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# Dark Academia: Curating Affective History in a COVID-Era Internet Aesthetic

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**Abstract:** Dark academia is an ‘internet aesthetic,’ an aesthetic style used in posts on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr that resonates the atmosphere of life in boarding schools, prep schools, and (Ivy League) colleges from the last decades of the nineteenth century up until the 1940s. It expresses a fascination with (neo-)gothic architecture; with tweed, lace, wool, and leather; with literature and art, and Romantic longing. Having been a main trend on social media platforms throughout the coronavirus pandemic, dark academia captures and facilitates cultural engagement in times of social isolation and closed college campuses. This article studies the dark academia aesthetic as a mnemonic curatorial practice with tendencies to counter hegemonic norms and narratives. Focusing on the affective dimensions of dark academia, this article argues that the aim of this internet aesthetic is to annul historical distance by capturing a mood and atmosphere associated with early twentieth-century campuses through the means of curated social media representations. This de-historicization allows for the renegotiation of values, like inscribing queerness – associated with secret queer romantics at gender-divided schools – into its representational language, without having to reassert historical gender binaries.

**Keywords:** dark academia, affect, curation, memory

black coffees and teas, silver signet rings, worn paperbacks, ink smudged hands, eyes in starlight, frayed sweaters, cashmere, wine colored lips, dark lashes, the smell of liquor and cigars, broken glass, humming softly down corridors, stacks of books all around your room, oak and vanilla, the perfect mix of sugar and poison, speaking in ancient languages, rain fogging your glasses, old clocks ticking, vinyl static, searching for meaning, lines of

poetry written down your arms, obscured by an air of ambiguity, morally grey ... murder?<sup>1</sup>

This much reblogged quote from the microblogging platform Tumblr captures the ‘mood’ or ‘feel’ of an ‘internet aesthetic’ called ‘dark academia.’ Dark academia is an aesthetic style that centers around a thematic focus on life in boarding schools, prep schools and colleges from the last decades of the nineteenth century up until the 1940s. It idealizes this period as a time in which the upper classes still favored an education in the liberal arts; where the classics, rhetoric, and literature were central elements of scholarly interest; and where irrational, esoteric, and mysterious topics were not shrouded. At the same time, its historical outlook is pastiche and affect-driven: rather than remembering specific pasts it creates a blended image of artifacts, literature, art, fashion, and architecture that may or may not bear reference to early twentieth-century college life, but should at least contribute to dark academia’s aesthetic mood. As interest in dark academia spiked among adolescents after the coronavirus pandemic introduced lockdowns globally in March 2020, it increasingly gained a social function and developed into an internet subculture that provided cohesion in times of social isolation, while creating a shared value system.

In this article, I will take dark academia as a case to study the dynamics of counter-narratives in the curation context (here understood as counter-curation) in internet subcultures. I will study how they originate from curatorial practices, as on platforms such as Tumblr, Instagram and TikTok, pages and profiles provide the ‘space’ to curate an ‘aesthetic’ that romanticizes college and student life. At the same time curation facilitates ‘countering’ perceived dominant societal norms, values, and developments, such as the impact of capitalism on higher education, and the binary gender distribution. This showcases the ‘democratization’ and decentralization of curation in the context of the ‘platformization’ of memory on social media, which highlights the various ways in which memory is shaped and affected by social media

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<sup>1</sup> sappylittlebitch, “Types of Academia Pt. 1,” *Tumblr, Punk Isn’t Dead but i Am* (blog), August 2020, <https://sappylittlebitch.tumblr.com/post/626788480566149120/types-of-academia-pt-1>.

interfaces, affordances, and ecologies.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it also urges us to understand the impact of social and technological platform affordances – such as search and recommendation systems driven by artificial intelligence – on curatorial practices.<sup>3</sup>

On social media platforms, ‘dark academics’ function as curators of their own posts and pages, as they bring together objects, sounds, movements, and quotations that ensemble establish the ‘look and feel’ of this aesthetic, and generate a specific mood or atmosphere of melancholia, nostalgia, spleen, and solitude – often brought into connection with the lockdown and the physical absence of campus life – while at the same time striving for intellectual sublimation. Its rejection of the pragmatic tendencies in contemporary higher education makes it a clear case of counter-curation, as dark academia mobilizes a nostalgic image of an imagined past to counter contemporary shortcomings. This highlights a second aspect that this paper focuses on next to the platformed democratization of memory: the importance of affect and aesthetic experience in curation. While it has been argued that the theory of curation is in need of an epistemology that explains how curation pertains to knowledge production,<sup>4</sup> I argue that the quest for affect also requires a reflection on the ontological dimension of counter-curation; concretely, how counter-curation can aim to invoke aesthetic experiences that affect people’s dispositions and thereby how they relate to, interpret, and imagine the world.

This article specifically focuses on the social media platform Tumblr, a crucially relevant platform to understand the genesis and development of dark academia as it appears to be the platform where this internet aesthetic originated and developed.<sup>5</sup> First, I will discuss Tumblr as a

platform that facilitates counter-curation, particularly through the mobilization of affect. Then I will explore the genesis, main characteristics, and historical and literary sources of inspiration for dark academia within the context of Tumblr. Subsequently I will analyze how, why, and to what effect these posts are curated affectively. Finally, I will outline the limits of curating affect by discussing issues of representation and the translation of dark academia to different cultural contexts.

