

In Memoriam

Iris Young

1949-2006

On August 1, 2006 after a year-and-a-half long battle with throat cancer, Iris Young passed away. At the time of her death, Iris was Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and a member of the faculty boards of the Center for Gender Studies and the Human Rights Program of her university. Her extensive publications included *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990); *Throwing like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (1990); *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (1997), and *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000). She was also a personal friend to many of us affiliated with *Constellations*, a contributor to the journal, and a participant in the Conference on Philosophy and the Social Sciences in Prague.

Iris's work emerged out of that explosive energy of the early 1980s, generated by the coming together of continental political thought, feminist theory, and the rethinking of democracy in view of the frustrated utopian hopes of new social movements. Integrating the insights of French feminist theory, particularly those of Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous, into a radical democratic theory inspired by new social movements in the USA, Iris Young developed a memorable critique of the distributive paradigm of justice. Taking aim at the heart of John Rawls's theory, she changed how we think not only about the *who* of justice but also about the *what* of social goods. No longer satisfied with the distinction "political, not metaphysical," which dominated Rawls's thought, Iris showed how expanding the concept of the subject to include an embodied and affective being would also lead to refocusing the theory of justice not only on the distribution of public goods but also on injuries of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism. Iris's early book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, thus laid the groundwork for the now-familiar distinction between "redistribution" and "recognition." The "five faces of oppression" that Iris brought to light were primarily injuries of recognition.

One of Iris's most memorable essays, "The Ideal of Impartiality and the Civic Public," in *Feminism as Critique*, a 1987 volume I co-edited with Drucilla Cornell, thematized the appearance of the body in the public sphere. She criticized Habermas's work on the public for occluding and leading to the disappearance from sight not only of the body but of affects and the emotions as well. She rejected the ideal of "impartiality" in liberal and contemporary critical theory for banishing bodily particularity and affectivity into the private realm. For her, this move implied the denial of the subjectivity of those, like women, gays, blacks, and other ethnic groups, whose public appearance was necessarily marked by the "difference" through the filter of which their embodiedness would be perceived in the public sphere.

This argument marked for me the beginning of a conceptual split: unlike Iris, I was not willing to jettison the ideals of impartiality and neutrality in the public sphere, and I insisted on an immanent rather than debunking criticism of these moral regulative principles. Iris, I thought, was too romantic in her faith in the subjectivity of the oppressed and in her belief in the good that would come from revealing, rather than concealing, some aspects of subjectivity from the public eye.

It is also around this time that I understood how profoundly Iris was indebted to the experience of American democracy: for many like me who come from other worlds where the politics of difference can assume murderous dimensions of ethnic, religious, national, and linguistic conflict, the civil war in Yugoslavia extinguished any hopes in the emancipatory dimension of a politics of difference without the guarantees of democratic constitutionalism.

But Iris did not think of the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, or Africa in theorizing justice and the politics of difference. Her experiences were those of grassroots urban activism in cities like Worcester, Massachusetts, where she taught at Worcester Polytechnic Institute at the beginning of her career; in Pittsburgh, where she likewise was a professor at the University of Pittsburgh for some years; in New York, where she was born; and in Chicago, where she died. Her moving Preface to her last book, *Inclusion and Democracy*, begins by invoking these experiences and moral and political commitments.

“Throwing like a Girl” is another memorable Iris Young essay. Whatever my misgivings may have been at the theoretical level about jettisoning impartiality, neutrality, and the civic public, reading this essay I greatly admired Iris’s brilliant articulation of the experience of the female body – its vulnerability, its messiness, its sheer thereness, whether during cycles of menstruation, pregnancy, birth, or menopause. Iris could turn experiences of shame into ones of subtle philosophical reflection.

