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Images as Invitations: Fostering Reader Engagement and Collaboration in Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Small Backs of Children*

Abstract: This paper analyzes how Lidia Yuknavitch, an American writer and creative writing teacher, employs vivid and evocative imagery to foster a participatory reading experience in her autofictional novel *The Small Backs of Children* (2015). Grounded in Ellen Joann Esrock's thesis from "Visual Imaging and Reader's Response", this analysis explores how Yuknavitch strategically invites readers to collaborate in the storytelling process. By doing so, Yuknavitch creates a dynamic interaction where meaning is co-created by the author and her audience.

Yuknavitch's narrative style blends the visceral with the conceptual using imagery that transcends mere description to evoke powerful emotional and intellectual responses. The imagery in *The Small Backs of Children* serves as a bridge between the text and the reader, transforming the act of reading into interactive practice. By blurring the lines between authorship and readership, Yuknavitch redefines traditional storytelling, positioning the reader as an active participant in the narrative. This paper demonstrates the diverse ways in which Yuknavitch's prose engages readers, transforming the act of reading into a collaborative process of creation of meaning and emotion.

Keywords: literary images; Lidia Yuknavitch; *The Small Backs of Children*; autofiction; visualization; participatory reading.

1. Introduction

Lidia Yuknavitch's imagery, recognizable by its dynamic interplay of violence and beauty, commands the reader's engagement. Her strategic use of imagery not only draws readers into the narrative but also blurs the lines between authorship and readership, fostering a collaborative space where the author's creative intentions and the reader's response merge. This paper aims to explore how Yuknavitch's visceral imagery prompts readers to immerse themselves in a dynamic literary experience and actively participate in the storytelling process.

The starting point for conducting this analysis was Ellen Joann Esrock's paper "Visual Imaging and Reader's Response"[1]. Esrock analyzed Julio Cortázar's story

[1] Ellen Joann Esrock, "Visual Imaging and Reader Response," *CEA Critic* 51, 1 (1988): 30–38.

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"Blown-up" to prove that visual images can have semiotic status and thus become integral to the meaning-making process in literature. These images function as signs that communicate specific messages, emotions, or themes to the reader. In her analysis, Esrock proposed that "the visual images formed by readers do not occur randomly but are guided by cues within text"[2]. Building on Esrock's thesis, I analyzed how Yuknavitch strategically prompts readers to collaborate in the storytelling process, where meaning is co-created by the author and the audience.

To provide context for this analysis, it is helpful to begin with definitions of an image in literature and the process of visualization. I will reference the well-known definition from 1913, attributed to Ezra Pound,[3] the founder of the Imagist movement. Pound defines image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"[4]. Although Pounds' definition has been challenged with questions such as "whether one image can encompass both intellectual and emotional parts" or "if the reference to time is accurate"[5], it remains a foundational concept.

According to the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*,[6] visualization is defined as the production of mental images in the process of reading. Renate Brosch suggests that "more vivid imaginings depend to a significant extent on textual triggers in the narrative"[7]. While neuroscientists have argued that textual triggers can be random, their research didn't include a wide variety of literary texts. Brosch further suggests that visualization is an elusive phenomenon that emerges from an interaction between a particular text and a reader in a particular situation and context.[8] This concept aligns with Louise Rosenblatt's[9] idea of literary work as a transaction between the reader and the text, where the reader "infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into verbal symbols", which in turn channels their thoughts and feelings.

This paper analyses *The Small Backs of Children* as a transactional and collaborative literary work, where the author employs various textual cues to engage readers in the processes of meaning-making and the continuous generation of images.

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[2] Ibid., 30.

[3] I part from Pound's definition because Yuknavitch opens the novel with a quote from H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), a renewed figure in the Imagist movement.

[4] Walter Sutton, "The Literary Image and the Reader: A Consideration of the Theory of Spatial Form," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 16, 1 (1957): 112–23.

[5] Ibid.

[6] David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (London: Routledge, 2005), 633.

