Whispers of History: The Challenges of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma in Jean Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*

Murmures de l'histoire : les défis de la transmission transgénérationnelle du trauma dans After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, de Jean Rhys*

Abstract

This article explores the representation of transgenerational transmissions of trauma in Jean Rhys's interwar novel *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930). It explores the female protagonist's struggle to comprehend her own trauma of alienation within the unspoken history of suffering of a neglectful family. The protagonist's encounter with her family is analysed as a deeply ambivalent moment, where trauma's lingering presence disrupts rather than enables the transmission of history and affect across generations. In keeping with contemporary approaches to Rhys focusing on the relational dimension of her work, my analysis tackles how the narrative depicts the heroine's attempt to restore the fractured relationship with her family by struggling to decipher their experience of trauma. Drawing on Meera Atkinson's "poetics of transgenerational trauma," this article addresses the ambiguities inherent in the encounters between ancestors and descendants, revealing their paradoxical role as both catalysts for the transmission of traumatic affect and reminders of the impossibility of fully grasping or articulating inherited trauma. In so doing, this study foregrounds the opacity of Rhys's female characters alongside the eerie, elusive nature of her poetics, where silence and disruptions in language not only reflect the enduring impact of trauma but also expose the challenges of transmitting it through storytelling.

Keywords: transgenerational trauma, Jean Rhys, interwar novels, alienation, Meera Atkinson, affect, Rhysian poetics, storytelling

Résumé

Cet article examine la représentation des transmissions transgénérationnelles du trauma dans le roman de l'entre-deux-guerres de Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930). Il explore la lutte de la protagoniste pour comprendre sa propre aliénation dans l'histoire tacite de la souffrance d'une famille négligente. La rencontre de la protagoniste avec sa famille est analysée comme un moment profondément ambivalent, où la présence persistante du traumatisme perturbe plutôt qu'elle ne permet la transmission de l'histoire et de l'affect d'une génération à l'autre. Dans la continuité des approches contemporaines de Rhys qui se concentrent sur la dimension relationnelle de son œuvre, mon analyse aborde la manière dont le récit dépeint la tentative de l'héroïne de restaurer la relation fracturée avec sa famille en s'efforçant de déchiffrer leur expérience du traumatisme. S'inspirant de la « poétique du traumatisme transgénérationnel » de Meera Atkinson, cet article aborde les ambiguïtés inhérentes aux rencontres entre ancêtres et descendantes et descendants, révélant leur rôle paradoxal à la fois comme catalyseurs de la transmission d'affects traumatiques et comme rappels de l'impossibilité de saisir ou d'articuler pleinement le traumatisme hérité. Ce faisant, cette étude met en évidence l'opacité des personnages féminins de Rhys ainsi que la nature étrange et insaisissable de sa poétique, où le silence et les perturbations du langage ne reflètent pas seulement l'impact durable du traumatisme, mais exposent également les défis de sa transmission par le biais de la narration.

Mots-clés : trauma transgénérationnel, Jean Rhys, romans de l'entre-deux-guerres, aliénation, Meera Atkinson, affect, poétique rhysienne, narration

The literary work of Anglo-Caribbean writer Jean Rhys (1890-1979) exhibits a remarkable timelessness, rendering it relevant and worthy of reinterpretation in contemporary times. Indeed, as Mary Wilson and Kerry L. Johnson expound in the introduction to their volume *Rhys Matters*, she is still significant because her work intersects various fields and is multivalent, thus laying bare the difficulty of viewing her from just one angle (2013, 4-5). The influence of different cultures inherent in her genealogy, the ever-flowing dialogue between biography and fiction or the in-between position of her multifaceted heroines evince how her writings are in keeping with the relational consciousness defining our present age, which, as Irena Ateljevic contends, encourages us to "accept contradicting realities and multicultural perspectives" (2013, 213).

In the wake of this paradigm shift, recent approaches to Rhys have brought the topic of transmissions to centre stage. In Rhys's context, these transmissions refer to the sharing of insights about the intricacies of a specific social and cultural backdrop—namely, the alienation experienced by a series of female protagonists within a hostile metropolis—across her novels and short stories. A case in point is the volume *Transnational Rhys: Lines of Transmission, Lines of Flight*, which, as stated by its editors, contributes to reassessing a set of lines of transmission and dialogue: "transnationalism, transculturalism and diasporic cultural trajectories" (Lopoukhine, Regard and Wallart 2020, 1). In like manner, the special issue "Jean Rhys at the Crossroads" underscores the rhizomatic quality of her writing and her position as "a breaker of cultural boundaries" (Harris and Savory 2023, 79-80). Interestingly, the scholarly interest in unravelling the dialogism within the seemingly inward-looking and emotionally detached narratives of Rhys's female characters invites an examination of how these women tentatively move out of their emotional paralysis by struggling to make sense of their life stories. In this

respect, the recent volume *Jean Rhys: Writing Precariously* delves into how the "fluidity and porosity" of Rhys's texts enables both the author and her characters to critically explore their vulnerability through the revisitation and ultimate transmission of their stories that have been silenced (Lopoukhine, Regard and Wallart 2023, 2-3).

