

“I Should’ve Done Target Practice”:

Why Valerie Solanas Missed

Desireé D. Rowe

Abstract

Through performative writing, this article seeks to tell the story of Valerie Solanas. Solanas, the woman most notoriously known as the shooter of Andy Warhol, has had little media exposure that does not frame her outside of the violent female assassin trope. (Auto)ethnographic writing, coupled with theoretical interludes via footnotes, works to retell Solanas’ story.

In this way this article is telling three stories: the main narrative of Solanas, the footnoted theoretical narrative, and the author’s relationship to Solanas.

Keywords

Valerie Solanas, radical feminism, identity

When walking a deliberate pace, it takes 4,678 steps to walk from 170 E. 3rd street to 19 E. 32nd street. I estimate that steps move quicker for New Yorkers today, considering the way the world spins. But on June 3, 1968, with a gun in her pocket, it took Valerie Solanas 4,678 steps to shoot Andy Warhol. Why steps? Because Valerie never would have taken a taxi or the subway; she didn’t trust cars too much. Or the men in them.

No. It wasn’t as dramatic as that. It wasn’t with each step she became more and more determined. We are dealing with avant-garde artists, save the melodrama for the actors. Valerie really wanted to shoot Maurice Girodias, but he wasn’t in that day.¹ Warhol was a part of The Factory. Just like his shocking white hair and Campbell soup cans, his location was predictable. Valerie walked in, shot three times wounding both Warhol and Mario Amaya, and left the building, leaving behind a paper bag with her address book and a sanitary napkin. I imagine the napkin as her calling card. You know, just like in Chopin, when ladies left square impeccable reminders of their presence on silver trays.²

After exiting The Factory, Valerie stopped a beat cop on the street. He was a rookie cop, and choosing him was random. She told him all the facts; she allowed herself to be arrested. No fight, no struggle.

Valerie spent the next 3 years in prison.

Her sentence was probably so short because she was so crazy, but that’s just me making more crazy assumptions. She was paranoid. She was a writer. She maybe shot Warhol because he had lost a script she had given him and maybe she shot Amaya because he was just there. And maybe she shot both men because she really didn’t hate men, but that’s only what I deduce because of what they did to her. Maybe those facts are connected. I don’t know.

Her sentence was short, some say, because Warhol refused to testify against her. But it could have been because she was under care in a mental hospital . Or it could have been because her lawyer, Florynce Kennedy, was a leading feminist and quite effective in the courtroom or that Ti-Grace Atkinson, the New York president of NOW, spoke on her behalf.³

Why doesn’t matter.

After her release from prison, she went to San Francisco, acquired a vibrant drug addiction, and, in 1988, died of a sexually transmitted disease⁴. And that's the end of her story. It's more than most people know about her—or want to know about her, so congratulations for getting this far.

Living at 170 E. 3rd street was part of Valerie's big life plan. She grew up in Ventnor, New Jersey, a shitty town outside of Atlantic City. You drive right through the ghetto of Ventnor to get to AC, like money slipping through dirty hands. Thinking of Jersey, all I can think of are shitty towns. I grew up on the beach too, but in another part of New Jersey. More dirt, less money.

I have a lot in common with Valerie.

Valerie and I stared at the same algae-covered water, watched the same replaceable tourists. Connectedness, right? Valerie is my calling card because I know we are connected. Our lives branched off the same tree, born of the same node.⁵ We are like cities interconnected by the rats burrowing between us. Each connecting tunnel represents points of connection, and each tunnel can grow, shift, morph . . . but we are still connected.

