flaw-is-that-i-cant-stop-thinking-about?source=share>.



idolise a history of educational exclusion, and celebrate outdated modes of learning (for scholars, see Burton 2021; Ewald 2022; for students, see Krishnakumar and Vohra 2020; Guin 2021; Nohria 2021; Quiring 2021). Since this is a subculture that belongs to students, I choose to feature their voices most prominently in the concluding reflections.

### ***Who is Dark Academia for?***

Nohria (2021) clearly articulates the central concerns around ‘who’ dark academia might benefit, explaining how ‘given its shared glorification of classicality, the dark academia aesthetic is a direct descendant of these oppressive practices and their racist evolutions in the centuries since’. Nohria questions not only the aesthetics of the dark academia subculture but also the qualities of liberal education from which the culture draws upon. She wonders, why should the veneration of a canon of literature limited to Western texts be prolonged? What is the effect of dark academia’s replication of the dress code of a bygone intelligentsia? Such questions reveal that the problematic characteristics of dark academia are understood and actively explored from within the subculture by its participants. Elsewhere, Quiring (2021) similarly acknowledges the racist problematics of using elite canons and bygone aesthetics to create a sense of self, but questions whether ‘dark academia’s tendency to celebrate the inherent appeal of the Western canon while simultaneously deconstructing it’ might not be entirely unproductive. She writes:

The archive of dark academia combines Great Books with contemporary novels in way that reflects the sinister implications the classic curriculum. ... The doubled impulse to indulge in and critique the Western canon reflects the dual social function that an aesthetic like dark academia can serve. It idealizes narrow and Eurocentric standards of education. At the same time, it democratizes their trappings and texts by making them available as fashion. Though you might not be able to attend private boarding school, you can listen to Chopin, read Waugh, and buy scuffed black brogues from the thrift store. ... This translation shifts, and diminishes, the claim whiteness makes to elite academic spaces. Because its aesthetics are always subject to revision, dark academia fans can recombine their favorite styles with other cultural markers in order to build a more inclusive community (Quiring 2021)

There are many examples of dark academia users reclaiming and refashioning Eurocentric stereotypes and expanding the reference points available in the subculture (e.g. Anansi’s Library on YouTube; @sumaiyya.books on Instagram; @cosyfaerie on TikTok). Monier’s (2022) article ‘Too Dark for Dark Academia?’ highlights the popularity



of @cosyfaerie, who as of August 2023 had 482k followers on TikTok. @cosyfaerie, a Black Muslim creator, shares a personal reflection on how making space for BIPOC in dark academia ‘challenges preconceived notions that Black women do not belong in spaces of higher education or are not interested in romance or fantasy’ (Monier 2022). There are growing parts of the dark academia community that represent literature and aesthetics from beyond the limits of an Anglo-American imaginary, including ‘desi academia’ or ‘desi romantic academia’. This community is described as ‘celebrat[ing] love, exploration and joy of literature all mixed up with South Asian Heritage. It is centered around reading poetry, making perfumes, decorating hands with henna, painting, sewing’ (Aesthetics Wiki 2022). There is also ‘hijab academia’, which offers users ways to incorporate modest dress and recognise and celebrate, for example, Islamic architecture or Arabic classic literature. These expansions of the dark academic aesthetic show that an evolving community is using traditionally exclusionary sources as a platform to critique and imagine an inclusive future of global education.

### **Where Next?**

In dark academia, young adults are reclaiming spaces and histories that previously excluded them while adding new sources and modes of representation. Rather than an outright rejection, the problematic burdens of the past are being adopted and recirculated online as tools to generate wider conversations about educational value. In the opening of this article, I cited how Stetz (2010: 306) observes that ‘the long nineteenth century turns out to be longer than we thought’. Dark academia shows that this is true not just for those within academia, but also in communities residing outside the academy. In examining the convergence of contemporary student engagement in the dark academia community online with fictional nostalgic portrayals of elite higher education institutions, this article reveals the allure of economic privilege.

However, practitioners of the subculture are also actively drawing the nineteenth century into the present as a means to explore queerness, race, class, and global representations of privilege. Through shared sources, such as Tartt’s *The Secret History*, young adults within and outside the academy are placing their own lives at the centre of key political debates about the future of society and the ideals it holds. This study has revealed how students use screen media to reflect, challenge, and redefine historical and contemporary academic ideals online and offline, with implications for accessibility and racial diversity and representation. This is of significance for anyone seeking to better understand student identity on screen. The contrasts of dark academia – between the outside/inside, elite/popular, danger/safety, past/future – become mechanisms for student self-identification and fertile ground for a more radical politics.

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## Disclaimer

The author confirms that the references to text and images comply with the usual guidelines for social media and research ethics. The author confirms that the research complies with the T&C of the platforms referenced in the text. The author declares that the cited posts are publicly available. The related accounts seek to increase their visibility by attracting followers. Thus, the content has been posted for a wide audience in a public and open space. Given this, it has been agreed that there is no need for specific individual consent and the published posts can be cited in the same way as any other form of text or material available in the public domain.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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