

## The Political Uses of Lesbian Romance Fiction: Reading Patrick Califia's *Macho Sluts* as a Response to 1980s Anti-Pornography Feminism

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**Abstract:** In 1988, the author and radical sex activist Patrick Califia published *Macho Sluts*, a collection of lesbian sadomasochism-themed erotic fiction that provided visibility and erotic legitimacy for the modern lesbian leather community. Using the narrative conventions of the romance novel to construct powerful stories of lust and love that drew readers to his cause, Califia carved out a public space for lesbian sadomasochism. At the same time, he offered a dynamic political response to American anti-pornography feminists, who denigrated SM as a dangerous form of sexuality that reproduced the positions of power associated with heterosexuality. The article offers a biographical account of Califia and a political history of the clash between lesbian SM advocates and anti-pornography feminists, as well as a textual analysis of major themes within the stories of *Macho Sluts*, emphasizing their continuity with the romance genre.

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In 1988, the author and political activist Patrick Califia published *Macho Sluts*, the first collection of sadomasochism-themed short fiction to provide visibility and erotic legitimacy for the modern lesbian leather community.<sup>[1]</sup> Offering a vivid portrait of the discos, sex clubs, and bars that nurtured the Bay Area's lesbian SM scene, *Macho Sluts* revealed a complex and little-known sexual subculture, and presented a loving and

sympathetic account of lesbian SM sexual desire. Califia's goals in writing *Macho Sluts* were to celebrate key aspects of lesbian SM erotic behavior, expectation, and ritual, and to provide an emotionally satisfying and sexually thrilling resource for lesbians who rarely saw their romantic desires validated. He also intended the book to serve as a "recruitment poster" (2009, 52) to inform and thus attract more people to SM, which consists of sexually pleasurable behavior between consenting adults involving an exchange of power through dominant and submissive partner roles, and often includes bondage, flagellation, and the use of blindfolds and restraints. *Macho Sluts* has been praised for its raw eroticism, as well as for demystifying the leather community's practices for the uninitiated reader.

Califia's fiction has political, sexual, and literary significance. His stories subvert the codes and conventions of traditional romance, destabilizing the centrality of heterosexual institutions like courtship and marriage, and queering the genre for contemporary readers. *Macho Sluts* is replete with characters who abandon gender and sexual norms, who seek sex with multiple partners as opposed to a singular Byronic hero, and who reject betrothal, marriage, and childbearing as life's highest goals. Yet, these modern adaptations do not impede the traditional, romantic journey of Califia's protagonists from "a state of unfreedom to one of freedom," as Pamela Regis has described the typical progression of characters within the romance novel (30). Rather, the recognition and fulfillment of a character's deepest sexual and human needs through the practice of SM enable her to overcome internal and societal barriers that have blocked her path to happiness. Regis argues that the female protagonist in a romance novel "rejects various encumbrances imposed by the old society to arrive at a place where society stops hindering her" (30). Califia's protagonists confront personal demons around social expectations of gendered behavior and legitimate desire. They challenge the deeply ingrained ideological structures of heterosexuality derived from "old society" to arrive at a new place "where society stops hindering her" and constraining her ways of being.

In this study, I offer the historical background necessary for an informed analytic reading of *Macho Sluts*. I provide the context for literary scholars, and romance scholars in particular, to evaluate the particular political, sexual and social moment that led Califia to write this collection of stories, and to gain insight into the ways that lesbian SM romance invigorates and expands the romance genre. I argue that his writing ought to be interpreted through the lens of the American feminist sex wars of the 1980s, especially the contentious anti-pornography debates. *Macho Sluts* offered readers a window into the marginalized world of lesbian SM, and served as a public coming out for the embattled lesbian leather community: a precursor to the mainstreaming of heterosexual BDSM visible in E.L. James' popular erotic trilogy, *50 Shades of Grey*, but one which offered a far more radical challenge to institutionalized norms of both gender and genre. The article offers a biographical account of Califia, including his role in the history of the founding of the influential Bay Area lesbian SM support group Samois, which became a primary target of anti-pornography activism; an overview of feminist controversy around the question of SM; and an analysis of Califia's authorial intentions and major themes with regard to *Macho Sluts*.

I intend to show that Califia wrote the stories as a sexual and political intervention that contested the anti-pornography movement's characterization of lesbian SM as a form of sexual violence that reproduced and glorified patriarchal relations, and which claimed a space of greater freedom for sexual variation and gender variance. In so doing, he invited readers to engage in openly political activity, aligning themselves with characters who not

only lived outside the orthodoxies of heterosexuality and state-sanctioned sexual activity, but who also rejected dominant versions of lesbian feminist sexual behavior. Califia used the romance genre, simultaneously leaning on and destabilizing it, to create narratives that showed readers that they could disrupt gender and sexual norms, whether as full-fledged participants in SM or as individuals whose involvement extended only so far as reading SM fiction. From Califia's perspective, both groups were comprised of gender warriors: gender and sexual norms could only remain norms if performed continuously, left unchallenged. The act of reading *Macho Sluts* constituted a disruption, a first step toward unmasking hegemonic gendered patterns of behavior and social expectation. Reading was a pathway to discovering an alternative way of living, and to bringing a marginalized sexuality out of the shadows. "[I]f enough of us speak out about our dreams and obsessions," Califia encourages in the introduction to *Macho Sluts*, "a body of genuine knowledge can accumulate, and make all of us feel less crazy and less alone with what we cannot live without" (57). Writing *Macho Sluts* was Califia's way of voicing his sexual truths and political demands, and in turn, the collection invited readers to reconsider the complexities of their own sexual desires, and to reappropriate cultural orthodoxies like romantic love.

