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SONIA BAELO-ALLUÉ
University of Zaragoza

The posthuman trauma novel: Reconfiguring subjectivity in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking about This* (2021)

ABSTRACT

Trauma studies and posthuman studies are two paradigms that became popular in the late twentieth century and have been used to define the culture of our time. Both fields deal with subjectivity, agency, embodiment and the relation with 'the other', viewing subjectivity and the self as shattered and fragmented. However, while trauma studies focuses on the process of acting out and working through to return to a sealed, complete conception of the self, posthuman studies explores the fluidity and interconnectedness that results from the decentralization of human subjectivity in our technological, boundary-blurring reality. This article introduces the concept of the posthuman trauma novel, which delves into the shared sense of vulnerability between trauma and posthumanism and the complex identity dynamics emerging from these paradigms. Formally, these novels favour complex timelines, non-linear narratives, interconnected plotlines, emotional detachment, machine-like narrators and thematic fragmentation, among other strategies. Patricia Lockwood's No One Is Talking about This *(2021) is a representative example of the posthuman trauma novel that navigates virtual and*

KEYWORDS

posthuman studies
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Patricia Lockwood
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real worlds. Through fragmentation, intrusive images and non-linearity, the novel represents the disintegration of the mind caused by the internet and social media in which the sense of self is engulfed by a collective consciousness emerging from the never-ending scrolling and the juxtapositions between the important and the shallow. It is a real-world trauma that pulls the protagonist out of the virtual world of disembodiment and detachment. While acknowledging the importance of social media and digital technologies, the novel also sees the blurring of digital and physical spaces as a wound of modern subjectivity, a suffering that needs to be worked through to achieve an embodied and embedded conceptualization of the self.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma studies and posthuman studies are two fields that despite developing in parallel in the past few decades offer very different conceptualizations of the self. Trauma studies relies on a definition of the self that can be traced back to Enlightenment humanism and sees the ideal human as autonomous and self-determined, exerting dominance over other life forms. This conception of the self is destabilized when a traumatic experience occurs, producing a temporal displacement of the self in which subjectivity is shattered and fragmented and that, ideally, can only be healed when it returns to a previous, humanist understanding of a natural, healthy and coherent definition of the self. The shattered and fragmented conception of the self that results from the traumatic experience comes closer to a posthuman definition of the self in which fluidity and fragmentation are integral parts of human subjectivity. However, this fluidity is not seen in posthuman studies as something necessarily negative but a constitutive part of the self who is understood as relational, 'constituted in and by multiplicity' (Braidotti 2013: 49), 'always intermeshed with the more-than-human world' (Alaimo 2010: 2). The posthuman vision rejects a conception of the human based on exceptionalism, rational thinking, uniqueness and differentiation from other living entities to explore and expand the limits of human identity through the interaction with various forms of life and machines. In this sense, the organic body, machines and other material forms are relational, co-evolutionary and interdependent.

While the traumatized human and the posthuman share a vision of the self as vulnerable, fluid and fragmented, the trauma studies perspective sees the loss of human agency as undesirable. This loss needs to be 'acted out' and 'worked through' (LaCapra 2001: 141–53) to restore a coherent sense of the self. From a posthuman perspective, the loss of agency and the porous boundaries of the human invite for a desirable embodied and embedded posthuman subjectivity (Braidotti 2013: 51) and a radical ethics of expansive vulnerability (Vinci 2014: 94).

Vulnerability is a term that trauma and posthuman studies share and encompasses the different approaches of the two fields. Vulnerability is often connected with emotional exposure and ensuing uncertainty. In his book, *Trauma and Its Wake*, Charles R. Figley defines trauma as '*an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary, catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor's sense of invulnerability to harm*' (1985: xviii, original emphasis). As a result of trauma, individuals must confront their own vulnerability before being able to reconstruct a sense of safety and wholeness. Ontological vulnerability is a core, universal and constant aspect of

both the human and the posthuman experience (Fineman 2008: 1). However, from a posthuman perspective, the sense of invulnerability that trauma theoretically shatters is an illusion since vulnerability 'is not a matter of "external" dangers that threaten or tyrannize us, […] instead, it is bound up with our relational, technological and transient kind of being – human or posthuman' (Coeckelbergh 2011: 8). From this perspective, posthumanism is an ethical project on ontological vulnerability that should be embraced, rather than feared, as it acknowledges our multiple entanglements and our opening up to the human and the non-human.

This article deals with what I have called the posthuman trauma novel, which explores the sense of vulnerability that both trauma and posthumanism share and the complexities of identity emerging from the trauma and the posthuman paradigms. This type of novel deals with the posthuman and the vulnerability that emerges from the realization that we are relational subjects, radically entangled, transjective beings trans-subjectively and transmaterially interconnected (Daigle 2023: 29–30). However, and despite acknowledging and depicting this radical vulnerability, the posthuman trauma novel does not provide instances of generative vulner-ability, to borrow Daigle's hyphenated use of the term which underlines the abilities and possibilities of the open wound ('vulner') (2023: 117). Posthuman trauma narratives delve into the wound of post-anthropocentrism and the loss of agency and unitary identity that results from it but through the lens, vocabulary and aesthetics of trauma. These novels favour non-linear narratives, intricate timelines, emotional numbness, thematic fragmentation, interconnected storylines and machine-like narrators, among other strategies.