## 1 Countercultures, Curation, and Affect on Tumblr

Founded in 2007, Tumblr is an online microblogging and social networking platform that allows users to post short text-based messages called ‘tumbles.’ People can add images, videos, quotes, or links to other websites to their tumbles. Tumblr grew to be one of the most popular social media platforms of the early 2010s, expressed by the fact that it sold for \$1.1 billion to Yahoo (later acquired by Verizon) in 2011. Resentment against this corporate takeover among Tumblr’s userbase did not hamper the platform’s popularity, as user engagement peaked in 2014 with around 110 million new posts every day.<sup>6</sup> With the rise of competing social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and lately TikTok, the platform’s popularity waned, with Verizon selling the platform in 2019 for reportedly \$3 million<sup>7</sup> at a moment when the number of new posts per day had dropped below 30 million.<sup>8</sup> Not long before, Tumblr had lost 30 percent of its userbase as an effect of the mass deletion of fan blogs for copyright infringement, and a purge of visual pornographic content in response to the removal of the Tumblr app from Apple’s App Store.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Elisabetta Locatelli, “Towards the Platformization of (Social) Media Memory: Articulating Archive, Assemblage, and Ephemerality,” *Comunicazioni Sociali* XLIII, no. 1 (2021): 162–173, [https://doi.org/10.26350/001200\\_000098](https://doi.org/10.26350/001200_000098); Rik Smit, “Die Plattformisierung des Erinnerns,” in *Handbuch kommunikationswissenschaftliche Erinnerungsforschung: Grundlagen – Arbeitsfelder – Perspektiven*, by Christian Pentzold and Christine Lohmeier (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, December 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Historical Analogies and Historical Consciousness. User-Generated History Lessons on TikTok,” in *History Education in the Digital Age*, ed. Mario Carretero, María Cantabrana, and Cristian Parellada (New York: Springer), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10743-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-10743-6_3).

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer, “A History of Curating – Past and Present,” *Critique d’art. Actualité Internationale de la littérature critique sur l’art contemporain*, no. 45 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.19153>.

<sup>5</sup> Kristen Bateman, “Academia Lives – on TikTok,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/style/dark-academia-tiktok.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Álex Barredo, “Tumblr Is Tumbling,” *HackerNoon*, November 25, 2017, <https://hackernoon.com/tumblr-is-tumbling-d6deb3bb831e>.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Siegel, “Tumblr Once Sold for \$1.1 Billion. The Owner of WordPress Just Bought the Site for a Fraction of That,” *Washington Post*, August 13, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/08/13/tumblr-once-sold-billion-owner-wordpress-just-bought-site-fraction-that/>.

<sup>8</sup> Álex Barredo, “Updated the #Tumblr Chart Showing the Number of Posts Created Each Day to Give Context of the Great Job Yahoo and Verizon Did with It Good Luck to @automattic,” *Tweet, Twitter*, August 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/somospostpc/status/1161024458460712962>.

<sup>9</sup> Shannon Liao, “After the Porn Ban, Tumblr Users Have Ditched the Platform as Promised,” *The Verge*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/14/18266013/tumblr-porn-ban-lost-users-down-traffic>.

Despite its decline in popularity with a general audience, Tumblr has always maintained a dedicated userbase, as the platform offered an “inhabitable space for people and communities, especially those with minoritarian experiences, identifications, lifestyles, and values.”<sup>10</sup> As a platform, Tumblr has widely been recognized by users and scholars as an empowering platform for “socially and politically disenfranchised” communities or “counterpublics.”<sup>11</sup> Prominent topics and communities on the platform concern fandom, feminism, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and mental health. Users are engaged with social justice, and the platform has had a formative effect on users’ self-perception and worldviews. However, scholars also recognize the dangers of communities creating self-reinforcing ‘utopias’ that establish an informational ‘vortex’ that suck people into information bubbles and periods of intense – but not sustainable – online interactions.<sup>12</sup>

The blossoming of countercultures on Tumblr has been explained out of its platform affordances, which comprise both the technological capacities of the platform that users can utilize and users’ perceptions of these possibilities.<sup>13</sup> Curation plays a crucial role here, as users are basically curators of their own content. The hashtag-oriented browsing structure, combined with an ‘infinite scrolling’ feed allows to “endlessly explore the community you yourself curated.”<sup>14</sup> As posts will not only show up on one’s own Tumblr page, but are publicly browsable through and in the contexts of these tagged feeds, curation has a direct community-building effect, and users curate their posts to fit the content and scope of the communities whose idiosyncratic tags they are using.<sup>15</sup> This explains

how a vast plurality of diverse communities can coexist on the platform in experienced and imagined “silos.”<sup>16</sup> Although curation is generally an individual effort of the blog owner, social interaction and the community focus make Tumblr a “collaborative, (trans)personal/(trans)media archival space,”<sup>17</sup> where skillful curation is much appreciated and most of the popular blogs derive their fame from apt curation rather than from creating original content.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, despite the public nature and communal character of Tumblr, users still find ways for intimate expression, for example by using additional reflective tags.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from creating new posts, curation on Tumblr is facilitated by its ‘reblogging’ feature. Reblogging allows users to repost content from someone else, whether or not accompanied by additional commentary. It offers an easy way to post content to one’s Tumblr page, with the ability to reframe the contents with commentary. Additionally, reblogging has a community-building effect, rendering Tumblr “a collaboratively produced representational space.”<sup>20</sup> Contrary to profile-based social media platforms such as Facebook, Tumblr is particularly favorable to anonymous or pseudonymous presentation and communication, enabling full creative freedom over self-presentation in users’ blog descriptions, blog pages, posts, and post tags.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the affordances of the platform facilitate countercultures and communities that challenge hegemonic societal norms, like LGBTQIA + communities.

Finally, counter-curation on Tumblr has an explicit affective dimension. As means of the stylization of communal discourse, but also in terms of the contents of what is communicated, affect is deeply intertwined with communicative and aesthetic practices on the platform. Curation then “is a way in which the archive is shaped

**10** Katrin Tiidenberg, Natalie Ann Hendry, and Crystal Abidin, *Tumblr* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2021), 16.

**11** Allison McCracken et al., “You Must Be New Here: An Introduction,” in *A Tumblr Book. Platform and Cultures*, ed. Allison McCracken et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 2.

