

Introduction

WENDY CHAPKIS

Picking up *Macho Sluts* again has been a little frightening; maybe because I'm still suffering from a bit of post-traumatic stress disorder after the Feminist Sex Wars of the 1980s in which Patrick Califia's work figured so prominently. The last time I had the honor of introducing Califia was almost twenty years ago before a talk s/he gave in California; the next day, I found graffiti scrawled on the bathroom wall of my favorite café that read "Wendy Chapkis promotes violence against women."

But my anxiety isn't entirely about ghosts from the past. It would be daunting in any situation to be asked to write something about Patrick Califia's work. Califia is one of the most important writers on sexual politics of my generation. Over the past thirty years, I have read and re-read his essays, taught a number of them in college seminars, and referenced them in my own writing. Califia has had a profound effect on my identity, too, on what it means to me to be queer and on how I think of myself as a woman (even as he transitioned out of that shared identity). Califia is also an iconic top who knows exactly how to take down those foolish enough to talk back.

But there was an even more basic challenge for me in writing this essay. Despite my constant engagement with his nonfiction work, when I dug out my old copy of *Macho Sluts*, I was surprised to realize that I hadn't picked it up in years. As I began re-reading it, I remembered why: Califia's fiction makes me uncomfortable. It took a couple of stories for me to remember that the discomfort is intentional. In a 1979 essay, "The Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," Califia wrote: "If someone wants to know about my sexuality, she can deal with me on my own terms. I don't particularly care to make it easy. S/M is scary. That's at least half its significance ... S/M is a deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy. It is a form of sexual extremism

and sexual dissent.”¹ In the 1980s, when I first read that essay and was introduced to lesbian S/M, Califia’s provocation was nothing less than electrifying. Like many feminists and queer nationals of the time, I was unwilling to see women’s liberation and gay liberation reduced to a polite equal rights campaign—especially if equality was modeled on the lives of those who were straight, male, or conventionally gendered.

Feminism and queer politics were compelling to me precisely because they were dangerous, or at least could be. In my twenties and early thirties, I read Califia in order to be confronted as well as aroused, and never came away disappointed. Even—or perhaps especially—at the height of the AIDS epidemic, and while deeply engaged in struggles against sexual violence in women’s lives, I knew it wasn’t simply sex but, in the words of the ACT UP slogan, silence that equaled death. As fellow porn writer and essayist Carol Queen observed, *Macho Sluts* “blew a hole in the dam of female erotic silence.”²

If these stories could be told, what couldn’t?

Now, in my fifties, I find Califia as discomfiting and as important as ever. Sexual extremism and dissent is a necessary tonic in the early twenty-first century, when the right to marry is at the top of the “gay agenda” and when “sex education” still includes little more than appeals to abstinence and monogamy. With teen pregnancy rates among the highest in the industrialized world, HIV rates rising, and priests and public servants alike regularly exposed as sexual hypocrites, we are clearly in need of a more honest and less self-satisfied conversation about sex. Califia’s writing prompts that kind of engagement and honesty.

Not all readers are up to the challenge. Since its publication in 1988, *Macho Sluts* has repeatedly been accused of glorifying and inciting violence against women—hence the bathroom graffiti. But, as Califia has consistently responded, “No erotic act has an intrinsic meaning. A particular sexual activity may symbolize one thing in the majority culture, another thing to members of a sexual subculture.”³

The subculture in which these practices derive their erotic meaning—the lesbian S/M community—was almost invisible when these stories were written, even to those who would call it their own. The book, then, had a

particularly generative power, helping to write into collective awareness the community it described. As Califia has said, the stories were intended seduction of an “audience that would appreciate my work (and let me live out some of my fantasies in the real world). That’s the one thing that I believe makes my fiction unique, the fact that it built the very community that it celebrates.”⁴ For some critics who believed that no woman could, or should, willingly engage in the practices found in these pages, the power of *Macho Sluts* to “recruit” was an additional reason to condemn the book.

