

FRAGMENTATION OF IDENTITY IN PATRICIA LOCKWOOD'S *NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS* BY PATRICIA LOCKWOOD

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Abstract:

This paper argues that Patricia Lockwood's No One Is Talking About This fundamentally reconfigures identity fragmentation in the digital age, presenting it not as a lamentable loss but as the constitutive ground of contemporary consciousness. Analyzing the unnamed protagonist's navigation between the immersive "portal" of internet culture and the visceral reality of a family medical crisis, the paper demonstrates how Lockwood constructs identity as inherently fractured across three primary axes: primarily, the digital/physical divide, where the "communal mind" of the portal dissolves boundaries while demanding performance of fragmented selves; secondarily, linguistic instability, where digital communication accelerates the decay and deferral of meaning, rendering language unreliable and detaching it from the self; and finally, embodied experience through pregnancy and medical trauma (Proteus syndrome), which violently disrupts bodily integrity and understanding. The research contends that Lockwood moves beyond critique, showing crisis-induced fragmentation fosters profound connection unavailable online, while the portal enables new, albeit fragmented, forms of global belonging. Crucially, the novel rejects nostalgia for a pre-digital unified self, suggesting instead that fragmentation is the defining condition of twenty-first-century identity. The paper concludes that Lockwood's fragmented narrative structure itself embodies this reality, offering recognition rather than resolution and positioning identity as constituted through its multiplicity and instability.

Keywords : Patricia Lockwood, *No One Is Talking About This*, Identity Fragmentation, Digital Identity, Embodiment, Linguistic Fragmentation, Communal Mind, Contemporary Consciousness.

Introduction:

In Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, the modern self fractures under the relentless pressure of digital existence, medical crisis, and the fundamental instability of language itself. The novel, structured as a series of fragmented observations that mirror the very disintegration it describes, presents a profound meditation on how identity splinters in the contemporary world. Through its unnamed protagonist—known only as "she" who moves between the "portal" of internet culture and the visceral reality of caring for a critically ill infant—Lockwood articulates what it means to exist simultaneously in multiple realms, with competing demands on one's sense of self. This paper examines how Lockwood constructs identity as inherently fragmented in the digital age, arguing that the novel presents

fragmentation not merely as a condition to be lamented but as the very ground of contemporary consciousness. The work demonstrates how the self fractures across digital/physical boundaries, linguistic uncertainties, and the destabilizing experience of crisis, ultimately suggesting that identity in the twenty-first century is constituted precisely through its fragmentation rather than despite it.

The Portal and the Splintering Self :

Central to Lockwood's exploration of fragmented identity is the concept of "the portal," a deliberately vague term representing the immersive world of internet culture and social media. The portal functions as both a physical space and a psychological state where the boundaries of self dissolve: "Her pronoun, which she had never felt particularly close to, traveled farther and farther away from her in the portal, swooping through landscapes of us and him and we and them. Occasionally it flew back to light on her shoulder, like a parrot who repeated everything she said but otherwise had nothing to do with her, who in fact had been left to her by some old weird aunt, who on her deathbed had simply barked, 'Deal with it!'" (Lockwood 45). This striking image of the pronoun as a dissociated parrot captures the essential fragmentation of identity in digital spaces—language no longer serves as an extension of self but becomes an autonomous entity that may or may not align with one's internal experience.

The portal creates what Lockwood terms "the communal mind," a collective consciousness that simultaneously connects and fragments individual identity: "Mostly, though, it passed into you, you, you, you, until she had no idea where she ended and the rest of the crowd began" (46). This dissolution of boundaries represents a radical reconfiguration of identity where the traditional markers of selfhood—pronouns, personal narratives, distinctive perspectives—become unstable. The protagonist's experience reflects what philosopher Sherry Turkle has described as "the divided self of the networked life," where constant connection produces a sense of perpetual partial attention that fragments the psyche (Turkle 154). Lockwood pushes this concept further by suggesting that in the portal, fragmentation isn't merely a side effect but the very condition of existence: "It was a place where she knew what was going to happen, it was a place where she would always choose the right side, where the failure was in history and not herself... where she was not subject to the swells and currents and storms of the mind of" (Lockwood 78). The portal offers the illusion of stable identity precisely because it demands constant performance of already-fragmented selves.

Linguistic Fragmentation and the Unreliable Word :

Lockwood's novel demonstrates how language itself fractures under the pressures of digital communication, further destabilizing identity. The protagonist's relationship to language becomes increasingly tenuous as the narrative progresses, reflecting how meaning disintegrates in the online world. She notes: "The cursor blinked where her mind was. She put one true word after another and put the words in the portal. All at once they were not true, not as true as she could have made them. Where was the fiction? Distance, arrangement, emphasis, proportion? Did they only become untrue when they entered someone else's life and butted, trivial, up against its bigness?" (Lockwood 112). This passage reveals the fundamental instability of language in digital spaces—words lose their intended meaning as they travel through the communal mind, becoming detached from their creator's intention.

