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Classics and Social Media

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Classics and Social Media: Memes, Red-Pillers, and Dark Academia

Thanks, Raedene, for that introduction.

In this talk, I will focus on the creations and curations of Classics students—memes, red-pill communities, and the dark academia aesthetic. I need to do a disclaimer about educational use, since I will be showing such items as a Confederate battle flag or a couple of quotes from rather terrible people, and I need to clarify that I am not endorsing or promoting everything I show.

Part 1: Memes

SLIDE First, I should define the word “meme.” According to sociologist alicemarwick, a meme is “a string of reappropriated words and images.” marwick traces the idea back to Richard Dawkins, who attempted to use biological terms to describe the

spread of human culture in the 1970's. Dawkins wrote, "memes propagate themselves by leaping from brain to brain."

I even had a student who enrolled in New Testament Greek because I advertised it with a meme about the Internet's favorite Shiba Inu dog, affectionately nicknamed Doge. The student even brought up the cryptocurrency Dogecoin in a class discussion of ancient money. Even though ancient coins were made of precious metals and could be melted down and made into other objects, some of the value was "fiat value" conferred by the image on the coin or by whoever issued it, so cyptocurrency takes "fiat value" to new heights or depths.

At a recent academic conference held online, one archaeologist illustrated his points with memes. Since the archaeologist was from Poland, I was unfamiliar with some of the memes, but I still "got" most of the jokes, and in the discussion

period, some of the conference participants expressed appreciation for his use of humor in this unfamiliar, rather disembodied format. At an in-person academic conference before the pandemic, a Canadian professor and I opened our laptops to show one another the memes we had used in teaching ancient history courses. And his memes were more on-point than mine.

SLIDE While there are dozens of Classics-related memes, I am going to focus on two Instagram accounts that I follow and one inactive Twitter account, and I am going to emphasize the lighter side. First, gilgameshofuruk on Instagram: he is an undergraduate studying history at Saint Andrew's University in Scotland, and his interests are as much archaeological as literary or historical. A recurrent theme is the difficulty of making a living if he should go on for his doctorate in archaeology, and some of his posts are pessimistic or "doom" memes. Like all history

majors, he has also had to take courses in non-Western history, so some of his recent memes reflect East Asian or Central American contexts. Here are a couple posts from his account, and only one is career doom meme. This career doom meme is an elaboration of the Russian proverb, “we have already stepped on that rake.” The second refers to the mythological story of Aeolus, god of winds. He gave Odysseus and his crew a bag full of winds so that the winds would stay in the bag while they were sailing. But the crew thought that the bag contained treasure, so they opened it with disastrous results. This meme from the Nickelodeon cartoon character Spongebob captures the moment of opening the bag and letting out all the winds.

SLIDE Second, I adduce the Instagram account, [larththeetruscan](#): he is a recent graduate of Seattle Pacific, and he started creating memes when he took my ancient history course on Greece and

Rome. I would usually show some memes during the short break halfway through class to get everyone to relax a bit. While some of you know who he is, I will refer to him as Larth, a typical name of a male Etruscan. If you are not familiar with the Etruscans, they are an ethnic group in northern Italy, for whom Queen Anne's own Etruria Street is named. Here are a couple posts from his account. One of them is a meme featuring a triple standoff among armed men. This meme compares the triple standoff to the successors of Alexander the Great, who divided his empire and immediately began fighting one another the minute Alexander died. The second is a comparison I did in class between the actor Owen Wilson and a mosaic of Christ in late antique Britain—look at the chin! My point is not of course that Jesus was white, but that cultures enculturates the Christian story with people that look like them.

SLIDE In Ethiopia, Jesus looks Ethiopian; in Japan, Jesus looks Japanese; in Britain, Jesus looks British. Larth has not posted much lately, since he is now discerning a monastic vocation while working for a service organization in New York City.

