

***Pornography Embodied*: Joan Mason-Grant Remembered (1958–2009)**

Alison Wylie

Hypatia 26.1 (2011): 130-131

When the cluster on “Sexual Expressions” began to take shape, one of the first people I thought of to serve as a referee was Joan Mason-Grant, given her longstanding philosophical and activist interest in pornography. It was with great sorrow that I learned, when I contacted her, that she had been diagnosed with a fast moving cancer. Joan was most interested to hear about this emerging “found cluster”; “it sounds like an interesting issue of *Hypatia* to look forward to, but unfortunately my own academic work has had to be suspended” (May 17, 2009). She died just four days later.

As both a scholar and an activist, Joan was centrally concerned with what she took to be the promise and the pitfalls of the Dworkin-MacKinnon approach to understanding and combating the harms of pornography. Crucial insights about how to reframe our thinking about pornography had been submerged, she argued, in debate generated by the 1982 Minneapolis Civil Rights Ordinance that kept our attention focused on questions about the nature of speech and legal strategies for its regulation or protection. In *Pornography Embodied: From Speech to Sexual Practice*, Joan urged that we return to Dworkin and MacKinnon’s central, innovative insight: “that pornography is not merely the representation or expression of ideas—that is, ‘speech’—but a *material practice* of subordination” (Mason-Grant 2004, 2). Although the tools of speech-act theory carry this line of argument some distance forward, she made the case that these are fundamentally limited and limiting; they serve, ultimately, to codify a conceptualization of pornography as speech and to reaffirm a reductive legal framing of the issues. What we need, she argued, is a nuanced understanding of how the social meanings and values of pornography are enacted and become quite literally embodied in everyday practice—not just communicated as words and pictures, with (or without) illocutionary force.

The philosophical account Joan offered in *Pornography Embodied* is a theory of sexual practice and performance, a theory that captures the ways in which routinized, normalized uses of pornography actively constitute forms of social agency and sexual competence. This marks a conceptual shift that has profound practical as well as philosophical implications; rather than pressing for (or resisting) legislation, it redirects our energies to interventions that bring to awareness, and that disrupt, the submerged politics of seemingly natural forms of sexual know-how and desire.

Joan’s philosophy was always engaged. She was long involved in what she described as “grass roots sexual politics,” working locally with the Middlesex-London Health Unit Teen Sexuality Coalition (London, Ontario) and increasingly turning her attention to the ways in which mainstream, mass-market pornography is implicated in patterns of sexual violence and the sex trade that operate on a global scale. She was enthusiastic about the opportunity to work with the Social Justice and Peace Studies program at King’s University College (University of Western Ontario), a community that she described as devoted to the social and political values that animated all her work.

We regret that Joan did not live to see this “found cluster” come to fruition, but we are delighted to offer the *Hypatia* readership a collection of essays that, we believe, reflects the spirit of feminist engagement she lived so fully. AW

REFERENCE

Mason-Grant, Joan. 2004. *Pornography embodied: From speech to sexual practice*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.