Each time I am asked how and why and what and where is my connection to Valerie, and each time it gets harder to answer. I am in this text as a writer, as a woman, as an out- sider. But each time I click “INSERT -> FOOTNOTE” it gets harder to explain that connection to you. My PhD has put a distance between Valerie and I, the kind of awkwardness you feel at family gatherings when your aunts and uncles wonder why you are still in college at thirty. Who am I in this text? Where do I belong? I am writer, woman, outsider. I am here. There is only a certain amount of nodes in the world, and I share a few of Valerie's.⁶

Sorry. I can't help but move to the sorrow-filled malaise before I tell the rest of the story.⁷

Let's go back to steps. Valerie's big plan was to move to New York City. But, after graduating college at the University of Maryland with a major in psychology, Valerie moved to Minnesota to get her PhD in biological sciences. A big step. Minnesota is a new world compared to New Jersey. It's white, clean, smiling. I share this moment with Valerie.

Moving to Minnesota to get my master's degree was a cultural turn that I never expected. So much Whiteness. The snow, the people. At the airport at Minneapolis/St.Paul, watching the people crowd around the baggage carousel, everyone looked like me. Bright mirrors smiling, welcoming me to my home. The land of my people. I imagine that Valerie noticed the same thing, noticed her atoms tingling. Something is not right about Minnesota.

We both spent only 2 years there.

I tidily finished up a MA, while she dropped out of the PhD program. Hours of combing through the DNA of men and women, combined with her notebooks filled with personal observations of genetic differences, had given Valerie a new perspective.

Moving to New York City. The big time, right? Lights, money, possibility. All the stuff New Jersey never allowed you to touch; New York dangled in front of you. God. It makes you want to f'ing jump off a building for it. And we almost did. I decided to explore New York at 17, living only 15 minutes away from Times Square. Every weekend was a new adventure. Limelight, Roxy, Twilo.⁸ I wore the boots; black,

suede up to my thighs.

Working. Valerie worked tirelessly on manuscripts, selling soft-core porn to magazines to make ends meet. Giving blow-jobs when things got too rough. Spending her off nights writing her play. Eventually, she met Candy, a hesitant drag queen who needed a roommate. Candy and Valerie moved to 170 E. 3rd street and started hanging out at The Factory. The Factory was as big as those clubs I strutted around in, with just as many drugs. It was where Andy Warhol lived and worked, where he created art. By the time Valerie showed up, Billy-Name9 had already covered all the walls with aluminum foil. Making the large warehouse look like the inside of a disco ball. Strutting around were women like Edie Sedgwick, poor little beautiful rich girl.

The women of The Factory loved Andy. And Andy loved them.

Both the men and women of The Factory were androgynous in a way you don't see anymore. Besides the blatant drag queens, where Candy was now holding court, gender was fluid, mysterious. Everyone was attractive.

Except Valerie.

Valerie had finally finished her play, *Up Your Ass (or) Up From the Big Suck* and wanted to give it to Andy. She had dreams of being a big-time writer. Andy virtually ignored her.

Valerie wasn't overtly beautiful. She wore the same heavy red flannel coat and grey hat everyday. With dark, short, curly hair that was barely brushed and military boots, she wasn't as fluid as those other women. Valerie stuck out, lurking in the corners, not talking much; no one wanted to talk to the ugly girl from Jersey.

So much, that when Andy finally read her play . . . he forbid her from entering The Factory again. Why? He said that the play was so obscene, he thought she was a NARC.

She wasn't.

After reading the play (aloud to the denizens of The Factory), Andy promptly dismissed it. Tossing Valerie's only copy aside. She wanted it back.

Some scholars say that her play was the first moment of queer theory.¹⁰ Where characters confronted gender norms and broke down binaries. Vulgar, yes. Potentially ground-breaking, maybe. Valerie's first moment of radical lesbian politics.

She wanted it back.

Andy lost her only copy. It was rediscovered in 2002 in trunk filled with lighting equipment. Too late to help Valerie. But, George Coates produced the play in San Francisco.¹¹ The first and last time Valerie's work ever saw the stage.

The play now sits in the archives of The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburg. In the archives. Not even visible to the public.