**12** Andre Cavalcante, “Tumblr into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 12 (2019): 1715–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1511131>.

**13** Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond, “The Affordances of Social Media Platforms,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media*, ed. Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), 236.

**14** Louisa Ellen Stein, “Tumblr Fan Aesthetics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2017), 87.

**15** Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Social Media and Multimodal Historical Representation: Depicting Auschwitz on Instagram,” in *Analysing Historical Narratives. On Academic, Popular and Educational Framings of the Past*, ed. Stefan Berger, Nicola Brauch, and Chris Lorenz (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), 199.

**16** Tiidenberg, Hendry, and Abidin, *Tumblr*, 17.

**17** Dinu Gabriel Munteanu, “Improbable Curators: Analysing Nostalgia, Authorship and Audience on Tumblr Microblogs,” in *Collaborative Production in the Creative Industries*, ed. James Graham and Alessandro Gandini (London: University of Westminster Press, 2017), 148, <https://doi.org/10.16997/book4.h>.

**18** Tiidenberg, Hendry, and Abidin, *Tumblr*, 41.

**19** Ingrid Brett and Sarah Maslen, “Stage Whispering: Tumblr Hash-tags Beyond Categorization,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 3 (2021): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211032138>.

**20** Katrin Tiidenberg and Andrew Whelan, “‘Not like That, Not for That, Not by Them’: Social Media Affordances of Critique,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2019): 83–102, 91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2019.1624797>.

**21** Abigail Oakley, “Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 3 (2016):, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116664217>.

affectively and in which a taste community is formed.”<sup>22</sup> It is in this nexus of societal critique and aesthetic curation where dark academia is located.

## 2 Dark Academia

Dark academia is not a new phenomenon; it led a largely unnoticed existence on Tumblr since around 2014,<sup>23</sup> when dark academia posts primarily consisted of dark, grainy photos of objects, such as books, candles, handwritten letters, and old photographs representing bygone scenes of academic life, accompanied by lists of book recommendations. It spilled over to Instagram around 2017, where users posted stylized dark academia images of their daily life, aspects of paintings, literature, academic life, and shared self-created ‘moodboards’ representing the universe of dark academia they created. Many Instagram posts also contain inspirational quotes drawn from Tumblr, underlining this platform as the source of this internet aesthetic’s development.

Although demographics are difficult to obtain for a largely anonymous online community, observations indicate that the aesthetic is carried generally by female and gender-queer bloggers in their late teens and early twenties, often – but certainly not exclusively – with a higher education. While the lockdowns and online education accelerated the spread in popularity of dark academia and the relevance of its learning-oriented thematic, its popularity had already been on the rise since the summer of 2019 (Figure 1).

And while on Tumblr the popularity of dark academia is now declining, its outreach is probably bigger than ever as it has spread over other platforms beyond Tumblr and Instagram, most notably the video-sharing platform TikTok. While Instagram and Tumblr are mainly community-oriented and serve those already interested in the aesthetic, TikTok’s recommendation algorithm is significantly more likely to make videos go viral and reach new audiences.<sup>24</sup> The

breakthrough of dark academia on TikTok in early 2020 turned the aesthetic mainstream and generated significant media coverage. The impact of lockdowns should not be underestimated as they severely ruptured social communications, enhanced feelings of loneliness, and fractured a sense of belonging to cities and universities where students study.<sup>25</sup> Lockdowns created or aggravated mood fluctuations and difficult emotions, which necessitated coping strategies.<sup>26</sup> For many, dark academia catered to that need because it offered distraction, meaningful offline and online activities, and a sense of purpose – even though it could by no means replace in-person relationships. In lockdown, dark academia functioned as a digital and idealized replacement of academia, and physical travel restrictions were supplanted with new intellectual and historical worlds to explore: classical and Romantic authors, music, and vintage clothing. Social media posts show image montages of sepia-tinted photos and videos of museums, libraries, books lit by candlelight, tweed blazers, oxford shoes, feather pens spilling ink on yellowed paper, often accompanied by light classical music. While different platform affordances largely determine the form dark academia social media posts take, all platforms display the curation of romanticized pasts as a central aspect of the aesthetic.

The focus on learning and self-edification is shrouded in a rediscovery or reinvention of Western humanism and its literary canon, a humanism generally associated with the fin de siècle and to a lesser extent the interwar period. To dark academics, this period represents the heyday of liberal humanist education in grammar schools and colleges across the West, and with it the general acceptance of learning to be a process of intellectual self-edification (*Bildung* in German). As a Tumblr blogger explains: “the upper class of this time period emphasized a liberal education, where Latin, rhetoric, and classics were taught – subjects that are seen as unusual and slightly esoteric, creating an allure that presents schooling as not dreary or boring, but one that cultivates a learned person that learns for the sake of joy.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast, contemporary academic

<sup>22</sup> Alessandra Mondin, “‘Tumblr Mostly, Great Empowering Images’: Blogging, Reblogging and Scrolling Feminist, Queer and BDSM Desires,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2017): 282–292, 290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1287684>.