This interpretation of the transmission lines underlying the opaque narratives of these female characters demands a reappraisal of how Rhys represents the experience of trauma. The phenomenon of trauma, defined as a lasting psychological wound caused by a shocking and unlocatable experience, is a pervasive theme in Rhys's works. It acts as a debilitating force that underpins the alienation of her female protagonists. Their sense of dislocation stems not only from specific traumatic events—such as the abandonment by male lovers or instances of sexual abuse—but more profoundly from the systemic marginalisation they face, both as women and social underdogs. One of the seminal studies on Rhys's depiction of trauma is Patricia Moran's, which emphasises how traumatic experiences impinge on her female protagonists' ability to access these events through memory and, by the same token, affect the transmission of their trauma narratives, haunting both the text's intelligibility and its aesthetic qualities (Moran 2007, 5, 8). The lingering presence of trauma contributes to the often-cited haunted nature of Rhys's writing. This ghostliness can be seen, as Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran observe, in her revisitation of themes of alienation in various forms across her fiction, creating an atmosphere of "estranged familiarity" (2015, 2). Likewise, Sue Thomas notes that Rhys's fiction haunts readers through its engagement with a historical consciousness that, in its very elusiveness, carries an inherent risk (2022, 2).

Rhys's work is therefore characterised by a peculiar dialectic of transmission and rupture, as if the narratives are torn between conveying the traumatic past through storytelling and the impossibility of doing so. This is because trauma cannot be smoothly transmitted

through the telling of a coherent story, leading to a dissonance between the desire to communicate and the inherent elusiveness of trauma. This noteworthy clash between transmission lines and hiatuses lies at the core of a phenomenon that has been underresearched in Rhys's criticism: transgenerational trauma. The interplay of relational transmission and epistemological rupture inherent in this phenomenon, defined as the transmission of trauma across generations, is a hallmark of modernist art's attempt to grapple with the limits of communication. As Melissa Dinsman argues in *Modernism at the Microphone*, modernist literature takes great interest in depicting communication failure, where the very act of broadcasting (or writing) coexists with a propensity for obstructing communication (2015, 122). This paradoxical relationship between transmission and disruption is a defining feature of Rhys's work, where the silences and gaps speak as loudly as the words themselves.

This article seeks to examine the complexities of transmission—both affective and communicative—within family dynamics shaped by transgenerational trauma in Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930). Rhys's second interwar novel, written after the bleak *roman à clef Quartet* (1928), foregrounds how the disrupted emotional connections between its protagonist, Julia Martin, and her family are central to her experience of trauma and alienation. The breakdowns in transmission between them are given pride of place in a pivotal medial interlude, in which Julia travels to London to reconnect with her family after years of living in Paris. This section of the novel serves as the primary focus of my analysis. I offer two complementary readings of Julia's confrontation with her family during this visit, both of which illuminate the paradoxes of transmission at play. On the one hand, I explore how Julia's structural trauma—exacerbated by her family's neglect—haunts the text itself, giving shape to a poetics of rupture that resists a linear narrative of both her suffering and that of her family. On the other hand, I read Julia's

return to London as an attempt to fathom a family secret that seems to have obstructed mutual understanding, rendering this encounter a deeply fraught yet intentional effort to restore an emotional connection amidst the breakdown of language and the lingering effects of trauma.

The paradoxical nature of transmission in Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* becomes evident through an analysis of the narrative mechanisms Rhys employs. Rhys subtly depicts the transference of trauma across generations and inscribes this psychic wound into the very fabric of the text, using storytelling as a means of transmission. For this purpose, I draw on Meera Atkinson's *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (2017), which tackles how the literary text struggles to convey inherently unspeakable intergenerational and multigenerational transmissions of trauma, as well as the ethical dimensions of these transmissive cycles. Ultimately, this article reexamines Rhys's depiction of trauma as a complex, layered social condition, shaped by the complexities and paradoxes of its transmission across generations and onto the written page.

The Phantom and the Limits of a Haunted Narrative

As with Rhys's interwar fiction at large, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* chronicles the unbelonging of a destitute female protagonist that is pushed to the margins of invisibility in the modern European metropolis. Rhys's second novel fleshes out the underdog status of an expatriate Englishwoman living in Paris, Julia Martin, who struggles to leave behind the legacy of a failed relationship with an older man she relied on both economically and emotionally. Besides depicting the motif of the solitary *flâneuse* subjected the gaze and exploitation of men, this novel introduces an additional layer to the female protagonist's suffering: a more explicit insight into the neglect she experiences within her own family.

This fraught relationship comes to the forefront in Part Two, when Julia heads for London to visit the family she left behind ten years earlier, only to be met with further rejection and contempt.

