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**ACADEMIA'S IVORY TOWER WITHIN THE WORLDS  
OF NEW MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE**

*Ivana Pleviková*

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on issues of the accessibility and approachability of the academic space, the ways it is generally represented outside of academia as well as how scholars who have written about being academics perceive it. It discusses the levels of inclusion and exclusion that are present when academia is seen in relation to the real world and what both of these states generate in regard to the act of forming opinions of higher education and its usefulness in the eyes of the general public. Transcending the boundaries of academia, this paper explores how graduate students who are a part of academia attempt to deal with the clash of different identity points and mental health problems caused by it, and also how they try to forward academia into new spaces such as popular culture, music, or social media. These include for instance the American rapper Sammus, or the Canadian theoretician Kristen Cochrane. This paper further delves into ways in which academic space and university experience are represented on social media entertainment platforms as well as the means by which universities promote themselves online. In this regard this paper's aim lies in searching for a defamiliarized view of academia and creating a pathway for making its ivory tower more down to earth. This paper concludes that by getting closer to audiences with broader sets of interests, academia has an increasingly better chance of gaining new meanings, which may ultimately prove beneficial for the understanding of its significance not only within the sector of education, but also outside of it.

**Keywords**

Academic space, accessibility, approachability, ivory tower, popular culture, social media, rap music, defamiliarization, mental health

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ACADEMIA generally represents the space of the university and a sphere where scholarly research takes place. The space is divided into individual sectors according to their academic focus, ranging from natural sciences to humanities, each of them being further divided, for instance, into sociology, literature, or other disciplines. Each occupies its small section of the academic space; however, the individuality of each section is not equal to the individuality of its parts, the people who

are either employees or are on their way to become employees, the professors, the teachers, the graduate students. Undoubtedly, it can be said that the prime functions of the university that are discussed most frequently are the processes of studying or teaching, or at least these are definitely discussed more frequently than any interpersonal level in such a space as well as the relations of the academic space toward the outside world.

A lack of focus on the individuality of people – the academics – may result in them being perceived as the equivalents of the institution that they are a part of, as knowledgeable enlightened people of reason. To a large extent academics are indeed exactly that. However, the individuality of their personalities, identities that reach beyond being a professor, or a teacher, as human beings that feel and not only think, are oftentimes neglected. This paper aims to explore the way academic space is generally represented nowadays, how scholars who have written about being an academic perceive it. In that regard, this examination will address a collection of essays entitled *Transforming the Ivory Tower: Challenging Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Academy* co-authored and edited by Brett C. Stockdill and Mary Yu Danico. Transcending the boundaries of academia and reaching out to different platforms, this paper further explores how graduate students who are a part of academia and who are also devoted to other unrelated disciplines attempt to deal with the clash of their different identity points as well as how they try to forward academia into new spaces such as popular culture, music, or social media. These include, for instance, the American rapper Sammus, or the Canadian creator of critical theory memes<sup>1</sup> Kristen Cochrane. This paper will also explore ways in which academic space and university experience are represented on social media entertainment platforms as well as the means by which universities promote themselves online, for instance, via YouTube videos.

The criteria based on which the discussed individuals, websites, and ways of representation of academia have been selected for this article include their direction towards the promotion of values relating to the accessibility and approachability of academia, the encouragement of greater transparency, and a more multi-faceted discussion regarding academic identity. The main aim of this paper is to analyze if and in what ways the exposure of the academic space and identity to these more popular and even mainstream horizons influences its further reception. This article studies

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of the more well-known definition of a meme as “an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture,” this paper deals with the term’s secondary meaning defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media” (Merriam-Webster 2019).

ways in which academia and academic space and identity are represented untraditionally, thus enabling it to be understood in a broader context than merely as the enclosed space of the ivory tower, or how this view might even allow this space to be normalized by the general public. Apart from the importance of the intersectionality of the academic sector with the space outside of it, the point of departure of this paper is also focused on a certain negligence in discussing the lives and identities of academic members, personal characteristics that reach beyond their research present in current scholarship.

