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This research completes a textual analysis of three prominent novels in the dark academia subgenre and how the genre critiques academia's relationship with students: one of exploitation and violence. The novels are, *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M.L. Rio, *Ninth House* (2019) by Leigh Bardugo, and *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) by R.F. Kuang. Research shows that students can be both a consumer and laborer in the eyes of the academy. As universities shift to a more neoliberal and capitalistic mindset, the student's knowledge, and therefore labor, becomes more profitable to the university. Research found that that the genre shows how the university uses isolation, dependency, narratives surrounding self-worth and value, and outsider/other identities as a way to exploit students for their knowledge production and labor. As the genre expands and continues to make a cultural impact, it will continue critiquing and shedding light on the different ways that academia forms violent relationships with students.

THE POWER OF DARK ACADEMIA: EXPOSING THE
VIOLENT RELATIONSHIP THAT STUDENTS
HAVE WITH THE ACADEMY

by

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DEDICATION

This dedication is for everyone that has been with me throughout this whole process. Thank you to all my friends but especially Michela for letting me rant, cry, and scream and being my rock. Thank you to other my friend McKayla for answering all my questions when it came to the thesis process and formatting; I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you to my friend Angela, for always being there and reminding me to take time for myself. And thank you to Morgan. I couldn't have done grad school without you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Ivy league settings, unsettling and creepy atmospheres, a mysterious murder and wondering what went wrong; as an avid reader, all these characteristics led me to one of my favorite subgenres of literary fiction, dark academia. Dark academic novels are commonly described as psychological thrillers, with the murderer and victim being revealed early into the book such that the reader is then trying to figure out the why and as a fan of wondering what went wrong, this was another aspect of the genre that drew me in. However, I could not help but wonder and ask myself what are the specific ways that the genre offers a critique of the relationship between the university system and the student. As a student currently existing in academia, I cannot help but notice all the different ways that violence occurs by the academy, especially in relation to existing in these spaces that I am not supposed to exist in because of my economic background. I also am constantly aware of how students' labors are exploited and used by the academy for financial gain and status, another aspect that some books in the genre comment on.

Dark academia allows me to read and reflect about my own relationship with the academy as well as gaining a holistic perspective of the student's relationship with it. As the genre continues to expand, we see novels incorporating magic which furthers the question of how the genre uses magic and real life to showcase the violence that is inflicted upon the student through the exploitation of student labor and knowledge. I also discovered how it is possible for each student to have a different relationship with the academy even if it is still one exploitation, that there are many different forms of relationship violence within the academic institution. I understand exploitation to take form in how students are overworked, having work stolen from them, and even how the universities acquire money through students. The novels I look at today

especially critique and comment on the exploitation that occurs through labor and knowledge production. Through analyzing three important novels in the genre, I explore the earlier question as well as discover how each novel critiques the academy and what specific themes they are discussing in their novels. Each of the novels critiques the academy and the relationship that exists with the student however they also discuss different aspects of academic violence. The novels that I analyze are, *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M.L. Rio, *Ninth House* (2019) by Leigh Bardugo, and *Babel, or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) by R.F. Kuang.

What is Dark Academia?

The definition of dark academia varies from person to person, especially as it continues to grow into other aspects of popular culture. However, in the book community, the genre tends to overlap and get confused with campus novels. Novels in both genres feature characters that are in their mid to late 20s and normally take place on a campus setting; it is the tones, themes, and plots that separate the two genres.¹ I have seen that campus novels often focus on the future and characters' coming of age, specifically focusing on current life struggles and what life has in store for them. These novels tend to lean more toward literary fiction, with a more hopeful tone to them; dark academic novels on the other hand have a different tone to them. From my personal reading experience with the genre, these books tend to feel haunting, almost tragic and are left with open endings, not leaving much closure for the reader. Dark academic books are overall very atmospheric, immersing the reader into an often times moody setting, with a sinister

¹ John E. Kramer and Ron Hamm, *The American College Novel, An Annotated Bibliography*, 2nd Edition (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

undertone. It is through the atmospheric and haunting settings that have made dark academia a prevalent and popular aesthetic on social media platforms, allowing a wider audience.

With the expansion of the dark academic genre, the definition is becoming broader and fluctuating more than in the past. I understand and define dark academia to be a literary subgenre often described as lush and melancholic, in which the plot is often a murder mystery focusing on the whydunnit vs whodunnit narrative, the why being why the events occurred and the who being who committed the crime.² Not all novels share the whydunnit vs whodunnit narrative, but they all share dark academic themes at their core and discuss what it means to operate in an institution that was built on murder and violence. Dark academic novels, in my eyes, critique the different ways that the academy creates and perpetuates violence, and the novels within the genre showing the different forms that violence can take and how it operates in an academic setting.

Widely considered the first novel in the dark academic genre is Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992), the blueprint when describing and defining what dark academia is.³ During *The Secret History* (1992) initial release, the marketing centered around a whydunnit narrative, emphasizing how the novel would not only include murder but that at the beginning of the book the audience would already know who was responsible. The biggest mystery thus being why did our protagonists murder this person and the motivations and catalysts that led to the murder of their friend. Donna Tartt's novel is fundamental to how dark academia is understood today because it was considered one of the first times in publishing where a novel did not fit clearly into the mystery thriller or the campus novel subgenre. With its uniqueness and with the ways it

² Amy Gentry, "Dark Academia: Your Guide to the New Wave of Post-Secret History Campus Thrillers," *CrimeReads*, February 18, 2021, <https://crimereads.com/dark-academia-your-guide-to-the-new-wave-of-post-secret-history-campus-thrillers/>.

³ Classics tend to get put into this category however Tartt's novel is the first modern novel to define dark academia as a subgenre.

has established a whole new subgenre, it is always referred to when readers are looking for dark academia book recommendations. *The Secret History* (1992)'s synopsis is intentionally extremely vague, only letting the reader know that the story follows a group of clever outsiders who are detached from reality and what happens when they go beyond the boundaries of morality.⁴

It is these specific elements in *The Secret History* (1992) that created the traditional definition of dark academia, and the one that I use when defining which novels (in my eyes) are dark academic novels. These novels are often set at elite universities where the students put a heavy emphasis on education and have a cast of characters who romanticize that education, specifically the humanities. In *The Secret History* (1992), we see the first murder being committed as a way to reenact an archaic Greek ritual, just one example of what happens when obsession goes too far. The reader will then follow a tight-knit group of friends who come from an upper middle-class background. These novels are character driven novels, therefore while you are reading you are following the group as they commit the murder and also the repercussions of their actions—not so much in terms of them getting caught, but what it does to their relationships with each other and how that impacts them moving forward. These novels showcase themes of jealousy, greed, and obsession. But most importantly the reader sees what happens when knowledge becomes destructive and what the consequences are, especially regarding what happens to relationships.

These novels display the brutal reality of the student experience in the university system, and I argue that the murder that is often portrayed in these novels can be a symbol of how the

⁴ Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1992).

academy creates violence within its own walls, displaying how this appears in who is allowed to commit violence, who is not, and what the acceptable outcome is. It is this particular theme that each of the novels I analyze share. As the genre continues to grow, we see how authors critique academia in different ways and show the different types of students that exist within these institutions and the different types of relationships that they have with the academy. Having read from the genre before, I understand violence to be nuanced and not consistent in its definition because I see it defined by its context and actions. Something I explored when looking at these novels and afterward realizing how violence operates in different forms, how it can appear physically and mentally but also how it can be one rooted in how we view others and our own positionality.

As an element of popular culture, dark academia has become wildly popular on social media, for example on Tumblr in the 2010's and TikTok in early 2020.⁵ Social media allows a visual representation of the romanticized academic life as well as creating an aesthetic that matches the haunting and melancholic tones and gloomy campus atmospheres of the genre. People are drawn into this aesthetics because of the romanticization and air of mystery regarding how people present themselves and their lives. While the genre critiques the university system, social media does the opposite and romanticizes it. But I believe that is because of how social media attracts a wider audience compared to the book world. The way social media is used to

⁵ Lisa Zirngast, "Everything to Know about the 'Dark Academia Aesthetic' Trend," *L'officiel.At*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.lofficiel.at/en/pop-culture/dark-academia-aesthetic>; Priya Elan, "TikTok's Dark Academia Trend Criticised for 'Whiteness,'" *The Guardian*, February 10, 2021, sec. Fashion, <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2021/feb/10/tik-toks-dark-academia-trend-criticised-for-whiteness>; Amatulla Mukadam, "A Touch of the Picturesque," *Post45 Dark Academia*, March 15, 2022, <https://post45.org/2022/03/a-touch-of-the-picturesque/>.

expand an audience for dark academia, could use its own research and analysis since it would cover different themes and topics that I was not able to explore.

Another piece of popular culture that dark academia has infiltrated is through media, specifically movies and tv shows. I am not an avid lover of this form of popular culture but know that media is able to do something differently with the genre that books cannot because (again) of how it can reach a different audience and its ability to add visuals and sounds to tell a story and create an atmosphere. This is all to say that dark academia has ingrained itself into our culture and as it continues to gain popularity, it will continue to reach wider audiences and make an impact on how we view knowledge and university systems.

Theoretical Frameworks

Scholarship surrounding dark academia is extremely limited. Therefore, when creating my approach, I made sure that I pulled from scholars that centered their work surrounding students and their relationships with the academy, capitalism, and neoliberalism; especially when it comes to themes of exploitation. I was particularly interested in the frameworks and theories created by Dean Spade, Marc Bousquet, others because of their research surrounding different relationships of exploitation that students have with the academy and how those relationships are portrayed within the novels. Exploitation is a critical theme and tool that I see the academy using, both in the research these authors have completed and through the novels themselves. I personally define exploitation in how students are not only having money taken from them, but their energy, emotions, and knowledge are being stolen as well. All these things are critical in keeping academic institutions existing.

Another theme that I was able to see and analyze was dependency, the authors above allowed me to use a framework that showed how dependency can be seen within the academy

and how it is a tool used by the university. The real horrors of the university are disguised in common narratives that portray students as having a sense of agency over their own intellectual pursuits and in achieving their goals; this is one way that neoliberal ideals are used to cover systematic inequalities especially when creating narratives that only whiteness and wealth are the answer to obtaining desired outcomes.⁶ When thinking of what neoliberalism means and how it has been used, I like how Dean Spade has said,

Scholars and activists have used the term “neoliberalism” in recent years to describe a range of interlocking trends in domestic and international politics that constitute the current political landscape. [...] it is sometimes used to refer to conditions that we could understand as not new at all, like state violence toward people of color, US military imperialism, and attacks on poor people. However, I find the term useful because it allows space for critical insight into the range of practices producing effects at the register of law, policy, economy, identity, organization, and affect. It helps us look at a set of things together and understand their interlocking relationships rather than analyzing them in ways that make us miss key connections.⁷

Spade has also discussed how neoliberalism has played a significant role in how we view labor, our relationship to labor, and overall how the work force has shifted. Our relationships have decreased, minimum wage does not financially support people, and much more.⁸

I apply this lens to see how the shift in the relationship with labor, profit, and the person is seen within the university institution itself. Universities apply these neoliberal lenses, to view students as a laborer; someone to make profit out of and exploit. When understanding neoliberalism in this way and applying this framework to how we view university institutions, the positionality of the students becomes clearer. This is also clear in the narrative of how, the academy has often been seen as a place where the main goal was a pursuit of knowledge, a place

⁶ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*, 2015, 22, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374794>.

⁷ Spade, *Normal Life*, 21.

⁸ Spade, *Normal Life*, 22.

where students can grow intellectually; however, with the enforcement of neoliberal policies within a capitalistic university, knowledge and scholarship are becoming commodified services that are often privatized and policed.⁹ This is how I define what it means to be a neoliberal institution.

Bousquet further offers a discussion on how commodified information can be delivered on demand because of the student labor, otherwise known as a constant workforce. Going as far to say that “the casualization of the higher education teacher has been accompanied by the wholesale reinventing of what it means to be an undergraduate: the identity of “student” has been disarticulated from the concept and possibility of leisure and vigorously rearticulated to contingent labor.”; otherwise known as a worker.¹⁰ Bousquet mainly discusses what it is like to work within a university institution, how faculty and students are not paid what they are worth and how the university exploits their labor. It is through his framework on how he views the university exploiting workers, is how I view the exploitation in regard to knowledge production. The genre is able to show a reflection of the institutional failures that academics experience when they become aware of the horrors that the neoliberal academy produces; especially in regard to how knowledge is produced through the exploitation of students.¹¹ Student experiences can be seen as if “it’s a society in which people are thrown into a chasm full of dangers, cruelties, and inequalities”.¹² This experience has only gotten worse because of the

⁹ Atalay, “When Students Become Customers; The Changing Relationship Between the Student and the Academic,” 513.

¹⁰ Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York, UNITED STATES: New York University Press, 2008), 45, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncg/detail.action?docID=2081643>.

¹¹ Ryan Lackey, “Disappointing Attachments: Reading the Secret History on Campus,” *South Central Review* 38, no. 2 (2021): 90–96, <https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2021.0036>.

¹² Roderick A. Ferguson, *We Demand: The University and Student Protests* (Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2017), 1, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncg/detail.action?docID=4711970>.

commercialization of higher education as a result of capitalism within the academy.¹³ It is with this shift, that we see students also becoming a consumer in the eyes of the academy. This violence is a different type of relationship that some students have with the academy; both of these relationships (laborer and consumer) can exist at once and is something we see specifically in *If We Were Villains* (2017) and *Ninth House* (2019).

However, in order to disguise the reality of the student/academy relationship it is important to encourage a false sense of agency in students, mainly in the form of passion and ambition for intellectual pursuits. Encouraging a student's ambition creates more labor and knowledge production, and the university is able to exploit the labor being done because then there will be a constant 'product' and profit from the student.¹⁴

This relationship also forms a dependency because a student's knowledge and skill set become homed in on a specific passion/knowledge. By encouraging the student, feeding narratives of how the university itself is dependent on the student as well as the narratives of how the student's passion is their value, is how this violence shows and is used. This allows the university to disguise the transaction happening as one in which the university is being supportive of students' goals and aspirations in a way that only the academy can offer. This is why it is critical for the university to form interpersonal relationships with students as a way to push this narrative and in some cases it is through manipulation that the student provides this type of labor for the university, whether this is through publication and research or obtaining a

¹³ Selin Atalay, "When Students Become Customers; The Changing Relationship Between the Student and the Academic: A Case Study from Social Sciences in Turkey: Öğrenciler Müşteri Olduklarında; Akademisyen ve Öğrenci Arasındaki İlişkinin Değişimi: Türkiye'de Sosyal Bilimlerden Bir Vaka Çalışması.," *Journal of Higher Education & Science / Yükseköğretim ve Bilim Dergisi* 12, no. 3 (December 2018): 513, <https://doi.org/10.5961/jhes.2018.292>.

¹⁴ Bousquet, 63.

high paying and high-profile job after graduation. These are all ways that capitalist ideals are being incorporated into the university system, there is constant free labor and profit to be had through student exploitation.¹⁵ More specifically because of how students are encouraged to attend university, and therefore how they end up in a violent cycle of exploitation and dependency.

When it comes to thinking of the student as a consumer, or as a worker, we must acknowledge how these relationships create and perpetuate a way in which the student can never be seen as just a student, in the eyes of the academy the student becomes associated with how their knowledge production is being used.¹⁶ The relationships between the student and university continue to shift under a neoliberal ideology because of how neoliberalism has shifted the dynamics between workers and owners, resulting in a buyer/seller mindset when it comes to students' knowledge production; as well as establishing value and profit onto the student.¹⁷ I argue that it is most clear in how value is placed on the student for the work that they are producing; if a student has more published work and status they are more valued. Their work is then stolen for the university to profit off of (in status, recognition, and sometimes monetary¹⁸), all the while encouraging the student to keep researching and writing because of how intelligent they are.

As universities continue to shift and use neoliberal ideologies these decisions impact the students on deep and personal levels because what is happening in the university is a form of

¹⁵ Bousquet, 64, 87.

¹⁶ Bousquet, 87–89.

¹⁷ Spade, *Normal Life*, 22.

¹⁸ Not a ton of money is made off of publishing but funding by outside cooperations and peoples, scholarships, endorsements, etc. are different types of monetary gain.

structural violence that impacts the students' lives and wellbeing.¹⁹ This especially can be seen when looking at students' aspirations and their experiences once they enter the workforce because of the narrative that students must constantly provide labor in order to be successful. Once students enter this abusive relationship with the university they are never able to truly escape it even when they have graduated and moved on. This is a specific type of violence that happens within the academy that never goes away. As I read and analyzed the novels, I applied these theoretical frameworks as a way to understand the students' positionalities and their relationship with the university system, as well as understand how these various forms of violence can and did take place in the novels, adding a more nuanced approach to how violence appears within these characters' motivations, actions, and experiences.

In addition to these frameworks, when discussing *Babel* (2022) I incorporated frameworks from Frantz Fanon, Craig Steven Wilder, and Edward Said that I discuss in further detail in the chapter. I specifically choose these scholars because Kuang herself was inspired by them and used their work to help craft *Babel* (2022). With Fanon, I incorporate his work where he discusses what it means to be a person of color operating in the academy.²⁰ Wilder allowed me to have more understanding and background knowledge on colonialism and its relationship with university institutions, and how universities are ultimately tools of imperialism.²¹ Said is another author who discusses colonialism and its impact. Specifically, when discussing identities, he says “Yet what gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by

¹⁹ Ferguson, *We Demand*, 68–80.

²⁰ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised edition (New York: Berkeley, Calif.: Grove Press, 2008).

²¹ Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*, 1st edition (Bloomsbury Press, 2013).

which the Orient was identified by the west.”²² Kuang uses Said’s work as a way to discuss the relationship between the West and East Asia, especially when looking at how Robin is Chinese living in London and what that means for him to navigate the world. While looking at the themes of colonialism and race in *Babel* (2022) I applied these frameworks to my overall analysis.