SLIDE Elena Gomez, a student at University of Iowa, who made a Twitter account for Prof. Hannah Čulík-Baird's Classics 102 course, World of Rome. Culik-Baird comments, "her memes were so on-point." Here are some images from her twitter account. The first one uses images of the comedian John Mullaney to describe the plot of Seneca's tragedy *Thyestes*. This tragedy treats a kin-murder plot from ancient Greece to illuminate the pervasive kin-murder of the early Roman Empire; for instance, the Emperor Nero had his own mother assassinated. The second image, not strictly a meme, shows Elena's flashcards of key words for her class—the key word here is 'ambition' or 'ambitio' in Latin, that

literally means going around to various people seeking their votes and political support. Before there were those annoying political robo-calls, candidates had to wear out shoe leather or sandal leather seeking support. What I like about this image is that it shows her studying and even suggests a learning strategy to her fellow students. The emphasis is on learning, rather than on self-promotion.

Why is this happening? First, it is fun to create or spread memes that others will recognize. Second, it is near-simultaneous communication with your peer group and with your instructors. LarthTheEtruscan started his account partly as a way to show his love for his academic discipline to his fellow students. Elena Gomez' Twitter account @elenaCL102, says, "in it for the extra credit," though she has put in way more work than necessary. Finally, it is a way to trick yourself into studying; even the act of

typing the name of an historical figure or literary character solidifies it in your memory.

But now I want to look at a way that Classics has played a role in a far less constructive pursuit, the building of so-called red-pill communities.

Part 2: Red-Pill communities

Classics and Red-Pillers

SLIDE The rise of the alt-right in North America and in Europe has been one of the most frightening developments of recent years. A Polish-American friend said to me recently, “We Middle-Europeans have seen this movie before, and we know how it ends.” He did not even need to add, “in World War.” But I hope that there is still time to turn back.

The alt-right likes to use a scene from the film *The Matrix* (1999) as a guiding metaphor. For those who have not seen the film, the character Morpheus, played by Laurence Fishburne, offers the character Neo a choice between reality, represented by a red pill, and a sleep of illusion, represented by a blue pill. Note that the political meanings of these colors had not yet been popularized. Moreover, some interpretations of the film see the pill choice not as an allegory for politics, but as an allegory for being transgender—the red pill is the true gender, while the blue pill is the gender identity assigned at birth. The transgender reading of the allegory is reinforced by the fact that the filmmakers, the Wachowski siblings, both changed gender from male to female some time after the film, and this allegory is offered in passing in the new movie *Matrix Resurrections*, the fourth movie in the franchise. But in alt-right discourse, the red pill means their ideas

and frames, while the blue pill means the ideas and frames of their opponents.

Some red-pillers have participated in alt-right events, such as the

Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, VA, shown here, or

Identity Evropa meetups like the one on Queen Anne Hill

profiled in the *Stranger* newspaper. Their connection to Classics is

tenuous, but some adopt Classical pseudonyms, pretend to follow

the ancient philosophy of Stoicism, or claim to model their lives

on Classical literature. For example, Musonius Rufus was the

name of an ancient Stoic philosopher from the first century CE.

This philosopher wrote two treatises arguing that women should

become Stoic philosophers. He also taught Stoic philosophy to the

formerly enslaved Epictetus, whose philosophical writings

influenced the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. But the name

Musonius Rufus was adopted by the founder of the neo-

Confederate website Identity Dixie and host of the podcast Rebel Yell: a Southern Nationalist podcast of the Alt-Right; he also helped publicize and promote the Unite the Right Rally. To unpack this irony, the neo-Confederate Musonius Rufus would disagree with the philosopher Musonius Rufus on the education of the formerly enslaved and on women having the same abilities as men. Curtis Dozier, who teaches Classics at Vassar, has an entire list of Pseudonyms and Avatars on his blog Pharos, Greek for lighthouse, including this one. More examples can be found in Donna Zuckerberg's book *Not All Dead White Men*.

SLIDE One other odd thing is that many Red-Pill forums and reading lists recommend the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.

Zuckerberg remarks on how Red-Pillers prefer later Stoic philosophy and their thoughts about ethics rather than about logic or physics (49). Marcus Aurelius writes in Greek in the late

second century CE, almost at the end of the Stoic tradition and with influence from other philosophical schools (49).

