

# Disembodiment to Embodied Care: A Zoe Centric Ethical Approach to Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*

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## Abstract:

The research article analyzes Patricia Lockwood's debut novel *No One Is Talking About This* from the perspective of the feminist philosopher and the posthuman critic, Rosi Braidotti's Zoe-Centered Ethics. The novel delves into two distinct narrative focus. It traces the narrator's journey from disembodied digital self to embodied caregiving, that she extends for her niece diagnosed with a rare medical illness. Applying Rosi Braidotti's concepts of Zoe, affirmative ethics and nomadic subjectivity from the book, *The Posthuman* and *Posthuman Knowledge* reveals how the novel repositions vulnerability and disability as catalysts for ethical transformation. While the novel has often been analyzed from the view of Posthuman Trauma theory, this paper adopts a divergent perspective, emphasizing the narrator's affirmative turn - moving from detachment and disembodiment towards care, relationality and an embodied engagement with life.

**Keywords:** Posthumanism, Zoe-Centric Ethics, Affirmative Ethics, Nomadic Subjectivity, Human Exceptionalism, Interdependence.

## Introduction

Literature is an encyclopedia that records life. It finds and explores many vast transformations which is experienced once every decade. In the era of hyperconnectivity, literature increasingly mirrors the fragmentation of selfhood and the blurring of boundaries between digital and embodied life. Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* captures this cultural renaissance by plotting a narrator whose online submersion transforms radically after a family crisis captivates her into the physical demands of care. Using Rosi Braidotti's Zoe-centered ethics as a lens, this analysis examines the narrator's transformation from a disembodied digital existence to a more involved and relational form of care, demonstrating the novel's commitment to a posthuman ethics that prioritizes relationality and the value of all life.

American Literature has long been built on its traditional and historical exploration of identity, freedom and prosperity and human existence. As digital media reshapes the literary landscape, American fiction increasingly interrogates the conventional ideas of human exceptionalism. It gradually laid its focus on the evolving concepts of virtual realities, fragmented self, fractured subjectivity, fluid embodiment aligning with posthuman critiques that questions human dominance. (The Posthuman, 66)

Patricia Lockwood is a 1982 born American poet, memoirist and novelist best known for her debut novel *No One Is Talking About This*. She is famously known for her innovative writing style and contribution she rendered in exploring the nuances of internet culture. She initially claimed recognition

through her poem anthology and her debut memoir *Priestdaddy* (2017) which received critical acclaim. Patricia Lockwood is widely regarded as the ‘Poet Laureate of Twitter’.

Employing surreal imagery and dynamic narratives, Lockwood’s writing expertly, integrates absurdity with the extensively human to examine how online discourse impacts intimacy, perception and identity. Her fiction deals with problems related to connection, grief, embodiment and care ethics, that establish her as an influential writer across contemporary American literature.

*No One Is Talking About This* (2021) is the Booker Prize and the Women’s Prize for Fiction shortlisted work intelligently handcrafted by Patricia Lockwood. The Novel is distinctly divided as two parts, one focusing on the Narrator’s mediated identity, while the other integrates her embodied human centric persona. The first half immerses the readers in “The Portal” which is a meme-saturated world and the second shifts to the narrator’s personal encounter of agony with the birth of her medically fragile niece.

Critics have interpreted *No One Is Talking About This* as both a satire of Internet culture (Smith 214) and a reflection on digital-age grief (Harris 88). The novel is also analyzed from the perspective of Emily Laidlaw (14) as a study of virtual life’s disorientations. While Baelo-Allue (219) examined the work as a posthuman trauma novel instilling the fragmented plot rooted under trauma studies.

This research article stands apart reading the transition as holistic moral vision, showing how Lockwood’s narrator exemplifies Braidotti’s ideas by shifting from digital detachment to a focus on embodied relationality. The paper narrows down its vital focus on the fiction *No One Is Talking About This* from the Post humanist Framework embedding the critique of Rosi Braidotti’s *Posthuman* (2013) and *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) ultimately targeting on giving an affirmative ethical outcome.

Rosi Braidotti, a dominant figure in posthuman theory, challenges conventional anthropocentric thinking by advocating for an ethical paradigm build upon Zoe – the vital, embodied life force that links all living beings, including humans, non-humans, nature and technology. Her work encourages nomadic subjectivity by proclaiming the interconnectedness of all life and rejecting the fixed identities. All life forms have significance for their inherent worth in Braidotti’s Zoe-centered ethics and not just based on their helpfulness or fidelity to social conventions. This approach strives to foster resilience in the face of mortality and vulnerability by drawing attention to diversity, interconnectedness and embodiment.

Braidotti elucidates the distinction between ‘Bios’ (the socially qualified life of humans) and ‘Zoe’ (a vital, non-hierarchical force that transcends human exceptionalism), advocating for a shift away from human-centered perspectives in her book *The Posthuman* (2013). In *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), she extends this to knowledge practices and ethical relations, emphasizing interconnectedness, Zoe-centric view of life, nomadic subjectivity, interdependence and affirmative ethics. This research studies on the narrator’s journey from the disoriented digital self to Zoe-centric Ethics with reference to Braidotti’s viewpoint.

