

# A QUEER REWRITING OF WHITE WESTERN HISTORY THROUGH THE AGENCY OF PLANTS AND WITCHES

## **Abstract:**

Already a surface reading of Kalynn Byron's *This Poison Heart* (2021) and *This Wicked Fate* (2022) reveals the novels' queer themes and postcolonial potential; the protagonist Briseis is herself lesbian, and so are her mothers; almost all main characters are black and the later part in the series ends up being a rewriting of Greek mythology. Central to the story of these fantasy YA novels are the theme of plants and their powers. This article reveals how the fantasy genre, and the theme of witchcraft as a feminist and queer strategy and vulnerability, obscures the line between plants as metaphors and plants as objects with agency and the embodied experience of closeness between human minds and plant minds. Through an intersectional analysis of the relation between plants, literature, queerness, blackness and witchcraft, the central narrative structure of danger, mystery and the need to keep secrets are understood as a radical perspective on diversity and queer powers rooted in the connection between plants and humans in a minority position. Even though Byron's work opens up for a historical and literary reimagining of symbols, myths and political perspectives, the main focus of the analysis is the material; how the plants are *actual* plant bodies, with minds and agency, relating to *actual* human bodies and minds. There is an *actual* porosity and bleeding between human and plant bodies: human bodies are transformed into plants and plants essential for the killing as well as birth of humans. The metaphors and the embodied experience are deeply entangled, affecting what stories can be told and how they need to be told.

## A QUEER REWRITING OF WHITE WESTERN HISTORY THROUGH THE AGENCY OF PLANTS AND WITCHES

The back of Kalynn Bayron's YA novel *This Poison Heart* (2021) explains the story of Briesis like this:

To break an ancient curse she must let her power bloom...

Briesis has a gift. She can grow an apple tree from seed in a heartbeat, and flowers bloom at her touch. And when she inherits an old house, she suddenly has the privacy to test her powers for the first time. But as Bri starts to magic the house's rambling grounds back to life, she finds she has also inherited generations of secrets. In a hidden garden overgrown with the most deadly poisonous plants on earth a dark legacy lies waiting for her.

And Bri's long-departed ancestors won't let her rest until she finds it.

This text captures much of what makes Bayron's novel interesting from a plant studies perspective. Briesis has *powers*; her way of being in the world, being with the non-human plants, is described as *powers*, which suggests that there is something special with Bri. These powers, are, throughout the novel, sometimes understood in terms of magic or witchcraft, but the naming of the powers, and thereby the plant-human relation, are under constant negotiation. Words associated with it in this introductory text is also: *gift* and *curse*. These might seem as opposite, yet, in this context, they refer to the same abilities, or rather, the same interspecies relationships. The short text also makes clear that the powers need privacy – which hints at the fact that when not in a private setting, they need to be hidden. Further, there are levels of hiddenness: Briesis has inherited “generations of secrets”. Which suggests *she does not know what her body can do*. The theme of time is also central: the house is old, and Briesis way of touching the plants queers their time and their growing. Equally important is the heritage. Heritage are part of the story in terms of family relations, and actual ancestors – but also as the inherited narratives of civilization, and how these narratives can be used for different purposes. The cover of *This Wicked Fate* (2022), the second part of the series, features a blurb from E.K. Johnston, saying:

Bayron takes an old story, turns it on its head, and makes it her own...

This suggests there is a rewriting going on in the novels' narrative: a radical “turning on its head”. Read from its most revolutionary point of view, what Bayron's novels suggest is that the “old story” was never the original, that the rewriting is not a “new perspective”, but a return to another original. She does, I argue, not make the story “her own” – the own-making was instead done by the white men telling the “old story”, and Bayron's retelling is a taking back of a black female narrative, at the core of Western civilization.

In my paper I examine how plant bodies and human bodies are connected and interact in Bayron's novel and how the concept of plant-human relations are understood within the

narrative. I further relate the narration of plants to the rewriting of Greek mythology and narratives of black female agency, queerness, and witchcraft. I argue that, even though the plants within Bayron's novel possess obvious powers, these are mostly understood as being tied to human needs, thus putting the telling of plant agency within an anthropocentric context; still the close and bodily relationship between *certain* humans and plants, and the combination of this sensory depiction of porous bodies, and the skewing of Western male narration of witchcraft and temporality, leads towards a reduction of anthropocentrism, and male centred narratology where the intersectionality strengthens the perception of the novels as a radical rewriting and retelling. Through the blurring of boundaries between the human and the vegetal Bayron eventually achieves a successful re-negotiation of the nature-culture divide, next to her more highlighted retelling of the patriarchal mythology.

I read Bayron's duology *This Poison Heart* and *This Wicked Fate* as YA fantasy novels, that enters a tradition of intertextuality, as well as re-reading and rewriting in line with queer and postcolonial practice. These contexts, although in many ways different, have that in common that they work with a renegotiation of a human majority population most often conceives as "reality". Therefore, I suggest the combination of perspectives might have a powerful effect.

Fantasy literature often finds its motives and narratives within myths. Fantasy literature also has a long tradition of engaging with the non-human. According to Chris Brawley, fantasy challenges us "to revise our perception of the natural world" (2014, 9), and Ursula K. Le Guin argues that fantasy literature "include the nonhuman as essential" (2007, 87), while Rosemary Jackson suggests that fantastic literature tries "to erase this distinction itself, to resist separation and difference, to re-discover a unity of self and other" (1981, 30). Mónika Rusvai concludes that "extension of agency to a non-human, non-living other through magic is not unknown in fantasy literature", and she further understands "magic as the vitality of matter", in line with Jane Bennetts reading of nature – and the whole world – as "a shared, vital materiality" (2010, 14). Liam Heneghan also points out that witchcraft, as a specific kind of magic, is often associated with nature (2018, 181). This way of connecting the magical with nature and the Other, includes an understanding of narratives (fantasy literature as a narrative strategy) as well as relations (inter-species relations made possible through magic). Focusing on the later – the possibilities of relationships, and desires, Katri Aholainen suggests that a combination of realism and fantasy opens up a space for queer agencies (2021, 34), and propose a connection between human-animal-plant relationships and queer relationships; what she writes of in terms of "queer posthuman performances" (2021, 31).