One of the main concerns in Rhys's narratives of alienation and vulnerability is the absence of a loving family. The female protagonists' relatives are living in a faraway, inaccessible land or else have severed their emotional bonds with them. The frail relationship of Rhys's protagonists with their families is at the root of their inability to trace back their origins or define their cultural identity. By way of illustration, Julia is depicted as someone who is excluded from the family's close-knit community, viewed by her sister Norah "as if she were something out of a zoo" (Rhys 1972, 73). In the words of Sylvie Maurel, roots in Rhys's work are defined as "something you are forever cut off from, something you never return to" (1998, 53). In this light, Julia's situation aligns with Helen Carr's description of Rhys's own standing as a person who belongs nowhere: "She became a migrant, unsettled, on the move, with no roots to return to, no base point, a foreigner everywhere" (2012, 27). Still, a closer look at the heroines' recollections of their familial relationships, though being depicted in a disturbing, dream-like manner, hints at how Rhys tries to reframe these seemingly lost origins. The nebulous nature of these introspections suggests an absence that, though elusive, nonetheless exerts a significant impact on the characters' lives. Rhys's heroines struggle to fathom their frail relationships with their families or their lost roots, and yet they are aware that these unfulfilled connections are haunting elements in their lives. As explored in the following paragraphs, this conflict can be more effectively understood by addressing this affective breach within the familial unit in the context of trauma.

Cathy Caruth's oft-quoted definition of trauma integrates the unavailability of a traceable event and its lingering presence: "[T]he response to an unexpected or overwhelming event

or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena" (1996, 91). This paradox of a trauma that is never fully understood yet persists in its impact mirrors the experience of the "phantom," a key idea in transgenerational trauma. Psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Mária Torok conceive of a form of traumatic transmission across generations, which they term "transgenerational haunting." To explain this process, they employ the metaphor of the "phantom"—a haunting presence that is transmitted to the descendants of trauma survivors, reminding them of a secret linked to a "narcissistic injury" or "catastrophe" inflicted upon the parents (Abraham and Torok 1994, 174). This family secret, which is in line with the definition of trauma as "unclaimed experience" (Caruth 1996), accounts for the omnipresence of ellipses and the lack of continuity in narratives of transgenerational trauma. Indeed, the phantom is symptomatic of the inability of both ancestors and descendants to access the repressed memory of the traumatic event, which Nicholas Rand describes as "the blocked expression of a memory trace which cannot tell the submerged history of its own traumatic origins" (1994, 7). This suppression of consciousness is conceptualised by Rand as a "psychic aphasia" (1994, 17) that impedes any effort to reexperience and retell trauma as a linear narrative, as this psychic barrier destroys the expressive capacity of language (Schwab 2010, 54). In the case of Rhys's work, the proliferation of ellipses, abrupt disruptions of chronological time and depictions of her female characters' dissociation serve as manifestations of the phantom's ongoing influence on their lives and relationships. The silent inheritance of an unresolved secret evokes a lost and inaccessible past that, as Patricia Moran suggests, drives the obsessive thought patterns that shape the lives of both the heroines and their families, and this fragmented transmission of trauma leads to a disjointed narrative that poses more questions than it provides answers (2007, 118).

Approaching trauma as a transgenerational phenomenon entails retracing the ways in which this secret or emotional wound is transmitted across generations even when the ability to articulate feelings through language is curtailed. Meera Atkinson contends that transgenerational trauma encompasses both transmissions from one generation to the next and multigenerational ones (2017, 4). These transmissions entail, as Sue Grand and Jill Salberg point out, the transfer of mental projections—or, to put it another way, the family secret—from the minds of the ancestors to those of their descendants (2021, 211). However, they caution that the mechanism of this transfer remains unclear (211). One of the primary ways this "phantom" is transmitted, as they explain, is through ruptures in attachment relationships caused by trauma (211). These fractures leave an indelible mark on the text. Indeed, Meera Atkinson characterises the poetics of transgenerational trauma as "a particularly haunted textuality that actively engages with the specter, either in its amorphous ghostly form or its more pointedly named or indicated phantom/s" (2017, 86). In the case of Rhys's targeted novel, it is the elusive, intangible spectre that dominates. The emphasis on London's mist-laden atmosphere is a case in point: while reflecting Julia's traumatic disorientation when faced with her family's neglect, it can also be said to foreshadow the haziness of the family secret.

Upon arriving in London, Julia perceives both its houses and its passersby as "withdrawn, nebulous" (Rhys 1972, 67). In like manner, as she is roaming around Tottenham Court Road, she envisions herself as a ghost emerging from the fog, with this spectral version of herself observing Julia "coldly, without recognizing her" (68). Like Abraham and Torok's phantom, this spectral presence hints at a traumatic wound that obscures Julia's understanding of her purpose in London. Not surprisingly, the narrative voice points out in the lines that follow that she is "walking about aimlessly" (68). The lack of a purpose hinted at in these pages is underscored by the chime of a church clock she overhears as

she roams. The chime of the clock triggers an epiphany for Julia, making her feel that she has followed a circular pathway back to London and that, despite the ten years since her departure, life has "stood still" for her (67). This circularity evokes the nature of transgenerational trauma, which, as Atkinson argues, works "cyclically and in assemblage" (2017, 4). The element of trauma is suggested by the description of the clock striking "in that aggressive and melancholy way" (Rhys 1972, 67), and also by Julia's realisation that she has experienced no progress whatsoever. The ghost's inability to recognise her is a poignant symbol of this stagnation: despite her quest to reconnect with her family, she remains trapped in a cycle of unresolved past wounds, much like other Rhys's heroines. This "psychic aphasia," to borrow Rand's term, is likely to hinder any attempt to grasp the emotional weight of the family secret, thus obstructing meaningful emotional transmission and reconciliation.

