Studies on Intermediality and Intercultural Mediation – REUNIDO
Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research – 13.3 (March 2026): 1-20
e-ISSN 2340-650X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17811/jaclr.23479

RITUALS OF SISTERHOOD: QUEER GIRLHOOD AND TRAUMA IN JULIA ARMFIELD'S *PRIVATE RITES* (2024)[1]

MARTA AGUZA BERRAL
Universidad de Córdoba, Spain
l02agbem@uco.es

Abstract: This article examines Julia Armfield's *Private Rites* (2024) through the intertwined lenses of intersectional girlhood, queer identity, and trauma theory. Drawing on recent work in girlhood studies, the analysis foregrounds Armfield's depiction of three sisters—Isla, Irene, and Agnes—who struggle to navigate familial estrangement, the burdens of intergenerational trauma, and the precarities of queer adolescence within a climate-crisis dystopia. The study situates the novel against postfeminist cultural backdrops, resisting narratives of seamless empowerment and instead highlighting how trauma unsettles narrative and lived experience. Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000) underpins the discussion of privilege and vulnerability among the sisters, while queer theory (Sedgwick 1993; Halberstam 1998) illuminates Agnes's affective and embodied navigation of sexuality and identity. Literary trauma theory is used to interpret Armfield's narrative techniques, including fragmentation and nonlinear chronology, which reflect the persistence of wound and memory. Ultimately, the article argues that *Private Rites* advances contemporary fiction by probing the unstable ties of sisterhood, the affective volatility of queer girlhood, and the cyclical inheritance of trauma, offering a textured vision of survival that is marked by misrecognition, longing, and endurance.
Keywords: intersectional girlhood; queer identity; trauma; sisterhood; postfeminism; ecological precarity.

RITUALES DE HERMANDAD: LA INFANCIA FEMENINA QUEER Y EL TRAUMA EN *PRIVATE RITES* (2024), DE JULIA ARMFIELD

Resumen: Este artículo examina *Private Rites* (2024), de Julia Armfield, a través de las perspectivas entrelazadas de la interseccionalidad en la adolescencia femenina, la identidad queer y la teoría del trauma. Basándonos en trabajos recientes sobre estudios de la niñez, el análisis destaca la descripción que hace Armfield de tres hermanas —Isla, Irene y Agnes— que luchan por superar el distanciamiento familiar, la carga del trauma intergeneracional y las precariedades de la adolescencia queer en una distopía marcada

[1] Recommended Citation: Aguza Berral, Marta. "Rituals of Sisterhood: Queer Girlhood and Trauma in Julia Armfield's *Private Rites* (2024)." *Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 13, no. 3, 2026, pp. 1-20: https://reunido.uniovi.es/index.php/jaclr/index

por la crisis climática. El estudio sitúa la novela en un contexto cultural posfeminista, resistiéndose a las narrativas de empoderamiento sin fisuras y destacando, en cambio, cómo el trauma perturba la narrativa y la experiencia vivida. La interseccionalidad (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000) sustenta el debate sobre el privilegio y la vulnerabilidad entre las hermanas, mientras que la teoría queer (Sedgwick 1993; Halberstam 1998) ilumina la navegación afectiva y encarnada de Agnes por la sexualidad y la identidad. Se utiliza la teoría literaria del trauma para interpretar las técnicas narrativas de Armfield, incluyendo la fragmentación y la cronología no lineal, que reflejan la persistencia de la herida y la memoria. En última instancia, el artículo sostiene que *Private Rites* avanza en la ficción contemporánea al explorar los lazos inestables de la hermandad, la volatilidad afectiva de la adolescencia queer y la herencia cíclica del trauma, ofreciendo una visión texturizada de la supervivencia marcada por el desconocimiento, el anhelo y la resistencia.
Palabras clave: infancia femenina interseccional; identidad queer; trauma; hermandad; posfeminismo; precariedad ecológica.

1. Introduction

In recent years, cultural criticism has increasingly turned its attention to the shifting terrain of girlhood, recognizing girls not merely as future women-in-the-making but as agentic subjects with complex, intersectional identities. The emergence of girlhood studies since the 1990s has foregrounded the need to examine how girls' experiences are represented and negotiated across social, cultural, and political contexts (Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz; Kearney). Scholars in this field resist monolithic constructions of "the girl", emphasizing instead the plurality of girlhoods, shaped by intersecting axes of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. This article is situated within this critical turn, aiming to "visibilise" girlhoods that are often obscured by dominant postfeminist and neoliberal frameworks. Julia Armfield's recent novel *Private Rites* (2024) offers a particularly rich site for this analysis, as it entwines familial trauma, queer desire, and fractured sisterhood within a climate-crisis dystopia that mirrors the instability of contemporary girlhood.

