

Jules Gill-Peterson

The Miseducation of a French Feminist

01/05

e-flux journal #117 — april 2021 Jules Gill-Peterson
The Miseducation of a French Feminist

It's the same old story of feminism. In the beginning, woman was a monolith. Then feminists of a certain element invented a new language, with its own *écriture féminine*, to undo the patriarchal order of things and forge a new world.¹ Except, it turned out they'd risked it all on some essentializing scheme. A new feminine mystique that made woman back into nature again. Then, in 1990, Judith Butler broke us of woman and into gender. Right?

I never know what people mean when they say *trans* feminism. It could be the other side of the problem of not knowing, either, when they say *trans-exclusionary* feminism and mean it.

When I say those words, do I mean me?

What makes feminism *trans* if not the bastard daughter of two infamously anti-*trans* feminists? Chère Liz, chère Luce, my adolescent loves. I have no childish wish to kill them and take their place. This isn't an oedipal tale. But neither is it an anti-Oedipus. I want *trans* feminism to mean something, to be more than *trans*-inclusive regular feminism. More than what we thought didn't happen in the 1970s, when *trans* and feminism supposedly had their falling out. A *trans* feminism through a new relation to language, one which could provision for me, and girls like me, to finally speak. To invent a relation to what language has not already ordered. To speak, or at least to write, to my once feminist mothers not as a child, but as another. Another woman. Which always means another kind of woman.

I was twenty-two and I took a course on Luce Irigaray, taught by my professor Liz. She trained me in everything I know about those big names Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Nietzsche, along the way to a deep apprenticeship in what Americans call "French feminism." I never identified much with that moniker, being myself not-American. I had read *those* big names, like Wittig, Kristeva, and Cixous in French during my strangely provincial education in Canada, all with some fascination. Irigaray I knew only by reputation for being an essentialist. Apparently, she really believed women were one way and men were another and that was bad because it put a limit on what women were allowed to be, even if she critiqued men's monopoly on domination. But Liz took us queer children of *Gender Trouble* and made us into partisans of French sexual difference in less than a semester.

I wrote her a seminar paper on the figure of "the child": how to think "it" differently, without conscripting the existence of children to the reproduction of the social. That was all a high theory way to say that children, as images or a set of ideas, serve the purpose of making the future the same as the past. The child is used to

literalize the idea of reproduction at the scale of the entire world, so that things like the Family, the Nation, the Race, and the Economy don't fall apart or even change too much. It's why we spend so much anxious time trying to make children all the things we're told are actually natural and inborn. It's one of the most ridiculous paradoxes you can find in everyday life.

Look at children's sexuality, for instance, which has to form and grow even as kids are supposed to be asexual, which means that our culture is structurally pedophilic, taking an erotic interest in children's purity. It also means that children's sexuality is so fragile that a gay character on a cartoon, or too much sex education, might ruin the institution of marriage and even the institution of heterosexuality itself. It's why there's a whole subreddit now populated by teenaged boys convinced that their lives have been ruined by their addiction to porn and that, if only they stop masturbating, they'll become powerful and desired supermen.

This paradox goes for bodies and gender too, which are supposed to be derived out of genetics and brains formed by infancy and yet are so precarious that it's okay for people to openly hate and try to kill queer and trans kids to purify the population of its deviants. It's also a paradox of race, in one of the worst versions of all, which isn't even supposed to be biological but nevertheless guarantees that the spoils of white supremacy and empire won't be threatened because a twelve-year-old Black boy can be shot on camera and half the country *likes watching it*.²

The point is, no one has to admit any of these secret truths. They're open secrets. That idea, that figure of "the child" – *won't somebody please think of the children!*, screams Maude Flanders – guarantees that all this gross violence needed to maintain the status quo can pass itself off as innocent. As innocent as the cherubic white child who must be protected from the terrible sins of the world. It's just, she's actually not a real child, *she's* the alibi for those sins.

My question in grad school was, could a child become otherwise? What would become of its "parents," of putative mothers and fathers and queer others, if they met not as equals (as in, the same), but as happily different from one another? For me, that was a way of imagining children free from having to serve this violent and conservative function for a world that they didn't create but were thrown into and openly abused by. I wonder why that project appealed to me so much. I still have the seminar paper I wrote that semester, dusted with Liz's penciled-in notes. I had forgotten how nice my professors were to me in grad school, smiling upon my

02/05

e-flux journal #117 — april 2021 Jules Gill-Peterson
The Miseducation of a French Feminist

overly ambitious essays. In her comments, Liz gently observed of my reading of Irigaray that "I think you may be a little harsh about her 'humanism.'" It was true. I was young and eager and trying to think my way out of a dreadful life as what I was sure was not-quite-human. That such a serious feminist philosopher thought me a good student was more satisfaction than I thought I deserved.