## Naming the Power and handling the *normal* world

In the beginning of the narrative, Briesis is aware that of the fact that her relationship with plants are different from other humans'. Plants react to Briesis presence. She cannot control these reactions – sometimes their actions become violent, not to Briesis but to the surroundings; when Briesis is close to the plants, they start growing extremely fast (their bodily connection disturbs or queers the plants' sense of time and development), with the result that they destroy or risk to destroy buildings – a motive that could be interpreted as were the plants, in their connection to Briesis, a treat to civilization. Another interpretation would be that of uncontrolled teenage emotions. But keeping from interpretation, and staying with the body focuses the reading on the details how the plants are *actual* plant bodies, relating to *actual* human bodies:

The tingling spread into my fingertips, warm and oddly comforting. A swell of anticipation crashed through me as a stout evergreen stalk broke through the dirt and immediately sprouted several small offshoots. They pushed their way up between my outstretched fingers. Sweat dampened my back and forehead. I clenched my teeth until the muscles in my temples ached. The new stalks reached toward the sun, their stems thickening, thorns sprouting, but never close enough to prick my fingers. Buds bloomed white as snow between new leaflets green as emeralds. Right before their petals unfurled, I pulled my hands back, clutching them against my chest. Dizziness washed over me. Orbs of light danced around the edges of my vision as I sucked in breath, filled my chest with the sticky summertime air, then pushed it out. My heartbeat slowed to a normal rhythm. (3)

The active, and reactive, relationship between Briesis and plants are, in the context of the “normal world” infused with fear and hiding, which contrasts to the obvious desire expressed in the bodily relations. The story, told from Bri's first person perspective, shows the glitch or gap between Bri's and the plants' physical relation and the fear of this strange and queer relation being recognized:

She [Mom] had always been fascinated with what I could do, but her curiosity was tempered with concern. I couldn't blame her. [...] This past school year had put my acting skills to the test. Not because I wanted to be on stage, but because the row of potted plants my English teacher kept on her windowsill grew roots as long as I was tall; the trees in the courtyard arched toward the window next to my assigned seat in science – and everybody noticed. (7)

This quote captures first the fear that Bri's (adoptive) mother expresses for Bri, and for her skills. The concern seems to be double: she is afraid of the *skills* – which fascinates her, but that she *does not understand*; and she is afraid of the consequences these skills might have for Bri. The consequences are noted in the second part of the quote, where Bri tells about how the plants react on her presence in a public space, the particular consequence is only hinted at: “and everybody noticed”. This points to Bri living in an environment where other people do not understand her skills, or her relationship with plants, or the plants relationship to her; the desire between the

plants and Bri. But even more so, it points to Bri's, and her mothers' concerns about Bri's skills and desires should remain hidden. They are afraid of what the strangeness of the plant relationship should mean if other people knew about it. Later in the novel, this concern about what other people would do with what they do not understand is named "magic" and "witchcraft":

"I don't know. Maybe it's magic."

I blinked a few times, trying to clear my head. "I don't know about magic. I've been like this all my life, but until I got here I'd always been afraid that I was gonna lose control and mess up or get someone hurt." (180)

"Yes. Being a woman was enough to get you labelled a witch in those days, but for her [Medea], it had more to do with her talent for crafting poisons." (191)

The fear of losing control, mess up and hurt someone, is mixed up by the risk of being labelled "witch" – a term also repeatedly connected to black womanhood in the novel. Thus, the powerful black girl, who stretches the boundaries of *what a body can do*, induces fear in the surrounding human context, which in turns put the powerful girl in an at-risk-position. The motive might be read metaphorically in several ways: The plants' desire for Bri, and Bri's close relation to them, might be read as a parallel to queer desire. What is interesting here is that what might be called the "realist" setting of Bayron's novels are in itself queer affirmative: Bri lives with her lesbian adoptive mothers. There is no depiction what so ever of them being harassed or questioned in any way. Bri herself falls madly in love with Marie (who by the way has been made immortal a few hundred years earlier by her first lesbian lover); and also most of the other essential protagonists are lesbian. Yet, it seems, there are limits of queer acceptance and what is termed acceptable embodiment and desire.

When Briesis mysteriously inherits her birth aunt's estate, far out in the woods, she realizes:

I didn't see any other houses or buildings. If I accidentally made something happen, nobody was around to see. I expected that possibility to send me spiraling into thoughts of controlling my power, of worrying about keeping myself and my parents safe. Instead, a quick burst of excitement pulsed through me. It caught me by surprise to feel anything other than fear and uncertainty. (55)

Moving to this new place gives Bri the opportunity to "be herself" and follow her skills, desires or gifts – give in to her human porosity. Farah Mendelsohn observes that a common structure of the fantasy narrative is that from denial to acceptance (Mendelsohn 2008), and Brian Attiebery observes that women's coming-of-age stories often focus on unleashing rather than mastering power (1992, 88-89). Bri's narrative follows both these structures: arriving at her "safe space" – a term I chose to use although the estate in most cases rather opens up for great danger, since the opportunity to be herself – not only in terms of following individual needs and desires, but accepting a heritage, thus being part of community, and part of empowering a minority culture

through risk-taking – is the most important theme of the novels – opens up for a reading of Bri's skills in new way: an acceptance. She now accepts, and is sometimes forced to accept, that her skills are part of her heritage, that they are both healing and dangerous – she dives into the study of poison. She also realize, that the dizziness and exhaustion she has previously felt when using her powers as well as trying to conceal them, disappears when she does no longer try to control her powers. Giving in to the plants, to the relation and co-existing, not trying to master what is happening, makes her powers more effective.