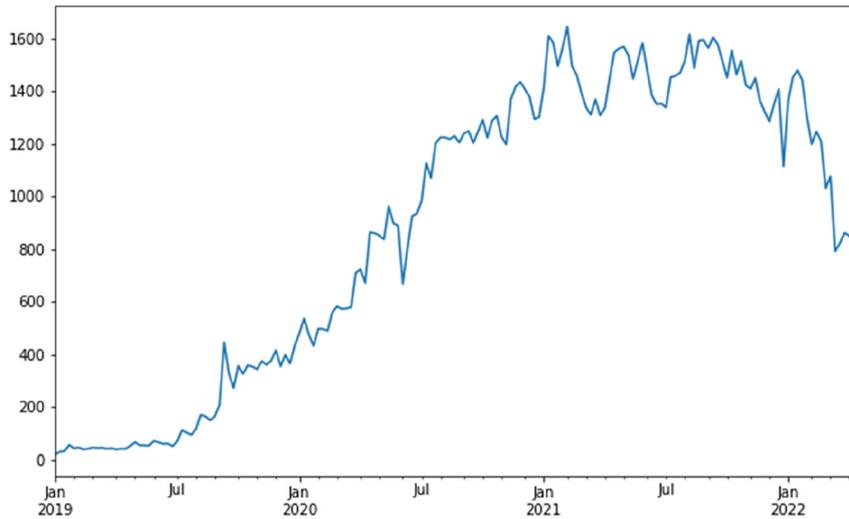
<sup>23</sup> The earliest retrievable post tagged ‘dark academia’ stems from 2014, but the specific origins of the aesthetic are difficult to establish as many earlier tumblrs have been deleted. spacesweepers, “I’m Bored of the Privileged White Kids’ Murder Club Trope,” Tumblr, *Space-sweepers* (blog), accessed June 13, 2022, <https://spacesweepers.tumblr.com/post/106494227836/im-bored-of-the-privileged-white-kids-murder>.

<sup>24</sup> Adriaansen, “Historical Analogies and Historical Consciousness. User-Generated History Lessons on TikTok.”

<sup>25</sup> Richard Phillips et al., “Student Loneliness through the Pandemic: How, Why and Where?,” *The Geographical Journal* 188, no. 2 (2022): 277–293, <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12438>.

<sup>26</sup> Phoebe E. McKenna-Plumley et al., “Connection, Constraint, and Coping: A Qualitative Study of Experiences of Loneliness during the COVID-19 Lockdown in the UK,” *PLOS ONE* 16, no. 10 (October 13, 2021): e0258344, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0258344>.

<sup>27</sup> she-and-a-book, “‘Beauty Is Terror. Whatever We Call Beautiful, We Quiver before It.’ – Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*,” *Tumblr, Made of Starlight* (blog), accessed May 25, 2022, <https://she-and-a-book.tumblr.com/post/654774273353940992/beauty-is-terror-whatever-we-call-beautiful-we>.



**Figure 1:** Weekly number of posts tagged with 'darkacademia' on Tumblr between January 1, 2019 and April 17, 2022.

culture is described as a capitalist “rat race,”<sup>28</sup> a “one-size-fits-all” type of education to which dark academia is diametrically positioned as idealized “self-care” and “self-improvement.”<sup>29</sup>

Although they resonate with fin de siècle cultural tendencies, the esoteric, mysterious, and dark qualities of dark academia are largely inspired by key literary and cinematic sources of inspiration. Books such as Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992) – a book widely acclaimed to be the “Bible” of the dark academia aesthetic –, M.L. Rio’s *If we Were Villains* (2017), and the movie *Dead Poets Society* (1989) all reconstruct this atmosphere within sites of higher learning. They narrate initiations of students into poetry and the classics, but do not treat the classics as representatives of “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur,” as the pristine imagination of Neoclassicism had it, but with a deeply Romantic undertone that sees death, murder, and destruction as just one step away from intellectual brilliance. It is no coincidence that the opening quote of this article ends mysteriously with “... murder?” – it is a direct reference to Tartt’s novel. Set in a college in New England in the 1980s, *The Secret History* bears reference to the dark side of the reverence of elitism and the pursuit of the sublime, as it tells the story of a group of upper-class students who – in their pursuit of the sublime – kill a farmer during a

Dionysian bacchanal. The ‘dark’ in dark academia therefore not only relates to the dark sepia, brown, grey, and black color palette that characterizes its aesthetics, but also to the air of mystery, artistic irrationalism, Romantic madness, and – as the opening quote indicated – murder (with the question mark).

### 3 Affective Counter-Curation

In general, Tumblr blogs, Instagram and TikTok feeds can be understood as curated sites where users display whatever they deem dark academic, whether in relation to themselves or not. This can range from book and music recommendations to Romantic pictures of neo-Gothic hallways to clothing tips and suggestions on how to render your bedroom as dark academic as possible. When it comes to history, dark academia aims to romanticize through mobilizing and communicating affect. These posts rarely convey specific historical knowledge but aim to (re) create what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht called a *Stimmung* or atmosphere inspired by that of their literary resources, such as Tartt’s *The Secret History*, or of a general idea of dark academia.<sup>30</sup>

*Stimmung* is a useful concept when analyzing the curation of affect, as it specifies the dimension of affect in which people find themselves bodily and mentally similarly affected prior to the constitution of subjectivity. Generally, *Stimmung* can be translated as mood,

<sup>28</sup> basiltyourdorian, “The Need of ‘School’ in Your Life,” *Tumblr, Blood-Lust* (blog), November 2021, <https://basiltyourdorian.tumblr.com/post/667293068222939136/the-need-of-school-in-your-life>.

<sup>29</sup> iamoverdressedandovereducated, “Post Dark Academia,” *Tumblr, This Is Much More than School* (blog), accessed July 5, 2022, <https://iamoverdressedandovereducated.tumblr.com/post/656695766145024000/post-dark-academia>.

