



# A Witch's Way

An ecofeminist analysis  
of Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*  
and Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan*

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Bachelor's Thesis

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14/08/2020

# **A Witch's Way: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* and Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan***

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the question: How does the witch figure relate to and in so doing critique climate change and humanity's response to it? It answers this by analysing the ecofeminist themes surrounding the witch figures of these two relatively recent novels: *Uprooted* by Naomi Novik and *The Book of Joan* by Lidia Yuknavitch. By building upon the works of Greta Gaard, Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood and other ecofeminist/ecocritical academics, a definition of ecofeminist themes is constructed; it concerns its dualist history and present, how the model of dualisms might be improved upon and the most common dualisms in ecofeminist theory. The main dualism that is explored is men+science/women+nature; where both novels represent it yet also break it down. *Uprooted* represents it externally, where the two main characters initially each embody one 'end'. Agnieszka, the witch, identifies as woman and is portrayed as intuitive and closer to nature, whereas her partner and teacher identifies as man, seems disconnected from nature and adheres quite strictly to logic. However, they learn from each other and find a balance. *The Book of Joan* has an internal version of this dialectic, within the titular witch figure, Joan, as she is both an environmental activist and has seemingly magical abilities, yet is also passionate about science. In terms of gender and sexuality the witch figures are Other, which is the first way in which their position in society allows uniquely them to resolve the climate crises in their worlds. The second way can be found in how they break down the main ecofeminist dualism, thus softening the boundary between Self and Other. Thirdly, nature is given a voice, which allows the witch figures to act in political solidarity and in so doing build toward a better, more ecofeminist world. These ways allow Agnieszka and Joan to bridge the dualisms and find the balance needed that needed to be restored. All in all, the main critique that can be read in the novels is that a more balanced relationship between humans and nature is needed in order to collectively survive the impending climate breakdown.

## Foreword

The idea for this thesis came to me roughly two years ago. I had even started writing it, with a different supervisor, but there were too many things going on in my personal life, so it was not to be then and there. Roughly speaking, starting university was also the time that my interest in sustainability sparked, seeping into other parts of my life. As such I sought to combine this passion with others: I love books and I was wondering how sustainability and books intersected. I came across Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement*, a series of essays where he looks at literature and how, so far (in 2016), it had not really represented our ongoing climate crisis, even though literature is often the place where global goings-on are explored. In terms of climate change nonfiction it is rather unique in both scope and combination of subjects: he discusses the history of literature and sci-fi, but also the colonialist topography of cities, the uncanny, capitalism and the petrol industry, while relating his own history and experiences throughout. After questioning the human as centric and only 'sentient' species he posits:

So, if for a moment, we were to take seriously the premise that I started with – that the Anthropocene has forced us to recognize that there are other, fully aware eyes looking over our shoulders – then the first question to present itself is this: What is the place of the nonhuman in the modern novel? (66)

The question got me thinking. Another passion that had stirred up again during this time was exploring tarot cards; so now the crockpot that is my brain had all the ingredients it needed to simmer on for my final question: literature, the climate crisis and its immediacy and the 'witchy'.

Writing this thesis was – and still is – very important and dear to me; it felt like now I could really explore all those things I love and bring something new into the world. Part of the importance to me is being as inclusive as possible, trying to leave space for other perspectives than my own, without passing my own off as insignificant. I have tried to *write* what I preach: queerness, the Other, the climate crisis and how we handle those topics and

their intersections are so important to discuss right now. Especially because, as Ghosh so eloquently puts it: “The Anthropocene has reversed the temporal order of modernity: those at the margins are now the first to experience the future that awaits all of us” (62-3)<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps this is why these topics called to me, as I am marginalised as a hard of hearing/deaf person, queer in gender and sexuality, presenting as female and being a small/er fat person<sup>2</sup>. Of course I am also privileged as a white person in the Western global North, the relatively accepting and progressive Netherlands and being in a relationship that passes as heteronormative. I think it is important to acknowledge my personal and political locations and intersections, because it creates awareness and diversity, something that is not yet an academic standard but which I want to work toward. Here is my contribution.

This would not have come to be what it is if not for the help of my partners, my therapist, my previous supervisor Codruta Pohrib, my current supervisor Sonja Kleij, Frank Brandsma, my friends proofreading and people on the internet taking the time to educate others. To you all: Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning, for example, that people who are poor tend to live in less protected places and when the frequency of natural disasters increases – as it will if nothing changes – they will be the first to feel it, even though they probably had the relatively smallest part in causing these changes in our climate.

<sup>2</sup> In the body positive movement ‘fat’ is used as a descriptive word, to disconnect it from the societally associated, negative value. As ‘fat’ conveys a whole spectrum of body types, there also came some critical acknowledgement that, generally speaking, large/r fat was more marginalised than small/er or middling. ‘Small/er’ fat, or sometimes also called ‘midsize’, tends to be in the range of sizes that are often still available in the average clothing store, thus making clothing more accessible to those who identify as such as opposed to large/r sizes. In terms of prejudice there also seems to be the ‘logic’ that the fatter the less healthy, pretty or acceptable you are, so small/er fat people can more easily pass than large/r fat people.