Nevertheless, he has the advantage of being complete rather than in wretched fragments and widely available in translation rather than requiring two years of college-level Greek courses. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* are mined for advice on "character" (second work on the list of "Hesiod-Blavatsky" on /redpillbooks, [Select-Works.pdf - Google Drive](#)). Or a thread on Redpillbooks includes the *Meditations* for advice on "how to be a man," even though very little in the work is gender-specific. Older translations use "man" for the Greek word *ἄνθρωπος*, human as opposed to animal. The word is grammatically masculine because the default setting for people is masculine or because roles and jobs are masculine, but "person" is probably the most appropriate translation into modern English. But the observation about the

lack of gender specificity does not come from me, but a woman, the accomplished local poet Roberta Olson, with whom I read through a substantial portion of the *Meditations* in Greek. Here is an example from the *Meditations*:

“Early in the morning, you should say to yourself: I will meet people who are too much, unpleasant, aggressive, tricky, malicious, or anti-social. All these features have turned out in them due to their ignorance of good and evil” (2.1, trans. O. Ewald). At the risk of being obvious, Aurelius talks in a rather abstract way about people in general, of all genders, and not how his wife, the Empress Faustina, should make him a sandwich. This quote also shows his pessimistic view of humanity—on a bad day, comments the Roman historian Colin Wells, he sounds like Eeyore from A.A. Milne’s Winnie the Pooh series.

I cannot argue that ancient Stoics were progressive by modern standards. While Stoics believed that every human being is capable of philosophy, they did not argue or work for the abolition of slavery or for legal equality

of women with men. But to make ancient Stoicism less egalitarian than it actually was is a pronounced failure of red-pill discourse.

SLIDE If they have not sworn off romantic relationships altogether, many red-pill men seek casual sexual encounters as pickup artists. As pickup artists, they overvalue and misread the Roman poet Ovid, who wrote an infamous work about how to arrange casual sexual encounters called the *Ars Amatoria*, sometimes translated as the *Art of Love* or, perhaps better, the *Lover's Skill*, and they see Ovid as a kindred spirit. Peter Burns comments, "The *Ars Amatoria* is quite red pill...Women of two thousand years ago and from very conservative cultures had the same vices that women of today have" (qtd. in Zuckerberg, p. 94). What the red-pill men have in common with Ovid is a view of men as superior to women and a goal of transgressing women's boundaries. Here is an example of a pickup moment in Ovid, and again, I don't endorse this or recommend it as relationship advice:

"Do not let the contest of noble knights get away from you:

the Circus Maximus, full of people, has many opportunities...

and as it happens, if some dust by chance should fall into the girl's lap,
your fingers would have to brush it off,
or if there is no dust, still brush away nothing.

Let any reason be fit for your service.

If the hems of her cloak are lying on the ground,

Gather them and carefully pick them up from the unclean dirt.

Immediately, if the girl allows, her ankles will turn out to be

Visible to your eyes.

(135-136,149-156)

Creepy? Yes, but not necessarily serious, unless you are red-pill. Red-pill readers would take the desirability of crowds at face value, as increasing their odds for meeting women. They would also recommend invading women's personal space, as Ovid's lover does, even though red-pillers emphasize unrequested kisses much more. Finally, they also would

approve of looking at the woman's ankles, as a way of extrapolating the shape of the rest of her body and ranking her on a ten-point scale.

But what the red-pill men miss is a lot of ambiguous features of Ovid pointed out by Zuckerberg and others. First, he is being overly technical about human interactions, as one might be technical about horse-training. Richard Tarrant called the *Ars Amatoria* "insanely systematic" (CCO 18). Baylor professor Julia Hejduk, in the introduction to her translation of this work, points out how absurd the idea of a technical manual for relationships is, how Ovid's work is a satire in its very premise, a subtlety that red-pillers miss. Second, Ovid discusses the idea of "service," which is my rough translation of the Latin word *officium*, service or duty, the ancestor of our word "office." Usually services are performed by men for their political allies or ideally for the state, as in Cicero's work *De Officiis*, "On Services/Duties," a work largely based on real Stoic philosophy. But in gender relations, the power gap between men and women in ancient Rome was enormous. The idea of a man performing service for a woman is more like a metaphor or a cosplay that does not change any underlying social or

political realities. Red-pill men would actually see the idea of service from a man toward a woman as being a “simp,” a distraction from the goal of magnifying one’s own status and power.

