

Acceptance speech by Michelle McGowan
2010 Iris Marion Young Undergraduate Award recipient

Thank you for such a flattering introduction! I'm so honored to receive an award in memory of a scholar and activist like Iris Young. It's wonderful to be surrounded by so many of my professors, mentors and fellow nominees as we celebrate our passion and dedication to the types of social change Young devoted her life to. I would also like to thank the Women's Studies Program for hosting this lovely event.

As professors, therapists, social workers, and advocates for social change, we become experts at negotiation, sometimes biting our tongues for the sake of our clients, students or political reputation. We often have to settle for methods of harm reduction as we slowly progress towards achieving a more socially just world. This has become one of my greatest challenges as I struggle to work through the system as a professional, while still radically resisting the oppressive power structures in my private life. Rather than wasting this rare opportunity by preaching to the choir, I instead would like to serve as a reminder. A reminder to take a break from the delicate thought and care we use when speaking to even the most frustrating students, clients or colleagues.

I say we deserve a vacation. Allow yourself room to be furious sometime this week, month, year without apologies or hesitation. Take time to set aside the tip toeing. Engage in a movement or even just a moment where you can cry, scream, stomp on the political correctness and fear that binds so many social movements to jargon and academia. It is in these rare moments, regardless of an individual's level of education or knowledge of discourse, that true human compassion and desire for justice will surface. It is derived not from a textbook, but from an instinctive desire to alleviate the pain and suffering of others.

Iris Young reminds us that there are many creative ways manifest the changes we want to see around us. That we don't always have to compromise and that we never have to settle for less.

The following poem is about the ways in which I have refused to compromise.

My skin is eggshell, pale pink, freckled, cloudy beige, but my personality, individuality is bleached out, as I am cataloged- 'white.' My brothers and sisters appear as sandstone, ebony, birch, charcoal, though they too are reduced to one color, one label. I work to understand how our reduction, our categorization, our segregation are experienced through hierarchy and oppression; I work, yet recognize that I will never truly experience racial discrimination. I can only acknowledge and attempt to use my undeserved privilege in the name of equality.

Though in many cultures the shape of my genitals embodies weakness, I recognize this discrimination is rooted in fear. Patriarchy will shudder as I refuse to be considered less and will not tolerate its use of law, religion, or media to control my body and mind. I will not conform to the norms that divide sister from sister, claiming that we are rivals and that males are our opposites. I will not be socialized to believe that my sex determines my gender and will not allow oppressive labels to restrict me or my partner. I hope one day each of us will feel safety and freedom in loving whichever humans we choose, regardless of their reproductive functions.

I thrive on adventure, experience and education, searching for loud spirits, souls who will scream for equality and solidarity. I strive to organize and unite, not on the basis that we overlook our differences, but instead that we value our individual experiences and constructively use them as we make change. In unison, we must shout that We too are free, that We too are oppressed, but, most importantly, that We too are human.