Now, Briesis slowly discovers how the place where she now lives is special, and that her family is also special. She descends from a line of females with the same powers as she: the openness to plant-relations, and a knowledge (both learned and intuitive) about how to use poisons as weapons, and potions as healing tools (in medical as well as magical senses). The powers are understood in line with black tradition; Bri is described as “You're some kind of actual Black girl magic.” (148) and her adoptive mother's family is used as a reference: “Mom came up in a family, headed up by my grandma, whose folk magic practices stretched back generations. She wasn't as into it as my Auntie Leti or Granny, but she respected it. Fully.” (57). But finally, it is discovered that Bri's powers come from her being the descendant of Medea, from the Greek mythology and literary tradition – who in turn is the daughter of the goddess Hecate. Now, the unravelling of an alternative and non-white, anti-patriarchal history and literary history (centred in what is often understood as the beginning of western civilization), as well as the destruction of the conceptualization of narratives as narratives (they are not stories, they are reality) – runs parallel with the deepened discovery of how humans and plants can interact physically, in ways as yet unimagined (Morton 2007, 2010, 2016). There is an *actual* porosity and bleeding between human and plant bodies: human bodies are transformed into plants and plants essential for the killing as well as birth of humans. The metaphors and the embodied experience are deeply entangled, affecting what stories can be told and how they need to be told.

### **The quality and intention of plant actions**

Jane Bennett propose that anthropomorphism might prove a useful tool against anthropocentrism (2010, 120). In her article on Naomi Novik's YA fantasy novel *Uprooted* (2016), Rusvai notes that, in the novel

[a]ll vegetal beings are highly anthropomorphized [...] becoming agents in the Wood's undecipherable intentions. Even though anthropomorphic thinking is approached with a generous amount of scepticism (if not open hostility) in contemporary ecocriticism, *Uprooted* manages to remain eco-conscious [...] blur[ring] the distinction between human and vegetal (2022, 92)

Here, two different approaches towards anthropomorphism are accounted for: one that sees the dangers of anthropomorphism: the risk of understanding the non-human in human terms and thereby misinterpreting or violently reducing the possibilities of understanding, contributing to a kind of “plant blindness” (Wandersee & Schuster 1999; Wandersee & Clary 2006); and one arguing that anthropomorphism might work instead as a necessary tool to perceive the lives of non-human agents. Dawn Keetley further highlights humans’ long-standing instrumental attitude toward plants, arguing that, when humans actually see plants, they see only something made to serve them (Keetly 2016, 19-20). These phenomena: understanding the non-human in human terms, and understanding the non-human in terms of usefulness from a human perspective, are different, but share the distinctly human gaze on the non-human.

Most plant actions in the novels are described as reactions to Briesis’ presence. The plants grow when she makes them grow, they feel when she feels. Sometimes though, the plants act on their own. These actions can be acts of care:

As I put [the key] in the lock, the bougainvillea curled down and encircled my wrist, twisting around it gently before snapping itself off, leaving me with a beautiful bracelet of purple blooms. Few things shocked me when it came to what foliage might do around me, but this left me in awe. (123)

The creating and giving of the bracelet is, as I suggested, an act of care, but it could also be read as a marking of belonging or possession: the bougainvillea gives Bri the bracelet as a sign that she belongs to the plant. This reading suggests a skewing of the idea that humans can own plants (a discourse that is present through the books because of Bri’s mothers’ flower shop, which places the plants in a capitalist setting), and argues that humans can also be “owned,” by plants. It is, of course, also an anthropomorphic reading – made both by the narrator and by me as a reader. The vine making a “bracelet” clearly refers to a human action, comparing the plant body to a human commodity. Still, Bri’s reaction to the plant’s action is one of “shock” and “awe”, she experiences something she did not expect to experience, meeting something she did not expect to meet, thus opening for a blurring of the distinctions. The plant action in the novel is, through magic, made to speed up, thus skewing, queering – or humanizing – the plant time. This makes the action of the plants more visible for a human eye – suggesting an anthropomorphic quality to the magic-naming and magic-narrative of Bayron’s novels. Further, the plant agency is also understood in terms of intentions.

On other occasions the plant actions are violent:

A duo of vines slithered off the top of the enclosure and struck out like giant arms, catching the man in a tangle of poison barbs. He screamed as they lifted him off the ground and tossed him into the tree line like a rag doll. (100)

This passage shows the plant agency as violent. The actions of the plants are described through a comparison with human actions and bodies; “struck out like giant arms”, and the action here is very obvious – in contrast to the subtle movements described above. The context of the episode is that the plants act on their own accord, but they do so with the intention to protect Bri – the man is attacking her with a machete: thus pointing at an alliance between plants and *certain humans*.