It is through the analysis of the autofictional novel *No One Is Talking about This*, published by Patricia Lockwood in 2021, that I want to explore the emerging posthuman trauma novel that has become increasingly popular in the twenty-first century. *No One Is Talking about This* mainly deals with a woman, presumably the author herself, who spends countless hours endlessly scrolling through social media and the internet. However, a family tragedy brings her back to the realm of the real. To study this novel, I am going to draw from both trauma studies and posthuman studies since the novel emerges from the encounter of two paradigms in its two very distinct parts. The first part sees the narrator's individuality fragment and disappear into the collectivity of the virtual world that emerges from an X/Twitter-like platform called 'the portal' in the novel. The second part sees how a trauma in the non-virtual world makes the narrator deal with a new sense of vulnerability in a process of acting out and finally working through. The result is neither a trauma novel nor a posthuman novel. It offers instead a middle-ground position that rejects former conceptions of the autonomous, independent, bounded self and is well aware of our having become techno-assemblages in a digital world of social media that at points engulfs our bodily existence. It is the rupture, wound and suffering that emerge from this realization that the novel explores.

WHEN TRAUMA AND THE POSTHUMAN MEET

Trauma studies and posthuman studies became popular at the end of the twentieth century and have been used to define the culture of our time. Mark Seltzer has employed the term 'wound culture' to define the 'the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound' (1997: 3). This reading of

life through the lens of trauma creates a 'pathological public sphere', an idea that has been embraced by leading scholars in the field. For example, Kirby Farrell has used the term 'post-traumatic culture' (1998), Roger Luckhurst 'traumaculture' (2003) and Philip Tew 'the traumatological' (2007). Dominick LaCapra, in a pivotal essay on trauma studies, has also acknowledged this cultural obsession with trauma and pointed to the dangers of the pathological public sphere in which everyone is a victim and history is framed as a narrative of trauma (1999: 712). Canonical novels like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) or Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) have exerted a remarkable cultural influence as they shape the experience of slavery and the Vietnam War through the aesthetics and the vocabulary of trauma and are evidence of this cultural preoccupation with trauma.

The posthuman as a cultural trope gained significance in the 1980s, drawing on challenges posed by feminist, multiculturalist and postcolonial movements that emerged in the 1970s against Enlightenment thought. Donna Haraway's 'A cyborg manifesto' (1991) played a significant role in the popularization of the term and the reconsideration of the human/machine boundary in a developing techno-social reality, also opening the path for seminal works like Katherine Hayles's *How We Became Posthuman* (1999). The wound culture characteristic of the pathological public sphere becomes more complex from a posthuman perspective as it undergoes a great transformation moving from 'an "analog" (humanist, literate, book or text-based) to a digital (posthumanist, code, data or information based) social and economic system' (Herbrechter 2013: viii). This 'posthuman turn' (Heise 2011; Braidotti 2013) or 'posthumanist paradigm shift' (Philbeck 2015) has brought new ways of thinking about humanity in a new environment resulting from the non-human turn (Grusin 2015), great techno-scientific advancements of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2016) and imminent environmental threats (Kolbert 2014).

The posthuman context of exponential change has destabilized and challenged the perceived autonomy traditionally associated to the idea of 'Man' as constructed by fourteenth-century Renaissance humanism and later seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment. This destabilization is the realm of both trauma and the posthuman. As Braidotti explains in her seminal book, *The Posthuman* (2013), humanism saw rationality, authority, autonomy and agency as the defining features of the human. From Protagoras's formulation of 'Man' as the measure of all things to Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, humanism provides an ideal, essentialist, universal and fixed depiction of human identity. This ideal 'Man' is White, western, handsome and able-bodied, which reduces those that do not fit this ideal, that is, the sexualized (woman), racialized (the Indigenous) and naturalized (animals, the environment or the earth) others 'to the less than human status of disposable bodies' (Braidotti 2013: 15). The Vitruvian ideal of Man is a historical construct that has been challenged among other groups by the feminist movement, postcolonialism and critical race studies to overcome the intellectual tradition, normative frame and institutionalized practice of humanism (2013: 30). However, posthumanism builds on but moves further from anti-humanism. As Nayar explains, critical posthumanism goes beyond these critiques of humanism by underlining that the criticism of the exclusionary ideal of the human affects not just the 'non-normal' human but also the non-human others, that is, animals, plants and machines. The human is a hybrid constituted by difference, which leads to 'a whole new conceptualization of

the human as a more inclusive, non-unitary entity whose boundaries with the world, with other life forms and species, are porous' (Nayar 2014: 30).