Chapter Outlines

In chapter one I analyze *If We Were Villains* (2017) by M.L. Rio. The novel centers around narrator Oliver Marks who is being released from jail 10 years after he takes the blame for a murder. As he is leaving prison, the detective on the case from the past asks Oliver to tell the story of what actually happened all those years ago and this time, Oliver is ready to tell it. This novel employs a dual timeline, going back and forth between the present where Oliver is telling the story of what happened in the past and the other timeline which follows the events leading up to the murder.²³ Published 15 years later than *The Secret History* (1992), this novel is still highly recommended to lovers of the genre and is frequently compared to Tartt’s novel. Having read both of the novels, I find them extremely similar because of the dark academic tones and themes but also different in how they execute these two aspects of the genre.

Rio is one of the first novels in the genre that is able to show the different possibilities that the genre has when it comes to expanding the ways that relationships between students, knowledge, and violence can be presented. I especially see this when thinking about how this genre doesn’t have to focus specifically on one field of study, even though it initially started with romanticization of the humanities and language, but how the themes of violence can also be shown in different ways. In this chapter I specifically look at how academia impacts students’

²² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, UNITED STATES: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014), 61, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uncg/detail.action?docID=5337468>.

²³ M. L. Rio, *If We Were Villains* (Affirm Press, 2017).

relationships with one another, the way that the academy exploits students' passions and obsessions, and traditional elements of the dark academia genre and the impacts of those elements.

Chapter two will discuss and analyze *Ninth House* (2019) by Leigh Bardugo. The novel's synopsis states that Alex Stern has been given a new life at Yale, tasked with monitoring Yale's secret societies through a fictional organization called Lethe. However, they are not what Alex expected and it looks like there is something sinister happening on campus.²⁴ *Ninth House* (2019) shows the different types of student relationships that occur with the academy, one of consumer and laborer, and allows for deeper discussion surrounding classism and exploitation. Unlike *If We Were Villains* (2017), Bardugo incorporates magic and ghosts within our contemporary world, it is through the magic systems that Bardugo critiques academia and how students are profited from. In this chapter I discuss class, what it means to be an outsider entering elite university spaces, as well as dive into a deep character analysis of three of the protagonists and each of their relationships with Yale and Lethe. Doing multiple character analyses allows me to showcase the different types of students, as I discuss the different ways that students are exploited, how they experience violence through the academy through their positionality, and what it means to exist in these institutions.

Lastly, chapter three discusses and analyzes *Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (2022) by R.F. Kuang. *Babel* takes place in 1828 and follows a boy named Robin who was adopted and trained to be a master in languages to one day be admitted into Oxford University's prestigious Royal Institute of

²⁴ Leigh Bardugo, *Ninth House* (Flatiron Books, 2019).

Translation, *Babel*. Robin was adopted from Canton, today known as Guangzhou, and brought to Britain by a mysterious professor named Lovell. After being admitted into the program Robin sees that it is not what he thought it would be, especially because it means betraying his motherland and encouraging the colonization of the British empire through knowledge and its relationship to power.²⁵

Incorporating *Babel* into this analysis is important because it is the most recent novel to be published in the genre, and discusses themes of colonialism, knowledge, and violence. Colonialism and race have often been left out of the more popular dark academic novels and Kuang is able to offer a different perspective on the violence that occurs within the academy, specifically how racism and colonialism show up in these institutions and with students. By looking at a more recent novel in the genre, especially by a prolific author, we are able to see how the genre has come since *The Secret History* (1992) was published 30 years ago.

In each chapter I briefly describe each author's educational background as a way to view the inspiration for their novels as well as understanding which authors are drawn to the dark academic genre. In an interesting trend, academics themselves are the ones contributing and offering critiques based on their personal experiences about the university system, especially within academic scholarship and the student experience.

Overall, I view each of these novels critical to the dark academic genre because of how they each critique the university and have discussions surrounding the exploitation and violence that students experience by and within the academy. Rio dives into complex relationships that students have with each other within the academy, Bardugo discusses what it means to be an

²⁵ R. F. Kuang, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (Harper Voyager, 2022).

outsider coming into elitest spaces as well as the different relationships that students can have with the academy, and Kuang talks about the way that colonialism and racism impact students through the academic study of language and translation. All these novels offer these critiques as well as the overarching themes of dependency, self-worth/value, and isolation that occurs once students interact with the academy.

CHAPTER II: ACADEMIC TRAGEDIES

If We Were Villains (2017) is often compared to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992) because of how M.L. Rio is able to take dark academia elements and tell a story regarding obsession, murder, and what happens to the relationships of our main characters after a tragic event happens halfway through the novel.²⁶ Just like in Tartt's novel, the reader finds themselves knowing that a murder has taken place at the beginning of the novel and then follows the journey of learning about the events leading up to the murder and the events after. With over 150,000 ratings on Goodreads, the novel is beloved by fans of the dark academic genre because of the staple dark academic elements, and some even argue that it is far better than *The Secret History* (1992).²⁷

M.L. Rio has a Ph.D. in early modern English Literature, at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she focused on representations of madness and mood disorder on the early modern stage.²⁸ After completing her Ph.D., she has spoken out about her experience, saying "If you learn nothing else from following me, learn from my mistakes and don't go to grad school. Academia ain't worth what it asks of you."²⁹ Before writing *If We Were Villains* (2017) she had not yet started her first year at College Park, and I think it is important that when reading this novel, we remember that academia continues to be violent, and if anything, the violence and

²⁶Which Is Better | *The Secret History vs If We Were Villains*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Jq1dNso0x0>; *I Read 5 Dark Academia Books and Now i'm More Pretentious than Ever* 📖❤️📖, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_J0QyMRRXP0; Olivia Gündüz-Willemin, "An Interview With M.L. Rio!," *The Attic On Eighth*, July 29, 2017, <https://www.theatticoneighth.com/blog/interview-m-l-rio>.

²⁷ M. L. Rio, "If We Were Villains," n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30319086-if-we-were-villains>.

²⁸ "About," *M. L. Rio*, June 11, 2015, <https://mlrio.com/about/>.

²⁹ Melanie Rio (@sureasmel). 2023. "Portrait of the PhD candidate at the end of her f*ing rope." Instagram. February 18, 2023. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Co0C57Er6ra/>

dependency only become more intense the longer you are in academia. Another dark academic novel I have read that I do not discuss in this project does touch on violence within graduate programs and with faculty, which is a theme worth exploring beyond this scholarship.³⁰ Before her Ph.D., she received a M.A. in Shakespearean studies from King's College London and Shakespeare's Globe.³¹ With Shakespeare being a large part of her life within academia, she wrote her debut novel and international bestseller *If We Were Villains* (2017) centering on thespians and their obsession with the playwright.³²

The novel centers around seven aspiring Shakespearean actors and is told from the point of view of Oliver Marks and follows a dual timeline. In the present timeline, Oliver is getting out of jail and has agreed to tell the events of what really happened ten years ago to the now retired detective on the case, Joseph Colborne. It is instantly made clear to the reader that Oliver took the fall for a murder that happened that fateful night ten years ago. Even from the beginning, we know Oliver is not a violent person, and as the reader learns more about how deeply loyal he is to his friends. It is significant to acknowledge how having Oliver as a narrator changes how the story is perceived because of the actions he excuses and how his perceptions of the others fluctuate, especially with how he perceives the murderer and his actions. The story in the past timeline takes place at Dellecher Classical Conservatory, an institution where artists go to pursue their passions in hopes of becoming famous in their professions. Rio shows the changing dynamics of friend groups and how that is impacted by their obsessions.³³ I argue that it is through their relationships that we see how academia has instilled violence through the forms of

³⁰ The novel I am talking about is *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, taking place within an MFA program and specifically categorized as horror.

³¹ "About."

³² Gündüz-Willemin, "An Interview with M.L. Rio!"

³³ Gündüz-Willemin.

dependency into their relationships, especially when looking at what is left of them at the end of the novel. This violence not only appears physically but also psychologically because of the emotional manipulation and guilt that occurs in the novel. This is only further proved by having Oliver as the novel's narrator and how he himself reflects what students are willing to excuse and allow when interacting with violence caused by the academy and the narratives of dependency that students tell themselves.

Just like these violent and intimate relationships, *If We Were Villains* (2017) ends in a tragic way, inspired by Rio's love for Shakespeare's tragedies and their exploration of violence and embodiment.³⁴ By incorporating these themes, and specific tragedies by the playwright, she conveys the obsession and passion that the students in the novel are in and how immersed they are in their studies. It is through my analysis and deep character study that we see the academy's role in generating/fostering/nurturing this obsession and the events that occur because of it. Sadly, this means that the novel will not end happily because of the inherent violence that occurs with obsession in academia.

If We Were Villains (2017) is a character driven story meaning the novel and plot surrounds the characters' thoughts and feelings, with limited outside forces interfering with their actions toward one another. The character who is the victim of the murder is Richard, who is described as "...pure power, six foot three and carved from concrete."³⁵ During the annual Halloween performance, Richard is upset when he is not assigned the titular role in *Macbeth*, leading to him be angry, make nasty remarks, and eventually physically harming his friends. He was found by his friends in the lake, blood everywhere but still somehow alive, but it was his

³⁴ *The Cup | Interview with M. L. Rio (If We Were Villains)*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k4l6Phdfy4>.

³⁵ M. L. Rio, *If We Were Villains* (Affirm Press, 2017), 15.

friends that let him drown instead of calling for help because of his abusive behavior. The next protagonist is Meredith, the girlfriend of Richard and who eventually ends up in a romantic and complicated relationship with Oliver. She is constantly described as feminine, seductive, and sensual; the ultimate femme fatale.³⁶ At the end of the novel, it is she who ends up discovering who made the killing blow towards Richard, calling Colborne to arrest the murderer. We then have Wren and Filippa, the other two women in the cast; Wren is Richard's cousin and described as the girl next door while Filippa is described as more boyish.³⁷ As Oliver takes the blame for the crime, it is discovered that Filippa was always aware of who murdered Richard because she helped hide the murder weapon; keeping it a secret from the others. We then have Alexander, the character who always plays the villain in the plays.³⁸ He is the one who vocalizes the idea to not save Richard at all.

Oliver describes himself as "...average in every imaginable way" and is always looking down on himself and his acting abilities because he always plays a supporting role; the loyal sidekick.³⁹ He discovers who the murderer is right before Colborne comes to Dellecher. Finding the murder weapon, an old boat hook, that knocked Richard into the water and made him unable to move, Oliver puts together the pieces of what happened before Richard's death.⁴⁰ Yet, Oliver is more than just a supporting role, he is someone that his friends value dearly. At the end of the novel, they feel betrayed when he takes the fall for something he did not do because they believe that Oliver does not deserve it. Lastly, he describes James as the actor that everyone fell in love

³⁶ Rio, 15.

³⁷ Rio, 15.

³⁸ Rio, 15.

³⁹ Rio, 15.

⁴⁰ Rio, 321.

with and how he is considered the best and most serious actor of the group, even being considered as the better actor compared to Richard.⁴¹ It is James who hit Richard and left him to drown in the lake, and he is also the one who plays the role of Macbeth, the role that Richard felt that he deserved.

For this chapter, I will be analyzing the formatting of the book, how it incorporates different elements from Shakespeare's tragedies, how Rio interweaves Shakespeare and reality as a way to show the characters are struggling with differentiating what is real and what is not in terms of feelings and actions, and the different elements that go into creating an isolated environment for students. I will then analyze the characters and their relationships, discussing in more detail the plot of the novel since it revolves around their actions. It is important to analyze the characters and intentionally look at their roles in the novel since they are embodying Shakespearean tropes, as well as looking at the complexity of their relationships with the academy. While looking at the characters and their relationships, we are able to witness the impact and creation of interpersonal violence. I show how Rio is successful in displaying the violent and interpersonal relationships that students experience through and with the academy. By showing a murder committed within a friend group, inspired by greed, jealousy, and obsession, we see how violence can and does exist in these spaces and from the beginning we see how Dellecher encouraged these emotions between the friends.

Dellecher is an example of how the academy inserts violence into students' relationships, allowing it to prosper as long as the violence produces value, status, and profit. Specifically, in how we see the students valuing themselves, their work ethic in regard to their profession, and

⁴¹ Rio, 6, 16.

overall, how each of them views themselves within a Shakespeare play. *If We Were Villains* (2017) at its core is about interpersonal violence and how that is impacted and produced by university institutions and what that does to relationships after it appears.

Reflecting Shakespeare & Purposeful Isolation and Dependency

If We Were Villains (2017) is broken up into five acts, each act starting with a prologue, then instead of chapters we follow “scenes”, just like in one of Shakespeare’s plays. The prologues follow Oliver and Detective Colborne in the present, and the scenes follow the events leading up to Oliver’s arrest. There is a distortion of reality that can be seen in the way that the characters often use a combination of modern speech with Shakespearean dialogue/quotes; the language becoming more heavily present during moments of high emotional intensity. The novel begins with the lines “I sit with my wrists cuffed to the table and I think, *But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul.*”⁴² Even though it has been ten years since Oliver has been in school, he is just as enamored with Shakespeare as he was before. When Oliver meets with Colbourn he uses the word “fortnight” and Colborn tells him that, “You would say fucking ‘fortnight’.”⁴³ Oliver even goes as far as to describe himself and his friends as the players: “There were seven of us then, seven bright young things with wide precious futures ahead of us, though we saw no farther than the books in front of our faces. We were always surrounded by books and words and poetry, all the fierce passions of the world bound in leather and vellum. (I blame this in part for what happened.)”⁴⁴

⁴² Rio, 3.

⁴³ Rio, 3.

⁴⁴ Rio, 6.

This mixing of reality and Shakespeare can be shown with how they view themselves in the play, how they view themselves in reality, and ultimately how they struggle to define the distinction between themselves and their Shakespearean characters. Oliver describes their experiences at Dellecher in the following way: “Here we could indulge our collective obsession. We spoke it as a second language, conversed in poetry and lost touch with reality, a little.”⁴⁵ This isolation and focus bled into their roles as Shakespearean characters for they “...live in a world of real extremes. They swing from ecstasy to anguish, love to hate, wonder to terror.” We begin to see these extremes with the protagonists after Richard’s death because of the secrets and guilt that they all have.⁴⁶ James is the one who struggles the most to separate his sense of self from the Shakespeare character he plays, but Oliver says that for all of them they “...felt all the passions of the characters we played as if they were our own...Imagine having all your thoughts and feelings tangled up with all of the thoughts and feelings of a whole other person. It can be hard, sometimes, to sort out which is which.”⁴⁷

I argue that Rio purposefully creates this mixing of languages and formatting as a way to immerse the reader into the world of Shakespeare as well as a way to better understand our characters' obsession with the playwright and their motivations. All of the characters find themselves detached from reality, both within their theatrical roles and in the isolation they experience within their institution. The allowing of this obsession, and I argue even the encouragement of it, is a form of violence that leads to interpersonal tension and conflict between each of our characters. By encouraging this obsession, students being to place their

⁴⁵ Rio, 248.

⁴⁶ Rio, 248.

⁴⁷ Rio, 248.

value on how proficient and talented they are, to the point where they become isolated from other things and people, their work becoming all consuming.

The characters only truly interact with their friend group and the faculty, all of whom have an obsession with Shakespeare, spending four years completely immersed and isolated. As Oliver returns to Dellecher after he gets out of prison he talks about how difficult it was “...to tell where campus ended and town began.”⁴⁸ Even though Dellecher overlapped with the town, Oliver is still isolated to its grounds; he says, “Archibald Dellecher Theatre and the rehearsal hall and, ergo, was where we spent most of our time.”⁴⁹ Oliver and his friends were always in close proximity to one another, always competing against each other as well for different roles. It was easy to become close to each other and care, but just as easy to turn on each other because of the nature of the institution. This is how isolation and harmful immersion appeared in these students lives and something that we can see within our very own institutions. Students and faculty often become isolated from the world outside of academia and making it difficult to understand what is reality and what is not.

Later in this scene, Oliver talks about how surviving till your fourth year was proof that you had talent, but for Oliver it was dumb luck that the “seven of us had survived three yearly purges because we were each somehow indispensable to the playing company.”⁵⁰ This is a clear example of how Dellecher enforced competitiveness among its students through the isolation, furthering themes of obsession, greed, and jealousy. We see with Richard’s death a very physical

⁴⁸ Rio, 13.

⁴⁹ Rio, 13.

⁵⁰ Rio, 14–15.

violence that manifests from this, but we also see how the mental abuse and violence inflicted by the academy is through the competitive nature and the value that is being assigned.

Oliver even goes so far as to discuss how prison made him realize how cult-like Dellecher was and as a student he was completely blinded to it.⁵¹ Unlike the other novels that I will discuss later, the narrative that is occurring at Dellecher is that the institution is dependent on its students, that they are needed and not easily replaceable since they have the potential to hold great amounts of value. However, there is still a purposeful dependency that the institution is creating for the student through an emphasis on their isolation, complete immersion into their studies, and even the narrative about how being at Dellecher is a high achievement and gift.

There are two narratives happening within *If We Were Villains* (2017), one where the institution is discussing how valued the students are, how they need them to succeed; the caveat being that their value is only if they meet the unrealistic expectations and make it to fourth year. The second narrative that I see happening is the one where the students themselves are dependent on Dellecher, how they become obsessed and immersed in their profession but as we will see with *Babel* (2022) later on, these students do not know how to function in the outside world, and I argue lose touch with reality. These narratives are clear and supported by the academic bubbles and isolation that occurs with faculty and students and only becomes clearer the longer you stay, with this novel specifically it means making it to the fourth year. This is an inherent form of violence and pipeline to exploitation, because the longer you stay the more dependent you become on the institution and therefore the more work and profit you provide.

⁵¹ Rio, 85.

During the commencement ceremony at the beginning of the semester, one of the staff members named Holinshed says “If you are sitting in this room tonight...it means you have been accepted into the esteemed Dellecher family.”⁵² He then goes on to say in his speech how prized the students are and how remarkable they are, however Dellecher still has high expectations of them because of their potential and that they must be dedicated, determined, and dazzling, and that they do not want to be disappointed.⁵³ The characters find themselves constantly struggling with the workload because of these expectations, they “...were fighting to stay afloat in a sea of lines to learn, reading to do, text to scan, and papers to hand in.”⁵⁴ This message instantly suggests how students are valued but only if they excel, creating an immense amount of pressure. This message also exists within academic institutions today, given the amount of pressure to excel within academia as it is supposedly the only way to be valued and have a better life. We also see this with where you attend and to which institutions you were accepted into. The narrative is that attending university is a gift, but the institution expects its student body and faculty to pay back to show gratitude. However, nothing will ever be enough for a neoliberal academy, there will always be profit and competition among the people residing in the institution, the violence will continue to exist within the university system if there is no disruption of these destructive cycles.