Merriam-Webster defines “ivory tower” as “a secluded place that affords the means of treating practical issues with an impractical often escapist attitude” (Merriam-Webster 2019) and their exemplary sentence using the term is: “The book was written by some college professor who’s spent her entire professional life in an *ivory tower*” (Merriam-Webster 2019). As can be seen, the concept of the ivory tower is oftentimes used specifically in the context of university education or academic space. It describes not only the escapism and seclusion from the world outside of it, but also further aspects resulting from them, such as certain hierarchical structures emerging not only in the larger context of the academic sector versus the world, but also within academia itself, which is an issue that Stockdill and Yu Danico deem important in their aforementioned work. Therein, they explore different ways of perceiving education and its role in society as either a way of liberation or, contrarily, domination (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 3).

In their book, they and other contributors deal with different topics of discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or position, resulting in the establishment of domination and hierarchy between members of the academic space. They write:

While we were not strangers to bias and discrimination in academia [...] we grew increasingly troubled by systemic attempts to dismiss our concerns about inequalities on campus and quash our individual and collective defiance of these inequalities. We experienced quite viscerally a central paradox of the academy: Critical thinking was promoted only to the extent that it did not call into question biases and bigotry within the department, the classroom, or the university. [...] Multiple inequalities linked to hierarchical, undemocratic decision-making processes make higher education an alienating place for many students and staff and faculty members. When we questioned institutional contradictions and bigotry, some staff, faculty, and administrators viewed us as “troublemakers.” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 3-4)

What the quoted paragraph reveals is the description of a peculiar dead-end position in which many people may find themselves while being a part of academia. The

active realization of the trespasses of other members, together with the simultaneous feeling of being unable to deal with the situation accordingly, reinforces passive acceptance of the described situation as well as strengthens the inability to penetrate and dismantle the hierarchical structures of academia as an institution. In his own essay in the book, Stockdill writes about the time when he and his Ph.D. colleagues openly challenged their department for “the lack of representation of women and people of color in a modern social theory syllabus as well as Eurocentric/racist, sexist, and homophobic biases in other classes” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 154). In a reactionary memo written by the Department Graduate Affairs Committee, Stockdill and his colleagues were called “militant” and their activities were described as threatening “the intellectual and social atmosphere of the entire department” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 155).

Stockdill's story is a proof of the paradox which he describes in the introduction of his book quoted above and which is still pervasive today. Theories of equality and critical thinking are supported and preached during different seminars and lectures. Nevertheless, it can easily happen that a person making, for instance, unwanted sexual advances to colleagues or graduate students may be the same person teaching a seminar on the theory of gender equality and sexual politics. Outside of Stockdill and Yu Danico's personal experiences from their own university, there have, over the years, been many cases of university employees showing questionable or inappropriate behavior. In light of the #MeToo movement that has been at the center of attention in recent years, one well-known example might be seen in the case of John Searle, a professor of philosophy at UC Berkeley, who “had been sued by Joanna Ong, a graduate student in the Philosophy department, for sexual assault over many years. After the allegations, several other women came forward, and even more students relayed stories of Professor Searle making misogynist and racist comments during lectures and in office hours” (Newfeld 2018). Stockdill, further in his essay, ponders on a certain paradox when it comes to dealing with issues such as those mentioned and continues by saying:

Given the image of academics as open-minded, free thinkers, it may seem ironic that many in higher education assume the same reactionary stances as other elites. But it makes sense. The hierarchical and elitist socialization of graduate school (and the tenure/promotion process) elicits the labeling of dissent as a threat. And in some ways, it is a threat: A threat to the decorum, the expectations, the sense of entitlement and expertise that swell the egos of those with the letters “PhD” after their names. A threat to that face of the academy that claims detachment from the ugliness of the world, a claim that in reality feeds the ugliness of exclusion, violence, and poverty. (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 155-56)

In relation to that, there is another question that poses itself in the search for an answer. If the academic sector has troubles finding a common ground of equality and fairness in its own closed off institution, is there a possibility for such a space to ever be open toward the outside, or is the emergence and further widening of the gap between these two worlds inevitable? The gap, naturally, must be there in all cases, otherwise there would be no tangible elements distinguishing academia from non-academia. However, the understanding and the reception of meaning – whether of works produced within academia or people who are a part of it – could, for instance, be understood in correlation with the understanding of a literary work's meaning in Wolfgang Iser's essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." In order to interpret a particular text, he explains, the gap between the author and the reader must be present, so that the active interest in reading further and exploring the work is maintained. However, at the same time, it cannot go into horizons too far from the reader's apprehension and lose the connection between them altogether. For him, it is thus "boredom and overstrain [as] the boundaries beyond which the reader will leave the field of play" (Iser 1972, 280).