Armfield's novel follows three sisters—Isla, Irene, and Agnes—in the aftermath of their father's death, weaving together memories of maternal absence, sibling estrangement, and an ever-present ecological catastrophe. Their dynamic is marked by both intimacy and alienation: Isla, the eldest, becomes defined by emotional detachment; Irene oscillates between political rage and exhaustion; and Agnes, the youngest and half-sister, emerges as a queer figure whose adolescence is shaped by abandonment and desire. This constellation of perspectives refuses a unified notion of girlhood, instead staging a dialogue between multiple and sometimes contradictory modes of becoming. Crucially, Armfield resists the cultural impulse, identified by Anita Harris, to celebrate the "future

girl" as a neoliberal emblem of resilience and adaptability. Rather than envisioning girlhood as a site of seamless empowerment, *Private Rites* exposes the fractures, silences, and traumas that accompany gendered subjectivity under patriarchal and postfeminist conditions.

The framework of intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides an essential lens for reading *Private Rites*. Intersectionality highlights how overlapping structures of oppression "intersect" to shape experiences of marginalization in ways that cannot be reduced to single categories (Crenshaw 1242). Patricia Hill Collins further theorizes this as the "matrix of domination" whereby power operates simultaneously at structural, cultural, and interpersonal levels. Within Armfield's narrative, the sisters' divergent experiences—conditioned by different maternal lineages, sexual identities, and generational positions—illustrate how family trauma is not distributed evenly but rather refracted through intersecting dynamics of privilege and vulnerability. Agnes's queer girlhood, for instance, is deeply marked by abandonment and anxiety, while Isla and Irene, despite their own mental wounds, dissociate from the same trauma through professionalization and political performance.

Angela McRobbie's critique of postfeminism also illuminates the novel's cultural work. McRobbie argues that postfeminist discourses operate by appearing to affirm women's agency while simultaneously re-inscribing patriarchal norms through individualization and consumerism. In *Private Rites*, this paradox is dramatized through the sisters' attempts to manage their trauma: Isla adopts clinical detachment in her career as a therapist; Irene alternates between activist posturing and domestic compromise; Agnes channels her queer desire into compulsive encounters that blur the lines between autonomy and self-destruction. These strategies reflect not empowerment but the contradictory pressures of a postfeminist culture that demands self-regulation while offering no real escape from patriarchal legacies.

This article aims to argue that *Private Rites* exemplifies an intersectional vision of girlhood by dramatizing how three sisters inherit, resist, and reconfigure trauma within the matrix of domination of patriarchal and postfeminist culture. By examining the sisters' dynamics through the lenses of intersectionality, queer theory, and trauma studies, I contend that the novel foregrounds girlhood as a fractured, plural, and affectively charged site. The analysis pursues three main objectives: first, to trace how familial estrangement and intergenerational trauma destabilize conventional understandings of

girlhood; second, to analyse how Agnes's queer girlhood both disrupts and intensifies the patterns of disaffection embodied by her older siblings; and third, to show how the dystopian backdrop amplifies these dynamics, situating girlhood within broader critiques of neoliberal resilience narratives and ecological precarity. Ultimately, the article positions Armfield's novel as a vital cultural text that not only visibilizes marginalized forms of girlhood but also interrogates the ideological frameworks—postfeminist, patriarchal, and neoliberal—that continue to shape their representation.

2. Critical Notes on Sisterhood, Queer Girlhood and Trauma

In order to situate this article within broader critical discourse, it is mandatory to take a look at different theoretical undercurrents. First of all, trauma theory has emerged as a central lens in contemporary literary studies, allowing critics to interrogate how literature represents experiences that shatter the boundaries of ordinary narrative and consciousness (Caruth 3; Balaev 7). In this context, Cathy Caruth's influential concept of "unclaimed experience" underlines the impossibility of fully apprehending or expressing trauma at the moment it occurs; instead, trauma returns belatedly, structuring memory and storytelling in complex, nonlinear ways (Caruth 5; Felman and Laub 57). This latency means that literary texts often feature gaps, silences, or fragmentation as formal correlates of traumatic experience (Whitehead 40; Luckhurst 82). To further exemplify how trauma resists full apprehension at the moment of its occurrence, Caruth's study of the Holocaust reveals that:

> The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of the Jews' historical experience: since the murder is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. (17)

Hence, Caruth argues that a traumatic event is often not fully understood or consciously experienced at the moment it happens. Instead, the mind protects itself by "forgetting" the event in that instant. Because of this initial repression, the trauma only becomes real or fully perceptible later, when it returns in unexpected ways—through memories, symptoms, or repetition. Moreover, Judith Herman's psychiatric model, articulated in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), draws attention to the dynamics of psychological processing. Herman identifies recurring patterns: safety, remembrance, and reconnection,

stages often paralleled in trauma fiction where characters oscillate between alienation and attempts at healing (Herman 103; Balaev 13), as well as some difficulties that may entail going under therapy, mainly the "identification with the perpetrator" (Herman 103) on the part of the therapist, making the patient's recovery more difficult. In this line, Freud's psychoanalytic theory of trauma, especially his notions of repetition compulsion and deferred action, remains foundational for understanding how narrative and memory intertwine in trauma discourse (Freud 12; Balaev 4). Contemporary critics such as Michelle Balaev, Ruth Leys, and Dominick LaCapra have pressed beyond these roots, highlighting trauma's cultural and social dimensions—how storytelling can serve both as a mode of testimony and as a vehicle for individual or collective recovery (Balaev 11; Leys 90; LaCapra 36). In Leys's words, when facing trauma "[f]iguring the order of authority, law, and difference, culture produces a split in the self" (67).