SLIDE Moreover, many features of Ovid’s text violate Roman laws of his day, specifically laws promoted by the Emperor Augustus. Ovid claims that he is not teaching how to seduce married women, which was newly outlawed under civil law by the Emperor Augustus, but rather how to get free sex from prostitutes, which is obviously not serious. Ovid’s lover is unmarried, and Augustus instituted legal and financial penalties for celibacy, for remaining unmarried into middle age. The scene quoted above takes place at events arranged by the Emperor Augustus, but he also passed laws to force women and men to sit in separate areas at public events. As if this was not enough, this poem, the *Lover’s Skill*, motivated the Emperor Augustus to exile Ovid from Rome to the town of Tomis on what is now Rumania’s Black Sea coast. Red-pill readers are unaware of the legal and political implications of Ovid’s text, just as they often seem to ignore their own countries’ laws against assault or improbably advocate

the repeal of the 19th Amendment of the US Constitution, which specifies that women have the right to vote.

Finally, the incident may be modeled on an anecdote about the Roman general Sulla that appears in Plutarch's *Life of Sulla*:

"A few days later there was a gladiatorial show. In those days men and women could still mingle in the theatres and were not segregated into different areas, and there happened to be sitting near Sulla a good-looking, high-born woman called Valeria, who was the daughter of Messala and sister of the orator Hortensius. Coincidentally, she had just been divorced from her husband. As she walked past Sulla, on the row behind him, she rested her hand on him and pulled a piece of fluff off his toga, before carrying on to her own seat. Sulla looked at her in surprise, and she said, 'Don't worry, Imperator, I just want to have a little bit of your good fortune for myself.' Sulla liked her remark, and was clearly intrigued, since he sent someone off to make discreet inquiries about who she was....In the end, they became formally betrothed." (Plutarch, *Life of Sulla* 35, trans. R. Waterfield). Despite how well Sulla comes off in this anecdote, Plutarch

goes on to mention that Sulla, even after his marriage to the charming Valeria, continues to visit prostitutes of both genders.

This incident in Plutarch is closer to a meet-cute than Ovid's service, and note that the gender of the one doing the touching has a completely different cultural meaning. A woman touching a man's clothing is coded as a gesture of admiration rather than a prelude to acquiring him. But the most important thing for Roman readers is that the man in the anecdote is Sulla, who was in the opposite political faction from Augustus and his adoptive father Julius Caesar. Sulla ordered the murders of thousands of his political opponents, in contrast to the Augustan policy of pardoning his enemies if they surrendered. I have called Sulla the Voldemort of Roman politics. So it is transgressive to make Sulla look good or to recommend behaving like him in meeting women at sporting events, in violation of several of Augustus' laws.

Finally, the audience for Ovid's poem is unclear. If the audience is Augustus, named as Caesar three times in the work, the poem constitutes extended political trolling or even a metaphorical dissent from Augustus'

laws, morality and politics. Allison Sharrock characterizes Ovid as not promoting adultery for its own sake, but offering an “alternative to Augustan social control” (CCO, p. 105). If the audience is other free, elite men, the lover is showing his competitors his techniques. If women gain access to his text, they can recognize the lover’s techniques and perhaps have enslaved attendants or male relative keep him at a distance or block his efforts at service. In any case, the Red-Pill readings of Ovid as an unironic pickup artist are missing a lot, both about the political context and about human behavior.

Part 3: Dark Academia—More than an Aesthetic

SLIDE Before getting into Dark Academia on Instagram, I first need to acknowledge my own attempts at creating an aesthetic.

Here are some examples from my own Instagram page, which are mainly bright colors: here is a bright yellow sunflower from late fall, and some tall pale green grass. Perhaps unwittingly share in what philosopher Daniel Kauffmann calls “The Good Place”

phenomenon—I use brighter colors to suggest a more constructive attitude, rather than the more restricted palette of more nihilistic shows. But I want to emphasize here what I have in common with the dark academia movement. I want to show that my suggestions come from someone sympathetic to the aesthetic rather than a grouchy “kids these days” rant. The image on the right features a quote-off between me and Larth the Etruscan about the ancient South Asian epic *Mahabharata*, which we were reading in class at the time.

SLIDE On the popular social media application Instagram, there are many accounts using the #darkacademia hashtag. Some of the common things labeled with this hashtag include enigmatic photos of older buildings or study nooks, references to “classic” literature, yearnings to retreat from the world and read classic literature within the aforementioned study nooks, and ideally, the

pursuit of learning and self-knowledge. But this talk will not simply describe the phenomenon—it will suggest ways that dark academia can be more of a way into the world and less of a way out of it, a way into writing and creativity rather than an escape from it.