## Introduction

Lately, our ongoing climate crisis has been on the frontpage, both literally and figuratively. What happens if we do not address it will be disastrous, so address it we must. Literature can provide a way of addressing contemporary issues such as the climate crisis. Two pieces of literature that do this are *Uprooted* by Naomi Novik and *The Book of Joan* by Lidia Yuknavitch, published in 2015 and 2017 respectively. These dates provide some cultural context: both have been written in a time where the climate crisis has become more and more prominent, where a resurgence of the 'green' movement is happening and in an age where that is more visible and accessible to the public through social media. Indeed, I might not have known of these books if not for social media. There has been some use of these books in the literary academic field: Bethan Coates' master thesis "Genii Loci and Ecocriticism from Mythology to Fantasy" analyses *Uprooted*, as did Sara González Bernárdez with "The Fantasy of the Female: Gender Construction in the Fantasy Genre". Two articles have been published on the other novel: "Anthropocene Storytelling: Extinction, D/Evolution, and Posthuman Ethics in Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan*" by Hope Jennings and "Apocalyptic Body Song: *The Book of Joan*" by Heidi Hart. These analyses focus on the setting, gender roles, posthuman aspects and musicality, but not primarily on climate change or the witch figure both novels contain. In this thesis I will address both aspects in these novels, to pave the way for more work concerning witches and climate change. Using these novels and the method of close reading, I seek to answer this question: How does the witch figure relate to and in so doing critique climate change and humanity's response to it?

To start my analysis I will first lay out the theoretical framework that will assist it, followed by three chapters that will each discuss different aspects concerning the relation of the witch figure to climate change. The first, Wild Hair & Queer Love, introduces the witch figures and their position in society concerning their gender and sexuality. Secondly, Magical Currents & Trees That Talk builds upon this and addresses the main dialectic of ecofeminism: men and science 'versus' women and nature. Lastly, A Witch's Way will

conclude how it was uniquely the witch figures' position that allowed them to resolve the climate crises in their relative stories.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Ecocriticism sprung up in the 1990's, inspired by a strong ecological movement that had been rising since the 1960's. It is a branch of literary and cultural studies, that seeks to "examine representations of nature in literary - and non-literary - texts, and in other modes of cultural production", predominantly "how nature is constructed" (Bertens 224). In analysing texts and other media ecocriticism seeks to explore the discourses and subsequent hierarchies surrounding nature. The most common hierarchy is human/nature, with humans in the dominant position, which flows into the hierarchies of human/animal and culture/nature. Ecocriticism seeks not only to expose these hierarchies, but also to dismantle them (Bertens 225). It has a "'green' agenda", that, most importantly, takes an earth-centered approach rather than a human-centered one (Bertens 226). Through its green agenda it evaluates texts and other media in how far they align with furthering said agenda, or where a medium lacks in doing so (Bertens 226-7).

Ecofeminism is a specific branch within ecocritical studies, with some significant differences to ecocriticism. Most importantly:

[...] the basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. Its theoretical base is a sense of self most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups - a self that is interconnected with all life (Gaard 1)

I choose to read “oppressions” as interlinked, along the lines of Audre Lorde’s “[t]here is no such thing as single-issue struggles, because we do not lead single-issue lives”<sup>3</sup>: to truly liberate oneself from one oppression you must also address the interlinked ones.

The last sentence of the definition above also provides an important focus point: a sense of self interconnected with all life. I take “most commonly expressed by women and various other nondominant groups” here as meaning Others, in their various identities and contexts.<sup>4</sup> Interconnectedness regards a sort of awareness of similar issues and struggles; though I refrain from calling them ‘one and the same’, because they are not. They are interlinked.

Another note Gaard makes on the Self is that distinguishing it from the Other is what causes hierarchies to be made, which in turn is seen as the root cause of oppressions (3). In that sense the Self/Other dualism is sought to be broken down, but again, here we must be careful not to erase Other experiences. So perhaps it would be more inclusive to phrase it like seeking to soften the Self/Other dualism, so it functions less like a handbook of exclusion and more like a guide to broadening one’s perspective; to raise more awareness of the interconnectedness of all life.

To continue with this theme of dualisms: reviewing and dismantling dualisms is one of the main goals of ecofeminists and an especially important one for those within the field of literature.<sup>5</sup> Therefore it will be the focus in the analysis of *The Book of Joan* and *Uprooted*. There are a lot of dualisms involved in ecofeminist politics, but the most obvious and predominant one is women+nature/men+science. This makes sense, as:

[...]the way in which women and nature have been conceptualized historically in the Western intellectual tradition has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in

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<sup>3</sup> Audre Lorde said this in her “Learning from the 60s” address she held in 1982, at Harvard University, at the celebration of the Malcolm X weekend.

<sup>4</sup> I do wish to address the fact that in this bundle, Gaard’s usage of the term women is not defined necessarily to mean either sex or gender and is often used in the binary men/women. This makes sense, considering this text was published in 1993, but for modern usage it is important to point out. In today’s (feminist) standards more people might be included within this group. I address this later in the framework.

<sup>5</sup> Dichotomy might seem a more fitting term, as it defines the exclusiveness of opposing ends, whereas dualism is ‘just’ the opposing ends. Dualism seems the more commonly used term within the field, so therefore I will also use it. Perhaps the idea behind it is that the language used to phrase these things is also already political and using dualism instead of dichotomy already slightly blurs the lines between opposing ends on a binary.



value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind. (Gaard 5)

Carolyn Merchant relates how these dualisms/associations crystallised in history, in her fundamental work *The Death of Nature* (1980). After many critiqued ecofeminist theory in the 1990's of being too essentialist by framing these discourses as dualisms and in doing so keeping up the power structures that they had meant to dismantle, Merchant starts to use a different, more inclusive terminology: "rooted [...] in the dialectics of production and reproduction" (Merchant 514). In 2005, she wrote an article reflecting:

[...] I had argued that nature cast in the female gender, when stripped of activity and rendered passive, could be dominated by science, technology, and capitalist production. During the transition to early modern capitalism, women lost ground in the sphere of production (through curtailment of their roles in the trades), while in the sphere of reproduction William Harvey and other male physicians were instrumental in undermining women's traditional roles in midwifery and hence women's control over their own bodies. During the same period, Francis Bacon advocated extracting nature's secrets from "her" bosom through science and technology. The subjugation of nature as female, I argued, was thus integral to the scientific method as power over nature [...] (514-5)

Throughout the Scientific Revolution, in essence, the associations that have become dualisms like women+nature/men+science formed, or as Merchant now phrases it, women's place in the dialectics between production and reproduction became as such (517).

