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'*Sarahland* would trick me into thinking it was the entire world': Sam Cohen's short story cycle as queer ecology

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Queer ecology, writes queer ecocritic Nicole Seymour, is 'a conceptual framework that interrogates the relationship between the queer and the natural, broadly constructed' (2020:108). In her seminal contribution to the field, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (2013), she analyses contemporary queer literature and film which 'manage[s] to conceive of concrete, sincere environmental politics even while remaining, to varying degrees, skeptical, ironic, and self-reflexive' (2013:2). She challenges, on the one hand, the rejection, amongst radical environmentalists, of human concerns as ecologically unimportant (2013:14); on the other, she challenges the rejection, amongst some queer theorists, of futurity as an oppressive, heteronormative construct (2013:8-12). Instead, she draws on theories of queer utopianism and optimism to explore how these texts show that 'there are ways to care about the natural, ways to expand the social, and ways to care about the future, that are not heteronormative' (2013:10). In bringing together ecocritical and queer theoretical lenses, she shows how texts which might not appear as explicitly environmental nevertheless produce an ethical, empathetic vision that thinks sexuality and gender with the environment.

More recently, in *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (2018), Seymour extends her exploration of irony in relation to ecological concerns. She develops the term 'bad environmentalism' to mean 'environmental thought that employs dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse' (2018:6). Her focus, here, is on how 'irony's conceptual doubling allows it [the work under discussion] to disrupt the binarized logic of despair/hope and to dispute mainstream environmentalism's claim to authenticity and straightforwardness' (2018:5)'. As with *Strange Natures*, she is writing in conversation with queer theorists such as Jose Muñoz ([2009] 2019) and Jack Halberstam (2011) who focus on the reparative, radical and optimistic uses of 'improper attachments and inappropriate feelings', as well as on cultural artefacts which may not be considered as worthy of attention within mainstream academia (2018:24). In this way, she continues to explore the environmental stakes of contemporary queer culture which challenges the serious, the valuable and the proper.

Seymour reads queer novels, films, poetry, stand-up comedy, and performance art; at no point, however, does she consider the short story's contribution to queer ecological and bad environmental thought. This is the gap this article aims to fill. Although it focusses on Sam Cohen's *Sarahland* (2021), it is worth nothing that Cohen is just one of many contemporary Anglophone authors using

the short story to interrogate the relationship between the queer and the natural. Other key examples include Callum Angus's *A Natural History of Transition* (2021), Jess Arndt's *Large Animals* (2017), Julia Armfield's *Salt Slow* (2020), Leon Craig's *Parallel Hells* (2022), Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) and Bryan Washington's *Lot* (2019). Whilst many of these collections have won literary prizes and garnered positive reviews, they have yet to receive serious critical attention. *Sarahland* strikes me as a particularly interesting example because of its focus on the role that narrative — both the consumption and the production of it — plays in constructing environments. Each of its component stories feature a Sarah who relates to, yet is independent from, the young queer Jewish woman who narrates the first, titular story. These Sarahs are hungry for stories of all kinds: the stories of the good, straight, academically successful Jewish girl they have grown up with, and the stories of the anti-normative, eco-friendly, critical theory-reading queer woman which they turn to instead. They morph into post-apocalyptic non-human 'Sah-wahs' into video game avatar versions of various famous Sarahs, into a pre-Biblical transfeminine 'Sari', into an older lesbian couple who 'transition' from women to trees.

In the first section of this article I close read the cycle's first three stories, arguing that Cohen positions heteronormativity as an ecology of harm, whilst exploring the possibilities and limitations of using queer theory as ecological material with which to build alternative environments. I situate Cohen's text within Seymour's notion of 'bad environmental' writing by paying particular attention to the way in which her ironic, self-reflexive narration critically engages with not only the pitfalls of mainstream environmentalist discourse, but those of the more 'irreverent' queer theory on which Seymour herself draws; drawing, also, on criticism of the short story cycle, I show how she uses the genre to explore the possibilities and limitations of using story as ecological material. The second half of the article focusses on the later stories and how, in moving away from realism, they attempt to articulate a queer ecological consciousness by bringing her, thus-far implicit, environmental concerns, to the fore.