With the isolation and evaluation, we see through Oliver how Dellecher and his friends become everything to him and that without this identity he thinks he is nothing: “never before in my life had I experienced something so undeniably stirring and important. Without him, without

⁵² Rio, 35.

⁵³ Rio, 35.

⁵⁴ Rio, 284.

Dellecher, without my company of lyric-mad classmates, what would become of me?”⁵⁵ This specific scene is in reference to when he discovers that his parents are deciding not to pay for Dellecher anymore and Oliver panics because it would mean he would not be able to go back unless he can find some way to afford it.⁵⁶ When confiding in his sister he says that he does not want to be anywhere else, that the others are his family and he needs to be with them.⁵⁷ This means that the isolation, expectations, and so forth are worth it to him; his friends and Dellecher mean the world to Oliver because of what it has offered him. He tells Colborne that “I won’t pretend it’s not difficult. We’re always working, and we don’t sleep much and it’s hard to have normal friendships outside of our sphere, but it’s worth it just for the rush we get, being onstage and speaking Shakespeare’s words. It’s like we’re not really alive until then, and then everything just lights up and the bad stuff disappears, and we don’t want to be anywhere else.”⁵⁸

A critical element that Rio includes in the novel are themes, tones, and plot devices from Shakespeare tragedies; specifically, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *King Lear* since these are the plays that the protagonists perform. The central, and more obvious, parallels are to *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*. It is not a coincidence that “Tragedies and histories were reserved for the fourth years, while the third years were relegated to romance and comedy...”⁵⁹ We specifically see this in how Richard is cast as Caesar and dies at the hands of James, who is cast as Brutus in Act III, in both the play and the actual novel. While discussing who will get which roles, Alexander says, “‘Well, obviously Richard will be Caesar.’ ‘Because we all secretly

⁵⁵ Rio, 190.

⁵⁶ This leads him to take a custodian position at the university and will be the reason he finds the murder weapon.

⁵⁷ Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, 190.

⁵⁸ Rio, 267.

⁵⁹ Rio, 14.

want to kill him?’ James asked. Richard arched one dark eyebrow. ‘Et tu, Bruté?’”⁶⁰ Alexander even goes as far as to talk about Richard’s character being killed in Act III so he will not have as many lines to learn.⁶¹ These are the more obvious references to *Julius Caesar* in the novel. It is important that Rio incorporates these elements because how they show a parallel to Shakespeare, specifically in the mixing of reality and fiction and because it gives an example of how their obsessions and academic violence are transcending into reality and playing a critical part in their lives. Each of the characters are deeply intertwined with their Shakespeare counterparts and therefore distorting their reality. By incorporating Shakespearean tragedies and elements, we are seeing and experiencing the way that their obsession and relationship with their passions are integral to their lives and play a role in each of their downfalls.

It is after his death that Richard becomes a tragic hero to the people outside of the friend group; mainly because nobody was aware about the extent of his physical abuse of the others. We see foreshadowing in a dialogue between he and Wren, where Richard discusses how Caesar and Macbeth are tragic heroes.⁶² After his death Gwendolyn, one of the faculty at Dellecher, says, “Henry the Fifth is one of Shakespeare’s best beloved and most troublesome heroes, much as Richard was one of ours. They will, I think, be similarly lamented.”⁶³ Not only is he being remembered as a tragic hero, but Oliver states that Richard will never forgive his friends for letting him die, and would want to wreak havoc for what happened to him and their role in his death.⁶⁴ Richard’s defense of Caesar and Macbeth as heroes shows how he himself will then be

⁶⁰ Rio, 7.

⁶¹ Rio, 20.

⁶² Rio, 50.

⁶³ Rio, 179.

⁶⁴ Rio, 180.

remembered in that way even though he never was in his real life, he was the tyrant character after all. “He was as much a bully in death as he was in life, a giant who left behind not an empty space so much as a black hole, a huge crushing void that swallowed up all of our comforts, sooner or later.”⁶⁵

The novel ends tragically, with Oliver discovering that James committed suicide by drowning himself, his body never being found. The way James dies is discovered in the last paragraph of the novel, leaving an open ending, with some readers speculating that James is not dead because the letter he leaves Oliver references a scene in which the character fakes his own death.⁶⁶ The novel is ultimately a tragedy given Richard’s murder, the destruction of the characters and their relationships with one another, and the way it purposefully ends with James’ death.

I think it is important that we remember that *If We Were Villains* (2017) is a tragedy, that as we grow to care for their characters and want them to be happy, that ultimately because of the violence that occurs and the way the academy does not have our best interest at heart, we are made for tragic endings unless we disrupt these cycles of violence. Incorporating tragic Shakespeare elements allows for that tragedy to be shown clearly to the reader, but it is our own tragic relationships with the academy that are at the heart of this novel. Oliver reminds Colborn and the reader “But that is how a tragedy like ours or King Lear breaks your heart—by making you believe that the ending might still be happy, until the very last minute.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Rio, 263.

⁶⁶ VanGoghNotVanGo, “How Do You Interpret the Ending of If We Were Villains?,” Reddit Post, *R/DarkAcademia*, December 11, 2019, www.reddit.com/r/DarkAcademia/comments/e964aw/how_do_you_interpret_the_ending_of_if_we_were/; Sydney Rose, “Review: ‘If We Were Villains’ Leaves Readers Thinking,” *The Cougar*, August 25, 2021, <http://thedailycougar.com/2021/08/25/review-if-we-were-villains-leaves-readers-thinking/>.

⁶⁷ Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, 334.

Fiction and Reality: What Academia Does to Relationships

Even though we are following seven characters, a core focus/dynamic lies between Richard, James, Oliver, and I would argue even Meredith. From the very beginning we know that Oliver views himself as the least talented of the group, even Richard proves that he thinks this telling Oliver (while they discuss *Julius Caesar*), “...they always cast you last...as whatever happens to be left over.”⁶⁸ Oliver continues to think during the scene how he is not as talented as his friends, the one “...doomed to always play supporting roles in someone else’s story.”⁶⁹ It is not ironic that we learn this about Oliver in the beginning, how he is always the supporting cast member because in the novel, as the events unfold we learn how he is the supporting character since he takes the fall for James’s actions as a way to save him from prison. When Oliver and James discuss how they want different parts in the upcoming plays, James tells Oliver that “Your time will come to be the tragic hero. Just wait for spring.”⁷⁰ Sadly, that is what happens, but it is in real life and not in a play; while Richard is remembered as a tragic hero the reader learns that it is Oliver who actually is one because of his relationships and care for his friends. Yet, unlike Richard before his death and Oliver, it is always James who is thought of as the hero, both on and off stage; and so it is difficult to believe who is which hero or if they are all heroes but in their own ways.⁷¹ Maybe James is a hero, but only to Oliver because, “he was the sort of actor everyone fell in love with as soon as he stepped onstage...”.⁷²

⁶⁸ Rio, 6.

⁶⁹ Rio, 9.

⁷⁰ Rio, 11.

⁷¹ Rio, 16.

⁷² Rio, 16.

Each of these characters play a distinct role, and I believe that these different versions of the “hero” can also resemble the different relationships that the academy has with each student. With Richard, we see the tragic hero because of the value he has for the academy; he is their prized actor and Oliver even comments on how he was one of the faculty’s favorites. James is also valued by faculty but because he is able to play the “good” characters, he is always playing the hero and therefore is a key component to the plays they are putting on at Dellecher. Finally, Oliver is a tragic hero because he is the one who faces the consequences and the visible violence that the academy is capable of. Because of the rivalry and tension between Richard and James, and because Oliver plays a supporting character persona, he protects James for harming Richard and ends up incarcerated for ten years. The rivalry and tension encouraged by the academy and fueled by obsession, and Oliver is the one who deals with the fall out.

While James was loved by everyone (except Meredith), Oliver admits to feeling protective of him.⁷³ We later find out that Oliver is not only platonically in love with James but also romantically, while it is only hinted at that James might reciprocate his feelings. It is this close bond that they feel towards each other that has Oliver unquestionably and immediately taking the fall for James. However, it is important to understand that maybe James and Richard are not so different, how what makes James different in how we perceive him is because of the roles that he plays. While James is loved it is important to remember that “...Richard was hated and loved with equal ferocity.”⁷⁴ Showing the dynamics of how Richard, even though he is the tyrant archetype, is still cared for by many and that he ultimately has this charismatic nature to him. For me, I see Richard and James as being different sides of the same coin. They both are

⁷³ Rio, 16.

⁷⁴ Rio, 16.

obsessed with their roles, and are both loved by Dellecher, especially when it comes to how they can be exploited through their talents. I argue that what makes them different is how Richard is unafraid to show his arrogance and pride in what he does, while James portrays and views himself as more of a hero. So, it only seems fitting that they both die at the end, each being haunted by the other and their actions.

Even though Richard and James can represent different types of relationships with the academy, they each at their core are interacting with the academy in various forms of violence. How would we see academic violence shift if our narrator was different? This question and the characters, I argue, demonstrate how our view of the academy and our relationships with it depend on narratives and perspective; especially since violence is extremely nuanced and not easily defined. That the university uses a narrative of dependency as a way to show that the university systems care about the student. However, when we shift that perspective to show the violence and capitalistic ideologies that the university system has, that is when we see the danger and tragedies. Richard and James, as characters, show these things within the novel.

As they all discuss what the upcoming year brings, Richard makes a comment about how this was going to be a good year, Wren responding that it was because Richard got the part he wanted.⁷⁵ As they receive their roles for *Macbeth*, which will not be publicly revealed or known to one another until performance night, Oliver learns he is playing Banquo; he is surprised because he expected the role to go to James and assumed Macbeth would be played by Richard.⁷⁶ We know something is wrong the minute everyone discovers their roles as Richard storms off with Meredith following after him and Oliver thinks that he "...couldn't help feeling

⁷⁵ Rio, 22.

⁷⁶ Rio, 38.

that the balance of power had somehow shifted.”⁷⁷ It is because of *Macbeth* and the change of routine, that we see the dynamics of the friend group change. Before everything that will happen, Oliver says of their friend group that “Our squabbling was good-natured and usually harmless. We had, like seven siblings, spent so much time together that we had seen the best and worst of one another and were unimpressed by either.”⁷⁸ With Richard not getting the role he desired and felt entitled to, and his attitudes towards them will shift into one of malice and violence.

As Alexander and James rehearse a scene for *Julius Caesar*, they struggle to remember their lines since it is the first run through and Richard antagonistically responds with, “Are we going to spend the whole night on this scene? Clearly they don’t know the lines.”⁷⁹ Everyone is taken aback and made angry by the rude interruption, for Richard had never acted like that before. Oliver describes it as, “There had always been small rivalries between us, but never before such an open display of hostility.”⁸⁰ Even though the friends have always tolerated Richard’s ego and pride, they remember how difficult it is to work with him, with James even calling him self-righteous and vain.⁸¹ It is in these earlier scenes that we see a visible rivalry form between James and Richard, Richard assuming he knew who took his role as Macbeth and maybe even feeling a bit threatened by him. Even though we will see Richard taking his anger out on everyone, it is James who gets most of it. They later call a truce on the antagonism between the two, but it does not stay that way for long.⁸² There is foreshadowing at the end of this scene where Oliver describes how actors are volatile, going back to the theme of our

⁷⁷ Rio, 39.

⁷⁸ Rio, 22.

⁷⁹ Rio, 46.

⁸⁰ Rio, 52.

⁸¹ Rio, 48, 52.

⁸² Rio, 52.

protagonist adopting the emotions of the character roles they play, and how sometimes you get disaster when things get tense.⁸³

On the night of the performance of *Macbeth*, Oliver confirms that Richard is not playing Macbeth because he plays alongside James, and later we learn that Richard was cast for the role of Macduff.⁸⁴ After the play is over, they all celebrate by playing games out on the lake near Dellecher, specifically chicken fight; Richard very clearly is upset and does not want to join in. It is not until James and Wren form a team against Oliver and Meredith that Richard decides he wants to play because of how Wren and Meredith are involved with James. Still very clearly upset, he starts pushing and taunting James; Richard “shoved James again, and there was nothing playful about it.”⁸⁵ As James falls back into the water, he lunges at Richard and that is when Richard overpowers James, thrusting his head in the water and not allowing him to come up, James thrashing the whole time trying to come up for air.⁸⁶ The others begin yelling at Richard to stop, with Oliver and Colin (Alexander’s boyfriend) trying to pry Richard from James.⁸⁷ When James comes up for air and sputters, Oliver describes how he was next to James with Filippa hovering over them: “Alexander looked dumbstruck. Colin, absolutely terrified. Wren cries silent, little hiccups making her shoulders jerk and twitch. [Oliver] had never seen Meredith so angry, cheeks burning crimson even in the weak moonlight. And Richard just stood there, bemused.”⁸⁸

⁸³ Rio, 52.

⁸⁴ Rio, 54, 62.

⁸⁵ Rio, 75.

⁸⁶ Rio, 75.

⁸⁷ Rio, 75.

⁸⁸ Rio, 77.

Within this scene, we see what Richard is capable of and how his friends' perception of him changes, and the true shift in friendship dynamics between all of them.⁸⁹ As everyone leaves, James and Oliver sit behind reflecting on what just happened. Nobody was expecting Richard to ever physically harm them because he hasn't in the past, however his role and profession were never threatened until now. I believe that this could be another parallel to how we view violence in the academy. Before entering the university institution, it is not always apparent about how the university itself (I argue even faculty) can inflict violence upon the student. This is because the violence that does occur is one of exploitation and emotional abuse. Students start to base their value on their knowledge and their performance leading to the emotional abuse; and the exploitation occurs because the institution can use the student's knowledge and labor as a form of profit.

As the weeks go on, Oliver discovers how Richard has been physically harming James, by saying, "bruises in raw, vivid blue spotted the undersides of arms, all the way to his elbows."⁹⁰ James admits to Oliver that Richard has been leaving these bruises during the rehearsals of the assassination scenes for *Julius Caesar*, that he has been able to hide them under his clothes.⁹¹ Oliver finds himself furious, James asking him to keep it a secret because Richard would ultimately win if he did anything about it.⁹² Later during rehearsal he throws Meredith backwards on the stairs, who sits up furious at Richard, with Richard reflecting back that same anger towards her.⁹³ He then grabs her close whispering to her, "Are you really going to make a

⁸⁹ Rio, 80.

⁹⁰ Rio, 95.

⁹¹ Rio, 95.

⁹² Rio, 96.

⁹³ Rio, 99.

scene right now?...“I wouldn’t.”⁹⁴ As Richard turns around he realizes that his friends all saw what happened, the anger and fury in their expression for his violence against Meredith, and he tells them to relax, that he did not hurt her, gaslighting everyone's anger.⁹⁵ As Wren essentially tells Richard how his actions are inexcusable, she says, “You know Rick, people aren’t going to put up with your bullshit for much longer.”⁹⁶

Lastly he attacks Oliver on the premier night, hitting him in the ear when he stabs him on stage, Oliver stumbling off grasping his ear at the amount of pain he is in.⁹⁷ Angry, James heads back on stage for the assassination scene; the scene is intense because the emotions toward each other are very real and not an act at all: “Richard’s words were thick with hatred as he said, “ ‘Et tu, Bruté?’ James took one step forward and placed the blade against his neck. ‘Then fall, Caesar.’ James’s face was unnervingly blank. He slid the knife quickly forward—Richard made a short choking sound, then let his head loll against his chest.”⁹⁸ This is the moment where it is made clear to the reader that something bad is going to happen with Richard specifically because his anger is still clearly evident from the *Macbeth* play.

Rio slowly builds Richard’s abuse in the novel as a way to show how violence is not always visible. With Richard, he slowly becomes increasingly more abusive towards his friends, and he did not become violent until he felt like he was denied something that was his. We can see this within academic relationships. Students’ relationships within the university go well and smoothly until the university feels threatened, specifically when the value and profit decrease

⁹⁴ Rio, 99.

⁹⁵ Rio, 101.

⁹⁶ Rio, 101.

⁹⁷ Rio, 111.

⁹⁸ Rio, 119.

that is when we see universities cast students aside. This can be seen in no longer providing housing or stipends, or can be seen as ruining a student's reputations, preventing them from being promoted in their profession because of the loss of academic connections, labels, and knowledge.

During the after party for *Julius Caesar*, it becomes clear that Richard and Meredith have ended their relationship, and feeling disconnected and isolated from his friends, Richard becomes belligerently drunk, isolating himself from the group at the beginning of the party. The whole night quickly turns chaotic. There is a scene where Richard becomes angry, pushing James on the ground and shoving Wren out of his way in the process. It is also during this night that Meredith and Oliver begin their complicated relationship as Meredith takes him upstairs and they sleep together. Richard storms after them and is banging on the door, screaming at Oliver that he is going to kill him. It is in the morning that Oliver notices the bruises on Meredith, the "older marks, weak as watercolors now, showed where a heavier hand than mind had touched her, where phantom fingers had squeezed too hard: the nape of her neck, the curve of her knee."⁹⁹ We know, as Oliver realizes, that Richard is the one who left these bruises on her, that just like James he had been hurting her all this time but kept it a secret from the others. Since Oliver left with Meredith part way through the party it is unclear what happened after that, all he knows is that Richard was screaming and upset, and everyone was trying to calm him down. Richard has gone out of his way to harm almost everyone in their friend group but especially James, Meredith, and Oliver.

⁹⁹ Rio, 136.