The plants’ actions are made comprehensible as actions, through comparisons with human movements and bodies – thus, the subjectivity of the plants can be said to be understood through a human lens. Does this humanlike plant action devalue any kind of “normal” plant action? Is it only through the magical that plants in Bayron’s novels become agents, and do they have agency separate from their symbiosis with Briesis and her family? The question is complex, and also tightly connected to the plants as narrative tools, and gatekeepers. In one episode, Bri is allowed into the Poison Garden by the plants:

I stuck my hand out again, fingers trembling. The vines pulled back. I stepped onto the path, and the cloak of leaves and vines closed behind me. // The late afternoon sunlight slanted through openings in the canopy. The black spruce and red pine groaned as they shifted like hulking shadows, creating a corridor for me to walk through. (97)

The vines, spruce and pine work simultaneously as portal and guardians. They open up a space for Bri, thus giving her the space she needs. They also perform this space, they *are* the garden. The portal also have a narrative function, giving Bri the opportunity to enter a new stage in the story. This points to the plants involvement in the more narratological aspects of Bayron’s story. Claire Colebrook is, in *Death of the Posthuman* critical to classical narratology’s possibility to include more-than-human perspectives and narratives, she asks how other timelines, rhythms and perspectives can be understood and suggests the possibility of viewing the world itself as a narrative (Colebrook 2014, 23). In Bayron’s novels the plants have powers relating both to their own agency, and the humans’ perception of this – the later being closely tied to the story’s development. Recent biological research has (re)demonstrated the variety and complexity of the plant behaviour, claiming there is a plant intelligence, or plant intelligences (Manusco & Viola 2016, Pollan 2013, Trewavas 2003) – a claim that goes hand in hand with a botanical and philosophical questioning of the predominant Western cultural attitude towards plants. In *This Poison Heart*, this questioning and claim for intelligence is part of the central narrative – but it also referred to in different ways on a surface level, as grounded both in black magic tradition, and in a mainstream science context – for example, Marie tells Bri:

”I read a study once. It said that if you have a plant and talk to it like you love it, it’ll grow faster, bigger. But if you keep a plant and talk down to it, insult it, it will wither and die.” (160)



Here, I might mix up intelligence and emotions, but it still points to a kind of agency. Bennett use the term “Thing-Power” to refer to the agential roles of various organic and inorganic materials. She defines the term as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic or subtle” (2010, 6), but she also highlights the fact that this is not necessarily linked to consciousness. In Byron’s novels, the consciousness of plants are never actually pointed out – so, whether their actions could be explained through “consciousness” are not clear. The use of terms like “intelligence” and “consciousness”, opens up for a broader questioning of these, and other, terms used to understand and define action. Does intelligence need to be conscious? And are both these terms *all too human* to make sense when trying to understand non-human actions? Can they be used to understand even *human* action and narrative? According to Bennett, human bodies involve both human and non-human components, so that in our material reality, humans, i.e. “we” are “an array of bodies” (2010, 112-113), and through this she argues for the need of an acceptance of our foreignness. This is easily combined with Jackson suggestion that fantastic literature blurs the distinction between self and other (1981, 30).

By this, I argue, that the narrative, the fantastical and magical and the magical tradition rooted in acts resistance or minority culture, can be combined with a ecocritical questioning of the borders of humanity, and the complexity in human attitudes toward plants, to suggest a worldview where the position of “us” is never to be taken for granted, and where the stories about “self and other,” the ideas of agency and power and vulnerability are messed up and skewed and totally uncertain. I will now move on to analyse the use of bodies as metaphors or metaphorical motives in the narrative, and how these motives suggest a human body becoming plant, that is deeply entangled in the rewriting of the myth of Western civilization.

### **Embodying metaphors and skewing the concepts of life, death and (human) time**

The porosity and boundary-crossing between plant and human bodies reaches its narrative highpoint in the complexity of the story about the Absyrthus’ Heart. Absyrthus was the brother of Medea, and when he was killed,

She spent her days wandering her Poison Garden, where she buried the six pieces of Absyrthus’s body. In the spot where the earth covered each piece of his remains, peculiar plants grew, plants only Absyrthus’s beloved family could tend. Medea nurtured them with drops of her own blood and slivers of moonlight. (301)

Here, the mythological narrative, told not as a myth but as a truth and the story of Briesis’ ancestors, tells the story of a human body becoming plant, in a way that queers perspectives on life and death divisions and give agency to affection. Questions of life and death thereby become

skewed, the idea that a dead person is truly and forever dead becomes the human perspective – plants’ lives are, instead circular, and gods are immortal. The depiction of Medea’s action are gruesome, yet affectionate. The body of Absyrthus is dismembered, as a plant is dissected, and the violence against Absyrthus body is to be paralleled to violence that black and queer bodies are victims of. A most concrete parallel between plant and politics of racism are made in a speech by Isaac Grant (father to Khadija Grant, the police and social worker):

”Your secret’s safe with me, but I can tell you she’s not in the business of enforcing laws about weed as long as Black folks are sitting in jail on possession charges while Karen and Brad are getting rich of edibles in Colorado.” (237)

These two passages shows to very different aspects of the relationship between human and plants: there is the mythical Becoming-Plant, that took place in a prehistorical period, and there is the political aspect of the racist policing of growing weed – plants that affect the human mind. Placing these stories of human-plant connections next to each other suggests a mutual and shared story.

