

## Trasher Feminism: Valerie Solanas and Her Enemies

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Valerie Solanas:  
The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote  
SCUM (and Shot Andy Warhol)  
by Breanne Fahs  
The Feminist Press, 2014, 352 pp.

*Late last year* former NYPD Commissioner Ray Kelly visited Brown University to deliver a lecture on “proactive policing,” a tepid euphemism for a stop-and-frisk policy that primarily targeted black and Latino youth. Lying in wait was a group of students who had assembled to protest Kelly and his policies and who booed and shouted until the commissioner decided to leave the podium. When the students’ victory reached the social justice media circuits, the left divided. Many celebrated the protests; others believed the shout-down was a low blow and undermined efforts to curtail police abuses. Several high-profile progressive commentators, including *Nation* columnist Katha Pollitt and MSNBC host Chris Hayes, issued rebukes, with Pollitt declaring, “It’s fashionable on the left to mock liberalism as weak tea—and sometimes it is. But you know what is getting rid of stop-and-frisk? Liberalism.”

When the radical writer Valerie Solanas shot Andy Warhol in 1968, a prominent segment of second-wave feminism underwent similar fractures over the utility of this extreme action. In a new biography of the would-be Warhol assassin, author Breanne Fahs documents how the National Organization of Women fissured in the aftermath of the shooting. Ti-Grace Atkinson, then the president of NOW, rallied to Solanas and enlisted prominent civil rights attorney Flo Kennedy to handle her defense. NOW’s

founder, Betty Friedan, on the other hand, condemned Solanas’s actions and warned Kennedy in a telegram to “desist immediately from linking NOW in any way with Valerie Solanas. Miss Solanas [sic] motives in Warhol case entirely irrelevant to NOW’s goals of full equality for women in truly equal partnership with men.” Stoking the flames of this rift was Solanas herself, a wildly irascible malcontent who lashed out even at those trying to help her. From jail, three months after her arrest, she wrote Atkinson:

I know you, along with all the other professional parasites with nothing of their own going for them, are eagerly awaiting my commitment to the bughouse . . . I want to make perfectly clear that I am not being committed because of my views or the “SCUM Manifesto”. . . . Nor do I want you to continue to mouthe [sic] your cultivated banalities about my motive for shooting Warhol Your gall in presuming to be competent to discourse on such a matter is beyond belief. In short, do not ever publicly discuss me, SCUM, or any aspect at all of my care. Just DON’T.

*Solanas, who penned the vitriolic SCUM Manifesto*, has long functioned as a kind of mythical misandrist in the collective imagination of the feminist movement. The vision of radical social upheaval outlined in *SCUM* tends to evoke the infamous Pat Robertson quote that many liberal feminists have essentially dedicated their careers to debunking: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.” With perhaps the exception

of killing children, Robertson's characterization describes Solanas's politics with darkly funny accuracy. As the *SCUM Manifesto* suggests—and Fahs's biography confirms—

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Solanas had little interest in achieving “equal partnership” with men under the existing structures of society or, for that matter, working within any established feminist organizations. While Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* urged dissatisfied housewives to seek employment outside of the home as the path to fulfillment, the *SCUM Manifesto* advocated—alongside the eventual elimination of men—the radical idea of “unwork,” or a perpetual labor slowdown in which women would accept jobs only to do bad work, destroy equipment, and get fired, repeating the process until they eventually destroyed the fulcrum of women's exploitation: capitalism. “What will liberate women from male control,” Solanas declared, “is the total elimination of the money-work system, not the attainment of economic equality with men within it.”

“SCUM” has been remembered, somewhat apocryphally, as an acronym for “Society for Cutting Up Men.” Solanas did use the phrase a handful of times during her early days in New York, littering the lobby of the Chelsea Hotel, where she briefly lived, with advertisements for meetings. She later insisted, however, that “SCUM” was not an acronym but rather a reference to the refuse of society: the women who would eventually overthrow the male-dominated political and economic regime. According to Solanas, men's inherent inferiority had rendered them a class responsible for war, racism, and suburbs, among other social ills. The solution for a better world, she proposed, was for SCUM to unwork, kill all

men, eliminate money, and implement the complete automation of society. “SCUM is out to destroy the system,” wrote Solanas, “not attain certain rights within it.” In the manifesto's breathtaking conclusion, she asserted that once money was eliminated, there would be no further need to kill men, as they would be “stripped of the only power” they held over women. After this point, men would be allowed to “exist out their puny days dropped out on drugs or strutting around in drag or passively watching the high-powered females in action.”