Traumatic experiences also have the potential to disrupt the perceived stability, autonomy and sense of self attributed to the humanist subject. The rational, self-contained subject becomes fragmented in the face of trauma, making the subject vulnerable and dependent. Trauma also disrupts the belief in the power of reason and coherent expression, rendering language unfit to narrate the traumatic experience. The posthuman paradigm is experienced by many as a wound of modern subjectivity, an 'eco-technological' trauma resulting from the Anthropocene and 'the age of machines' (Peters 2020: 582). The growing reliance on digital technology has transformed humans into 'digital beings', integrated into extensive data systems managed by algorithms. This dependence, together with other challenges posed by deep time, big data, microbiology and artificial intelligence, has put into question the idea of autonomous human agency and calls for a re-evaluation of subjectivity (Herbrechter et al. 2022: 8). Therefore, the boundaries of the self become blurred both by trauma and by the posthuman, liberating the human subject from the confines of a singular and universal form. Trauma studies and posthumanism broaden our understanding of the human subject by challenging the stability and autonomy traditionally associated with liberal humanism. Even though posthumanism celebrates radical vulnerability and trauma studies view vulnerability unfavourably, both disciplines highlight the complexities, vulnerabilities and transformative potential that shape human experiences in ways that go beyond the confines of the liberal humanist model.

TRAUMA, THE POSTHUMAN AND THE NOVEL

Literature often reflects the social changes and concerns of the present. Therefore, both wound culture and the ensuing posthuman turn have found their way into contemporary literary representations. Both trauma fiction and posthuman fiction depict shattered subjectivities, pressing vulnerabilities and blurred boundaries of the self. Both types of fiction often share an interest in formal experimentation to reflect this fragmentation, even though trauma fiction does not necessarily deal with traumas connected to the posthuman and posthuman fiction is not necessary concerned with the posthuman as a form of trauma.

Much has been written about trauma fiction and its narrative conventions. Although novels dealing with trauma have always existed, according to Luckhurst (2008: 87), it is in the late 1980s and early 1990s that the genre emerged, especially after the inclusion of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the 1980 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-III*), published by the American Psychiatric Association and the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Trauma novels have come to share a series of stylistic features that formally mirror the symptoms of the traumatized person. Cathy Caruth, drawing from Freud's theory of trauma and post-structuralism, laid out a framework to understand the phenomenon of trauma that has served as basis for a prescriptive set of conventions that have come to define the classical trauma novel. For Caruth (1996), trauma is a wound of the mind caused by an overwhelming event that escapes language and is experienced belatedly. The mind cannot grasp the event when it happens and the memory of it cannot be accessed directly or integrated into memory, underlining the unspeakability of trauma and the fragmentation of the psyche.

PTSD involves nightmares, flashbacks, re-enactments, hyperarousal, numbing and somatic reactions through which the traumatic experience is relived (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 173–75).

Trauma novels have traditionally mimicked these symptoms in their formal structure, creating an aesthetics of trauma that explores the challenge to language and narrative that the very experience of trauma produces. As literary scholars like Anne Whitehead (2004) and Laurie Vickroy (2002, 2015) have explained, in these novels the traumatic experience is expressed through temporal dislocations, fragmentation, repetitions, intertextuality, shifting viewpoints or even the inclusion of visual images and textual gaps. In the past decades, both the definition of trauma and how to represent it in fiction have become less prescriptive, opening up to less conventional techniques and tropes and less formal experimentation. Luckhurst proposes 'narrative *possibility*' (2008: 89, original emphasis) rather than narrative rupture as the only acceptable aesthetics of trauma, and moving from a narrow canon of works to include high-, middle- and low-brow fiction. Similarly, Gibbs suggests alternative trauma paradigms and denounces a 'checklist criticism' (2014: 38) of trauma in which a number of set symptoms and literary elements are expected in trauma novels to be considered as such.

The posthuman has come to revitalize the prescriptive formula of the trauma novel and in these past decades, new narratives concerned with the posthuman predicament have also emerged. Science fiction has always been inextricably linked to the concerns of the posthuman and it has shown an interest in exploring the limits of the human and breaking with humanist conception of the human as rational, self-contained and autonomous. Vint explains how three different streams of thought in the exploration of the boundaries of the human have found their way into science fiction with the representation of the *uber-human* (or enhanced human), the *new human* (those excluded from the tradition of humanism) and the *non-human* (which includes 'animals, microbes, robots and AIs, plants and aliens' [2022: 226]). The three ways of becoming posthuman see new possibilities to be explored in the shattered conception of the self.

