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Research Article

The Fragmented Self: Posthuman Subjectivity in Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway*

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Abstract

In an era where digital consciousness and post-scarcity economies challenge the foundations of human identity, Cory Doctorow's Walkaway (2017) offers a radical exploration of posthuman subjectivity. This paper argues that the novel reconfigures the self through mind uploading, digital replication, and decentralized existence, presenting subjectivity as fluid, networked, and plural rather than singular and stable. Unlike traditional cyberpunk narratives that portray fragmented identity as a dystopian crisis, Walkaway depicts the dissolution of selfhood as an act of liberation from capitalist structures that commodify labor and mortality. Drawing on posthuman theory (Haraway, Hayles, Braidotti), the analysis examines Doctorow's representation of consciousness duplication, the erosion of individualism, and the socio-political stakes of posthuman futures. Ultimately, Walkaway functions as a utopian counter-narrative to cyberpunk's prevailing anxieties, redefining identity in the age of digital transcendence while raising urgent ethical and philosophical questions about the politics of posthumanism.

Keywords: Cyberpunk; Fragmented identity; Mind uploading; Posthumanism; Utopia; Walkaway

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1. Introduction

In contemporary literary studies, the intersection of digital technologies, post-scarcity economies, and shifting notions of identity has increasingly become a central concern. Questions about what it means to be human in a world of artificial intelligence, ubiquitous networks, and technological mediation have pushed critics to reconsider the stability of subjectivity. Cory Doctorow's Walkaway (2017) provides a particularly rich narrative for exploring these dynamics, offering a vision of identity that radically reimagines the human subject in the age of digital transcendence. The novel dramatizes a near-future society in which consciousness can be uploaded, replicated, and distributed across decentralized networks, destabilizing long-held assumptions about individuality, embodiment, and mortality. In doing so, Walkaway foregrounds the tensions between traditional humanist ideals of subjectivity and emergent posthuman configurations of the self, situating itself at the crossroads of science fiction, political critique, and philosophical speculation. Scholars such as Donna Haraway, N. Katherine Hayles, and Rosi Braidotti have shaped critical discussions of posthuman subjectivity, offering frameworks that illuminate the hybrid, fragmented, and networked identities that emerge in technologically mediated environments. Haraway's A

Cyborg Manifesto dismantles rigid binaries such as human/machine and nature/culture, envisioning a cyborg ontology that resists essentialist understandings of identity. Hayles's How We Became Posthuman interrogates the disembodiment of information and the cultural shift that increasingly conceives of consciousness as separable from material instantiation. Braidotti's The Posthuman further extends these debates, articulating the concept of the nomadic subject as multiple, fluid, and relational, embedded in networks of humans, nonhumans, and technologies. Taken together, these perspectives provide a critical vocabulary for analyzing the ways in which Walkaway interrogates and redefines subjectivity.

At the same time, situating Doctorow's novel within the broader context of speculative fiction highlights its intervention in ongoing literary and cultural debates. Much of the cyberpunk tradition, from William Gibson's Neuromancer to more recent dystopian narratives, portrays fragmented identity as symptomatic of alienation and crisis. In these works, disembodiment and technological mediation often result in a loss of self, a collapse into chaos, or the domination of capitalist and corporate powers. By contrast, Doctorow's Walkaway frames the dissolution of selfhood not as a crisis but as a form of liberation. Characters who embrace fragmentation and multiplicity resist the structures of late capitalism that commodify labor, information, and even mortality itself. The novel thus reimagines posthuman identity not as a site of anxiety but as an opportunity for political and social transformation.

Recent scholarship on utopianism and post-scarcity imaginaries provides further context for interpreting Walkaway. Critics of contemporary speculative fiction note a shift away from the dystopian pessimism of early cyberpunk toward narratives that envision alternative social arrangements and technological futures. In this regard, Doctorow's work can be read alongside authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson, who likewise explore communal, ecological, and technologically mediated models of subjectivity and society. By embedding its characters in networks of shared knowledge and collective resistance, Walkaway aligns itself with this more hopeful strain of speculative fiction, one that insists on the possibility of imagining futures beyond neoliberal capitalism.

This paper argues that Walkaway constructs posthuman subjectivity as fluid, networked, and plural, thereby challenging the dominance of dystopian cyberpunk narratives. Through close analysis of Doctorow's portrayal of consciousness duplication, digital replication, and decentralized social organization, the discussion demonstrates how the novel envisions posthuman identity not as loss but as liberation. In doing so, Walkaway not only redefines the human subject in an age of digital transcendence but also raises pressing ethical and political questions about the future of posthumanism.

