



Performative (re)Writing:
Valerie Solanas and the Politics of Scribble

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Valerie Solanas, a radical feminist writer best known for shooting Andy Warhol in 1968, is also the author of *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, a feminist anti-capitalist treatise advocating for women's revolution against work, men, capitalism, and the patriarchy. Some time after publication, Solanas defaced the New York Library's copy of *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, rewriting it to document her rejection of the unauthorized edits that had been made to the published version of her work. Based on this performance, in this essay I argue for broadening the conception of performative writing to admit Solana's activism. Such an understanding of performative writing allows us to widen our field of investigation to include writings that might be cast aside for not being traditional or conventional enough in style or material location and written by those outside of creative writing or academic circles.

0.50¢ for Women, \$1.00 for Men: The Circulation of a Text

By 1967, Solanas had written her manifesto and achieved a certain amount of local notoriety thanks to an interview with the *Village Voice* about her "scrabous [feminist] tract" (Doyle, 2006, p. 32). Peddling mimeographed copies of her manifesto on the streets of Greenwich Village,¹ Solanas sold at least four hundred copies by the spring of 1968 (Rich, 1993, pp. 16-17). It is widely known that she charged men \$1.00 for a copy, while she sold copies to women for 0.50¢.

Solanas was then contracted by the maverick publishing house Olympia Press to publish the manuscript, but prior to publication she was imprisoned for shooting Andy Warhol and subsequently sent to Elmhurst Psychiatric Hospital for schizophrenia (Dederer, 2004). Meanwhile, the rights to the manuscript were bought out by her publisher, Maurice Girodias, and the treatise was copyedited and published in 1971 without her consent. In a 1977 response to her earlier interview with the *Village Voice*, Solanas stated that "*none* of the corrections I wanted made were included and that many other changes in wording were made—all for the worse—and there were many

'typographical errors' [sic]: words and even extended parts of sentences left out" (Smith & Van der Horst, 1977, p. 26).

After being released from the hospital, Solanas visited the New York Public Library and using a black pen, literally wrote her own comments into the book. Within the thirty-two page text, eight pages (including the front and back covers) are marked.² Through her pen marks on these pages, she engaged in a localized, embodied rewriting of her own work. I contend that Solanas's rewriting is a performance of feminist activism.

My argument draws on Pollock's (1998) understanding of performative writing³ as a "queer" method of writing that "expands the possibilities of writing" (pp. 96-97). Using this queer form, Madison (1999) highlights the theoretical importance of performative/embodied writing. Madison's piece is both/and; it is both performative writing and writing about being performative. Pelias (1999), Denzin (2000, 2003), and Diversi and Moreira (2009) argue that experimental texts can be sites of resistance where "the poetic, performative text translates remembered and observed experience into narrative truth" (Denzin, 2000, p. 261). However, seeing resistant texts *through the lens* of performative writing is different than reading/performing/analyzing texts that were performatively written. My concern is with the exclusivity and elitism of current conceptions of performative writing as the purview of performance scholars and artists (i.e., Gomez-Pena, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, E. Patrick Johnson, and Elizabeth Whitney, to name a few), precluding the analysis of a nonscholarly, political conception of this powerful form of writing.

Another form of performative writing

That performative writing invites participatory construction is, to some extent, why so many of us have accepted the invitation.

-Frederick C. Corey (2001, p. xii)

So why do we not invite everyone to the party?

A more organic, vernacular conception of performative writing might advance this form as embodied action toward social change inspired by Madison's (2010) conception of the dialogic performative; "the expressive and responsive frequencies where conversation sparks alternative imaginaries and disruptions against the mesmerizing pull to conform, even to tradition" (p. 49). This dialogic performative, for Madison, is an action—a "doing" that spurs social change—the opening up of a possibility. Performative writing commits to text the energy and force of desire to create an engaging, even transformative, account of lived experience. In the scribbling on her *Manifesto*, Valerie Solanas offers a unique demonstration of performative writing as activism that seeks to inscribe an alternative experience of the text. I look more closely at the performative work on three of the defaced pages.