What Iser writes about may not only be understood in parallel with ordinary people reading academic works, but also more generally with people seeking understanding and the meaning of the whole academic community. Thus, if both works produced within this space as well as the space itself maintain their seclusion in the so-called ivory tower, the gap between this world and any other world outside remains. In that way, consequently, academia continues to be inaccessible and unapproachable for the people of the general public. One may also, of course, ask whether institutions of university education are to be approachable in the same way as, for instance, spaces, purposes, and personnel of lower levels of education such as high schools. In order to help answer that question, let us look at the opinion research conducted in 2017 by the Pew Research Centre striving to find out what views general United States citizens hold on the effect of colleges and universities on the country. In June 2017, "58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents sa[id] colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, while just 36% sa[id] their effect is positive" (Fingerhut 2017). Although the numbers for the Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters showed that 72% still believe the effect of post-secondary education has a positive impact on the country, the negative numbers for both parties are still quite substantial. Naturally, this might lead to a discussion of such results which could consider the reasons for such a difference as can be found between the voters of the two parties. However, according to further statistics provided by the research, it seems evident that the issue goes beyond merely partisan affiliations.

When the questions were only directed at the university graduates, the results were vastly different and the gap between Republican and Democratic voters diminished. “Overwhelming majorities of Republican (93%) and Democratic (97%) college graduates [...] indicated their education was useful in helping them grow personally and intellectually” (Fingerhut 2017). These results are where the aspects of accessibility and the approachability of academic spaces resurface and again become relevant to discussion. The numbers quoted above suggest that the experience of being a part of the academic space, whether as a student or even further, as a scholar, is crucial to attributing value to it and perceiving it as an important contribution to one’s society. It may also imply that the purposes of the academic space are still either unknown or vague enough for the perception of the ordinary people to deem them important. Arguably, however, there exist many professional job occupations which require a university degree and manage to be perceived as significant. For instance, in the case of medical doctors or lawyers, the purpose of their work is rather clear to everyone in the general public, seeing that they interact with various kinds of people while doing their job as well as finding themselves portrayed in mass media, television, or popular culture.

The work of academic scholars, on the other hand, is predominantly presented within the boundaries of the university, at conferences which are attended by people of the same or similar academic rank and interests, and is subsequently published in scholarly journals. These are largely inaccessible to the general public in the same way they are to the members of academia, and that despite the fact that these people, too, contribute to the development of university education by having their share in the tax money further used by the government to support universities. Firstly, the general public, in most cases, has no way of knowing that most of these events and scholarship even exist, because they are usually not advertised beyond academia. Secondly, if the scholarship is available, ways of accessing them are more difficult due to the various requirements of acquiring reader’s cards in libraries or even differences in their price, which largely depends on one’s academic position, or lack thereof.

After Michel Foucault’s death, his partner and the inheritor of his archives, Daniel Defert, spoke about the issue of exclusivity and accessibility of academic materials when the fourth and final volume of *The History of Sexuality* was to be made public against Foucault’s wish. In an interview conducted by Guillaume Bellon, Defert said:

The fourth volume of [The History of Sexuality], falls in the category of the posthumous publications. At one point Michel Foucault’s family had deposited the typed work at the Bibliothèque de Saulchoir. I was against the idea

of such a faulty reading, [...] if there is no posthumous publication, why would Ph.D. students be the only ones to know anything about it? What is this privilege given to Ph.D. students? I have adopted this principle: it is either everybody or nobody. (Defert 2010, 5)

The example of Defert speaking about Foucault's publication is representative of the stark division in accessibility to academic materials in a more general sense. However, in reality the privileged group that Defert talks about consist of more than just Ph.D. students and includes all kinds of faculty members and academic researchers. A professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, Elliot Berkman, claims that in order to fight the gap described by the difference in privilege and access,