[7] Renate Brosch, "What We 'See' When We Read: Visualization and Vividness in Reading Fictional Narratives," *Cortex* 105 (2018): 136.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration* (New York: Noble and Noble, 1968), 25.

1.1 Lidia Yuknavitch and her work

Lidia Yuknavitch is a contemporary American writer and creative writing teacher, whose literary work defies easy categorization. Her writing spans genres from non-fiction and memoir to speculative fiction. Her prose oscillates between raw realism and poetic abstraction. Central themes in Yuknavitch's work include personal and collective trauma, the body, and the fluidity of identity. Her 2011 memoir, *The Chronology of Water*, established her reputation as an author who, through evocative and visceral imagery, captures the complexities of personal suffering. Yuknavitch's fiction, which includes novels *Dora: A Headcase* (2012), *The Small Backs of Children* (2015), *The Book of Joan* (2019), the short story collection *Verge* (2020), and her latest novel *Thrust* (2023), can be characterized as autofiction within a poststructuralist context. This is evident in her use of fictional characters with autobiographical origins, the erosion of boundaries between fact and fiction, and "the collapse of the concept of a homogenous, autonomous subject identity"[10]. The engagement with autofiction is particularly evident in *The Small Backs of Children*, which Yuknavitch wrote concurrently with her *The Chronology of Water* memoir.[11] The novel's featured character – the writer, shares autobiographical data with both the memoir's narrator and Yuknavitch herself. For Yuknavitch, autofiction is not a tool to fabulize real life, but to re-create it artistically. In *The Small Backs of Children*, the autofictional[12] narratives, though grounded in visceral experiences of pain and ecstasy, engage with broader existential questions.

In addition to her literary career, Yuknavitch is also engaged in teaching creative writing through innovative and transgressive methods. After earning her doctorate in English literature from the University of Oregon, she spent years teaching in academia. In 2015, however, she left the traditional academic path to establish "Corporeal Writing Center" in Portland, Oregon. This center serves as a hub for writers and artists of all kinds, fostering a space for collaborative creative exploration and discovery – an embodiment of Yuknavitch's unique vision for the writing practice. Yuknavitch's influence in contemporary literature is as much about her bold thematic choices and her stylistic innovations as her work as a writing teacher who tirelessly inspires a new generation of storytellers.

1.2 *The Small Backs of Children*

The Small Backs of Children is a hybrid novel that weaves prose, poetry, scripts, letters, and literary fragments into a complex narrative, creating a matrix of embedded

[10] Herman, et al., 89.

[11] Alden Jones, "The Rumpus Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch," *The Rumpus* (July 13, 2015), https://therumpus.net/2015/07/13/the-rumpus-interview-with-lidia-yuknavitch-2/, acc. on April 19, 2024.

[12] Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor propose the use of the adjective *autofictional* to describe a mode or a strategy an artist can use to extend the use of autofiction to other forms of art as well as to artistic reception and the audience's engagement with art. See in Alexandra, Effe, and Lawlor Hannie, *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2022), 1–18.

juxtapositions. The story unfolds in four parts, each set against the backdrop of a war in an unnamed Eastern European country, focusing on personal struggles of its characters. These characters are introduced by their creative vocations – the writer, the photographer, the filmmaker, the painter, the performance artist, and the playwright – rather than by their names. The novel also features the girl and the widow. The photograph introduced in the opening can be argued to function as a character itself, as it both catalyzes the plot and deeply engages readers. The photographer captures an image of a girl (suspended in midair by the force of an explosion that killed her entire family) and sends it to the writer. The writer becomes so consumed by the image of the girl that she falls ill and ends up in a grief-induced coma, which results in her hospitalization. In the second part of the novel, the writer's coma inspires a rescue mission by other characters, who plan to extract the girl from the war-torn country and bring her to the United States to recover and study art. The third part follows the girl's journey as she navigates her new life in America, while the final section explores various possible endings that echo the story's central question: is there a distinction between artmaking and life?