The plant body imitates a human organ. The image of the heart plant thus opens up for a metaphorical reading of the motive; the plant as a heart, or; the heart as a plant. The Absyrthus Heart as a plant is thus both a collapse of human and plant bodies, and a kind of materialised metaphor. The metaphor here, works as a *metaphor* of the further collapse between embodiment, physical porosity, language work and narrativity, in Bayron’s work with refiguring ideas of human-plant relations as well as mythology and its relation to heritage and truth. Johanna Lindbo does in *Ekonarratologi och metaforanalys* (2022) investigate how econarratology and the use of metaphors can be used and performed to find new ways of reading. She suggests that the metaphor, though treated with scepticism by previous ecocritics, has the possibility to unveil the complex porosity between the human and the more-than-human (2022, 118). Lindbo’s use of the porosity concepts draws on Serenella Iovino’s understanding of porosity as a way to highlight the connection between bodies and the discursive worlds these bodies inhabit (2014, 103). This kind of porosity is close to the concept of metaphor as a bridge between language or discourse and materiality. As Lindbo points out; matter is always involved in a process of meaning-making, where discursive and material phenomena cannot be separated but re-create each other in a constant flow (2022, 121).

The Absyrthus Heart has the power to make humans immortal. Rusvai notes, that in *Uprooted*,

The plant kingdom blurs another important category boundary: the one between life and death. [...] this phenomenon [a tree being alive even though it looks dead to the human eye] is magnified through the lenses of the fantastic. [...] [The extremely long life of magic people] means that with respect to time perception, these people are actually closer to trees than to humans. (2022, 94)

A similar motive occurs in Bayron's novels. The theme of immortality first appears through Marie. Marie is made immortal by her best friend and lover Astrea – one of Briesis' ancestors. When Marie tells Bri about it, she says Astrea saved her – she was sick and close to death:

"It is the cure for impending death, no matter the cause," said Marie. "But the result is immortality. I'm sitting here the same as I was the day Astrea used the Heart to save me. I'll be seventeen forever." (274)

It is because of love that Astrea saves Marie – the sentence "used the Heart to save me" thus get the metaphorical meaning of love as a way to immortality, as well as the concrete meaning that is the Heart plant that is used for the saving. It also means that Marie will never be an adult. This can be understood in terms of *queer time* (Halberstam, 2005). The failure to adapt to a straight lifeline is here, with Rusvai's word "magnified through the lenses of the fantastic", as Marie is also, after this always out of time, or actively fucking up the concept of human time. The situation is utterly complex and involves a multiple of motives and possible readings. One involves the huge love – that crosses the borders of *death do us apart*, and how it is placed within a lesbian teenager; i.e. the telling of this great love as rooted in the Girl Body. The girl theme and feelings are then told through generations; Marie becomes Bri's lover – and Marie's feeling for Bri is both told as specifically *for Bri*, but also connected to her love for Astrea (Bri's ancestor, whom she also looks like) thus suggesting the love as not exclusively tied to *one person*. Another reading could point out how Marie, through the physical intervention of the Heart becomes a kind of cyborg (Haraway 1991, Hayles 1999); something foreign enters her body and changes it, she is no longer an autonomous human body, but a co-product of human and plant.

A reading that combines a queer and ecocritical approach to text is done by Ann-Sofie Lönngren in "Maktkritik och antropocentriska läckage" (2022). Lönngren understands ecocriticism as a critique of power, and propose an ecocritical reading method inspired by feminism and gender and queer studies – both in its implementation and in its motives. Lönngren's aim is to detect what she terms "leakages" of non-human as well as queer actions, and perform an analysis that reaches *exorbitant* and *unbelievable* results (2022, 152). The dissolution of live and death, divine and mortal, fact and fiction, might be one such unbelievable reading (if the reader chose to believe this divinity to be a result of Queer Black Magic). Here, a complex negotiation of morality and ethics is placed within the narrative of life-death and desire. The complex relationship between Marie and Bri (the ordinary non-normal girl and the monster) is contrasted with the seemingly simple lesbian (but homonormative) relationship between Bri's mothers. And the question of ethics, desire and normative death is always entangled with the plant motive, since it is the result of a plant action that triggers the situation.

## **To meet the Greek and Black Medea**

The centre of Bayron's novel is the narrative. The narrative in the novels include the Greek mythology, and the telling of the Medea myth – and the refiguring of the myth as a family story of real people who actually existed and exist; it also include other family stories, as well as telling of Black history and queer love. The reading as action is constantly present; Bri reads about Medea, and contacts literary and historical scholars who are experts on the Greek mythology and its narratives. This theme of narrative, and even more – of narrator, runs parallel with the theme of plant-human porosity. Rusvai notes that “knowledge of the past – from our anthropocentric view at least – is so closely intertwined with story, that it is hard to imagine any narrative in absence of language (2022, 95). Rusvai further refers to Luce Irigaray who says about the language of the vegetal, that plants teach us in silence and “say through shaping their own matter” (2017, 129). Applying this to the plants shaping of their own matter in Bayron's novels, the plants speak silent, and actively interact in the narrative as well as knowledge production, through shaping. This shaping includes the actions of plants close to Bri and her biological ancestors, most notably Circe, her aunt, as well as the Absytus Heart's shaping of the human body that is treated with the heart. The plant human interaction, that has been inherited through Bri's family tree since Hecate and Medea, tells a silent but active counter-story to the literary tradition of Medea as a killer mother. Bri's investigation into narrative and narrator thus is a kind of performance of a suspicious reading (Sedgwick 1997) with the aim to find a new and true version, not tainted with patriarchal power. In that way – Bayron's novels not only *tell* the story but *do* the story – the perform a *reading* and a literary analysis, through botany, plant relations and refigurations of time, life and death.