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's testimonial theory further reinforces literature's unique ability to bear witness to historical and personal trauma. Felman and Laub stress that literary texts often enact a crisis of witnessing, foregrounding how language itself can fail or flounder when encountering traumatic history (25). Anne Whitehead's and Roger Luckhurst's studies further demonstrate how trauma fiction borrows formally from psychological discourse, deploying fragmentation, repetition, and disrupted chronology to evoke the experience and aftermath of trauma in ways that traditional history cannot (Whitehead 18; Luckhurst 99).

Private Rites builds on these traditions: Armfield's portrayal of family trauma, intergenerational wounds, and the aftermath for its characters is informed by these theoretical debates, moving fluidly between psychological and cultural registers. The novel thus contributes to—and complicates—literary trauma theory by foregrounding subjective fragmentation, communal bearing witness, and the slow process of narrative reintegration.

Moving on to another key issue, queer girlhood studies interrogate normative images of adolescence, exploring how non-heteronormative identities and desires reshape the coming-of-age narrative (Sedgwick 1990, 1993; Halberstam 1998, 2005). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet exposes how secrecy and disclosure contour queer subjectivities. As Sedgwick has asserted, "'[c]loseted-ness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that

surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 3). She has further observed that 'queer' can refer to many things: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (*Tendencies* 7). In other words, Sedgwick highlights that 'queer' names the fluid, non-fixed nature of gender and sexuality, resisting any single, uniform meaning.

Jack Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* and *In a Queer Time and Place* reconsider adolescence through the perspective of alternative gender presentation and temporalities. As Halberstam has written, "[m]asculinity . . . becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (*Female Masculinity* 2). Furthermore, Halberstam highlights how women have overcome lots of obstacles, both social and cultural, during the last hundred years in order to make "their own unique contributions to what we call modern masculinity" (*Female Masculinity* 46). In this context, one central contribution is "that what we recognize as female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a proliferation of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity, the more they multiply" (ibid.). In this reflection, Halberstam shows that female masculinity is not a single, uniform category but a diverse and expanding range of ways to embody masculinity. Their work destabilizes fixed binaries and introduces the concept of queer time life paths outside of linear developmental logics (Halberstam).

Moreover, intersectionality is foundational in terms of queer theory studies. Crenshaw's theory and works such as Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin's *The Lives of Transgender People*, demonstrate how queer girlhood is shaped not only by sexuality and gender but also by race, class, and ability. As Crenshaw has asserted: "Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem there, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things" (qtd. in Steinmetz). She has often pointed out that "[b]ecause the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 140). Crenshaw then stresses that Black women's experiences cannot be understood by looking

at racism and sexism separately, because their oppression emerges precisely from the intersection of both. This framework allows scholars to challenge monolithic representations and highlight the diversity of queer experiences. Hill Collins similarly emphasizes how "[u]nderstanding the contours of this heterogeneity . . . constitutes one important task for U.S. Black feminist thought" (93). She affirms: "The sexual politics of Black womanhood reveals the fallacy of assuming that gender affects all women in the same way—race and class matter greatly" (Collins 229).

Affective and embodied experiences are also central for the present discussion. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* theorizes orientation—how queer girls inhabit worlds shaped by estrangement and possibility: "In order to become orientated, you might suppose that we must first experience disorientation" (5). Disorientation is at once a "crisis of losing one's place in the world" (Ahmed 139) and also an aspect of queer experience that can produce alternative methods of interacting with the world. Valerie Rohy's work also elucidates how emotion, shame, and euphoria mark queer girlhood narratives, attending to "the entanglement of blood (lines) and time (lines)" and the affective volatility of queer life (Tuhkanen 106).

Furthermore, collective memory and testimony play vital roles. Felman and Laub's testimonial theory reveals "[t]he absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story" (68, emphasis in the original). They write: "Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect" (69). Judith Butler's theory of performativity productively extends this notion of continuity into the present: "gender is always a doing . . . there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (32). Read together, these perspectives suggest that just as gender is constituted through ongoing acts, traumatic histories are continually reconstituted through acts of narration and reception—through the presence of a listener who makes the survivor's ongoing experience legible.

Contemporary fiction such as *Private Rites* exemplifies and further develops these theoretical perspectives: Armfield's depiction of queer sisterhood, nonlinear

bildungsroman, and embodied affect draws from the intersectional, affective, and choral features above. The text's structure and style echo queer theory's insistence on complexity and plurality in narrative form and lived experience.