When the small body which enveloped this bouncy and spirited woman began to fight an aggressive cancer, I saw how Iris turned her inventiveness and playfulness against her declining physical frame. During the December 2005 meetings of the American Philosophical Association in New York, we had lunch together. The speed with which the cancer kept recurring gave me the sense that she would not be with us for much longer. After a long and tedious wait to sit at one of the equally tedious restaurants in the basement of the New York Hilton, Iris and I finally got to order lunch. My eyes kept wandering to the big scar on her throat; as I asked Iris about radiation and chemo-therapy, people kept stopping at the table greeting her, hugging her and wishing her well. Iris ordered a big ice cream chocolate for lunch! She smiled impishly and said that since her throat was still burning, she would treat herself to ice cream!

The last time I saw her during a conference at the University of Chicago in late May 2006, she had also playfully tried to cheat the cancer by covering her thinning hair with a stylish white beret, à la française. She looked like a frail existentialist out of the 1950s of the Latin Quarter! We joked about the stylishness of her gesture – a gesture, alas, none could have known was made in the face of impending death. But it is her

humor, ironic defiance, and boundless energy which will mark those final weeks and our memories of her always.

Good-bye Iris! We miss you already!

Seyla Benhabib

We are deeply saddened by the loss of Iris Marion Young, an exceptional scholar and friend and longtime *Constellations* editorial associate.

From her widely acclaimed *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), highly influential writings on gender and embodied experience, thought-provoking contributions to democratic theory, and, more recently, pointed criticisms of the US security regime as a protection racket, Iris thought and wrote with an intense honesty and clarity. Drawing upon the experiences of activists, her own and others', she took the claims of social movements seriously, challenging the basic concepts of normative political theory from the embedded, partial, and specific positions of struggles against militarism, poverty, masculinism, racism, and other forms of oppression. She writes in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*: "Rational reflection on justice begins in a hearing, in heeding a call, rather than in asserting and mastering a state of affairs, however ideal. The call to 'be just' is always situated in concrete social and political practices that precede and exceed the philosopher" (5). Iris heeded these calls, calling upon others to heed them as well.

Much of her work sought to draw out the unrealized possibilities of the present, possibilities experienced as lacks, desires, and yearnings for freedom. Thus for Iris, universality was less a principle or ideal to which all might agree than the passion of the activist fighting to redress the injustices and omissions that result from the normal workings of social and economic institutions. As she notes in an article published in 2001, a goal of activists is to rupture our ways of thinking, to make us *wonder* about what we are doing rather than simply to weave an argument out of the reasons available in a given discursive setting. Such wonder fractures the given, enabling universality to appear in a new way of thinking about, approaching, hearing, and heeding the conditions in which we find ourselves, conditions predicated upon prior harms and exclusions as well as on principles, struggles, and aspirations for justice.

Iris listened to many voices, voices from others active in feminist, anti-poverty, and peace movements as well as voices from many philosophical quarters. At a time when too many academics sought to draw lines between, say, liberals and postmodernists or communitarians and deconstructionists, Iris drew from a rich theoretical archive, bringing together Rawls and Kristeva, Frankfurt School critical theory and French post-structuralism. For her, the resources of critique and responsiveness available through the imbrications of these differing lines of thought enabled a politics and a thinking far richer and more nuanced than what was achievable by any single strand alone. It's almost as if she didn't have time for scholastic divisions, being far more preoccupied with the pressing work of political change.

It is to all of our great loss that she didn't have more time – particularly given the pressing present of ever-increasing war and militarism in the Middle East and the suspension of basic rights and liberties, critical deliberation, and the separation of powers in the United States. In *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris reminds us that democracy is hard to love (2000). Yet, seeing democracy as necessarily intertwined with justice, she gave us reasons to love it, to love it for its flaws, as a differentiated, disorderly, conflicted, and conflictual way of living together under unjust conditions. In the months and years to come as we struggle with threats to democracy presented in democracy's name, we will do well to heed her reminder and keep returning to her work and life, to the fierce, pragmatic engagement with which she confronted oppression and inspired hopes for justice.

Jodi Dean