Liz told us that Irigaray, then in her eighties, still held a yearly seminar in the UK, convening graduate students from around the world to train them and keep her philosophical project growing. She suggested that I and a few others from the class apply. I had no real philosophical aspirations but I fantasized that it was something like the chance of a lifetime. I landed in Bristol later that summer with my paper on the child in hand.

Irigaray was nothing like I expected. She was petite and elderly and very annoyed at speaking slowly in English, but also animated by a streak of energy that took everyone aback in her penchant for telling bawdy jokes and giggling like a schoolgirl. I was mesmerized by her presence after having spent months reading decades of her writings on sexual difference. I was most taken by her ethics, through which she had composed stunning tributes to being a lover and encountering the beloved as irreducibly different, never trying to possess what lies outside of your immediate world. In her exquisite formulation of "I love *to* you" (*j'aime à toi*), I felt a pathway to another world, though I was too young and too untransitioned to know what it could possibly be.³

It was uncanny, the way she clearly saw me without ever daring to overstep the interval between us. Here's the riddle: because I was a boy – I guess – and because she was notoriously hetero – I guess – I was often invited to sit next to her at the dinners that followed the seminar each day. There was Luce, holding court with the single glass of wine she consumed daily, eager to gossip, tell stories, and flirtatiously get on. Because I spoke French and she frequently felt tired from a day in English, I was gifted an intimacy of fluency, a language shared between us. It made me feel special.

I asked her one night what each of my then favorite white philosophers had been like.

Derrida?

He was the nicest person you could ever meet, with such a heart.

Foucault?

An interesting fellow, but of course his entire philosophical project was irredeemably masculine.

Deleuze?

He was onto something about difference,

perhaps. He lived a life of great suffering.

I knew not to ask about Lacan – besides, I didn't like him either. She paused almost solemnly for a moment, sipping her wine before a smile lit up her face.

The thing is, it is I who outlived all these men!

The thing is, it's true that she was the last of a generation of postwar continental thinkers. The feminist philosopher who outlived all the men who were celebrated far more than she. Men who, from the moment Lacan fired her for her brilliant critique of his work, kept her in exile, without a professorship. I had never met someone who despite it all incarnated her life's work, somehow free of resentment. She rose every morning to find a beautiful tree in front of which she could practice yoga. She would find time every day in Bristol to visit a park to share some sort of invisible communication with mischievous squirrels. She had only recently given up her practice as a psychoanalyst after decades spent in deep relation.

S and I asked her one day during a break in the seminar about trans people. She walked with us slowly in the courtyard of the old university building, sipping her coffee, and shared that she had seen a number of trans women in her psychoanalysis practice over the years. And that she regretted how psychoanalysis was often used to disallow trans identity through analytic sleights of hand and the disavowal of the power wielded by the analyst. This failure in the analyst's duty to the other, she told us, was yet another masculinist negation of difference. She felt her trans analysands should be encouraged to become as they would come to know themselves to be. Transness was in no way incongruent with a project of sexual difference. Quite the contrary.

"I never meant that there can only be two sexes," she offered, turning to look at us with what I had to interpret as feeling. "I would be unhappy if those who have read my work use it for such ends. We can say that there may be 'at least two' sexes. My point is that we have only a single sex at this time."

Was a missive on trans feminism thus delivered in that June courtyard in Bristol? At least that's how I remember it. But I felt certain that no one back in the United States would believe me if I told them. *Irigaray is not an essentialist – she recognizes trans people as part of her feminism and said there can even be more than two sexes!*

But it was also true that I didn't understand what it was that I wanted to bring back with me from the seminar. Me, who had broached transness as innocently as I could, as if it were an important but abstract philosophical

question. Me, who started having nightmares every night during the seminar. One night, Luce appeared in a dream, admonishing me for my endless failures. I reached my hands out towards her, but before I could touch her I realized that I had no body. I looked down from my hands and saw nothing. Air where I should have occupied space. A feeling of pure terror gripped me and I awoke into my body, drenched in a sweat.