Moving on to the last key issue, we must discuss sisterhood, both as metaphor and lived relationality. Sisterhood is a critical site for feminist theory and literary analysis. Second-wave feminism advanced sisterhood as a call for resistance, yet as bell hooks writes, "[w]e can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity" (138). She cautions: "Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression" (ibid.). Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, affirms: "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own" (132-133). Furthermore, Lorde insists that

> difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate. (111)

Lorde's words highlight how solidarity across differences is essential for collective liberation, reinforcing that freedom and creative transformation can only emerge when diverse experiences and strengths are recognized as interdependent. This perspective underscores the political and ethical necessity of embracing differences rather than fearing them. Lorde's emphasis on interdependency and the creative potential of difference sets the stage for Adrienne Rich's expansion of relational possibilities. By introducing the concept of the lesbian continuum, Rich extends this idea, showing how women's connections—beyond narrowly defined sexual relationships—reveal broader patterns of female history and psychology that have been historically marginalized or overlooked:

> I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman . . . If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism'. (27)

Literary criticism of Jane Austen and Toni Morrison demonstrates that sisterhood can function as a site for moral development, resistance to patriarchy, and spaces of trauma and healing (Curtis 13; Fontes 62; Morrison 52). Trauma theory complements this view, emphasizing that "[t]he telling entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim" (Felman and Laub 69), highlighting how recounting trauma can be an act of agency and restoration. Beyond literary and psychological perspectives, sisterhood can also be understood as political praxis. Feminist intersectional solidarity—built on strategic coalitions across multiple axes of difference—represents a contemporary reformulation of sisterhood (hooks 88), demanding both the redistribution of power within movements and the active centring of marginalized voices. In *Private Rites*, all of these theoretical currents converge: sisterhood figures as both buffer and wound, a source of trauma and healing. Armfield's portrait of sisterly and chosen bonds dovetails with feminist theories that foreground solidarity, contestation, and the labour of reckoning with trauma.

3. The Politics of Sisterhood in *Private Rites*

Julia Armfield's *Private Rites* is at once a novel of climate dread, ritual, and inheritance, but at its core lies the fraught, elastic bond between sisters. Isla, Irene, and Agnes—bound by blood but separated by years, resentments, and competing self-conceptions—form a shifting constellation in which sisterhood becomes not simply a matter of familial proximity but of power, misrecognition, and longing. Armfield renders sisterhood as a paradoxical space, where intimacy and estrangement overlap, and where the desire for recognition often collides with the inability to truly see the other.

From the beginning, the novel signals that Agnes, the half-sister, inhabits a liminal position. Isla thinks of her not as a sister in the intuitive sense but as something imposed: "Agnes is her sister–is their sister–in the sense that all three of them share a father, but the concept of sisterhood is not one that Isla has felt able to extend to Agnes" (Armfield 40). This ambivalence highlights one of Armfield's novel central themes: sisterhood is not automatically granted by bloodline, but must be lived, recognized, and sustained in time. Agnes's existence is felt as an interruption for her sisters, as can be deduced from the following instance: "something that happened to [Isla] and Irene: a small and squalling baby, abandoned within a year of her birth by her mother and left to be managed by everyone else" (40). Here we can observe how Isla's perception collapses Agnes's

personhood into an event. Thus, her birth becomes less an addition to the family than a calamity to be managed.

Irene, by contrast, embodies a different tension within sisterhood, namely the persistence of misrecognition across time: "There are, Irene has always felt, few frustrations to match that of being read a certain way by family members. To be misunderstood is one thing, but the curious hostility of a sibling's approach lies less in what they miss than in the strange backdated nature of the things they choose to know" (Armfield 29). For Irene, the enduring perception of her as the "furious" seventeen-year-old—"self-consciously furious in every direction and seldom polite enough to let anyone reach the end of a sentence" (29)—illustrates the difficulty of outgrowing the narratives siblings impose on one another. Sisterhood in this novel thus becomes an archive of outdated versions, where the present self is always shadowed by the fossilized versions others insist upon.

At the same time, Armfield does not reduce sisterhood to hostility alone. The novel repeatedly stages moments where antagonism doubles as a strange intimacy. For Agnes, even watching Isla and Irene quarrel offers a kind of belonging, though she remains excluded from it: "The two of them going at it in a play of hostility that is still a greater intimacy than either has ever shown to her" (Armfield 64). This moment of reflection captures the painful paradox of the half-sister that the character of Agnes represents in the novel: her siblings' ability to wound one another through conflict is itself proof of a closeness she does not share. Armfield suggests that even negative recognition—the sibling who gets under one's skin—is preferable to absence. To be antagonized is still to be seen, to be perceived and to be contested.

