

Digital Selves and Embodied Realities: Cyborg Identity and Posthuman Subjectivity and Intertextuality in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*

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Abstract: The paper draws on the ideas from Haraway (1985) and Hayles (1999) to investigate how a digital techno sphere transforms our selfhoods and relays qualities of circulation and visibility as it pertains to Patricia Lockwood's *No one is talking about this*. The narrator exists online in what Hayles calls a posthuman identity defined through life in the techno sphere, although Lockwood's narrator as Haraway's cyborg has no name or corporeal singularity ascribed to her. Lockwood's self is built almost entirely in "the portal" generics; her vocabulary drifts closer to the internet than that of any single assured narrator, and her habits of thought, her jokes, or even her sense of emotion exist to be circulated and exchanged rather than to be contemplated. Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality provides a guiding precursor to understand this problem because Lockwood's narrator treats her interior sense of humour as simply an amalgamation of screenshots and memes. The second half of Lockwood's novel depicts the birth of her sister's baby who's hard to see and suffers from Proteus syndrome. These characters are confronted with caregiving, and illness, and loss. In the face of this exposure of vulnerability, Lockwood's narrator starts to find her ironic distance and vocabulary unsuited to suffering, love and the kind of labour with a body that refuses to work for her name. What is poignant about Care work is that while the first half of the book is light-hearted in tone. Since most of the critical readings on Lockwood's novel have tended toward Comics studies, literary experimentation or Cultural Studies of the internet itself, few formal readings engage with Lockwood's use of a textual mythos of the cyborg, or borrowing from Hayles' formal texts.

Keywords: Cyborg, Identity, Intertextuality, Portal, Posthuman, Suffering.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of technology has changed the ways in which people communicate, establish relationships, and perceive themselves. The digital media have evolved from the mere medium of information exchange into an agent that plays an active role in the construction of contemporary identities. Consequently, the line between the virtual world and the physical reality has become blurred, since human experience is constantly affected by interactions with technology. This change has inspired the authors of contemporary literature to explore the effects of the digital age on the human psyche. People's lives are thoroughly enmeshed in devices and social media use; the way they think, talk and find themselves has been captured within the mediated spaces of the internet that both exist and do not exist. The internet is no longer a tool; it is where one exists. Literature has begun to reflect the impact of these changes, and follows characters whose minds and bodies are shaped by technology. The paper studies how the protagonist's subjectivity is formed through her "portal" (*Lockwood*) obsession and how this technology-based self is violently questioned by the thrust of real experiences, bodily suffering and loss. The paper posits that the protagonist's identity is formed by her constant immersion in the portal digital space, where her perceptions and language are presented as influenced and composed by memes, online references, and a collage of quotes and fragments. She has drawn closer and spent more time in this universe of intertextuality and digital language, which collapses the boundaries between her corporeality and those of the technological, provoking a cyborg-like identity.

Patricia Lockwood is a contemporary American novelist and poet known for her humour and commentary on the internet. Born in 1982, she was raised in a Catholic context that is reflected in much of her writing. Lockwood first gained recognition for her poetry and work on social media, before achieving wider public attention with her memoir, *Priest daddy*, and her novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, which examines digital life and identity. The novel revolves around the life of an anonymous woman protagonist, whose life is tied intricately to a website called "portal". Interactions on this website mold her language, perceptions, social interactions and understanding of everyday reality. The highly

fragmented form of writing in this novel reflects the quick exchanges in the modern-day digital world where thoughts and experiences spread through terse statements, references to cultural artifacts and online material. Therefore, the book provides a framework for studying the relationship between technology and self-construction.

The protagonist spends her time at the portal becomes a success online influencer.. Her identity becomes almost hyperlink, moving from memes, to viral trends to viral conversations with everything moving and shifting. We spend our time in the portal, everything seems detached, and nothing seems connected. The first half of the novel moves in and explore life inside the portal as it travels past while the second half involves her leaving her digital life behind being involved in a serious family situation. Lockwood tells her sister's problem, that her sister gives birth to a baby with Proteus Syndrome. The protagonist spends her time with the baby and witness the baby's sufferings, illness and eventual death. Before that she tells her story of disconnect with digital world and in that baby finds the physicality of the body, emotional connections and real-life bonds.