Over the past decade, novels authored by writers not typically associated with science fiction have been published, presenting a world similar to ours that may incorporate speculative elements or reflect on the challenges that exponential technological development may bring. This narrative choice enables the introduction of posthuman concerns within the storyline. As is the case with more conventional trauma novels, these posthuman trauma novels are also formally experimental. Caracciolo mentions narrative non-linearity as a key feature to dismantle humanist positions with novels offering circular structures, multiple levels of narrative embedding or intricate timelines to work against linear understandings of technological advancement and economic growth (2022: 49). Examples of these novels published in the past few years could be Megan Boyle's *Liveblog* (2018), Darcie Wilder's *Literally Show Me A Healthy Person* (2017), Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020), Calvin Kasulke's *Several People Are Typing* (2021), Eugene Lim's *Search History* (2021) and Jennifer Egan's *The Candy House* (2022), among others. A style of fragmentation and non-linearity emerges from these texts, already establishing a prescriptive style to write about the contemporary world and the experience of being online. In Lauren Oyler's novel, *Fake Accounts*, the narrator writes an entire section parodying this style and the need for it:

> Another justification for this structure is that it mimics the nature of modern life, which is 'fragmented'. But fragmentation is one of the worst aspects of modern life. It's extremely stressful. 'Fragmented' is a euphemism for 'interrupted'. Why would I want to make my book like Twitter? If I wanted a book that resembled Twitter, I wouldn't write a book; I would just spend even more time on Twitter.
>
> (2021: 191)

For a style to be parodied, it needs to be well established and recognizable. The prescriptive trauma novel has a lot in common with the equally prescriptive style of writing that is emerging from the posthuman trauma novel as it reflects the posthuman experience of life in the twenty-first century.

As we can see, trauma fiction and posthuman fiction can have common thematic concerns and also share similar aesthetic strategies, even if their general approach to vulnerability and its consequences differs. The temporal dislocation and fragmentation not only captures the fractured, traumatized psyche but also responds to the humanist understanding of human life as fundamentally linear and leading to technological development and economic expansion. The use of interconnected narratives and intertextual references reinforces the embedded nature of trauma and its connection to the experiences of others as it also challenges, from a posthuman perspective, the boundaries of the self and the connection between human and technology and the non-human. Textual gaps can reflect not only the unspeakability of trauma but also the uncertainties of the posthuman condition and the loss of centrality of the human that it conveys. The narrative non-linearity reflects the way trauma disrupts temporality and can also challenge the humanist understanding of progress and change.

PATRICIA LOCKWOOD'S *NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS*

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking about This* (2021) is a very interesting novel to explore from the double perspective of trauma and the posthuman, as it is a posthuman trauma novel that offers 'narrative *possibility*' (2008: 89, original emphasis) if we go back to Luckhurst's term. The novel makes use of many of the stylistic features previously described and combines the fragmented, boundless self that emerges from digitalization and social media in the first part, with the equally fragmented, traumatized psyche of going through a painful family crisis in the second part. Both parts complement each other, ironically turning the trauma of the second part into the healing that the main character needs to recompose her lost sense of self brought about by her immersion into the virtual world.

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking about This* is an autofictional novel published in 2021 to great critical acclaim. It was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Women's Prize for Fiction, as well as being a National Book Critics Award Finalist and winner of the Dylan Thomas Prize. Lockwood had previously published two collections of poetry: *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black* (2012) and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals* (2014), and a bestselling memoir, *Priestdaddy* (2017), about her unconventional upbringing as daughter of a married Catholic priest, a former Lutheran minister. Lockwood is also very active on X (formerly Twitter), which she joined in 2011 and where she has a large following. She has become a celebrity in this social media for her surreal humour and has even been hailed as the 'poet laureate of Twitter' (Jerkins 2017) and the

'queen of twitter' who 'doesn't live in the internet but upon it […] sail[ing] along on trends and tweets' (Berick 2021). She became viral in 2013 when she asked *The Paris Review*, a prestigious quarterly literary magazine established in 1953: '@parisreview So is Paris any good or not'. *The Paris Review* mock-reviewed Paris a year later in response (Piepenbring 2014) and *The Atlantic* included the tweet as one the best tweets of all time (Bump 2013).

As an expert on X/Twitter language and culture, in 2019 Lockwood delivered a lecture at the British Museum as part of the London Review of Books Winter Lecture series on what it feels like to be constantly online and on the 'communal mind' that emerges and that disintegrates the individual mind and dictates people's thoughts online. Curiously enough, to make her talk understandable she needed to illustrate it with a PowerPoint presentation filled with GIFs, tweets and viral photographs. A week later, the talk was published as an essay in the *London Review of Books* (Lockwood 2019) and was illustrated with the photographs she used in her talk. In the online version of the journal, the text was also accompanied by the video of Lockwood's talk. This talk is actually an excerpt of what would become the first part of *No One Is Talking about This*, which is the result of a diary that she kept on what it was like to be constantly on X and how she no longer felt like herself. The result is a series of short fragments filled with references to viral but also ephemeral tweets that are hard to understand. Some are so obscure that the website Literary Hub even ran an article explaining up to 55 memes and references in the first part of the book for the less 'digitally literate' in need of context, given the ephemerality of online (Caplan 2021).

Similarly to Lockwood, the main character in *No One Is Talking about This* is also a social media influencer who, in the first part of the novel, has achieved digital fame for a post that says: 'Can a dog be twins?' and is totally engulfed by the world of X/Twitter, which in the novel is called 'the portal', since it is an entry point into an immersive and fragmented digital world unconnected to the real one. All around the world she is invited to give lectures about the portal and where she has a chance to discuss absurdities like why to spell sneezing with an a ('sneazing') is funnier than with an e (2021: 14) and where she can meet other digital celebrities like a man famous for posting progressively more explicit images of his genitalia online (2021: 25–26). Just like Patricia Lockwood, at the end of the book the narrator delivers a lecture at the British Museum in a metafictional touch that underlines the autofictional elements in the text.