2. Posthuman Subjectivity in Cory Doctorow's *Walkaway*

2.1. Consciousness Duplication and the Problem of Identity

One of the most striking motifs in Walkaway is the possibility of duplicating consciousness, which destabilizes the assumption of the self as singular and indivisible. The act of copying a mind challenges not only metaphysical understandings of identity but also the social and ethical frameworks that depend upon individuality. When Seth first undergoes digital uploading, his consciousness exists simultaneously in his biological body and within the networked infrastructure of the walkaway settlements. Doctorow dramatizes the uncanny reality of interacting with "two Seths," both of whom claim authenticity and continuity with the original self (Doctorow, 2017, p. 213).

This duplicity foregrounds what Hayles calls the "paradox of embodiment," in which informational patterns are never fully separable from their material instantiations (Hayles, 1999, p. 284). While Seth's digital double insists on continuity of memory and intention, subtle divergences emerge as the two versions of the self accumulate different experiences. Here Doctorow offers a fictional instantiation of Hayles's theoretical caution: the digital copy is never simply identical to the original, but constitutes a new trajectory of subjectivity.

Haraway's cyborg ontology further illuminates these dynamics. By dismantling the binary of original/copy, Haraway allows us to read Seth's duplication as a productive expansion of identity rather than a loss. Instead of privileging one Seth over the other, Walkaway embraces the simultaneity of multiplicities, gesturing toward a cyborgian subjectivity that refuses essentialism (Haraway, 1991, p. 163). This radical reconfiguration of selfhood offers a direct critique of capitalist structures, which depend upon the assumption of individuality for the commodification of labor and property.

2.2. Fragmentation as Liberation: Rejecting Humanist Individualism

While much of the cyberpunk tradition portrays fragmentation as alienation, Walkaway reframes it as liberation. Characters who embrace the dissolution of selfhood find themselves freed from the oppressive demands of neoliberal individualism. Gretyl's narrative arc is particularly instructive: after uploading, she coexists with her embodied self, and the copy begins to diverge, adopting new perspectives and desires (Doctorow, 2017,

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p. 274). Instead of perceiving this divergence as threatening, Gretyl and her community accept it as an enrichment of subjectivity.

Braidotti's concept of nomadic subjectivity is crucial here. For Braidotti, the nomadic subject is multiple, relational, and fluid, embedded within networks of human and nonhuman others (Braidotti, 2013, p. 91). Gretyl's duplication embodies this nomadic ideal: she becomes more than one without collapsing into incoherence. This multiplicity resists capitalist insistence on the bounded, autonomous individual whose labor and identity can be commodified.

Doctorow explicitly contrasts this liberated multiplicity with the capitalist elite, or "zottas," whose obsession with ownership extends even to the control of mortality. The zottas view duplication as theft of intellectual property, revealing the extent to which capitalist ideology depends upon maintaining the fiction of singular individuality. Against this, Walkaway dramatizes fragmentation as resistance, a political refusal of humanist individualism and the exploitative structures it supports.

2.3. Networks, Collectivity, and the Utopian Horizon

Another crucial dimension of Walkaway is its portrayal of collective networks as the foundation of posthuman subjectivity. The walkaway settlements operate through open-source collaboration, ecological stewardship, and radical sharing of resources. Doctorow frames these networks not as sites of chaos but as spaces of utopian possibility, where subjectivity is understood as interdependent and relational.

Haraway's cyborg manifesto insists on "the power of affinity over identity" (Haraway, 1991, p. 176), and this insight is borne out in Doctorow's communal vision. In the settlements, identity is not an isolated possession but a node within a larger network of relations. Subjectivity emerges in the interactions among humans, technologies, and ecological systems rather than being anchored in an autonomous core.

Hayles's critique of disembodiment is again relevant. While consciousness uploading risks erasing embodiment, Doctorow insists on the material infrastructure that sustains the digital realm. Servers, energy, and physical environments remain essential, ensuring that the utopian promise of the settlements does not lapse into naïve immateriality. As Hayles reminds us, "the body is the ground of meaning" (Hayles, 1999, p. 291), and Walkaway demonstrates this by embedding digital life in ecological and technological networks that must be maintained and defended.

In this sense, Walkaway aligns with Braidotti's vision of posthuman subjectivity as an "expanded relational capacity" (Braidotti, 2013, p.95). The settlements illustrate how identity can flourish as collective rather than competitive, resisting the isolating individualism of neoliberal capitalism.