[w]e academics need to do a much better job of actually contributing to society and telling people about our contributions. [...] We need to take our obligation to society more seriously. We need to make social impact the starting point of our work rather than something we say will happen later, be done by someone else, or magically happen on its own. More than that, we need to fundamentally shift how we think about ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. We have a tendency toward "academic exceptionalism," as though our jobs were not work and our work need not address reality. (Berkman 2018)

Importantly, Berkman stresses academia's turn to society as a whole, and that not only as a working space producing books, articles, and other intellectual content. Crucially, his thoughts also stress the importance of academics realizing their own humanness and opening up to other people in the world, in order to emphasize that the identity of an academic does not merely consist of being an enlightened machine controlled by reason, or a two-dimensional cardboard character. Based on that, Berkman proposes to break out of such a narrow-minded view and tries to explore ways in which academics represent the space they work in as well as their own identities as being multi-faceted and defined by a plurality of characteristics, rather than the singularity outlined above.

As seen in the passages quoted from the collection of essays edited by two Ph.D. students Brett Stockdill and Mary Yu Danico, the position of graduate students can prove to be valuable when discussing various issues regarding the academic space. Because they are the freshest members of academia as well as recent graduates of master's and bachelor's programs, their position of standing at the crossroads of being students, researchers, and teachers at the same time grants them a unique insight into the space itself and eventually gives their opinions relevance within the academic community.



Enongo Lumumba-Kasongo, also known as Sammus, is an American underground rapper as well as a recent recipient of a Ph.D. degree in Science and Technology Studies, and one of the prominent personas attempting to move academia out of its ivory tower by making it a frequent topic addressed in her rap songs. In one of her interviews, when she was still a doctoral student, she said:

I wanted to speak about the anxieties that I think a lot of folks who have a lot of different identity points experience when navigating the world. I am at the intersection of a lot of different identities and so I think that that lends itself to people questioning a lot of things about me. I am a black woman in mostly white environment, I'm a Ph.D. student, and a rapper, and a producer, and a gamer, a geek. ("Sammus Leads a Multi-Hyphenate Life" 2017)

In her songs, she not only tackles the experience of being a Ph.D. student, exploring the world of academia and finding her place within it, but also some of the more personal matters including having troubles defining her own identity and understanding who she is as opposed to who she "should" be as an academic. In a different interview, she confessed: "Sometimes my identity as a Ph.D. student has become content for different songs as in the case of '1080p' or 'Pity Party'" (McKinney 2016). When examining her song "Pity Party," one notices that in her rapping, Sammus tackles several personal dilemmas in regard to her position as a doctoral student. The following excerpt of her lyrics presents the song's most pertinent part:

What am I doing?  
Is it worth me pursuing degrees?  
I don't even know what I'm gon' do if  
I'm 37 and I'm still a student  
Can't focus on music  
I be comparing myself to my friends I know  
It's a bad habit I try hard to let it go  
I admit I been feeling pathetic so  
I keep on thinking in all hypotheticals  
Every minute it's  
What if I dropped out?  
What if I stopped now?  
What if I...?  
Well where would I be now?  
(Sammus 2016, lines 17–30)

On the one hand, she admits that because she is both a musician as well as an academic, the different identity points act as a break in her focus. On the other hand, the

passage full of questions which remain unanswered implies that Sammus's academic identity is in fact a strong one, and perhaps also an inseparable part of her personality and her identity. The rapper questions her decision of staying in the academic environment and asks herself what would happen if she dropped out of her studies. When she raps "I don't even know what I'm gon' do if / I'm 37 and I'm still a student" she not only stresses the fact of being a Ph.D. student at an age older than the one usually considered a "student's age," but also brings into the discussion a concern about the uncertainty related to doctoral students' career prospects after their graduation.

The academic experience as presented by Sammus is, however, not only an authentic way of peeking into her own life as an individual, but in a more general sense represents aspects of the whole world of academia through a lens that is different from that of enlightenment, ivory tower, and reason, but rather affords us a view of the artist's own personality and the troubles she undergoes. Eventually, this may not only help the people outside academia, who might be listening to her music to create a better and more informed picture of what the world of academia is like and thus bringing them closer to it, but importantly, also provides a representation and a way of relatedness for that part of her audience that shares the same feelings and parts of her identity she talks about.