By focusing on *Macho Sluts* as a work of lesbian SM romance fiction, the article also begins to address the dearth of critical attention to this subgenre, even by authors explicitly studying lesbian romance, such as Phyllis M. Betz (2009) and Bonnie Zimmerman (1990). In a review of Zimmerman's survey of post-Stonewall fiction, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction from 1969-1989*, Maida Tilchen (1991) noted with dismay that Zimmerman dismissed works of lesbian SM fiction entirely, creating "a censorious chill" (7). Tilchen found this "grating" (7) for a work that claimed to be both a chronological and comprehensive survey of the genre. Furthermore, Tilchen argued that the omission was damaging to writers at the margins of lesbian literature, authors who were already struggling for inclusion and visibility. Zimmerman devoted just two sentences to lesbian SM romance, noting that advocates of SM and role-playing were "sexual outlaws" (223). In providing historical context for the authorial intent behind *Macho Sluts*, this manuscript invites a reconsideration of the critical role that lesbian SM romance plays in challenging gender norms and helping women discover alternative visions of romance.

## **The Social Function of Lesbian Romance Fiction**

The act of reading popular romance fiction offers readers vicarious emotional and sexual experiences, and it may inspire behavioral change, making the genre a potential vehicle for erotic and political transformation (Radway 1980; Crusie 1997). As Jennifer Crusie points out in "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real," romance fiction can be eye-opening, revealing that many of the "truths" that "societal ideologies" have foisted on women about how they should feel and behave are actually lies (92). Lesbian romance fiction has radical potential in that it can represent a diverse range of characters who respond to life and love in ways that defy heterosexual convention (Lynch, Sternglantz and Barot 2012). In an evaluation of Crusie's essay, literary theorist Tricia Zakreski adds that romance fiction can effectively challenge "essentialist

notions” that exist within patriarchal society about “what a woman should do, how she should think, and what she should be interested in” (Zakreski 2012).

In her study of lesbian romance novels, Betz argues that the genre supports the lesbian community by reflecting the diverse cultural, social, and emotional interests of its members. Lesbian readers want to see their desires given “a recognizable and honest representation” within romance fiction (2). The lesbian romance novel can challenge the limited, stock portrayals of lesbians, such as the burly, mannish butch, and the short-haired, androgynous, womyn’s music festival lesbian. Readers have access to diverse characters whose experiences may resonate with them personally, such as Laura Kasdan in Maggie Ryan’s *The Deal* (2001), a prominent broadcast journalist who has substituted her professional goals for any semblance of a satisfying personal life. Jennifer Moreland, the protagonist in Linda Hill’s *Class Reunion* (1997), rekindles an affair with her first female lover, rediscovering her at their high school reunion. The lesbian romance novel thus serves an important ideological and personal function, presenting the reader with an opportunity to recognize herself, or other women in her life, in the mirror of fiction, and thereby to be affirmed in, or to freshly claim, identity and agency.

Another advantage of the romance genre for lesbian authors, Betz observes, has been its ability to respond quickly and accurately to social change. Within the familiar frame of genre convention, authors can adapt their characters and plots to reflect contemporary social trends and allow readers to navigate political issues through the pages of romance fiction. For example, author Gillian Hanscombe uses her 1982 novel *Between Friends* to explore the tensions in a romance between a lifelong lesbian, Meg, and Jane, a woman discovering lesbianism through the women’s movement. A similar set of tensions underwrites Valerie Miner’s *Blood Sisters* (also from 1982), in which Liz is the quintessential American cultural feminist who discovers her erotic attraction to women working side by side with lesbians on a feminist literary journal. Lee Lynch’s *Toothpick House* (1983) explores a romance between a townie and a gownie, superimposing on this well-known dichotomy the characters of a working-class, taxi-driving bar lesbian and an upper-middle class, feminine Yale senior. In so doing, she gave readers in the early 1980s a way to reflect on contemporary feminist debates about butch/femme identity, and class, just as more recent lesbian romance authors have used the form to explore and comment on the struggle for marriage equality, among other twenty-first century issues.

This representational variety and political potential was not lost on Califia, who realized through his experiences in the leather community that there was no such thing as a typical lesbian, even though a few lesbian stereotypes were dominant. “We came in all colors, classes, ages and physical (dis)abilities,” he writes. “This rich, complex body of interlocking social networks never got portrayed in print because, I believe, our writers were ashamed of us” (2000, xvi-xvii). In *Macho Sluts*, Califia presented not only the panoply of sexual and political experiences that were common to SM lesbians in the Bay Area scene, but also the diversity of the community. He offered a range of characters—from gay male police officers to a sixteen year old girl to a seasoned biker chick and her babe, to a bar butch, an experienced dominatrix, and a neophyte—enabling readers, some of whom were SM practitioners, some of whom were SM curious, and some of whom might have sought only the pleasure of reading sexually explicit content, to find a point of entry and connection.

Lesbian romance authors have also used the romance genre to show progression in societal acceptance of gay lives. They have moved their protagonists from positions of social isolation and despair, as in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), to positions of social authority and power, as in Lynn Galli's *Wasted Heart* (2006), which features four strong and successful lesbian characters: a district attorney for the state of Washington, a CEO of a software company, an FBI agent, and a former professional athlete. Califia's work also answers this call, but takes it one step further, going beyond the established "vanilla" lesbian seeking love and commitment in a monogamous relationship (e.g. Galli's protagonist Austy is secretly in love with her best friend, Willa, who is married to another woman), to portray lesbian sadomasochists who mostly avoid or subvert the conventions of monogamy. In *Macho Sluts*, there are fewer traditionally happy pair-bonded endings than one expects to encounter in lesbian romance novels—reviewer Shannon Holcomb notes wryly that Califia's story "Jessie" does not end with a U-Haul rental—but the protagonists enjoy loving and supportive (though not necessarily exclusive or long-term) relationships. In writing alternate—but still happy—endings, a prerequisite of the romance genre per Pamela Regis's analysis, Califia addressed readers' desires for the pursuit of love, broadly defined. Suzanne Juhasz writes that favorable outcomes in lesbian romance are very important, because the "foremost fantasy" that motivates people to read the genre is confirmation that "a person could *be* in such a way as to function usefully and satisfiedly in the life that she lives" (74, emphasis in original). In particular, *Macho Sluts* challenged feminist dogma that characterized SM relationships as inherently damaging, rooted in a power dynamic that produced inequality, and offered a range of (mostly) sympathetic characters to inspire and support readers.