Here are some examples from Instagram. Note the limited color palette: white, black, earth tones, especially sepia or dark red or green. The dominant clothing aesthetic is mid-20th century boarding school uniforms—classic lines, but limited colors because of wartime shortages of fabric and dyes. The film still on your left shows this aesthetic, even though the film is set in 1988. But 1988 was at a peak of vintage nostalgia and the year before the film *Dead Poets' Society*, another stylistic touchstone for the Dark Academia aesthetic. The image on the right shows how the

Dark Academia aesthetic can be monetized, like everything else under the sun.

SLIDE Next, I want to talk about the buildings. I love the building images, especially since some of them I have never seen before.

My urban architecture antennae are usually up, and I taught architecture in a very introductory art history course at SPU for over a decade. My study of art history, though, would challenge the dark academics to think a bit more about these buildings both artistically and socially—to what architectural movements do they belong? Who designed them? What is it like to walk through these buildings? How does the feature in the photo fit in with the overall design, or not?

Particularly during these pandemic times, it seems particularly alienating to include a photo of an empty building or its exterior: + 1 for curation, -3 for experience. Even a brief

sentence nearby such as “I like this building façade because” would go a long way toward connecting a random image with a more coherent aesthetic. In fact, both of these images could easily mention about the work of art-historical restoration that goes into maintaining the aesthetic. The Residenz in Wurzburg was heavily damaged in World War 2, then restored to what you see here in one of the biggest restoration projects in Europe. Similarly, Santa Croce in Florence has been repeatedly damaged by floods of the Arno River, then restored to what you see here. SLIDE. The books mentioned here discuss several restoration efforts, including building back from the 1966 flood. The nave looks way more awesome than a statue next to the door.

SLIDE Next, I will discuss the nooks. We all need places to study where we can find the right degrees of comfort and focus, but this will vary a great deal by person. I wonder whether the principles

of achieving a flow state or the much older monastic idea, “go into your cell, and it will teach you everything” would be helpful here. Not simply, “I want” or “that looks like the best place for the activity of reading or creating”, but “I can get refuge from rain/sun/overstimulation/understimulation”. The monk Richard Rollheiser in *Domestic Monastery* quotes Saint John of the Cross, “But they, O my God and my life, will see and experience your mild touch, [they] who withdraw from the world and become mild, bringing the mild into harmony with the mild, thus enabling themselves to experience and enjoy you” (*Living Flame* 2.17; Rollheiser 10). Here I am in more sympathy with the Dark Academia aesthetic, and note that the nooks do not need to be dark; sunlight is actually a plus.

SLIDE Next, classic literature. The canon of dark academia, on most days, seems very limited, a list of maybe half a dozen books

and films. On some days, it seems that half the posts are about the *Great Gatsby* or about *Romeo & Juliet*; I do not want to slag either of these worthy works, but despite the humor of the right image, it is time to move on. Donna Tartt's *Secret History* appears frequently, but more as a hashtag than anything else—it is far from clear whether the posters have even read this story of college students studying Classics and worshiping the Greek god Dionysus with human sacrifice.

SLIDE Some of the books featured in Instagram posts for their aesthetics barely count as literature. For example, the books on the left slide are mostly geography books published in Europe in the 19th century CE, artifacts of peak colonialism. The books on the right side are from the nicely affordable Penguin series, but you cannot read half the titles, and what you can read is mostly from the 19th century and in English or translated into English.

More adventurous posters will branch out to poetry, such as, on a really good day, Mahmoud Darwish, Louise Glück, Anne Carson, Anna Ahkmatova, or Pablo Neruda. More of that, please! Maybe what bothers me more than the limited reading list is that some account owners seem to have stopped reading after high school. They want to create clever posts about literature, but cannot be bothered to read more of it.

SLIDE For me, literature is like a rope in freezing weather running from the front porch of the farmhouse to the barn and the outhouse. I follow the figurative rope from one book to the other. I read the novel *Confederacy of Dunces* because a celebrity whose name I have forgotten mentioned it in a *Parade* magazine interview; I read Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* because it was repeatedly mentioned in *Confederacy of Dunces*! If you like *Gatsby*, follow up with Petronius' *Satyricon*, whose character Trimalchio

is a possible model for *Gatsby*, but much more savagely satirical about the morally corrosive effects of wealth. Petronius outdoes Fitzgerald on the strength of a scene where a childless rich man has left his money to a group of parasites and fortune hunters.