2. The analysis of Yuknavitch's use of imagery to foster reader's engagement and collaboration

2.1 The interplay of juxtapositions

Lidia Yuknavitch opens the first chapter of her novel entitled "The Girl" with an italicized paragraph that directly addresses the reader: *You must picture your image of Eastern Europe. In your mind's eye. Whatever that image is. However it came to you. Winter. That white…*[13] The imperative "must," immediately draws the reader into the narrative, implying that their imagination will play a crucial role in the unfolding of the story. Instead of offering a detailed description, Yuknavich presents a blank canvas as an invitation for the reader to fill in the gaps with her/his own mental images. The reader's participation in setting the tone and context of the story echoes Rosenblatt's theory of literature as a transactional experience – "the reader seeks to participate in another's vision to gain insight that will make his own life more comprehensible"[14]. The directive to "picture your image of Eastern Europe" allows for a wide range of interpretations, shaped by personal memories, media-fueled perceptions, or the abstract meanings of the words "winter," and "white…" The open-ended nature of this initial instruction enables each reader to construct a unique vison, informed by their own experiences and cultural references.[15]

[13] Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children*, 3.

[14] Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 7.

[15] Ibid, 30. Rosenblatt explains that the reader always "brings into the literary work their personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mode of the moment and physical condition."

After inviting the reader to participate in setting the tone and context of the story, Yuknavitch takes over the narrative, opening the first scene with the fairy-tale-like phrase "One winter night when she is no longer a child […]."[16] The reader's gaze is now drawn towards a girl in the first scene – "her shoes against snow, her arms cradling a self […]"[17] – and is again invited to visualize her, filling in the gaps in description. The subsequent sentence "It is a year after the blast that has atomized her entire family in front of her eyes",[18] frames a profound moment of trauma. However, the author's deliberate lexical choice emphasizing the word "atomized"[19] creates an emotional remove that may prevent the reader from engaging in a more detailed visualization.

In the analysis of Julio Cortázar's story "Blown-up", Esrock[20] suggests that author's textual cues can either invite or discourage the reader's inclination to visualize, strategically shaping visual imagery for semiotic purposes. Yuknavitch seems to employ this principle right from the first chapter juxtaposing vivid, bodily imagery that prompt instant visualization with textual cues that create a narrative distance. For example, in the scene where the girl in the snow observes the trapped wolf chew its own leg to escape death, Yuknavitch directs the readers visualization process with an exquisitely sensual description: when the wolf limps away, the girl urinates over his blood, against the whiteness of the snow. In contrast, Yuknavitch layers the narrative with sentences that can serve as points of discouragement from visualization – or perhaps as moments of brief rest. We see more examples of this in the harrowing third chapter, where the narrator catalogues the brutalities of war. The juxtaposition is clear: explicit descriptions of violence against young bodies ("A soldier's cock entering the thin white flesh of a girl, into a small read cave of her…"[21]) are set against detached statements like "Women and children were raped repeatedly"[22] and "Children were bought and sold on the open market"[23]. This stylistic contrast magnifies the images of violence, particularly when the text revisits the blast, now described as "an anonymous explosion"[24] – the word anonymous contradicts the devastating personal impact of the event.

It's within this chapter when the photographer captures the girl's image: "In that moment, the girl's mouth opened wide as if to scream, but no scream emerged […]."[25] This image adds layers to the earlier description, prompting a more emotional

[16] Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children*, 3

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] The same word, along with other words from the first chapter like winter, white, nothingness… will echo throughout the narrative, reinforcing thematic continuity.

[20] Esrock, "Visual Imaging and Reader Response," 31.

[21] Ibid., 13.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 14.

response from the reader. According to Yuknavitch's writing philosophy, emotional responses are rooted in the body, because, as she explains – "the human body is an epistemological site, a physical place where meanings are endlessly generated and negated"[26]. This concept helps us understand the play of juxtapositions in the novel – a continuous process of drawing the reader in, then pulling back, which is the key to Yuknavitch's process of creating meaning. Graphic images of a character's body experiencing either violence or pleasure prompt a physical response in the reader (the stomach contracts, the jaw clenches, the breath arrests). In contrast, flat, detached descriptions provide the reader's body with moments of rest. This interplay of vivid and subdued imagery can be interpreted as a breath cycle – an innate bodily function. The vivid imagery that triggers a visceral reaction prompts an inhale, while the flat imagery offers a brief repose before the next response, hence facilitates an exhale.

