

FEMINISM / POLITICS
\$12.95 / £7.99 / \$17.50CAN

*An exploration of gender and
desire from our most exciting new
public intellectual*

Females is Andrea Long Chu's
genre-defying investigation into
and lies, desperate artists and
politics, the smothering
of gender and the punish-
ing force of desire.

Drawing inspiration from a for-
gotten play by Valerie Solanas—the
woman who wrote the *SCUM Man-
ifesto* and shot Andy Warhol—Chu
aims her searing wit and surgical
intuition at targets ranging from
performance art to psychoanalysis,
incels to porn. She even has a few
barbs reserved for feminists like
herself. Each step of the way, she
defends the indefensible claim that
femaleness is less a biological state
and more a fatal existential condition
that afflicts the entire human race—
men, women, and everyone else.
Or maybe she's just projecting.

A thrilling new voice who has
been credited with launching the
"second wave" of trans studies, Chu
shows readers how to write for your
life, baring her innermost self with
a morbid sense of humor and a
mordant kind of hope.

Females

Andrea Long Chu



VERSO

London • New York

First published by Verso 2019
© Andrea Long Chu 2019

All rights reserved

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

1 3 5 7 9 1 0 8 6 4 2

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-737-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-738-8 (UK, EBK)

ISBN-13: 978-1-78873-739-5 (US, EBK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

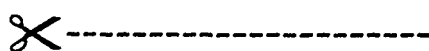
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available
from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Sabon by Hewan Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY





Everyone is female.

The worst books are all by females. All the great art heists of the past three hundred years were pulled off by a female, working solo or with other females. There are no good female poets, simply because there are no good poets. A list of things invented by females would include: airplanes, telephones, the smallpox vaccine, ghosting, terrorism, ink, envy, rum, prom, Spain, cars, gods, coffee, language, stand-up comedy, every kind of knot, double parking, nail polish, the letter tau, the number zero, the H-bomb, feminism, and the patriarchy. Sex between females is no better or worse than any other kind of sex, because no other kind of sex is possible. Shark attacks exclusively target females. All the astronauts were female, which means the moon is a female-only zone. The 1 percent is 100 percent female. The entire Supreme Court is female. The entire United States Senate is female. The president is, obviously, a female.

Females dominate the following professions: zookeeping, haberdashery, landscaping, investment banking, long-distance trucking, lutherie, consulting, talent management, tort law, taxidermy, real estate development, orthodontia, prison administration, and the mafia. Not all females are serial killers, but all serial killers are female, including the necrophiles. The entire incarcerated population is female. All rape survivors are females. All rapists are females. Females masterminded the Atlantic slave trade. All the dead are female. All the dying, too. The hospitals of the world are full of them: females in beds or gingerly walking about, full of pain, recovering, slipping away. All the guns in the world are owned by females.

I am female. And you, dear reader, you are female, even—especially—if you are not a woman. Welcome. Sorry.

BONGI. I'm so female I'm subversive.

This book began life as an essay on a forgotten play by Valerie Solanas called *Up Your Ass*. Solanas is mainly remembered for two things: self-publishing the *SCUM Manifesto* in 1967, a darkly funny polemic against the government, the money system, all men, and most women; and shooting artist Andy Warhol at his studio, the Factory, then located on Union Square West in Manhattan, in 1968. The play usually appears as a possible motive for the shooting: Since sending him a copy of the script in 1965, Valerie had been nagging Andy to produce *Up Your Ass*, and her paranoia that he was playing her increased in tandem with his indifference. As Breanne Fahs writes in her biography of Solanas, Valerie's anxieties "were both based in fact and somewhat bizarre; Andy *had* lost the play . . . in part because of frank disinterest, in part because of Andy's sloppiness, and in part because he generally

neglected everyone in his sphere who felt passionately about anything.”

Up Your Ass, or, From the Cradle to the Boat, or, The Big Suck, or, Up from the Slime is a weird, fascinating play. The unpublished manuscript reads like a very enjoyable undergraduate one-act—rough, raunchy, highly narcissistic, and so blatantly irreverent that its tone can feel impossible to parse. “I dedicate this play to ME,” Valerie writes on the first page, “a continuous source of strength and guidance and without whose unflinching loyalty, devotion, and faith this play would never have been written.” Two additional acknowledgments follow: “Myself—for proofreading, editorial comment, helpful hints, criticism, and suggestions, and an exquisite job of typing. I—for independent research into men, married women, and other degenerates.” This is vintage Valerie: impossibly serious, seriously impossible. It’s one of the reasons I love her.