<sup>30</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Reading for the Stimmung? About the Ontology of Literature Today,” *Boundary 2* 35, no. 3 (2008): 213–221, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2008-016>.

atmosphere, or attunement. Since its rise in philosophical discourse in the nineteenth century, *Stimmung* has had a connotation of nostalgia to it.<sup>31</sup> Authors such as Friedrich Hölderlin, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Alois Riegl connected *Stimmung* to experiences of unity, harmony, and order that was presumably lost in modernity and claim that *Stimmung*-generating art could have redemptive qualities for modernity through its nostalgia. Most prominently was the concept used by Martin Heidegger, who rejects this temporal understanding of *Stimmung* and turns it into a central existential category. For him, constantly changing moods and atmospheres condition our behavior and feelings ontologically. We cannot consciously choose moods, and moods are not objects to consciousness.<sup>32</sup> It is through a *Stimmung* that we find ourselves in the world – not in a cognitive manner, but as “how it is for one;” mood is a way of Being.<sup>33</sup> This is important because it allowed Heidegger to move beyond the subject-object dichotomy of modern thought, or at least to understand being as a realm prior to such secondary, theoretical distinctions. Therefore, *Stimmung* is not nostalgic anymore to Heidegger, as nostalgia implies a cognitive appropriation and objectification of the past. This does not mean that *Stimmung* is not related to temporality, it certainly is, but it connects to our understanding of time existentially. Since it is through moods that we engage with the world, moods color our experience of time and our relationships to the past, present, and future. While *Stimmung* attests to human historicity, one’s existential position in time, it does not imply a specific historicist understanding of the past as remote and distanced.

The relevance of *Stimmung* for internet aesthetics is underlined by the editors of the Aesthetics Wiki website, who call an internet aesthetic a “collection of visual schema that creates a ‘mood.’”<sup>34</sup> Aesthetics comprise of “a collection of images, colors, objects, music, and writings that creates a specific emotion, purpose, and community,” and are bound by culture and personal taste.<sup>35</sup> As a niche

within the broader framework of aesthetics, dark academia is no different.

The affective curation of *Stimmung*, referred to as ‘atmosphere,’ ‘mood,’ or ‘vibes’ on Tumblr, is central to the posts. There are different ways in which dark academia aims to evoke mood. A prime example would be moodboards. These are digital collages that try to convey a general feeling or mood related to dark academia or elements of it. It is a visual rendition of the style, setting, fashion and central ideas the creators attribute to the aesthetic. On Tumblr they can consist of curated image collections presented in blog posts, or as single image collages.<sup>36</sup>

Despite a strong coherence in moodboard contents it would be difficult to claim one specific dark academia ‘mood.’ In terms of contents and expressive atmosphere, moodboards take positions on a spectrum, and blur at the outskirts with other aesthetics, such as cottagecore, which idealizes cottage life, Gothicism, or ‘light academia,’ which uses lighter color palettes, swaps woolen vintage clothing for linen and goes heavier on baroque, ethereal imagination, flowers, and light music. The moods conveyed are all unique within this spectrum; they depend entirely on the curatorial choices made. While some, emphasize literature, learning, and its accompanying tranquility with the grandeur of Baroque art, others use even darker color palettes and highlight (neo-)gothic architecture and a sense of inquisitive mystery. Moreover, moodboards and other posts vary per season, as spring, summer, fall, and winter are found to render different dark academia moods.

The bodily effects of curating affect are attributed with great importance. One dark academic emphasizes that “it’s not the filters of the moodboard that make a post aesthetic rather it’s the colors the person who made that moodboard prefers to see the world from and live in that world. [...] aesthetics are in a way the sensory experience of world in the light of our perceptions and emotional state,”<sup>37</sup> an explicit reference to how *Stimmung* ontologically determines our dispositions and thereby how we relate to the world. The value of a moodboard and of dark academia in general thus lies in the resonance it has with how people perceive and experience the world

31 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford University Press, 2012), 8–9; David Wellbery, “Stimmung,” *New Formations*, no. 93 (2018): 6–45, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF:93.02.2017>.

32 Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Das Wesen der Stimmungen*, Schriften Bd. 1 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009); Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1, 68.

33 Jan Slaby, “More than a Feeling: Affect as Radical Situatedness,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2017): 7–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/misp.12076>.

34 “FAQ,” *Aesthetics Wiki*, accessed May 25, 2022, [https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics\\_Wiki:FAQ](https://aesthetics.fandom.com/wiki/Aesthetics_Wiki:FAQ).

35 “FAQ.”

36 avokadoodoo, “Dark Academia Moodboard,” *Tumblr*, *Avokado* (blog), accessed May 25, 2022, <https://avokadoodoo.tumblr.com/post/662846174148116480/dark-academia-moodboard>.

37 theclassicalmind, “As Much as I’d like to Believe That Aesthetics Are ...,” *Tumblr*, *The Classical Mind* (blog), accessed May 25, 2022, <https://theclassicalmind.tumblr.com/post/655242485799485440/as-much-as-id-like-to-believe-that-aesthetics-are>.

phenomenologically. This is the resonance of the *Stimmung* that moodboards or any other curated social media post capture and in which the reader, viewer, or creator find themselves.

To many, dark academia provides an environment, an atmosphere, suitable for reading, learning, writing, and thinking. Finding the right spot or creating one using vintage home decorations is part of this, just like finding the right music playlists. One Tumblr blogger stresses that romanticization only works when these bodily effects are taken into account. Just doing dark academic things will not suffice and may – we could add – become kitsch if done for its own sake. Rather, romanticization “is about being present in any actions we take. It is about mindfulness. It is a form of meditation for those who do not like meditating. Being in the body rather than in the mind. As Romantic and pleasing as images and ideas are, it really is through the body that we experience the *feeling* of romanticism.”<sup>38</sup>

This understanding of the involuntary or desired phenomenological effects of romanticization also impacts historical understanding. In its affective context, the past does not appear historicized as an object of knowledge, but is rather understood to have presence as sediments of time that have constituted the present, as cultural and intellectual traditions that facilitate the aesthetic. Romanticization, one dark academic contends, is “all about glorifying little acts of everything that exists. Looking at the world in a vivid manner or celebrating the exoticism of solitude and the aestheticism of every possible thing in the world. Celebrating art and realizing that everything you do or see is a part of the history being made.”<sup>39</sup> Romanticization is understood as an aesthetic mode of viewing the world ontologically, rather than in terms of representation, hence it has little to do with a nostalgic ‘escapism’ from contemporary issues into an imagined idealized past, but rather with sensing a meaningful affective coherence in life, in past, present and future.