The catch is that if they want to inherit any of his fortune, they have to eat a proportional share of his dead body—how's that for dark!

SLIDE Or maybe what bothers me is that Latin textbooks appear as props, but the posts rarely move on to Latin literature, especially poetry, which is a large part of the point of reading Latin literature. In other words, the textbooks are usually spine-out, rarely open. Even though I work on Latin prose, I want to affirm the value of Latin poetry or even to say that it has more to offer dark academics. The romantic elements in Latin poetry are somewhat culturally specific, as in my Ovid example, and some

of them make Victorian England look progressive. But the notes of yearning, the fantasies about another human soul, and the wish for things to be different and better are all there for the finding. Of course, I am not claiming that Latin literature is the purest or best place to find things that appeal to the dark academia aesthetic, only yet another place, especially for those who have gone to the trouble to learn Latin.

Here are some samples from the Roman male poet Propertius. The notes of longing and wishing for things to be different is very congenial to the Dark Academia aesthetic, but he is not one of the A-list authors.

“If all were to desire to pursue such a love-life and if all snuggled together and relaxed their limbs with the help of plenty of wine, there would be no cruel sword nor warship, nor would the sea near the Battle of Actium splash over our bones.”

Some of these thoughts are pretty conventional — what the world needs now is love. The hypothetical language is in the original, and the wish for things to be different is very much in the spirit of Dark Academia. But I also want to highlight what is historically particular--Rome had recently finished almost a century of wars, and in 31 BCE, Romans had killed Romans at the Battle of Actium, which the Emperor Augustus won. Propertius is sometimes considered obsessed with death and the dissolution of bodies, but in his case, it is hard to separate obsession from memory. Even though Propertius enjoyed the patronage of the Emperor Augustus and his circle, Propertius mostly celebrated the ideal of romance over laws or wars.

SLIDE If first-person narrative is more your thing or if you prefer Greek to Latin, here is a great piece usually attributed to the Greek female poet Sappho. “The moon has set — the Pleiades, too.

It is midnight, and the time is passing by, but I sleep alone.”

Again, we can recognize the feelings of loneliness and sleeplessness she invokes, and this poem is short and vivid enough for Dark Academia Instagram posts. But I need to add that Sappho was part of a vibrant poetic ecosystem now mostly lost to us, and we know even less about her century, the early 6th century BCE, than when Propertius or Ovid lived. Even more than with Roman poetry, some of the nuances will remain out of reach. Here is a comment from one Instagram account quoting a scene from the movie *Paterson* about the difficulty of reading literature in translation, “Poetry in translation is like taking a shower with raincoat on.” I am not saying, “Don’t translate,” but that there are things you will miss.

Some participants in Dark Academia to acknowledge the Eurocentrism inherent in the aesthetic and solicit appropriate

works by non-white and non-Anglophone authors or filmmakers, especially Japanese works, but the top works cited on Instagram remain British or American, even if the posters themselves are physically located in Italy or in India. Another account includes a short video called Decolonizing Dark Academia, whose title is self-explanatory; this video may seem to cancel all of dark academia because of links various colonial regimes, but the speaker is specifically calling out admiring the British Raj, the attempt by Britain to control the areas now known as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. If you want to know why the Raj was bad, the short version is that they put Gandhi in jail for advocating Indian independence from Britain. Moreover, Lord Macaulay's 1835 memo, The Minute on Indian Education, forbade the teaching of Indian literature in British-controlled India. As an American, I have no love for British colonial regimes, even as

some of the Classics resources I use originated in the British Empire. I certainly do not want to idolize the British Raj, and the Dark Academics based in India want this even less.

SLIDE Here is a constructive example of applying the Dark Academia aesthetic outside of a western context. The left one features an example of juxtaposing an ancient Sanskrit manuscript, a Mark Twain quote admiring India, and a modern Anglophone novel by the Indian author Arundhati Roy. The post is somewhat devoid of commentary, but at least the juxtaposition is not clichéd. On the right, here we see a Mogul-period mosque, duly identified and featuring an actual human being at prayer, and with the label “Muslim Dark Academia.” Since the poster is based in South Asia, I read this not as a slur, but as an invitation to consider how the effects of light and darkness or the aesthetics

of Dark Academia as a whole are at play in the architecture of this mosque.

