

Editor's Note: "Meet the Future" is a regular column appearing in the Features section of SFRA Review (beginning with issue #326). It is an interview series conducted by the SFRA Review editor that highlights the work of up-and-coming SF scholars, typically graduate students, postdocs, and recent hires.



Meet the Future: An Interview with Sarah Lohmann

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Hi, Sarah, could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Hello! I'm a final-year PhD student at Durham University in North-East England, and I've just submitted my doctoral thesis entitled 'The Edge of Time: The Critical Dynamics of Structural Chronotopes in the Utopian Novel', which I completed under the supervision of Professors Patricia Waugh and Simon James. I'll be defending my thesis in a viva in April, and then I'll be applying for academic jobs far and wide, particularly within the fields of contemporary British and American literature, speculative fiction (especially sf), women's writing, and anything related to utopianism.

I'm originally from Munich, Germany (with a bilingual German/American upbringing), and after graduating from a German high school, I moved to Scotland to study English literature and philosophy at the University of St Andrews. After that, I completed an English literature MLitt degree in 'Women, Writing and Gender' as well as an MLitt in analytic philosophy, both also at St Andrews, before moving to Durham to start my PhD. My current research is still informed to a large extent by my interest in philosophy, particularly with regard to moral philosophy and epistemology, and I would like to continue incorporating interdisciplinary approaches in my work in the future.

My PhD thesis, in fact, is fundamentally interdisciplinary in that it employs both ethics and systems theory in suggesting that examples of utopian fiction are best understood as science-fictional thought experiments whose success is determined by their dynamic structures. I argue that these structures, which I present as Bakhtinian chronotopes due to their reliance on spatiotemporal placement and movement, are in turn either functionally closed, homeostatic systems, as described in the work of Walter Cannon on homeostasis and Humberto Maturana and Francesca Varela on autopoiesis, or open systems that can be read as examples of complex adaptive systems as described by complexity theorists such as Ilya Prigogine and Paul Cilliers. Ultimately, I suggest that the utopianism of several of the novels that Tom Moylan terms 'critical utopias' – Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*,

Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Ursula K Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* – can therefore be understood as inherently dynamic and thus sustainable: both the utopian societies described as well as the novels' fragmented, cross-temporal narrative structures can be seen as complex systems that are self-organising and self-optimising in a sustainable manner predicated on the non-hierarchical nature and inherent dynamism of complexity. Moreover, I argue that it is these underlying complex mechanisms that render these novels truly critical of their 'zero worlds' in Moylan's terms, in that their open networks connect utopia and zero world in a transformative relationship of cognitive estrangement. By contrast, I suggest, examples of traditional utopian literature such as Plato's *Republic*, Thomas More's *Utopia* and fin-de-siècle novels such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and H. G. Wells' *A Modern Utopia* ultimately undermine the dynamic potential of their own utopian systems through homeostatic closure, reliant on forced equilibrium – this, in turn, creates the utopian presentism and social stasis that has historically been associated to the genre. The ethics-related element of my thesis, then, is that I identify a certain 'ethics of complexity' in the critical utopias, linking the inherent features of complex systems with the feminist equity-based functioning of their societies, and contrasting this with attempts at utilitarianism or virtue ethics within the aforementioned traditional utopias, which I believe to be hindered through their homeostatic functioning.

In general, I am fascinated by the dynamic networks and organic or coercive forces that underlie all relationships, human and non-human, and of the value that lies in recognising these networks and enabling them to function in ways that allow for the organic flourishing of all participants. In fact, my final thesis chapter explores what happens when supposedly inclusive complex networks are once more imbalanced through inadvertent bias and exclusion, using the examples of Naomi Mitchison's *Memoirs of a Spacewoman* and Joan Slonczewski's *A Door into Ocean*; this once more highlights the intricate workings of self-organising systems as well as the ease through which their balance can be upset.

As per the prompt, I think I would therefore say that a secret of the universe that I've discovered for myself (not uncovered, sadly!) is that we are only at the very beginning of understanding the myriad ways in which we are all integrated into the constantly shifting and evolving connections between us and our human and non-human environment – one might even say that it is nonsensical to speak of individuals or even humans in general as being in any meaningful way distinct within these networks. In my future work, I would love to explore these dynamic connections further and investigate what they mean for human behaviour and social planning in the Anthropocene, as well as tracking the various ways in which they have been interpreted in literature, both speculative and traditional.