As the fourth years begin to wake up and move around the building, Filippa comes to Oliver and James, telling them that they need to get dressed and go down to the lake as she goes to find the others.¹⁰⁰ As they gather around the dock they find “Richard float[ing] on his back, neck twisted unnaturally, mouth gaping, face frozen in a Greek mask of agony.”¹⁰¹ It is James who realizes that Richard is still alive, drowning in the lake and his own blood.¹⁰² As the six of them stand around wondering what to do, it is James who insists on needing to help Richard, straining against Oliver's grip to reach out for him.¹⁰³ However, Alexander is the one who reasons that there's no reason to help him because of the violence he was inflicting on the others, that they should let him die, and they all agree.¹⁰⁴ Alexander even goes so far as to tell James that he feels a pathological need to play the hero and that they all need to think about what is the best thing to do.¹⁰⁵ Still going against James, even Meredith tells him that they do not owe him anything.¹⁰⁶ After they decide to let Richard die Oliver thinks, “I felt it on the tip of my tongue, the compulsion to confess that in that perilous instant when I thought he was dead, all I'd really felt was relief.”¹⁰⁷ They watch Richard die “...in a state of rigid paralysis.”¹⁰⁸

This is a critical scene in the novel, and the end of Act II. This is the moment that not only do we realize our main protagonists are involved in a murder, but this is the beginning of when we see their relationships with one another begin to fall apart. They start to be held

¹⁰⁰ Rio, 140.

¹⁰¹ Rio, 140.

¹⁰² Rio, 142.

¹⁰³ Rio, 150.

¹⁰⁴ Rio, 150–53.

¹⁰⁵ Rio, 151.

¹⁰⁶ Rio, 153.

¹⁰⁷ Rio, 153.

¹⁰⁸ Rio, 154.

together with grief, guilt, and secrets and this is what happens when obsession goes too far and what happens when isolation starts to feel claustrophobic.

It is then Filippa who initiates the conversation about what they need to decide to tell the police. Even though four of them are unaware of what actually happened they knew they had to fabricate a story of where they all were and what they were doing, that way they would not look like suspects.¹⁰⁹ They then start to discuss the story they will tell the police, and decide on telling them that he fell in water, must have been drunk, and they found him dead; even though no one except Filippa at this time is aware of how James hit him over the head and he then fell into the lake choking on his own blood.¹¹⁰ As they walk away Oliver cannot help but think about Hamlet's poor fallen sparrow.¹¹¹ As they become more and more stressed over the role that they played in letting Richard die, they have less patience with one another, often finding themselves bickering, becoming nervous about being caught by the police, all of which speaks to the guilt each of them have.

It is around this time we see the friendships truly start to crumble, guilt and secrets tearing them apart. It starts with Wren and her grieving and taking the rest of the Winter term off, and Meredith making a comment about how what she needs is to be away from them and Dellecher.¹¹² It did not help as well that they were all high strung, drowning in lines and midterm speeches adding to the stress that they already felt regarding Richard's death.¹¹³ Their relationships are crumbling around them and it does not help that Colborne is aware of how

¹⁰⁹ Rio, 155.

¹¹⁰ Rio, 177.

¹¹¹ Rio, 156.

¹¹² Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, 184.

¹¹³ Rio, 221.

fragile they are.¹¹⁴ During the present timeline when Colborn asks Oliver when it happened, he tells him that it was Christmas break, “That’s when everything went wrong... We were separated.”¹¹⁵ They are experiencing enormous stressors in their academic life, paired with the stress and inner turmoil of one of their closest friends being murdered at their hands and yet they are still expected to meet Dellecher’s high expectations and balance everything they are feeling.

James in particular starts to change and become more aggressive, specifically with Oliver. During a rehearsal scene when he goes too far and breaks Oliver’s nose, Alexander makes a comment about how James is diving too deep into his role as Edmund in *King Lear*.¹¹⁶ James is slowly losing himself throughout the play because of his guilt over killing Richard as well as his anger towards Oliver and his relationship with Meredith. When Oliver confronts James he finds himself struggling with his emotions; he tells James, “I want so badly to be so mad at you that I could do that, but I can’t, so I’m mad at myself instead. Do you even understand how unfair that is?”¹¹⁷ Even after experiencing James’s cruelty, he finds it difficult to be upset with him, and James confides with him how he is having a difficult time with the weight of Richard’s death, how it is easier to be a character instead of himself.¹¹⁸ James says, “Oliver, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I want to hurt the whole world.”¹¹⁹ It does not help that after this scene we see Meredith’s attitude towards James’s shift, how she “...went from lukewarm to icy...” because of how he hurt Oliver.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Rio, 207.

¹¹⁵ Rio, 249–50.

¹¹⁶ Rio, 277.

¹¹⁷ Rio, 282.

¹¹⁸ Rio, 283.

¹¹⁹ Rio, 283.

¹²⁰ Rio, 289.

Oliver's relationship and reaction to James is interesting in the way that he is almost forgiving of what James is becoming. I argue that it shows how the academy and its demands, as well as the blurring of reality and fiction, appear in how James starts being outwardly aggressive, and because Oliver is loyal to him it is easier to take it out on him. The way their relationship shifts, reflect how students can experience exploitation by the university but claim it as something that is better for them because they believe in the narrative that they will reap the rewards. That it is okay, to experience this abuse and exploitation because of how they should of the narrative of how they should be thankful to attend university and they will be able to benefit from all of their own hard work.

The relationship between Oliver and Meredith is complicated, I argue that she loves him and cares for him, wanting to protect him because he cannot see the harm that James is capable of; she never fully trusted him since their first year at Dellecher. She even has a moment with Oliver:

“You know, everyone calls you ‘nice,’” she said slowly, expression drawn and thoughtful. “But that’s not the word. You’re good. So good you have no idea how good you are.” She laughed—once—a sad, resigned sort of sound. “And you’re real. You’re the only one of us who isn’t acting all the time, who isn’t just playing whatever part Gwendolyn gave you three years ago.” (224)

Meredith plays a larger role in the latter half of the novel because of how she is distrusting of James, and it is she who is able to realize what James is capable of, while Oliver is not.

Even as the reader, and weirdly Oliver, realize the love that Oliver and James have for each other, ten years later Oliver is not able to fully understand the relationship that they had.¹²¹

It is the relationship between James and Oliver that I find confusing yet interesting. The dynamic

¹²¹ Rio, 302.

between them is portrayed as Oliver always being the sidekick, having a devotion toward James even though at times it seemed James never reciprocated. But yet, Meredith sees Oliver's infatuation even though she cares about him, she knows that Oliver's love for James will only end with him hurting. As Meredith realizes that it was James who killed Richard, she almost tells Oliver at a party before the *King Lear* performance. She tells Oliver to be careful of James, that he is not himself (which Oliver thinks is in reference to how drunk James is at the party that night).¹²²

Even though Meredith is viewed as a seductress and reduced to her sex appeal when it comes to her acting career, she is incredibly insightful and loyal. She sees the violence that James is capable of and that is why she feels the most betrayed when Oliver takes the fall for James's actions. I believe that Meredith and Filippa are the most insightful out of all of them, Meredith is aware of inherent violences, and I believe would see how Dellecher's expectations contributed to the murder and Richard becoming abusive. If Meredith were our narrator the novel would be different; the actions, scenes, dialogues, would all be told differently because Meredith is able to see behind the façade that her friends (especially James) put on, it is only Oliver who does not hide behind a mask. I believe there is an interesting critique on gender, on how gendered experience can perceive abuse and exploitation differently. Yet, Oliver is our narrator and that is why we will never see James a hideous light. Oliver's romanticization of James can be read as similar to the romanticization of the academy and the refusal to see the destruction it can do.

¹²² Rio, 314.

After the party before the show, Oliver finds the old boat hook in James's mattress while cleaning up the tower, and knows instantly that it was James who did it.¹²³ Earlier in the novel, he had found a bloody rag in the fireplace and had overheard from Detective Colborne that Richard had suffered a blow to the head.¹²⁴ Oliver then confronts James in between scenes during the performance of *King Lear*, telling him that he found the boat hook and begging James to tell him that he did not kill Richard.¹²⁵ James explains that he did not mean to, that it was all an accident, that Richard had been taunting him and would not leave him alone. That was when Richard told James, "Why can't you and Oliver just admit you're queer for each other and leave my girls alone?," and James lost it and hit Richard with the boat hook.¹²⁶ This is also when Oliver discovers that Filippa knew all this time and did not tell anyone because she was the one who ran into James when he was walking back to the tower and helped him hide the evidence.¹²⁷

As Oliver discovers the truth and goes back to the final scene of *King Lear*, Colborne comes in and Oliver gives himself up right away before James could. As Oliver looks at his friends he notices how "Alexander's face was so full of sadness that there was no room left for surprise. In Filippa's expression there was only a desperate kind of conduction. In Wren's, emptiness. In Meredith's, something violent...And on James's face, despair."¹²⁸ His friends know that Oliver did not kill Richard and are astounded and confused by what he is doing, but they cannot do or say anything without giving themselves away and knowing Oliver would not want that. Meredith is the most furious out of all of them, telling him that "You have no idea, do

¹²³ Rio, 321.

¹²⁴ Rio, 264, 205.

¹²⁵ Rio, 326–29.

¹²⁶ Rio, 329–31.

¹²⁷ Rio, 333.

¹²⁸ Rio, 339.

you? What you've done"; even Alexander asks Oliver why he is taking the fall for killing Richard.¹²⁹ And it is James that pleads with him not to do so, while Oliver tells him that he is playing the part, referring to his role as James's sidekick.¹³⁰ For Oliver was always James's Banquo and Benvolio, his right hand man.¹³¹ James begs him for six years to let him take the blame, with Oliver refusing each time.¹³²

As Oliver finishes telling Colborn the truth he thinks, "I feel, at the end of my story, sapped of life, as if I have been bleeding freely for the past few hours instead of simply speaking."¹³³ It is at the end of the novel that we learn what has happened to the friend group after they graduated and Oliver was arrested.¹³⁴ We have known since the start however that Filippa was the only person he kept in contact with and is the one who picks him up after he is released, and that she continued to see him every two weeks for ten years.¹³⁵ Oliver ponders thinking, "I don't have any old friends except Filippa. How do the others think of me now? I haven't seen them. I don't know."¹³⁶ So when Colborne asks Oliver what he plans to do next he says that he wants to see James and that's when Filippa breaks the news to him. She says:

"Oh, Oliver," she says, her voice a distant echo of itself. "I'm so sorry. James is gone." The world drops out from underneath me. My hand gropes blindly for the bookshelf beside me, for something to hold on to. I stare down at the burn on the carpet, listening for my own heartbeat and hearing nothing. "When?" is all I manage to say. "Four years ago," she says, quietly. "Four years ago now."¹³⁷

¹²⁹ Rio, 334.

¹³⁰ Rio, 341.

¹³¹ Rio, 238.

¹³² Rio, 342–43.

¹³³ Rio, 344.

¹³⁴ Rio, 83.

¹³⁵ Rio, 83.

¹³⁶ Rio, 145.

¹³⁷ Rio, 345.

As Oliver is stunned over the news, she tells him how he drowned and how they were all afraid to tell Oliver because they were unsure of what he would do, if he would even make it through his sentence.¹³⁸ She goes as far as to say, “I knew you better than you knew yourself,” she says, and I can hear ten years of sadness in her voice. “...I was terrified you’d do exactly what you did.”¹³⁹ I argue that this scene is critical because it shows that not only has Oliver been in prison, but that his friends have also held guilt and sadness because of what he did for them. That even if it was not commented on a lot throughout the novel how much they cared for them, we see it clearly in this scene with Filippa.

Upon discovering this, Oliver decides to go see Meredith and she welcomes him. They catch up on everything but avoid conversation about James and what happened. Eventually, “Though we never talk about it, it is somehow decided that I will stay with Meredith indefinitely.”¹⁴⁰ Over the years, even though Meredith becomes a famous actress, she does not have a social life outside of work and prefers to live quietly and after everything Oliver has been through, that is what he is craving after he is released. While Meredith is away on a business trip, Oliver decides to look up James' death on the computer, the last sentence of the novel being, “He drowned himself on the last day of December, and though the local authorities dragged the freezing water for days and miles, his body was never found.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Rio, 345.

¹³⁹ Rio, 347.

¹⁴⁰ Rio, 351.

¹⁴¹ Rio, 354.

Conclusion

Academia takes a physical and mental toll on us, and *If We Were Villains* (2017) demonstrates this without the use of magic unlike the other novels I will discuss. Even though, as we will see later, magic/fantastical elements can still critique and display the brutal reality of student/academic relationships, without the use of magic, it makes these elements of violence much more tangible and realistic. It is harder to ignore how the elements in the story can become real and there is true terror in confronting a violence that is not entirely visible because it is more psychological. Through interweaving themes of obsession, greed, betrayal, in Shakespeare's tragedies and having them appear in the novel, we see Rio capturing the tone and mood of the dark academic genre. Ultimately these books are tragedies, as are our relationships with the academy. As long as we are intertwined with the university institution, we will continue to interact with the inherent violence that occurs in and at these spaces. The novel also shows us how Dellecher has created an isolated environment that creates high expectations, stress, and competition between the students—a clear reflection of university systems today and how they isolate their students within an academic bubble. Our main characters and their work as actors show what can happen in an academic environment when the routine is broken, when an individual does not get what they feel they are entitled to.

If We Were Villains (2017) sheds light on how academia impacts our relationships, specifically the violence that is inherently rooted in them and what happens when academic expectations and guilt destroys our interpersonal relationships. Even though this novel is fiction, parts of these experiences are reality, and the other parts can become reality because of what fueled the actions of the students. Modern university institutions purposefully find ways to exploit students; while this novel is focused more on the dangers of obsession and isolated

environments the other novels in this genre showcase student labor exploitation. Through a character driven story, we are able to experience the academic world through their eyes, watching reality shift between being immersed and obsessed with their passion while at the same time balancing the expectations of the academy and what happens when you do not get what you want. Rio creates a dark academic novel that builds off the *Secret History* (1992) and allows for more discussion in the genre to follow.

CHAPTER III: EXPLOITATION, LABOR, AND THE STUDENT

Ninth House (2019) by Leigh Bardugo has been a beloved book since its release day. It has over 200,000 ratings on Goodreads, was named as one of Amazon's best books of 2019 and a Goodreads Choice Award for best fantasy of 2019, and was considered a must-read of 2019 according to *Time*.¹⁴² *Ninth House* (2019) was even optioned by Amazon to create a TV series shortly after its publication.¹⁴³ Bardugo interweaves magic and the academy as a way to critique and display the deeply rooted violence of the university and to explore what it means to be an outsider entering these spaces of violence and exploitation, especially in regard to class and gender. *Ninth House* (2019) is gritty, dark, and unflinching in its unveiling of the danger of being given an abundance of power by looking at the complex relationship between ivy league secret societies and magic.

Leigh Bardugo first began her writing career with the *Grishaverse*, a YA fantasy series, and instantly became a bestselling author.¹⁴⁴ *Ninth House* (2019) is her debut novel in the adult genre, and her first foray into interweaving magic into a depiction of the contemporary world. Bardugo has obtained a B.A. in English from Yale University and is an associate fellow of Pauli Murray College and was even a member of the secret society Wolf's Head, one of the ancient

¹⁴² "Ninth House (Alex Stern, #1) by Leigh Bardugo | Goodreads," n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43263680-ninth-house>; "Announcing the Goodreads Choice Winner in Best Fantasy!," *Goodreads*, n.d., <https://www.goodreads.com/choiceawards/best-fantasy-books-2019>; "'Ninth House' Is One of the 100 Must-Read Books of 2019," *Time*, n.d., <https://time.com/collection/must-read-books-2019/5724596/ninth-house/>.

¹⁴³ Nellie Andreeva, "Grishaverse Author's 'Ninth House' Novel To Be Developed As TV Series By Amazon Studios," *Deadline*, October 10, 2019, <https://deadline.com/2019/10/grishaverse-authorleigh-bardugo-ninth-house-amazon-studios-tv-series-development-1202756743/>.

¹⁴⁴ Leigh Bardugo, "About," *Leigh Bardugo | Author*, n.d., <https://www.leighbardugo.com/about/>.

eight secret societies of Yale; the secret societies are “exclusive” clubs for Yale students, with very little publicly known about what goes on during the societies’ meetings.¹⁴⁵

Bardugo explains this novel as being special to her because of how she draws upon her experiences and time at Yale.¹⁴⁶ Since her freshman year, she has been drawn into mysteries that happen in ivy league settings and with her first adult novel she wanted to discuss the “...parallels to power in our real world.”¹⁴⁷ Even at eighteen she was entranced by the secret societies, especially Skull and Bones, and could not help but think what it would be like if magic existed in these institutions.¹⁴⁸ She discusses in interviews how she has a deep attachment to Yale, that it was not until she had to revisit those memories and look at old photos that she realized she held only rosy memories of her time there, and how actually she herself participated and lived in the wealthy, patriarchal, and misogynistic culture that exist at institutions like Yale.¹⁴⁹ It is this culture that she wanted to discuss, and overall make sure that she showed the horrific and dangerous power that these institutions have and how they are built upon white supremacy, classism, and misogyny.¹⁵⁰ She especially refers to this when talking about the damage and harm that can be done when using magic as a way to commodify knowledge and labor.¹⁵¹ Bardugo explains that with this novel she wanted to ‘hyper-mystify’ (complicate and blur the

¹⁴⁵ Leigh Bardugo On “*Ninth House*,” 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/06/767636941/leigh-bardugo-on-ninth-house>; Michael M. Jones, “Spring 2012 Flying Starts: Leigh Bardugo,” *PublishersWeekly.Com*, n.d., <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/profiles/article/52823-spring-2012-flying-starts-leigh-bardugo.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Leigh Bardugo On “*Ninth House*.”

¹⁴⁷ Leigh Bardugo On “*Ninth House*.”

¹⁴⁸ news?content_type=all, “Leigh Bardugo Storms the Gates of Hell with ‘Ninth House’ Sequel,” *Goodreads*, October 28, 2022, sec. Interviews, https://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/1574.Leigh_Bardugo.

¹⁴⁹ Leigh Bardugo On “*Ninth House*.”

¹⁵⁰ Annabel Gutterman, “She Was in a Secret Society at Yale. Her Novel Explores the Dark, Mysterious World of the Ivy League,” *Time*, October 8, 2019, <https://time.com/5694837/leigh-bardugo-ninth-house-interview/>.

