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 Julia Gatermann

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

Hi! Thanks for inviting me—this is such an honor. I started as a PhD candidate last year at the department of English and American Studies at the University of Hamburg, Germany. I’m a meticulous writer of lists (anything, really: To Reads, To Dos, Pro-Cons...) because I like the way they structure my thoughts and give me the confidence to then (well, sometimes) just throw them to the wind and be present in the moment—because life (thankfully!!!) has a tendency of sneaking up and surprising you.

How do you describe yourself professionally?

Looking at my research interests, they seem to be spread out unreasonably wide (something I find simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating): I’m writing my dissertation on sexual and gender fluidity (looking at contemporary films, novels, tv series, and so on) with a strong emphasis on intersectionality. I’m also employed at an interdisciplinary research project called “Fiction Meets Science II” with the subproject titled “Science in Postcolonial Speculative Fiction: Nature/Politics/Economies Reimagined” where we look at depictions of science, technology, and knowledge production from perspectives that challenge and decenter dominant Western discourse. While both areas—sexuality and gender as well as science and knowledge production—are each dauntingly vast and complex, the overlap between
the two—and incidentally the aspect I’m interested in most—is the dynamics at work when you look at the margins instead of the center: the emergence of imaginary spaces that allow for a (re-)negotiation (be that of concepts, power relations, or identities) that becomes possible in the liminal spaces “in between”, resulting from the friction between center and periphery. These imaginary spaces are inherently utopian, I believe, since they, by their very nature, always already point towards the future and to the question “what if”? Which allows us to elegantly segue into the next question...

Why does sf matter to you?

Pretty much all of my academic work at the moment is inflected by sf because I find it a good mode to think with. Similar to the conceptual friction that happens at the boundaries of two disparate cultures, for example, that allows for new imaginary spaces to emerge, sf deliberately strives to provoke cognitive estrangement that unsettles one’s familiar perspective. There are many aspects about sf that I’m in love with (and some of them are too embarrassingly cheesy to admit to publicly!), but what I think is probably sf’s most powerful capacity is how it opens our view—with a sometimes only ever so slight tilt of the angle—to aspects of our own culture that we previously might have overlooked or been blind to. Long held preconceptions and beliefs that are tightly woven into the fabric of our culture and thereby have become “white noise” to us, something we just take for granted and maybe even perceive as neutral facts of life, can be challenged in sf with a stunning ease—by just shifting the frame a bit. And this ease with which something so profound can be accomplished reveals just how brittle these values and beliefs really become when they remain unquestioned. Therefore, sf hands us powerful tools to both make visible new sides of what we thought we already knew well enough—our reality—and thereby also the power to reshape it by asking new questions—“what if...?” Sf, at its best, challenges its readers/viewers and keeps them on their toes.

What brought you to sf studies?

I started to discover sf (as probably most of us) in my teens (if “the golden age of science fiction” is considered to be twelve, I was a bit of a late bloomer, though). In my family, education was always considered as something highly valued, yet not
to be taken for granted (I am the first to have been to university). I owe my love for
books to my mother who read to me tirelessly when I was little (I somewhat suspect
I didn't allow her to tire, as closure is still something I can't go to sleep without!).

Yet when I started university, I always regarded anything “genre” as an illicit
pleasure. In Germany, even more so than in Anglophone culture, we make a very
distinction between high and low brow culture when considering cultural
artifacts, and the study of the latter was (sometimes still is) regarded as somewhat
frivolous—and for someone very conscious about their class background this can
become a very fraught thing. While the devaluation of pop culture had been contested
for decades before I ever picked up my first sf novel, and the cultural climate at my
university therefore thankfully was rather inclusive (every now and then there were
seminars on detective fiction, for example), it was till my second to last semester
that I encountered a loud and proud announcement of science fiction in the course
catalog.

This seemed to me delightfully transgressive; the crowd this seminar drew was
indeed one composed of people who also reveled in “out of the box” approaches and
challenging conventional thinking, and I felt like I finally belonged! I immediately
decided to write my master's thesis on sf, went to my first academic conference (ICFA,
closely followed by SFRA), spent a year researching my thesis at the Merrill Collection
in Toronto, and was overwhelmed by the sense of community I encountered! Just
starting out in academia, I felt seen and accepted, my opinions valued. I felt buoyed
by the emotional support the academic sf community gave me in my endeavors and
ambitions, making me almost giddy with happy optimism. When I returned back
home to Germany, I longed to take this feeling of community and belonging with
me, yearning for a similar network in the German context.