Using posthumanism, cyborgism and intertextuality as frameworks, the author explores how the protagonist's online persona is constructed, and how she experiences alterations to this identity as a result of being confronted with human suffering. Literature Research Gaps The major focus of existing literature on *No One Is Talking About This* has tended to be around humour, emotion, or social media. Very few studies use posthumanism or cyborgism to examine *No One Is Talking About This*. This paper provides a literature gap by providing a framework for examining how the portal creates and alters the protagonist's digital identity, and how real-world experiences create disruptions to that digital identity. The author of the paper argues that the portal initially creates the protagonist's mental framework and identity by programming her mind to respond to the rapid and fragmented language used in the digital realm. As a result of being created through digital culture, the protagonist becomes a cyborg-like being. Nevertheless, the experiences of suffering, sickness, and grief from within the real-world context interrupt and reveal the limits of the protagonist's digital identity.

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* has been widely praised for its unconventional format and for how it represents a life lived in an online world. Critics note that the book shifts from humorous observations about life lived on the internet to tragic depictions of real-life family tragedy, thereby illustrating the limitations of the digital existence when contrasted with the significant emotional trauma associated with the physical existence. Reviews of this book appearing in *Kirkus Reviews* and *The Guardian* highlight this transition from internet humour to familial tragedy and illustrate that, although people may believe they are creating lives on the internet, they will ultimately find themselves unprepared to deal with the negative consequences of their actions.

The relationship among digital culture, identity, embodiment, and subjectivity have become prominent features in literature reviews about Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*. Sumner (2024) discusses the influence of datafication and digital culture on self-making through portraying the character as a subject created in the digital world. Baelo-Allué (2024) provides a posthuman interpretation of the text, linking the concepts of digital fragmentation, trauma, vulnerability, and embodiment. In the same line of thought, Garilli (2024/2025) explores internet humor, memes, parody, and online language, showing how digital culture plays a part in the literary form of the novel and the mental process of the protagonist. Taken together, these works argue that the "portal" is more than just a technological setting – it is an important factor in shaping the identity and consciousness of the protagonist.

The connections between virtual experiences and embodied experience are explored even deeper in more recent research. İmşir (2026) argues that the two are closely related, and Pihl (2025) explores the shift from digitally-mediated sociality to family relations and physical presence. Saduriya and Vadivukarasi (2026) discuss digital identity, fragmentation, and alienation. Whereas existing literature sheds light on the issue of digital subjectivity, trauma, inter-personal relations and alienation, there is still a lack of scholarly work dedicated to the issue of interplay between cyborg identity and intertextuality in relation to the formation of the main character's subjectivity. This research paper aims at filling this gap by employing the ideas of Donna Haraway on cyborg identity and Julia Kristeva on intertextuality.

THE PORTAL AND THE FORMATION OF THE CYBORG SELF

Throughout the novel, the protagonist's inner experience is embedded in the experiential space of what has become referred to as the "portal". The portal is not simply another tool she utilizes occasionally but rather is the location of all of her cognitive processes including how she reacts emotionally to events and how she starts to develop an understanding of her own identity. Almost all of her mental and emotional activity occurs within the digital environment and is now more significant to her than her actual physical environment has ever been. Her cognition and perception of reality are reflective of the way in which the internet is constructed. Her thoughts develop in brief, unconnected pieces which resemble social media messages. She views everything through the lens of memes, humour and viral phenomenological

events. Unlike old-fashioned paradigms of thought which took considerable time and contemplation to develop, her thinking pattern moves at a frantic pace similar to the speed of the evolving, hyper-kinetic world of the internet. Thus, the logic of the portal is beginning to determine how she will view the world.