As noted above, the narratological structure has its roots in Aristotele's *Poetics*. Parallel to this, Matthew Hall suggests one of the “roots of disregard” for plants within Western culture are to find in Greek philosophy; in Plato's zoocentric description of plants as created not for their own sake but for the use of humans and animals utility, and in Aristotele's view of plants as “a lower class of being” (2011, 22). Hallvard J. Fossheim argues though, that this view of Aristotele is unfair, and he aims to counterbalance the one-sided view of Aristotele as a nemesis of plants. According to Fossheim, Aristotele had both knowledge and interest in plants, and plants are not just alive, but exemplify completeness (2021, 44). Fossheim also explains how, according to Aristotele, the borders between plant, animal and human, are not real borders, but there is a “plant soul” within both human and non-human animals. This plant soul connects humans with the divine and the immortal: “in us too it is the vegetative soul principle that ensures our

participation in a crucial form of divinity” (2021, 44); and plants are described as “the basic vehicles for the eternal, complete and divine” (52), related to “communion and wonder” (44). This is similar to the way immortality works in Bayron’s novels. It is the workings of the Heart that makes possible the immortal in Marie – a phenomenon that seems really close to the idea of the plant soul connecting the human to the divine. The divine, in its most concrete form, is also present in the novels; Medea is told to be the daughter of the goddess Hecate, and so, her ancestors, including Bri, are also related to the divine – which is visualized by a family tree drawn on the wall in Bri’s house – thus adding one more layer to the porosity of the metaphor-narrative-plant-human entanglement.

Imagination, here, is tied to tradition, and tradition is tied to narrative, and to an understanding of art and literature as dependent on alternative understandings and a fusion of pasts, presents and imagined futures; this perspective of time as moving forward and backward, is similar to the concept of time working in the Afrofuturistic movement, which I will later compare Bayron’s novels with.

As Fossheim’s repositioning of Aristotele shows, readings, and counter-readings, interpretations and re-interpretations are part of the intertextual context that makes up the narrative of humanity, civilization and origin. Ancient Greece as a place where the tradition of both human-plant division and narratology is supposed to originate makes it a place that is both a physical and discursive centre. A questioning of the traditions thus destabilizes and creates the opportunity to rethink the world – and its power structures – in different terms. Bayron’s novel finds this place and works with it physically and temporally and philosophically; physically, Bri, her aunt Circe and the immortals Marie and Persephone travel to Aeaea, a mythical island, to find the Absyrtus Heart. Their search for the island unveils the non-neutrality of history writing; historians have assumed the secret island is close to Italy, but it is pointed out that:

It doesn’t make much sense other than to illustrate how historians often centre themselves in their research.” He gestured to the map on the wall. “Notice the proximity to Rome.” [...] “A bunch of mostly old white men admit that they don’t know everything there is to know or that something they once believed is wrong?” (*Wicked* 107-8)

The white history writing is made fun of, but the mockery clearly shows the limits and blindness of that white narrative. When arriving on the island, it is the presences of the plants that is most noticeable:

The forest on Aeaea was unlike anything I’d ever seen. [...] It was full of foliage that didn’t belong to the same continent much less crowded together on an island. (446)

The idea of plants dependent on geography is here collapsed – all places, the plants of all places, are melted into one. This refers to the motive of a colonial explorer, discovering species and

giving them names, but it also effectively skews this motive. Similarly the collapse of time is told through the plants actions:

I wasn't calling the plants, but they reacted to me nonetheless. [...] They were waiting for me to give a signal. (477)

Here, the agency of the plants is complex: the first part of the quote shows how Bri cannot control, the second shows her part in the relationship as a (passive) centre. The actions are the plants' but the trigger for the actions is the specific human. Bri is this specific human, because of her heritage, and the plants non-human temporality places the ideas of time (human time and plant time) parallel to each other, creating a material place where it is possible to share space across centuries.

Bayron uses intertextuality; a rewriting of first and foremost the Medea myth. There are several previous rewrites of Medea as a black woman; Barbara Klose-Ullmann (2020) mentions Paul Heyse (1896), Hans Henny Jahn (1925) and Guy Butler (1950) as early white writings of a black Medea, while Betine van Zyl Smit (2007) accounts for more recent stage adaptations in South Africa where Medea is positioned as black, and Kevin J. Wetmore (2013) collects American adaptations of the play, where Medea, as a woman of colour, is positioned in a colonial context. – Byron does not get into dialogue with these, but focuses on the Greek myth and critiques Euripide's portrayal of Medea. In Byron's rewriting, plants are involved, as tools for the political agenda and as affected by the consequences of the rewritten history. When Medea is introduced, it is through research in the literary tradition, made through academic methods:

Medea is said to have killed her own brother in an attempt to avoid being married off by her tyrannical father, who happened to be the son of the god Helios. She was said to have been cursed in some way because of this. What I know for certain is that her legend has been twisted, retold, and reimagined so many times that original elements have been obscured. I don't believe she killed her own children, as only in Euripide's play does she do this. (292)

Here, it is clearly pointed out that the story known as "original" is the twisted and retold one, and the *narrator* is made into a person in a power position, with the opportunity to be a villain. The real original is something different. One version of the killing is referred to like this:

She concocted the deadliest poison she could, distilled it into a goblet of wine, and had it served to [Jason]. Medea watched with horror as Jason made his children taste the food and drink before him. The children fell to the floor, writhing in pain. (300)

The killing becomes a question of intention and uncontrollable power. Medea uses her powers as a poisonist, trying to free herself from Jason, but Jason instead kills the children. Thus, Medea's powers are twisted against her and her children, and the position of the powerful woman is also told as a position of vulnerability. Not only Medea's white story is reimagined – or rather re-reimagined – but also Hecate's:

“She’s ancient,” Auntie Leti said. “An original goddess, or an entity that the goddess label was slapped onto because they didn’t have a name for what she was.” (321)

Hecate is told as not even a goddess – the identification of her species as “goddess” is, according to Auntie Leti, a construction based on limited human, white concepts of the world. The namegiving and classification is obviously not only used on/against plants, to order them into human Western science, but also the distinction between human and gods/goddesses, between plants and animals, between collectives and individuals, entities and parts, is shown as an appropriation of non-Western culture. And the “culture” is told as not reducible to narratives or myths, but it is bound to living material bodies. The use of the words “slapped onto”, points at the carelessness of the narrators.