More recent work in ecofeminism has become more nuanced in terms of its use of gender. Sherilyn MacGregor proposes to use gender as verb: to gender (3). "[T]he *gendered* interaction of human labour with the environment, and the *gendered* impacts of environmental degradation" (Sturgeon xxi)(italics mine); a wording that is somewhat more open and allows for a spectral view of gender rather than a binary one. In the same collection of essays on gender and the environment is one critiquing dualisms. Freya Mathews starts with Val Plumwood's fundamental argument, that dualising is inherent to theorising, and takes it one step further: Mathews proposes an alternate way that would not 'feedback-loop'

binaries and power structures. She looks at the figure of the Greek philosopher as origin for dualising theory and suggests that we use a Chinese sage inspired methodology instead. Where the Greek philosopher would study an objective world through their subjective self and arrive at a conclusion of how 'it' works, the Chinese sage would learn how to adapt to the world and conclude how to make 'it' work (54-68). The latter 'it' refers to a self within the world, whereas the former refers to only the world. As such a Chinese sage inspired method sees the subject as part of the world, rather than merely its spectator. This kind of shift in thinking about theory and thus about politics is a lot more interconnected, therefore more ecofeminist.

When applied to the concept of the subjective Other, that which one does not know or understand, one might begin to see how there is now incentive to see similarities, to raise awareness of the interconnectedness of all life: if one tries to understand a subject and seeks to establish a productive relationship with them, adapting to/with them - rather than remaining at a distance and observing - one needs to relate to that subject. Thereby establishing a relation based politics and most importantly, undermining the Self/Other binary.

The processes that created the hierarchy of men/science over women/nature are also the same ones that started the exploitation of nature, which 'laid the foundation' for our current climate crisis (Merchant 514, 516). Through an ecofeminist analysis, reviewing the dualisms and dialectics present in the novels, I wish to lay bare how those dualisms relate to climate breakdown and how, in so doing, the novels critique this relationship. Climate crisis is a topic that reaches as deep as it does wide and as such is hard to fully fathom. This is why Timothy Morton calls climate crisis a hyperobject, something that is "massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 1). Morton argues that it is precisely its massiveness that makes it hard to truly work on preventing a climate catastrophe (4). Many scholars argue that fiction serves as an excellent way to imagine what a climate crisis means and thus could also make it more graspable. Melina Pereira Savi summarises:

[...] [L]iterature, like the humanities, is outpouring with works that warn, ponder on, and speculate what is happening and what might happen if we continue to overlook the practices that have led the world to enter (according to human parameters, of

course) the Anthropocene Epoch. [...] Humanities scholars have, I would argue, very rich and interesting investigation materials to work on [...], and in doing so one might gain more insight not only into what ethics are possible and desirable for human and nonhuman interactions in the present and future, but also into the cultural practices that have led us into the Anthropocene in the first place (956).

With this in mind I will analyse the ecofeminist themes in the two literary pieces of fiction.

### **Wild Hair & Queer Love: Exploring Gender & Sexuality**

When gender becomes a marker of difference and of power status, often, so too does sexuality. Gender and sexuality are two concepts that are bound up in such a way that it cannot always be said where one ends and the other begins. In questioning the constructedness of both concepts the tangle becomes visible.<sup>6</sup> (Re)Presenting a diversity within and of those concepts is important, in order to expose readers to new experiences, create understanding and empathy and in doing so perhaps soften the boundary between Self and Other (Roberts and McCallum-Stewart, 3). This softening might then also work to bring about a sense of interconnectedness, one of the strives of ecofeminism. In this chapter I will analyse these concepts within *Uprooted* and *The Book of Joan*, examining the identities of the witch figures within and without the context of the novel.

*Uprooted*'s focalising protagonist and witch figure Agnieszka refers to herself as a girl. "I wasn't a lady-like quiet girl; all my life I'd spent running in the woods, climbing trees and tearing through brambles [...]" (Novik 40). She does not fit into the box of a 'perfect' girl; the world of the story seems to have similar beauty standards to ours which she defies. This becomes apparent in Agnieszka's description of her best friend, Kasia. Every 10 years a wizard called the Dragon comes to their home valley to take a girl, born in a certain year, to serve him, in return for his protection of the land against the malevolent Wood adjacent to it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Not to say of course that the constructedness of the concepts imply that the meanings are void, rather that they are (in)formed by cultural and social factors. When one considers that the meaning of 'woman' is constructed in one particular way and could have been constructed another, one can come to question what it means to like a 'woman', to identify as lesbian or heterosexual, etc.

<sup>7</sup> In the book he is referred to as 'the Dragon', even though he is human, therefore I will also call him thus.