The second part is also both autofictional and metafictional. In it, the protagonist has to abandon the portal to confront the news that the baby girl her sister is expecting has been diagnosed with Proteus syndrome, a rare genetic disorder also known as Elephant Man Syndrome. Patricia Lockwood's niece, Lena, to whom the book is dedicated, was born with this disease and died six months later. In the book, we can read: 'The end of the Wikipedia entry always the most suspect. But listen, this time it was true' (2021: 189). Patricia Lockwood's own Wikipedia entry ended at the time of publication of *No One Is Talking about This* with 'Lockwood has acknowledged that much of the second part of *No One Is Talking about This* was inspired by real-life events surrounding her niece Lena, the first person ever diagnosed in utero with Proteus syndrome' (Wikipedia 2024).

The two parts of the novel address different aspects of Lockwood's life: her online persona and her niece's birth and death very much offline. Thus, the first part focuses on the wound of modern subjectivity resulting from the 'the

age of machines' (Peters 2020); the second part deals with the psychological trauma of a baby born with a genetic disease that eventually causes her death. It is this part that helps the narrator work through her loss of agency to the collective consciousness emerging from the constant scrolling down in social media. This division in two parts also mirrors the dualistic mind/body division that in the western philosophical tradition can be traced back to ancient Greece and was further developed by Descartes in the seventeenth century setting the stage for privileging the mind (*res cogitans* or thinking substance) over the body (*res extensa* or extended substance) (Grosz 1994: 6). Within the transhumanist movement, which advocates for human enhancement through science and technology to overcome human limitations, there are some theorists who embrace this dualism and the subordination of the body, even suggesting mind uploading and post-biological existence as a desirable possibility to attain immortality (Kurzweil 2005). In the novel, the first part focuses on disembodiment, where the narrator's mind exists primarily in the portal, and her body seems secondary. This gives way to a second part, where everything revolves around the body and senses. Here, body and mind come together to fully experience life, even if it is an encounter that takes place around the wound.

Absence, melancholia and social media in the posthuman self

Following the conventions that we tend to associate with the novel of trauma, in the first part, there is a third-person narrator who reproduces the immersive experience of social media and the fragmented consciousness that it produces. There are short, disjointed fragments and scenes in a stream-of-consciousness manner without any clear structure, direction or linear chronology. To borrow LaCapra's well-known Freudian term, this part represents the 'acting out' response to traumatic events. LaCapra draws from Freud's 'Mourning and melancholia' (1957), in which melancholia is seen as an abnormal response to unresolved trauma, a prolonged form of mourning and a persistent sense of absence since the trauma cannot be grasped or understood. As a result, there is an acting-out process that leads to repetitive behaviour and the re-enactment of the trauma in the present, preventing closure or the working through (LaCapra 2001: 141–53). In this sense, the protagonist's sense of self and agency is lost and engulfed by the repetitive, intrusive fragments of social media that make up the narrative. New media like the internet has destabilized the stable liberal humanist self, leading to a loss of agency that cannot be easily assimilated. For Herbrechter, this is a media-based 'cyborgization' since

> [n]ew forms of individual identity (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, avatars in discussion forums and chatrooms or online gaming) as well as new forms of collectivities (MUDs and MOOs, etc.) emphasize the increasing interconnection between humans, media and technologies and threaten to render the traditional liberal humanist subject and its autonomy obsolete.
>
> (2013: 183)

This loss of agency is represented as traumatic through a non-linear structure characteristic of the posthuman trauma novel.

The narrator constructs a metaphorical timeline, a digital feed made of paragraphs that are often not much longer than 280-character tweets and

that include memes, GIFs, news items and references to viral episodes, images and video snippets. According to Lockwood, a novel about the internet that captures the tone of social media needs to have a fragmented form: 'It has to have that shock of surprise of the next thing you encounter being totally unexpected. It was a really interesting formal challenge, but it was the only way to do it' (Lockwood cited in Westenfeld 2021). Each fragment is frozen in time and remains unconnected to the previous or the next one. There is no chronology or logic that may order them, which also mimics the experience of trauma. As Ruth Leys explains, '[t]he experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present' (2000: 2, original emphasis). The protagonist is trapped in a melancholia, an acting-out that she is unable to stop, imprisoned in the plotless digital world of the continuous present. As the protagonist herself puts it when describing her experience online:

> 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, wash all the things that made her herself, all the things that just kept coming, all the things that would just keep coming, until one day they stopped so violently on the sidewalk that the plot tripped over them, stumbled, and lurched forward one more innocent inch.
>
> (2021: 63–64)

The digital is not only a non-linear, fragmented and plotless space, but it is also an immersive experience of the mind, rather than the body, which the protagonist enters in the very first line of the novel: 'She opened the portal, and the mind met her more than halfway. Inside, it was tropical and snowing, and the first flake of the blizzard of everything landed on her tongue and melted' (Lockwood 2021: 3). A place where there are diverse but also contradictory experiences (tropical/snowing) and the user is exposed to an overwhelming amount of experiences and information ('the blizzard of everything') that is immediately assimilated by her ('landed on her tongue and melted').