2.4. Mortality, Capitalism, and the Ethics of the Posthuman Future

Finally, Walkaway situates posthuman subjectivity within an explicitly ethical and political horizon. The duplication of consciousness destabilizes not only identity but also mortality, raising profound questions about what it means to live and die in a digital age. For the zottas, death is an unacceptable loss to be conquered through capitalist control of life-extension technologies. For the walkaways, by contrast, the dissolution of selfhood into multiplicity is embraced as liberation from the tyranny of biological finitude and economic exploitation.

This contrast foregrounds the stakes of posthuman subjectivity: whether it becomes a tool of capitalist domination or a pathway to liberation. Doctorow's novel insists that the politics of the future will be decided not by technological possibility alone but by the social arrangements through which technologies are deployed. As Haraway cautions, the cyborg can be "the servant of militarism" or a tool of feminist resistance (Haraway, 1991, p. 164). Likewise, Walkaway acknowledges that posthuman technologies carry ambivalent potentials, yet imagines a utopian horizon in which multiplicity, collectivity, and shared existence define the future.

In this regard, Doctorow's work distinguishes itself from the dystopian pessimism of earlier cyberpunk. Whereas Gibson's Neuromancer portrays digital disembodiment as alienation and corporate domination (Gibson, 1984, p. 115), Walkaway reframes it as an opportunity for radical freedom. The novel thus offers a critical counter-narrative to cyberpunk's anxieties, positioning fragmentation not as crisis but as possibility.

Doctorow's Walkaway dramatizes the dissolution of the stable, humanist self through powerful narrative moments where consciousness is no longer singular, bounded, or tied exclusively to one body. Instead, identity in the novel becomes plural, distributed, and open to replication. This destabilization of subjectivity is not depicted as crisis but as opportunity, transforming the very meaning of the self in the digital age.

One of the most striking moments occurs when characters awaken after uploading themselves into new instantiations:

"Every time I wake up, I know I'm me, but I also know I'm not the only me. There's a dozen of us walking around, with the same memories, the same loves, the same rage at the zottas. I don't feel less real because of them. If anything, I feel more—like my life is too big to be carried by one body, one mind, one voice." (Doctorow, 2017, p. 287)

This passage offers a direct challenge to the humanist notion of subjectivity as singular and continuous. Instead of perceiving multiple selves as fragmentation or dilution, Limpopo insists that she feels "more" real. Identity here becomes amplification rather than erosion. Katherine Hayles's How We Became Posthuman is illuminating in this regard. Hayles argues that subjectivity in technologically mediated contexts operates as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (Hayles, 1999, p. 3). Limpopo's recognition that she is "too big to be carried by one body" directly echoes Hayles's definition of posthuman identity as distributed and shifting. In Walkaway, the multiplication of selves destabilizes traditional individualism but simultaneously affirms the richness of subjectivity when freed from scarcity.

Doctorow also redefines death, one of the most foundational boundaries of humanist subjectivity. In a crucial scene, characters discuss what it means to "die" when backups of their minds exist:

"You could be dead in one place and alive in another, running a backup of yourself while the meat version went on, oblivious. Death wasn't an ending anymore, just a branching, a fork in the path." (Doctorow, 2017, p. 214)

This passage reframes mortality not as an ultimate termination but as continuity through divergence. The language of "branching" and "forking" recalls computational metaphors, suggesting that death in the posthuman condition functions less as disappearance than as multiplication. Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto is particularly useful for understanding this scene. Haraway critiques binary logics such as life/death, human/machine, and self/other, proposing instead hybrid identities that resist essentialist definitions (Haraway, 1991, p. 154). In Walkaway, the characters' ability to persist in multiple forms collapses the binary of life and death, producing a subjectivity that is neither finite nor bound to mortality. Instead, death becomes just another transformation, a continuation of existence across different instantiations.

This radical reframing of identity and mortality is also profoundly political. In another key moment, the narrator critiques the capitalist notion of scarcity in relation to identity:

"The zottas wanted you to believe your self was property, something scarce, something you could sell or lose. But once you walked away, you learned that selfhood, like knowledge, like love, was inexhaustible." (Doctorow, 2017, p. 332)

Here, Doctorow links subjectivity to the politics of neoliberal capitalism. The zottas—wealthy corporate elites—frame identity as something commodifiable, tied to property relations and scarcity. In contrast, the walkaways experience selfhood as abundant and inexhaustible, a resource that cannot be reduced to ownership. This vision resonates with Rosi Braidotti's theory of the nomadic subject, which resists being fixed, commodified, or possessed (Braidotti, 2013, p. 58). For Braidotti, the subject is multiple, relational, and embedded in networks that exceed capitalist logic. Doctorow dramatizes this very idea, showing how posthuman subjectivity is not just an ontological shift but also a political act of resistance to systems of domination.