SLIDE Less positively, there is something post-traumatic about this aesthetic that makes people want to retreat. They have experienced at least failure, perhaps exclusion or prejudice or even violence. It is part of the aesthetic to feel the feels, but less so to write about seeking help from others or trying to get perspective on the situation. Here are a couple examples, with some clarification. The left example seems like a classic self-defeating spiral, but the account owner in other posts suggests that he has avoided the spiral by dropping out of college. The right example depicts an example from Jenny Slate's recent memoir *Little Weirds* about her sinking into a pit of despair and rising back up, but the account owner helpfully adds a plea for

empathy, since most people will not tell you they are in a pit of despair.

SLIDE I'm here to tell you that academic success does not magically solve the rest of your life. Yet empathy remains crucial.

M. Stewart Lewis, emerging from a years-long depressive episode, writes in his article "Acadepressives," *Writing on the Edge* 29.1 (Fall 2018), page 26:

"Indeed, I have real trouble loving some colleagues, but I am learning that one never knows the full picture of another's life, regardless of what staunch, work obsessed academic persona that person seems to wish to cultivate. They too may be building pyramids against their own darkness and grief." This is a useful reminder, especially since social media tends to magnify the persona and minimize the person.

M'Balia Thomas, a professor at the School of Education at the University of Kansas, discusses her own experiences as a woman of color in academia through the lens of Harry Potter, particularly the summoning of a metaphorical patronus to protect her from all the soul-sucking, dementor-like forces trying to make her quit or to show her the door. The patronus could be a colleague who is willing to speak up for her, especially when she is not in the room, or someone who navigated the same stresses she did. Thomas specifically mentions Berea college professor bell hooks, now of blessed memory. Thomas emphasizes that this help is meant to respond to particular situations or needs, not to take away your own agency or efficacy. Although Thomas does not discuss the Mirror of Erised from the Harry Potter, I think she would caution dark academics and others from excessive use of Instagram, a mirror that shows “neither knowledge nor truth” in

Dumbledore's words. According to Dumbledore, people starved to death staring into the mirror, and Instagram will never fully satisfy, as our colleague Katie Kresser pointed out in her recent Weter Lecture on the "Low-Res" world.

In other words, I want to encourage dark academics to do more empathizing and less wallowing. I would encourage dark academics to talk more about what helps them, not what drives them further down the pit. One other piece is that although reading can be therapeutic, you cannot read your way out of mental health episodes, as M. Stewart Lewis would emphasize.

SLIDE The trick is the right book in the right dose, and I would advise reading a wide variety of books to see what effects they have on you, almost as a type of aesthetic experiment, as the philosopher David Hume recommends in "On the Standard of Taste". We know that some books make you feel happy, others

make you sad, and others fill you with longing; others make you think about how fragile human life is or how resilient. But here is the thing—reading too much of one kind of book will unbalance you, and I need to read things other than what I study professionally, or else I will drown in despair. The library bingo offered by the Seattle Public Library is a good example of a way forward—read books out of your comfort zone, read things to which you are not naturally drawn, try something other than your usual reading diet. For example, pushed to read a book about summer, I read the *Summer Book*, a novella by Tove Jansson, better known for her Moomintroll comics. No Moomins, but a good picture of the relationship between a young girl and her grandmother and what summer feels like as a kid for whom everything is new. I also read Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*, which involves a Black woman time-traveling from contemporary

Los Angeles back to pre-Civil-War Maryland, where she meets her ancestors, both enslaved and free. The novel is an unflinching portrait of how race works in America, and also Butler is also a master prose stylist who keeps you in suspense until the end.

In conclusion, I looked at student memes, red-pill discourse, and the dark academia aesthetic. Memes are fun and edifying, if you can add context, while red-pill discourse is a toxic misreading of ancient philosophy and literature. Dark-academia aesthetic has some annoying features, but I feel that it is basically redemptive and capable of more constructive engagement with art, literature, and with the struggles of everyday life. Thank you!