The First Encounter

From the outset, Julia's attempts to make sense of her past and rekindle her emotional bonds with her family are hindered by the sense of stagnation explained above. Her conflict with a dominant family member like Uncle Griffiths curtails any affective transmission between her and her family. The uncle's discomfort is enhanced by characterisation, as his alertness and the description of his eyes as "cold as stones" (Rhys 1972, 79) represent how the privileged groups in the interwar metropolis view the Rhysian heroine. The coldness conveyed by his gaze hints at her family's indifference, and the emotional strain caused by his attitude is illustrated by the "mechanical" smile that Julia forces as she replies to his questions (79). Remarkably, Griffith's questions are omitted from the text, possibly reflecting Rhys's emphasis on the impact of the family's neglect rather than its causes. Indeed, Julia is unable to offer more than a simple "yes,

very well" (79), which serves as evidence of the communication breakdown between them. At the same time, the rupture in verbal and emotional communication also hints at a similar emotional turmoil within Griffiths. For the duration of Julia's visit, he remains wary and insists that they speak in an area of the house where nobody can listen (80). Additionally, the narrative voice highlights that he tends to speak "between closed teeth" (82), as if afraid to communicate. His anxiety, therefore, makes him an ambivalent figure: even though Julia perceives him as a "solid and powerful" man whom she longs to please (81), his speech collapses when he tries to explain himself: "Things are very difficult over here, you know. Hard. Yes, yes—hard times" (82). The high degree of fragmentation in his utterance seems to reflect his distress over the circumstances he is confronting and, potentially, his inability to fully understand such tribulations. It is likely that the situation he is subtly referencing is Julia's mother's illness. Still, as the passage unfolds, the narrative discloses a deeper, more enigmatic layer to his suffering. These unspoken afflictions come to haunt the text, so much so that a "restful and inevitable darkness" (81) takes hold, echoing the obscurity surrounding his potentially traumatic experience.

The dual nature of the darkness in Uncle Griffiths' home—symbolising both his hostility toward Julia and the elusiveness of inner turmoil—is reflected in his verbal exchanges with Julia before she leaves. While he harshly reprimands her for requesting money, the mention of money prompts him to tentatively articulate the particular narrative he seems to have repressed so long. The sporadic narratorial remarks on his history lay bare his decline: while he used to be "the large and powerful male" in the family (80), even more so after the death of Julia's father, he has become a self-conscious man consumed by distress at the prospect of relinquishing his comforts (84). His awareness that he is running short of money, which he mentions on several occasions, has crystallised into a series of "fits of foreboding" that make him envision an impending destitution (84). These

emotions point to a sense of negative inertia that is in keeping with the ambiguity of his storytelling. He fails to elaborate on the "things" (83) that are going wrong and instead relies on nonverbal signals, such as "an anxious expression" and chuckling (84). These signs of traumatic anxiety are by no means inconsequential, as economic vulnerability is a core theme and a source of suffering in Rhys's work. Indeed, the absence of financial stability condemns underdog characters in general to a marginal position in a metropolis where leisure is commodified. This is particularly severe for Rhys's female characters, since the lack of money drives them to seek affluent male partners for economic and emotional support, as seen in Mr Mackenzie's relationship with Julia.

Julia's reference to money as the catalyst for the uncle's narrative is particularly significant in understanding the mechanisms of transgenerational trauma transmission in this novel. His fragmented account marks the only moment when some common understanding between them emerges, rooted in their social status. The profound psychological impact of economic vulnerability on both characters' psyches is conveyed through an infra-verbal instance that, in keeping with Rhys's ambivalent poetics, unsettles the reader: "Uncle Griffiths considered her for some seconds without speaking" (82). His silence may stem from the shock of revisiting a traumatic experience linked to financial insecurity, while simultaneously allowing him a brief moment to "consider" her, which could be read as an instance of faint connection with her emotions. This fragile attempt at empathy is further underscored by the openness and honesty acknowledged in the text when he confides a "secret" (84) to her, even though it ultimately remains undisclosed. This "secret" may hint at an overwhelming set of events that have shaped this character's emotionally detached demeanour. The elusive nature of these traumatic events, combined with his inability to access them through memory retrieval and his fractured relationship with Julia, hinders any straightforward transmission of his narrative to his niece, despite

his fleeting attempt to do so. His frankness when struggling to verbalise the secret might, in fact, betray his dire need to find an empathic listener. In this regard, Sue Grand argues that the self-narrative of trauma survivors is greatly affected by what she denominates a flawed "cultural responsiveness" (2024, 46). The silences and fears exhibited by older-generation members like Griffiths and, later on, Julia's mother, can thus be understood as an outcome of their alienation as no longer respectable subjects and, presumably, of the absence of empathic listeners that could relate to their testimonies. Ultimately, Griffiths finds no such listener in Julia; instead, he abruptly dismisses her, cutting off any chance of connection or transmission between them.