Therefore, when Lars Schmeink decided to organize an inaugural conference
for the Gesellschaft für Fantastikforschung (German association for research of
the fantastic in the arts) in 2010, I did what I could to help build up this academic
association and provide an organizational structure for a still growing band of
likeminded academic SFF enthusiasts to rally around. I feel privileged that I’ve been
allowed to serve on the board of the GfF for ten years!

While my love for sf has been longstanding, I believe it was really the open-
mindedness, the combination of critical acuity and creative scholarship happening
in the field, and, probably above anything else, the warmhearted inclusiveness and
integrity of the people within sf that made me catch fire. I feel at home in sf and I couldn’t imagine my (academic and overall) life without it.

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

As mentioned above, the two projects I’m working on at the moment are my dissertation on representations of sexual and gender fluidity in contemporary American culture and the interdiscplinary research project with “Fiction Meets Science” on representations of science, technology and knowledge production in postcolonial speculative novels. Here, I’m looking at how author’s from the Global South or of a hybrid cultural background challenge and destabilize such notion as the supremacy of Western science in their novels, and debunk the fallacy of perceiving it as something neutral and free of any “cultural baggage”. Sf, through extrapolation, can expose problematic developments that, in mainstream society might long have become normalized, and critically question the power relations and dynamics of a capitalist economy that often harnesses scientific research for profit oriented gains, pushing for advancements while downplaying potential risks, for example.

Against the dystopian backdrop of climate change, global pandemics, war and overwhelming inequality, Western science (entangled in capitalist interests) doesn’t only seem to lack the answers but often seems to be at the heart of these problems. And while the present moment long seems to have caught up with sf, creating a strange sense of “double vision”, an inherent sense of futurity in our here and now, I nevertheless believe that sf’s capacity of extrapolation and estrangement can help us process these problematic developments as it affords us with the required conceptual distance to our own reality—it makes us take a step back—to take a good look at it.

I’m interested in how postcolonial sf (and I won’t go into the problematic history of the term here) explores questions such as how non-Western knowledge traditions might hold solutions to these problems, how a Western binary thinking in terms of a nature-culture-opposition might be broken up in favor of more fluid and interconnected understandings of the two, or how different science traditions might work hand in hand to come to creative responses to complex problems. I’m just thrilled to hear how new voices, especially those voices who previously had been silenced, contribute to the discussion, trouble and upend preconceptions and change
the dialogue—even the way how we ask questions.

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

This, I guess, is also what I hope for the future of sf studies and scholars within the field. Sf is full of diverse and brilliant voices, upending what we thought we knew, challenging us to become better thinkers. Likewise, I want to see more scholars succeeding in academia that belong to groups that previously have largely been underrepresented, marginalized, even silenced—people who can challenge white, male, Western, able-bodied, hetero, cis-normativity, take the discourse to new places and ask new questions. These strange and difficult times have shown us that “business as usual” is no longer sustainable, that closing our eyes in front of the obvious no longer is an option. We are in desperate need of change—in the face of an intricately interwoven and incomprehensibly complex global system of . . . everything . . . this is a staggering challenge. We need out of the box thinking, we need new perspectives and angles to look from, we need new ways to cooperate and collaborate, to communicate with each other across the divides of our subjective experiences. And, above all else—we need a huge portion of utopian thinking! These times seem to require sf scholarship more than ever—and the more diverse the voices within it, the better our chances to radically change our world for the better.

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

The dream book would be my dissertation. I’m interested in how expressions of non-normative sexual and gender identity are being transported and translated in contemporary culture, thereby counteracting cultural erasure and giving visibility to marginalized groups as well as breaking up preconceptions and unsettling binary thinking. Core to my work is an intersectional approach; my theoretical foundation is informed by a variety of discourses, be that critical posthumanism, postcolonial theory, posthumanist feminism, queer theory and critical race studies. I look through an sf lens at my work, firmly believing that the affordances of sf, especially estrangement and extrapolation, allow us to inspect and explore the here and now from new angles and make it possible to perceive from these perspectives what we otherwise might have missed due to our cultural blind spots that derive from an
overfamiliarity with the cultural tapestry of our reality. I’m interested in novels, films and tv series that negotiate the experiences of marginal subject positions and embodiment in complex ways that decenter normative thinking, Larissa Lai’s *The Tiger Flu*, for example, or Alex Garland’s *Ex Machina*.

In terms of a dream course, I get to teach a seminar on intersectionality next semester, using Janelle Monáe’s emotion picture *Dirty Computer* as an example and spring board to dive into the vital importance of (self-)representation, cultural memory, and the political, utopian force of Afrofuturism.

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