Another of her songs vital for this discussion is titled "1080p." Straight from the beginning, the rapper directly delves into her feelings about the academic environment.

I'm kind of scared of the academy  
think that my parents are proud of me  
I just wish I knew how to be comfortable here  
I never feel like I'm allowed to breathe  
Rubbing shoulders with these old nerds  
Rockin' sweater vests in their office hours  
Eatin' hors d'œuvres while I soul search  
Tryna make some sense of the ivory tower  
Feelin' sober  
Am I just a coward or a poser?  
I don't really doubt it  
Or a soldier?  
Books in holsters  
But the setting sucks I can't fight the power  
Cuz they write books nobody reads  
For these white folks that they tryna please  
Recycle all the right quotes tryna cite blokes ain't my cup of tea  
(Sammus 2016, lines 1–17)

In the first four verses, the rapper talks about her fear of the academic space in a very raw and unfiltered way. Instead of pretending to blend in with the environment as well as the people of higher academic positions who create it, she admits to her fear and feelings of discomfort, constraint, and a metaphorical sense of suffocation. In the following four verses, she proceeds to describe people which she encounters during her daily life as a graduate student. The attributes such as “old nerds,” “rockin’ sweater vests” and “eatin’ hors d’œuvres” are arguably all very superficial descriptions which imply that in Sammus’s perception superficiality and shallowness are generally means via which one has the chance to know the people she describes. These descriptions are also put into harsh contrast with the previous four lines presenting the artist’s own personal feelings, which, in her view of the professors around her, are lacking. Moreover, these attributes are undoubtedly also references to the history and tradition of academia, as well as to a kind of entitlement of the elite. The next six lines are where the two previously described poles – superficiality and the raw representation of feelings of fear, discomfort, and anxiety – collide.

As was the case in the previously cited song “Pity Party,” here, Sammus again questions herself, her identity, and her place within the academic environment. She poses questions which remain open and unanswered. In the last four verses, Sammus reminds us, again, of the inaccessible nature of academia, of academics often building up their careers, positions, and power by writing books for very small audiences as lacking in diversity as well as any social impact and general interconnection with the people of the real world.

What is worth mentioning is the fact that Sammus’s “1080p” is not a song exclusively about academia. When the introductory section which is quoted above ends, she seamlessly continues rapping about her ex-boyfriend while eating crackers: “Eatin’ chex mix / Feelin’ helpless / I really miss my fuckin’ ex it’s / Such a mindfuck” (Sammus 2016, lines 18–21). She stresses the fact that for her, being a graduate student together with her whole academic experience is not a secluded world of its own detached from anything else she experiences in her life. In the music video for the song, Sammus is portrayed having a consultation with a professor at school while rapping about a child that she never had with her former partner (1080p Official Video 2016). Sammus stresses that her identity points are interconnected and that being an academic does not instantly position her in an intellectual highground as might often be perceived, and that it does not make her any less of a feeling and emotional human being.

Later in her song “1080p,” Sammus talks about going to therapy, being on medication, and she mentions the topic of depression directly in connection with academia: “I was taking pills up in the bathroom / ended up alone in grad school” (Sammus 2016). In an interview, the artist herself emphasizes the importance of talking

about depressive feelings, especially in connection to spaces such as universities where reason to a great extent dominates feelings. She says: “I think the tide is starting to change regarding conversations about mental health across many genres. Perhaps, the thing that’s different about ‘1080p’ is the subject matter of the song. Depression, particularly in the context of academia is not necessarily a topic that has been broached, particularly by a woman MC” (McKinney 2016). As studies show, mental health problems among academics, namely Ph.D. students, are far from being rare and thus these topics as a subject of Sammus’s songs are not only personal for her, but also highly relevant within the academic community. “In a [2017] study of 3659 Belgian doctoral students across several universities and disciplines, 51 % reported having at least two mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety), 40 % reported three or more, and 32 % reported at least four, with work-family conflict found to most strongly predict psychological distress” (Levecque et al. 2017).