Finally, an interesting fact about me is thus perhaps that this research focus has also

changed the ways in which I move through the world – I try to tread as lightly as possible and live respectfully alongside my human and non-human neighbours, which has so far informed everything from my plant-based diet to my interest in sustainable housing and green politics in general, particularly in response to the climate crisis.

How do you describe yourself professionally?

I am a researcher at heart, driven by curiosity and the joy of discovering new patterns and connections in my research, but I also love teaching: I enjoy creating an intellectual atmosphere in which students have the support and freedom to explore their own ideas among their peers and feel excited about pursuing further research. Having previously worked to become a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA), I am therefore currently completing the final stage of this programme at my university to attain the full PGCAP (Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice), a certificate in education at university level that will allow me to feel confident in my future teaching of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In the next few years, I hope to have the opportunity to conduct both research and teaching across a broad range of eras and genres and with interdisciplinary components. My thesis research has taken me from antiquity to the present day, while my university teaching so far has mainly focused on the history of the novel from Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* up to graphic novels such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen*; this work has allowed me to come up with various ideas for future research and teaching across historical stages and disciplines that I would love the chance to develop further at some point.

Why does sf matter to you?

Sf forms the backbone of my academic interests because of its inherent suitability for social critique through cognitive estrangement; in my opinion, no other genre is capable of holding up a mirror to our world in quite the same way, and with the same formalised imaginative rigour. Moreover, sf's generic tropes such as time travel, alternate realities and far-future settings allow for a particularly extensive development of nova that can allow us to reimagine or extrapolate on so many aspects of our current existence – the possibilities are endless! In particular, I enjoy utopian, dystopian and post-apocalyptic sf because of its large-scale capacity for social restructuring, especially in terms of social roles related to marginalised identities, but I also appreciate the more subtle estranging capacity of sf mechanisms applied to more straightforwardly mimetic fiction.

I believe that especially in the current age of rapid environmental change and technological development, sf is an institutionally under-appreciated genre despite its astonishing critical

potential, and I would love to see more extensive engagement with sf studies in university departments as well as a greater appreciation of the genre in culture-focused media.

What brought you to sf studies?

I had hardly read any sf growing up, but an undergraduate module on the topic at the University of St Andrews piqued my interest – it ended up being a fascinating course, brilliantly taught by Dr Jim Byatt, which put me on track to what will most likely be a life-long interest in the genre! As an undergraduate student undertaking a joint degree in English literature and philosophy, I had a fair amount of freedom in choosing modules in both disciplines, and I'm so glad that I ended up picking this particular one: after completing my undergraduate degree, I went on to write my first master's dissertation on feminist utopias and four-dimensionality from an sf perspective, and this later fed into my PhD on structural chronotopes in the utopian novel, again grounded in sf theory. Although I do look forward to expanding my academic repertoire, as mentioned above, I know that I will always value and return to the imaginative potential that is unique to sf, and I hope to encourage any interested students to do the same.

What project(s) are you working on now, and how did you get there? What question(s) really drive your work?

At the moment, I am beginning to prepare for my viva, as well as continuing on with my tutorial teaching, completing my PGCAP, and starting to apply for academic positions elsewhere.

In addition, I am always on the lookout for interesting conferences and projects—over the course of my PhD, I presented my work at many national and international conferences, particularly within the fields of sf and utopian studies, and I am very grateful to have become a part of a wonderful academic community in doing so. I am also always keen to take part in any promising cross-university and/or interdisciplinary projects that relate to sf or utopia: over the past few years, I have been lucky enough to participate in several interesting projects, including co-hosting the podcast 'Exploring Utopian York' with Dr Adam Stock, being interviewed for Paul Walker-Emig's podcast *Utopian Horizons*, running two interdisciplinary seminar series at Durham University (which featured influential sf scholar Mark Bould, among others), giving a keynote speech on feminist utopias for an MA graduate conference at Teesside University, and serving as Project Officer for an exhibition on time travel and narrative ('Time Machines') at Palace Green Library in Durham. I would be very happy to contribute to similar interesting projects in the future, and to collaborate with people in various fields.

