

**Returning to a Place of Play: Love, Grief, and Transformation of Identity  
in Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This***

The exploration of human emotion is portrayed with stark contrasts between Part One and Part Two of Patricia Lockwood's text, *No One Is Talking About This*, where the narrator grapples with her identity while redirecting her attention from an online portal to real life. In Part One, the narrator's identity is largely shaped by the portal, where problems are made abstract and stripped of context. But when the narrator returns to the real world, she now must confront it without hiding behind humour or irony. I argue that through the care the narrator provides for her family, she is transformed by the love and grief she feels. This allows her to return to the world she once knew in childhood, before the portal, where her mind was still "a place of play" (Lockwood 72).

While the narrator was submerged in the portal, she was overwhelmed with novel stimuli everyday, which mellowed her feelings of empathy. She realizes this when she hears the difficult news about her sister's pregnancy, thinking "hazily...finding tucked under her arm the bag of peas she once photoshopped into pictures of historical atrocities, oh, *have I been wasting my time?*" (120). Since the portal and its demands influenced significant parts of the narrator's identity, she was made numb to select feelings apart from irony and humour, which again, the portal prioritized (95). Notably, in the portal, you were meant to "[avert] your eyes from the ones who were in mad grief" (125). But since she was now dealing with grief herself, she wondered, "If *all she was was funny*, and *none of this was funny*, where did that leave her?" (125).

Fortunately, the narrator's numbed feelings begin to revitalize as she takes care of her sister, and eventually, her baby niece. A prominent example of this is how the narrator's views of the police change. In Part One, she is motivated to hate the police since being radical was expected in the portal (19). However, she does not fully become radicalized until she confronts her policeman father, who she resents for being anti-choice, as that directly threatens her pregnant sister's life. From this anger

she is “radicalized at last” (126). The narrator’s initial struggle with radicalization in the portal was due, in part, because it was made abstract. But now, the politics of the world were affecting her family tangibly, allowing her to regain empathy for those who have been affected by right-wing laws and the authority of the police state. After screaming at her father, she sees her “sad familiar face in the rearview mirror, redder than ever before,” depicting the stark contrast between the screen of the portal and the true, brutally honest reflection of her in the mirror (126).

In the portal, the narrator’s mind was “obsessive, perseverant... [swimming] with superstition and half-remembered facts” (72). But, she also noted that her “mind had been, in its childhood, a place of play” (72). Notably, she does not return to this child-like wonder until her niece is placed in her arms, and only then, do her “worries about what a mind is” fade (143). This passage also mirrors the narrator’s previous existential crisis, where she asks, three times in a row, “What is a human being?” (128). But in loving her niece, she easily accepts, “A path [is] a path [is] a path” (143).

Though the narrator is angry about all the time she wasted in the portal, she realizes she can give the rest of her time to taking care of her niece. She says, “I can give them to her, I can give her my minutes” (120, 171). Ultimately, the care she gives to her family and her niece radically transforms her, as “Someone had shot the child’s name into her... maybe she would never...think of anything else again...Just: *Love. Love. Love.*” (175-176). The parallel and triple repetition of “Love” notably marks her last transformation in the novel. Despite the grief the narrator feels with the passing of her niece, she now does not worry about how to preserve memes for future historians. Instead, she wishes “for a better way to preserve [the] human smell” of the baby (190). Love and grief have transformed her, and she will never return to the person she once was in the portal, for worse, or for better.

## Works Cited

Lockwood, Patricia. *No One is Talking About This*. Riverhead Books, 2021.