¹⁵¹ Gutterman.

power systems at play), as a way to examine and analyze the power, wealth, and connections that secret societies hold.¹⁵²

The novel is set in New Haven, Connecticut but most of the action takes place at Yale University, following a dual timeline where the past is narrated by one of our main characters, Darlington, and the present by Alex. In the past timeline, the chapters are numbered with the label 'Fall' above them, and they follow Alex's initial start at Yale, leading up to the disappearance of Darlington. In the present timeline, labeled as 'Winter' and 'Spring', we follow Alex as she solves a murder and seeks a way to find and bring back Darlington. These chapters go back and forth in the novel up until the point of Darlington's disappearance.

Galaxy Stern, otherwise known as Alex, is twenty years old, and grew up in Los Angeles, California but after ending up in the hospital because of an event referred to as "Ground Zero", she is found with large doses of heroin in her system and it is in this hospital room where she meets the leader of Lethe (a fictional secret society at Yale), Dean Sandow. He offers Alex a full ride to Yale because of her magical ability to see ghosts, specifically referred to as grays. Throughout her life, Alex has had the reputation of being a drug addict; since she comes from a low economic status family, and overall has had a rough life, this offer feels like a new start, the opportunity of a lifetime. She is employed to watch over Yale's secret societies, otherwise known as the Ancient Eight or Houses of the Veil, Lethe being considered the ninth house.

Alex's ability to see grays plays a key role in this novel. Grays are drawn to anything that reminds them of the living and flee from anything that reminds them that they are dead. Therefore, grays are extremely attracted to Yale's secret societies and their prognostications, and

¹⁵² Gutterman.

this is one of the key reasons for Lethe's purpose. In the novel we are entering the year in which Lethe has two students, a Dante (Alex) and a Virgil (Darlington), to protect the secret societies during these meetings and scare the grays away. In Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil was Dante's guide and teacher, a role that Darlington takes once Alex is accepted into Yale and he has to teach her how to protect and care for the Houses of the Veil. Since Alex can see them, a gift according to everyone but her, she is deemed a powerful asset and doesn't have to take a drug called Orozcerio like Darlington does. As the Virgil and established member of Lethe, it is Darlington's duty to train and teach Alex all the things she needs to know. Her training is then cut short when Darlington disappears, and it is not until the end of the novel that we discover that he has gone to hell. During the parts of the novel that are written from Alex's point of view, we interact more with a character named Pamela Dawes who is also a member of Lethe and referred to as Oculus since her role is to support Dante and Virgil and be a resource. It is during the modern timeline that you are introduced to the murder of Tara Hutchins and Alex's determination to solve Tara's murder since Alex knows that the secret societies are somehow involved.

When plotting the novel, Bardugo knew she wanted to create a main character whose experiences with magic can parallel how women are treated in society, especially in regard to the experience of sexual assault and not being listened to or believed. Sexual assault and gender-based violence is still happening on university campuses and main character Alex's experiences with magic can show that very real harm in a magical way.¹⁵³ She uses magic to parallel the experience of how people who have experienced sexual violence are silenced, with Alex being silenced and even not believed in regard to the things that are hurting her. When discussing the

¹⁵³ Gutterman.

novel, Bardugo always emphasized how she intentionally wanted to discuss gender-based violence on college campuses and as a way to continue the discussion, I will be centering my analysis and thoughts with how that is interwoven with class and outsider/other identities (specifically in Alex's character analysis). *Ninth House* (2019) tackles themes of trauma, surviving and survivor's guilt, unjust power and what it means to be in the hands of the wealthy. Bardugo created a powerful novel that talks about the damage that is done to us and the structures that fail to protect us, specifically the violence inflicted by the academy when students are viewed as a source of profit/labor.¹⁵⁴

I argue that *Ninth House* (2019) is an excellent example of a dark academic novel, in which Bardugo exposes and critiques the violence and destruction that students experience. She comments on intimate and abusive relationships between the academy and the student through the intentional dependency, isolation, and experience of otherness that is created. The novel also explores what it means to not be a part of the Ivy League/elitist world yet be thrust into its environment and be expected to survive. I will begin this chapter by analyzing the impact of power and how it works at Yale and in the Ancient Eight, as well as analyzing the importance of the plot as a way to discuss what it means for these institutions to exist. Especially when organizations like the secret societies, are symbols of wealth, power, and exploitation. Then I will dive into a character analysis of Alex as a way to talk about student labor exploitation and what it means to be considered and defined as an outsider. Finally, I will look at Darling and Dawes and how they themselves are depicted as exploited students as well as how they demonstrate the different relationships students can have with the academy. With this chapter, I

¹⁵⁴ Angela Lashbrook, "Leigh Bardugo's 'Ninth House' and the Complexity of Trigger Warnings," November 18, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/mbmn4q/leigh-bardugos-ninth-house-and-the-complexity-of-trigger-warnings-v26n4>.

want to have a deeper discussion about the themes of isolation and power, the student's positionality in academic settings, varying forms of violence and the exploitation of knowledge that are portrayed in this novel.

Tara's Murder, the Ancient Eight, and Lethe

Bardugo captures the atmosphere of Yale to the point where the reader feels like they are walking and exploring its campus, so that even if you have not physically been there this novel makes it feel that way. Bardugo spends the beginning of the novel describing the various types of architecture that can be found on Yale's campus. She includes descriptions such as "During the day its panels glowed amber, a burnished golden hive, less a library than a temple. At night it just looked like a tomb. This part of campus didn't quite fit with the rest of Yale – no gray stone or Gothic arches, no rebellious little outcrop of red-brick buildings" when she is describing Beinecke Plaza.¹⁵⁵ She even goes so far as to describe New Haven and how the town was a combination of gentrified areas and run down stores, how "it left Alex uneasy, as if the city's identity kept shifting in front of her."¹⁵⁶ By describing New Haven in this way, Alex, and Bardugo, are showing how Yale specifically is its own isolated culture. We see how Alex is an outsider because of her existence and personality, but also how other people in New Haven are considered outsiders because they do not work or study within Yale's walls.

As we continue to be introduced to the setting we quickly realize that Yale is different from New Haven, as if Yale is its own bubble. This setting of the town and the university mirror Alex's own experience as an outsider coming in, which we can see in Alex's description of Yale

¹⁵⁵ Leigh Bardugo, *Ninth House* (Flatiron Books, 2019), 7.

¹⁵⁶ Bardugo, 239–40.

as looking wrong, as having a “complete lack of glamour.”¹⁵⁷ There is even a strong disconnect between the people; from Alex’s perspective the students all follow the same trends and uniform, and their clothes, cars, and friend groups are designed to tell the world who and what they are. The students of Yale all aim to have the same message and similar ways in thinking and acting.¹⁵⁸ Bardugo takes the time to describe these settings and the students through Alex’s eyes as a way to demonstrate what it is like in these elitist bubbles, this being a common theme and focus within the genre itself. Dark academic novels often spend time on describing the setting and atmosphere, establishing the dark and grim tones of the novel, as a way to demonstrate the separation between the real world and the university. Leigh Bardugo beautifully crafts this haunted atmosphere in *Ninth House* (2019) and will use the murder of Tara Hutchins as a way to show just how the elite view outsiders.

As the audience, we see a clear linguistic distinction regarding how the members of Yale view outsiders by referring to them as “townies.” This term is first introduced when Alex discovers the death of Tara Hutchins, the plot surrounding her murder, and who killed her. It is through Tara Hutchins that we are introduced to how Yale views outsiders and how Alex begins to unravel the happenings of Yale’s secret societies.

Since learning about Tara’s death, Alex has known that she was somehow involved with the secret societies at Yale. When Alex pressures Detective Abel Turner (the police officer who works with Lethe) and Dean Sandow, she is told that Tara’s murder has no correlation with Yale and it is important that her murder stays far away from the university.¹⁵⁹ While Sandow has that

¹⁵⁷ Bardugo, 76.

¹⁵⁸ Bardugo, 76–77.

¹⁵⁹ Bardugo, 47, 51.

discussion with Alex, she cannot help but notice what he means is that "...she's town. Not a student. Not connected to the societies. Let it go."¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, what he implies about her is, "I don't expect you to handle this. No one expects you to handle this. No one expects you to do anything..." (73). Alex has every right to believe this, however, because during her experience at Yale everyone has thought less of her because she does not come from an elitist and affluent background. We do see at the end of the novel and discover that the reason for Sandow wanting Alex to not be involved with figuring out the murder was because it was him all along, and if it was not for Alex being persistent in finding justice for Tara he would have gotten away with it.

It is through the language that others use to describe Tara Hutchins that Alex is constantly reminded of what it means to not be associated with Yale. In a conversation with Professor Belbalm, she talks about the situation as, "A terrible thing. I will say a more terrible thing and admit that I'm grateful she was not a student. It does not diminish the loss in any way, of course.' But Alex was fairly sure Belbalm was saying exactly that."¹⁶¹ It is implied here how Tara herself held no value because she was not a student, and that if she was there would have been more care put into solving her murder; yet at the same time she would not have been murdered by Sandow if she had been a student. At the end of the day, "Tara wasn't one of you, Alex thought, as she packed up her bag. You all still feel safe."¹⁶² Everyone around Alex is telling her not to be involved with what happened to Tara" because this is a funding year. Because Tara Hutchins is town. Because there's no indication the societies are involved at all. So let it go."¹⁶³ This is one of the ways in which I see the dark academic genre critiquing the people

¹⁶⁰ Bardugo, 51.

¹⁶¹ Bardugo, 83.

¹⁶² Bardugo, 88.

¹⁶³ Bardugo, 118.

within the academy. It shows the bubbles that people, myself included, have created within the university system, how “townies” and their experiences are not something that occupy our thoughts because we are so wrapped up in our research and what is currently happening within the institution to care about anything happening in the outside world. It is also important that the secret societies and Yale intentionally create these distinctions as a way to promote elitism and create power.

As a member of Lethe, Alex knows that Tara’s murder is connected to the secret societies. It is because of Alex’s persistence that we discover how Tara was connected to the societies, why she was killed, and by who. As you the reader and Alex navigate the mystery you discover that she was connected to Skull and Bones, Scroll and Key, and Manuscript. Tara was known to sell drugs to Yale students and found herself getting pulled into the secret societies because she was paid by Kate Masters, a member of Manuscript, to recreate and grow a powerful drug called Merity that puts its users under a compulsion, therefore losing autonomy and agency over their actions.¹⁶⁴ It was through a relationship with Tripp Helmonth who was a member of Skull and Bones—who later took the blame for murdering Tara--that she was connected to that secret society. Finally, she was connected to Scroll and Key because she was approached by Colin Khatri to grow a drug called psilocybin, a tablet that created portals.¹⁶⁵ It was also through Colin that Tara discovered who exactly she was working for because she threatened to stop making the drugs for him unless he told her.¹⁶⁶ She was able to experience traveling to new

¹⁶⁴ Bardugo, 330.

¹⁶⁵ Bardugo, 332.

¹⁶⁶ Bardugo, 388.

places and making a lot of money from the members, “[b]ecause Tara has gotten a taste of something more. She’d glimpsed true power and she knew this was her chance to take it.”¹⁶⁷

Ninth House (2019) focuses heavily on the relations and interactions between Alex and the Houses of the Veil because of her obligation to Lethe and because of how it shows the reader how outsiders are viewed and treated, even if we are only seeing it through Alex and Darlington’s perspectives. As Alex and Turner are close to solving Tara’s murder and after they discover Tara’s connection to Colin and start wondering if he is a potential suspect, Alex thinks, “But he was a boy with a bright future, and that meant he had plenty to lose.”¹⁶⁸ I argue that even though this statement is made directly in relation to Colin, it can also represent how the students associated with the secret society are also seen in this light. By being a part of the ancient eight, they gain wealth and influential connections and therefore are viewed as more valuable compared to people like Tara. This is an ongoing theme in the novel with how we see Alex interact with these types of students, and the assumptions that are made and the value that is placed on her. Bardugo purposefully creates these interactions and shows the reader the way that Alex navigates the world and what it means to have these labels and values placed on you.

At the end of the day the students are untouchable and will never face any consequences, which can be seen in how even when it is uncovered that members of the secret societies broke rules regarding allowing outsiders in, nothing happened to them other than getting a slap on the wrist. Alex thinks, “Mirandas of the world could do plenty of damage without ever meaning to. Their mistakes never stuck.”¹⁶⁹ In the beginning of the novel as Alex is learning about what goes

¹⁶⁷ Bardugo, 389.

¹⁶⁸ Bardugo, 333.

¹⁶⁹ Bardugo, 48.

on at the secret societies, she asks Darlington “And we’re okay with this?...With people getting cut open so Chauncey can redecorate his summer home?”¹⁷⁰ At the end of the day, the secret societies are using people, literally and figuratively, to advance and to gain more wealth and power. It is through the ancient eight where we learn about how to navigate this world and how everything runs on favors.¹⁷¹ In order to operate within these circles and gain from them, you must form connections, have some sort of power, value, and ultimately wealth. In the end, “[t]he Houses of the Veil had too much power, and the rules they had put in place were really about controlling access to that power, not limiting the damage it could do.”¹⁷²

Lethe’s purpose is to keep the secret societies in check when it comes to how the magic is being operated. Lethe says, “that our duty is not to prop up the vanity of Yale’s best and brightest but to stand between the living and the dead.”¹⁷³ In Darlington’s eyes “We are the shepherds” because of how they are there to make sure the Houses of the Veil never go too far and cover up any damage that occurs.¹⁷⁴ In actuality they “...are charged with monitoring the rites and practices of any senior societies trafficking in magic, divination, or otherworldly discourse, with the express intent of keeping citizens and students safe from mental, physical, and spiritual harm and of fostering amicable relations between the societies and school administration.”¹⁷⁵ This aspect of Lethe reminds me how university boast about diversity, inclusion, and equity yet the way students are treated do not reflect that mission statement. While

¹⁷⁰ Bardugo, 13.

¹⁷¹ Bardugo, 254.

¹⁷² Bardugo, 366.

¹⁷³ Bardugo, 5.

¹⁷⁴ Bardugo, 19.

¹⁷⁵ Bardugo, 57.

the intention is there the impact is that there is a lack of accessibility when it comes to gaining university resources.

Lethe is an extremely small house, where everyone abides by codenames, and all hold specific responsibilities. Darlington is called Virgil and Alex is Dante, these are the representatives of Lethe and the two that attend the secret societies' meetings. You have Dawes who is called Oculus because she is in charge of researching, keeping track and knowledge of any magical items that could be useful. Finally, there is Abel who is the Centurion, the police officer working with Lethe. All these characters are critical for keeping Lethe in charge because of their role in carrying out the organization's actions while also covering for the wrong doings that the secret societies can commit. If it was not for these roles and responsibilities Lethe would not be able to carry out its purpose of protecting the Houses of the Veil. These individuals are valued only for what they can do for Lethe, and we see that with how Darlington is viewed and treated after his disappearance. Alex thinks to herself, "either way, Alex didn't like that it would be so easy for Lethe to close Darlington's chapter. He has been a lot of things, most of them annoying, but he had loved his job and Lethe House. It was cruel that Lethe couldn't love him back."¹⁷⁶ Even later at the end of the novel it shows how, "So no one pays,' said Alex. Except Tara. Except Darlington. Except her and Dawes. Maybe they were knights—valuable enough, but easy to sacrifice in the long game."¹⁷⁷ The same way the university system views students, as expendable only valuable until they cannot be used anymore.

¹⁷⁶ Bardugo, 188.

¹⁷⁷ Bardugo, 391–92.

Galaxy “Alex” Stern

We open up the story, and our official first introduction to Alex, with the sentence “By the time Alex managed to get the blood out of her good wool coat, it was too warm to wear it.”

¹⁷⁸ From this point on, we learn that Alex comes from poverty, has a history of drug use, did not obtain her high school degree or GED, and overall is the complete opposite of every Yale student.

Growing up, Alex has always been able to see Grays and was always scared of them, however it was not until she was twelve years old when she realized they could touch her. After being sexually assaulted and almost raped in a public bathroom by a Gray, Alex cannot help but think, “Where could she ever be safe again?” ¹⁷⁹ After this scene Alex quickly realizes that no one would believe her, that “no one could see the things hurting her” and therefore stays silent about what happened. ¹⁸⁰ After becoming isolated and closed off, it was when she was fifteen that she started smoking marijuana and realized that when she was high she never saw the ghosts, that being high offered safety and comfort. ¹⁸¹ As we slowly learn more about her background, it is around this time that she drops out of high school, is never home and never interacts with her mother, and when she starts making friends and being involved in relationships with drug dealers and drug addicts. Alex even admits how there were times between when she started smoking and when she joined Yale when she would plan to get sober only to start smoking again because she was able to see the Grays and she no longer felt any peace. Even in the current timeline, we

¹⁷⁸ Bardugo, 1.

¹⁷⁹ Bardugo, 123.

¹⁸⁰ Bardugo, 123.

¹⁸¹ Bardugo, 126.

know Alex does not feel safe and she tells the reader that the only way to feel true safety is to have money and power.¹⁸²

Alex feels a sense of otherness because of the dichotomy between her and students at Yale, specifically in regard to wealth. Toward the end of the novel there is a scene where Tripp tries to murder Alex because of how close she came to figuring out who murdered Tara.¹⁸³ However, even though she faced this traumatic experience with Tripp, “Alex realized she was crying. She’d been choked, drowned, beaten, choked again, and nearly killed, but now she was crying—over a shirt. She’d bought it new at Target before she’d come to school. It was soft and fit well. She hadn’t owned many new things.”¹⁸⁴ Alex had just experienced a traumatic event, yet all she can think about is this brand-new t-shirt, something that many people take for granted. Even though this happens toward the end of the novel, this is another example of the reader truly understanding that Alex grew up in a life of poverty, in a state of constant survival. We know she worked part time jobs once she turned fifteen, but her paychecks went toward marijuana because of how it allowed her not to see Grays, in a sense it allowed her to survive. Another example that we see earlier on in the novel is when the “...idea that there could be hot food just waiting for her three times a day was still shocking.”¹⁸⁵ I argue that Alex shows the reader the different types of students who exist at institutions and what it means to constantly live a life trying to survive and what happens when you are in an environment that does not care about or empathize with those experiences.