Anna Mills, writing in *The Lesbian Review of Books*, describes the effect of putting lesbians at the center of their own stories as akin to offering a lifeline. Lesbians, she argues, are victims of gender oppression, told by storybooks, television, movies, and other manifestations of popular culture from childhood onward that the correct and proper form of sexual love takes place between a man and a woman. For Mills, the reason to read lesbian romance novels is "survival," for nourishing stories that help readers believe that love, sex, relationships, and happiness are within their reach (7). In a review of nine lesbian romances written in the decade following the publication of *Macho Sluts*, Mills notes that the heroines are not always sure of their path, or making all the right choices, but "they are always on the road to knowing themselves, communicating, and trusting" (14). Like Crusie, Mills defends romance fiction as reinforcing a sense of self-worth in readers and validating women's desires.

Califia too sought "survival" in the act of writing erotic fiction. He began writing and "making noise" in order to find like-minded others and "to develop a community in which to thrive" (Holcomb 8). He recognized the potential for fiction to serve as a site of radical critique and knew that it could offer a supportive, even transformational, space for readers struggling against sexual orthodoxy and the social constraints of gender, looking for another way to live and to be sexual. He wrote his community and his sexuality into visibility; his pen was his sword throughout the feminist sex wars. "I write because I have to," he has said, "because it is all I know, because it is my truth, because I am compelled, because I am driven to make the world acknowledge that women like me exist, and we possess a dangerous wisdom" (1995, 11). He was determined to share that wisdom—the mutability of gender and sexual norms in the hands of those willing to unravel them—and

to offer an honest portrayal of the lesbian SM community for its practitioners and for outsiders who were interested to learn more. Califia recognized that without better depictions, the leather community was “too easily left to others to label as a pathology or social aberration,” as Mark Thompson writes of such silence in the introduction to his anthology, *Leatherfolk* (xiii). Califia used the genre and codes of romance fiction to create *Macho Sluts* as a space where readers could experience, vicariously or otherwise, romantic and sexual fulfillment, and where they could negotiate their own potential affiliation with the SM community.

## **Patrick Califia: Author, Activist and Lesbian SM Advocate**

Patrick Califia is a bisexual trans man, a psychotherapist, and a leading advocate for sexual diversity and the erotic rights of marginalized sexual communities. He is the author or editor of more than twenty foundational books on radical sexual culture, such as *Public Sex* (1994/2000) and *Speaking Sex to Power* (2001); lesbian BDSM safety and how-to manuals, such as *Sapphisty* (1980) and *The Lesbian S/M Safety Manual* (1988); political essays on sexuality, long-running sex advice columns in the national gay and lesbian news magazine, *The Advocate*, and the lesbian magazine, *Girlfriends*; the poetry collection *Diesel Fuel* (1998); collections of erotic short fiction for the lesbian leather community, such as *Macho Sluts* (1988), *Melting Point* (1993) and *No Mercy* (2000); and BDSM-themed romance novels including *Doc and Fluff: The Distopian Tale of a Girl, and Her Biker* (1990). Califia describes this body of work as “pornographic, political and educational” (Califia 2000, xiii) and it is a major aspect of his contribution to sexual radicalism.

Prior to transitioning genders in the mid-1990s, Califia lived as a woman and lesbian and was known as Pat. From the early 1970s onward, he was a high-profile Bay Area lesbian rights activist and SM educator, and he co-founded the historically significant lesbian support group, Samois, in 1978 with radical sex activist and author Gayle Rubin (Bronstein 140-141). Over the course of the next twenty years, Califia established himself as a leading gender critic with an outsider’s perspective on marriage, the family, heterosexuality, and sexual relationships. In his mid-forties, facing the onset of menopause and a physician’s recommendation that he begin female hormone replacement therapy, Califia decided that the moment had arrived to deal with the gender dysphoria issues that had plagued him since childhood. He changed his name to Patrick and began taking testosterone to support gender reassignment (Marech “Radical Transformation”). In recent years, Califia has described this path as bringing a greater sense of “physical, sexual and spiritual congruency” to his life (2000, x).

Califia had a conservative Christian upbringing as the child of Mormons living in Salt Lake City. Through his childhood experiences, he developed a missionary’s worldview. In an interview published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Califia credited his parents’ religious observance for instilling in him the belief that he was morally obligated to give voice to his convictions. “One of the primary tenets of Mormonism is that if the truth has been revealed to you and you don’t speak out,” he said, “you are culpable for any wrongs that are committed in those realms of life” (Marech “Radical Transformation”). From this beginning, one can see the origins of Califia’s insistence on speaking truth to power. He felt

obliged to preach about the injustice and suffering created by sexual repression, and the ways that society forced people to quell natural sexual desires, resulting in alienation from their own bodies and psychosexual truths.

Califia came out as a lesbian in 1971 while attending the University of Utah, a declaration that prompted his parents to commit him to a mental institution. He suffered a nervous breakdown, dropped out of college, and broke away to become involved in radical causes, including the women's liberation movement and activism against the war in Vietnam. He moved to San Francisco in 1973 and began working as a writer for *Sisters*, the magazine of the San Francisco chapter of the lesbian advocacy group, the Daughters of Bilitis, and became involved with the lesbian separatist movement (Califia 1980). During this early period, Califia began building a reputation as an activist focused on lesbian rights, committed to the principle that sexuality has an almost infinite capacity to empower people and improve their lives.