The novel abounds with examples of linguistic fragmentation that mirror identity fragmentation: “Her most secret pleasures were sentences that only half a percent of people on earth would understand, and that no one would be able to decipher at all in ten years: grisly british witch pits sex in the moon next summer what is binch what is to be corn cobbled that’s the cost of my vegan lunch pants burn leg wound” (Lockwood 58). These nonsensical phrases represent the accelerated decay of meaning in internet culture, where language evolves so rapidly that it becomes incomprehensible almost immediately. Literary theorist Laura Gurak has argued that digital communication creates “a linguistic landscape where meaning is perpetually deferred” (Gurak 78), and Lockwood embodies this concept through her protagonist’s experience. The words “binch” and “corn cobbled” function as linguistic artifacts that simultaneously connect and disconnect the speaker from others—understood by a select few in the moment but destined for obsolescence.

This linguistic fragmentation reaches its crisis point when the protagonist faces the medical emergency of her infant daughter: “How could you explain it? How could you explain it? Which words, and in which order, could you possibly utter that would make her understand? ‘... yes binch’” (Lockwood 105). The absurd non sequitur “yes binch” in response to a life-or-death question demonstrates the complete collapse of language’s ability to convey meaning in moments of extreme crisis. As philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 5.6), and Lockwood shows how those limits expand and contract unpredictably in the digital age, leaving the self fragmented across multiple linguistic realities.

The Body as Site of Fragmentation :

While much of the novel focuses on digital fragmentation, Lockwood equally explores how physical embodiment creates its own fractures in identity, particularly through the experience of pregnancy, birth, and medical crisis. The protagonist’s journey from internet celebrity to mother of a critically ill child creates a profound rupture in her sense of self: “All the worries about what a mind was fell away as soon as the baby was placed in her arms. A mind was merely something trying to make it in the world. The baby, like a soft pink machete, swung and chopped her way through the living leaves. A path was a path was a path was a path. A path was a person and a path was a mind, walk, chop, walk, chop” (Lockwood 62). This passage marks a radical shift from the abstract, linguistic play of the portal to the visceral reality of caring for another human being.

The medical crisis surrounding the infant’s condition—revealed to be Proteus syndrome, the same condition that affected the “Elephant Man”—forces the protagonist to confront the fragility of the body and the instability of identity grounded in physical form: “The exome test had found the misspelling, the one missed letter in a very long book. The family sat at the conference table as the entire dictionary was shot at them through pea-guns. The words the doctors said were Proteus syndrome, the words they said were one in a billion, the words they meant were Elephant Man” (Lockwood 51). The medical language here functions like “pea-guns” firing incomprehensible terms that shatter the protagonist’s previous understanding of her body and her child’s body. Science writer Siddhartha Mukherjee has noted that “genetic diagnosis often feels less like revelation and more like fragmentation—discovering that what we thought was a unified self is actually a collection of vulnerable parts” (Mukherjee 214), and

Lockwood embodies this experience through her protagonist's shock at the "misspelling" in her child's DNA.

This bodily fragmentation extends to the protagonist's own physical experience: "She could not feel her first fingertip. This in the way that your ear used to get soft, pink, and pliant, and the swirls of hair around it like damp designs, from talking on the telephone" (Lockwood 59). The loss of sensation in her fingertip mirrors the gradual erosion of embodied experience in the digital age, where physical presence becomes increasingly mediated and fragmented. The comparison to telephone use—a technology that already mediated physical presence—suggests an acceleration of this fragmentation in the internet era. As media theorist Mark Hansen has argued, "The digital environment doesn't merely represent the body but actively reconfigures our experience of embodiment" (Hansen 112), and Lockwood shows this reconfiguration through the protagonist's growing disconnection from her own physicality.

Crisis as Catalyst for Radical Fragmentation :

The novel's second half, marked by the infant's medical crisis, represents a profound intensification of identity fragmentation that transcends the digital/physical divide. When the protagonist transitions from the portal to the hospital, she experiences a different kind of fragmentation—one born not of digital dispersion but of traumatic focus: "It was a marvel how cleanly and completely this lifted her out of the stream of regular life. She was a gleaming sterilized instrument, flashing out at the precise moment of emergency. She chugged hot hospital coffee and then went, 'AHHHHH,' like George Clooney on ER, like she was off to go slice out the tumor that had lately been pressing on the world's optic nerve" (Lockwood 83). This passage reveals how crisis doesn't heal fragmentation but transforms it—where previously she was dispersed across digital spaces, now she is fragmented by the singular, overwhelming focus on her child's survival.