He takes “the most special” girl, whether that be in beauty, skill or character (Novik 12). “And Kasia was all those things” (Novik 12) according to Agnieszka, which is why everyone expects her to be picked by the Dragon that year and why everyone is greatly surprised that Agnieszka is picked instead. Agnieszka’s description of herself reads very differently to that of Kasia: “[...] I was still a *too-skinny colt* of a girl with big feet and *tangled dirt-brown* hair [...]”, “I was no great cook [...]” (Novik 14; 43) (italics mine).<sup>8</sup> If her hair is not undone or her clothes are not dirty or damaged, it is not long before they will be (Novik 14).<sup>9</sup> Kasia is described as having “thick *wheat-golden* hair, [...] her eyes were *warm* brown and her laugh was *like a song that made you want to sing it*” and she is proficient in plenty of skills (Novik 12) (italics mine). The descriptions of Agnieszka are generally associated with being of lesser value, or less ‘beautiful’, “tangled” and “dirt-brown”, whereas those of Kasia are associated with being higher in value and more ‘beautiful’, “wheat-golden” and “warm brown”. However, by having Agnieszka as protagonist, *Uprooted* subverts the idea of having “beauty as a necessary adjunct to feminine accomplishment, or even the very plot” (Luis 174). So, Agnieszka identifies as a girl, but does not see herself as the local definition of ‘perfect’, contrasting with Kasia.

In *The Book of Joan* novel we learn of a future humanity where the most powerful have fled the now dead Earth and live in a space station. Due to this change of habitat their bodies have become hairless, white and nearly sexless.<sup>10</sup> Primary and secondary bio sex characteristics have eroded, leaving only remnants of what was once there. Through Christine, a space station inhabitant, we learn that the Earth was destroyed by Joan of Dirt, who was framed as “eco-terrorist” and burned at the stake for heresy.<sup>11</sup> Christine grafts the story, the book of Joan, into her skin, rebelliously uncovering the truth that celebrity-turned-politician Jean de Men and his government so carefully covered up. Joan, with help of her girlfriend, turns out to still be alive, trying to survive on what is left of Earth. Joan is described by Christine as “[n]ot particularly female, leaning toward male, an exquisite androgyny” (Yuknavitch 50) echoing in one of many ways the descriptions of the historical

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<sup>8</sup> Agnieszka’s use of the word “colt” is worth analysing too, as she is comparing herself to a young male horse. This would be an interesting angle on the novel for an analysis more focussed on nonhuman animals.

<sup>9</sup> How Agnieszka handles this trait changes throughout the novel, at first she is almost constantly feeling apologetic for being messy, but does not try make herself different than she is. This slowly evolves into her feeling free to be herself, without apologising and without second thought, just letting herself be.

<sup>10</sup> The colour white you would generally find paint labelled as, or like the colour of this page. Not the ‘white’ used to refer to the ‘white’ race.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Ball of dirt’ is used to refer to Earth in *The Book of Joan*.

figure Joan of Arc<sup>12</sup>. One of the charges made against Joan of Arc was her ‘male’ dress, which included a typically ‘male’ haircut (Cohen 124; Warner 149). In this way Joan of Arc was also androgynous, defying the gender norms of her time. Interestingly, the idea that her hair was part of her crimes, is echoed in *The Book of Joan*, where Joan of Dirt is interrogated<sup>13</sup>: “Somewhat incomprehensibly, my [Joan’s] clothing and my ... hair? ... are cited as crimes against the state” (Yuknavitch 49). Notably, this parallels Agnieszka’s hair which similarly marks her difference: she is often judged by her tangly and undone hair. Hair is often used as a signifier of identity, both in a positive and negative sense: a person might use their hair to signal what kind of person they are, people are often remembered by their hair, but they are also judged, think of discriminatory hiring practices and/or work environments where traditional Black hairstyles are deemed ‘unprofessional’ for instance.<sup>14</sup> Further contrast is made by the fact that Joan is the only one whose body has not ‘devolved’, she still has her hair, her genitals/reproductive organs and breasts. What makes Joan even more unique is the fact that she is an “engenderine”, “[a] kind of human conduit for all living matter” (Yuknavitch 190). This is what had allowed her to destroy the Earth and gave her a way of controlling nature<sup>15</sup>.

In terms of sexuality, *Uprooted* is a bit less clear cut. At the beginning of the book, Agnieszka does not really seem to think about intimate relationships, be they romantic and/or sexual in nature. However, her relationship with Kasia is never quite defined and could be read as romantic in nature, or as Agnieszka having romantic feelings for her. She describes Kasia as “my dearest” (Novik 14) and goes to great lengths to save her when she is taken by the malevolent Wood. They have always been together, until the Dragon’s picking. After being reunited again, they cling together when facing danger and are in each other’s presence

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<sup>12</sup> However, Joan is still referred to as and refers to herself as girl/woman, with she/her pronouns, so therefore I will too.

<sup>13</sup> Also, notably, echoing Joan of Arc’s history in form here: what is left of Joan of Arc’s story in terms of historical sources dating around her time are the recorded interrogations which *The Book of Joan* echoes in its layout and content.

<sup>14</sup> See [vice.com/en\\_us/article/j5abvx/black-womens-hair-illegal-tignon-laws-new-orleans-louisiana](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/j5abvx/black-womens-hair-illegal-tignon-laws-new-orleans-louisiana) or [thepolitic.org/hair-politics-how-discrimination-against-black-hair-in-schools-impacts-black-lives/](https://thepolitic.org/hair-politics-how-discrimination-against-black-hair-in-schools-impacts-black-lives/) for examples.