'Sarahland,' or, Heteronormativity as Ecology of Harm

'Sarahland,' the cycle's first, titular, story, frames heteronormativity as an ecology of harm. The story explores a young Jewish Sarah's increasing discomfort with, and attempts to escape, the mainstream, conservative, heteronormative environment of her elite college; she moves from a strained friendship with a group of popular girls, to a strained almost-relationship with a queer, critical theory-reading girl, and she ends up getting raped by a male environmental sciences student. The story may be seen as an illustration of the naturalization of heteronormativity and its attendant harms,

as well as of the difficulty of creating queer alternatives and the complicity of mainstream environmentalism in both these projects. .

This is clear from the beginning of the story, as we are introduced to the narrator, Sarah, a member of a cool-girl group, a 'Sarah horde,' in a 'privately owned off-campus dormitory where 90 percent of the girls were named Sarah' (2021: 3). The Sarahs have rigid affective, aesthetic and behavioural rules: they eat microwaved broccoli to lose the 'freshman fifteen' (2021:1-2); they flat-iron their hair before 'Going Out' (2021:5); they tell our narrator that she's 'too pretty' for pre-med (2021:2); and they compliment the nose job that her mother forced upon her (2021:8). They assign value to themselves and one another only in terms of whether they are attractive according to heterosexual norms (thin, pretty, straight-haired, not too nerdy). But whereas the other Sarahs are content with this environment, the narrator feels constricted by it:

> While I might think I was making independent choices and moving around freely in the world, it was as though a secret groove had been carved, and some invisible bumpers were going to push me gently back into that groove, the Jew groove, *Sarahland*, and Sarahland would trick me and trick me into thinking it was the entire world. (2021: 3)

Here, Cohen's self-reflexive first-person voice draws attention to the ways in which the physical parametres of Sarah's world are shaped by story. The 'invisible bumpers' humourously register the constructedness of Sarah's identity. It makes visible the process by which Sarah's highly heteronormative world — a very *literal* land of Sarahs — comes to feel natural, thereby demonstrating that it is precisely the opposite.

Cohen uses imagery to further illuminate the ways in which heteronormativity can function as a harmful, all-encompassing environment. The Sarah horde frequent a student bar called Stillwaters where the boys pressure each other to do tequila shots and the girl groups 'look like there was a memo: dewy skin and dark eyes, lightly glossed lips, hair meticulously flat-ironed, one of two models of jeans'; our Sarah, however, prefers to think of it as 'Stagnant Pond' (2021:9). When she returns to her dorm, she must fight the 'infestation' of 'Nice Jewish Boys' who, like 'cockroaches,' are 'most visible at night' (2021:1). She, and the other Sarahs, often wake with 'their [the boys'] palms clawed around our boobs in a way they didn't try that hard to make look accidental' (2021:6). The boys are both animalistic — they 'claw', they 'slobber' — yet in possession of the human capacity to lie and scheme. Cohen is straining at the limitations of realist narration, making what at first read like comic simile into a more concrete, and therefore more terrifying, invasion of the girls' space. The absurdity of this description rewrites male violence against women as badly constructed theatre — not natural at all. In *Strange Natures*, Seymour explores how queer ecological texts do not so much critique

nature per se, but the harmful processes of its construction (2013:5). In ‘Sarahland’, Cohen’s use of imagery takes aim at the process by which patriarchal heteronormativity positions itself, and the violence against women and girls it entails, as natural; heteronormativity is posed, in other words, as an ecology of harm.

The story also highlights the difficulty of moving from the critique of heteronormativity to the generation of alternatives to it. Sarah initially finds escape from Sarahland in Sasha, a queer-coded girl who doesn’t straighten her hair, diet, or seem to care what anyone thinks of her. Crucially, Sarah meets her in an Integrated Liberal Studies class which aims to “‘imagine a method of critical thought that produces writing with the potential to change the world.’” (2021:15); the possibility of changing *the* world and Sarah’s world are intertwined. Sasha talks as if ‘the Great Men were just dudes we could know’ (2021:16), and when Sarah confesses to boy troubles, she tells her to read bell hooks (2021:17). Yet, hidden within this apparent antinormativity, is a different set of rules: Sarah is careful to wear her ‘edgiest’ (2021:16) outfit to class, yet despite this, she cannot impress Sasha, who ‘rolls her eyes’ when she expresses opinions (2021:16), joking that she’s still just *a* Sarah (2021:23). When Sasha tells Sarah that she kissed her female teaching assistant, Sarah feels like ‘the world has exploded open and anything on earth is possible, like I could be a dolphin after all’ (2021:18). Later in the story, they come close to kissing, only for Sasha to begin making out with the female TA instead, who is pretty and has a septum ring (2021:28). Sasha reprimands Sarah for not expressing the right opinions, whereas the Sarahs reprimanded her for doing premed. Sasha also seems to value a particular aesthetic, involving conventional prettiness plus a certain edge signified by elements such as the septum piercing. Queerness, in the story, does not necessarily produce a more caring environment and has, the story seems to suggest, its own hierarchies of aesthetics and behaviour that, although different, reproduce the dynamics of those of mainstream heteronormative culture.