To get access to see the play, I had to get permission. Proof. Proof that I was an academic. Whatever that means. You needed to have an elevated level of intellect to access the work, apparently.

An e-mail from the director of my department, a middle-aged White heterosexual man, to the head archivist at the museum proving that I was, indeed, an actual academic. Not a fraud.

Valerie wouldn't be pleased.

I want to tell you all about the piece. How the pages mailed to me are photocopies of the original, typed, manuscript. How some of the phrases evoke such meaning for me. Ridiculous, insane uses of language that seem to just work.

But, sorry. I relinquished that ability when I agreed to receive the manuscript. Sorry. Can't show you. Can't tell you. Can't even give you a hint.

Well, screw it. Just one nibble:

The woman doesn't die. The woman doesn't run into the darkness in red high-heeled shoes, chasing after a mythos of romantic comedies and red roses. No. She gets it. She punches and kicks and claws and realizes. Realizes that you make moments, you don't wait for them.

Sorry.

I might get in trouble. I might have said too much. Let the cat (hmph) out of the bag (hmph).¹²

Valerie's sort-of boyfriend at the time, Mark Motherfucker, put her in contact with a man with a gun, Paul Krassner.¹³ And the est has already been written. I mean, we already know how many steps it takes.

In her writing, Valerie throws around language like bodies. Bodies shielding her from all of the shit that she had to deal with: rape, prostitution, abuse. Language, words, can only be repeated so many times before they become meaningless.

Judith Butler says that there is a moment that the repeated language slips. That one time that iterability fails, something changes.¹⁴

Click.

Something feels different. It is a moment of possibility because you aren't stuck in the cycle of drugs, f'ing, drugs, rape, poverty, loneliness.

Click.

And I think Valerie felt it twice.

US\$25 for a blowjob was what Valerie charged. I imagine with inflation that was a bit pricey for her time. Paying for college by working as a prostitute, Valerie eventually slipped up. Got pregnant.

Click.

I can't find his name. She spoke of him, saying that she didn't regret giving him up for adoption. She realized that she had other places to be.

I've never experienced it twice.¹⁵

Maybe the second time that language fails you notice it. In situ.¹⁶ Recognition of the location of your body and its relationship to how you are living your life.

She talks a lot about shit. Scum. Semen. All of the liquids that pour out of the body.¹⁷ Recognition of your body, and how it can bleed.

At the moment she decided to shoot someone, Valerie was known as trash. Scum. Nothing but the remains of a once vital, intelligent woman. Whose crazy ramblings were nothing but crumpled trash.

Trash.

There is a bit of me that thinks it was alright for her to shoot him. I get nervous telling you that. Sometimes it gets too much. There is a release.

haven't written this much for it to end like this.

I haven't written this for you to end and feeling sympathy for Valerie.

We've built something here. I want recognition.¹⁸

A recognition of faces in a crowd. That when you touch a face that person feels the edges of your fingertips and that's meaningful. Worth something.

I just feel like no one touched Valerie. Reached out their hands and connected. So, this is my calling card. A touch. Click.

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Notes

1. Girodias went on to publish Solanas' SCUM Manifesto after her imprisonment. He also published Nabokov, Burroughs, and Miller.
2. Valerie would never have read *The Awakening* but it is fittingly morose for her, I can only assume.
3. NOW is the National Organization for Women.
4. You are going to have to trust me on a lot of these facts. For now, I'll send you to Harding, J. M. (2001). The simplest surrealist act. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 45, 142–162. I've read so much, sources blend and it becomes common knowledge. So, like I said, you are going to have to trust me.
5. I call upon Deleuze and Guattari's system of rhizomatic mapping to illustrate the points of connection between us. Each node represents points of connection, and each point can grow.
6. In *Between Talk* (2010) Diversi and Moreira explain their own (auto)ethnographic work, "When I am writing, I am trying to represent my body—not only my mind, ideas or thoughts, with all my feelings, emotions, lived experiences, beliefs, values (in that moment or shifting moments) in the paper. I am not daring to represent Conde [the research participant]. I am not giving him voice. He has his own. I am performing my own experience of my relationship with him grounded in my commitment with social justice—rounded in my own progressive political agenda then and now" (p. 112). I know that was a long excerpt, but it was worth it. Diversi and Moreria get to the heart of my connection with Valerie. I am recounting her experiences via my experiences; that is what I would like to make clear. Identities shift and