The Novel *No One Is Talking About This*, opening sections populate the narrator’s mind with short, meme-like fragments, reflecting an attention economy driven by algorithmic stimuli. One telling line captures the portal’s commutative feedback loop: The people who live in the portal were often compared to those legendary experiment rats who kept hitting a button repeatedly to get a pellet. “When we hit the button, all we were getting was to be more of a rat” (Lockwood, 90). The metaphor diagnoses a contemporary subjectivity shaped by reinforcement mechanics rather than autonomous aims. Braidotti’s concept of nomadic subjectivity helps explain this fragmentation. The narrator’s identity here is not unified but distributed across networks of code, affect and collective attention. By staging a

decentering of the human, the portal reveals the self as part of a complex web of human and non-human interactions, rather than a standalone source of value.

The novel's first part is saturated with reference to how the narrator encounter moments that are fractured and fragile which she could not explicitly experience or live it. It explains the ephemerality nature of the digital acquaintance.

“There was a new toy. Everyone was making fun of it, but then it was said to be designed for autistic people, and then no one made fun of it anymore, but made fun of the people who were making fun of it previously. Then someone else discovered a stone version from a million years ago in some museum, and this seemed to prove something. Then the origin of the toy was revealed to have something to do with Israel and Palestine and so everyone made a pact never to speak of it again. And all of this happened in the space of like four days” (Lockwood, 11).

This reference proves that how “The Portal” as referred by the narrator is hasty in spreading news, yet sluggish in fostering understanding or resolution. The portal floods her with instantaneous updates and viral absurdities, creating the illusion of urgency, but offers little space for sustained reflection or embodied engagement. She continues to exist in a liminal state, always reacting but seldom living, by this acceleration of information and retardation of meaning.

“Every day their attention must turn, like shine on a school of fish, toward a new person to hate. Sometimes the subject was a war criminal, but other times it was someone who made a heinous substitution in guacamole.... I mean, have you read that article about octopus intelligence? Have you read how octopuses are marching out of the sea and onto dry land, in slick ad obedient armies?” (Lockwood, 9)

The narrator's immersion in the portal mirrors her own disembodied existence as well as the transient, performative cycles of online debate. In this context, social media functions similarly to a school of fish “every day their attention must turn ... toward a new person to hate” (9) which implies quick at generating anger but lacking in long-term significance.

The narrator is seen serving as a detached conduit of volatility as she switches from the news about “a heinous substitution in guacamole” to viral curiosities like “that article about octopus intelligence” with no embodied connection to the events. Her reactions are filtered entirely through screens, such as watching “footage of bodies being flung from a carnival ride” (9) and scrolls past the revelation “that someone was dead” (9) without much thought. This pattern of intense emotional spikes followed by swift forgetting echoes her fragmented identity, where digital observation replaces embodied experience and moral responsibility is lost in ephemeral, context-free interactions.

In the novel, “candida overgrowth” works as both a literal online health topic and a metaphor for how people's sense of self can be shaped by internet communities. At first, the narrator stumbles upon it during a late-night search, linking it to her fatigue, memory lapses, and even the color of her tongue. But by the turn of the page, we get to know that she's not just reading about it-she's absorbed into the ‘candida overgrowth board’, picking up its jargon, doctrine and dogma (28). Her behavior was evidently seen as a reflection of what she experiences online. This reinforces the fact that the online discussions have profound influence on her thoughts and actions, blurring the lines between her digital and offline life. She finds herself mentally replaying online debates even in private moments, like in the shower, highlighting the pervasive impact of the digital world on her daily life and interactions.

Through candida overgrowth, Lockwood shows how internet subcultures can rewrite a person's inner life, not just with information, but with language, habits and even imagined relationships, “you

might leave your husband for that guy” (28). It’s a humorous yet unsettling reminder that in the portal, identities can grow and spread as quickly and sometimes as invasively as the yeast itself.

“The Portal’s favorite stories, now” (70), here, the word “now” reveals the changing trend and the constant ephemeral nature of the digital information. Thus, in the novel’s first section, it is evident that the protagonist is living an interconnected life with technology. She lives a disembodied life absorbed into the portal, where information flows without corporeal grounding. “The portal was a place of infinite jest, but it was not funny”. This represents a dispersed, posthuman identity that risks losing contact with embodied Zoe.

In *No One Is Talking About This*, the narrator’s niece, is prenatally diagnosed with Proteus syndrome, a rare genetic disorder caused by AKT1 mutation that leads to abnormal tissue growth resulting in severe physical and neurological complications and potentially shortened life expectancy. There is a noticeable emotional breakdown when the narrator first learns of the diagnosis. She goes from the sardonic disinterest of her internet-dominated life to a startled, visceral realization of her vulnerability and death. “She Googled it, she wished she had not googled it”. This response captures the clash between the unfiltered, lived truth of a human crisis and mediated, computerized knowing. The narrator initially searches for the material, processing it similarly to how she might process internet trivia, but the seriousness of what she discovers draws her into a different emotional register.