<sup>15</sup> Here I use ‘controlling’ for lack of a better word. It does not necessarily seem like she ‘dominates’ nature, as her gift was given to her by a tree, but rather that she was explained how to let nature do different things as she sees fit. I did consider ‘bending’ similarly to how it is used in *Avatar: The Last Airbender* but found it to sound too similar to ‘bending to one’s will’ and thus too much associated with a hierarchy of power.

for the larger part of the novel. Sometimes they kiss, but it is unclear if that is meant in a friendly or romantic way (or both). At the very least Kasia and Agnieszka have a strong bond. Agnieszka turns out to have been picked by the Dragon because she has magic and as wizard he is obligated by law to school her. After slowly getting to know the Dragon and forming a bond of trust, they have an intimate magical connection and kiss, developing a sexual attraction for each other. As danger looms over the kingdom they are separated and/or too busy to deal with this mutual attraction, but eventually they do develop a sexual (and perhaps also romantic) relationship. As it is all never defined in the story, one could argue that perhaps it does not need to be and that Agnieszka, who is still very young and only just beginning to discover new and other forms of desire, is given the space to explore this. This produces two effects: it gives readers some space to imagine and question and it also means Agnieszka (and possibly Kasia) could be read as queer. This is significant, because she comes across as non-normative in terms of gender and sexuality which make her Other.<sup>16</sup>

Sexuality is a somewhat different matter in the world of Joan, where Joan herself is the only one who still has her hair and genitals.<sup>17</sup> So, in a way she is the only one 'able' to have sexual stimulation/interaction in a bodily sense.<sup>18</sup> What is more, Jean de Men has forbidden any reference to sex or sexuality, with the exception of text. Joan, roaming the Earth when everyone believes her dead is not subject to these laws, but nonetheless is too hardened by her experiences for any sexual endeavours. However, she is not alone, but travels in the company of her only love: Leone. So Joan, too, can be read as being attracted to women and thus queer. Like Agnieszka, she is set apart in terms of gender and sexuality, becoming an Other.

Both Joan and Agnieszka are identified as girl/woman, yet also as different within that group. They are both their own type of woman, which is a more diverse way of presenting women, breaking dualist ways of thinking down into a more spectral mode and furthering an ecofeminist agenda of interconnectedness.

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<sup>16</sup> In terms of her gender it is made clear that within the story that she is Other, in terms of sexuality it is never explicitly said that being queer is Other within the story, though all couples within the story seem to be comprised of man and woman. Gender is also never explicitly defined within the story, it seems that generally people regard 'man' and 'woman' as the available options. A woman with woman relationship seems to at least be rare, if not Other. Outside of the book Agnieszka can also be seen as Other, as the beauty standards for Western women are very similar, and also because queerness is (still) Other.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, to the reader, the white and sexless humans are Other and Joan more like our Self, but contrastingly Joan is Other within her world: a reverse effect happens, creating a chiasmus.

<sup>18</sup> I put 'able' in parentheses here because I am speaking generally/generically and do not mean to exclude different experiences.

## Magical Currents & Trees That Talk: The Dialectics of Men+Science/Women+Nature

As working definition of what can be associated with the dualism/dialectic of men+science/women+nature I will cite Freya Mathews' list, as it is both short and comprehensive:

“mind/matter  
mind/body  
culture/nature  
human/nature  
human/animal” (57)

Which flow into these:

“reason/emotion  
reason/intuition  
abstract/concrete  
universal/particular  
subject/object” (57)

Here each set of words embody dualistic views, that must be named in order to be overcome. Mathews adds that the first words became linked to the dominant group and men, the second ones to the dominated group and women (57). This creates the image of men as cultured and civilized, as logical and rational, as central and center; and women as the respective ‘opposites’<sup>19</sup>. Both novels show a dialectic that can be connected to these concepts. In *Uprooted* this dialectic is external, in the sense that two characters initially each embody one ‘end’ of these dialectics. *The Book of Joan* has an internal dialectic, taking place mainly within the titular character. Apart from how the novels follow these dualist dialectics, it is also important to analyse how they subvert them.

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<sup>19</sup> This is a rather binary view of course, but I merely use it as a reference point, not as a true representation.

Agnieszka and her teacher/partner the Dragon perfectly exemplify a transition from seemingly opposites to a more balanced partnership. Especially in their relation to magic this becomes clear. Agnieszka's magic is described, from her perspective, as similar to natural phenomena, for example: "[...] it seemed to me the sound of the chanting [of a spell] became *a stream* made to carry magic along, and I [Agnieszka] was standing by *the water's edge with a pitcher that never ran dry, pouring a thin silver line into the rushing current*" (Novik 173); "I [Agnieszka] imagined my magic *running* into the ground *like water*, finding cracks and weaknesses, *spreading out* beneath my hands" (Novik 218) (italics mine). In both of these quotes Agnieszka likens her magic to water, comparing it to a stream, flowing. When the Dragon becomes frustrated with Agnieszka for still not really duplicating his kind of spells he lets her try what she thinks works. He then tries to repeat this himself, unsuccessfully. Agnieszka explains:

"It was all right when I [Agnieszka] did it [saying a certain word during chanting]," I said, "but when you [the Dragon] did it, it was wrong. As though—you were *following a trail, but a tree had fallen down in the meantime, or some hedge grew up*, and you insisted on continuing on anyway, instead of going around it—" "There are no *hedges*!" he roared.

"It comes, I suppose," [...] "of spending too much time *alone indoors*, and forgetting that *living things* don't always stay where you put them." (Novik 190) (italics mine)

Again, Agnieszka sees her magic through a natural lens foreign to the Dragon. It is even implied that Agnieszka sees the Dragon's magic as not living and being disconnected. Where Agnieszka's magic is described as natural and intuitive, the Dragon's is rational and non-natural and/or technological: "I [Agnieszka] began to glimpse *his* [the Dragon's] spell: almost exactly *like that strange clockwork* on this middle of his table, *all shining moving parts*" (Novik 194) (italics mine). The Dragon learns magic through rigorous study, noting down all the precise circumstances and words used, but that does not work for Agnieszka. Here the Dragon echoes some of the first words in the above mentioned list of dualisms: mind, culture, reason, abstract, universal. Agnieszka echoes the opposites: body, nature, emotion, intuition, concrete, particular.