The unproductive encounter with Uncle Griffiths contributes to exacerbating Julia's feelings of displacement and disorientation. In the paragraph immediately following her uncle's dismissal, after a paragraph break, the narrator highlights the female protagonist's "bewilderment" and her perception that the houses she passes seem to "bulge forward" menacingly (Rhys 1972, 85). As is the case with the darkness that suffuses the atmosphere during her visit to Griffiths, the lingering effects of trauma haunt the poetics of the text, constructing an atmosphere of emotional paralysis. Once again, she perceives a metaphorical darkness that "made walls round you" (85), stifling her ability to breathe or speak: "You wanted to beat at the darkness and shriek to be let out" (85). The failure of communication is closely linked to her powerlessness to come to terms with the disregard she has been subjected to, and possibly with her inability to fully comprehend her uncle's suffering. This is suggested by the attention drawn to a melody she apparently overhears on the street:

> Down at the far end of the street a voice quavered into a melancholy tune. The voice dragged and broke—failed. Then suddenly there would be a startingly powerful bellow, like an animal in pain. The bellow was not fierce or threatening, as it might have been; it was complaining and mindless, like an animal in pain. (85)

It remains ambiguous whether Julia, in her state of confusion, is hearing an actual tune or whether it is a projection of her own emotional turmoil following her interaction with her uncle. Remarkably, the broken voice of the singer mirrors that of Griffiths and, thus, may point to the inability to effectively transmit their narratives of suffering through language. As for its melancholic tone, it echoes the uncle's own suffering as he looks back on his former status. Much like Griffiths's discourse, it is marked by fragmentation and abrupt outbursts of anger that point to his helplessness as a figure haunted by an unspeakable past. Although Griffiths contributes to Julia's alienation, he is a potentially traumatised subject who, as the simile of the wounded animal suggests, struggles to articulate his suffering to no avail.

If the passage quoted above is read as a projection of Julia's mind, it stands as an instance of affective transmission where trauma manifests indirectly through atmosphere, sound, and fragmented discourse. This blurring of internal and external experience suggests that Julia's suffering as she leaves her uncle's house is not solely her own; it may be entangled with the lingering echoes of Griffiths's unresolved pain, highlighting the ethical stakes in her struggle to understand the family's secret. Such a tension between the failure of communication and an unfulfilled yet perceptible desire for transgenerational understanding is even more salient in her encounter with her paralysed mother. The visit to her mother's dwelling, which is close read in the following section, explores how Julia attempts to engage with the unspoken history of her mother's suffering amidst the collapse of language.

The Second Encounter

Julia's visit to her dying mother represents a pivotal moment in her journey to London, an event marked by an overwhelming sense of estrangement and confusion. This is immediately evident in the characterisation of the mother, a paralysed woman who is perceived by the focalising character, Julia, as a "shapeless mass under the sheets and blankets" (Rhys 1972, 97) and who cannot go beyond "breathing noisily" (97). This initial portrayal underscores the mother's paralysis and her inability to speak, and the heavy silence in the room reinforces a pervasive sense of displacement: "She only knew that the room was very quiet—quiet and shut away from everything" (98). In a way, these descriptive passages foreshadow that this encounter will pose a barrier to any meaningful transmission that might allow Julia—and, by extension, the readers—to grasp her mother's history.

The theme of paralysis resonates with Atkinson's idea that the affects that come into play in trauma transmissions heighten "a sense of being bound to a body and subjectively and socially confined within it" (2017, 9), mirroring the entrapment and alienation that both characters experience as they are "shut away." However, the similarities between these family members, evident in their voicelessness and displacement, may prompt a reading of this episode in accordance with Atkinson's view of the traumatic encounter: "[A] becoming-event, an event that both reverberates with previous traumatic encounters and generates an affective charge destined to later, and again, resonate" (2017, 9). In this section, I will interpret Julia's return to Acton as a revisitation of her family's history and its traumatic dimensions, which, as suggested in my previous reading of Uncle Griffiths's storytelling, may lead to a subtle yet fleeting rekindling of affect. In this regard, it is essential to examine how the Rhysian text's poetics ambiguously depict the tension between opacity and relational communication, as well as the (im-)possibility of

transmission, reflecting the complexities of the traumatic encounter and the affective charge as described by Atkinson.