The final part of the story critiques mainstream environmentalism’s obliviousness to gender-based violence. After Sasha’s rejection, Sarah is upset, vulnerable and alone; ignoring her doubts, she goes home with an environmentalist sciences student, who tells her about cloud forests, before proceeding to rape her. She does not, however, use that word:

> I’m not practiced in saying no so instead I say “What are you doing?” and “Hey put me down” or maybe I don’t say that and what’s coming out is a confused urghhh sound and then my skirt’s scrunched up around my hips and my thermals are down, so easily, like he’s done it all, lifted me and unzipped and slipped right in, in a simple move and I try wresting free but I can’t and all I can think is someone might walk in. (2021:31)

This passage performs trauma’s resistance to narration: the rapist has occupied not only Sarah’s body but her ability to tell a story about what has happened to it; neither Sasha nor Rousseau nor bell hooks

nor any other of the narratives surrounding Sarah seem able to change this. That rape is hidden beneath the 'and then;' it happens 'in a simple move', a seeming inevitability, and a more extreme iteration of the 'boy invasion' Sarah has been fighting since the beginning. Cohen highlights the absurdity of caring for the cloud forests when you are oblivious to the harm you cause other humans. In doing so, she implies a relationship between mainstream environmentalist discourse, which would separate out human from non-human concerns, and sexual violence. This passage insists on the necessity of unpicking the ways in which mainstream environmentalism contributes to the processes by which violence against women and girls is made to appear natural.

The first story in the cycle therefore establishes Sarah's hereto-patriarchal, white middle-class environment as an ecology of harm – a bad environment that is at once symbolic and material. It can be read as both 'queer ecological' and 'bad environmental' writing in that it illuminates, and thereby questions, the processes by which heteronormative gender norms, and sexual violence against women, present themselves as natural, inevitable, unchangeable. But it also illuminates the ways in which both queer academic culture and mainstream environmentalism may be complicit in these harms. Cohen's ironic, absurd narration is in both implicit and explicit dialogue with critical theory, asking why it is so hard to move from registering the harmful elements of this naturalisation process, to escaping, resisting, or creating alternatives to it. This is the question that animates, as discussed below, the cycle as a whole.

Beyond 'The Only Story': 'Naked Furniture,' and 'Exorcism, or Eating my Twin'

The second and third stories from the cycle explore the difficulties of developing queerer alternatives to heteronormative ecologies of harm. The hidden rules, hierarchies and blindspots of queer academia and counter-culture that 'Sarahland' hints at, are brought to the fore, exposing the extent to which these supposedly anti-normative and radical spaces are still entangled with mainstream, heteronormative ways of thinking and being. I will draw on criticism of the short story cycle genre to show how it is not only through the individual stories but the resonances and dissonances between them that Cohen illuminate both the possibilities and the limitations of using story as ecological material.

The second story in the cycle, 'Naked Furniture,' follows a Sarah who is desperate for a story to replace 'The Only Story' of being 'adorable and marriageable and getting all A's at the state university' (2021:33). She initially jettisoned 'The Only Story' as a result of the 'new strong feelings' which arose after switching to an English major (2021:34). Cutting and bleaching her hair, getting a septum piercing, reading books leant to her by classmates, becoming a lesbian, and letting go of her old, 'Fendi-wearing' friends, were a part of this jettisoning (2021:34-6). After graduating, she moved to LA and worked as part of a reading program to help disadvantaged kids which didn't pay enough

to cover rent. She began, as a result of feeling 'loose' and lonely when not at work (2021:36), as well as needing more money, to work in a brothel. She is initially cheered by the other sex workers' counter-cultural views and the promise of structure and financial stability, however, by the end of the story, she is in more debt, and is disconnected from herself and those around her.