In times of lockdown, the romanticization of reading, writing, creating art, solitude, and morning walks allowed dark academics to cope with solitude, but – specifically where it comes to online education – the necessity to romanticize as a coping mechanism was broadly

recognized. As one Tumblr blogger notes: “I’m in a terribly urgent need to romanticize my life because that’s how I get through it. Online classes might kill me but at least I can die in style.”<sup>40</sup> The recognition that there is a mismatch between online education and the general mood and principles of dark academia that no suggestions of making handwritten notes, sipping on Earl Grey tea during class, or “hearing the rhythm in the keys on your keyboard as you type away”<sup>41</sup> can compensate – bolstered the idealization and romanticization of pre-lockdown life, be it campus life, library visits, or social interactions.

In counter-curatorial terms, the Romantic and affective dimensions of dark academia are not only coping mechanisms, but also challenge hegemonic norms and values. We have seen how the aesthetic supports a passion for learning and culture that dark academics know is looked down upon as ‘old-fashioned’ by their peers.<sup>42</sup> Beyond that, dark academia is entangled with Tumblr’s queer community. Dark academia is particularly relevant from a queer perspective for its historical associations with secret queer romantics at gender-divided boarding schools and homoeroticism in sources of literary inspiration such as Oscar Wilde, but also because the androgynous qualities and possibilities of the fashion involved allow exploration and experimentation with a plurality of gender configurations. For some, the engagement with literature and history opened their eyes for the “complete erasure of queerness” from “the version of history we are taught today,”<sup>43</sup> and quotes from classics, ranging from Sappho to *If We Were Villains* that highlight queer and homoerotic dimensions are widely shared on the platform. Highlighting queerness in dark academia posts can be seen as a counteract to this erasure. This counter-curatorial effect is no explicit discursive practice that aims to supplant existing historical metanarratives but leverages the aesthetic dimension of dark academia by reading a homoerotic or queer mood that is deemed inherent to dark academia into a plurality of

<sup>38</sup> academieboheme, “Explore Dark Academia,” *Tumblr* (blog), October 2, 2020, <https://academieboheme.tumblr.com/post/630821742381842432/i-have-found-out-how-to-romanticize-life>.

<sup>39</sup> medusabutmodern, “I Don’t Think Many People Realise That ‘Romanticism’ ...,” *Tumblr, Sittinginsilence* (blog), March 2021, <https://medusabutmodern.tumblr.com/post/646178243435741184/i-dont-think-many-people-realise>.

<sup>40</sup> watch-me-disappear-into-thesun, “Online Classes + Dark Academia,” *Tumblr, Dark Academia* (blog), 4 June 2021, <https://watch-me-disappear-into-thesun.tumblr.com/post/653039800303108096/online-classes-dark-academia>.

<sup>41</sup> malfoycollins, “Dark Academia as Online Schooling,” *Tumblr, Malfoycollins* (blog), December 12, 2020, <https://malfoycollins.tumblr.com/post/637332247117201408/dark-academia-as-online-schooling-so-theres-a-ton>.

<sup>42</sup> captainmarvelstudies, “DA: A Short Essay,” *Tumblr, Studyblr* (blog), February 29, 2020, <https://captainmarvelstudies.tumblr.com/post/611331389200154624/da-a-short-essay>.

<sup>43</sup> softly-adore, “The More I Read about Poets, Authors and Artists,” *Tumblr* (blog), January 8, 2020, <https://softly-adore.tumblr.com/post/190142752358/the-more-i-read-about-poets-authors-and-artists>.

literary and historical sources. As one dark academic puts it: “[I]f the book you’re reading doesn’t already have homoerotic subtext, imagined is fine.”<sup>44</sup> Dark academia inscribes queerness into the cultural logic of humanism in a way that does not require a full intersectional revisionist reading of Western history, for example one that identifies structural – ‘patriarchal’ – hegemony to be the root cause of inequality and inequity.

While queer dark academia helps highlight the ‘counter’ in its counter-curatorial practices, it does so within a cultural context that assumes a shared canonical and affective history. Not restricted by historicist demands for historical accuracy, affective curation indeed offers the possibilities of such inscription of gender nonconformism, albeit targeting only the in-crowd.

## 4 Representational Critique and Affective Counter-Curation

Nonetheless, dark academia has had its fair share of criticism, generally pertaining to curatorial choices made within the community. However, these discussions hardly touch the affective dimension of dark academia, which is valued as its core characteristic by its proponents: “dark academia as an *aesthetic* is completely okay,” one Tumblr user writes, “wearing tweed, lighting old candles in your room, picking blood red roses, carrying around pounds of books, these are harmless.”<sup>45</sup> While there is general agreement on the harmlessness of the affective dimension of the aesthetic, critiques – both internal and external – understand curated posts in terms of representation. Contrary to affective immediacy where the past can be seen to have ‘presence,’ representation assumes an objectified and distanced understanding of the past within the framework of history.

A core criticism concerns the underrepresentation of people of color and women in dark academia. “Dark Academia Has A ‘White’ Problem,” the online student magazine *Study Breaks* headlined. Author Emily Jewett identifies dark academia to be “Eurocentric and white-washed” due to the virtual absence of people of color in

moodboards and in the literature and movies it is inspired by. At the same time Jewett appreciates the affective dimension of dark academia as “beautiful and timeless.”<sup>46</sup> But the criticism of the lack of diversity requires a disengaged, cognitive understanding of the aesthetic that neglects affective immediacy as it treats dark academia as a container of a variety of historical and aesthetic representations. The question thus becomes one of historical representation, but one which needs to represent both the past, as well as today’s racial and ethnic diversity. Jewett recognizes that this conflicts with historical accuracy but contends that accuracy “doesn’t supersede the necessity of diversity and equity.”<sup>47</sup>

While dark academia can be said to be counter cultural by nature, for its queer inclusivity and its untimely hinge for art and learning, calling out that it praises a canon of hegemonic Western, male-dominated discourse resulted in defensive attitudes but also opened up opportunities for the diversification of the aesthetic. Yet, the suggestion to “acknowledge the buildings, landscapes, authors, poets, chefs/cooks, etc., of other cultures, and stop acting like three specific movies and books written by white people and consisting of only white people, is the epitome of dark academia,”<sup>48</sup> required a change in curatorial practices that never fully materialized. While very vocal, critics were not able to fundamentally change curatorial practices within dark academia, or to extend its counter-curatorial outlook to challenge the perimeters of the canon of Western high culture it relies upon. This is demonstrated by the discrepancy in popularity of the most important revisionist tag ‘poc dark academia,’ with ‘poc’ referring to people of color, which had 836 followers as of June 14, 2022 versus 158,000 followers of the tag ‘dark academia.’