The conflicting aspects of the traumatic encounter are encapsulated in Julia's perception of her mother. On the one hand, she is unsettled by her emaciated appearance, which is likened to a deformed mass (Rhys 1972, 97). This portrayal underscores what Carolina Sánchez-Palencia Carazo describes as "the unknowability of this vulnerable and traumatised Other" (2018, 204), evoking a profound sense of displacement. This shocking experience threatens to disrupt Julia's perspective, as her mother appears as elusive and inscrutable as trauma itself. On the other hand, she is able to glimpse beauty within her mother's strangeness (Rhys 1972, 97). This shift in her approach to the traumatic encounter highlights how her recourse to affect hints at the possibility of a fragile reattachment across generations. This potential for connection is suggested when Julia touches her mother's hand and whispers, "Darling" (98). The emphasis on touch gestures toward a fleeting intimacy that, even amid disorientation, carries a momentary sense of power, as it rouses the previously inert woman. It is an attempt at communication and affective transmission that momentarily awakens the mother from her lethargy and initiates a struggle to articulate a message:

> The sick woman looked steadily at her daughter. Then it was like seeing a spark go out and the eyes were bloodshot, animal eyes. Nothing was there. She mumbled something in a thick voice, then turned her head away and began to cry, loudly and disconsolately, like a child. (98-99)

This ambivalent passage reflects the opacity inherent in transgenerational transmissions of trauma in Rhys's novel. The mother's steady gaze—perhaps a final assertion of resilience—coexists with the brokenness of her speech and the fading of a spark that might have signified hope. Their fleeting exchange of glances suggests a moment of recognition, yet it is too brief to foster an empathic connection rooted in shared pain.

As for the mother's weeping, it serves as an expression of the affective charge that might resurface in the survivor's revisitation of the traumatic event (Atkinson 2017, 9). Her cry seems to reveal the enduring influence of trauma and the persistence of past wounds. The use of a simile appears to symbolically connect the older woman with her offspring, raising the question of whether the mother's cry is an attempt to transmit her life story to her daughter. However, the text's haunted poetics once again emphasise the impossibility of a seamless transmission of trauma between generations: the mother's hurried movement of her head suggests that directly confronting the traumatic event may be unbearable for her. This instance of preverbal communication, in which the mother averts the gaze from Julia, stresses the divide between them, ultimately thwarting a true intersubjective connection.

The near impossibility of the mother articulating her traumatic story through language leaves Julia with speculation as her only means of reconstructing the family's past. As she addresses her sister Norah, the selfless daughter responsible for their mother's care, she expresses her certainty that she has deciphered her cry: "Yes. It sounded like 'orange-trees'. She must have been thinking of when she was in Brazil" (Rhys 1972, 99). Still, both Julia's hypothesis and her whispered assertion that she believes that her mother has recognised her (99) introduce an element of doubt. In this regard, Deborah Kelly Kloepfer contends the following: "In Rhys's novels the daughter seldom knows what is true or what is available or what the mother or she herself wants" (1989, 55). Julia's whisper is highly significant, as it has a spectral quality that underscores both the elusive and incomprehensible nature of the mother's disjointed speech, which may be interpreted as a manifestation of the phantom. Notably, as the passage unfolds, Julia's speculation prompts Norah to recall how her mother recently called her "Dobbin," the name of a workhorse, yet both the meaning of this reference and its associated context remain

unspoken. Norah's nervous laughter following this recollection is tellingly let out in a "hysterical way" (Rhys 1972, 100). Subsequently, Norah's uncontrollable laughter is passed on to Julia and eventually provokes an intense "howling" from the mother (100). This cyclical transmission of anxious laughter, triggered by an enigmatic moment, highlights the haunting presence of a traumatic event that remains elusive and resists articulation. The synchronous emotional outbursts among the characters may serve to highlight what Atkinson describes as "shared circulations of traumatic affect within a virtuality that connects them" (2017, 140). Their displays of intense emotion as they relive an apparently traumatic past can therefore point to a sense of interconnectedness rooted in their shared experience as broken individuals.

The disjointed emotional outbursts sparked by Julia's mention of Brazil suggest that this country holds an enigmatic and potentially destabilising significance: the link between Julia's mother and Brazil has been severed, marking a profound instance of traumatic loss. The angst of this alienated woman following the hysterical laughter of her daughters ties in with the "sickening for the sun" (Rhys 1972, 105), which starkly contrasts with the greyness and unhappiness the mother associates with England: "This is a cold, grey country. This isn't a country to be really happy in" (105). The contrast between the bleakness of the metropolis and the bright colours of tropical countries—a recurring motif in Rhys's fiction—is conveyed in the novel through direct speech, emphasising a melancholy akin to that of Uncle Griffiths. Likewise, this instance of direct speech contrasts with the breakdown of language caused by the emotional paralysis of the members of the previous generation, one that renders their history opaque, unspeakable and accessible only through speculation. In this context, the collapse of the mother's speech marks the irrevocable loss of this cherished land, making Julia's attempts to grasp its significance within the family's traumatic past futile. Indeed, Julia recalls that, during

her childhood, her mother was reluctant to speak about Brazil (105). Not surprisingly, then, early in the novel, Julia blends memory and imagination as she reminisces about her past, culminating in a vague reference to "some tropical country that she had never seen" (12). This moment serves as yet another example of how the lasting impact of a traumatic phantom haunts the text itself, making any attempt to transmit the family's history nearly impossible.