The narrative in 'Naked Furniture' hinges around Sarah's relationship to story: her need for it, as well as her tendency to be swept up by it. Here are two passages from early on in the story which explore the impact that reading has on her life:

> She was scandalized by the boys who lowered their voices to sound dumb and tough, who talked to her like she was made of synthetic materials but whom she made out with anyway. She was scandalized by the trash cans full of plastic and the invisible dying polar bears. But the books from Sarah's classmates made Sarah feel like there might be other ways to respond to scandal. Or at least like she wasn't alone in feeling sick and weird. The books worked on Sarah like paint stripper. There had been a store in Sarah's hometown called the Naked Furniture Store and this is now Sarah felt, like naked furniture, like something embarrassingly unfinished, something that could be anything**.** Sarah as Naked Furniture let herself be remade by the books. (2021: 34-35)

> No one told Sarah that if you're going to just abandon the story that is The Only Story, you have to *replace* it with something – you have to, like, fight for social justice or become a genuine artist. Sarah felt loosely inclined toward art and social justice but she wasn't really doing anything about those loose inclinations. (2021:37)

In this first passage, the repetition of 'scandalised,' and the comparison of herself to 'synthetic materials' alongside the mention of 'plastic trash,' emphasise how 'the books' help Sarah to causally connect the harms she personally experiences to larger structural harms. Plastic trash is connected to dying polar bears, but also to her experience of being objectified as a woman; capitalism creates plastic products that end up as trash, and heteronormativity makes 'boys' treat her as 'synthetic'; but only 'the books' enable her to make this connection. Yet, whilst the first passage's 'naked furniture' metaphor implies that the books have done more to destroy the stories Sarah grew up with than to replace them with anything else, the second passage, which comes shortly before her entry into sex work, makes this explicit: 'strong new feelings' might generate excitement, and some degree of personal liberation, but not necessarily the means to intervene meaningfully in the power structures they critique. Seymour argues that 'bad environmentalism' uses irony to disrupt despair/hope binary (Seymour, 2018:5) set up by mainstream, serious environmentalist discourse; these passages

simultaneously take Sarah's need to take everything seriously, whilst, through opening an ironic distance between narrator and narration, poking fun at it. Phrases such as 'no one told Sarah' imply that she is naive, almost childlike, and so we cannot be sure if 'the books' are to blame for her limitations, or her particular reading of them.

Sarah's time at the brothel further exposes the limited nature of even the personal liberation that 'the books' seem to offer in ways that echo Sarah's disappointing interactions with Sarah in 'Sarahland'. At first, Sarah enjoyed feeling like a 'Story Girl' again (2021:41) and 'liked that everyone here accepted her as a fictional character [Dorothy]' and that, by comparison to teaching kids to read, 'it was a simple, clear transaction' (2021:43). The clarity of her sex work character and role fills the hole that was left after abandoning mainstream expectations of success. Yet this relief doesn't last; she finds the other girls' distance from 'The Only Story' manifests in conspiracy theories and a refusal to sit on chairs or eat gluten, 'freaky' (2021:50). Just as the Sarah of 'Sarahland' didn't quite fit in with Sasha, so this Sarah doesn't quite fit with the other sex workers. She gets into further debt, and the apartment she shares with her girlfriend and co-worker Katherine ends up beset by 'crust in the takeout containers, crust in the crotches of her never-clean-enough panties, crust in the floor mats of her towed car' (2021:64). The 'crust' echoes, in its spirit of despair and entropy, the 'stagnant pond', Sarah's nickname for the popular heteronormative bar, StillWaters, in 'Sarahland.' This implies that Sarah's attempt at creating a queerer, more radical environment has ended up just as constricting, and feels just as natural, and as difficult to change, even if, in this story, she is the one with the septum piercing and the queer lifestyle, not her romantic rival (Sasha's 'pretty' TA). When she discovers that an ex critical thought classmate and fellow essay prize winner, Steele also works there, she wonders: 'What was the connection between being an excellent English major and playing dead in a lace thong and red lipstick?' (2021:65). Whilst Steele is, on the face of it, more like Sasha than Sarah — she looks down on Sarah for being suburban (2021:58) and is cool in both senses of the word — there is a link made here between intense academic engagement with critical theory and an impulse to detach from societal norms without necessarily having the means to create meaningful alternatives.