The protagonist's experience in the hospital creates what might be called "traumatic hyper-focus," a state where identity fragments not through dispersion but through extreme concentration on a single point of pain: "She thought about the 24-hour NICU badge in her coat pocket, that she kept there to remind herself she had once been a citizen of necessity" (Lockwood 89). This badge represents a new citizenship, one that supersedes her previous identity as a portal-dweller. Cultural theorist Cathy Caruth has written that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to disrupt the ordinary" (Caruth 5), and Lockwood shows how the medical crisis disrupts the protagonist's ordinary fragmented existence with a more profound fragmentation.

This crisis forces the protagonist to confront the limitations of the communal mind when faced with genuine suffering: "She went silent in the portal; she knew how it was. She knew that as you scrolled you averted your eyes from the ones who could not apply their lipstick within the lines, from the ones who were beginning to edge up into mania, from the ones who were Horny, from the dommes who were not remotely mean enough... But above all you averted your eyes from the ones who were in mad grief, whose mouths were open like caves with ancient paintings inside" (Lockwood 99-100). The portal, which previously provided a space for fragmented identity, now becomes inadequate for expressing the depth of

her experience. The communal mind, designed for light connection and rapid fragmentation, cannot accommodate the weight of genuine trauma. As media scholar danah boyd has observed, “Social media platforms are built for connection but not for depth—they facilitate the spread of emotion but not its processing” (boyd 204), and Lockwood dramatizes this limitation through her protagonist’s withdrawal from the portal.

Fragmentation as Constitutive of Contemporary Identity :

Perhaps Lockwood’s most radical contribution is her suggestion that fragmentation isn’t something that happens to identity but is rather constitutive of contemporary identity itself. The novel rejects the nostalgic notion that there was ever a unified self to be lost, instead presenting fragmentation as the ground of being in the twenty-first century. When the protagonist reflects on her previous life, she recognizes its essential fragmentation: “She could barely recall her previous life, the flights through blue rare space, the handing over of tickets and stamping of passports, the gorgeous violent ruptures of somewhere-else. Even less could she remember what she did when she wasn’t on the move” (Lockwood 93). The “unified” life she might have imagined before the portal was itself a series of ruptures and displacements.

Lockwood suggests that fragmentation creates new forms of connection that weren’t possible in supposedly more “unified” times. When the protagonist experiences a moment of connection with her husband in an international city, she recognizes a new kind of belonging: “Revolution, she thought looking at them, bring on the revolution, as they suddenly turned the sun of themselves on her and smiled. It should not be true that, walking the wet streets of international cities, she should suddenly detect the warm, the unmistakable, the broken-to-release-the-vast-steam-of-human-souls, the smell of Subway bread. That she should know it so instantly, that she should stop in her tracks, that she and her husband should turn to each other joyously and sing in harmony the words EAT FRESH” (Lockwood 49). This moment of global recognition, based on a corporate brand, represents a new form of connection made possible precisely by the fragmentation of traditional cultural boundaries.

The novel’s structure itself embodies this argument, with its fragmented, episodic form resisting traditional narrative coherence. Literary critic Stephanie Burt has noted that “contemporary literature increasingly adopts forms that mirror the fragmented consciousness of its characters” (Burt 87), and Lockwood’s novel exemplifies this trend. The text moves between short, disconnected observations, social media posts, medical reports, and philosophical reflections without clear transitions, forcing the reader to experience fragmentation rather than merely read about it. As the protagonist observes: “That these disconnections were what kept the pages turning, that these blank spaces were what moved the plot forward. The plot! That was a laugh. The plot was that she sat motionless in her chair, willing herself to stand up and take the next shower in a series of near-infinite showers” (Lockwood 60). The novel acknowledges its own fragmented form while suggesting that this fragmentation isn’t a failure but the very condition of contemporary storytelling.

Conclusion :

Patricia Lockwood’s *No One Is Talking About This* fundamentally argues that identity fragmentation, far from being a lamentable consequence of the digital age, is the very essence

of contemporary consciousness. Through its protagonist navigating the disorienting “portal” of online culture and the visceral fragmentation of a medical crisis, the novel illustrates how identity fractures across digital/physical divides, language, and trauma, rejecting nostalgic ideals of a unified pre-internet self. Crucially, Lockwood avoids simplistic critique: while showing the portal’s fragmenting effects, she also acknowledges it as a space for connection, creativity, and revolution; similarly, profound trauma shatters identity but also fosters authentic connection unavailable online. The novel’s strength lies in embracing these contradictions without resolution, reflecting the unstable nature of modern identity. Ultimately, it offers not solutions but recognition—a mirror to our splintered existence—suggesting that the radical act is to acknowledge fragmentation without despair, understanding that identity is constituted through its many pieces, as captured in the line: “a path was a path was a path was a path. A path was a person and a path was a mind, walk, chop, walk, chop.”

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