¹⁸² Bardugo, 333.

¹⁸³ At this point in time, the reader and Alex are made to believe that Tripp is the murderer since he is an easy scapegoat because of his known relationship with Tara.

¹⁸⁴ Bardugo, *Ninth House*, 314.

¹⁸⁵ Bardugo, 78.

As Alex slowly discovers what happened to Tara, she cannot help but constantly be aware of how she is viewed and treated by the people at Yale and how “the world punished girls like them, like Tara, for all their bad choices, every mistake.”¹⁸⁶ Even though Alex had gotten a fresh start at Yale, she still cannot escape her past and the type of preconceived judgements that have been placed on her just from a single glance. A quote that truly describes Alex and her perseverance and strength is “I want to survive this world that keeps trying to destroy me.”¹⁸⁷ This quote is at the end of the novel and it shows that after all the events of *Ninth House* (2019) – losing Darlington, almost being murdered–she is still surviving in a world that does not want her because she did the things she needed to survive and she will carry that judgment for as long as she lives.

Yet, Alex lets people make judgements about her and never corrects them, especially Darlington. She lets him make small jabs at her intelligence and herself as a person and never says anything. I believe that this is another survival technique that Alex uses is a way to navigate the world, because I believe that in her eyes it is better to be underestimated at Yale. I think that there are other aspects to, feeling guilty for being there, wanting to remember where she came from, these are all things that are tied to Alex and how she navigates the world. Early on in the novel, we know Darlington is upset when he thinks “His Dante, the girl he would gift with the keys to a secret world, was a criminal, a drug user, a dropout who cared about none of the things he did.”¹⁸⁸ He never says this out loud to her, but he makes it clear in the first interactions with

¹⁸⁶ Bardugo, 299.

¹⁸⁷ Bardugo, 404.

¹⁸⁸ Bardugo, 31.

her, calling her graceless, uneducated, and an unwelcome surprise.¹⁸⁹ This will all be explored more when we discuss Darlington.

The other character who Alex never questions is Detective Turner. He is constantly dismissing Alex and makes it very apparent that he does not want Alex anywhere near the investigation of Tara's murder. When we first see their interaction with each other, Turner says "I don't know how you ended up here, Ms. Stern, but I know the difference between quality goods and what I find on the bottom of my shoe, and you are most definitely not quality."¹⁹⁰ There is even a point in the novel where he threatens that if Alex does not leave the investigation alone he will take her life apart, that all he has to do is plant drugs in her room and it's over for her.¹⁹¹ Alex is devastated and scared when he says this because he holds this power over her; as the reader and even Alex understand that if she came from a different background, if she was the traditional Yale student he would not be able to make this threat.

Even though Alex is struggling to exist at Yale because of her past and lack of wealth she still appreciates what Lethe has done for her. That her relationship with the academy is complicated and blurred, that it does not have to be one thing or another in regard to her needing Yale and Yale depending on her. She states, "The greatest gift Lethe had given Alex was not the full ride to Yale, the new start that had scrubbed her past clean like a chemical burn. It was the knowledge, the certainty, that the things she saw were real and always had been. But she'd lived too long wondering if she was crazy to stop now."¹⁹² Yale, even if we do not want to admit it, has given Alex a better life. Lethe has confirmed that Grays exists and has shown her ways to fight

¹⁸⁹ Bardugo, 98, 28.

¹⁹⁰ Bardugo, 145.

¹⁹¹ Bardugo, 244.

¹⁹² Bardugo, 19.

them off, therefore making her feel safer because she knows how to scare the things away that have been hurting her. In exchange for giving her this knowledge, she is expected to work for Lethe and protect the Houses of the Veil. During one of the first meetings with Darling, Alex is almost overwhelmed with fighting off many Grays, she discovers through Darlington that Yale has known all along that she could see grays, and she is furious, growling at Darlington and asking why they never helped her.¹⁹³ It was not until all her friends were killed (the events of that night referred to as Ground Zero) and she woke up in a hospital room with Sandow telling Alex, “We are offering you an opportunity”, and that was when she was given a new start for her life.¹⁹⁴ Now that she is all alone, that is when she is useful and easier to convince to accept Lethe, to start a new life and erase everything from before.¹⁹⁵

With the acceptance of Lethe and the narrative of starting a new life, she is still being thrown into an environment that does not want her and she does not have the tools to be successful at Yale, because at the end of the day she thinks to herself about how she does not belong at Yale.¹⁹⁶ Alex is an outsider, an identity that will never escape her when she is existing in these settings. Alex is constantly working hard, constantly striving to do her best and make a better life for herself, but she is still failing her classes and struggling to keep up in them because she does not have the tools to fulfill her commitments to Lethe and be a full-time student. Alex is constantly thinking, “How much time to try to get the work done? How much time to rest? She could never quite make the numbers work.”¹⁹⁷ Her experience conflicts with the narratives that

¹⁹³ Bardugo, 112.

¹⁹⁴ Bardugo, 111.

¹⁹⁵ Bardugo, 48.

¹⁹⁶ Bardugo, 11.

¹⁹⁷ Bardugo, 25.

Lethe and Sandow are telling her. After she is attacked by a dangerous ghost called a glumna she is talking to Sandow about how the secret societies are involved in Tara's death and he is telling her to let it go, that he wants Alex to thrive at Yale and to make it through this difficult year.¹⁹⁸

These are current, modern day narratives that we hear from the university as students. Emphasis is placed on retention and graduation rates, however the tools for success are not there. Students who do not benefit the university do not matter in these systems of power; at the end of the day, we are all expendable.

What makes *Ninth House* (2019) unique to the genre is its in-depth look at the experiences of class and how that impacts the experience at a university, especially an Ivy League. Alex reflects the experience of students who do not come from financially wealthy backgrounds: "For people like Alex, it would never be *what do you want*. It was always just *how much can you get? Enough to survive?*"¹⁹⁹ Not only are these students struggling with survival, but they are also easier to exploit because of what the university is supposedly able to offer. It is easy for Lethe to recruit Alex because she has and comes from nothing, and Lethe/Yale are able to offer her a new start as well as relieve financial stress since everything is paid for. The caveat is that she only has to work for Lethe and interact with Grays. It is through this specific identity that Bardugo, and ultimately the genre, comment on what it means to become 'other' at university institutions and the horrors of being in those environments. I argue that this is critical to understanding the genre and the ways that the academy purposefully and intentionally exploits students because there is already the mindset that these students are not designed to exist in these academic spaces. We see all the small obstacles that students face, beginning with the

¹⁹⁸ Bardugo, 194.

¹⁹⁹ Bardugo, 84.

judgements and misperceptions that other people have of Alex and the barriers to entering academic spaces. However, by offering a ‘gift’, a chance at a better life, it is easier to make students feel indebted to the university and easier to exploit them.

After the attack by Tripp and while Turner is discussing what happened to other police at the scene, all Alex can think about is how Yale is ultimately shielding her, how being a student at Yale offers protection.²⁰⁰ Yet, she is still able to acknowledge how wealthy, affluent people at Yale still operate: “They took what they wanted. The world might forgive them or ignore them or embrace them, but it never punished them”; specifically in regard to how the narrative surrounding Tripp will be created.²⁰¹ This whole relationship between Alex and Yale is complex and messy, it’s a push and pull of wanting to belong and belonging but only to an extent, with the added question of how do I navigate these settings? At the same time, Yale is asking how much more it can gain.

Before the epilogue, right before the reveal of Sandow being the true murderer of Tara, Alex is able to have her tattoos reapplied and storms into a small party with fellow students and professors to confront Sandow on what he did.²⁰² She makes sure to encourage the narrative that she is unhinged, the monster at their door, as a way to remind them why they are scared and threatened by her.²⁰³ I argue that by ending the novel in this way, we see the growth that Alex has had over the course of the novel, and that even though she exists in these spaces she will never be a part of them and that is something that she has accepted and embraces, as a way of taking back power.

²⁰⁰ Bardugo, 384.

²⁰¹ Bardugo, 421.

²⁰² At the beginning of the novel, Darlington shows Alex these moths that make her tattoos disappear as a way to make sure Alex fits in more with other Yale students.

²⁰³ Bardugo, *Ninth House*, 244, 421.

Daniel Arlington & Pamela Dawes

Daniel Arlington, referred to mainly as Darlington, is described as Lethe's golden boy. In *Ninth House* (2019), Darling narrates the story from the past leading up to his disappearance. Darlington represents one kind of student that we see being exploited and existing within university spaces. I argue that he is the student who loves the institution and is willing to sacrifice and devote his life to it, only for the university to exploit that passion for its own gain; the minute he is no longer useful the university does not care, and this is what makes him easier to exploit. Unlike Alex, Darlington purposefully presents himself in a specific way to others versus how he is with himself. The first impression that Alex sees is this 'golden boy' persona and it is not until halfway through the novel when the reader gets to know him as well.

Darlington has always "...prided himself on being prepared for anything..." and Alex is the first person and situation that he has never felt prepared for.²⁰⁴ He appears to always be prepared, knowledgeable, and even wealthy. In the beginning of the novel Alex asks him for three hundred dollars and he pulls it out of his wallet, making it appear that money is never an issue.²⁰⁵ He is similar to Alex in a sense because he does not correct the judgements people make, he wants to appear as a wealthy Yale student who has everything figured out. I argue that is partially why Darlington resents Alex, because he has to keep a façade up and perform in the way that Yale wants him to, and Alex does not. Alex is dangerous, chaotic, can see the Grays and experience magic, and these are all reasons that Darlington resents and fears her. As we move through his point of view we discover that Darlington has had his own struggles, but he does not allow them to be shown.

²⁰⁴ Bardugo, 28.

²⁰⁵ Bardugo, 34.

As we learn more about Darlington, we discover that he was raised by his grandfather who was one of the people to build his wealth, instilling blue collar worker values to Darlington.²⁰⁶ Growing up with this mindset, he believed that his grandfather always knew what was best and trusted him because he had worked for a living, building and creating wealth for himself instead of inheriting it: “his grandfather prided himself as being as much blue collar as blue blood.”²⁰⁷ Living with his grandfather at Black Elm Manor, he became accustomed to his parents coming and going, asking for money and later figuring out that they lived off his grandfather's money, and wondering why the estate was never sold because it was seen as something that just had money being poured into it.²⁰⁸ When Darlington is around sixteen years old, his grandfather dies and Black Elm Manor has been left to him as well as a college trust fund that he would not be able to access until a later time. After his grandfather dies he only speaks to his parents one more time. The only reason Darlington speaks to his parents is that they want him to sell the estate so they can make more money and he refuses to do so since his grandfather gifted it to him in his will.

With no one to provide for Darlington, he was constantly struggling with money, could not afford to eat or have electricity, sold clothing and furniture because he had to keep Black Elm Manor alive because it is what his grandfather would have wanted.²⁰⁹ Darlington was constantly in a state of survival, never knowing what came next and where he would end up.²¹⁰ Then one day he began the process of trying and creating magic and, “Magic was all he had left. He was a

²⁰⁶ Bardugo, 222.

²⁰⁷ Bardugo, 230.

²⁰⁸ Bardugo, 222–23.

²⁰⁹ Bardugo, 230.

²¹⁰ Bardugo, 230.

boy on an adventure, not a boy swallowing poison.”²¹¹ After ingesting the magic potion he made, he was found the next morning lying on the step of the manor after he collapsed leaving the kitchen. The chapter regarding Darlington’s backstory ends with him waking up in the hospital and being told, “‘My name is Elliot Sandow...I have an offer for you.’ Magic had almost killed him, but in the end it had saved him. Just like in stories.”²¹²

Darlington views Lethe as saving him and therefore he feels indebted and prideful to be a part of what Lethe is doing because they are able to share with him magic, and by extension the Grays. Even though, unlike Alex, Darlington does not have the sight and has to take a magical elixir, “Darlington had never gotten used to it. He doubted he ever would—the urge to gag, the bitter spike that drove through his soft palate and up into the back of his skull. ... He tried to nod, but of course he was already nodding—spasming, really. The elixir was like dunking your head into the Great Cold, like stepping into a long, dark winter. Or as Michelle had once said, “It’s like getting an icicle shoved up your ass”; ultimately “... it was the feeling of having brushed up against something horrible.”²¹³ Darlington has shown the lengths he is willing to go in destroying himself to see the Grays and continue working for Lethe, even though one day it will have to come to an end. In his eyes there should always be more magic, he should be able to continue experiencing and taking all that he can.²¹⁴

Darlington is devoted and feels a sense of duty to Lethe, he loves Lethe so much that he fears destroying or distorting this romanticized image of Lethe, for “[h]e did not like to think that

²¹¹ Bardugo, 231.

²¹² Bardugo, 230.

²¹³ Bardugo, 100.

²¹⁴ Bardugo, 163.

Lethe had behaved badly.”²¹⁵ He is not only devoted, but he enjoys working for Lethe because of how it allows him to work closely with magic. In the novel, Darlington is having to ask the questions of what happens after he graduates because he is a senior, but, “Darlington doesn’t want to leave Yale, Lethe, he wants to stay but: He knew Lethe expected him to apply to graduate school, maybe take a research position in the New York office.”²¹⁶ These are all things that are expected of him because there is now someone else to take over the watch of the Houses of the Veil, he will no longer be useful once Alex is trained. Darlington is the student who loves the institution, devotes his life to his passions and work, only to be tossed to the side the minute something else comes in that can offer better results. Darlington does everything he can for Lethe, is extremely intelligent and seen as morally good, only to get swallowed up and taken to Hell by Dean Sandow. Darlington is a risk because he would have known that Lethe was involved in Tara’s murder, so he had to be eliminated; we find out that Darlington is in Hell in the middle of the novel and discover why at the end.

With Darlington, we see the student who cares so much, who devotes their life to the academy, and that is something I want to emphasize when discussing his character and the type of student that he is and how he is very much parallels to real life. Even Alex recognizes and sees his devotion and how wrongfully Lethe takes advantage of the, Alex says she, “...didn’t like that it would be so easy for Lethe to close Darlington’s chapter. He had been a lot of things, most of them annoying, but he had loved his job and Lethe House. It was cruel that Lethe couldn’t love him back” and that Lethe never intended on bringing him home.”²¹⁷

²¹⁵ Bardugo, 111.

²¹⁶ Bardugo, 171.

²¹⁷ Bardugo, 188.

Pamela Dawes, otherwise, none as Dawes primarily, is another strong protagonist in the story, developing a strong friendship with Alex while also discovering who Tara's murderer is along the way. I argue that she represents the student who is overworked, ignoring basic needs such as eating, showering, and drinking, focusing on school and nothing else. As a Ph.D. student, Dawes is described as always looking confused, blinking rapidly when looking up as if she was just exposed to sunlight and, "...always looked a little put out when to spoke to her..."²¹⁸ We know that she has been working on her dissertation for six years but seems nowhere near finishing it, but she always looked like she was on the verge of completing it. It was as if she was always so close to and yet so far from finishing it. She is described as having her nails bitten down to the quick, constantly having highlighter marks all over her hands; Alex cannot remember a time where she did not see Dawes working on her schoolwork.²¹⁹ Alex even remarks/thinks that it looked like her thesis "...was draining the life right out of her."²²⁰

As Alex and Dawes grow closer over the course of the novel, Alex cannot help but think that Dawes does not like her, that when Alex recruits her to solve Tara's murder that she thinks, "She might have been referring to a hundred different things. I don't know if this is a good idea. I don't know if you can be trusted. I don't know how to finish my dissertation. I don't know if you robbed me of our golden, destined for glory, perfect boy."²²¹ Dawes in the beginning is known to be skittish and only cares about and focuses on her dissertation. Overall, she is perceived as, "The Student, Dawes herself in a cage of her own making."²²² We later find out

²¹⁸ Bardugo, 130.

²¹⁹ Bardugo, 130.

²²⁰ Bardugo, 131.

²²¹ Bardugo, 131.

²²² Bardugo, 156, 233.

that it was because of her dissertation topic, which focused on magic, as well as because of financial need that she was recruited by Lethe. Yale saw Dawes's research interest and decided to initiate her as a way to still profit from her because she will be assisting Lethe and her research will ultimately benefit them because of her findings regarding magic and the unknown.

Conclusion

Ninth House (2019) is a gritty and dark novel exposing and critiquing the violence that students endure when it comes to the exploitation of their labor. By setting the novel at Yale and showing the dichotomy between a university campus and the town around and the treatment and perception of Tara's death, Bardugo explores how otherness is created and the roles that it plays in the novel. With three distinct and different types of students, seen with Alex, Darlington, and Dawes we see the various and easy ways in which the university is able to exploit the student. The academy purposefully creates dependency, isolation, and role of being an outsider/other as a way to create a violent relationship between the university and student. With Alex we see the financially poor, undereducated student from a bad background who is entering these spaces of elitism. With Darlington, we see the devoted student who romanticizes the academy and feels a sense of duty. Dawes then shows us the overworked student, whose only view is of school and research. The characters and plots show varying forms of violence and exploitation that occur within the academy and how that parallels our modern world.

CHAPTER V: THE STUDENT'S POSITIONALITY IN REGARD TO VIOLENCE WITHIN

THE ACADEMY

Babel, or The Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution (2022) by R.F. Kuang was a most anticipated release for many people and by the end of 2022 it became nominated for Barnes & Noble's and Amazon's Best Books of the year. *Babel* is a new edition to the dark academic genre that adds a commentary and perspective on colonialism, language/translation, academia, and various forms of violence. Drawing from her experiences within academia, Kuang set out to create an ambitious novel.

After completing her bachelor's degree, she became a Marshall Scholar granting her the opportunity to pursue and complete an MPhil in Chinese Studies from the University of Cambridge and then complete an MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies at the University of Oxford. She then moved back to the U.S. and is now currently pursuing a Ph.D. in East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University specializing in diaspora, contemporary Chinese literature, and Asian American literature.²²³

During her time in England, she began her writing career in 2018 with the *Poppy War Trilogy*, leading her to become a bestselling author. After finishing the final book in the series, Kuang mentioned in an interview that she wanted her next novel to be a historical fantasy standalone, one that talked about magic, colonialism, and the academy, specifically set at Oxford.²²⁴ One of her inspirations for *Babel* (2022) was *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna

²²³ "About," *Rebecca F. Kuang* (blog), August 4, 2017, <https://rfkuang.com/about/>.<https://rfkuang.com/about/>"About."