*As the first comprehensive biography of Solanas, Fahs's Valerie Solanas delivers a thorough, empathic portrait of the notoriously volatile but little-understood writer. A formidable biographer, Fahs reconstructs, mostly from primary sources, the familial and social conditions that surrounded the creation of Solanas's masterworks, the SCUM Manifesto and the lesser-known but equally searing play Up Your Ass. Born in 1936 in New Jersey, Solanas grew up in poverty and earned a reputation among her school peers as a rebellious but brainy misfit, prone to fights with boys and petty crimes like shoplifting. According to Fahs, she likely suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her father and may have become pregnant by him, giving birth at the age of fourteen to a child that her family would raise as her sister. Solanas had another child a year later, who was given to family friends to raise and never again had contact with her after the age of four. Despite this tumultuous adolescence, Solanas would go on to attend the University of Maryland, where she excelled academically and received a degree in psychology. She arrived in New York City in the early 1960s after dropping out of a master's program and drifted on the margins of the avant-garde art scene until her fateful encounter with Warhol.*

Solanas spent most of her adult life in states of economic and emotional precarity. Impoverished, often homeless, and likely suffering from untreated schizophrenia, she routinely alienated her few friends as a result of her erratic behavior. Despite the posthumous induction of the *SCUM Manifesto*

into the feminist canon, Solanas never received royalties for her work and always struggled, living hand to mouth. Even after death, her legacy has lived on uneasily, as both she and her ideas have been subject to numerous distortions, perhaps the most widely dispensed of which being the claim that she shot Warhol because he was a “male chauvinist pig.” On this count alone, Fahs’s book, which meticulously reassembles Solanas’s scattered and misunderstood life, is an essential corrective.

Solanas shot Warhol in the summer of 1968 and, in some senses, killed him. He was clinically dead for a minute and a half at the hospital, and though he was resuscitated, friends later reported that the shooting initiated a long, downward trajectory of poor health that culminated with his death in 1987. Though a flurry of media reports portrayed the attack as an outburst of militant feminist rage, Solanas herself consistently stated that she had simply shot Warhol for stealing one of the few copies of her play, *Up Your Ass*, which she had asked him repeatedly to produce. That Warhol had declined to do so clearly was not due to an aversion to Solanas’s work itself—in fact, he had a pernicious habit of cribbing lines from their conversations and from her writing for his own work. After Solanas complained, Warhol eventually cast her as more or less herself—a fast-talking lesbian acidly rebuffing the advances of a hapless suitor—in his film *I, a Man*, but she claimed she never received payment for her role.

Labor, it seemed, usually went uncompensated at Warhol’s Factory, and labor almost always seemed to go uncompensated for Solanas. Around the same time she was negotiating the production of *Up Your Ass* with Warhol, she had also signed over the rights to the *SCUM Manifesto* in a slippery contract she would come to regret—and for which she also never saw royalties. As Fahs’s book suggests, Solanas’s primary motive for shooting Warhol was his theft of her wages and artistic work. Five years after the shooting, *Esquire* would overlook these factors and write that Solanas had “claimed she did it because Warhol was a disgusting male chauvinist pig.” But Solanas herself shot back in a blistering letter to the magazine, denying any relationship to the

feminist movement. And when NOW president Ti-Grace Atkinson met with Solanas in prison after the shooting, she recalled, “[Solanas] took great pleasure in describing how humiliated they were, how they were begging for mercy. It seemed inhuman to me. It had nothing to do with feminism at all. It had to do with artist’s rights.”