However, this issue most certainly is not limited to the doctoral students in Belgium who comprised the sample of the quoted study. A more recent study conducted in 2018 “surveyed a total of 2,279 individuals (90 % PhD students and 10 % Master’s students). Respondents were from 26 countries and 234 institutions [...] and represented diverse fields of study including, biological/physical science (38 %), engineering (2 %), humanities/social sciences (56 %) and “other” (4 %)” (Evans et al. 2018). Their official results are as follows:

Our results show that graduate students are more than six times as likely to experience depression and anxiety as compared to the general population. Forty-one percent of graduate students scored as having moderate to severe anxiety on the GAD07 scale as compared to 6 % of the general population, as demonstrated previously. Additionally, 39 % of graduate students scored in the moderate to severe depression range in our study, as compared to 6 % of the general population. (Evans et al. 2018)

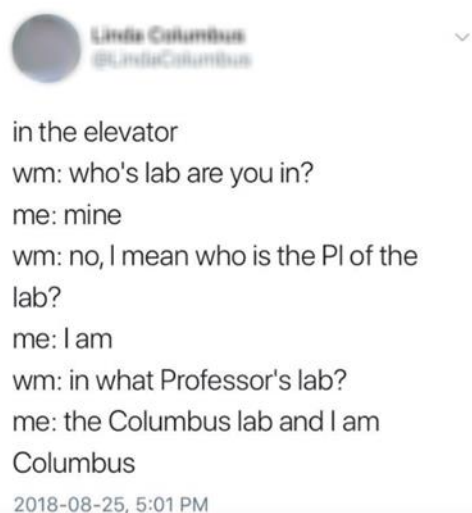
Taking both studies into consideration, the fact alone that studies such as these are being conducted one year after another proves that mental health problems among Ph.D. students, and presumably other members of academia, are still very present. Nevertheless, in most cases no special attention is paid to such problems at the institutions and they are not dealt with accordingly, and in some cases not at all. Frederik Anseel, one of the professors involved in the study conducted in Belgium stresses that instead of dividing between believers and non-believers in any sort of crisis regarding mental health in academia, it is important to acknowledge that, “[g]iven that there are at least strong indications that a substantial group of people

are suffering, wouldn't it be worthwhile to at least examine in your own organization what the problem is, and make sure that you have policies in place to deal with problems if they arise?" (as cited in Flaherty 2018)

Because institutional changes take much longer to come into action and the studies themselves, as Anseel claims, take years to conduct and further evaluate, (as cited in Flaherty 2018) it is quite unsurprising that actions taken by individuals rather than masses, such as Sammus's songs discussed, are occurring more frequently now than before. Her songs dealing with these topics not only provide therapeutic comfort to herself as an artist and a creator, but also to other people listening to them and finding their own problems such as feelings of not fitting in, fears of inadequacy, alienation, depression, or poor prospects for their future career, represented in the artworks of popular culture. For Freud, as Rob Lapsley argues in his essay "Psychoanalytic Criticism," art has its own way of providing for the identification of its spectators with the values or heroes that it presents. For him, "artworks are [thus] more than merely the articulation of conscious and unconscious desires; they are also attempts to actively master distressing, even traumatic, situations" (Lapsley 2006, 72). In this way, Sammus's songs may also act therapeutically and offer their listeners a platform for identification and for mastering trauma.

Sammus speaking out about the mentioned issues through her music is not, however, the only occasion in which one can observe academic identity, or the problems people experience within academia, being actively represented outside of its own space, namely within the spaces of new media and popular culture. For example, an internet community called Shit Academics Say which has just under 620,000 likes on Facebook and 316,000 followers on Twitter is "a blog on faculty issues, graduate education, and social media" (Shit Academics Say 2019, "About") as introduced by its creator Nathan C. Hall, associate professor at McGill University in Montreal. The main aim of the platform is sharing memes related to either the experience of being an academic or also experiencing academia as a space more generally, including from the position of an outsider. The main success of the posted memes lies in the conjunction of relatability to the experience presented and sarcastic humor dominating most of the site's content. The form of a joke in which the various experiences of these people are presented is not incidental. As Rob Lapsley summarizes in his essay, for Freud, jokes, together with various other forms of art, are compromise formations which "disguise their articulation of the artists' conscious and unconscious desires through formal devices" and act as a medium through which repressed desires or impulses find their way of representation and social acceptance (2006, 70). As seen in Figure 1 below, in this case the platform

shared a real-life experience of a female professor being repeatedly asked about whose lab she was in and repeatedly not being understood after she explicitly answers that it is her own lab (Shit Academics Say 2018).