By 1975, Califia was involved with a small group of lesbian feminists in the Bay Area who were beginning to discuss their desire around SM. Barbara Ruth published "Cathexis" that year in *Hera*, subsequently reprinted in *The Lesbian Tide*, the first article that asserted the compatibility of feminism and lesbian SM. At the time of Ruth's article, the gay male community was open to SM, and leather bars and biker culture were visible in major cities like San Francisco and New York. But the lesbian SM community remained deeply closeted, and Ruth's essay sent a shockwave through the women's movement. Califia credited that article for challenging "other S/M dykes to begin taking the women's movement's repression of their sexuality a little more seriously" (Califia 1982, 244). Ruth endorsed SM as a practice that empowered her to be sexual with other women, free of male control, making up their own rituals, "scripting as well as starring in them" (Ruth 11). SM freed her to ignore gendered expectations about how a woman was supposed to behave in courtship matters, and to be boldly sexual instead. In these early discussions of SM, Califia recounts, women were for the first time confronting real women—"sisters"—as sadomasochists, not dealing abstractly with literary figures or patient case studies from the sexological literature, and this made the emerging controversy more intense (1982, 244).

Califia was a central actor in these conversations, and he was active in early Bay Area gatherings of women interested in SM. He attended a 1976 conference on Women's Health and Healing at Los Angeles City College and participated in a workshop with twelve women called "Healthy Questions About S/M." Califia remembers the criticism and scorn directed at participants, leaving them huddling together in the workshop room, "feeling threatened and scared" (1982, 245). One opponent stormed into the workshop and delivered an angry speech about the connections she saw among patriarchy, rape and SM. The meeting was a turning point for Califia, who began to acknowledge and accept his SM desires, and to realize that he would have to become an activist to protect his erotic rights. The meeting left him feeling like a "terrified and titillated neophyte" hearing others' SM fantasies which "fell on me like rain on the desert" (1982, 245). He understood for the first time that these desires were part of his authentic sexuality and he believed that he could pursue them in a way that was compatible with feminism and that upheld feminist values of choice and freedom. When he returned to San Francisco after the conference, he began the process of coming out to his friends as a sadomasochist, looking for sexual partners and support groups. Reflecting on the conference, Califia believed that if twelve

others had endured hostility and humiliation to talk about SM, he would be able to find a community.

From 1975 to 1978, Califia and other SM lesbians in the Bay Area were loosely organized via support groups and welcoming gay leather bars. Califia joined Cardea, an SM support group for women that was part of the Society of Janus, a primarily gay male SM educational organization founded in San Francisco in 1975. He met some SM lesbians through Cardea, but most of the women identified as straight or bisexual, and most lesbians were not willing to join an SM organization primarily devoted to gay men. According to Califia's account of this time period in *Coming to Power*, Bay Area lesbians who were interested in SM at the end of 1977 were affiliated with the Society of Janus; with Cardea; with the Catacombs, a gay male fisting club that allowed women to attend parties; and with gay men's leather bars. San Francisco did not have a lesbian leather bar at this time, nor any public place with a reliable lesbian SM presence.

In June 1978, Califia and two friends, including author Gayle Rubin, decided to form a specifically lesbian SM support group. By reaching out to their personal networks and hanging posters in the gay leather bars, the organizers attracted seventeen women to the first meeting. They soon settled on dual foci of educational and political activities, and SM group sex parties in which members could participate. Members hoped to support their own erotic lives while also responding to attacks on SM from the larger women's movement. Their purposes included circulating information on safe SM techniques and practices; developing lesbian feminist perspectives on SM; promoting positive discussion of SM; and creating a network for SM lesbians to build community, lessen isolation and stereotyping, and heighten their consciousness (Kaufmann 1980).

This group became known as Samois, the first lesbian feminist SM advocacy organization in the nation. Its name was taken from the text of the 1954 French SM literary classic, *The Story of O*, by Pauline Réage; Samois was the estate owned by the lesbian dominatrix who pierced O and branded her. Califia and the others sought a name that was connected to the heritage of lesbian SM, and they wanted to use something from *The Story of O* because anti-pornography feminists were trying to get the book removed from women's bookstores and were picketing periodic theater screenings of the film adaptation, which had been produced in 1975.

Califia came out to the public as an SM lesbian in December 1979, a year and a half after the founding of Samois. He published a graphic account of his life as an SM sadist, or top, replete with details about his dating habits and sexual routines, in the national gay and lesbian newspaper, *The Advocate*. This was a turning point for Califia, a move that cost him some allies in the gay and lesbian movement who had not previously been aware of his affiliation with SM and could not accept it. Califia recalls that he was "terrified" while writing the essay, "A Secret Side of Lesbian Sexuality," suffering bouts of nausea and shaking that necessitated frequent rest breaks (2000, xiii).<sup>[2]</sup> Once the issue of *The Advocate* hit newsstands, Califia could not bring himself to read his words in print for days, overcome by fear and the emotional impact of publishing something so intensely personal and dangerous.

Califia had two sets of reasons for disclosing the most intimate details of his sexual identity and behavior. The first involved his desire to create greater awareness around the existence of Samois and the lesbian SM community, and to dispel myths about lesbian SM practice. "Since our community depends on word-of-mouth and social networks, we have

to work very hard to keep it going,” he writes in the essay. “It’s a survival issue” (1979/2000, 159). He wanted to reach out to other lesbians who were practicing SM, and he could no longer tolerate the self-hatred and shame that came from life in the SM closet. Reflecting in later years on this decision, he expressed the sense of isolation and alienation that drove him to write his truth. “I was tired of being alone,” he confesses, “and I knew there would never be a leatherdyke community if somebody didn’t announce that one already existed. I figured if I was public enough about being into leathersex, either I would get squashed and my misery would be over, or other perverse girls would find me, and then I wouldn’t be so lonely” (2000, xiii). Writing *Macho Sluts* was Califia’s way of expressing his sexual identity and his deep longing for connection with others who shared SM desires.