*That Solanas has* entered the cultural lexicon as the vengeful feminist archangel rather than the patron saint of exploited artists perhaps has as much to do with those who rallied to her cause in the wake of the shooting as it does with the militant program of male elimination she proffered in *SCUM*. Her assault on Warhol and the caustic brilliance of *SCUM* compelled several prominent second-wave feminists, including Shulamith Firestone, Vivian Gornick, and Robin Morgan, to seek her out and offer their support following her arrest. Though initially receptive to their attentions, Solanas would eventually turn against all of them, convinced they were trying to appropriate her plight for their own brand of movement feminism, which she vehemently declared was made up of “dupes” and “know-nothings.” In a series of letters from jail to Ti-Grace Atkinson, Solanas railed, “It’s obvious that, not only do you not understand *SCUM*, but that *SCUM* is not for you. *SCUM* is for whores, dykes, criminals, homicidal maniacs. Therefore, please refrain from commenting on *SCUM* + from ‘defending’ me. I already have an excess of ‘friends’ out there who are suffocating me.” As Fahs makes clear, though Solanas’s vicious diatribes on the theft of her work often seemed to verge on clinical paranoia, even her most outlandish assertions often contained a kernel of truth. (Robin Morgan, for instance, would incorporate an excerpt of the *SCUM Manifesto* into her feminist anthology, *Sisterhood is Powerful*, without Solanas’s permission and, Solanas believed for some time, without payment.)

At times, though, Fahs also seems to want to situate Solanas within the parameters of the second wave, even as she deftly shows how Solanas herself resisted this identification. In her book’s preface, for example, she describes the cultural milieu in which Solanas

wrote *SCUM* as a “context in which women wore strings of pearls, married in their early twenties, renounced sex before marriage, and lived out scenes from *Mad Men* in real time.” This was perhaps the environment that most of the constituents of NOW were pushing against, but Solanas—who never married, who clandestinely gave birth to two children in her teens, and who lived in poverty her whole adult life—was no more a part of an upper-middle-class second wave than she was of Warhol’s wealth-saturated art world. Liberal feminist plums such as “glass ceiling” (a phrase Fahs uses at one point) come off as inadequate ways to understand the life of someone who was, to continue the metaphor, more interested in blowing up the entire building.

A more precise evaluation of Solanas’s politics might locate them not within the cultural currents of the second wave, but rather as a manifestation of a particular tendency found within (but also without) feminism. Solanas was arguably the preeminent “trasher” of her era, referring to activists like Atkinson and Jo Freeman as the “Women’s Bowel Movement” and castigating the tracts and groups that she believed had emulated the *SCUM Manifesto*, including the *C.L.I.T. Papers*, Freeman’s *Bitch Manifesto*, and the organization W.I.T.C.H. (Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell). Yet her insult-laden screeds against “establishment” feminists also opened a space for her to edify her own theories. The *SCUM Manifesto* may have had nothing to do with the second wavers’ push for abortion rights or equal pay, but it was about teaching women why they should “purposefully fuck up.” During a time when the most visible expression of feminism centered on the assertion that women were as just as capable as men of waged employment, Solanas’s recognition of the political possibilities of failure was an unexpected—and radically provocative—gesture: one that, at once,

recognized the centrality of women to capitalist production and also championed the destruction of that very system. Likewise, the feminist discourse that is commonly dismissed as “trashing” today often serves as a flashpoint for resistance against liberal feminism and includes, among others, women of color criticizing the systemic racism that continues to pervade much of these liberal feminist spaces.

If calls to end trashing are efforts to close the gaps between various factions within feminism, then Solanas has helped to remind us that trashing can also be the insistence that these gaps cannot be filled—that feminism must represent a multiplicity of claims and seek to redress several interlocking forms of exploitation.

*Controversy over “trashing”* reignited again in February, thanks to an essay in the *Nation* by Michelle Goldberg that suggested that online feminism had curdled. The source of its demise: a “toxic” new Twitter culture that had given rise to petty infighting and tyrannical language policing. Citing a 1976 essay by Jo Freeman that first detailed the epidemic of feminist trashing, Goldberg stated, “This is hardly the first time that feminism . . . has been racked by furious contentions over ideological purity.” But as with Freeman (whom Solanas was to subsequently trash), the “furious contentions” described by Goldberg are less about bids for “ideological purity” than appeals for recognition. A more radically inclusive feminism, therefore, would be one that enables marginalized groups to assert themselves against dominant narratives of feminism rather than beseeching them to all fall in line. As Solanas reminds us, revolutionary ideas don’t emerge quietly from the elite stratum of a society; they often bloom from its scum.

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