move, and mine is no different. But considering this, I am working to make Solanas' narrative (admittedly framed through my writings) accessible and infused with theoretical moments.

7. In his *Limited INC*, Derrida explains that it is the tradition of metaphysical philosophy to arrange history into sets, good/evil and so on. In attempting to break out of that metaphysical tradition, I must ask, "What is the limit of trying to write history?" History is normally constructed through sets, so in rejecting that framework, where does Valerie's history begin or end? Don't hope for a linear setup and payoff, because I'm not sure I can deliver.

8. These were all mega clubs in NYC in the 90s. Drugs were commonplace.

9. Billy Name was not his real name, but a pseudonym he adopted. He was Andy's closest confidante and handyman of The Factory.

10. Avita Ronnell is one of the first scholars to see Solanas' writing as pre-queer theory/activism. Solanas was before such activists as Queer Nation and the Lesbian Avengers.

11. George Coates Performance Works is a still active theatre company. I have no idea how he got the manuscript or the rights to perform it. George is a difficult man to find.

12. Do you get my metaphor? No? Well, you should stop reading. I get tired of footnoting every little nuance. Try to stick with me next time.

13. Ok. Mark Motherfucker was the founder of the activist group, Against the Wall Motherfucker. Krassner was a counterculture figure who would eventually coin the term, "Yippies" (as opposed to Hippies), as was running with Motherfucker. Coincidentally, while working in NYC at Barricade Books, I organized and implemented Krassner's publicity campaign for *Murder at the Conspiracy Convention*. Funny how the world works.

14. Iterability means repeatability. I use "iterability" to call upon the long semiotic traditions of Saussure, Austin, Derrida, and Butler. Butler's conception of iterability leads into her discussion of performativity in her work *Bodies That Matter*.

15. I have read this article over and over. I cannot stop thinking that I am valorizing Valerie as some "other" woman and that I have not explained to you why the connection that I have to her pushes me toward writing this piece. I spent a lot of time with her—reading, writing, performing. This does not make me entitled to anything, but it does give me at least a small sense of knowing.

16. Latin for "in the place." Phenomenology works with the core-searcher in situ, in order to achieve a greater understanding of subjectivity. I use in situ here within that context.

17. Pursuing a degree in psychology, Solanas was using her body as a tool to engage in endeavors of the mind. This theme reappears in nearly all her (known) texts, when she focuses on the abject processes of the body. For example, the scatological reference in the title *Up Your Ass* and the excremental reference in the acronym SCUM (for which she does not separate with the required "periods") that she seeks to use as a subversive name for her revolution. As Ronnell notes, you can never lose a sense of "the excremental site to which Solanas relentlessly points and from which she speaks" (p. 11). Solanas is reaffirming the value of the abject, or the connection between body and mind. A consideration of scum, or the waste product of a waste product, as a powerful mobilizing force of women was not overlooked by Solanas. She attempts to turn what is abject into that which is valued.

18. Recognition in terms of Levinas' recognition of "the face of the Other." In order to recognize the humanness of other people, Levinas proposes, we must give ourselves to a mutual vulnerability. This vulnerability naturally occurs in the interaction of individuals who recognize each other as humans. A sort of philosophical game of blackmail. We are both implicated now.

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Bio

Desirée D. Rowe is an assistant professor of speech at the University of South Carolina, Upstate. Her research interests include pop culture, feminist rhetoric, new media, and performances of identity.