This also applies to publications, of course, an area that I will be able to spend more time focussing on now that I have submitted my thesis: so far, I have begun with a published book review (of Patrick B Sharp's brilliant *Darwinian Feminism and Early Science Fiction: Angels, Amazons and Women*), and I am looking forward to the publication of my first book chapter, entitled "What isn't living dies": Utopia as Living Organism in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* and Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, which is forthcoming as part of an edited collection in honour of Lucy Sargisson on the occasion of her retirement (edited by Lyman Tower Sargent and Raffaella Baccolini).

I have touched above on the questions that really drive my work: an interest in deeply interconnected human and non-human networks and relationships, as well as the dynamic forces that drive them; I would here add to this the more philosophical consideration of how exactly we try to find meaning in a rapidly shifting world in which subjective experiences of reality have become radically divergent, and how literature and especially sf can provide us with unique tools to work through these questions and experiences and explore them in countless thought-provoking ways.

What do you envision for the future of sf studies and sf scholars? What do you want to see us accomplish?

As mentioned above, I would love for sf studies to gain more academic clout within university departments, but I would also like to see more collaboration across disciplines that touch in various ways on human experience and cross-temporal and spatial possibilities within this world and others. Ultimately, I see the future of academia as lying in collaboration and mutual support driven by specific research questions and areas of interest, and ideally as less tied to traditional disciplines and vocation-led curricula. Of course, this vision is somewhat utopian, but as a utopian studies scholar, I do always stress the positive potential of utopian thought to create tangible change in the real world!

If you could write a dream book, or teach a dream course, what would it/they be?

At the moment, my dream book would be based on my thesis, described above – in part, the dream would lie in properly including several utopian texts that I did not have the space to discuss at length in my thesis, particularly those from more distant historical periods in which sf and utopia were approached very differently to today, as I would love to do them justice and explore their unique employment of structural dynamic chronotopes.

Moreover, regarding my dream course, I am in fact currently designing a university module as part of my PGCAP certification that could be taught at either undergraduate or master's level, and that I imagine would be quite rewarding to teach. Also loosely based

on my thesis, this course examines women's utopian writing through the ages while also expanding on this focus and using it as a 'threshold concept' (Schwartzman 2010) to discuss larger questions surrounding the canonisation of literature, genre conventions and academic gate-keeping with regard to sf, utopian literature and women's writing in particular. It thereby challenges students to develop independent critical approaches to the study of genre, historical source material and literature in general; the ultimate aim of the course is to use women's utopian writing and genre/canonisation as springboards for a 'pedagogy of uncertainty' (Shulman 2005) to help prepare students for critical and unbiased participation in a wide range of intellectual environments, giving them the tools to question received knowledge and together build better intellectual paradigms. Although the design of this particular course is intended as an intellectual exercise for my PGCAP degree, I could certainly imagine teaching this or a similar module as part of an undergraduate or master's curriculum at some point in the future. Indeed, I would particularly enjoy preparing and teaching any course that would allow me to relate the critical potential of speculative fiction, and sf or utopian literature in particular, to other literary genres, and to encourage students to critically engage with the various ways of seeing and relating to the world that characterise and sometimes cross-fertilise these approaches. However, for the time being I would be grateful for the chance to teach anything that is loosely related to sf, utopia or speculative fiction in general – in addition to my teaching on the history of the novel, I have in the past few years had the chance to design and teach a short sf course as part of a 'Supported Progression' summer school for promising Year 12 students in the North East (who are applying for undergraduate study at Durham), and I would love to expand on this material, for example.

Whatever may come, however, I hope that I will be able to stay involved with the academic networks surrounding sf and utopian studies, as I have found a real home within these communities over the years. In fact, I have recently attained British citizenship (alongside my German and American nationalities) in part so that I may have a better chance of remaining part of these networks, and possibly also work at a university in either the UK or the US in the future, despite the horrible uncertainties of Brexit and US politics. In any case, I refuse to give up hope that things will eventually turn out all right, even if they are looking somewhat bleak at the moment—again, this must be the optimism of a utopian studies scholar!

Thank you! Your labor and thoughts are valued and appreciated.