The Cover

On the front cover of the New York Public Library edition of *S.C.U.M.*, Solanas scribbled over her own name and replaced it with “Maurice Girodias” (Figure 1). Her pen strokes were so forceful that the cover shows bits and pieces of torn paper. The cover, with its pixilated close-up of Solanas’s face, is marked through those violent scratches with a forceful recognition of authorship. In removing her name, Solanas cedes authorial power to Girodias, demonstrating the lengths that she is willing to go to disavow his editorial decisions. Further, by removing her own name she is reclaiming textual agency.

This violent scratching is an instance of performative writing as resistance and activism. Harron and Minahan (1996) documents that Solanas, through a friend, complained about Girodias, “Why did you not have the guts . . . to let the *Manifesto* stand or fall on its own? Was there ever an author who was attacked and put down by her own editor and publisher, and right in her own book, too?” (p. xxvii). Furiously scratching out her own name from *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, distancing herself from a text she produced, is a powerful performative disavowal. And, if we truly believe that texts are messy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, pp. 256-265), this cover offers a literal exemplar as Solanas disrupts the conventions of authorship, textual authority, and visual aesthetics. In performative writing “things happen; it is writing that is consequential, and it is about a world that is already being performed” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. 94). By scribbling on the cover, Solanas reflexively engages her place in the distribution of her text, making sense of

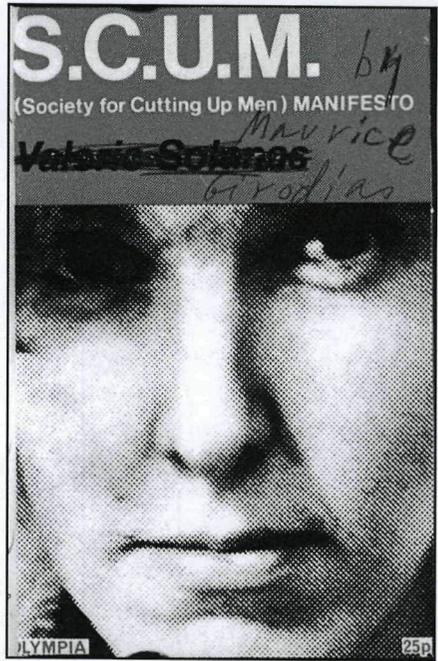


Figure 1

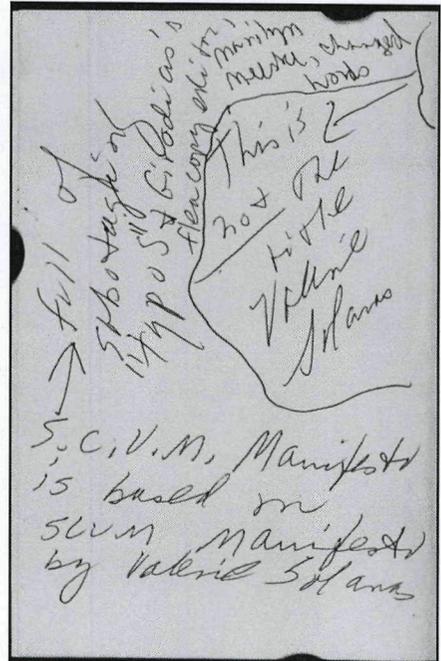


Figure 2

In The Salon

it, criticizing the process, and resisting the suppression of her voice.

The Flyleaf

The text, for Solanas, has been manipulated so much it does not even express her original ideas. In the New York Library edition, S.C.U.M. becomes an acronym for the “Society for Cutting Up Men.” This acronym appears boldly on the front cover and throughout Girodias’ introduction. Although in addition to the shooting of Warhol, Solanas is known for advancing the Society and its evocations of violence and hostility, Solanas, in her own handwriting, disavowed any connection to that acronym (Figure 2). On the front flyleaf, Solanas drew a long arrow to the title on the opposite page and wrote, “This is not the title” and “S.C.U.M. *Manifesto* is based on *SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas.” In this instance, Solanas’ performative writing attempts to “turn the performative into the political” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. xiii) by alluding to her absent text and challenging the representation of her work in the S.C.U.M. text.