Viewing digital space as disembodied, the realm of the mind, was originally hailed as potential equalizer since the lack of physical markers of race or gender online would, in theory, end social discrimination. In 1996, John Perry Barlow addressed the governments of the world in 'A declaration of the independence of cyberspace' to defend the free, open and self-governing nature of the internet:

> Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.
>
> (1996)

The internet was seen as the 'home of the Mind', where 'identities have no bodies' and thus 'all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth' (Barlow 1996). In a way, the narrator feels that way in the first part:

> For a moment, if she allowed herself, she could even feel exhilarated to think she had been manipulated this way. That all the thickness, clumsiness, ploddingness she had ever felt in her biological vehicle could be overwritten. She was not those things. She was not her own slowness. She wasn't trapped, rooted in her provincial ignorance and her regional mispronunciations, pinned to one place. She was an instantaneous citizen of the flash of lightning that wrote across the sky *I know*.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 93, original emphasis)

However, the digital world that can be experienced in the first part of *No One Is Talking about This* is a place of contradictions, a nightmare resulting from the information age described by Hayles in her seminal book, *How We Became Posthuman*, as a culture 'inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being' (1999: 5). The narrator seems to be aware of this danger, but she cannot help but be trapped by it.

> It was in this place where we were on the verge of losing our bodies that bodies became the most important, it was in this place of the great melting that it became important whether you called it *pop* or *soda* growing up, or whether your mother cooked with garlic salt or the real chopped cloves. […] You were zoomed in on the grain, you were out in space, it was the brotherhood of man, and in some ways you had never been flung further from each other. You zoomed in and zoomed in on that warm grain until it looked like the coldness of the moon.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 12–13, original emphasis)

Disembodied but obsessed with the body, free to talk about anything but discussing inconsequential topics, a place of brotherhood where people are actually driven apart, disconnected and isolated, a bubble in which everything is magnified in the face of the overwhelming volume of available information which transforms the familiar into something alien and distant.

Many of the fragments that compose the first part of the book are impossible to fully understand as they highlight the ephemerality of X in which apparently significant and urgent interactions shortly fade away. To fully understand this part, it would be necessary to include more footnotes than T. S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land', and in a way the short-lived nature of X leaves behind a wasteland of signifiers without signified:

> Close-ups of nail art, a pebble from outer space, a tarantula's compound eyes, a storm like canned peaches on the surface of Jupiter, Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, a chihuahua perched on a man's erection, a garage door spraypainted with the words STOP! DON'T EMAIL MY WIFE!
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 3, original emphasis)

The intended effect of the constant juxtapositions and obscure allusions is that we do not understand them because virality is ephemeral, which is something that the narrator acknowledges when she looks back:

> Already it was becoming impossible to explain things she had done even the year before, why she had spent hypnotized hours of her life, say, photoshopping bags of frozen peas into pictures of historical atrocities, posting OH YES HUNNY in response to old images of Stalin, why

> whenever she liked anything especially, she said she was going to 'chug it with her ass'.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 90–91)

In this online cacophony of empty signifiers, agency is also shattered and fragmented, as the narrator ceases to be autonomous, coherent, exceptional, dominant and rational. The very fact that we have a third-person narrative voice focalizing on the protagonist, rather than a first-person account, already shows the detachment that the user experiences trapped in the digital feed and the constant scrolling down. Entering the portal means joining other minds and following the current:

> Every day their attention must turn, like the shine on a school of fish, all at once, 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.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 9)

The communal mind that emerges is not the 'collective intelligence' of knowledge sharing and collaboration that Pierre Lévy (1997) defined and popularized and is not the place that John Perry Barlow described in his very optimistic 'A declaration of the independence of cyberspace' where we can read that 'anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity' (1996). It is not just that upon entering the portal one leaves the body behind but that one's mind disappears into a communal mind:

> The mind we were in was obsessive, perseverant. It swam with superstition and half-remembered facts pertaining to how many spiders we ate a year and the rate at which dentists killed themselves. […] It had also once been the place where you sounded like yourself. Gradually it had become the place where we sounded like each other, through some erosion of wind or water on a self not nearly as firm as stone.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 71–72)