Califia’s second reason for coming out as a practitioner of lesbian SM had to do with burgeoning feminist anti-pornography politics, which were prominent in the San Francisco area in the late 1970s. He was infuriated that the anti-pornography movement characterized lesbian SM as a form of violence against women, and focused on it as an object of protest. He disclosed his identity as a means of fighting back, arguing that he could not remain silent while SM lesbians were persecuted. “I don’t know how long it will take for other S/M people to get as angry as I am...” he wrote in *The Advocate*. “I don’t know how long we will tolerate the ‘feminism’ of women’s groups who believe that S/M and pornography are the same thing and claim that both cause violence against women” (1979/2000, 167). Even at this early juncture, before SM became a major issue for the national women’s movement, Califia sensed the coming feminist sex wars, the divisions that would rise up between feminists who opposed pornography and SM and those who endorsed a wide range of sexual behavior. “We should be wary of making broad statements about the worth or value of another lesbian’s sexual style, especially if it involves behavior we don’t understand or have never participated in,” he warns in his 1980 book *Sapphistry*, in a chapter devoted to “variations” within lesbianism. “If we carefully consider all the different ways there are to be a lesbian, we must conclude that each sexual specialty is essential to the happiness of some lesbians” (1980, 107-108). Califia would put this philosophy into action as he wrote *Macho Sluts*, recognizing the need for diverse lesbian romance to satisfy the full range of lesbian sexual desire.

## **Samois and WAVPM: The Context of Anti-Pornography Feminism**

By the late 1970s, Califia and members of Samois were engaged in open combat with anti-pornography feminists, especially those affiliated with the Bay Area organization Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM). Most of WAVPM’s members identified as lesbian feminists, a theoretical position that rejected forms of sexuality that perpetuated an unequal distribution of power between partners. This included heterosexuality, as well as sadomasochism because of its dominant (master/sadist) and submissive (slave/masochist) roles. They viewed aspects of SM, such as the infliction of physical pain and the use of psychological intimidation tactics, as reproducing the power imbalance fundamental to patriarchy.[3] “We feel that S&M essentially involves one person voluntarily surrendering control...to another,” Deb

Friedman and Lois Yankowski wrote in *Aegis*, a feminist anti-violence journal. “We could not accept as ‘healthy’ sexuality, the practice of willingly submitting to a condition similar to rape” (48).[4] Poet and anti-pornography activist Audre Lorde also rejected SM as a feminist option. “Even in play,” she insisted, “to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically” (Lorde and Star 4). Anti-pornography feminists insisted that SM lesbians were encouraging sexual objectification and through it, sexual violence, and were supporting sexist and racist behaviors.[5]

As advocates for female pleasure and power, Califia and members of Samois were troubled and angry that some lesbian feminists viewed their sexuality as oppressive. Samois defended SM as healthy and liberating, arguing that it took place between consenting adults devoted to each other’s sexual pleasure; provided therapeutic and cathartic sexual release; and freed women to take on positions of power typically denied them in male-dominated society. Gayle Rubin urged feminists to consider the importance of defending alternative sexual practices as a means of ensuring sexual freedom for all. Foreshadowing key arguments in her influential 1984 essay, “Thinking Sex,” Rubin warned that valorizing certain types of sexual behavior would encourage the persecution of behaviors that fell outside the charmed circle of state-sanctioned, legitimate sex, which was heterosexual, marital and procreative. This was especially important given the context of 1980s right-wing conservative political power, and she urged feminists to develop tolerant and expansive sexual politics.

In August 1978, WAVPM announced plans for its first national conference, *Feminist Perspectives on Pornography*, which would take place in San Francisco that fall. Members of Samois wrote to WAVPM requesting permission to lead a conference workshop, but Califia and Rubin learned informally that organization leaders had no intention of exploring feminist dimensions of lesbian SM. This shocked Samois members, some of whom were also members of WAVPM. According to Califia, Samois members knew that WAVPM opposed heterosexual SM pornography, but they believed that WAVPM could and should have a “different, supportive position” on lesbian SM because many practitioners were lesbians within the women’s movement who regarded their sexual practice as consistent with feminist principles (1982, 253). In November 1978, Califia and Rubin showed up at the WAVPM conference but were refused entry by WAVPM leaders.[6]

Following the conference, Samois began contacting WAVPM to initiate a conversation about the anti-pornography group’s position on SM. First, Samois asked to see the WAVPM slideshow, “Abusive Images of Women in Mass Media and Pornography,” which was the organization’s community education program. WAVPM sent back a letter that asked Samois to justify the request. After exchanging numerous letters and telephone calls, Califia recalls, WAVPM denied the request “because our group ‘glamorized violence against women,’” and because members of Samois might find the slideshow “erotic” (1982, 254).

Samois members were not deterred. They attended slideshow presentations given to other community groups, and were dismayed and angry when they heard anti-pornography feminists describe consensual SM as violence against women. Rubin responded to a slide that showed a woman tied up in SM bondage play juxtaposed with a photograph of a battered woman retrieved from a police file. She found this “guilt-by-

association theory of pornography” to be “manipulative,” as the WAVPM presenter implied that the batterer had viewed this type of SM image in pornography and recreated it at home, resulting in real violence against a woman (English, Hollibaugh and Rubin, 133). Rubin and other members of Samois were concerned that anti-pornography feminists were looking as outsiders at material produced for a particular sexual subculture with a particular set of conventions, and were claiming an authoritative interpretation.

WAVPM expanded its public critique of SM throughout this period. On January 29, 1979, the organization picketed the privately owned UC Theatre in Berkeley, which was showing *The Story of O*. Forty WAVPM members carried signs with slogans including “Who Says Pain is Erotic?” while chanting “*The Story of O* has got to go!” WAVPM’s newsletter attacked the film for telling lies about women, namely that a woman would willingly wear a leather collar around her neck and endure whippings (Bronstein 286-292). Intense anger and distrust developed between Samois and WAVPM at this juncture. The SM lesbians were furious that anti-pornography feminists disparaged their sexuality, fearful that such criticism might jeopardize practitioners of SM and other marginalized sexual behaviors.