The antihero of *Up Your Ass*, Bongi Perez, is a caustic, wisecracking panhandler in tennis shoes and a “loud, plaid sports jacket” who spends the play catcalling broads, turning tricks, and grumbling about the coming destruction of the male sex. Indeed, Bongi, equal parts man-hater and chauvinist pig, is a clear stand-in for Valerie, who wrote *Up Your Ass* while

grifting her way around Greenwich Village in the early sixties, poor, often homeless, doing sex work, hanging with street queens, loitering in cheap automats—"shooting the shit," as she liked to say. *Up Your Ass* reflects this lifestyle: angry, gross, delighting in its own wit; a mostly plotless, often pornographic burlesque populated by broad sexual and racial stereotypes (a shit-eating secretary, a pompous male intellectual, a white-and-black pair of pickup artists). It's a fascinating read, but difficult to imagine performing without wearing an audience thin. The first full staging of *Up Your Ass*, devised by experimental theater director George Coates in 2000, seems to have compensated for the script's shortcomings by setting most of the dialogue to sixties pop songs. The same production also featured an all-female cast.

Up Your Ass might be most interesting as a precursor to the *SCUM Manifesto*, copies of which Valerie would start handing out around the Village in 1967. Several times during the play, Bongi longs aloud for the end of the male sex, suggesting in one instance that men be eliminated through technology-assisted fetal sex selection—a bloodless genocide. The idea horrifies Russell, a white-collar worker who fancies himself a sophisticate. "The two-sex system *must* be right," he protests, "it's survived hundreds of thousands of

years." "So has disease," Bongi shoots back. The exchange will make its way into *SCUM* almost to the letter. "It doesn't follow that because the male, like disease, has always existed among us that he should continue to exist," Valerie writes there. "When genetic control is possible—and soon it will be—it goes without saying that we should produce only whole, complete beings, not physical defects."

But Valerie would go further than that. If *Up Your Ass* only hinted at the coming male extinction, the *SCUM Manifesto* advanced the thesis that men *are already* female to begin with. "The male is a biological accident," Solanas declares in her opening salvo. "The Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene . . . In other words, the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion, aborted at the gene stage." In fact, she suggests, the entire history of human civilization consists of man's sublimated attempts to fulfill his repressed desire "to complete himself, to become female." On its own, this claim might provide the basis for a formidable theory of gender, but Valerie adds another wrinkle. The traditional division of male and female traits—brave, assertive men and weak, dependent women—is an enormous scam perpetrated by men. In truth, the opposite is the case: women are cool, forceful, dynamic, and decisive, while it is men who are

vain, frivolous, shallow, and weak. The male has done a “brilliant job,” Valerie admits, “of convincing millions of women that men are women and women are men.”

The irony here is that Solanas is proposing the annihilation of the male sex on the basis of some of the very things for which men have historically maligned women: vanity, submission, narcissistic anxiety, and most of all sexual passivity. (The title *Up Your Ass*, after all, is basically a joke about sodomy; in the play, the teacher of a homemaking class recommends that wives integrate their sex lives with their domestic duties by taking the brushes they use to clean their baby bottles and ramming them “right up” their husbands’ assholes.) By gender-swapping the sexes, in other words, the *SCUM Manifesto* effectively proposes *misogyny against men*. The truth is that Valerie, so remembered for her man-hating, hates most women even more. The manifesto’s real enemy is what Solanas calls the Daddy’s Girl: a female who is conned into adopting male—that is, traditionally feminine—traits as her own, devolving into niceness, self-absorption, and insecurity. The true political conflict, Valerie concludes, lies not between males and females but between “insecure, approval-seeking, pandering male-females” and “self-confident, swinging, thrill-seeking

female-females” like her. In fact, the mission of SCUM—a select group of “dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant females”—is not simply to kill men and smash the government but ultimately to *defeminize* the human race altogether. It is only through the genocide of man that the Daddy’s Girls will be liberated from “his maleness, that is, his passivity and total sexuality, his femininity.”