This uneven distribution of intimacy becomes especially clear when Isla reflects on the age gap between herself and Agnes: "She remembers, all at once, that Agnes is eleven years younger than she is, recalls the gap of time between them like something taken from her body, the ache like stolen flesh" (Armfield 40). The bodily imagery here is striking: the age gap itself becomes a wound, something stolen. Sisterhood is figured as both loss and reminder of what cannot be recovered—a history never shared, a bond never fully realized.

Isla and Irene's relationship is marked by a different kind of painful closeness. Their quarrels are often petty on the surface but signal deeper currents of guilt,

miscommunication, and rivalry: "I don't understand what it is you're so offended by, Isla said. I'm saying you're here now, and that's really nice to see. I'm saying it's a good thing. You're saying it's a miracle, is what you're saying" (Armfield 45). The sharpness of this exchange captures the difficulty of affirming each other without accusation; even kindness becomes a site of misinterpretation. The sisters' interactions suggest that to be a sister is to be permanently vulnerable to being misread—every utterance doubled with possible insult.

Agnes's perspective complicates this dynamic further. She recognizes her marginalization and yet yearns for a stronger tie: "Agnes is only their half-sister and the distance between them is keenly apparent even outside crises" (Armfield 31). The emphasis on crisis underscores how familial bonds are often summoned at moments of death or catastrophe, but for Agnes, even those moments do not fully bridge the gap. This is exemplified when she is the last to know about their father's death, and also the last to learn that their father had left her the house in which he lived in the will. Her position dramatizes the limits of family as a guarantee of belonging.

Yet the sisters also share memories of a household shaped by paternal absence and maternal instability. Isla recalls shielding Irene from their mother's volatility: "She was well practised at leaving things out: the parts where their mother and father fought, the shouting that Irene never heard because Isla had put her in her room with a record playing and shut the door" (Armfield 76). Here sisterhood is not simply antagonism but protection, albeit one structured by omission. To protect Irene is to curate her experience, to erase parts of their shared past. Sisterhood becomes an act of narrative control, as much about silence as about solidarity.

Taken together, these threads reveal Armfield's richly nuanced portrayal of sisterhood as neither wholly nurturing nor wholly destructive. Instead, it is a shifting terrain of misrecognition, rivalry, longing, and occasional grace. The sisters are bound by what they share—a mixture of trauma, memory and blood—but equally by what they withhold from one another. In *Private Rites*, sisterhood is not a stable category but a contested site, a relationship always in flux, shaped by absence as much as presence, and by the impossible desire to be both known and forgiven.

4. The Development of Queer Girlhood in *Private Rites*

If sisterhood in *Private Rites* is marked by tension and misrecognition, queer girlhood is presented as an equally uneasy territory—one that is defined by secrecy, performance, and bodily immediacy. Through Agnes's perspective in particular, Armfield explores queer adolescence and young adulthood not as a period of liberation but as an arena of ambivalence, where desire is both a refuge from familial fracture and another site of vulnerability.

Agnes's relationship to her own body and to intimacy often pivots on detachment, as if sex provides not connection but reprieve. Swimming becomes a central metaphor here, allowing her to submerge thought in physical repetition: "Thinking when swimming is not thinking, but something more like elevator music. It comes as secondary to the fact of her body, to the bald imperative of motion, and it makes her feel easier, more physical, and less liable to come upon a thought that will cause her to scream and to never stop screaming" (Armfield 17). This description encapsulates queer girlhood as a negotiation between the mind's turmoil and the body's insistence on survival. The pool, with its blend of routine and anonymity, becomes the stage for Agnes's sexual encounters, where physical immediacy overrides introspection.

Her sexual liaisons are blunt, often impulsive, and marked by a refusal to romanticize. She has sex with women in changing rooms, the smell of chlorine lingering on her skin, noting with ironic detachment that her fingers "smell both of chlorine and a little like the woman she fingered at the swimming pool" (Armfield 18). This detail collapses the sensory and the erotic into something simultaneously banal and transgressive. Queer desire here is not aestheticized but presented in its raw materiality—sweat, chlorine, touch—underscoring Armfield's commitment to demystifying the queer body.

At the same time, Agnes's attraction is immediate, visceral, almost overwhelming. Seeing a girl with dark hair, she "immediately wants to fuck her. It happens like this sometimes; impulse driven sharply upwards and into her gut" (Armfield 19). These passages resonate with the intensity often associated with queer girlhood—desire as a sudden, bodily surge that bypasses rationality. For Agnes, attraction is neither tentative nor polite; it interrupts, erupts, and redefines her space in the world.

However, queer girlhood in the novel is never entirely secure. The environments in which Agnes expresses her sexuality—the swimming pool, clubs, elevators, anonymous hookups—are liminal and precarious. At a queer night, she experiences both exhilaration and alienation: "A butch in a harness palms her back to move past her and she considers catching hold and asking to be rescued. Someone help me, for fuck's sake. It passes, the way it always passes, and the music is loud enough to let her forget" (Armfield 61). This scene crystallizes the ambivalence of queer girlhood: the bar is a site of visibility and possibility, yet also of overwhelm, where desire coexists with the impulse to flee.