²²⁴ Diya Chacko, "How R.F. Kuang Created the World of 'Babel,' Her Dark Historical Fantasy Novel," *Orange County Register*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.ocregister.com/2022/08/23/how-r-f-kuang-created-the-world-of-babel-her-dark-historical-fantasy-novel>.

Tartt and the subgenre of campus novels. Kuang wanted to make sure that *Babel* (2022) centered students' relationships with the academy and faculty. One aspect of this relationship that she wanted to focus on is the inherent isolation from reality and events outside of the institution that students experience; in other words, the academic bubble that students (and even faculty) find themselves within.²²⁵ One thing that sets Kuang's novel apart from the subgenre of campus novels is the historical setting, since most of these novels take place in the contemporary world. By setting it within a historical context, she wanted to expose the violent foundations of academic institutions. She discusses the relationships between profit and violence, with students specifically because they are the ones being exploited and used for profit; this violence is more noticeable when looking at the positionality of the student. In *Babel*, we experience a beginning conversation about the contradictions that come from living in and wanting to be a part of the academic world.²²⁶ *Babel* explores how for students, wanting the privileges and even indulging in the comforts that the academy offers is still a form of engaging with white supremacy and encouraging systematic oppression. One aspect of this form of engagement that the genre comments on is the exploitation of students' labor when it comes to knowledge production. As a way to continue commenting on these forms of violence, Kuang uses themes of translation and language as a way to show her audience how the academy exploits knowledge and student labor in a world still heavily dominated by the British Empire.

Kuang intentionally centers the plot around the relationships between elite universities, colonialism, and the British empire. Drawing upon her experiences as a translator, she demonstrates the role of language in these relationships. She states in an interview with John A.

²²⁵John A. Riley, "Translation As a Tool of Power: An Interview with R.F. Kuang," *PopMatters*, July 20, 2022, <https://www.popmatters.com/r-f-kuang-interview-2022>.

²²⁶Riley.

Riley that “...translation is never neutral, but it’s always biased and always ideologically motivated, [which] means that a magic system that takes advantage of the fact that translation can never be perfect, made perfect sense for this novel.”²²⁷ Language, and translation by extension, are ways in which we see Oxford aiding in colonialism, and we see them playing an integral part in our main protagonist's life and motivations for taking part in a revolution to stop the British Empire. Kuang then goes on to say in the interview that “translation doesn’t always have to be an act of betrayal. Good translation involves just a willingness to listen.”²²⁸ I argue that in *Babel*, we see how translation can bring destruction or it can bring justice; therefore, it has the ability to be warped to do whatever the translator's intentions are. In the novel we see the knowledge produced through translation being used both as a way to continue colonial efforts and as a way to destroy the British Empire.

Babel (2022) takes place in 1828 and follows a boy named Robin who was adopted and trained to be a master in languages and to ultimately one day be admitted into Oxford University’s prestigious Royal Institute of Translation, otherwise known as Babel. As well as being a place of study, Babel houses the British Empire’s power source: silver bars. The magic system that Kuang creates centers around how language and translation create and transform magical power into tangible silver bars as a way of manipulating the world around them, from something as small as allowing carriages to move on their own to aiding strength and resources when it comes to colonizing other countries.

Robin was adopted from Canton, today known as Guangzhou, and brought to Britain by Professor Lovell, a man who is presumedly Robin’s biological father and is also a professor at

²²⁷ Riley.

²²⁸Chacko, “How R.F. Kuang Created the World of ‘Babel,’ Her Dark Historical Fantasy Novel.”

Babel. After years of being groomed and taught to be fluent in Latin, Ancient Greek, and English, he is admitted into Oxford. His cohort is made up of three other supporting characters who Robin bonds with throughout the novel: Victoire, Ramy, and Letty. After being admitted into the program Robin sees that it is not what he thought it would be, especially because supporting and staying enrolled in Babel means betraying his motherland and encouraging the British empire through the relationships of knowledge and power.²²⁹ The first half of the novel focuses on Robin learning about Babel and what it means to produce silver bars and the second half of the novel focuses on him joining ex-Babel students who have been stealing silver bars from Oxford in hopes of sabotaging the British Empire and its colonial efforts. At the end of the novel, Robin ends up destroying Babel and all of its knowledge through the power of the silver bars with the inscription of a deadly and explosive translation combination, ending with Robin dying in the process as the building collapses on him.²³⁰

Babel ultimately discusses the big picture relationship between the university system and colonialism, specifically in how the British Empire distributed and stole power and resources from non-Western countries. Kuang begins a discussion of how the university produces violence through the exploitation of students and their knowledge but in the end, she ultimately centers the university's positionality in relation to colonialism. For this chapter I will be diving into the themes and discussions that left me wanting more, specifically in regard to a more nuanced discussion surrounding the student's positionality when it comes to academia and more subtle forms of colonialism. I will discuss how the students specifically are impacted and how they work within these systems of violence that are inflicted by the academy. Centering the student's

²²⁹R. F. Kuang, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* (Harper Voyager, 2022).

²³⁰Kuang, 534–36.

positionality and the impact of the ongoing violence of the academy, I will be looking at three major themes in the novel: language/translation as a form of knowledge production, student labor and exploitation through the students' academic studies, and dependency narratives about the university system. With these themes, and overall critical relationships between one another, I explore an in-depth analysis and conversation centering the importance of the student's positionality and the role that students play in the university and its various forms of violence. Especially when seeing how the novel discusses the intricate relationship that academia has with racism and colonialism.

Language and Translation

Coming from the novel's title and deriving from the story of Babel²³¹, the main setting centers around Oxford's language institution, Babel. Students admitted into the program are trained from a young age to be experts in language and translation, and for some this work becomes a passion and obsession. As a historical fantasy, the novel's magic system relies heavily on language and translation, portraying Britain's main power source as silver bars/silver working. Babel students are taught how to instill the magic in these bars through the power of translations and are encouraged to create new and different combinations of translations as a way to create more powerful silver bars. Certain powers are enacted based on the translation; some bars help move carriages while others provide barriers for institutions such as Babel and allow only students and faculty to enter its doors. The more precise the translation is, the more powerful the silver bar, and this is another reason why students are drilled in becoming proficient in different languages and being knowledgeable in how the languages were derived. At first, the

²³¹ The story of Babel refers to the biblical origins of how languages were formed. God was upset that humans had built a tower to avoid a second flood, and therefore destroyed the tower and created multiple languages as a way to divide humans.

creation of silver bars seems easy, but as Robin goes through his courses and is taught how the magic works, he learns that it is not enough to simply inscribe a translation but that in order to create the bars they, “...need to be able to think in a language – to live and breathe it, not just recognize it as a way of smattering letters on a page.”²³²

However, the more bars produced with the translated phrase, the more overused the language is, and the less powerful the bars become. We learn at the beginning of the novel that this is a current concern with some of the faculty at Babel. I find this to be a parallel in our contemporary world when looking at what type of work students are doing and researching, the ongoing pressure placed on students to create groundbreaking and original work. Students at Babel go through rigorous study, are expelled if they are not able to create silver bars and are pushed to their limits. As we move through the novel, the reader learns how the magic in this world is used and exploited by the British Empire as a way to carry out colonialism and as a way of displaying power.

The university system has been intimately connected to colonialism and was a tool for forcing Indigenous peoples to give up their culture and customs, especially if we were to look at it through the lens of when the Americas were being colonized by the British Empire, France, and Spain.²³³ As imperial instruments, universities enforced white supremacy and oppression, and controlled any cultural resistance when we look at the way indigenous people were treated during and because of colonial expansion.²³⁴ Setting the novel in the 1800s, Kuang wanted to show the reader how this colonial and superiority mindset was still very much real. She shows

²³²Kuang, 159.

²³³Craig Steven Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities*, 1st edition (Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 17.

²³⁴Wilder, 33.

how white supremacy and oppression were still being carried out and supported when looking at the relationship between Oxford, the British Empire, China, and India.²³⁵

The relationship between universities and colonialism are still occurring within current institutions today when it comes to knowledge production, especially when we dive deeper into the resurgence of imperialism and control over how knowledge production is used and distributed. A contemporary world example could be seen through scholarship in regard to who has access and permission to publish their research and which institutions are gaining credit for that world. I use scholarship specifically because of how it is used as a way to continue western knowledge as well as allow western scholarship to continue dominating and controlling knowledge. A specific example within the novel of this is when the cohort travel to China. All students between their third and fourth years are granted an international trip as a way to gain experience, however Robin is used as a translator for political meetings regarding free trade for England.²³⁶ In *Babel*, we encounter how the professors create the narrative that the silver bars are for the Crown only, and argue that by distributing the knowledge, and therefore power, that is found when creating these items, it would be betraying the British Empire and relinquishing control.²³⁷ Universities have always held institutional roles in politics, and are ever-changing in how they conform to political demands and motivations; this is especially seen within higher education trends and performativity when it comes to diversity initiatives and promoting neoliberal capitalist mindsets of equal opportunities for college students.²³⁸ The critique that dark academia has to offer is about how these politics create violence, specifically between the

²³⁵Kuang, *Babel*, 61.

²³⁶Kuang, 306.

²³⁷Kuang, 118.

²³⁸Wilder, *Ebony and Ivy*.

relationships of the student, knowledge, and education. These relationships are dangerous because of how complex, interwoven and intimate they are with one another.

Language has been a central tool of western colonialism because of its influential role in culture. In the beginning of the novel, when Robin first came to England and was being forced to learn English, his first thought was, “A stranger in a strange land, who had to learn the local languages if he wished not to die.”²³⁹ Language is vital for navigating the world, for communicating, understanding different customs and ways of thinking, and forming connections with other people. While Robin is learning English, he realizes that he is beginning to understand and learn something about English history and culture, and how learning this language is critical for his survival when interacting with British society.²⁴⁰ Western countries, in the novel specifically Britain, are using this as a way to erase cultures and enforce power dynamics and oppression. This is something we see when looking at how Robin, Ramy and Victoire are navigating and resisting within the novel.

When Robin question is why silver bars are in large supply in England and nowhere else in the world that could benefit from their properties, he is told that language is not a commercial good and it is an infinite resource that can be used by anyone; other countries (through the eyes of the professors at Babel) just will not pay the cost for this knowledge.²⁴¹ Professor Lovell specifically says, “But language...is not like a commercial good, like tea or silks, to be bought and paid for. Language is an infinite resource. And if we learn it, if we use it – who are we stealing from?”²⁴² As we move through the novel, we see Robin’s internal struggle with how the

²³⁹Kuang, *Babel*, 12.

²⁴⁰Kuang, 32.

²⁴¹Kuang, 116.

²⁴²Kuang, 117.

silver bars are used and distributed, how Babel is stealing knowledge and exploiting languages as a way of gaining power. Robin especially is concerned and grapples with this because he believes that the silver bars could have been used to save his mother who had died before Professor Lovell came to take Robin back to London with him. I believe that this is important to keep in mind because this shows the reader why Robin cares about who has access to the silver bars and who does not; if it were not for losing his mother he would not have started questioning who they could have been used for. However, the professors at Babel do not view language as something that can be stolen, only profited from.²⁴³ This is a discussion that is had between Professor Lovell and Robin during one of Robin's questions about silver bars and their potential to aid countries outside of England. Professor Lovell, and by extension the British Empire, do not view it as a form of exploitation because any country can produce silver bars and magic, however when Robin points out that they do not have the knowledge to do so, Professor Lovell mentions that it is not England's concern.²⁴⁴

This is one of the major conflicts and a consistent tension that rises between some of the Babel students when resisting against and questioning how Oxford is aiding in colonialism and oppression. This relationship between Oxford and colonialism is highlighted by the fact that Robin's cohort is mostly made up of students of color and the languages that they specialize in, especially since Victorie and Letty are the only two female students at the whole institution and Ramy and Robin are the only students who specialize in a language that no other students know. These discussions are more apparent in regard to seeing how the cohort is treated by other Oxford students and how Robin and Ramy are tokenized.

²⁴³Kuang, 117.

²⁴⁴Kuang, 116–17.

Unlike previous cohorts who specialized in the Romance languages, Robin's cohort offers languages that are not as well-known and are not inscribed on many silver bars, and therefore are not as overused. Previous to the timeframe of the novel, the main languages used when creating the silver bars were Latin, Ancient Greek, French, Italian, and German, and over time the power of the silver bars with these translations has weakened because of the plentiful source of knowledge that the people at Babel have collected. These languages have been overused with nothing left to be extracted, and where there is nothing left to gain from knowing these languages the institution begins to look at other languages to exploit. As we experience Robin's four years at Oxford, we discover how each student is tasked with discovering new information and knowledge on specific languages. This knowledge is then transferred to learning new translation combinations and compounds as a way of creating new and more powerful silver bars. However, the silver bars with these languages are weakening and newer combinations are becoming hard to find. This is why finding and gathering knowledge on languages such as Mandarin and Sanskrit are critical in creating new and more powerful bars. Setting *Babel* (2022) in the early 1800s, Kuang shows the contemporary tensions that existed during that time between Britain, China, and England, specifically the need for political control and power.

We discover later in the novel that Professor Lovell and Professor Chakravarti (another professor and direct adviser of Robin) pushed the initiative to diversify the cohorts as a way to innovate, especially when gathering new types of knowledge.²⁴⁵ This relates in how we see a larger discussion happening surrounding student exploitation, since students who speak 'unknown' languages are specifically being targeted so that their knowledge can be used and exploited by the British empire. Robin is even told by an upperclassman named Anthony, "But

²⁴⁵Kuang, 116.

it's really the colonies and semi-colonies – Robin and China, Ramy and India; boys, you're uncharted territory. You're the stuff that everyone is fighting over” and later on he explains that “Languages aren't just made of words. They're modes of looking at the world. They're the keys to civilization. And that's knowledge worth killing for.”²⁴⁶ Through this discussion with Anthony, Kuang spells out for the reader what is happening within Babel and the reasoning behind why Robin and Ramy were forced through rigorous schooling as a way of ending up at Oxford and being used as tools to aid British colonial power.

However, throughout this whole novel we are only looking at the positionality of Babel and the British Empire and not the student, the students are being used as tools and are the actual ones being exploited because of their knowledge. If it was not for the students who knew non-western languages, then there would not be a way to gain that knowledge. While reading I found myself wanting more exploration centering the student and how they themselves are interacting with these themes and systems of power. Unlike other novels in the genre, Kuang takes a plot-centric approach with *Babel* (2022) and therefore the focus is on the relationship between Babel and the British Empire, and not on the figure of the student. We see this with Ramy and Robin specifically, they were stolen from their homes and brought over to England as a way to prepare them to enter Babel so that way their knowledge could be used for creating more powerful silver bars. The students at Babel are a key factor within these relationships between the university, colonialism, and language/translation and if it were not for the student then there would have to be different modes of exerting power.

However, when it comes to language and translation, the novel focuses heavily on its relationship with the university and not how it is used as a tool for exploiting the student. The

²⁴⁶Kuang, 166.

exploration of exploitation within colonialism is viewed more through the relationship between the university and the British Empire, not the student's individual experiences. Students, even in today's institutions, are used as tools for creating and gaining power within universities through the type of knowledge that students are producing. Therefore, in the grand scheme of the novel, something that could have added to the impact of this novel is a focus on how the students themselves are being used a tool of extending power and oppression through the modes of colonialism as well as their experiences that directly affect them. In *Babel* (2022) if I was to take away our main characters and replace them and their passions, the novel would still be the same because they are not the center or key focus on how students interact with colonialism through the academy.

Kuang could have created a parallel to how language and translation are used as tools for colonialism while commenting on the student's role, how if it was not for the students being consumed by their passion and love for languages then the colonialist initiatives would not be possible; as a reader I would have wished that she had fleshed this out more and centered the students' experiences. We will see how this theme becomes prevalent at the end of the novel, as colonialist initiatives are stopped because Babel is destroyed, however I argue that destroying the institution would not have stopped the British Empire's power, because looking past this novel and its ending there are still students within the institution who are producing knowledge and becoming obsessed with their craft who can still be used for exploitative purposes. I argue that the destruction of Babel means nothing because the British Empire will just find another power source to exert imperial control because there are still students to exploit and profit from. With this, Oxford, and by extension academia, makes sure that students form a one-track mind, an obsession, for their passions as a way of ensuring an isolated life within academia. These

messages are told from a early age and with Robin specifically we how he was taught that, “All that mattered were the dead languages before him, and the fact that one day, a day that drew even closer as the years trickled by, he would matriculate at the university he knows only from the painting on the wall – the city of knowledge, the city of dreaming spirits.”²⁴⁷

Student Labor/Exploitation as Knowledge Production

As a Chinese scholar at Oxford, Robin encounters violence in relation to race, language, and knowledge production. When looking at Frantz Fanon’s work, who Kuang was inspired by, in Robin’s experience you can see the challenges that students of color face as colonized subjects within imperialistic structures. Scholars of color often find their work being stolen and used for gain by white scholars, and something that Fanon discusses and that Robin internally struggles with is still wanting to be a part of the academic world even with these real life struggles and problems.²⁴⁸ Ann duCille also discusses how white scholars steal the academic work and labor of Black women.²⁴⁹ Fanon says, “The white man wants the world; he wants it for himself alone. He finds himself predestined master of this world. He enslaves it.”²⁵⁰ We can see this exact relationship between the university and the student specifically in regard to how work is being stolen.

In the novel, we see how the student's knowledge of translation is being used as a way to create silver bars and to use that power source to continue expanding and enforcing power over the colonized world. Something that I wish had been discussed in more depth in the novel is how

²⁴⁷ Kuang, 44.

²⁴⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised edition (New York: Berkeley, Calif.: Grove Press, 2008).

²⁴⁹ Ann duCille, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies,” *Signs* 19, no. 3 (1994): 591–629.