The next morning, I told her I was having terrible nightmares. She asked if I was suffering from any neuroses. I said that I had been having great difficulty with anxiety and depression my whole life, but lately it was so bad that I was taking medication for the first time. She nodded and said that she could sense as much in my energy. I asked if I could tell her my dream because she had appeared in it, but she refused. She could not interpret my dreams for me, she said, because that would teach me nothing. Instead, I first had to cultivate a relation to the terrifying difference manifest as her in my nightmares, to walk a path that would lead me to the interpretive resources to make meaning of it. She pointed to a window, which opened out onto the university campus filled with ancient trees. Find a tree, she told me, and sit before it every day, for as long as you must until you begin to cultivate a spiritual relationship between your pain and the tree's energy. That is how you will start to heal yourself.

At the time I dismissed this as outlandish, except part of me knew she was right and also immensely generous to offer such a vision of my becoming. Better than any queer person rehearsing a generic discourse of boundaries, Irigaray practiced an entirely non-possessive relation to us as students. She gently cultivated our autonomy and subjectivity by giving back to us, with love, the interior space that we so often give up willingly in the hope that power will govern us from the inside out and relieve us of the burden of being ourselves. It's really hard, to let go of the relief of self-negation, the sigh of letting your body be invaded by someone else's designs. It takes a true feminist to resist the invitation every single time.

Many are not strong enough.

When I pressed her another day to give me something more of guidance, she added that her impression of my trouble was that I had no relationship to sexual difference to speak of. A crushing thought for a student at a seminar on, well. *Vous êtes, culturellement*, she said matter-of-factly over lunch before giggling to soften the blow, *complètement homosexuel*.

The thing is, she was strangely right. I was plagued by a problem of homosexuality in a cultural, not ontological, sense. A problem of sameness that I already felt with my boyfriend at

03/05

e-flux journal #117 — april 2021 Jules Gill-Peterson
The Miseducation of a French Feminist

the time, who I couldn't compute as the same as, or even alike, to me, and who I feared coupling with. When I got home from Bristol he had a surprise waiting for me. He had had our apartment painted a beautiful shade of blue while I was away. The generosity of it made my stomach drop so hard I could have almost discovered then that the problem was inside me and not our home. No wonder I couldn't even sit down in front of a tree.

Years later, I walked through some woods near my house for the first spring since beginning my transition. I stopped in front of a tree and spoke with it for some time. The tree mostly listened, but had it chosen to speak, I wonder if it would have spoken with Luce's voice.

But that spring was many years away still. I remained stateside, troubled as ever by nightmares. For the next year, Luce and I wrote each other letters between Brooklyn and Paris. The great irony was that in mine, describing my dissertation, I was charging queer studies with the fantasy that the queer child could birth himself, that this child needed no mother. She kept directing me elsewhere, until our letters dropped off, as any long and difficult conversation inevitably does.

I should like to finish our correspondence now with a letter unfaithfully translated by me.

Chère Luce,

I know it has been many years, so I hope first that this letter finds you. I had to write to you one more time. Something has happened. I am beginning to feel what it is like to know without seeing. I am not sure how to express a certain gratitude, but if you will let me try ...

I wonder if you even remember me. And if you could meet me today, if you would understand how I became out of that miserable boy you met in Bristol and Warwick and in our letters. I found the letters recently, tucked away in a box, and they made me cry, at first. I wrote you in a way I would call relentless, shamelessly trying to outthink the false and unsolvable problems you kept gently asking me to set aside for what was missing from and unthought in their premises. All that time, all those words, to try to make something of a queer child desperate for a mother instead of having to birth himself. The unconscious of my text was so morbidly visible. And yet you never once got mad at me for not learning right away, not opening myself up to a different possibility that echoed in your words. You whispered that the endless collection of mothers in my life was still not giving birth to me and so perhaps I had miseducated myself on the most basic question of my life and my thinking. I blush in shame at what a bad student I was, but I know you would never wish shame upon me.

You once described metaphysics as a leap of abstraction out of the immediacy of life.

I feel deep kinship with trees now, I want you to know. I feel connected to the natural world that I had long felt estranged from. I believe in spirit and energy because I have felt them to be real, not as resources or supplements to my ailments, but as shared parts of me, fibers that can extend from the forest into my flesh when I am weak or dreamy. I am less afraid of water. I still have trouble breathing the air and approaching fire, but I am no longer afraid to keep trying.