Nonetheless, criticism of dark academia-as-representation highlights an important aspect of the relationship between counter-curation and affect: when challenging curatorial practices in dark academia, critics seek alternative representational contents but try to maintain the overall aesthetic ‘feel’ and affective impact to avoid full alienation from the aesthetic’s core. Calls for

<sup>44</sup> boleysnlag, “Reasons to Read Dark Academia Book,” blog, *Tumblr* (blog), June 9, 2020, <https://boleysnlag.tumblr.com/post/620406463512346624/if-the-book-youre-reading-doesnt-already-have>.

<sup>45</sup> cubitumm-eamuss, “Cubitum Eamus?,” *Tumblr*, accessed May 25, 2022, <https://cubitumm-eamuss.tumblr.com/post/183726640595/i-always-see-those-posts-saying-that-dark-academia>.

<sup>46</sup> Emily Jewett, “Dark Academia Has a ‘White’ Problem,” *Study Breaks*, January 18, 2021, <https://studybreaks.com/culture/reads/dark-academia-diversity/>.

<sup>47</sup> Jewett, “Dark Academia Has a ‘White’ Problem.”

<sup>48</sup> booksartandpoetryy, “I’ve Had People Say How They Dont See Anything Wrong with Liking the Eurocentric Dark Academia Aesthetic,” *Tumblr, Gertie & Jo* (blog), April 30, 2021, <https://booksartandpoetryy.tumblr.com/post/649858706224316416/ive-had-people-say-how-they-dont-see-anything>.

better representation mainly argue for a diversification of the sources on which dark academia relies: less circulation of books and movies like *The Secret History* and *Dead Poet's Society* that underrepresent women and people of color or put them in a subordinate position and more circulation of book lists that offer non-Western or non-white alternatives that thematically fit the aesthetic.<sup>49</sup> The inclusion of people of color in moodboards generally means including them in fitting attire within the context of familiar dark academia images of shelves with old books, cups of coffee with notebooks, art galleries, and neoclassical architecture and statues.<sup>50</sup> 'For Black dark academics, the aesthetic's nostalgic appeal is also a desire to see oneself reflected in historic narratives and intellectual canons,' one advocate of the diversification of dark academia noted.<sup>51</sup> The curatorial effort to find and aesthetically match these images in moodboards and Tumblr posts exemplifies exactly this attempt of the inscription of people of color into the visual language of dark academia, and thereby indirectly into the Western intellectual canon. Curation is made easier for the black dark academic community by using the visual archive of specifically American black intellectual history and academic education.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, the curatorial possibilities are limited by Tumblr's platform constraints. Tumblr is tailored for curation, but not so much for the creation of original content. Images, videos, audio – any audiovisual content has to be created elsewhere and then uploaded to the platform to be included in a post; a cumbersome procedure which effectively makes curation an effort of matching diverse readily available content aesthetically. A platform like TikTok, on the contrary, facilitates video creation and editing within its app, which allows creators to inscribe their own bodies in a dark academia video, a strategy which popular TikTokers, like the black Muslim creator cosyfaerie,<sup>53</sup> have mastered with

great success. Nonetheless, as an effect of its emphasis on affect, these attempts to diversify dark academia do succeed in inscribing people of color affectively in the cultural and intellectual canon of the West but do also remain within its aesthetic and normative boundaries.

More practically challenging is the adaptation of dark academia in the global south. This effort moves beyond the inscription of disenfranchised bodies into the Western canon, as it asks for the transposition of affective *Stimmung* of dark academia to entirely different cultures that did not inherit a canon of Western humanism to tap into or for whom a history of colonial oppression makes it undesirable to do so. Exemplary is the case of Indian or desi dark academia. In the attempt to translate dark academia to the Indian context, it is primarily the affective element that remains similar. Tumblr bloggers emphasize similar activities with relatable affective impact: drinking coffee or chai; "delving yourself into Sanskrit and trying to learn all you can;" "Listening to classical music .... Tagore prefe[r]ably ....;"<sup>54</sup> "Reading poems and stories of Rumi, Hafez, Iqbal, Ghani Khan and Manto,"<sup>55</sup> "reading indoors by the window when it's raining;" or "reading by candle or flashlight during blackouts."<sup>56</sup> It is the small things in life, touches, sounds, emotions, pauses, and tastes that are emphasized to be the central core of dark academia, and these are deemed to be comparable regardless cultural differences:

Your mother braiding your hair before you sleep, getting up early to study, Ruskin [B]ond and other authors lined up on your desk, laughing and crying with your friends about boards, making memories on the way to your tuitions, the sweat on your shirt on the van ride back from school, book store hidden in small valleys, chess, carrom, chai breaks, being fed badaam before every exam, this is desi academia.<sup>57</sup>

But in terms of visual depiction and representational content problems arise. Partly given by the vast architectural

<sup>49</sup> compilationofletters, "Classic Novels from POC Authors," *Tumblr, To Live Forever*. (blog), July 12, 2020, <https://compilationofletters.tumblr.com/post/623443689125150720/classic-novels-from-poc-authors>; woermwoode, "Dark Academia Written by Authors of Colour," *Tumblr, Will/Miguel* (blog), September 21, 2021, <https://woermwoode.tumblr.com/post/662162702079246336/dark-academia-written-by-authors-of-colour>.