2.2 The Autofictional Strategy

The autofictional thread of the novel is revealed as early as the end of the first chapter, when the narrative is abruptly interrupted by an authorial voice asking, "What is a girl but this? This obscene and beautiful *making* against the expanse of white."[27] This rhetorical question signals that the girl's story is mediated through an external viewpoint.

In the following chapter, the narratorial voice is demystified with the introduction of the character of the writer. The writer's self-introduction echoes details from Yuknavitch's life, aligning closely with her memoir *The Chronology of the Water*[28]. Shared experiences such as childhood abuse, sexual trauma, depression, and complex relationships with both men and women converge identities of the writer and Yuknavitch. The narrative becomes more intimate with the mention of a stillborn daughter, marriage to a filmmaker and raising a son. The motif of a merger of identities is here further revealed: "Inside everything I have ever written, there is a girl. Sometimes she is dead and haunts a story like a ghost. Sometimes she is an orphan of war […] Maybe the girl is a metaphor, or maybe she is me…"[29]

In the closing of the second chapter, Yuknavitch directly addresses the reader: "This, reader, is a mother-daughter story."[30] The narrative address is often used as a strategy to get the reader more emotionally involved.[31]

To further involve the reader, the third chapter introduces foreign words, *Menuo* and *Saule*, meaning moon and sun, respectively. Curious readers will discover that these

[26] Cornelia Channing, "The Body Is a Place: An Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch," *The Paris Review* (February 4, 2020), https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/02/04/the-body-is-a-place-an-interview-with-lidia-yuknavitch/, acc. on April 25, 2024.

[27] Ibid., 6.

[28] Lidia Yuknavitch, *Chronology of the Water: A Memoir* (Portland, OR: Hawthorn Books, 2011).

[29] Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children*, 8.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Herman, Jahn, and Ryan, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, 49.

words are Lithuanian, and were dropped as clues, hinting at Yuknavitch's own heritage. The linguistic clue anchors the initially abstract image of Eastern Europe to a specific personal reality, fostering a deeper (emotional) connection to the setting.

Chapter four juxtaposes the collective trauma of war with the personal agony of a mother facing stillbirth. The chapter opens with another direct address: "My daughter. Say it – hold it in your mouth, look at the words: *born dead*"[32]. This line, consistent with the narrative style, invites the reader to share the weight of the words, encouraging a collaborative storytelling approach. As Esrock suggests, "the text now foregrounds a merger"[33], potentially creating identification between the reader and the narrator. The paradoxical motif of *born dead* encapsulates the novel's tension between creation and destruction. The writer's reflection on her imagined lifeless child – "I expected her to be blue, and cold. I expected her to feel dead weighted"[34] – is contrasted with an image infused with life: "Her skin was flushed… her lips were in the hue and shape of a rosebud."[35] In this chapter, Yuknavitch's personal experience of a child loss is retold differently compared to the account from *The Chronology of Water*.[36] In this version, the writer takes agency by steeling the baby's body for a private burial, reclaiming control over her narrative, and engaging in a sacred communion with her loss on her own terms.

By using autofiction, Yuknavitch openly offers her life experience to readers, encouraging a transactional experience that engages reader's participation. As David Bleich[37] notes, people think about themselves most of the time and they think about the world in terms of themselves. We find a similar idea in Rosenblatt's definition of literature as "an objective presentation of our own problems"[38]. The strategies the writer employs evoke responses in the reader's mind. Rosenblatt[39] refers to this as an act of communication between the writer and the reader. While it may appear that the writer's strategy shapes the reader's response, Rosenblatt reminds us that this response is never a passive outcome but a result of active reader participation in the transaction.[40]

2.3 (Re)membering and (re)imagining

In the second part of the novel, the narrative shifts focus to the interconnected lives of the characters who gather around the hospitalized writer. Bound by concern and affection, these characters attempt to untangle the events that led to the

[32] Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children*, 19.