“But what about the stream-of-consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you?” (*No One is Talking About This*, Lockwood). The protagonist, in her understandings about her own mind, now realizes how much of her thought originates not from her own consciousness but rather from the stream-of-consciousness produced in response to the online portal she frequently uses. Many of her thoughts contain words, images, and responses from others via the portal, which causes her thought process to be an amalgamation of the virtual and the real. The protagonist's conscious mind experiences both the stream-of-consciousness generated by the portal and objective realities; thus, her experience creates a cyborg self. This notion illustrates Donna Haraway's conceptualization of the cyborg, where there no longer exists a distinction between human and machine. The protagonist's corporeal form remains that of a human being. However, the digital system of the portal contributes significantly to the development of her consciousness. Her corporeal and digital beings begin to operate symbiotically, which produces a cyborg-like entity. In addition to Haraway's cyborg, there is a clear connection between the protagonist and the concept of the posthuman subject, as defined by N. Katherine Hayles. Hayles suggests that in the age of information and digital networks, an individual's identity is established through various sources and experiences, as opposed to one person's view of themselves or their relationships with others. The protagonist's current consciousness, therefore, is the product of her experiences with the portal, as well as the online identities she possesses through her membership in the portal community. Because of the protagonist's established identity within the digital realm, she has achieved notoriety and received social reinforcement which serves to solidify her sense of self-worth. In this way, her identity becomes defined not solely through her subjective experiences and relationships but also through the visibility she possesses, the responses she receives, and the digital validation (i.e., approval) granted her by others.

In the novel, she responds to real-life situations more frequently than not with the tone of the internet and the language of online culture. As reality is filtered through an immediate, distanced form of expression found in online culture, the complexities of events are reduced to short, shareable snippets of thought. According to Haraway, the cyborg is an entity that is both human and machine - thus breaking down the distinctly separate boundaries of the two. The contemporary subject is developed through constant interaction with technology, thus assisting in explaining the protagonist's character, as her sense of self is built upon communicating via the internet, being digitally famous, and continuously experiencing information overload. The first half of the book therefore depicts a character whose mental state is tightly intermingled with the portal. Her mental existence is in a psychological connection with the digital world, her identity is based on being connected to the internet, and her thought process is in tune with the logic of internet culture. Hence, the protagonist in the novel is depicted as having a cyborg self, as her human consciousness and being are closely connected to the digital world.

INTERTEXTUAL DIGITAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The narrative style and fragmented nature of the content in the first half of *The Internet* is the reason for this phenomenon. Instead of framing their own ideas as being completely unique or stable, the protagonist creates her thoughts through a series of disjointed, short phrases, commonly referred to as memes. This reflects an aggregate consciousness that is the product of an overwhelming number of texts, created and consumed via the portal. This consciousness emerges from continuous engagement with multiple sources of cultural production (e.g., either individual or collective cultural references). Furthermore, the overall flow of the narrative text resembles a social media post-disjointed from one another and demonstrating little to no cohesive storytelling. In fact, the progression of the narrative text often changes quickly from one thought to another as the protagonist experiences her journey through the Internet. Of particular note is that several of the lines can be classified as memes or viral phrases, indicating that the protagonist's thoughts are framed, not with the logic of a traditional narrative structure, but rather within the vernacular of the Internet.

The protagonist's thoughts are shaped by the language and fragments of the digital world rather than by stable, original ideas. Short phrases such as “Can a dog be twins?” (*No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood) This suggests that her thoughts are shaped by popular internet humour and commonly shared digital phrases. The novel also describes the portal as “a place where you could say anything,” (*No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood) which suggests a space filled with multiple voices, references, and cultural fragments. These lines reflect a consciousness that moves through bits of digital language instead of forming complete, independent thoughts.

This condition can be understood through Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality. Kristeva explains that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations,” (*Word, Dialogue and Novel*, Julia Kristeva) meaning that every form of expression

is made from earlier cultural and linguistic materials. The portal in the book is a mosaic, which builds up the protagonist's thoughts and ultimately reflects the language of the portal in her thinking. Therefore, even the most intense primal emotional experiences are translated for her as internet language. Furthermore, she interprets her experiences not as a traditional model of expressing emotion, but instead as the vocabulary of memes. This implies that the protagonist's consciousness is based on digital intertexts in which meaning is created by referencing other cultural and shared sources. Therefore, the author demonstrates that the protagonist's mind has developed through the intertextual forms of digital culture, which supports the assertion that the protagonist's identity develops in relationship to the technological plane and textual space of the portal.