In the final pages of the section titled "Acton," the evocative depiction of the loss of a cherished land—framed through the dichotomies of Brazil versus England and warmth versus coldness—is revisited, shifting focus to the deterioration of the mother-daughter bond. The closing paragraphs address how Julia returns to Acton the following day and, upon perceiving her mother lying "like a log" (106), she reminisces about her childhood. Once again, the text employs figurative language to depict the barriers to affective transmission and the paralysed mother's emotional detachment. The narrative shift into Julia's consciousness offers a poignant insight into her ambivalent childhood relationship with her mother, marking a key transformation: the mother, once envisioned as "the warm centre of the world" (106), is suddenly refigured as a "dark, austere, rather plump woman, who, because she was worried, slapped you for no reason that you knew" (106-107). These outbursts bring to mind the beatings inflicted by Rhys's mother, as documented in her "Black Exercise Book" (Moran 2007, 90), and the moodiness of Antoinette's mother in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Julia's confusion over her mother's impulsive tantrums leaves her unsure whether she resents or fears her, ultimately resulting in another ambivalent emotion: a detachment oscillating between indifference and sentimentality (Rhys 1972, 106-107). The text's emphasis on these contradictory feelings further underscores the lasting impact of trauma on the emotional opacity of Rhys's heroines. Even in adulthood, Julia remains torn between unease and a yearning for emotional reconnection with her

mother, an ambivalence that renders the purpose of her journey to London increasingly unclear. This is complicated by the lack of further interaction between them during the mother's lifetime, as foreshadowed by the mother's passive, lifeless state. After her death, the narrative transitions to a new chapter titled "Golders Green," named after the crematorium where her mother's body is burned. The final section in this article offers a glimpse into the emotions Julia experiences during and after the burial, which once again point to the challenges of transmission in Rhys's novel and the uncertainty surrounding the resolution of Julia's journey.

The Legacy of Julia's Traumatic Encounters: Ambivalent Transmissions and the Return to Alienation

The chapter "Golders Green" marks a crucial moment that revisits the theme of transgenerational transmission through the burial and cremation of Julia's mother. In keeping with the warmth once associated with the mother, Julia seems to reengage emotionally with her mother during the cremation of her body. In a profound act of mourning, Julia laments her personal loss—her mother—and the cycle of pain and shame she has endured (131). This process culminates in Julia envisioning herself as a "defiant flame" (131). This apparent sense of empowerment contrasts with the trauma-induced bewilderment that she experiences moments before the cremation, as she struggles to "grapple with nothingness" (130). Through mourning, she appears to undergo an emotional shift, stressed by her self-perception as a "defiant flame." This apparent surge in personal empowerment aligns with what Atkinson describes as a key transformative process that can emerge from a transgenerational encounter among trauma survivors: "[An] affective-ethical encounter is capable of producing an increase of subjective and

social power through a textual reckoning with trauma within and beyond the family" (2017, 50).

The concept of mourning is particularly relevant here. In his reassessment of Freud's distinction between melancholia and mourning, Dominick LaCapra defines mourning as a performative process that enables individuals to confront and reassess the traumatic past. Significantly, mourning has the potential to foster a renewed connection to life (LaCapra 2001, 65-66) and, ultimately, to enhance the survivor's capacity to relate to others (LaCapra 1998, 45). While the latter somewhat holds true for Julia, a reinvestment in life remains out of reach for her, as it often does for Rhys's female protagonists, whose stories foreground ambivalence and disillusionment. Following the metaphorical image of the "defiant flame," Julia's fleeting moment of empowerment is swiftly undercut by the realisation that "the flame sank down again, having reached nothing" (Rhys 1972, 131). The text underscores, once more, the inherent opacity of the Rhysian protagonist's inner turmoil. Julia's epiphany at the crematorium, in keeping with the text's haunted poetics, remains a cryptic moment, leaving readers uncertain as to whether a genuine affective transfer has occurred between the deceased mother and the daughter.

Despite Julia's empathy with her mother's suffering, this brief moment of emotional engagement quickly dissipates, and she falls back into detachment and purposelessness soon after the burial. As the novel progresses, it becomes evident that, beyond mourning, her weeping conveys her rage at having been overlooked by her family. After she announces her intent to leave London immediately, she reproaches Norah for failing to care for her and calls Griffiths "an abominable man" after he claims that she does not know how to behave in a respectable home (136). These fits of anger highlight her inability to use language to articulate her story of suffering to her family and, thus, bridge the chasm between them. Significantly, the narrator remarks that Julia speaks "in an

incoherent voice" (135), and the direct quotation of her words further reveals that, far from articulating a coherent account of her traumatic experience, her speech emerges as a disjointed rumbling:

> I cried about you. Have you ever cried one tear for me? You've never once looked at me as if you cared whether I lived or died. And you think I don't know why? It's because you're jealous. That's the bedrock. All you people who've knuckled under — you're jealous. D'you think I don't know? You're jealous of me, jealous, jealous. Eaten up with it. (136)

Rather than fostering empathy or understanding, her fragmented speech stresses the failure of relational communication within the family unit, reinforcing the sense that Julia and her family are condemned to perpetual misunderstanding. Their failed attempts at connection, rooted in their inability to communicate or understand their personal histories of trauma, reveal that their cycles of affective transmission are irrevocably broken.