Moreover, Armfield also frames Agnes's queer life against the background of a family that has failed to provide secure recognition. Her sisters' bond excludes her, leaving her to seek belonging elsewhere. Nevertheless, even in queer contexts, she carries a sense of being peripheral, of wanting more intimacy than she can admit: "The two of them going at it in a play of hostility that is still a greater intimacy than either has ever shown to her. Agnes shakes her head again, tries to force down the feeling that occasionally arises, of wanting to be wanted more than she pretends" (Armfield 64). Here, queer desire and sisterly longing intertwine, revealing that what Agnes craves is not merely sex but recognition—a recognition she feels denied both within her family and beyond it.

Agnes's presentation of herself as "simply a body" also reveals the defensive strategies queer girls often adopt: "It is very easy, she has found, to present herself as simply a body, to take her towel off in a changing stall and think of nothing and to feel much better for the break" (Armfield 18). To disassociate mind from body is to protect herself from the vulnerabilities of intimacy, to avoid the risk of being seen as a whole person. Armfield captures how queer girlhood is sometimes lived in fragments, in surfaces and gestures, rather than in an integrated self.

This fragmentation is further reinforced by the novel's apocalyptic setting. In a flooded world where permanence is impossible, queer girlhood mirrors the instability of the environment. Relationships flicker and dissolve as quickly as floodwaters rise; intimacy is provisional, like the precarious ground on which the sisters' house is built. The instability of home and environment echoes Agnes's sense that queer life is something improvised, improvised anew each time she enters a changing room or a bar.

Still, Armfield resists portraying queer girlhood as only alienating. The novel allows space for desire to be funny, irreverent, and alive. Agnes's scorn for "anyone who chooses to do the butterfly, which is a stroke for cunts" (Armfield 17) illustrates how queer girlhood, while fraught, is also textured by wit and irreverence. Desire here is not solemn but playful, a survival mechanism as much as a drive.

All in all, we can conclude that in *Private Rites*, queer girlhood emerges as a negotiation between visibility and erasure, desire and detachment, intimacy and alienation. Through Agnes, Armfield illustrates how the queer girl grows up in the cracks of family and society, forging identity in spaces that are temporary, unstable, and often inhospitable. If sisterhood in the novel is marked by misrecognition, queer girlhood is marked by precarious recognition—the desire to be wanted, to be seen, even if only briefly, and even if only as a body. Armfield's rendering insists on the validity of that precariousness, portraying queer girlhood not as failed adulthood but as a state of becoming, one as volatile and irreducible as the floodwaters that shape the sisters' world.

5. The Articulation of Trauma in *Private Rites*

If *Private Rites* is haunted by water, it is equally haunted by trauma: the psychological aftershocks of parental absence, the inheritance of violence, and the bodily marks of grief deferred. Julia Armfield presents trauma not as a singular event but as a dispersed condition, embedded in memory, ritual, and the very architecture of the Carmichael household. For Isla, Irene, and Agnes, trauma manifests as both rupture and continuity—an "always worsening" atmosphere that shapes the texture of their adult lives (Armfield 78).

The sisters' childhoods were defined by neglect and instability, conditions that created traumatic residues persisting into adulthood. Isla recalls the burden of caretaking, her father delegating responsibility: "a small and squalling baby, abandoned within a year of her birth by her mother and left to be managed by everyone else. The house disarranged and inhospitable, their father telling Isla daily to clean up the mess, as though she had created any of it" (Armfield 40). Trauma here emerges from an inversion of roles: children forced into premature responsibility by a parent's withdrawal. The house itself becomes complicit, its disorder encoding the absence of nurturing structures.

Moreover, Irene's memories underscore how trauma shapes self-perception. She recalls being perpetually misread by her family: "A person can be thirty, thirty-five, and yet still largely described by her sisters in terms of things which happened to be true at the age of seventeen" (Armfield 29). This persistence of outdated identity is not just irritating but traumatic, trapping Irene in a caricature of her own anger. Trauma here is the freezing of the self in the eyes of others, the impossibility of moving beyond an adolescent wound.

On the other hand, for Isla, trauma is also embodied in self-destructive impulses. Irene remembers her sister "aged eighteen, wandering out of the bathroom with a horizontal cut already clotting at the corners, asking someone to come and see what she'd done" (Armfield 56). This stark scene positions self-harm as both cry and ritual, a way of making visible what remains unspeakable. Armfield does not sensationalize the act; rather, she presents it as part of the continuum of trauma inherited within the family.

Furthermore, Agnes, too, is marked by traumatic loneliness. As a child, she staged elaborate play-suicides with stuffed animals, using her father's architectural models: "At the age of eight, unencumbered as she was by mother or sisters or very much in the way of distraction, Agnes stole a scale model that belonged to her father and used it to stage suicide attempts for stuffed animals in her bedroom at the top of the house" (Armfield 85). Though framed as childish play, this ritual reflects the internalization of despair in a household where death and absence were everyday presences. Trauma here is absorbed unconsciously, repeated as mimicry, before Agnes even understands the concept she is reenacting.