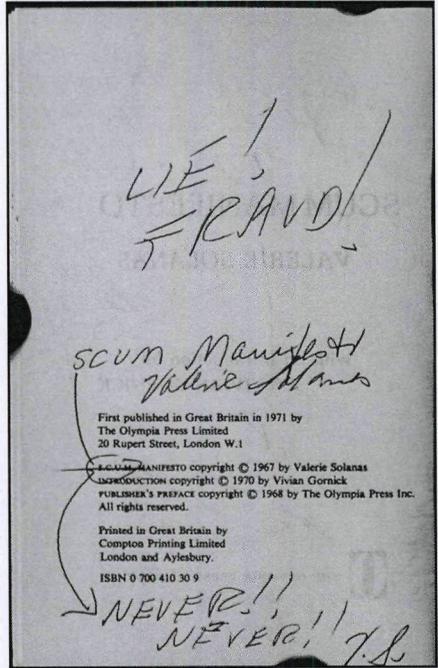


Figure 3

by alluding to her absent text and challenging the representation of her work in the S.C.U.M. text.

The Copyright Page

The assignment of a copyright invokes intellectual property rights and legal protection over reproduction and distribution. Yet on this page, Solanas railed: “Lie! Fraud!” and “Never!! Never!!” (Figure 3). The scribbles are a visceral performance of pain, anger, outrage, and desperation. At the same time, they reinscribe the dominant image of Solanas as a madwoman, a raging radical feminist. These scribbles refuse to line up or speak rationally; they enact a disturbance to textual proprietaries. Pollock (1998) notes that performative writing challenges “the boundaries of reflexive textualities; relieving writing of its obligations under the name ‘textuality’; shaping, shifting, testing language. Practicing language. Performing writing. Writing performatively” (p. 75). The scribbles on these pages write performatively.

Even with Solanas’ efforts at rewriting, Verso Books re-released *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* in 2004 as it had been published in 1971. The flyleaf of that edition features the centered legend, “The Society for Cutting Up Men.” Solanas’ attempt to voice her disagreements

with the editorial changes did not go further than the walls of the New York Public Library.

Conclusions: Paying Attention

Solanas, as a marginal subject, used performative writing to mark her own exclusion from the very text she created. Performative writing was her only way to viscerally/materially fight against the appropriation of her creative work, her public persona, her sanity, and her life. Feminist scholars who advocate for social change must recognize these moments as powerful reminders of those who are screaming to be heard.

Solanas' (re)writing implicates our thinking of history as a linear trajectory made up of discursive elements, and asks us to question who we believe in the construction of histories. Performative writing becomes not only a methodological tool within the historical present, but also a theoretical lens to enable a stronger understanding of the past. As Bowman (2006) explains, "The role of the genealogist is to investigate the diverse memories and counter-memories she finds" (p. 171). Performance studies scholarship is uniquely positioned to utilize performative writing as an alternative way to uncover these counter-memories.

It must be recognized that performative writing is an outlet for those that need to re-write texts that speak untruths—utilizing ways to write that are not *traditionally* text-based. Rather, this writing can take different forms: scratching out and rewriting, simple sentences, or repetitive phrasing—clearly marking the *embodied action* of writing. When we (as performance studies scholars) name these moments of engagement as new forms of performative writing and use performative writing as a lens to investigate them, we make those alternative voices louder and more accessible. Paying closer attention to these moments of performative writing indicates our deeper investment into the corporeality of performative writing as a lens to investigate, rather than only a tool for *us*.

Notes

¹ This method of distribution was “typical of the radical women’s movement approach to text, an approach which emphasized a group’s self-publication and distribution through informal networking” (Rhodes, 2005, p. 48).

² The handwriting has been verified by the New York Public Library and the book has been placed within their permanent archives for preservation.

³ I also understand that there is a vast array of terminology within the discipline that may refer to the either the same “type” of writing or something else altogether, but at times gets lumped together. These terms include: creative non-fiction, autoethnography, performance ethnography, narrative ethnography, narrative autoethnography, and auto/biography. For the purposes of this argument, I am situating this discussion with the tradition of one term: performative writing.

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