Together with the loss of agency and individuality, the capacity to distinguish the important from the insignificant has been especially diminished after the introduction of the X/Twitter News Feed that makes all interactions visible on a wall for everyone to see and without their original context. Due to this phenomenon known as 'context collapse', all information is flattened and carries the same weight, losing nuanced context and producing absurd juxtapositions. As the narrator claims, '[e]verything tangled in the string of everything else' (Lockwood 2021: 84). The fragments and allusion that constitute the first part are often interrupted by intrusive, out-of-context images that mimic the X/Twitter News Feed. These interruptions are short and often introduced in italics: '*CIA Confirms "Charlie Bit My Finger" Was on One of Osama bin Laden's Computers*' (Lockwood 2021: 57, original emphasis), '*Report: Man's rectum fell out after he played phone games on the toilet for 30 minutes*' (Lockwood 2021: 89, original emphasis) or '*Experience: I was swallowed by a hippo*' (Lockwood 2021: 101, original emphasis). As we have seen, these interruptions also resemble the intrusive images that trauma novels often introduce, together with textual gaps, repetitions and shifting viewpoints, to make readers aware of

the disorienting position of the traumatized character. These stylistic features imitate some of the symptoms of PTSD, such as nightmares, flashbacks, re-enactments and other somatic reactions through which the traumatized belatedly relive the traumatic event, unable of linguistic retrieval. The narrator's traumatic loss of agency in the portal is represented through these out-of-context interruptions that act out the trauma of the information age.

The combination of loss of agency, context collapse and flattened juxtapositions is effectively transmitted through stream-of-consciousness writing to immerse the readers not only in the narrator's mind but also in the continuous flow of the communal mind that the portal creates. As the protagonist wonders: 'But what about the stream-of-a-consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you?' (Lockwood 2021: 41). In this sense, the first part becomes a narrative of trauma in the classical sense where subjectivity is seen as shattered and fragmented, with a narrator unable to leave and trapped in an acting-out process in search for a cohesive narrative that never comes: 'When she set the portal down, the Thread tugged her back toward it. She could not help following it. This might be the one that connected everything, that would knit her to an indestructible coherence' (Lockwood 2021: 99). It is a trauma in the real world that pulls her out of the virtual world of disembodiment and detachment. From acting out the 'eco-technological' trauma of our age of machines (Peters 2020) in the first part, the story moves into the acting out of the trauma of the baby's impending death in the second part, which works as a process in which mind and body become one again and in which a conception of subjectivity emerges as embodied and embedded (Braidotti 2013: 51).

Loss, mourning, the body and the traumatized self

It is a message from her mother, '[s]omething has gone wrong, and How soon can you get here?' (Lockwood 2021: 119), that makes her physically move and leave the portal. This message is presented with a different typesetting, clearly signalling that it comes from a different world. It is also followed by a separation marked with three dots and the word Gap written four times in a row. Her reaction is to leave the portal to face the reality that social media often ignores:

> 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, from the nudeness that received only eight likes, from the toothpaste on the mirror in bathroom selfies, from the potato salads that looked disgusting, from the journalists who were making mistakes in real time, from the new displays of animal weakness that told us to lengthen the distance between the pack and the stragglers. 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 2021: 124–25)

Even though scrolling suggests a continuous flow of information, it also implies ignoring the type of content or individuals that do not fit the portal's

restricted notion of what counts as the human, which, as we can infer from the quotation, does not include those who do not fit the standards of beauty and mental stability, those whose sexuality does not fit the norm or social expectations, those who make mistakes or are weak or those who are in pain or in anguish. In other words, the 'less than human', the disposable bodies, the sexualized, racialized and naturalized others (Braidotti 2013: 15) that social media marginalizes or simply ignores. In the weeks she spends with her sister and family in hospital and later in the family house, '[s]he could barely recall her previous life' (Lockwood 2021: 151). One morning she decides to post about the next-door neighbours who have a concrete goose in their front yard and which they dress for every occasion, mood and season. However, when a reporter interviews her to know more about the feel-good story and asks her what she is doing in Ohio, 'she found herself speechless, all cute little costumes of language gone, for how would you dress up a goose for this?' (Lockwood 2021: 152). The trauma introduced in the second part, her niece's rare genetic condition, compels her to revisit the lost sense of self portrayed in the first part. Through this process, she progressively distances herself from her former identity, becoming aware of her past shallowness and disconnection from reality.

The second part is all about the body and its fragility and the return to unmediated human senses: looking, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. The narrator reads stories to the baby:

> What did a story mean to the baby? It meant a soft voice, reassurance that everything outside her still went on, still would go on. […] Her blue eyes rolled when the voice of the story came, and sometimes she shook with what must have been excitement.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 150).

The narrator holds her, massages her stomach, puts music to her ear, takes her to the zoo, to Disney World, kisses her and touches her cheeks as we read about how the baby gurgles, breastfeeds, kicks her legs and strains her limbs and knows their voices.

The flattening juxtapositions of the first part all but disappears:

> In her photoroll, between pictures of the baby appearing to smile, was a picture of perfect juggalo makeup imprinted on a woman's bare ass. 'Look. Look at her beautiful face. Look how wise', she would tell people, total strangers, scrolling quickly past the picture of the woman's hole.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 154)

When the narrator looks for photos of the baby to show to strangers, she dismisses the one that would have taken the portal by storm and focuses on the one that the portal would ignore. The context collapse of the first part has given way to a clear grasp of what matters. Even the communal mind seems to change its significance. When she delivers her lecture at the British Museum and has to talk about what the communal mind means, all she sees is

> the room her family had sat in together, looking at that singular gray brain on an MRI. 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. Why had she entered the portal in the first place?
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 205)

It is through the pain of her loss that the protagonist reclaims her sense of self and gains critical distance from her past.