Equally striking in Walkaway is how characters describe the affective dimension of multiplicity. Instead of anxiety, horror, or alienation—the emotions typically associated with fragmentation in cyberpunk narratives—Doctorow portrays joy and empowerment. In one scene, a character describes the experience of being replicated as profoundly collective: "It was like being part of a choir that sang with the same voice, but in harmonies you couldn't hear when you were alone." (Doctorow, 2017, p. 305)

The metaphor of the choir suggests that multiplicity is not chaos but harmony through difference. Each version of the self contributes to a larger whole, creating resonance rather than dissonance. This positive framing of fragmentation sharply contrasts with dystopian works like William Gibson's Neuromancer, where distributed identities are often portrayed as breakdowns of coherence under the weight of corporate and technological domination. Doctorow's utopian impulse instead aligns more closely with Ursula K. Le Guin's The Dispossessed and Kim Stanley Robinson's speculative futures, where new forms of subjectivity and sociality open possibilities beyond capitalism.

Doctorow repeatedly emphasizes that subjectivity is a social and political construct rather than a fixed essence. The walkaways' embrace of multiplicity mirrors their broader rejection of property, hierarchy, and scarcity. Just as they collectivize resources and knowledge, they collectivize identity itself. Fragmentation becomes not only an ontological reality but a social practice—an ethics of shared existence. The novel suggests that if selfhood is inexhaustible, then community can also be inexhaustible. This echoes Braidotti's insistence that the posthuman subject is inherently relational, defined by connections across humans, nonhumans, and technologies.

Furthermore, the novel directly confronts the ethical stakes of posthuman subjectivity. If multiple versions of a consciousness coexist, what does this mean for responsibility, accountability, or moral agency? Doctorow does not offer simple answers but uses these questions to press readers into reconsidering the foundations of ethical life in a posthuman world.

For example, when different instantiations of a character make conflicting decisions, the narrative forces us to ask whether moral responsibility is tied to the continuity of memory, embodiment, or something else

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entirely. Such dilemmas expose the limits of humanist ethics and demand new frameworks for thinking about agency in a networked existence.

Ultimately, Walkaway positions posthuman subjectivity as a site of utopian possibility rather than dystopian despair. By dramatizing identity as fluid, plural, and resistant to commodification, Doctorow reframes the fragmented self as a condition of liberation. In doing so, the novel carries forward the theoretical insights of Haraway, Hayles, and Braidotti, embedding them in a narrative that not only reflects but also enacts posthuman theory. Where cyberpunk once presented fragmented identity as symptomatic of crisis, Walkaway insists that fragmentation is the ground of new solidarities, new ethics, and new futures.

One of the most provocative moments in Walkaway arises when multiple versions of the same character begin to diverge in their choices. At one point, a copy of a walkaway decides to remain within the network and continue redistributing resources, while another version seeks negotiation with the zottas. This divergence dramatizes the ethical tension of posthuman subjectivity: if two selves share the same origin yet act differently, who bears responsibility for the consequences? Hayles reminds us that "information may travel across substrates, but meaning and accountability remain socially situated" (49). In Walkaway, Doctorow pushes readers to reconsider whether responsibility is grounded in the continuity of memory, in the persistence of embodiment, or in collective recognition across versions.

The novel also destabilizes the status of the body as the primary site of identity. In a striking passage, the narrator reflects: "My body was just another avatar—like my voice, like my memories. Something you could choose, trade, or discard, not something that defined you." (Doctorow, 2017, p. 361). This statement resonates with Haraway's insistence that the body functions as an interface where nature, culture, and technology converge rather than as a fixed essence (178). By treating the body as an optional layer rather than a definitive anchor, Doctorow repositions embodiment as one node among many in a wider posthuman network. Identity is thus rendered mutable, portable, and fundamentally hybrid.

Doctorow also emphasizes the political stakes of this reconfigured subjectivity. The zottas cling to the idea of the singular self precisely because it enables commodification: if one body equals one identity, then bodies and their labor can be owned, exploited, and controlled. Walkaways undermine this logic by insisting on multiplicity.

As one character defiantly proclaims: "You can't warehouse me. There will always be a version of me that walks out of the cage." (Doctorow, 2017, p. 412). This refusal echoes Braidotti's account of the nomadic subject as multiple, networked, and ultimately inappropriable (112). Posthuman subjectivity here becomes a mode of political resistance, eroding the foundations of capitalist ownership.