Kristeva argues that all texts have been extracted from previous written works and derive their contextual meaning from such influences. One way this can be established within the novel's portal type of setting is that there are many different voices, references, and fragments of culture present within the portal. Therefore, the protagonist's consciousness contains elements from the different forms of digital media within the portal. Thus, her mind is not whole or intact, but is constantly being rebuilt and refined through the multitude of texts she continually sees and consumes. Therefore, this continuously evolving and changing amalgamation of many different online cultural references keeps providing her with multifaceted and ever-changing representations of her identity. Consequently, this represents the change of consciousness that is cyborg-like as the human aspects of her consciousness are continuously reproduced via technology.

REAL LIFE AND THE BREAKDOWN OF THE CYBORG SELF

In the second half of this book, the protagonist experiences a transformation in her perspective of reality. At the beginning of the novel, much of the protagonist's perspective on life was influenced by her experiences through the digital world of the portal. However, after her sister gives birth to a child who has been diagnosed with Proteus syndrome, she comes to terms with the fact that she is now confronted with physical suffering and emotional connections that are real rather than virtual. While thinking about the unborn child, she reflects, "Because of this vigor and this wheeling and this insistence she felt more fitted to life than the rest of them -she was what life was, a grand and unexpected overreach, a leap out onto land" (*No One Is Talking About This*, Lockwood). his experience alters the author's perspective over time. The humour, joy, and playful quality associated with her digital life have lost their importance. She is beginning to see and understand the importance of the physical body, the emotional connection that exists between people, and the real-world experience of those connections. Her shift of thought is indicative of [the] move away from the fragmented way of thinking that she previously had and toward a more complete and narrative understanding of life.

At some of these moments, she is no longer able to find the language of the portal to describe her emotional experiences. The meme, viral terms, and irony of her previous digital experience are no longer able to articulate the depth of her experience. The fragmented and disjointed language of 'online' loses all meaning when comparing the reality of the person's experiences. This is an example of a limit of the digital language; at times the limits of the digital language will fail to communicate the depth of human experience; i.e.; love, illness, and death. Furthermore, posthuman theory provides an explanation for this type of transition. While posts-humans study the merging of the human with technology, many theorists will agree there is still a recognition of the importance of the physical body. This idea is reflected in this novel; the concept of a digital identity cannot fully replace the experiences of the physical body. When the main character is brought face-to-face with real emotional loss, the character's 'cyborg-like' digital identity becomes disrupted.

Multiple independent studies show the effects of excessive use of social media on youth's identity and mental well-being. One high profile example is the suicide of British student Molly Russell. Molly's family believes that Molly had been exposed to significant amounts of harmful content over a long period and that these experiences helped contribute to her depression. U.S. public health warnings indicate that youth who spend more than three hours per day on average in social media are at an increased risk of developing anxiety and depression. These examples provide evidence supporting that continued exposure to digital environments can significantly affect one's emotional state (positively or negatively) over an extended period of time, as well as impact how one thinks and where one fits into society.

CONCLUSION

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This* offers a nuanced exploration of the idea of identity in the culture where the influence of digital technologies becomes ever more pronounced. As it turns out, the identity of the protagonist in the 21st century cannot be examined strictly through the binary opposition of human and technological. It is seen that the process of communication via the portal affects her perception, her mode of speech and interpretation of reality, while the intertextuality of the digital culture makes the boundaries of the individual consciousness even more fluid. At the same time, the experiences related to the illness, care, vulnerability of the body and loss bring something new that cannot

be fully incorporated into the realm of the digital. This shift reveals both the potentials and limitations of the technological identity.

Thus, the paper states that the change that occurs in the protagonist cannot be interpreted as the transition from the virtual to the real world, but as the rethinking of the very notion of humanity in the context of an integrated technology. It is clear that the experiences of digital and embodied life intertwine and do not stay apart. In such a way, Lockwood's novel provides an important literary representation of the contemporary subjectivity.

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