²⁵⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 128.

it is the student's labor that is creating these tools for colonialism and therefore these other types of systems of power. However, the novel focuses on and centers the university as the tool of extending colonial power and not what it means to be a student operating in these larger power structures. It is important that when we shift the center of our discussion to the positionality of the student, we can truly examine how students are exploited and used for profit. While reading the novel, I purposefully centered Robin (instead of the plot) as a way to see how he was being exploited and how his labor was being used as a way to perpetuate colonialism. It is only because Robin interacts with other students that he becomes aware of how his knowledge of languages is being used for extending British power. The stealing and exploitation of knowledge is not as evident in our contemporary world unless you are working and studying within the university system, however it can be seen in how the university claims alumni, whether that be monetary gain or increasing social status, and I would even argue through public and private funding based on how successful (I use this term loosely) the institution is; these are all examples of the different forms of violence that students experience within their relationship with academia. we even see how this is represented in the novel with the discussions that Oxford professors have when discussing alumni of the program and what happened to the students after their time at Babel.

One of the ways in which we see the students' toxic relationship with the university is through Robin and Professor Lovell; about himself Robin thinks, "He has no right to be resentful. Professor Lovell had promised him everything and owed him nothing. Robin did not yet fully understand the rules of this world he was about to enter, but he understood the necessity of gratitude. Of deference. One did not spite one's saviors."²⁵¹ Were Robin to move forward and

²⁵¹ Kuang, *Babel*, 17.

live in the new world he was thrust into, it would mean that “he buried his past life, not because it was so terrible but because abandoning it was the only way to survive.”²⁵² Something that I will discuss later on, is this dependency being formed between Professor Lovell and Robin, a reflection of the relationship between the university and the student. Robin believes that the only way to live in the world, and to show his gratitude, is to be proficient in these languages, and we see later on how being a translator becomes his main purpose in life. From page one, it is clear to the reader that Robin is thought of in terms of his knowledge production (language and translation) and how it is beneficial to academia; whether Robin is aware of it or not, Professor Lovell planted those seeds the minute he brought Robin to England.

Not only did Professor Lovell keep Robin busy with lessons growing up, Robin still experiences the never ending university work: “Babel kept them all too busy with coursework to enjoy a social life.”²⁵³ We see how Robin has grown up in a life of isolation and how that impacts his relationships, it being most evident when he first meets Ramy and is unsure how to make friends but is also terrified about not being friends with this person in his cohort.²⁵⁴ However, academia encourages and normalizes isolation, as we see when Anthony tells Robin that “...academics by nature are a solitary, sedentary lot.”²⁵⁵ This isolation technique ensures that students are constantly producing and dedicating their lives to their studies and craft. I argue that this can be seen as a form of intimate violence.

Early on in the novel, Robin experiences the consequences of not living up to the expectations that Professor Lovell has set when he tells Robin that “[y]ou’ll be back on the

²⁵² Kuang, 18.

²⁵³ Kuang, 141.

²⁵⁴ Kuang, 51.

²⁵⁵ Kuang, 75.

streets with no family, no skills, and no money. You'll never get the kinds of opportunities I'm offering you again."²⁵⁶ In this scene we see how Professor Lovell already claims that Robin is behind in his studies because he started learning languages at a later age, and therefore the blame for not meeting these high expectations is put on Robin himself. Intimate relationships are created between the university and the student as a way to evaluate and put value on a student's performance, production, value, and overall labor; this can be seen within the novel and contemporary institutions. We see Robin realize that when he thinks that "[o]ne thing that united them all [his cohort] – without Babel, they had nowhere in this country to go. They'd been chosen for privileges they couldn't have ever imagined, funded by powerful and wealthy men whose motives they did not fully understand, and they were acutely aware these could be lost at any moment."²⁵⁷ Students become defined by their passions, their knowledge, and in *Babel*, we even see that with how the students are defined and introduced by the languages they speak.²⁵⁸ From the minute the students are introduced their worth is defined by which languages they know and the level of proficiency in those languages; even though we as the reader know that this is not what defines a person's worth it is still something that the faculty and other students believe.

We see instances in the novel where Robin believes in all the work he has done, regardless of the isolation and self-doubt. When Robin first succeeds in making a silver bar work, he finds himself "...watching the still quivering bar, saw clearly now that it was all worth it. The loneliness, the beatings, the long and aching hours of study, the ingesting of languages

²⁵⁶ Kuang, 41.

²⁵⁷ Kuang, 87.

²⁵⁸ Kuang, 76.

like bitter tonic so that he could one day do this— it was all worth it.”²⁵⁹ When students see the final product of all their hard work, the violence, and abuse that has happened is excused because, as Robin states, it has all paid off and was all worth it. Even though “Babel would like to crush the life out of us,”²⁶⁰ Robin believes in the obsession, the drive, the way that pursuing knowledge becomes all-consuming especially in how he notices that “like all good Oxford upperclassmen, he found himself losing his mind. His grip on reality, already tenuous, from sustained isolation in a city of scholars, became even more fragmented.”²⁶¹ For without his knowledge, without his aiding in these power structures because of his labor, he would not have a purpose or a place.²⁶² We see the inner struggle that he is going through and how Kuang critiques this dependency and gratitude for the academy.

It is through Robin’s encounters with Griffin (his biological half-brother) that we see what happens when students no longer are benefiting the university and Oxford’s motivations are questioned, for “Robin could see Oxford now through Griffin’s eyes – an institution that never valued him, that had only ever ostracized and belittled him.”²⁶³ It is because of Griffin that Robin questions what is happening at Babel and how knowledge is being used. Griffin’s main purpose in the novel is to show disdain towards Oxford, faculty, and the British Empire and as a way of showing Robin how colonialism is appearing within his life at Babel. A trend that happens within Babel is that students who no longer wish to be associated with Oxford will fake their deaths in order to leave the school, especially once they discover what is happening with the silver bars and their distribution. These ex-students form a society together where they enlist

²⁵⁹ Kuang, 83.

²⁶⁰ Kuang, 101.

²⁶¹ Kuang, 226.

²⁶² Kuang, 26.

²⁶³ Kuang, 183.

current Babel students to assist them with smuggling silver bars out of the university in hopes of taking down the British Empire and creating a revolution.

A more apparent instance where we see what happens to students who are no longer useful is with a third year named Philip. Robin says that the boy always looked like he never shaved or bathed, and was constantly in the library, looking panicked and bewildered.²⁶⁴ With this description it is clear to the reader that Philip became consumed with his studies and was constantly in an anxious and stressed state. This is not something that is unheard of, it is only pointed out in this scene because after Philip fails an exam and is told that he was out of chances, he is expelled from Babel. This is signified when Professor Playfair crushes a vial of Philip's blood, therefore not allowing him access into Babel ever again.²⁶⁵ Even though the crushing of the vial may be a bit dramatic, Philip's dread and shrieking signifies his inner anguish from losing his ambitions and dreams. Simply because Babel became everything to him, it became his whole world: "Wright," said Robin, "They crushed a vial of his blood. They threw him out of the tower, locked him out, cut him off from everything and everyone —."²⁶⁶

Even though this is fiction, students like Philip exist in our very own institutions. We see in students, and even being a student like this myself, how the need for perfection, the guilt for not constantly working on school and your goals can become all-consuming. Yet, the university system does not take actions to fix these stressors that students experience and that are created by academia. In the eyes of the academy, the student will always be viewed as a means of profit because of the ability to exploit student labor and knowledge production: as Robin points out, "...this tower – this place where had for the first time found belonging – treasured and loved

²⁶⁴ Kuang, 214.

²⁶⁵ Kuang, 214.

²⁶⁶ Kuang, 216.

them when they were alive and useful but didn't in fact, care about them at all. That they were, in the end, only vessels for the languages they spoke."²⁶⁷

Academic Narratives and Dependency

Narratives about the university, both from the community and academia itself, are in conflict with the actual experiences that students have after they are admitted into the institution. A theme within *Babel* (2022) that I wish had been discussed in deeper detail is how this narrative creates a romanticized version of the academy and the dependency that is formed between the student and academia. Robin says, “[l]anguages had to be lived to be understood, and Oxford was, after all, the opposite of real life.”²⁶⁸ This quote demonstrates how once inside the university there is no sense of reality of what is happening outside of the institution. With this isolation there is an inherent and intentional dependency that is created because of how the student becomes immersed within academic life. I argue that this dependency, created by the university, is one of its major tools for exploiting student labor and that is why it is crucial for there to be an allure, a tantalization, to the world of academia.

Throughout the novel, Robin is having to acknowledge his romanticization of Babel and the actual reality of what it means to be a student there. Babel is first introduced and described as a magnificent tower, eight stories tall, towering over the campus; one of the “... marvels of Oxford, Babel seemed the most impossible – a tower out of time, a vision from a dream.”²⁶⁹ Robin even grows up in Professor Lovell's home with a painting of Babel, something that symbolizes freedom and a new life for him, something that he has admired since he was young. He describes how he was struck by its beauty when he sees it in person; Babel is described as the

²⁶⁷ Kuang, 201.

²⁶⁸ Kuang, 254.

²⁶⁹ Kuang, 72.

loveliest place on earth, a university is where all of the famous scholars can come together research, study, and teach; a place that “is the center of all knowledge and innovation in the civilized world.”²⁷⁰ The beauty of Babel is discussed heavily in the beginning of the book, allowing the reader to see how the university is to be admired and sought after; however this is not far from our current perspective of universities today. From a young age, depending on where you grew up, there is a romanticization of the university system and how it can create a better life. One of the clear examples that I see this with is campus tours for incoming and potential students. The campus tours are designed to show you the beauty of the campus and all the things it has to offer, however once you start to experience university life all the glamour starts to fall away and the reality of what it means to be a student (such as the exploitation that begins) sets in.

For Robin, when he is finally confronted with the colonial intentions of Oxford he thinks, “How could he explain it? Babel represented more than material comforts. Babel was the reason he belonged in England, why he was not begging on the streets of Canton. Babel was the only place where his talents mattered. Babel was security. And perhaps all that was morally compromised, yes – but was it so wrong to want to survive?”²⁷¹ This passage encapsulates his need to keep a specific narrative of Babel alive and allows the reader to see the dependency that Robin has built with the university when it comes to surviving. In the beginning part of the novel this is an internal struggle that Robin will go through. This narrative also exists in modern institutions, especially for students who come from low-income backgrounds. As a first-generation college student, myself who came from a similar background, and from my own

²⁷⁰ Kuang, 23.

²⁷¹ Kuang, 137.

conversations with similar students there are two prominent narratives about being a student and one of those is the need to attend university in order to obtain a ‘better’ and more ‘successful’ life; and for many this is a means of survival. Often this is in correlation to obtaining higher-paying jobs as a way to escape poverty within a capitalist society; this narrative might be true to some extent. However, in our contemporary world we are seeing the opposite with students leaving the safety of the university and being bombarded with thousands of dollars in student debt. This narrative is only strengthened when students enter university and are told that their goals, such as higher-paid positions and status, are only obtainable with a higher education degree. I argue that this is the equivalent to what Robin states as survival for many students who are seeking a way out of poverty and are led to believe that this is the only pathway for that to be achieved. This is one of the more prominent forms of dependency that is created between the student and the university that the novel does not fully explore.

An instance where Robin realizes that he is benefiting from the colonial expansion of the British Empire is when he realizes where his financial stipends and paid education come from. During a conversation with Professor Playfair, Robin states how terrible and exploitative Babel is for charging and making a profit from the silver bars. Professor Playfair tells Robin that someone has to pay for his cohort to live and earn money, that nothing is just for free, causing Robin to be stunned.²⁷² We see a similar conversation with Professor Lovell, where he tells Robin that he can deny and fight against Babel all he wants, but ultimately Robin revels in Babel’s gifts and its money, and how he takes it without a hint of guilt.²⁷³ It is in this same argument/scene where Robin has decided to confront Professor Lovell about the objectives and

²⁷² Kuang, 160.

²⁷³ Kuang, 263.

motivations of Babel when it comes to profiting from the silver bars. The conversation quickly becomes an argument with Professor Lovell yelling at Robin and saying, “I have done more for you than you could ever imagine” and calls Robin ungrateful for not appreciating everything he has done for him, telling him that he would have never had a real or fruitful life if he stayed in Canton.²⁷⁴ He even tells Robin later on in the book before Professor Lovell’s death that, ‘You resent me then?’[...] ‘For giving you a life? For giving you opportunities, you couldn’t have dreamed of?’²⁷⁵

These discussions demonstrate Robin’s dependency on the professors and the university and how he himself is profiting from the university in terms of housing, finances, and education. He has no financial worries and is becoming successful in his craft because of the exploitation of power that is ongoing yet when he questions and combats how the silver bars are being used, he is told that he is ungrateful and that everything could be stripped away from him. Kuang does not spend much time with how the students are intentionally being used and that their livelihood is based on these systems of power, but it is important to see this dependency because of how it still exists in our contemporary institutions. That without the safety of the university walls to provide for you, without the money that the university gains and gives to the student, it becomes difficult to survive. These various forms of dependency, I argue, repeat in vicious cycles. This dependency is also created through the narratives ingrained in students and therefore becomes a key tool for student exploitation.

With this push and pull throughout the novel, we see how Robin tries to remove the guilt he feels from profiting from Babel by telling himself that, “Staying at Babel, at Oxford, wasn’t

²⁷⁴ Kuang, 261.

²⁷⁵ Kuang, 318.

an indulgence, it was survival. It was his only ticket into this country, the one thing between him and the streets.”²⁷⁶ He has convinced himself that “without Babel, I have nothing” and when he was asked to leave the institution to join the revolution against Babel and the British Empire, it is only after he has killed Professor Lovell that he does so. The inner struggle to view Babel as a form of survival is gone once he makes this decision because he knows that he will be punished for the murder and therefore to join the revolution becomes the new form of survival.²⁷⁷ When Robin, Ramy, Victorie, and Levy end up joining the revolution and are no longer able to profit off of Babel they realize the full extent of their dependency on the institution. Their lives at Babel were designed for them to never leave, they had no skills outside of academia, and could never think of themselves outside the identity of student while not imagining a world where they were not working, living, breathing at Babel.²⁷⁸ For me, this realization of the students fully showcases their dependency on the institution. In this scene specifically, after the cohort realize they can never go back to Babel they realize that they no longer have money, food, or a place to live. This brings full circle the violence that the academy does and how students are never truly able to escape it, for they will always be left with the scars.

Conclusion

Babel is an ambitious novel, discussing themes of colonial violence caused by the academic institution. While Kuang explores the relationships between colonialism, the British Empire, and Babel, she does not explore how the students themselves are affected by being used as tools for violence and at the same time are in violent relationships with academia through student labor exploitation. As students form intimate and dependent relationships with the

²⁷⁶ Kuang, 267.

²⁷⁷ Kuang, 285.

²⁷⁸ Kuang, 340–41.

university, their knowledge production is exploited and profited from by the institution itself. *Babel* uses the knowledge of language and translation as a way to show themes of violence in regard to how the British empire extends colonial control, the isolation and dependency that students experience, and the cost of knowledge. As Kuang sheds light on the positionality of the university within these systems of power, I hope I shed light on how the student is navigating these systems and relationships, and overall, how they are being impacted by this violence. As the dark academic genre continues to grow, the more it will continue to critique and shed light on the different relationships and forms of academic exploitation and violence in all fields of study.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

During this process, I have discovered that the common themes within the genre are isolation, outsider and other identities, and dependency. These themes unmask the different ways that students experience exploitation by the academy. These themes also depict how various and nuanced forms of violence can appear. In *If We Were Villains* (2017) we see the academy's dependency on its students and how that furthers obsession and greed and what happens when actions and relationships take a sinister turn. Showcasing the ways in which academia can destroy interpersonal relationships with others and ourselves. Unlike the other novels I analyzed, this one is rooted in reality and therefore can cause a much more realistic terror. Our relationships with academia are tragic, just like this novel in its tragic ending.

In *Ninth House* (2019) we see how outsiders are viewed and thought of by ivy league institutions and the harmful stigmas that are created. This novel also allowed us to see the different relationships that students have with the academy and how in the end students are replaceable, and how their value is based on what they can do for the academy. This novel in my opinion had a deeper analysis on student exploitation; how academia finds ways to have students become indebted to them. The narratives around exploitation are that the university is giving students a better life and helping them accomplish their dreams in return the student must be in servitude to the institution. There is of course deceptions and violence that occurs within this relationship and how it is largely based on how valuable the student is.

Finally, in *Babel* (2022) we discuss the importance of the students' positionality, how their knowledge and labor are used in colonialism and academia. This novel shows how racism and colonialism are rooted in academic institutions and play a role in how students of color are viewed. Especially in regard to language, colonialism, and exploitation of knowledge. The

student's positionality is crucial in understanding student exploitation because we become aware of how the student is being impacted by various forms of violence inflicted by the academia and how they themselves are contributing to colonialism and imperialistic endeavors. We, again, see themes of dependency, isolation, and false narratives of success. These novels all show the importance of dark academia as well as why it is important for the genre to continue expanding, to have more conversations about and critiques of academia and the various violences that occurs within its walls. My hope is that as the genre expands that there will be more scholarship surrounding this cultural phenomenon since there is not a ton of research at the time of this research. Ideally, future scholarship will expand outside of the literary genre and discuss social media, movies and television, and any other forms of popular culture that dark academia has appeared in.

This research, and genre, are important to me because of how it exposes the ugliness of the academy, how in a way this genre offers hope because of how it tackles these topics and does not hide behind a romanticization of the university. Even though all of these characters were in love with their passions (except Alex of course), that never diminished how the university acts in violent ways for it to benefit from and exploit that love. While reading (and even rereading) these novels they gave me a sense of hope because of the conversations they were having, that if we keep discussing these harms maybe the university will change one day because it will become impossible to look away. As I continue to read from the genre, I am looking forward to diving into deeper and broader discussions of some themes and topics I have missed while looking at only these novels. Below I list some other dark academic novels I loved and others that I want to read soon.

Other Dark Academic Novels That I Loved:

Bunny by Mona Awad

They Never Learn by Layne Fargo

A Lesson in Vengeance by Victoria Lee

Vicious by V.E. Schwab

Dark Academic Novels That I Want to Read Soon:

Plain Bad Heroines by Emily M. Danforth

Ace Of Spades by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé

A Deadly Education by Naomi Novik

Heaven by Mieko Kawakami

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