### **Dream\*hoping, counter-memory and *doing* fictional-physical literary criticism**

Lawrence Buell, points out how ecocriticism is both a way of *reading* and a way of *writing* – the latter pointing at there being certain texts that in themselves are ecocritical (Buell 1995, 6-8). Reading Bayron’s novel opens up for two possibilities: 1, to read the novels *as* ecocritical literature; and 2, to read the novels *through* ecocriticism. I suggest a combination of both.

*This Poison Heart* and *This Wicked Fate* are novels engaging with the more-than-human as motives and active parts of the narrative, thus pointing at the interfoliation of human and non-human history (Buell 1995, 6-8). Still, the fantasy genre and the use of magic as a motive to write plant action in a non-realist way, might be understood as a human perspective of the world – if fantasy is understood as a human concept, reducing the fictive plants to something non-real. Bayron’s novels are also critical to power structures; they are openly queer, feminist and anti-racist, performing a harsh critique of white patriarchy as part of the narrative. Is this critique undermined, or enlarged, by the magic perspective? Maybe both. The novels also engage in history (re-)writing.

Reading Bayron’s novels *as readings* might find a productive opening in Gilbert’s and Gubar’s feminist use of the concept of *palimpsest*; a search for the hidden feminist text under the patriarchal culturally accepted narrative (2000, 45-92). Bayron’s novels work with the patriarchal story of Medea, to point out how that one is a *told story*, and that under this, there is another story that undermines the established one. Lönngren sees Gilbert’s and Gubar’s method as somewhat problematic because it suggests a static view of what is female and male, thus hiding differences *within* the categories (2022, 144) – similar problems might occur if using the palimpsest concept to read a hidden more-than-human text; that one’s ideas of what is human risks being static. To

counter these risks, the perspectives of Karen Barad, Edward Said and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen might be useful.

Barad suggests that the creation of “reality” always requires an “intra-action”; a reciprocal movement between matter and discourse that affects both the environment and each other (2007, 113-202), while Said uses the term “contrapuntal” to refer to a way of illustrating the duality of negative and positive in the exile experience (2001, 173-186). For Said this is a way of visualizing the fact that some narratives of oppression and resistance are culturally recognizable, when others are not; and these narratives can interact within the same text. Both these perspectives points to a complex duality: matter and discourse cannot be separated, and neither can negative and positive, visible and invisible, the entanglement is key in the process of *trying* to grasp the world in this. I suggest using the *trying* as a tool, and the duality as a method – and that this is what Bayron is doing in her novels. According to Cohen the aims of material ecocriticism is to “re-enchant” the world and push the boundaries of what is assumed to be “reasonable” and “true” (2014, x). Likewise Lönngren advocates for a reading *trying* to reach unreasonable and unbelievable results (2022, 152). This is, I argue, what Bayron does when she refuses to read Medea as a fictive character but as an actually and historically existing, physical woman with actual black magic powers and an actual family. Reading Bayron as a literary scholar working the fields of fantasy fiction puts the reader in a position where they cannot make a boundary proof distinction between speculative fiction and material world and embodied narratives. This points to a stance where vulnerabilities work as leaking between the text and its surroundings; narrative violence is also physical and structural, but so do memory, and hope.

Drawing on the later, I will conclude by relating Bayron’s novel, the reading done within them and the reading of them, to the concepts of dream\*hoping and counter-memory.

Susan Arndt and Omid Soltani use the concept dream\*hoping in an analysis of how women within the movements of both Afrofuturism and the Harlem Renaissance use dreams as a way to narrate both the future and the past. The dream – related to both the (white) American dream Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream-speech – is used to counter-narrate concepts of modernity and civilization, and they use “‘future’ as a critical category of analysis, it starts off with an examination of dream\*hoping agencies of future-making” (2022, 200), using a rewriting of the very word to multiply the concept of time and connect futures to pasts:

“Future” denotes more than the time to come, and it is too multifarious to be reduced to the (simplicity of any) singular. We must speak of “futureS” to emphasise their plurality and poly-phony while being governed by modes of relationality and causality. FutureS do not simply occur; they are made, or unmade, by human actors with distinct agencies, who are positioned within power-coded



social spaces nonetheless. Futures are moulded by both the past and the present and are thus causally inter-linked and interlocked. (2022, 200)

The West African tradition of *Sankofa* uses the Akan symbol, on the verge between image, metaphor, poetry and material body, to tell about the wisdom in remembering and tying dreams to the past, seeing the past as a seed to nourish rather than a burden to bear. Arndt and Soltani continuously point out, that the tradition that Afrofuturism and Harlem Renaissance counter-narrate is the *white* Western modernity (white written in italics) – this separates white and Western, indicating that Western does not immediately equal white (colonialism). In line with this, Bayron's novels show that Western tradition, in a counter-remembrance, is a *black* (female and queer, plant based and magical) Western civilization, being colonised by white males through narratives and literature.

The concept of dream\*hoping and futures, used when reading Bayron's novels places the fantasy narratives within an activist literary movement and a critical and empowering collective context. Dream\*hoping is used in an anti-colonial context, but I suggest that it can also be used to rethink the human-plant relationship. Placing plants in the narratives of past, present and future, in narratives that through dreams (and hard work and struggle) are working with unveiling power and rethinking agency, draws on alliances between the non-*white* humanity and the more-than-human, suggests that the silenced stories and memories of the non-*white* find parallels in the silent language of plants, and finally works as a questioning of the life and death distinction.