By the end of the story, Sarah is in greater debt, but is proud to be 'better than all the girls at being dead', after all, 'who didn't want to be plastic? If real power was unattainable, who wouldn't want to be a doll?' (2021:66). She is no longer playing, but *being,* dead, her earlier social justice and feminist concerns subsumed by the difficulty of her own survival. We can't be sure whether Sarah has taken critical theory's critique of the recursivity of power structures too literally, or whether she has not read them thoroughly enough; we can't know whether she has found an island of respite from heteronormative ecologies of harm, or whether she is more enthralled to the imperative to self-objectification, hierarchy and competition between women, than she was to begin with, and indeed,

than was prevalent amongst the 'Sarah horde'. The story ecology that Sarah builds in 'Naked Furniture' is in conversation with, and connected to, that of the first story through narrative, cultural and intellectual references, affect, and imagery. Cohen's generation of symbolic and conceptual patterns across and between stories that illuminate the difficulties of moving from the critique of dominant power structures to the creation of alternatives, and indeed, how 'critique' is remains entangled with such structures.

In this sense, Cohen's vision emerges not only through each individual story but through what the influential critic of the short story cycle Forrest Ingram described as 'the bonds of unity which make the many into a single whole' (1971: 19). Subsequent criticism has focussed on the functions of unity, or 'coherence' within the form, with coherence defined as 'an index of the various ties that bind' the short story cycle into something distinct from its constituent stories' (Gill & Kläger, in Gill & Kläger, ed, 2018:4-5). For example, Helen Kadmos, in her study of Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitterage,* argues that ' […] in the short story cycle, the placing of each story within the collected whole enables the cycle to achieve a deeper and richer meaning than the singular story on its own' (2019:40). Below, I draw on these critical perspectives to show how it is the interaction between Cohen's component stories that allows for a 'deeper and richer' exploration of the difficulties of using critical theory to create queerer alternatives to hegemonic, heteronormative power structures.

The third story in the cycle, 'Exorcism, or Eating My Twin,' follows a Sarah who, heartbroken, is retrospectively trying to understand why her relationship has ended. She meets her ex at the 'enclosed world' of a fan convention for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2021:67) and is so drawn to them that she is convinced they are her 'twin', nicknaming them Tegan (after the queer twin pop duo, Sarah and Tegan). The narration's ironic distance, however, makes the differences between them apparent — to the reader, if not to Sarah. Sarah is a fan fiction writer who wants to make 'being a parasite […] a valid mode of living' (2021:69), whereas Tegan is a literature PhD student who works on 'reclaiming parasitic lesbian relationships' (2021:68). Despite their shared interest in parasitic relationships, Tegan embodies what Sarah interprets as a distanced 'academic Protestantism' which has taught her — in contrast to Sarah's Jewish background — 'not to gush' (2021:71). Gill and Kläger describe the short story cycle's 'added value' lying in its ability to create 'coherence' or connection, between and beyond each individual story (2018:4). By this, the third story, coherence is emerging not only through the reappearance of queer Jewish Sarahs, but through their failure to adhere to the affective rules of three quite different, yet overlapping 'enclosed worlds' of, respectively, the cool-girl dorm, the brothel, and the small University town. In 'Sarahland', Sarah's queerness placed her outside of the affective norms of heteronormative suburban Jewishness; in 'Naked Furniture' she is too suburban for the other sex workers but too queer and anti-normative for her suburban parents; here, she considers her Jewishness, which she couches in emotionality and enthusiasm, is deemed 'too

much' by Tegan's more distanced, measured, academic tone. In all three stories, Sarahs' interpretative missteps — of both the texts and the people they counter — serve both a diagnostic and an imaginative function, signalling to the reader both the limitations of each enclosed world, and, through encouraging them to question the continuities between them, to imagine how things might be different.

In 'Exorcism,' unlike in the previous two stories, however, Sarah's queer ecological thinking gets somewhat closer to providing an alternative way of being, albeit briefly. Early on in their relationship, before Sarah and Tegan's differences cause a rift, Cohen describes their physical intimacy as follows:

> it felt like maybe not kissing at all but like something else, like maybe eating. Tegan's breathing sounded heavy in a way that reminded me of whales and soon everything transformed into something so slick and open that I couldn't help but feel like we'd been returned to the sea. We stayed there for hours, in the promise of becoming primordial or futuristic. (Cohen, 2021:83)