Parental figures play a central role in shaping these traumatic landscapes. The sisters' father is remembered as glacial, dismissive, and opaque: "She remembers him looking at her—opaque expression of one thinking of something else—imagines she is eight again, thirteen again, and the nothing she always was in his company" (Armfield 55). To be a "nothing" in one's father's eyes is a deeply formative trauma, rendering the child's existence unacknowledged. Similarly, their mother's volatility, with "night sweats and frenetic impulses, long periods of agitation that found her outside at odd times and in uncertain weather" (Armfield 76), contributes to an environment of instability. Isla's act of hiding this reality from Irene—putting her in a room with a record to drown out shouting—highlights how trauma is managed through silence as much as exposure.

We can even say that trauma in *Private Rites* is not confined to the past; it is continually reactivated in the present. At the hospital after their father's death, Isla experiences dissociation: "She had pictured holding her loss in one hand and then the other, pictured opening up a window and lobbing out her loss to see how quickly it fell. You're dissociating, she had thought to herself, don't do that. Don't panic, for God's sake" (Armfield 25). The absurd image of physically handling grief underscores how trauma resists assimilation; it cannot be processed linearly but only displaced into surreal mental gestures.

Armfield also links trauma to the larger environmental collapse shaping the novel's setting. The sisters live in a world where burial is impossible because the earth is flooded: "Unpleasant to say, but there's no way to bury a body in earth which is flooded out" (Armfield 59). This impossibility of ritual parallels their difficulty in mourning their father. Just as the land refuses closure, trauma refuses resolution. Instead, both seep into the present, surfacing like the "previously buried bodies" that rise from the ground (59). Trauma here is ecological as well as familial: it is the inheritance of a broken world.

Despite its weight, trauma in the novel does not obliterate the possibility of connection. Moments of sibling recognition, however fleeting, puncture the atmosphere of pain. Agnes recalls Isla once hugging her before leaving for university, an embrace "she would repeat, as if experimenting, on the same toys she would latterly fling to their deaths" (Armfield 86). Even in its awkwardness, the gesture signals how trauma and tenderness intermingle, how survival depends not only on endurance but on small, remembered acts of care.

Ultimately, Armfield portrays trauma in *Private Rites* as cyclical rather than linear. It is transmitted across generations, re-enacted in bodies, and embedded in the environment. The Carmichael sisters carry their parents' wounds as their own, manifesting in anger, detachment, and self-destruction. Yet the novel's insistence on narrating these experiences also gestures toward the possibility of articulation. Trauma may never fully heal, but in being spoken—or written—it becomes shareable, if not solvable. In Armfield's world, survival is not the erasure of trauma but the ability to live with it, to persist amid its waters, and to recognize its presence in oneself and in one's sisters.

6. CONCLUSION

In approaching Julia Armfield's *Private Rites*, this article set out three interconnected objectives: first, to analyse the novel's portrayal of sisterhood as a site of intimacy, hostility, and misrecognition; second, to examine how queer girlhood is articulated through Agnes's perspective, exploring the tensions between desire, embodiment, and detachment; and third, to investigate how trauma—both familial and ecological—structures the lives of the Carmichael sisters. Having now addressed these objectives, it is possible to trace their convergence and to assess how they collectively illuminate the thematic core of Armfield's novel.

The first objective was to show how *Private Rites* complicates traditional literary notions of sisterhood. Rather than presenting the Carmichael sisters as bound by unconditional loyalty, Armfield depicts a fragile and often antagonistic connection, where recognition is inconsistent and rivalry is endemic. Isla and Irene, close in age, remain locked in patterns of mutual misreading, while Agnes occupies the precarious position of the half-sister, perpetually peripheral to their bond. Yet, as the previous analysis of sisterhood demonstrates, intimacy is not absent but refracted through conflict, sarcasm, and half-articulated care. Armfield thus achieves a representation of sisterhood that is at once honest and unsettling, foregrounding the paradoxical blend of estrangement and closeness that defines sibling life. This objective clarifies how *Private Rites* expands the literary archive of sibling relationships, moving away from idealized unity toward a portrait of fractured but persistent kinship.

The second objective was to consider queer girlhood in the novel, particularly as embodied by the character of Agnes. The analysis highlights how her sexuality is expressed through impulse, corporeality, and a defensive detachment that treats intimacy as a reprieve rather than a communion. Her encounters at swimming pools and queer clubs illustrate how queer girlhood often unfolds in transient, unstable spaces where visibility and alienation are intertwined. Crucially, Agnes's longing to be recognized—to be wanted more than she admits—parallels her position within the family, where she remains on the margins of her sisters' bond. By achieving this objective, the article demonstrated how Armfield weaves queer girlhood into the novel not as an isolated subplot but as a thematic extension of sisterhood itself: both are shaped by a desire for recognition, by the risks of intimacy, and by the difficulty of being fully seen.