Danger forces them to work together, so they learn how to combine their magics: “I [Agnieszka] envisioned his [the Dragon’s part of the spell] like the *water-wheel of a mill*, and mine *the rushing stream* driving it around” (Novik 194) (*italics mine*). The Dragon provides the structural framework, a water-wheel of a mill, and Agnieszka provides what will keep it moving, the stream. In learning how to work together magically, they learn some of each other’s strengths: Agnieszka learns that sometimes it can prove useful to study and test before trying something out intuitively, whereas the Dragon learns to trust her inner logic despite it defying his. If he had not trusted Agnieszka’s own sense of magic, they would never have been able to work together to save their kingdom. In turn, if Agnieszka had not studied solutions before trying right away, she would have failed in saving her friend from the Wood and perhaps even have died. This way they balance each other. The dualisms that they represented before have transformed: it moved from the model of the Greek philosopher, inherently dualist, to that of the Chinese sage, learning to adapt to surroundings.

Joan’s character represents these dualist concepts internally. She is the witch figure of the story because she connects with a tree as a child, after which she hears a song. This allows her to ‘control’ nature, which to everyone around her cannot be explained and therefore seems to be magic. Joan’s sudden abilities, among other things, bear great resemblance to the historical figure of the same name, Joan of Arc. Similarly, she also started to hear things that instructed her to take up arms and defend a cause, both became symbols of faith both during and after their lives (Cohen 114; 127). The unexplained, magical abilities and being a symbol of faith represent body, nature, emotion and intuition in the above mentioned dualisms.

As Joan grows up she becomes fascinated by science and becomes very knowledgeable on topics like bioluminescence, microbes and quantum physics. In the last stage of her life she learns how her abilities work, and why she hears this tree song: it is a representation of “telluric current”, the energy present in matter (Yuknavitch 205). She can hear and control it because she is an engenderine, able to work with telluric current (Yuknavitch 190). Here, it turns out that there is a scientific explanation for what was previously thought unexplainable. Both her love for science and her being a new form of human, an engenderine, represent science: mind, human, reason, abstract. So on the one hand she is like Agnieszka, in terms of the associations that come with her abilities and her similarity to Joan of Arc, on the other hand the scientific side of her abilities and intellectual

pursuits also embody the opposites. As such, Joan's character embodies 'both' sides of the traditional dualist concepts. By marrying those concepts within one person this novel defies a dualist perspective; it explores the grey area in between and what happens when you combine 'opposites'. This mimics what Joan learns: "But Joan knew one thing we [the humans in the space station] never learned: to end war meant to end its maker, to marry creation and destruction rather than holding them in false opposition" (Yuknavitch 105). Joan's *destruction* of nature, the ending of the war, is what enables her *creation* of new life. Where *Uprooted* neatly slots into Mathews theory, presenting a transition from the dualist model to an adaptive one, *Joan* does not quite fit in. I would propose however, that along the lines of Mathews, another Chinese concept can be applied, one that is less anthropocentric and thus more ecofeminist: yinyang.

[...][I]t represents equilibrium in difference and unity in diversity [...]The secret of their creative interaction is the recognition that, though different, they are not entirely opposite, since each is present in the other. The basic principle is that the two forces should be balanced, for any excess causes a variety of troubles (Sizoo 45-6)

The concept is an inherently sustainable one, as sustaining balance is its primary goal (Wang 3). As Joan embodies 'holding' opposites in herself, it is more similar to the idea of balance that the yinyang concept represents than to the adaptive stance of the Chinese sage: one thing exists because of the other, creation enables destruction and vice versa, or in terms of her abilities, the science behind it enables the magic, and vice versa. The different aspects of Joan balance each other out, representing these dualisms internally.<sup>20</sup>

The dialectic between nature and the protagonists adds to the ecocritical message the novels portray. First and foremost, in both novels nature is given a voice. In *Uprooted* nature is not only represented as a setting but a character, too. The effects of this are multiple: it subverts dualisms like human/nature, makes nature an actant and allows for ecofeminist critique. The dualism of human/nature is critiqued by making the Wood a character; not only is the Wood shown to be sentient and having a will of its own, it also gradually becomes apparent that the

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<sup>20</sup> As this particularly comes forward in the analysis of *The Book of Joan* I have chosen not to include it in the theoretical framework.

Wood is a people. In the last climactic scenes of the novel, Agnieszka learns the history of the Wood Queen and her people. Many years ago the Wood Queen had married a human, however, when he died - a concept unfamiliar to the Wood people - she and her people were betrayed by the humans; abused. The Wood Queen, the only survivor, is consumed by anger: corrupting the Wood with her dark emotions. The Wood, under her reign, was set on revenge on the humans. Agnieszka decides, instead of killing her to stop her cruel reign, to help her become a tree and find rest among what is left of her people. Even though the Wood Queen's anger no longer fuels the Wood, it is still a dangerous place.

So not only is the Wood shown as sentient, possessing a will, it is also shown with a face and emotions. This subverts the idea that nature is opposite to humans, by showing that there are more likenesses than were known to the people of the kingdom. When Agnieszka discovers that the Wood had been abused by humans of ages past, she performs a political act by giving back what had been stolen from the Wood Queen, namely the knowledge needed to become a tree. This form of politics fits the ecofeminist practices Val Plumwood strives for, as Chaone Mallory neatly summarises: 'humans can stand in solidarity with the natural other if by "stand with" one means to act politically and oppositionally to change conditions of oppression in a way that does not conflate the identities of the actors and the oppressed' (15). The Wood represents the natural other, and Agnieszka stands with the natural other to change the condition of the Wood Queen's isolation and anger, formed by oppression, without trying to conflate herself with the Wood/Queen. Another effect of showing the Wood as sentient character is that it subverts 'the dominant—and dominating— cultural understandings of nature that cast it as "background," "mindless," as lacking intentionality and unqualified for political subjectivity. And [this goes] toward moving beyond the view that assumes relations of political solidarity and other expressions of political community are wholly and strictly anthropocentric' (Mallory 17). In this way, Agnieszka recognizes the Wood as natural other and without overwriting their identity on herself shows political solidarity, an interconnecting ecofeminist practice.