In July 1979, Samois sent a letter to *Plexus*, a Bay Area women’s newspaper, that laid out its case against WAVPM. Samois challenged the anti-pornography organization’s characterization of SM as a practice that encouraged sexual violence. Samois also asserted its right to call itself a feminist organization and rebuked WAVPM for portraying SM as anti-feminist and SM lesbians as traitors to the women’s movement. Next, the group objected to WAVPM’s equation of SM with violence in its slideshow, emphasizing that images of SM in mainstream pornography produced for male consumers no more accurately reflected lesbian SM practice than images of lesbians in mainstream pornography reflected lesbianism. Finally, Samois asked WAVPM to stop picketing *The Story of O* and clubs that welcomed SM patrons, and to acknowledge the SM community’s right to exist.

*Plexus* asked WAVPM to respond to the Samois letter. The WAVPM reply was brief and did not directly address Samois’ major points. The anti-pornography feminists rejected the Samois claim that lesbian SM sexual practices were consistent with feminism. In an April 1980 WAVPM forum, founder Diana Russell confirmed the organization’s negative view of SM and groups like Samois who insisted upon its positive outcomes for women. “Defending such behavior as healthy and compatible with feminism, even proselytizing in favor of it is about the most contra-feminist...stance that I can imagine,” Russell told the audience (Russell 13).

Two months after WAVPM’s response to Samois appeared in *Plexus*, Califia published his SM coming-out essay in *The Advocate*. He warned that the anti-pornography movement’s restrictive new codes for “feminist” sexual behavior would limit female sexual agency and deny women the right to seek sexual pleasure on their own terms. He described “the [anti-pornography] women’s groups, the political clones, the Dworkinites” as anti-sexual, and mocked their preferred sexual encounter as one of “holding hands, taking their shirts off and dancing in a circle.” These “high priestesses of feminism” would surely fall asleep prior to orgasm, not wanting to participate in something so “male identified, objectifying, pornographic, noisy and undignified” (1979/2000, 161). Califia feared that the movement’s ongoing attacks on SM would fuel the idea that sexual variations were shameful and dangerous for women. The anti-pornography movement expanded dramatically over the next decade, gaining real steam as activists Catharine

MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin sought to pass anti-pornography ordinances that made pornography, including SM images, actionable under the law as a violation of women's civil rights.[7] The battles between lesbian SM advocates and anti-pornography feminists intensified as well, becoming one of the hotly contested and divisive issues of the feminist sex wars.

## Reading and Writing *Macho Sluts*

Beginning in the late 1970s, then, radical sex activists like Califia responded to the changes in the women's movement and demanded that lesbianism be recognized as sexual, and as open to sexual variation, and not defined solely as a political stance associated with a commitment to women's rights. As Lillian Faderman argues, Califia and others recognized that lesbians were doubly oppressed, first *as women* in a culture that denied them the freedom to explore an active, imaginative sexual life; and second *as lesbians*, constrained by a heterosexual society that had historically defined their sexuality as criminal and perverse. But Califia also recognized a third constraint: lesbian feminist standards that mandated a narrow range of permissible sexual behavior, focused on woman-to-woman mutuality and opposed to the genitally focused, orgasm-driven, penetrative sexuality associated with heterosexuality. The power exchanges and pleasure-in-pain of SM sexuality were anathema to this sexually conservative formulation, and Califia feared a chilling effect that would keep SM-curious people at bay. Fighting back, Califia produced fiction intended to persuade lesbians that it was their right to enjoy "the most imaginative and exciting sex their minds and bodies could construct" (Faderman 253). Califia saw lesbian culture in the late 1970s and 1980s as sexually "impoverished," and he feared that lesbians were so oppressed by heterosexual culture and by lesbian feminist conceptions of appropriate sexuality that they were "almost unable to imagine what bold and brassy, peacock creatures we could be if we were free" (2009, 56).

To help readers imagine more freely, Califia wrote *Macho Sluts*, a tantalizing, challenging collection of erotic short fiction. The eight stories in the collection were written between 1977 and 1985, years that correspond to the most intensive U.S. feminist anti-pornography movement activity, with its associated attack on SM. The stories in *Macho Sluts* linger on lush descriptions of pleasures, techniques, textures, and emotional and physical thrills, and they are "populated by women who are shameless in pursuing their own pleasure," freed of the usual burdens of worry over reputation and number of sexual partners (Chapkis 39). In order to write erotic fiction for lesbians that was as thrilling as he could muster, Califia pretended along the way that he would never publish the stories, so that he could push himself past any self-doubt or limit, but the goal of the connection was as public and political as it was intimate and self-exploratory. As Califia puts it in the Foreword to a recent edition of the collection, directly addressing potential readers, "It's all just fiction, fantasy, flat black ink on a white page. But it could lead to touching—touching yourself, asking someone else to touch you, reaching for someone else's skin and heart and mind." (2009, 33). In his own words, *Macho Sluts* was a "recruitment poster [for lesbian SM], as flashy and fast and seductively intimidating as I could make it" (2009, 52).

As the phrase “seductively intimidating” suggests, the stories in *Macho Sluts* are not always easy to read. They cross into such uncomfortable territory as incest, gang rape, and purposeful scarring of the body, often leaving the uninitiated reader wincing at the infliction of physical pain. The stories range in subject matter from an intense one-night stand between SM lesbians Liz and Jessie, the latter a singer and bassist in a women’s rock band (“Jessie”); to a heavy SM vampire tale involving blood-sucking (“The Vampire”); to a “parody of Victorian pornography and a parody of grand opera” (2009, 389) involving the triad of Berenice, her daughter Clarissa, and their maid, Elise (“The Finishing School”). In “The Surprise Party,” Califia presents Don, a gay highway patrolman, and his male partners Officer Mike and Officer Joe, who stop the lesbian protagonist on a routine traffic violation and proceed to cuff her hands behind her back and gang rape her through the night, penetrating every orifice and beating her black and blue. “The pain was lightning in the marrow of her bones,” Califia writes (312). Califia’s work has been excluded from many academic appraisals of lesbian romance fiction; sexual exchanges that violate mainstream norms, and the relative lack (or narrative downplaying) of generic markers that link his work to “romance fiction” are likely explanations.