<sup>50</sup> localbookshop, "Lucky Stars," *Tumblr, Lucky Stars* (blog), October 29, 2020, <https://localbookshop.tumblr.com/post/633339-842732916736>.

<sup>51</sup> Mel Monier, "Too Dark for Dark Academia?," *Post45* (blog), March 15, 2022, <https://post45.org/2022/03/too-dark-for-dark-academia/>.

<sup>52</sup> blvksupreme, "Some Blackademia," *Tumblr, Tre'Vion* (blog), November 30, 2021, <https://blvksupreme.tumblr.com/post/669326178-538176512/some-blackademia>.

<sup>53</sup> cosyfaerie, "Asiya," TikTok, accessed June 15, 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@cosyfaerie>.

<sup>54</sup> academiaenthusiast, "Indian Dark Academia," *Tumblr, Literature//Coffee//Desire to Learn* (blog), November 28, 2020, <https://academiaenthusiast.tumblr.com/post/636003520486768640/indian-dark-academia>.

<sup>55</sup> sleeplesspotioneer, "South Asian Dark Academia," *Tumblr*, July 7, 2020, <https://sleeplesspotioneer.tumblr.com/post/6229758442095902-72/south-asian-dark-academia-reading-poems-and>.

<sup>56</sup> munchee-academic, "Sri Lankan Dark Academia," *Tumblr, Sri Lankan Academia* (blog), September 22, 2020, <https://munchee-academic.tumblr.com/post/629956729115951104/sri-lankan-dark-academia>.

<sup>57</sup> ephimeralijo, "The Real Desi Academia," *Tumblr, My House of Stone, your Ivy Grows* (blog), March 14, 2021, <https://ephimeralijo.tumblr.com/post/645656057174228992/the-real-desi-academia-your-mother-braiding-your>.

and cultural differences of the South Asian peninsula, desi dark academics struggle to find a shared visual language, but also struggle to align Indian visuals with the visual archive of Western dark academia. A Northeast Indian Muslim dark academic, for example highlights that “Muslim academia” should combine dark academia with cottagecore as “Islam is intricately bound up with nature,” as visuals in architecture, ancient manuscripts, and calligraphy that take “on shapes of birds/animals/plants sometimes.” As an effect, it needs to deviate from the aesthetic boundaries of dark academia: “Islamic academia is aesthetically stunning and deserves its own category instead of conforming to Occidental boxes.”<sup>58</sup>

## 5 Conclusion

Social media platforms are prime locations of curation in the digital age with social media users curating their own pages and content. These platforms also function as sites of counter-curation when they host internet subcultures that experience marginalization and aim to challenge hegemonic norms and narratives. These efforts specifically involve history as they either aim to initiate historical change, separate past from future, or as they counter hegemonic narratives through romanticized re-readings of established historical narratives. In this article, I discussed the internet aesthetic dark academia as an example of the latter. Dark academia is not an organized counterculture with specific political aims for historical change, but is an ‘internet aesthetic,’ an aesthetic style used in posts on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Tumblr that resonates the atmosphere of life in boarding schools, prep schools, and (Ivy League) colleges from the last decades of the nineteenth century up until the 1940s. It expresses a fascination with (neo-) gothic architecture; with tweed, lace, wool, and leather; with literature and art; and with Romantic longing. Having been a main trend on social media platforms throughout the coronavirus pandemic, dark academia captures and facilitates cultural engagement in times of social isolation and closed college campuses.

The deliberate de-historization and eclectic aestheticization of the past counters curatorial norms, as well as the common ‘detached’ understanding of history as relating to

an objectified and distanced past. Using the concept *Stimmung* I argued that the aim of this internet aesthetic is to annul historical distance by capturing a mood and atmosphere associated with early-twentieth century campuses through the means of curated social media representations that provided comfort and inspiration during the global coronavirus pandemic. This de-historization allows for the renegotiation of values, like inscribing queerness – associated with secret queer romantics at gender-divided schools – into its representational language, without having to reassert historical gender binaries or having to present revisionist interpretations of history. More difficult is the translation of dark academia to other cultures that have less affinity with the canon of Western humanism. As the case of Indian ‘desi’ dark academia showed, affect remains the core of the aesthetic. The tacitly accepted standard for a good translation of the aesthetic involves recontextualizing it with Indian literature, fashion, architecture, and history that effectuates moods that are deemed to resemble the original.

Online counter-curation is strongly dependent on the affordances of the platforms that host them. The technical and perceived affordances and restraints dictate what is possible in terms of curation and what not. By focusing on Tumblr as the platform from which dark academia originated, I have argued how its structure as a micro-blogging platform that allows for customization and flexibility in posts, while also encouraging interaction through reblogging, facilitated the establishments of online communities with shared interests that gather around specific tags.

A final conclusion pertains to the affective dimension of counter-curation. As the example of dark academia has shown, curation is not just an epistemological affair, but has explicit and implicit ontological implications. Dark academia intentionally leveraged affect and moods as means of romanticization. While this comes at the expense of historical distance and historical accuracy, it also opens up a somewhat atemporal nostalgic space traversing history and the Western literary canon that allows for the inscription of queer and non-white bodies. At the same time, it challenges hegemonic historical interpretations that exclude these bodies, without having to argue whether or not this inclusion is historically justified.

<sup>58</sup> muslimah-in-academia, “When I Think of Muslim Academia/Da,” *Tumblr, Fading into Tomes* (blog), December 5, 2020, <https://muslimah-in-academia.tumblr.com/post/636646707206193153/when-i-think-of-muslim-academiada-i-find-that>.