After becoming aware of the personal crisis, the narrative shifts to focus on the tangible, embodied experiences of the baby – her touch, breathing, and expressions, signaling the narrator’s move towards Zoe-centric perspective, where life’s value is inherent, regardless of societal expectations or notions of ‘normalcy’.

Lockwood uses this detail to heighten the emotional weight. The family knows from the start that the baby will be medically fragile, and the narrator’s disembodied, online-focused existence in Part One is suddenly pierced by this embodied reality. The in-utero diagnosis also frames the narrator’s first reaction as a mixture of shock, grief, and a shift toward grounded presence because she is confronted with a life that demands immediate, full-bodied care.

The narrator’s realization gradually evolves the plot towards the turning point where it aligns with the post human ethics. Human exceptionalism is a belief system that humans are superior to all other forms of life. But in this state, when the narrator was informed about the niece’s birth with a severe medical condition, she moves away from human exceptionalism. She completely rejects it when she values her disabled niece’s life not for “human productivity” or “normative abilities” but as an equally valuable form of life within a web of human and nonhuman care. The niece’s birth reorients the narrator toward material vulnerability. “She was here, and they loved her beyond reason”. Braidotti’s ethic of valuing life beyond productivity is enacted in a deeply personal context.

The narrator before being announced about the illness that her niece was born with, is caught in a digital world, reacting to events passively. But after being aware of the inter-personal trauma, she actively chooses to be present, to love and to create comfort for the baby and family, not because she can “fix” the situation, but because caring itself is valuable and is much needed. “Even in pain there was radiance”. This reflects Braidotti’s Affirmative ethics, finding joy in relationality despite loss. The narrator’s act of shifting from passive scrolling to active embodied care marks the positive ethical responsive outcome.

While the first part shows the narrator drifting through “the portal”, fluidly taking on internet logics and linguistic play, the second part anchors her in a more embodied and emotionally charged reality the birth and illness of her sister’s play. The readers could understand that how nomadic subjectivity is not abandoned, but it transforms.

Braidotti's concept allows for movement between different ontological terrains-digital, material, affective. In the second part, the narrator still moves between these terrains, but the stakes are higher. She carries with her the humor, absurdity and language of the portal, yet now she navigates hospital rooms, medical terminology and the intimate labor of caregiving. The narrator's self is still multiple and mobile – she's a sister, a caregiver, a grieving observer and still, in fleeting moments, a participant in digital culture – but the gravitational pull of family and mortality shifts the balance.

The “nomadism” here is no longer just playful drifting rather it is a survival mode. She hovers in a state of in-between, bridging the baby's brief, precarious existence and the ongoing digital noise that lingers in the background. This mirrors Braidotti's idea that nomadic subjectivity is about adaptability and ethical responsiveness to changing conditions.

In the second part, the narrator's identity retains momentum – but the movement is now toward connection and care, not just exploration and detachment. Her subjectivity is still non-fixed, but the shifting is shaped by an urgent affective reality rather than the endless scroll.

## Conclusion

In a world increasingly mediated through the “portal”, *No One Is Talking About This* reveals both the collective allure and the alienating consequences of digital immersion. In part one, the narrator describes the portal as a place of infinite jest, underscoring the shallowness beneath its constant stimulation. Her life, once made up of internet, shifts irrevocably when she is drawn into the embodied reality of caring for her niece - a creature that made her forget the password to everything. This novel becomes more than just a reflection on the digital era when read via Rosi Braidotti's Zoe-centric ethics. It becomes a silent call to remember where we are in life continuum. From disembodiment in the “portal” to embodied care for her niece, the narrator has an ethical awakening that acknowledges the worth of all life, including that which comes in a frail, fleeting, or unexpected form. She learns through raising the child that even the darkest periods may be filled with purpose and that vitality is not dependent on perfection.

As readers of postmodern fiction, and critique of Patricia Lockwood's alluring work *No One Is Talking About This*, we learn the fact that however hard life becomes, it is the responsibility of humans to stand and face it with confidence rather than hiding behind a screen, where, emotions are numbed, feelings distorted, information flooded but its fleeting and ephemeral, identity online is fake and projections lack honesty. “There is still a real life to be lived, there are still real things to be done” (Lockwood 69). Rosi Braidotti's Zoe-centered ethical framework spotlights the importance of shared human experience, highlighting mutual vulnerability, mortality, and love as antidotes to human exceptionalism. Ultimately, Lockwood's narrative reminds us that true connection and meaning can only be found in the shared fragility and beauty of human experience, urging us to ground ourselves in the world we inhabit together.

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