Verónica Tello uses the concept of counter-memory, inspired by feminist and postcolonial theory, as a way to not only (as Barthes and Foucault) maintain or register erased and/or contested histories, or as a dialectical mnemonic system, but to think in a way that is post-dialectical, not bound to the formulas of either/or, us/them or self/other, committed to the endless accumulation and proximities of things – the and-and. For Foucault counter-memory is an attempt to forge a “totally different form of time” (1971, 385), which suggests a dialectical act of re-thinking. Tello instead understands

counter-memory, as conceptual tool and method, [that] models a subject that refuses the teleological logic of dialectical heroic/avant-gardist gestures and revolutions – and visions of a ‘new world’ – and instead seeks to make something out of what is already here – governed by feminist politics of maintenance, care and affirmative sabotage. (2022, 400)

In line with this, Tello points to terms such as hoarding and excess to suggest that there is, in this memory-work too much or too many times – a too-muchness that I understand as communicating with Lönngren's and Cohen's relations to the unreasonable and unbelievable. The counter-memory, thus, would not be dependent on the reasonable, but will use the existing world as an *already unbelievable space* and embrace the unreasonable to tell different stories.

Bayron's novels performs a dialectical counter-narrative, by stating that there *is* a different truth, a truth based in a queer black woman's body and her love for her children and brother, as well as a truth in the violence – physical, conceptual, narratological and metaphorical – done to queer black bodies by white patriarchal royalties and narrators. Yet, another layer is added when the reader of the novels is included in the analysis. As a reader, I am asked by Bayron's narrative to be sceptical to narratives. The storyteller, Bri, as a first-person narrator, works as a detective in the world of both plant-human relationships and of narratives of Western civilization. She is confronted with multiple narratives and continually instructed to distrust these narratives. The reader is thus faced with the same instructions; that narratives and stories can be potential lies, and that they are infused with patriarchal and racist power misuse. Those instructions also infects the reading of Bayron's narrative: is it possible as a reader to trust what is written within the novels? A YA audience is probably not expected to simply believe the narrative of a fictional fantasy novel to be the *truth*. Yet the performance of truth-telling is appealing and the result is a less dialectical view of history, created *within the reader*, in a conversation between reader and novel. So, even though Bayron does not use a montage aesthetics to create a multilayered spacetime.

## Conclusions

I have read *This Poison Heart* and *This Wicked Fate* through a lens combining an ecocritical perspective with a focus on anti-colonialism and queer feminism. I have read the books as an invitation to re-think the world. Starting with the question of *what novels do*, Wendy Wheeler points out the creative power of metaphor and the need for the reader to read playfully in order to create meaning (2012, 75). In Bayron's novels, this applies both to me as a reader of the novels, and the readers and readings *within* the narrative. Bayron's writing is, I argue, an ecoqueer reading of Western civilization, inviting me as a reader into a counter-narrative. This counter-narrative is created using both traditional or mainstream (fantasy) narratology, materialized metaphors, and critical investigations.

It could be argued, that the plants in Bayron's novels mainly acts as tools for human ends (Keetly 2016, 19-20).. Still, I read the relationship between humans and plants as more complex. In Bayron's narrative, the entanglement of human, more-than-human, plant, more-than-plant, divine, immortal, told and untold, known and unknown, is messy and magic. There are a myriad of motives and metaphorical aspects, that are used to undermine the idea of a Western civilization rooted in the stories of Ancient Greece. The narratological aspects and the clearly political intention of the counter-narrative *are*, in a way, distinctly human, mingling with human

understandings of as well plants as stories. Yet, the porosity that telling of the plant-human relationship unveils, the sensory – and dangerous! – contact, that for Bri is inevitable and inherited, blurs the distinction of what is a human and what is plant. This physical porosity finds its intellectual mirror in Morton's suggestion that ecological thought is also intrinsic to ideas of love, loss, capitalism and what might exist after capitalism, amazement, doubt, confusion, scepticism, concepts of space and time, reading, writing, race, class, gender, sexuality, ideas of self and weird paradoxes of subjectivity and society (2010, 2). In Bayron's telling, Bri's relation with plants renders her a place on the border between human and plant – or, she skews the idea of a humanity separate from the plants, not being with the plants, not co-act with them, is like “telling your body not to breathe” (2022, 227). The bodies can't be separate. Bri's aunt Circe suggests the term “allies”: “Don't underestimate what you're capable of with them as your allies” (2022, 227), an expression that reminds of Rosi Braidotti statement that “because my gender, historically speaking, never quite made it into full humanity, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted” (2006, 130). From there, Haraway's suggestion that *we have never been human* (Gane and Haraway 2006, 135) comes to mind, suggesting that (un-)naming our allies, also infects the porosity of our own definition. Similar to this, Bayron's rewriting of the *white* Western myth of civilization, also argues that this civilization have never been white, never been human, but is rather a mess of complicated and unconscious agencies, black magic, divine entanglements; and violent and secret and cursed narratives. Bayron performs, as does Bri, a digging of counter-memories and counter-narratives, narratives built into bodies; it is a performance of literary critique and a critique of power; and when done within the novels, the critique also calls for a reading where I as a reader read critically all that I thought I knew. This is a dangerous reading (you risk being called a witch, being misunderstood, or abused because of your powers and your insistence on being more-than-human), but a necessary one, where the combination of queer, feminist, black and ecocritical resistance and displacements suggests the power of narrative and embodied metaphors makes up a revolutionary poison.

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