And yet, as communication scholar Lisa Henderson observes, the stories in *Macho Sluts* are “high-contact, otherworldly, and often *deeply romantic*”—arguably more romantic, or more intensely so, than the upbeat fiction featured in magazines like *On Our Backs*, which Henderson describes as “idyllic daytime reveries of lesbian narrators who exhibit themselves ... to handsome telephone linewomen just outside the bedroom window” (511; my emphasis). The stories play SM staples like bondage and whipping against more traditional expressions of tenderness, such as kissing and hugging, and many of the most physically brutal sexual scenes, including those with multiple partners, are framed within mutually nurturing and loving pair-bonded relationships. The gang-rape of “The Surprise Party” ends, for example, with the romantic revelation that the entire evening had been staged by the protagonist’s female lover and male friends as a wonderful birthday celebration crafted in honor of her deepest sexual fantasies. In the collection’s centerpiece story, “The Calyx of Isis,” the character Alex arranges for her young lover, Roxanne, to be disciplined by a gang of six other “tough and experienced” SM dominatrices, pushed to the sexual and emotional brink to prove her love (*Macho Sluts* 152). Alex’s inability to trust Roxanne’s love represents the “internal barrier” blocking their union and Roxanne’s successful completion of the tortuous SM scene brings about “the recognition” whereby Alex masters her own psyche and “sees the hero clearly and realizes her love” for that person (Regis 37). In a striking twist on the “betrothal” convention of romance, Roxanne’s arduous test earns her Alex’s ring—or, more specifically, it earns her the ear, nipple and labia piercings that mark her as Alex’s *slave*: a journey and an ending quite compatible with governing elements of the romance novel, and perhaps a sly commentary on them.

Romance theorists Lynn Pearce and Gina Wisker have argued that romance fiction becomes truly subversive not when stories are retold with different players or a different plot (e.g. lesbian protagonists who do not marry), but when those stories separate sexual desire from cultural orthodoxies like heterosexuality and romantic courtship “*in such a way that the operation of the orthodoxy is exposed and challenged*” (1998, 2) [emphasis in original]. This mix of romance, exposure, and challenge lies at the heart of *Macho Sluts*, a collection whose stories do not simply differentiate sexual desire from romantic courtship, but go on to distinguish both of these from the orthodoxy of monogamy, heterosexual or

otherwise. This subversion of romantic convention is evident in Alex's confession in "The Calyx of Isis." "It's real hard for me to let myself go unless I know that the other person belongs to me," she tells Tyre, the proprietor of a successful San Francisco lesbian sex club who arranges Roxanne's SM trial-by-fire. "I know when most people say they want somebody to belong to them they mean they want to keep them all to themselves, but for me the real test of property is, can you give it away?" (152). Tyre herself is locked in conflict with an anti-pornography organization modeled on WAVPM, here called WIFE (Women for Images of Female Equality). The acronym mocks what Califia regarded as WAVPM's sexual conservatism, an ironically patriarchal tenor toward women's sexuality which threatened to leave women trapped in a static binary, caught in a fixed view of male and female nature that denied them an opportunity to experience new subjectivities. In this story, the kind of belonging that comprises true love can only be proved through acts that "expose and challenge" both heterosexual *and* lesbian orthodoxies.

*Macho Sluts* can thus be read, at least in part, as a tongue-in-cheek response to lesbian feminism, or at least to what Califia perceived as the anti-sexual, politically earnest and misguided majority in the movement. Throughout the collection, he embedded subtle jabs that poked fun at lesbian feminists and anti-pornography activists, using humor to deflate their intimidating presence and their attacks on the lesbian SM community. For the reader unfamiliar with the historical events that inspired *Macho Sluts*, these quips may go unnoticed. However, they place the stories firmly in the context of 1970s and 1980s feminism. In "The Finishing School," the older top (Berenice) wonders if she is too exhausted to sexually satisfy the teenage bottom (Clarissa), who asks plaintively: "Will you take me into your bed tonight?" (2009, 124). Finding her strength, Berenice seizes Clarissa by the hair and drags her close. She will not disappoint the sexually avid girl with a half-hearted performance, she thinks, because "they could not go like this, like a pair of simple-minded, medieval shepherdesses slipping hand-in-hand into the nearest patch of willows" (2009, 125). Here, Califia echoes his *Advocate* description of the anti-orgasmic "high priestesses of feminism" for whom holding hands and dancing topless in a circle equaled sex. In "The Calyx of Isis," the lesbian sex club owner (Tyre) barks orders to her staff to "double my annual contribution to the ACLU," the civil liberties organization that worked on behalf of pornographers' free speech rights and against the MacKinnon-Dworkin anti-pornography ordinances.

Just as some feminists denounced SM for "colluding in shoring up this misogynistic heterosexuality," so too did Califia see anti-pornography activists as victims of patriarchy (Barnard 265). The stories in *Macho Sluts* respond to the major critiques of SM being offered in the period, steadily dismantling the arguments of critics who saw only violence, coercion, and the abuse of power. Addressing power, for example, Califia does not deny that SM requires partners to assume dominant and submissive roles, and that a power differential exists in this arrangement just as it does in many heterosexual couplings. But he shows through his fiction that a trusted lesbian SM relationship can allow women to understand the nature of power, and learn how to negotiate the conditions of power and powerlessness created by social structures like gender, race, and class. In "The Hustler," a dystopian story about a society governed by lesbian feminist principles, Califia shows us how state power and sexual orthodoxy are used to oppress those on the sexual fringe. He presents a dominant lesbian street worker and a submissive Jane who are jailed for having illegal public sex. Drawn to each other through sexual desire, the protagonists face a hostile

and controlling society that tries to prevent their union and block their path to freedom, per Regis' (2003) analysis of romance. Once released from jail, the lovers reunite in the alley where they were arrested and the hustler offers Califia's version of vows: "I don't love you. But somebody is going to have to take care of you and show you what's what. If I slap you around a little, it's to make sure you listen" (*Macho Sluts* 281). In the last line of the story, Califia invokes the romance genre's betrothal convention: the hustler takes off her leather jacket and makes the Jane put it on. This is a deeply romantic ending, yet one in which Califia reminds us that those who dwell at the sexual margins can never walk off into the sunset to live happily ever after as the heterosexual protagonists of mainstream romance do.