Julia's cyclical regression to her original state of alienation reveals that her journey to London has been largely fruitless, as suggested by the abrupt collapse of her epiphany at the crematorium. The "nothingness" to which she returns is further reinforced by the novel's remark that her return to Paris is devoid of any vision of a future (140). This recursive descent into negative inertia mirrors the void she grapples with prior to the cremation. As Leslie Heywood points out, this emptiness signals her lack of agency (1996, 167), which can be understood as an utter inability to effect significant change in her relationship with herself or her social environment. This return to nothingness serves, as Mary Lou Emery notes, as evidence of the futility of self-representation despite her attempts (1990, 139). Within the framework of transgenerational trauma, this suggests that Julia's efforts to access her personal history of suffering—as well as that of her family—are thwarted, this situation leading to the collapse of (self-)representation.

Deprived of the means to symbolically confront both her own haunted status and the "phantom" of her family's unspoken wounds, Julia remains excluded from the process of

transforming these unspeakable histories into a coherent testimony. In line with Heywood's argument, Julia lacks the means to engage in a narrative agency aimed at the articulation of a coherent trauma testimony, an endeavour that Meg Jensen conceives as "a search for meaning with the aim of forging a new posttrauma identity, free from fear" (2019, 66). Instead, she remains trapped in a cycle of disconnection and listlessness, her alienation lingering like a spectre. This enduring estrangement not only exemplifies the weight of past wounds; it reflects the impossibility of constructing a shared, healing narrative of trauma, an absence that echoes the broader failures of transgenerational transmission in the novel. Yet, the underlying presence of tentative moments of empathic connection amidst the breakdown of language suggests that, through the form of intimacy provided by close reading, we may uncover hidden meanings within the strange poetics of the Rhysian text. This invites us to consider whether a reinterpretation of Rhys's work can deepen our understanding of its complexities, revealing tentative efforts at relationality or, as Lopoukhine, Regard and Wallart (2020) put it, "lines of transmission, lines of flight." Ultimately, reappraisals of affective and narrative transmission in her work—such as the one proposed in this article—compel us to explore and redefine the human relationships in Rhys's writing.

Bibliography

ABRAHAM, Nicolas, and Maria TOROK. *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 1. Ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

ATELJEVIC, Irena. "Visions of Transmodernity: A New Renaissance of our Human History?" *Integral Review* 9.2 (June 2013): 200-219.

ATKINSON, Meera. *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*. New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

CARR, Helen. *Jean Rhys* (1996). 2nd edition. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2012.

CARUTH, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

DINSMAN, Melissa. *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics During World War II*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

EMERY, Mary Lou. *Jean Rhys at "World's End": Novels of Colonial and Sexual Exile*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

GRAND, Sue. "The Wound and Its Social Imperatives." In *Transgenerational Trauma: A Contemporary Introduction*. Ed. Jill Salberg and Sue Grand. New York: Routledge, 2024. 45-59.

GRAND, Sue, and Jill SALBERG. "Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma." In *Social Trauma: An Interdisciplinary Textbook*. Ed. Andreas Hamburger, Camellia Hancheva and Vamik D. Volkan. Cham: Springer, 2021. 209-215.

HARRIS, Laurel, and Elaine SAVORY. "Introduction: Jean Rhys at the Crossroads." *Feminist Modernist Studies* 6.2 (2023): 79-83.

HEYWOOD, Leslie. *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996.

JENSEN, Meg. *The Art and Science of Trauma and the Autobiographical: Negotiated Truths*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

JOHNSON, Erica L., and Patricia MORAN, eds. *Jean Rhys: Twenty-First Century Approaches*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

KLOEPFER, Deborah Kelly. *The Unspeakable Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989.

LACAPRA, Dominick. *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998.

LACAPRA, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

LOPOUKHINE, Juliana, Fréderic REGARD and Kerry-Jane WALLART, eds. *Transnational Jean Rhys: Lines of Transmission, Lines of Flight*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2020.

LOPOUKHINE, Juliana, Fréderic REGARD and Kerry-Jane WALLART, eds. *Jean Rhys: Writing Precariously*. New York: Routledge, 2023.

MAUREL, Sylvie. *Jean Rhys*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1998.

MORAN, Patricia. *Virginia Woolf, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Trauma*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

RAND, Nicholas T. "Introduction: Renewals of Psychoanalysis." In *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*. Vol. 1. Ed. and trans. Nicholas T. Rand. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994. 1-22.

RHYS, Jean. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930). New York: Harper & Row, 1972.

RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). London: Penguin, 2000.

SÁNCHEZ-PALENCIA CARAZO, Carolina. "'Today I have left my armor at home': Revisiting Jean Rhys's Interwar Novels after the Ethical Turn." In *New Perspectives on Community and the Modernist Subject: Finite, Singular, Exposed*. Ed. Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas, Paula Martín-Salván, and María J. López. New York: Routledge, 2018. 199-212.

SCHWAB, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

THOMAS, Sue. *Jean Rhys's Modernist Bearings and Experimental Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

WILSON, Mary, and Kerry L. JOHNSON, eds. *Rhys Matters: New Critical Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.