**Figure 1** A screenshot of a picture posted on the Facebook page Shit Academics Say describing a female academic identity.



**Figure 2** a screenshot of a picture posted on the Facebook page Shit Academics Say describing the accessibility and approachability of academia.



**Figure 3** A screenshot of a comment reacting to the post in Figure 1.

As can further be observed in Figure 3 (Shit Academics Say 2018), which presents an excerpt from the discussion that was prompted by this post on the Facebook page, the community does not merely post memes to entertain its audience, but rather uses the entertainment as a channel through which vital academic experiences and issues of sexism, racism, professional mistreatment, and many of those already mentioned before, including depression or alienation, have a chance to be presented

to a wider audience. Arguably, in spite of the page's titular reference to academics specifically, due to its immense popularity, one cannot say that the page's content merely targets a niche academic audience and its significant reach outside of this community is more than predictable. Moreover, the public outreach gets even wider through the further act of sharing these memes on their fans' personal profiles. Because of that, not only can the frequency with which these various experiences ingrained in the memes occur be more consciously realized, but also, importantly, the issues can then be further debated.

In Figure 2 (Shit Academics Say 2019), there is another example of the kind of posts which Shit Academics Say shares on their Facebook page.

The paradox of academia being modern and up-to-date while simultaneously adhering to oftentimes worn out rules and values, which is at question in the picture, is a vital discussion topic that, in a broader sense, relates to the issues discussed by this paper and which Sammus and Stockdill both reference in their works. The increasing accessibility and approachability of academia are two issues brought to the fore by the modernization and the changing perspective of the orientation of academia. Therefore, despite being ruled by sarcastic humor and often ridiculing the academic space itself, Shit Academics Say, with the number of people that follow and like it on different social media outlets, creates a meaningful space stimulating the discussion on various current problems surrounding academia and contributes to the further dissemination of vital academic issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

Kristen Cochrane's Instagram account "ripannicolesmith" with more than 62,000 followers is another example where the products of the academic space find their way outside the boundaries of the university. In a way that is similar to Shit Academics Say, Cochrane's work is also oriented towards using humor and entertainment as attention-catching phenomena. Cochrane creates memes in which she takes segments of different theoretical materials, whether it be from philosophy, film studies, or literature, and connects them with what is seemingly the exact opposite of these highbrow scholarly books and articles – the mainstream popular culture. These include screenshots from the reality television series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, or various references to popular American high school dramas or music. In the description of her account she writes that, "everything is culture" (ripannicolesmith 2019) and emphasizes the fact that even these two worlds do not have to be perceived as so vastly set apart. Cochrane is a doctoral researcher from the Film and Moving Image Studies program at Concordia University in Montreal and creates memes and other content such as curated reading lists or articles on cultural criticism in order to help pay for her underfunded university program. On her Patreon page, where Cochrane introduces her work and interest in film studies,

she writes that one of the reasons she creates these memes is that she wishes these reality shows or teenage films had critical theory embedded in them (Cochrane 2019). In the pictures below, one can see examples of her memes recreating conversations between Kim Kardashian and her sister with the inclusion of Marshal McLuhan's theory on advertising in Figure 4 (ripannanicolesmith August 2018) and Roland Barthes's theory in Figure 5 (ripannanicolesmith September 2018).

"I don't want to be a Kardashian anymore. Our Twitter fanfic fights—that you orchestrated after doing close readings of Marshall McLuhan and his thesis that advertising is the greatest art form of postmodernity—are making me want to die." -Kourtney Kardashian (2018)



**Figure 4** A screenshot of a meme posted on the Instagram profile “ripannanicolesmith” recreating the conversation of the Kardashian sisters while referencing a theory of Marshal McLuhan.

Kourtney: “All men are trash”

Kim: “You just THINK that all men are trash because you keep CHOOSING shady men! Maybe if you had actually READ Roland Barthes, you would know that language is never innocent. What does ‘man’ even mean?!”



**Figure 5** a screenshot of a meme posted on the Instagram profile “ripannanicolesmith” recreating the conversation of the Kardashian sisters while referencing a theory of Roland Barthes.