The third objective centred on trauma, exploring how it permeates the sisters' lives in both personal and collective registers. The analysis traced how childhood neglect, parental volatility, and acts of self-destruction echo across the sisters' adulthood, shaping their identities in enduring ways. Trauma in *Private Rites* is not resolved but repeated, manifesting in dissociation, compulsions, and gestures of silence. Moreover, the novel situates trauma within a broader ecological context, as the flooded world disallows traditional mourning rituals, mirroring the sisters' inability to process grief. In meeting this objective, the article reveals how Armfield collapses distinctions between the personal and the environmental, suggesting that trauma is as much atmospheric as it is individual.

Taken together, these three lines of inquiry underscore how *Private Rites* interrogates what it means to live in the aftermath—of broken families, failed intimacies, and a collapsing climate. Sisterhood, queer girlhood, and trauma are not separate categories but overlapping frameworks through which the Carmichael sisters experience the world. Isla's caretaking, Irene's anger, and Agnes's queer detachment all emerge as responses to the same constellation of absence and instability. The objectives of this article, therefore, culminate in the recognition that Armfield's novel resists neat resolutions: sisterhood never becomes wholly reconciled, queer girlhood never entirely secure, trauma never fully healed. Instead, *Private Rites* insists on portraying survival amid fracture, intimacy amid estrangement, and desire amid precariousness.

In fulfilling its objectives, the article has shown that Armfield's work contributes to contemporary literature not only through its dystopian setting but through its piercing examination of human relationships under pressure. By dissecting the layered dynamics of sisterhood, by situating queer girlhood within both personal and collective contexts, and by analysing the persistence of trauma, this study illuminates how *Private Rites* is less a narrative of endings than of endurance. Its characters do not overcome their wounds so much as learn to inhabit them, a vision that mirrors the ecological instability of their world. In this sense, this analysis affirms the novel's thematic coherence: the fractured ties between sisters, the tentative articulations of queer identity, and the lingering presence of trauma all converge to form a narrative of survival in the ruins of family and environment alike.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

MARTA AGUZA BERRAL holds a degree in English Studies from the University of Córdoba (2020-2025) and in Translation and Interpreting from the same university (2020-2025). She is currently studying a Master's Degree in Specialized Translation at the University of Córdoba (2025-2026), which she combines with teaching and research work at the University of Córdoba as an honorary collaborator. She has been awarded the "Beca Semillero de Investigadores" grant, which is aimed at young researchers at the University of Córdoba (2024-2025), as well as the "Beca de Colaboración" (2025-2026), awarded by the Spanish Ministry. She has published a few book chapters and an article on English literature and has participated as a speaker at various conferences and seminars on English-language literature and cultural studies. She aims to write her doctoral thesis in the field of postcolonial literature studies and critical discourse analysis, specifically on Palestinian diaspora literature written in English by female authors.
Contact: l02agbem@uco.es
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7072-5545

WORKS CITED

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006.
Armfield, Julia. *Private Rites*. Fourth Estate, 2024.
Balaev, Michelle. *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*. Northwestern UP, 2012.
Beemyn, Genny, and Susan Rankin. *The Lives of Transgender People*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.
Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–99.
---. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1989, no. 1, 1989, pp. 139–67, https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8.
Currie, Dawn H., Deirdre M. Kelly, and Shauna Pomerantz. '*Girl Power': Girls Reinventing Girlhood*. Peter Lang, 2009.
Curtis, Tony. *A Common Ground: Essays on the Practice of Teaching English Literature*. Multilingual Matters, 2001.
Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, 1992.
Fontes, Maria T. *Sisterhood in Toni Morrison's Fiction*. Peter Lang, 2010.
Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Translated by James Strachey, Norton, 1961.
Halberstam, Jack. *Female Masculinity*. Duke UP, 1998.

---. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York UP, 2005.
Harris, Anita. *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*. Routledge, 2003.
Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1997.
hooks, bell. "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women." *Feminist Review*, no. 23, Socialist-Feminism: Out of the Blue, Summer 1986, pp. 125–38. *Jstor*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1394725.
Kearney, Mary Celeste. *Girls Make Media*. Routledge, 2009.
LaCapra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. U of Chicago P, 2000.
Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.
Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*. Routledge, 2008.
McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. SAGE, 2008.
Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Harvard UP, 1992.
Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985*. Norton, 1986.
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. U of California P, 1990.
---. *Tendencies*. Duke UP, 1993.
Steinmetz, Katy. "She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today." *Time*, 20 Feb. 2020, www.time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality.
Tuhkanen, Mikko. "Queer Hybridity." *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, edited by Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr, Edinburgh UP, 2009, pp. 92–114.
Whitehead, Anne. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh UP.