But feminism of the period was hardly united in opposition to pornography and S/M. In fact, from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, there was an explosion of feminist-created sexual culture, much, though not all of it, lesbian. Women-owned and -operated sex stores were available to women for the first time, including Good Vibrations in San Francisco, which opened in 1977. Pornography by and for women appeared in the founding of an astonishing number of new periodicals such as *Yellow Silk: Journal of Erotic Arts* (1981), *The Power Exchange: A Newsletter for Women on the Sexual Fringe* (1984, edited by Pat Califia), *On Our Backs: Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian* (1984), *Bad Attitude: A Lesbian Sex Magazine* (1984), *Outrageous Women: A Journal of Woman-to-Woman S/M* (1984), *The Taste of Latex: Entertainment for the Sexually Disenfranchised* (1990), *Frighten the Horses* (1990), and *Black Lace* (1991), to name just a few. Lesbian S/M organizations were founded in several major cities including San Francisco (Samois, founded in 1978, and the Outcasts, in 1984) and New York (the Lesbian Sex Mafia, founded in 1981). And, prior to *Macho Sluts*, Califia produced a ground-breaking book on the diversity of lesbian sexual desire and practice, *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* (1980), and also helped to edit the two earliest volumes of lesbian S/M instruction and erotic fiction, *What Color Is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (1979) and the second edition of *Coming to Power: Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M* (1983), both by Samois.

In other words, while some of the most intense condemnation of *Macho Sluts* originated from within the women’s movement, it is also true that these stories are as much a product of so-called “second wave” feminism as the hostile response they sometimes received. *Macho Sluts* would not have

been possible without feminist demands for control over our own bodies, for a right to express our own desires, and for recognition of the centrality of consent in the very definition of sex (as distinct from assault).

Of course, *Macho Sluts* isn't intended simply to stimulate conversation or thought. Like all pornography, it is meant to produce a more immediate and physical response in the reader. Whether it succeeds at that level depends both on the writer's talents—which are considerable—and on a match between individual kink and Califia's imagination. Califia is extraordinarily good at creating memorable characters and placing them in exquisitely detailed and richly imagined scenes. Not all readers, though, will find the situations as described to their liking.

Erotic tastes are notoriously quirky and diverse and it is a given that any piece of erotic fiction will leave some readers dry and dissatisfied or even disturbed, perhaps S/M fiction more than most. These stories require a willingness to accept the possibility that a whip is not always a weapon, forceful penetration (whether by cock, fist, or object) is not always assault, and words created to injure might also be used to other ends and effects.

If that understanding is in place, even readers who do not think of themselves as S/M enthusiasts may find much to like in this collection. Many of us initially were drawn to S/M less because of an obvious interest in dominance and submission and more because of an undeniable attraction to the wild women who were. As Cindy Patton, the founder of one of the original lesbian sex magazines, *Bad Attitude*, wrote in 1984, “for the lesbian community right now, at the first moments of our journey toward a new understanding of our sexuality, ‘s/m’ and ‘pornography’ function more as categories of relationship to the sexual than they reflect a consistent set of objective practices.”⁵ Perverse pleasure and sexually explicit imagery offered a compelling alternative to expectations of womanly purity, chastity, and timidity.

I was not alone in my fascination with these women who appeared to know exactly what they wanted and how to communicate it through the codes of black leather or the particular placement of a handkerchief in the appropriate back pocket. Seeing women signal the specifics of their desires made me realize how little I knew about my own. It also made me eager to

find out. Becoming sexually literate was both an adventure and an obligation when confronted by people like Califia, who said: “Anybody who answers the question, ‘what would you like to do?’ by saying, ‘I don’t know, what would you like to do?’ should be taken out and shot.”⁶

The stories in *Macho Sluts* are populated by women who are shameless in pursuing their own pleasure. The notion that a woman’s reputation could be damaged by having “too much sex” with “too many people” is effectively turned on its head in this book. If for that reason alone, *Macho Sluts* could be a potent weapon in women’s hands.

But these stories do more. They teach us often unexpected things about our own desires. In a culture in which most pornography is still made by men for men (including the industrial porn category of girl-girl sex) and more formal sex education continues to focus on the dangers of sex and not on its pleasures, variations, and techniques, many of us are still essentially sexually illiterate.

About fifteen years ago or so, I sat in a packed university auditorium, watching over two hours of porn clips with Susie (the “sexpert”) Bright as she taught us “how to read a dirty movie.” When the lights went up on a dazed and uncomfortably exposed audience, she said something like, “I bet each of you, especially the women in this room, could give me a list right now of all the things you didn’t like in the films we just watched. Women are really good at critiquing sex. But before you do that, try to identify one or two scenes that really got you off. They might even be some of the same scenes that you found offensive or disturbing. Pay attention to those scenes; they can teach you a lot about yourself, and that information is worth knowing.”