Cohen's self-reflexive narration is as attuned to the difficulties of describing consensual sexual intimacy as it was, in 'Sarahland,' to describing sexual assault. The difference is that here, it is Sarah's joy and connection that evades narration, not trauma. Consensual queer intimacy provides Sarah with a moment of ecstatic release from not only the 'enclosed world' of the conference, but from the human bodily form altogether. 'I' dissolves into 'we', present into past and future. This echoes 'Sarahland' Sarah's intimation that she could become a 'dolphin' with Sasha; it also foreshadows the psychedelic shapeshifting that Sarah undergoes in the later story, 'Dream Palace' (2021:91-96), acting as a tiny rip in the fabric of what is ostensibly realism, reminding the reader that other worlds – and other stories in the cycle – are never so far away. The language of return, of softness and movement and water, contrasts starkly with that of 'being dead 'in the brothel, or the dorm 'boy invasion': perhaps this is the fantasy world Sarah has been dreaming of, or maybe she is even about 'to bring Tegan's theories to life, to illustrate the 'magic,' instead of the pathology, of 'the lesbian merge' (2020:78). The 'self-shattering' that queer anti-social theorists might consider antithetical to futurity and ideas of nature (Seymour, 2013:5) is, through the use of natural imagery, reimagined as an ecological act, a means of connecting humans, but also the human to the nonhuman.

Yet this ecstatic release, this utopia, does not lead to structural change, not even at the level of the personal. Sarah's inability to accept the difference between herself and Tegan ultimately ends the relationship. She is annoyed when Tegan wants to work on her thesis instead of cuddle (2021:78), when they order a different restaurant dish or want to hang out with other local queer people (2021:81): Sarah is the one who wants to keep their world 'enclosed'. She certainly cannot deal with Tegan's disclosure that she is transmasculine, worrying that 'Tegan would be a dude and I would be

stranded on the island of gross lesbianism alone'(2021:86). The ending reframes this situation when Sarah, having realized that her exorcism has failed — 'I love my memory of Tegan, or my invention of Tegan, and I hate the new Tegan, the real Tegan '(2021:89) — opts instead, for the 'way more fun' option of cannibalism (2020:89). Pulling on 'Not-Tegan's binder, she says: 'I look at myself in the mirror and feel hot for the first time in forever' (2020:83). Is she falling in love with herself as herself, or as Tegan? Is she recognising her own gender queerness, or recreating the fantasy Tegan she could never encounter in reality? And who — if she is now Tegan, and if Tegan is Not-Tegan — is narrating/has narrated, the story? As with the endings of 'Naked Furniture' and 'Sarahland', Cohen leaves the reader in a state of affective and intellectual uncertainty; we cannot be sure if Sarah has used story as a material with which to construct a new self, a self that is not-Sarah, or to cling to the memory of the relationship, rather than letting go. This implies that neither Sarah nor Tegan's way of reading the world is the right one; maybe there is no right one.

Beyond the Human: 'Becoming Trees,' 'All the Teenaged Sarahs' and 'The Purple Epoch'

So far, I have argued that Cohen's short story cycle functions as a queer ecology in its exploitation of the form to repeatedly approach and deepen questions regarding the oppressive nature of heteronormativity and the search for alternative ways of being, even when this search is often ultimately fraught. Environmental concerns play a key role in articulating these themes, but they remain mostly woven into the figurative levels of the prose. The cycle's final three stories, however, articulate debates about naturalness in relation to human sexuality and behaviour that are more explicitly connected to environmental concerns.

The third-to-last story, 'Becoming Trees,' is set in a world in which people transition between human, animal and plant forms, as well as between genders. It focuses on an older lesbian couple who feel that without undergoing continual transformation, as all their friends are, they are inferior: 'We felt like caterpillars who didn't know that being a caterpillar wasn't the endgame. We felt like foamy pond water.' (2020:155). The possibility of becoming trees, however, promises an escape from the problem of human identity altogether:

> No one told the plants they had to be one thing or another. I slipped off my sandals and stood barefoot in the garden. I imagined the soles of my feet growing little hairs, then tentacles that reached down and multiplied outward. Suddenly, I had never wanted anything so much. (Cohen 2021:159)

When they finally root into the earth of their back garden, they have 'the best sex we'd had in years' (2021:171). Reviewing the cycle in *The LA Review of Books*, Rebecca Schutlz argues that the later stories of the collection are 'thinner than the earlier pieces; they seem to know the answers, in a way the early stories don't. They're less wondrously uncomfortable; their politics are more internet-

friendly. I agree with them; I'm not shattered by them' (2021). Yet, while it is true that the collection's later stories continue the project of envisioning queer alternatives of being and become more successful at doing so, such alternatives still present us with a multiplicity of possible interpretations: the couple's transition could be read as a critique of the misogyny, ageism and homophobia woven into the capitalist injunction to continually transform and improve the self; it can also be interpreted as a framing of trans identities as natural; an it is possible to see it as a rejection of the search for identity altogether.