In *Joan* nature is also given a voice, but not necessarily a face, like in *Uprooted*. It does however foreground nature's voice. The song Joan hears, she hears only after connecting with a tree. It represents the telluric current present in matter. This song leads her to an understanding of nature, after which she tries to use her political privilege as a human to

defend nature from the human overconsumption that is killing it. Here, Joan, too practices ecofeminist politics to show political solidarity.

What is interesting, as Heidi Hart analyses, is that “[...] this text thematizes, imitates, *and* evokes music, as a cumulative act of destructive-creative embodiment” (99). It thematises music as a recurring and important element within the plot: Joan who first hears her song; Christine’s rebellion that turns out to be inspired by that song, among other moments. It imitates music by its “cumulative textual intensity” (100) and repetition of phrases giving it a cadence, perhaps even affecting the speed at which the reader reads the novel (104). “The text’s conflation of song and story leads to a cluster effect, like a score made up of crashing notes and letters on the page” (109), which moves “beyond imitation to embodiment” (112), evoking music through a purely textual medium. This triple layering of musicality in this novel has the effect that the voice of nature is foregrounded. So, even though perhaps nature is less familiar to humans in this book than the Wood was in *Uprooted*, it is still portrayed as an ever-present entity, that is just as much part of the Earth as humans. By listening to nature’s voice, Joan, too, stands with the natural other.

### **A Witch’s Way: The Witch as Ecofeminist**

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Merchant mentions how women’s role in the sphere of reproduction became significantly less prominent than it had been around the 16th and 17th century (517). This is also roughly the period that a lot of the witch hunts took place; they started around 1440 and increased from 1560 on, till roughly late 18th century (Federici 12; Chollet 13). It is often thought that the witch hunts were a Medieval phenomenon, but it was only later in the 17th and 18th century that they became more predominant (Chollet 12-3; Federici 165). Witches and midwives were for a long time important practitioners in the sphere of reproduction, but throughout the Scientific Revolution and the witch hunts this became less so (Ehrenreich and English 4). Merchant sees a link: “The interrogation of witches as symbol of the interrogation of nature, the courtroom as model for its inquisition, and torture through mechanical devices as a tool of the subjugation of disorder were fundamental to the scientific method as power” (172). The process that got witches out of the realms of reproduction by persecuting them made it possible for the

scientific to become the dominant worldview.<sup>21</sup> The witch became – if they had not already been before – a marginalised person, an Other.

This history is what inspired feminists from roughly the 60's until now to take up the idea of the witch in their activism (Sollée 52). An example of this was the group W.I.T.C.H., that used guerilla theater on the streets of New York City to make a stance against capitalism and the sexism inherent in it, amongst other things, while wearing black pointy hats and broomsticks. The acronym “was repurposed for each unique action a group would undertake (Women Interested in Toppling Consumption Holidays, for example)” (Sollée 53). This witch trend within activism still remains: the phrase “we are the (grand)daughters of the witches you couldn't burn” and similar iterations of it is but one of the popular examples.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the novels discussed in this thesis can be seen to have a figure of the witch as the header to their form of activism: ecofeminism. As discussed in previous chapters, the witch figures are Other in the sense that they differ from normative beauty standards, they can be read as queer, they have an atypical relation to nature and they defy normative dualistic concepts.

These ways intersect, as oppressions are not singular but interlinked. It is their unique position on these intersections that allows them to ‘resolve’ the climate change in their respective worlds. It allows them to see both sides and give back what one side took. This becomes clear particularly in the endings of the novels. *Uprooted* ends with Agnieszka having helped the Wood Queen find rest and become a tree. From then on Agnieszka lives in an uncorrupted part of the Wood, slowly helping the Wood and its inhabitants restore themselves to their former uncorrupted state. In this too, she stands with the natural other, by doing what only she can do: using her magic and her rootedness to the land there to undo the corruption.<sup>23</sup> What is significant here is that this is not a relationship based on dominance, but on symbiosis. There is a scene that exemplifies this, when Agnieszka uses her magic to burn a corrupted Heart Tree and plant a new, uncorrupted one in its place:

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<sup>21</sup> It is not known if this was literally the goal of the witch hunts, but many scholars see this link, Merchant, Federici, Ehrenreich and English amongst them.

<sup>22</sup> A quick Google of the sentence brings forth a plethora of results; particularly ‘merch’, such as patches, mugs and shirts, sporting the phrase.

<sup>23</sup> Agnieszka learns that the Dragon picked girls from the valley because living on and off the land means living off the ancient power source that it is. This power comes with a price; rootedness to the land. The Dragon meant to siphon off some of that power that also fuels the Wood, without becoming rooted himself. He ‘uprooted’ the girls so they could now choose what they wanted to do with their lives. Agnieszka has not stayed away from the valley long enough for her roots to wither, therefore still benefiting from the power this gives her.

The walkers [creatures of the Wood] raked the ash [...], leaving a small mound at the center where the old tree had stood. I planted a fruit from my basket beneath it. I had a vial of growing-potion that I'd brewed up out of river-water and the seeds of heart-trees. I sprinkled a few drops over the mound, and sang encouragement to the fruit until a silver sapling poked its head out and climbed up to three years' height. [...] The walkers would be able to eat the fruit, when it came. (Novik 849)

Here Agnieszka provides her magical abilities and the Walkers help her; working on a new, uncorrupted forest that will sustain both parties.