This is excellent advice to follow while reading *Macho Sluts*. It is important to pay attention to what passes the “wet (or hard) test.” What turns out to be especially compelling in this collection will say a great deal more about the reader than it does about the relative quality of the various stories. For example, the fact that “The Vampire” and “The Hustler” both work so well for me, while I can barely get through “The Finishing School,” doesn’t just speak to my preference for sci-fi over Victorian school-girl fantasies, but also about my taste for butch women and rough

trade over highly mannered mistresses. I always find “The Surprise Party” and “The Spoiler” hot in part because they remind me of my enthusiasm for cock (whether flesh or silicone). Readers who have different literary and erotic tastes will have a different set of favorites. For those who have little practice with pornography, it might also be helpful to keep in mind that porn is meant to be read in snatches; the point is not to race through to find out what happens at the end.

The stories in *Macho Sluts* were written in the 1980s and in some ways reflect that period of now-closed lesbian bars like Maud’s and Amelia’s, easy-access pay phones, and ongoing sex wars. But what is just as striking as the historical references is what is historically absent: while condoms and gloves accompany the sex scenes in these pages, and a vampire worries about the possibility of “tainted blood,” the AIDS epidemic that so consumed the gay community in 1988 is otherwise invisible. *Macho Sluts* instead offers an alternative universe in which sex is uncoupled from the ongoing reality of death and dying from AIDS. For example, at a time when the only public sex venues for women were private parties or rented space in heterosexual or gay men’s clubs (and even those limited venues were being closed in an effort to contain the spread of HIV), Califia envisions a sex club so popular that women wind around the block three deep to get in on the weekends. Califia’s Calyx of Isis—which, incredibly, even in the twenty-first century, only exists in the imagination—is a clean place for women to get down and dirty with “rooms and lockers, big piles of clean towels and robes, stacked up boxes of lube and latex gloves.” The club offers not only a bar and a disco, a Jacuzzi and sauna, a masseuse studio, rooms for rent by the hour, a public sex room with a mirrored ceiling, and well-equipped dungeons, but also weekly STD and Pap smear clinics and offsite childcare subsidized by the club for use by patrons.

Not all the stories in this collection, however, offer utopian fantasy. If “The Calyx of Isis” imagines a world in which feminist sex radicalism is flourishing, “The Hustler” offers a world destroyed by war: “men’s wars” of bombs and missiles followed by a “woman’s war” against prostitution, pornography, and perversion. A “grubby perv bar” like the Labrys is the only real, if always threatened, place of refuge for sexual outlaws. “The Vampire,” too, features bars more closely resembling what was, in fact,

available to the leather dykes of the 1980s: not “the Calyx” but instead “Purgatory,” a small club with three times as many men as women, largely heterosexual, with the exception of a “handful of scruffy lesbians dressed like destitute bikers” and a few “slumming, well-dressed leather men.” Califia’s stories do not romanticize the limitations of such venues but do give them their due: “[Y]ou must practice this despised art where you can, and disregard what is tawdry or unclean—or learn to love the dirt, the sleaze, because it represents your membership in the elite.”

What is perhaps most striking about Califia’s fiction, though, and what sets it apart from most pornography, is its attention to the complexities of character and identity. Califia’s characters break through established roles within pornography and shatter even subcultural conventions. The very title of the book, *Macho Sluts*, reflects Califia’s appreciation of trans(gressive) identification. While the author clearly respects the political and erotic power of “top”/“bottom,” “gay”/“straight,” “woman”/“man,” “vanilla”/“S/M,” these concepts are used only as signposts, demarcating territory that then can be deliberately transgressed. In the process, Califia forces us to acknowledge that identities are unstable and that fantasies bear no necessary or direct relationship to them.

For example, acts like performing oral sex, which are ordinarily defined within S/M as strictly the province of bottoms, can be deployed in these stories by demanding tops. In the Calyx, “Roxanne witnessed something incredible and almost blasphemous. Chris went down on her knees ... But this was a mistress, on her knees, and it was not right! It should not be this way! The service offered was too much for her to accept ...” Chris, however, insists: “Don’t interfere. Don’t tell me I can’t have anything I want right now.” Cunnilingus, when performed by a top, becomes a “touch so taboo it was irresistible.” This is classic Califia, queering every encounter. In a 1992 essay on “The Limits of the S/M Relationship,” Califia pointed out that “thanks to the women’s movement, we no longer believe that biology is destiny. But I sometimes wonder if we have not transferred many of our old gender patterns to the top/bottom dynamic ... We still assume that being penetrated is a submissive act and sticking it in is dominant ... I think we should be challenging the very meanings we assign our sexual acts. This is the truly radical potential of S/M.”⁷

In *Macho Sluts*, as with his other fiction, Califia pays homage to “the ironclad roles of more traditional S/M” while recognizing the political and erotic power of deliberately flipping them.⁸ No story does this more fully than “The Spoiler.” The spoiler tops even the most accomplished topmen and yet, “since he had no interest in bottoms, he did not even think of himself as a top. He was more like a trusted servant who would think nothing of knocking his drowning and struggling master unconscious so he could be paddled to safety.” Because he does not locate himself fully within the roles and identities of the subculture, he is perceived as a danger to those who do. As the narrator says of the spoiler: “We are raised to think that everything in the world occurs naturally as a set of paired opposites. It is almost impossible for us to know what anything is if we cannot locate and define its counterpart. The spoiler was an anomaly. The same system that created him found that he threatened its premises.”