The novel highlights the utopian dimension of multiplicity by aligning the redistribution of selfhood with the redistribution of resources. Just as walkaways collectivize material goods, they collectivize identity, treating the self not as a scarce commodity but as a shared and renewable commons. In this way, Doctorow makes explicit the connection between ontological transformation and socio-economic liberation: to break the boundaries of the self is also to break the boundaries of neoliberal capitalism.

Another powerful thread in Walkaway is the tension between mortality and continuity. For Doctorow, the ability to replicate consciousness undermines the finality of death, reframing it not as an end but as a transition. As one character reflects after being restored from a backup: "Death wasn't an ending anymore; it was a pause, a handoff between iterations of me" (Doctorow, 2017, p. 287). This redefinition of mortality directly contrasts with the humanist tradition, which grounds meaning in the finitude of life. By dissolving death into continuity, Doctorow shifts subjectivity from the singular life-span of the individual to the open-ended temporality of the network.

Such a vision resonates with Braidotti's insistence that posthuman subjectivity is "fundamentally processual, becoming-with rather than being-in-itself" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 94). The walkaways do not merely survive; they proliferate across versions, iterations, and collectives, embracing transformation as a mode of existence. The fragmented self, then, is not a site of crisis but a generative process—one that allows characters to imagine freedom beyond the scarcity logic of both resources and identities.

Doctorow also dramatizes the anxiety that arises from such multiplicity. Characters occasionally question whether their copies are still "themselves," or whether identity has dispersed into something alien. In one moment, a protagonist wonders: "If another me remembers my life as vividly as I do, am I still unique, or just another instance in the database?" (Doctorow, 2017, p. 244). This doubt captures what Hayles describes as the "posthuman predicament," in which information and embodiment are decoupled, forcing the subject to negotiate continuity in the absence of stable material anchoring (Hayles, 1999, p. 13). Rather than resolving this tension, Walkaway embraces it, suggesting that fragmentation is not an aberration but the baseline condition of existence in digital modernity.

The novel also offers moments of profound intimacy that emerge precisely because of multiplicity. Characters form relationships not with singular individuals but with overlapping versions, demonstrating what Haraway might call "cyborg kinship," a relationality that is partial, hybrid,

and resistant to essentialist models of family or community (Haraway, 1991, p. 176). For example, when two versions of a character co-exist within the same community, the bonds that form are not based on exclusivity but on shared memory and cooperative survival. This fluidity unsettles the normative humanist model of the self-contained subject while opening new possibilities for collective life.

To make a long story short, Doctorow ties the politics of reproduction directly to identity. The zottas weaponize scarcity by insisting that only one body can house one mind, thereby turning both life and death into commodities. By contrast, walkaways dismantle this paradigm, demonstrating that subjectivity itself can be collectively owned, distributed, and remixed. The refusal of a single, proprietary self-echoes Haraway's claim that "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids" (Haraway, 1991, p. 150), and it radicalizes it into a political praxis. Posthuman identity in Walkaway thus becomes inseparable from acts of resistance: to multiply is to resist, and to resist is to multiply.

3. Conclusion

Cory Doctorow's Walkaway radically redefines subjectivity in the age of digital transcendence, challenging humanist notions of individuality, embodiment, and mortality. By dramatizing the duplication of consciousness, the dissolution of stable identity, and the emergence of networked collectivities, the novel situates itself as a utopian counter-narrative to the dystopian anxieties of cyberpunk. Unlike Gibson's Neuromancer or other works in which technological mediation threatens the coherence of the self, Walkaway insists that fragmentation can serve as liberation from capitalist structures that commodify labor, information, and even life itself.

Through the theoretical frameworks of Haraway, Hayles, and Braidotti, Walkaway emerges as a critical site for exploring posthuman subjectivity. Haraway's cyborg ontology illuminates the hybrid multiplicities that Doctorow presents as politically subversive. Hayles's critique of disembodiment underscores the entanglement of information and materiality, warning against the dangers of abstracting consciousness from its embodied ground. Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity provides an affirmative vocabulary for the relational and fluid identities embodied in the walkaway settlements. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that posthuman identity is not a threat to humanity but an expansion of it—an opportunity to imagine new forms of political, social, and ecological being.

By embedding its characters in networks of shared knowledge, collective resistance, and technological experimentation, Walkaway envisions futures beyond neoliberal capitalism. It reminds us that posthumanism is not merely about the technological transformation of the self but about the ethical and political reorientation of society toward multiplicity, interdependence, and liberation. In this sense, Doctorow's novel functions as a manifesto for alternative futures, one that insists on the radical potential of fragmentation and the necessity of imagining utopias in an age increasingly dominated by dystopian imaginaries.

Authors Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable. request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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