Looking at the memes above, it may seem as if Cochrane has tried to combine elements which resist combination – theory and mainstream popular culture. At the same time, however, it reminds us of Slavoj Žižek's ever-repetitive warning about ideology being everywhere and in everything, perhaps especially in those parts of culture consumed by mass audiences. Cochrane agrees that critical theory should not stay in its often-inaccessible position as the intellectual high ground and should be used to penetrate those parts of culture that affect people's everyday lives. She writes:

I chose this area of study because I think it has tremendous power in effecting (and affecting) social change. For instance, why are we conditioned to see certain forms of culture as bad or as guilty pleasures (like reality television, soap operas, or sports)? I want to be analytical and fruitful. [...] I want to talk about, and share



with you, the ways in which we can confront culture, which is political, gendered, sexual, sometimes fun, sometimes uncomfortable. (Cochrane 2019)

In the discussions of her posts, her memes more often than not spark interest in her followers who ask her to give recommendations on which authors and works to read, or they directly get into discussions of the theories appropriated.

These concerns about the accessibility and approachability of the academic space are nowadays also being dealt with on a more institutional level. One of the phenomena which is on the rise is the self-representation of universities on YouTube. While it is a fact that a vast majority of universities have a YouTube channel, many use it mostly for self-promotion and as a way of presenting their university as a “place to be” for their prospective students. Although this is a legitimate way of advertising, it is not interested in reaching people who do not plan to apply to study at a university, but would maybe appreciate the chance to peek in and see what the educational process there looks like, what lectures are being taught, etc. There are several prestigious universities, such as Yale University or Massachusetts Institute of Technology, whose YouTube channels offer an additional value of exactly this kind. Despite both being top-ranked schools with difficult admissions processes and high tuition fees, they attempt to fight their seclusion and inaccessibility by providing a wide audience with countless hours of unedited lecture recordings, guest lectures, as well as interviews with their professors which are free of charge.

In this way, ordinary people who either do not plan to attend any university, people who attended it a long time ago, or those that are studying a different field and are simply interested in a particular topic, can all draw from the content provided to them via these outlets in virtual space. Naturally, attending lectures and seminars in real life is without a doubt different from watching them online, since the latter excludes the experience of being in the classroom at the time of lecturing as well as the immediacy of this allowing one to respond to or participate in discussions. Nevertheless, the activity of these universities breaks boundaries between their own academic space and the rest of the world, at least to a certain extent, and allows for accessibility, even to those who would otherwise not be able to afford it. It is thus an excellent example of “the difference between education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination” (Stockdill and Yu Danico 2012, 3).

As has been pointed out by means of many examples showing the different endeavors of people to change perceptions of academia and accommodate it within the public space more than it has so far been, it is clear that the position of academia and the understanding of what it means are not values incapable of change. In this way, this text has tried to call attention to different ways in which not only academic

space but, importantly, also academic identity, are and can further be represented outside of academia itself and perhaps one day annihilate the concepts of “outside” and “inside” altogether. By getting closer to audiences with broader sets of interests, the academic space has an increasingly better chance of gaining new and different meanings, being viewed from different perspectives, which ultimately may end up being beneficial for the understanding of its importance not only within the sector of education, but also in the world generally.

It is not accidental that the people aspiring for such a change, some of which have been quoted above, are academics themselves. The representation of academic identity and the emphasis on its multifacetedness is, naturally, especially crucial for them. Moreover, as the institutionalized change coming from universities themselves is often a lengthy and bureaucratically exhaustive process, the call for change coming from the individuals themselves comes as no surprise. As has been pointed out in this paper, in order to personalize the academic sector and symbolically unlock it from the ivory tower it still finds itself in, it is necessary to focus on the individual parts creating it. Besides that, many of the experiences that the creators and doctoral students quoted in this article speak about, such as depression, alienation, or many others, are predominantly personal and first have to be discussed from a similarly personal point of view before they can be considered more generally and become numbers of in statistical research. In connection with this, the process of the academic space opening up to the world via its representation and inclusion in popular culture or social media, can then further lead to providing awareness and accessibility and to feasibly diminishing the problems discussed.

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