Schutlz's interpretation is also contingent upon her reading of each story individually; considering them as part of the cycle reveals a multiplicity of meanings. Kadmos's observation that 'the placing of each story within the collected whole enables the cycle to achieve a deeper and richer meaning than the singular story on its own' (2019: 40) is relevant here, since, by this point, late in the cycle, the reader is accustomed to the symbolic, cultural and narrative patterning within the book as a whole. That the couple feel like 'caterpillars' but want to become trees recalls the 'Sarahland' Sarah's hope of becoming a 'dolphin' around Sasha, and that of 'Exorcism's' moment of becoming 'primordial', whilst the 'foamy pond water' recalls the heteronormative bar, 'Stillwaters,' frequented by the Sarah of the first story. These allusions position the world of 'Becoming Trees' as a possibility embedded in the more realist worlds of the earlier stories, and vice versa, creating a thread of narrative cause and effect that runs, implicitly, across the cycle.

Likewise, the meaning of the penultimate story, 'All the Teenaged Sarahs,' is highly dependent on its placement in the cycle as a whole. It is split into sub-sections, such as, 'The Ordinary World', 'Responding to the Call', 'Crossing the Threshold to the Special World', etc (2020: 173-191), which reference 'The Hero's Journey,' a narratological framework which understands stories through the changes their protagonist undergoes (Campbell, 1949). This story also exhibits the cyclical nature of the collection, in that it references almost every preceding story: this Sarah is Jewish and from a midwestern suburb which she seeks to escape by attending a 'mystical horse camp' whose promo video she receives for her twelfth birthday (2021:174). She ends up in a sorority house whose Sisters turn into 'plastic dolls' (2020:181); she wants to 'devour' her lesbian lover Nancy (2021:185); she watches Buffy the Vampire Slayer (2021:181). The reason she can't succeed in either the straight or the queer world is that she is still twelve: 'She doesn't know where horse camp is…She needs a mommy or else a horse' (2020:186). The naivity that is more subtle in earlier stories, is spelled out here. After becoming 'Sarah Schuster', the alter-ego of Jenny, a Jewish lesbian from the TV show *The L Word*, she tries to commit suicide and wakes up to realize that 'there is no horse camp' (2021:187). Her narrative 'Reward' is to drive to the North Woods of Minnesota and Wisconsin, where the narrator observes: '[the trees] don't seem intent on expressing their own spectacularness, they seem happy to work together in creating leafy walls, in realising oxygen, et cetera' (2021:188),

a clear echo of ‘Becoming Trees’. She ‘mermaid swims’ in a lake, finds a horse who nuzzles her gently, like a ‘BFF’, then leaves to see a drag show and ‘pull wild garlic out of the earth’ (2021:191). The pop cultural references, the cannibalistic lesbian lover, the Sarah who feels stifled by her suburban Jewish upbringing, who can never quite understand the affective rules of any given environment, who forms ‘too strong’ attachments to friends, girlfriends, and fictional characters, the trees; the placing of ‘All the Teenaged Sarahs’ as the penultimate story in the cycle means that Cohen’s ‘themes are more fully realized, when read in the context of the stories with which they are connected’ (Kadmos, 2019:40) in that the references give this context explicit space in the story. More specifically, they indicate that, beneath the apparent diversity and disunity of the component stories, there is a unifying tension between progress towards and refusal of maturity, as well as a persistent attachment to story.

‘All the Teenaged Sarahs ’functions, then, like a lens through which the reader can look back at the previous stories and identify new patterns of cause and effect. It is an ironic, playful, synoptic view of everything that’s gone before. Is horse camp real? Are the trees who aren’t ‘intent on expressing their own spectacularness’ actually the old lesbian couple from ‘Becoming Trees’? Is going to a drag show as natural as picking wild garlic? That Cohen places these desires alongside one another implies that taking care of the self’s queerest and most illogical of desires, its limitations and its blindspots, goes hand-in-hand with caring for the planet. Sarah moves from inhabiting a heteronormative world in the first story, to queerer but still hierarchical worlds, to finding a fragile piece by connecting to queerness and the environment, thereby showing that ‘there are ways to care about the natural, ways to expand the social, and ways to care about the future, that are not heteronormative’ (2013:10). In this particular story, Sarah’s wishes come true, but they are the wishes of a childlike self, one who remains suspended in queer time, refusing to progress.