Agnieszka's unique qualities are what allow this resolve; her magic that is guided by the land and her intuition, but also the Dragon's lessons, which were made possible by the building of mutual trust. In other words, Agnieszka is positioned in between both emotion or intuition and reason, between familiar and strange, between human and nature. This position is what allows her enough insight into 'both' concepts to make a balanced choice: she understands the Wood people enough to see the similarities with her people, but also acknowledges and accepts the differences. She does not try to assimilate the Wood people to her way of living, but instead does what she can to facilitate their way, for instance by helping the Wood Queen become a tree. Agnieszka's position and her being portrayed as witch figure can be read to show that the idea of the witch figure, this 'hyper' intersectional person, can find the balance it takes to resolve a climate crisis.

Joan is able to resolve the climate crisis because she is an engenderine and has learned how her body works. It becomes clear to her that what allowed her to 'mercy kill' the Earth is also what makes it possible for her to give it life again. Once the resistance on the space station has toppled Jean de Men's regime, she and her partner return to Earth. There Joan helps the leftover souls to 'dissolve' into the Earth, to become parts of nature again<sup>24</sup>:

"Matter," Nyx says. Nyx points to the ground between the two men. Immediately the two figures throw themselves into the ground. Not onto it; into it. Their bodies wrestle the earth, turning and convulsing. Their musculature constricts and expands. It is

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<sup>24</sup> The word 'souls' was chosen because it is not clear if they are corporeal humans or rather some essence of human.

difficult to tell where one's legs and arms end and the other's begin. The earth, too, is dynamic, like clay. [...] Their bodies sink a meter or so, then begin to glow and heat and change colors [...]. Soon their bodies are decomposing right before my [Joan's] eyes. [...] The song in my head pressures my skull and becomes as loud as the sound I remember from the epic angry sea. When [...] I can no longer regard a trace of their bodies, their skeletons, their human form, the song subsides. Slowly and in waves. At my feet, and extending away from Nyx and me, is a growing carpet of moss. Tiny white flowers. Insects. Vines. The roots of a tree. Life. (Yuknavitch 224-5)

Lastly Joan gives herself back to nature. What is interesting, is the use of the word 'matter' here: initially it just seems like a command to return to matter, but it can also be read as a command to matter, to contribute. This is precisely what makes the ending ecocritical: all the humans that have and are returned to matter now *matter*, their old lives contributing to new life.

What is striking in both solutions is that both witches not only take the power nature seems to have granted them, but they also give it back. This is precisely what makes them so unique and what allows the resolve to happen: if they had not been who they were and had not stood with the natural other like the natural other stood with them, human life would not survive.<sup>25</sup> By drawing on the historical figure of the witch and presenting her in a modern light, both novels contribute to an ecofeminist discourse: both unworking the dualisms ingrained in our society and presenting an alternative approach.

Here the most important ecocriticism can be distilled: If one can learn to 'bridge' dualisms, by adapting to the world around them rather than observing it, like these witches do, one can adapt a solidary stance towards the natural other, thus embodying a practice that can begin to repair the damage humanity/humans in power have done.

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<sup>25</sup> *Human* life is specified here because it seems likely that humans would not survive climate breakdown, whereas parts of nature and of nonhuman animals might still survive.

## Conclusion

To conclude, I will provide a brief summary of my arguments: The witches in Naomi Novik's *Uprooted* and Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book Of Joan* occupy unique positions in their societies, which allow them to resolve the climate crises in their respective worlds. Agnieszka and Joan defy societal expectations in terms of gender and sexuality, portraying nonnormative women and queer relationships. Both also break down the dualism that ecofeminism sees at its base, men+science/women+nature, by finding a balance between those and associated concepts. Agnieszka's relationship with the Dragon represents this externally, whereas Joan's character represents this internally. What also plays a role in this balance is that nature is not merely a setting in these novels, but has a voice, even a character in *Uprooted*. This allows for the witches to act in political solidarity with nature, by helping without conflating themselves with the natural other. Lastly, in analysing the endings of the novels, it becomes clear that it was their unique position as witches that allowed Agnieszka and Joan to resolve their climate crises. Most importantly, it shows them giving back the powers that nature gave them, critiquing exactly what seems to have been forgotten by those in power today.

This reading captured *one* angle of analysis on these books, centering *only* these books. Much can still be said about both novels to broaden and deepen research: a posthuman focus concerning the relationship between humanity and nature and/or animals for instance would shine light on new elements, or an examination of the use of colours and/or the general sensory provocation in *The Book of Joan* or the similarities to Polish political history in *Uprooted*. A focus on the sources that inspired both books could also prove fruitful, such as examining the history of Joan of Arc and Shakespeare's work shining through in *Joan* or the Polish folktale Novik mentions that inspired *Uprooted*. Characters other than the witches could also provide different insights: Jean de Men as mirror figure to Joan, for example, or his practices, exploiting women's bodies for a scientific pursuit of recreating fertility, which can also be read in the light of Carolyn Merchant's work, or ecofeminism in general. These could all add to their relative fields of history, Polish politics, Shakespeare, folklore, ecofeminism and of course, literature.



More books concerning both witches and climate crises could also add to the academic discussion of ecofeminist literature. Or in broader terms one could study books with witches, how they relate to ecofeminist theory, perhaps even if/how they have changed over time. It seems clear that these books or the angle that I have taken on them can still provide insights that perhaps have been previously unexplored.

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