[33] Esrock, "Visual Imaging and Reader Response," 34.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid, 20.

[36] In *The Chronology of Water*, the burial of the newborn is featured in chapter titled "Ash". Yuknavitch, *The Chronology of Water*, 91–93.

[37] David Bleich, *Readings and Feelings: An Introduction to Subjective Criticism* (Indiana University: NSTE, 1975).

[38] Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 41.

[39] Ibid., 34.

[40] Ibid.

writer's collapse, searching for a way to bring her back from a coma. Inside the writer's home, the poet is the first to see the framed image that pushed the writer into despair. Through the poet's eyes, the photograph is now reintroduced: "the orphaned girl, illuminated by the blast, seems to surge forward, emerging from the flames, a girl poised to transcend the confines of the image and time, to step into our very world."[41] This altered description of the catalyst image brings us back to Pound's definition of the image as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time". However, at this different moment, the emotional and intellectual impact has evolved. The ongoing process of visualization generates new images and meanings, emphasizing Yuknavitch's focus on the importance of the continuous creation of meanings by both the writer and the reader.

As the third section unfolds, the girl is granted her own voice: "My name is Menas. This is my story. There was a bomb"[42]. The reader already knows the bomb she refers to. This statement is followed by a metaphor of resilience: "I am like a blast particle – a piece of matter that was not destroyed, a piece of something looking for form."[43] With the shift from third to first-person perspective, the narrative structure becomes more fluid, with prose stretching across the pages, and increased white space reflecting the unfolding of Menas's personal journey.

The sudden appearance of the white space in Menas's story circles back to the beginning and perhaps explains the recurring metaphor of snow, white, whiteness as a blank canvas of possibilities – a landscape where the reader can participate and draw their own story.

The final section reveals another author's invitation for readers – to envision how the story might end. Multiple endings are proposed, each underscored by the importance of artmaking – a recurring motif that serves as a source of both personal and collective narrative. As Yuknavitch explained in the interview with the Rumpus, "there is no such thing as an ending"[44].

At the conclusion of any work of art, just like at the conclusion of any experience, what we arrive at is a site of interpretation. Every reader commits a creative act at that site. Every reader creates a version of their own artwork within their act of reading. No author can ever succeed at holding a singular ending in place, stable, unwavering.[45]

This final act not only allows the characters' stories to converge but also offers a meditation on the very nature of the narrative creation – "I think art is the place where all our stories collect"[46], Yuknavitch writes.

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[41] Yuknavitch, *The Small Backs of Children*, 96.

[42] Ibid., 132.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Jones, "The Rumpus Interview with Lidia Yuknavitch."

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 198.

3. Closing thoughts

As we have seen, Yuknavitch's novel *The Small Backs of Children* employs strategic cues that actively engage the reader in the narrative. From the opening directive to visualize Eastern Europe to the playful invitation to collaborate in imagining the story's ending, Yuknavitch uses a variety of prompts to solicit the reader's participation. These cues – ranging from invitations to create mental images to commands that align reader perspectives with character experiences – blur traditional narrative boundaries and foster a dynamic literary experience. This approach not only encourages readers to immerse themselves deeply in the narrative but also positions them as co-creators in the unfolding story. By doing so, Yuknavitch transcends conventional storytelling, transforming the act of reading into an interactive, collaborative process that invites readers to actively participate in creating the narrative landscape.

At its core, *The Small Backs of Children* is a meditation on the act of creation itself. As Yuknavitch describes, her characters are limited "to their bodies and their labor (the labor of making art, the labor of making love, the labor of being and thinking)."[47] Central to this narrative and to Yuknavitch's philosophy, when it comes to writing and teaching creative writing, is the celebration of community, the dialogue between artists, and the enduring connection with the audience. Every narrative technique that Yuknavitch skillfully weaves into the fabric of this story serves to draw the reader into a dynamic engagement, not just with the text, but with the very essence of her artistic philosophy. The reader becomes a co-creator, an integral part of a continuous act of art-making that Yuknavitch so vividly portrays.

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