## Conclusion

Most accounts of Califia emphasize his connection with sexual freedom, rather than with romance. The historian Lisa Sigel describes Califia as taking the basic women's movement demand for control over one's own body and pairing this with an uncompromising insistence on sexual pleasure to claim sexual liberation as a basic right. This liberation included "the right to give and receive pleasure and pain, to choose gender and the symbolic framework of sexuality, and to discuss all aspects of sexuality in the public realm (46)." *Macho Sluts* does indeed mount a rigorous defense of female sexual pleasure, sexual variation, and the rights of sexual minorities. Califia filled the stories with intense erotic content, not only to thrill SM enthusiasts and tempt newcomers, but also to challenge the predominant focus of the women's movement at that time on *danger* in the sexual exchange, especially women's vulnerability to sexual violence. The stories of *Macho Sluts* eroticize danger, and they emphasize the necessity of risk in the effort to explore and satisfy sexual desire. Again and again, Califia makes the political point that the ability to pursue one's desires at will—even when those desires lead one into a shadowy netherworld—is an essential ingredient of human freedom.

As Pamela Regis has argued, however, a focus on freedom is also one of the key thematic features of the romance novel (16), and *Macho Sluts* can be read as a playful, self-conscious negotiation with the generic conventions of romance fiction and the complex cultural work that is done, as Radway and others have shown, in the act of romance reading. *Macho Sluts* reveals erotic romance fiction, in particular, to be "a category severely under stress" (Pearce 536), given the pressure brought to bear by Califia and other authors who adapt the genre to delineate and materialize new communities and subjectivities for their readers. The erotic presentation of the pleasures and rewards of SM in this collection are no more shocking than the book's almost casual presentation of satisfying and sustaining relationships—monogamous and otherwise—among protagonists who refuse to conform to traditional gender norms and whose happy endings defy easy characterization. Califia is justly seen as instrumental in creating the modern SM lesbian community and in providing support to women who sought to discover and embrace a new dimension of their sexual selves. We should also recognize that he used a radical form of romance fiction as a building block in this equally radical real-world undertaking.

Califia ends the Foreword to *Macho Sluts* with a group of teasing questions. "Are you more afraid that you won't have any fun, or that you'll be thrilled to pieces? Which is it?" he demands. In the face of both fears, his advice is the same: "Be bold. Put yourself in my proverbial hands. I promise I won't drop you" (*Macho Sluts*, 33). Just as he knew in the 1970s and '80s that there were very real risks involved in the practice and public defense of SM, Califia knows that there are risks involved in reading books like *Macho Sluts* and opening oneself up to dangerous desires. In each case, however, the rewards of being bold prove worth the risks, not least because of the opportunities that emerge for community-building and for erotic / romantic connection. Indeed, in lesbian and SM contexts, these two may be inextricable. If the reader ends up "reaching for someone else's skin and heart and mind" after finishing *Macho Sluts* (33), as Califia dares to dream, then the book's courtship has been successful. And if we move from "a state of unfreedom to one of freedom" (Regis, 30) by reading the volume, then the most important romance in *Macho Sluts* isn't between two or more of its various protagonists. It's between Califia and us.

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[1] As discussed later in the article, Califia is a bisexual trans man who transitioned genders in the mid-1990s. Prior to transitioning, Califia lived as a woman and lesbian and was known as Pat. When Califia first published *Macho Sluts*, he identified as a woman and a lesbian. I am using the pronoun *he* to refer to Califia in this article to reflect Califia's current gender identification. Readers should be aware, however, that Califia was a female-identified member of the lesbian SM community at the time of writing the stories in the collection.

[2] Califia discusses the writing process in "Introduction: Or Is It Always Right to Rebel," in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* (2000).

[3] See, for example Jeffreys, 132-135. For the most complete radical feminist analysis of SM, see Linden et al., eds., *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis*. For a detailed history of the relationship between Samois and WAVPM, and sex-positive feminism vs. anti-pornography feminism, see Bronstein, 2011.

[4] Lesbian feminists urged women to resist sadomasochistic thoughts and desires, even as they acknowledged that domination, control, and violence were so much a part of our cultural environment that they shaped women's sexual fantasies. Responsible lesbians could not simply indulge these desires in the name of pleasure, but had to recognize the origins of those desires and the ways in which a celebration of submission and dominance perpetuated the inequalities and oppressions of a patriarchal society. On this point, see Ann Snitow's exploration of how Harlequin romance novels use commonly experienced psychological and social elements in the daily lives of women to create their erotic pull. As Snitow describes it, Harlequins illustrate "the particular nature of the satisfactions we are all led to seek by the conditions of our culture" (247).

[5] Lynn Chancer argues that sadomasochism is "*both* sometimes a legitimate form of consensual activity *and* a practice that is often rendered especially attractive, maybe even predictably seductive, precisely because of its resonance with common experiences of our everyday lives." These common experiences include relationships with power differentials such as teacher/student, doctor/patient, employer/employee, and other everyday interactions that structure our lives. See Chancer, 201-202.

[6] The history of the conflict between Samois and WAVPM is recounted in detail in Bronstein, chapter 9.

[7] On the MacKinnon-Dworkin ordinances and their path to the Supreme Court in 1986, see Downs and Bronstein.

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