I suppose I thought that to become a girl was to necessarily be reborn, to claim a mother who could give me myself anew. I feel another blush of shame that I came to you with that wish. But I think now, maybe, that the lesson was simply to find within myself the confidence to approach you as another. As a woman, too. And that doing so is to say also that I love you for what I can never know why, or even if, you gave me intentionally. But I do not need that kind of interior truth from you to live well because being in relation to you, our interval I mean, outlasted even the words exchanged between us. They stoked a living fire that has kept me more alive than I had ever thought myself deserving.

And so, I write to you, one last time in that spirit, even if you will never read these words.

Je vous prie de croire,

Jules

This is an unfairly clean story, a fabulated letter, because it's obvious to me that my miseducation as a French feminist still doesn't work on the axis of race. Irigaray isn't known for thoughtfully and expansively acknowledging Western Europe's colonial relation to the rest of the world. Her penchant for yoga is maybe as naive as the embarrassing book she wrote about the meeting of "East and West." It could be worse, sure. A few years ago, I was at a conference where Julia Kristeva spoke and I was horrified to learn that she had taken a state-funded position in France to "reeducate" Muslim immigrants so that their psyches would become "individuated" and "European" instead of "collective." In the Q and A after her presentation, Black and brown women scholars lined up to admonish her naked racism, which she returned with nothing but scowls.

This story isn't that. But I still blush brown in embarrassment at my love for Luce, who surely never saw my skin.

As unlikely as my miseducation in French feminism may have been, I can't help thinking about how much more unlikely *English* feminism would be anyways. I may have spent a year presenting myself as a child to Irigaray in my letters, much as I presented my neutered work

04/05

e-flux journal #117 — april 2021 Jules Gill-Peterson
The Miseducation of a French Feminist

on “the child,” but she wisely kept rejecting that premise with love and encouraged me instead towards sexual difference. My letters with Irigaray are about a deferred transformation built of what we shared, another way of saying the word “interval.” The letters were a mode of relation and now I am not a child of her feminism as I had hoped to be, or even a trans child of French feminism, but a trans woman. Like her in one way, but also irreducibly not, in my difference, including my brownness.

Love without possession is feminist. A trans woman writing to her teacher, years later, is a voice speaking a certain feminism.

Irigaray did not intrude into my interiority. She never wrote me a letter that said, “I think you are a woman.” Nor would she have dared write me to say that I could not be one. She generously offered me visions for my own becoming through which I might find the answers to my torments, intellectual and personal. She made real for me an autonomy and a legitimation in my search for a livable self, and now it’s the subjecthood with which I write these words, full of femme feeling. Irigaray’s unlikely trans feminism has worked well in that way, regardless of anything she’s ever written, or said, that is radically insufficient on other grounds. Here I am, a brown woman to her because I present myself as one and it’s not her desire to decide on my sexual difference or my subjectivity. French feminism of a surprising sort.

But that rich Scottish woman, the author? That bitch is living in my head, rent free.

Trans-exclusionary radical feminism is almost entirely about breaching the interval. It has nothing in the way of respect for the other or a love of wisdom and surprise. The TERFs who serve in *her* army of today’s English feminism relentlessly harass and hound trans women out of a wish to see them eradicated from the face of the earth. And all the while they merrily claim innocence and victimhood for themselves under the immunity of white women. Now a TERF lives inside my head, trying to undo me from within.

No matter, she won’t hear what I’m saying anyways. There is no ethical project that can coerce someone’s listening.

Irigaray doesn’t live in my head. Truth be told, that’s why I don’t know anything of her these days. We lost touch after I sent a letter, and then another, that never received a reply. Maybe she moved. I know I did. But I still lay awake at night sometimes, wondering if she might visit me again in a dream. I’d like to see in her eyes the feeling of recognition without sameness.

x

1

The term *écriture féminine* is from Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93.

2

For extended accounts of how “the child” does all this sexual, racial, and gender work, there are books you should read, like Kathryn Bond Stockton’s *The Queer Child* (Duke University Press, 2009) and Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence* (NYU Press, 2012). I also wrote a book about this in the case of trans kids, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

3

Luce Irigaray, *J’aime à toi* (Éditions Grasset, 1992).

05/05

e-flux journal #117 — april 2021 Jules Gill-Peterson
The Miseducation of a French Feminist