In other stories, complexities of identity and desire are experienced less as a threat and more as an enhancement. In “The Surprise Party,” for example, gay and lesbian identity does not preclude a hot encounter with the “opposite sex.” Here a dyke gets picked up by three gay cops and silently admits to herself that this is what she wants: “He put his hand on his crotch, fondled it and squeezed it. ‘You don’t like this, either, do you?’ he demanded. ‘No!’ Liar, her sex conscience jeered. You love getting fucked. You fantasize about cock and talk dirty about it all the time. But I’m a lesbian, her public-persona objected. This doesn’t have anything to do with that, the wiser voice replied.”

Identities and roles are further complicated in the story “The Vampire,” in which the two main characters are described against type: Kerry, the vampire, is an olive-skinned dyke with a crew-cut in full leathers. Iduna, ostensibly the “prey,” is an alabaster-pale femme in a red-lined cape. Iduna is a vampire chaser, eager to offer herself up. The vampire has to be seduced into taking her and it is the “victim’s” desire that drives the scene. The roles of hunter and prey are effectively reversed; it is Iduna who muses “after the long hunt, the desperate search ... finally, my treasure, my pet, my lord, I will make you my beloved ...” Iduna is far from a passive recipient of the attentions of a top; indeed she has been “well schooled” in how to make herself “interesting to take.”

Even the concluding story in the collection, ostensibly “a dash of vanilla,” challenges neat distinctions between S/M and “normal” lesbian sex as well as between tops and bottoms. In this story, cunnilingus is revealed to be no less challenging or physically demanding than many other scenes depicted in the book. Nor is it free of power exchange: the narrator who performs cunnilingus on her girlfriend for hours on end might be seen as a classic bottom selflessly servicing her top. Yet at the end of the story, the roles flip as the narrator describes her own pleasure in overcoming her lover’s reluctance to be fucked: “I fuck you yet again, and this time you really protest. It’s too much, you’re too tired, you’re sore. But I’m adamant. I’ve worked so hard to get you to this place, thrown open to me ... It’s almost like a feeding frenzy, this lurch to fuck you again and again while pleasure has made you helpless.”

Nowhere in this collection does anyone sacrifice their own pleasure for another. Tops take what they want, bottoms get what they deserve, in all the best ways. While not every scene is as involved as Roxanne’s in “The Calyx of Isis”—in which she is the willing recipient of the attentions of no less than seven tops who guide her through “a high colonic, being fisted, pissed on, tied hand and foot, turned into a pin cushion, whipped ragged, fucked some more, called a whole lot of bad names, and pierced repeatedly ...”—the sex is unquestionably intense.

So consider yourself forewarned: Califia demands a great deal of his readers; there is no attempt here to present a kinder and gentler S/M. Of course, no one is obliged to continue turning the pages. As Califia offered his readers in a 1984 essay, “Those of you who aren’t ready for this have my permission to leave the room. But don’t slam the door on your way out.”⁹ On the other hand, you may just miss encountering yourself in new ways if you leave this room too precipitously.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Pat Califia, *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1994), 158.
- ² Carol Queen, “What Do Women Want?” in *The Burning Pen*, ed. M. Christian (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2001), 49.
- ³ Pat Califia, *Sapphistry: The Book of Lesbian Sexuality* (Tallahassee: Naiad Press, 1980), 107.

- [4.](#) ———, “An Insistent and Indelicate Muse” in *The Burning Pen*, 147.
- [5.](#) Cindy Patton, “Why I Write Porno,” *Bad Attitude* 1 no. 2 (1984), 3.
- [6.](#) Pat Califia, “Non-monogamy,” *On Our Backs* (summer 1987), 24.
- [7.](#) ———, “The Limits of the S/M Relationship,” *Out/Look* 151 (1992), 19–20.
- [8.](#) *Ibid.*, 21.
- [9.](#) ———, “Gay Men, Lesbians and Sex,” in *Public Sex*, 183.