The protagonist's sense of agency also returns as the impersonal stream-of-consciousness disappears: 'She remembered the peculiar onrushing pain of the portal, where everything was happening except for this. But for now, the previous unshakable conviction that someone else was writing the inside of her head was gone' (Lockwood 2021: 143). When she returns home, she tries to re-enter the portal but she cannot. In the final pages we can find echoes of the initial sentence that opens the book. From '[s]he opened the portal, and the mind met her more than halfway. Inside, it was tropical and snowing, and the first flake of the blizzard of everything landed on her tongue and melted' (Lockwood 2021: 3) to

> [f]ar away now, her sister texted, I think she's hearing rain for the very first time. The first flake of the snow of everything, now wild and warm. Thursday in the rain; October in the rain; twist of a heavy red apple; word on the tip of the tongue; grain by green glass grain; and all of it until it ran out.
>
> (Lockwood 2021: 165)

It is a return to the body, the pleasure of the baby experiencing life through her senses for the first time when her time is running out.

The death of the baby after six months leads the narrator to a period of crying uncontrollably in public places and nightmares (Lockwood 2021: 196). After a mourning process, gradually the world calls her back. The first part was the realm of melancholia, a mode of acting-out to deal with the pervasive sense of absence that traps the protagonist in a repetition-compulsion process and in a continuous present that cannot be integrated in her life narrative. The second part is a mourning process, a form of working-through, which is a process that according to LaCapra ultimately allows for 'critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others' (2001: 70). Her reintegration in life is symbolically represented in the lecture on social media that she delivers in the British Museum when she already feels the portal is in the past and has to pretend that she still lives there. She feels 'collaged together in body and mind' (Lockwood 2021: 206). She clicks through her PowerPoint as she distances herself from her past life, leaving behind the constant present of the first part, integrating it in a chronology of her life and putting her experience into words, finally organizing it on a linguistic level. Images of her days with the baby and her family come to her mind as she realizes that the connection she looked for in the portal is a connection that cannot be found there anymore.

CONCLUSION

The shattered, fragmented subjectivity aligns with both traumatic experiences and posthuman ideals in a common ground of vulnerability that the posthuman trauma novel explores. This vulnerability is twofold in *No One Is Talking*

about This as it focuses on the dissolution of individuality and agency in the virtual world in the first part and a non-virtual trauma in the second part. It is a trauma novel and a novel of the posthuman that, by using fragmentation, stream-of-consciousness writing, context collapse and flattened juxtapositions, introduces the reader into the mind of a woman trapped in the trauma of the information age. It captures both the fractured psyche and disembodiment resulting from social media and the traumatized psyche resulting from the family crisis. The melancholia and acting out that the absence of agency produces gives way to the mourning and sense of loss that the genetic disorder and death of the baby brings in the protagonist. The offline events re-establish her sense of self, agency and connection to the real and to her family, helping her gain critical distance from the disembodied digital world but still acknowledging its centrality in the present world.

At the end, mind and body are reunited and a posthuman understanding of embodiment is presented, which involves the entanglement of the organic body with non-human agents. Human bodies are part of fluid assemblages with different technologies and digital spaces. As Lupton et al. explain:

> Even those technologies that we may conceptualize as being 'disembodied' are felt and experienced in embodied ways, drawing out new corporeal possibilities. As we increasingly live in physical spaces that are enmeshed with digital spaces, there is a pressing need to remind ourselves that the fleshly body is always present in our virtual encounters.
>
> (2022: 380)

No One Is Talking about This is a posthuman trauma novel that acknowledges the importance of social media and digital technologies in our lives but favours an embodied and embedded conceptualization of the self. The wound of modern subjectivity, produced by the blurring of digital and physical spaces, raises questions about the true essence of being and the role of our fragile animal bodies. This is a space where posthuman studies can draw from trauma studies to acknowledge that the posthuman and its entanglement and transfer of agency to the realm of the non-human, the digital space in this case, can also be seen in terms of suffering with many still trapped in an acting-out process to come to terms with the posthuman that calls for recognition and that reflects not just the promise of the future but also the anxiety of the present.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Sonia Baelo-Allué is a senior lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Zaragoza (Spain) where she teaches US literature and

culture. Her research centres on trauma studies, 9/11 fiction, digital fiction and posthumanism. Her more recent publications include the chapter 'Posthumanism and trauma' in *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Posthumanism* (Palgrave, 2022) and the co-edition with Dr Mónica Calvo-Pascual of *Transhumanism and Posthumanism in Twenty-First Century Narrative* (Routledge, 2021).

Contact: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Universidad de Zaragoza, Pedro Cerbuna, 12, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain.
E-mail: baelo@unizar.es

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1191-0160