The cycle ends, in ‘The Purple Epoch,’ by narrating the end of human life all together. It describes how hotter temperatures render the earth uninhabitable for humans, yet ‘create a party atmosphere for all kinds of sporrias and phillas and cocci’ (2021:193). In the space of a few pages of impressionistic, poetic prose, it traces how these bacteria develop into reptile creatures called ‘Sah-wah’ (2021:194). Whilst more humorous than tragic in tone, this final story casts a shadow backwards, over the whole cycle, situating its narratives within a longer temporal frame, asking how such narratives led us here, and suggesting, through its symbolic patterning, many possible answers:

> Sarah is dead and so are all the other Sarahs. The ocean is green and chunks of still-existing land are covered with cockroaches, who survive everything […] The sea is putrid and foamy. Styrofoam bobs everywhere in tiny popcorn pieces and great slabs swathed in algal goo. (2021:192).

Here, in this post-apocalyptic landscape, there are cockroaches and popcorn pieces, recalling the boy invasion and microwaved popcorn of 'Sarahland,' perhaps gesturing towards the longstanding impact of the Anthropocene on the environment. Read alone, 'The Purple Epoch' has less interpretative ambiguity than earlier stories, but its placing at the very end only adds to the cycle's multiplicity of meanings as a whole; the words are the same but the the words employed by the story recur in previous pieces, and so have acquired multiple levels of meaning by the time the reader encounters them in the closing story. More than simply describing a post climate collapse world, their echoes also point at the heteronormative histories and failed queer alternatives that might have generated the present of the story.

Conclusion

Sarahland makes a crucial contribution to queer ecological and bad environmental thought by illuminating the ways in which stories function, and fail to function, as queer ecological material. The first, titular story, 'Sarahland,' establishes patriarchal heteronormativity as an ecology of harm Sarah yearns to escape; the cycle can be read as a series of attempts to create queerer and more caring environments. Cohen's irreverent, ironic narration, functions as a unifying force between the cycle's component stories, demonstrating how both queer and environmentalist schools of thought can create their own rigid affective rules that echo those of the dominant cultures they purport to resist. Cohen simultaneously takes mainstream environmentalist and social justice discourse's tendency to take everything very seriously, whilst using humour and ironic narrative distance to point towards its limitations in effecting material change and its tendency to replicate some of the hierarchies it purports to resist. Her use of natural imagery creates another layer of connection across stories, framing the processes by which heteronormativity and environmental destruction come to be seen as natural, as one and the same, joining the ostensibly human-focussed early stories to the later stories in which environmental concerns are more obvious.

Cohen's queer ecological and bad environmentalist vision is produced, then, by the dense ecology of connections that become more apparent over the course of the cycle. Each story dramatically exposes the spaces between queer, environmentalist and critical thought, and the practical reality of daily lives. Whilst the earlier stories focus on the difficulties of constructing a queer ecological vision in a heteronormative world, the later stories go further in articulating a queer ecological consciousness; they do so, however, by building on and refracting the meanings of the earlier stories. This encourages a mode of reading that is, arguably, ecological; each story modifies the meaning of the stories that have gone before whilst reminding us that stories, and the language we use to tell them, will always fail to capture the complexity of reality. The cycle could be described as a

kaleidoscopic ecology of stories which constantly refract off one another, never quite resolving. In this way, Cohen makes of the short story cycle's ability to create 'coherence' between component stories (Gill and Kläger, 2018:4), a narrative laboratory in which she dramatically investigates queer theory's claims about the possibilities and limitations of radical critique, queer futurity, empathy, and belonging. Her short story cycle can be read as a queer ecology itself in that the gaps, overlaps and resonances between and across its component stories ' there are ways to care about the natural, ways to expand the social, and ways to care about the future, that are not heteronormative '(Seymour, 2013:10). This reading demonstrates the fruitfulness of bringing queer ecocritical modes of criticism together with those of the short story cycle in order to illuminate the form's ethical and political ramifications.

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