If you’re confused, good. So was Valerie, I think—not because she didn’t know what she was talking about, but because of her fierce commitment to her own ambivalence: a sex worker who claimed to be asexual, a lesbian who slept with men, a satirist without a sense of humor, a man-hater who behaved, as often as not, like the men she hated. The radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson, a contemporary, reports that Solanas “had a habit of exposing herself,” having apparently unzipped her jeans and played with her clitoris at one of the SCUM “recruitment” meetings she was holding at the Chelsea Hotel in 1967. It’s simply impossible to square the *SCUM Manifesto*’s inclusion of “men who intrude themselves in the slightest way on any strange female” on the same list as rapists, cops, and landlords with Valerie’s alter ego, Bongi Perez, a shameless misogynist who opens and

closes *Up Your Ass* by aggressively propositioning women on the street. ("Give me a kiss and I'll let you pass," Bongi tells one broad, blocking her path.) One could be forgiven for wondering if Solanas's art, not unlike that of the great male artists she despised (and occasionally shot), might have represented its own kind of attempt to repress the very femaleness she hoped to unleash, like a biological weapon, on the entire world.

In fact, while the *SCUM Manifesto* is often taught in university courses as a feminist text, it's not at all clear whether this label is appropriate. Valerie sometimes ran with feminists, sometimes with downtown art types, sex workers, drag queens—but she was beholden to none. There are the makings of a recognizable political program in *SCUM* (the destruction of men, the end of the money system, full automation), but Solanas never describes this program or herself as feminist. Years later, Valerie would be gravely insulted when someone referred to her as "the founder of a group called SCUM." "This reduces me to the level of Redstockings, Radical Feminists, and the members of 1000's of other totally worthless, insignificant, pathetic little 'feminist' groups," she wrote in an angry letter, brushing off a decade of feminist organizing like a fat, drunk tick. Valerie was nothing if not an

individual—"always selfish, always cool," as the *Manifesto* puts it. Politics, in the sense of protest, strikes, and demonstrations, meant little to her; the Act was supreme. "If SCUM ever strikes," Valerie promises, "it will be in the dark with a six-inch blade."

For the record, I'm not sure if what you're reading is a feminist text, either. I'm not sure if I want it to be.

A

C

F

F

BONGI. Eventually the expression “female of the species” ’ll be a redundancy.

The thesis of this little book is that femaleness is a universal sex defined by self-negation, against which all politics, even feminist politics, rebels. Put more simply: Everyone is female, and everyone hates it.

Some explanations are in order. For our purposes here, I’ll define as *female* any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another. These desires may be real or imagined, concentrated or diffuse—a boyfriend’s sexual needs, a set of cultural expectations, a literal pregnancy—but in all cases, the self is hollowed out, made into an incubator for an alien force. To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense. This means that femaleness, while it hurts only sometimes, is always bad for you.

Its ultimate toll, at least in every case heretofore recorded, is death.

Clearly, this is a wildly tendentious definition. It's even more far-fetched if you, like me, are applying it to everyone—literally everyone, every single human being in the history of the planet. So it's true: When I talk about females, I am not referring to biological sex, though I'm not referring to gender, either. I'm referring instead to something that might as well be sex, the way that reactionaries describe it (permanent, unchanging, etc.), but whose nature is ontological, not biological. Femaleness is not an anatomical or genetic characteristic of an organism, but rather a universal existential condition, the one and only structure of human consciousness. To be is to be female: the two are identical.

It follows, then, that while all women are females, not all females are women. In fact, the empirical existence, past and present, of genders other than man and woman means that *the majority* of females are not women. This is ironic, but not a contradiction. Everyone is female, but how one *cope*s with being female—the specific defense mechanisms that one consciously or unconsciously develops as a reaction formation *against* one's femaleness, within the terms of what is historically and socioculturally

available—this is what we ordinarily call *gender*. Men and women must therefore be understood not as irreconcilable opposites, or even as two poles of a spectrum, but more simply as the two most common phyla of the kingdom Females. It might be asked: if men, women, and everyone else all share this condition, why continue to refer to it with an obviously gendered term like *females*? The answer is: because everyone already does. Women hate being female as much as anybody else; but unlike everybody else, we find ourselves its select delegates.

This brings me to the second part of my thesis: Everyone is female—and *everyone hates it*. By the second claim, I mean something like what Valerie meant: that human civilization represents a diverse array of attempts to suppress and mitigate femaleness, that this is in fact the implicit purpose of all human activity, and, most of all, that activity we call politics. The political is the sworn enemy of the female; politics begins, in every case, from the optimistic belief that *another sex is possible*. This is the root of all political consciousness: the dawning realization that one's desires are not one's own, that one has become a vehicle for someone else's ego; in short, that one is female, but wishes it were not so. Politics is, in its essence, anti-female.

A
C
A
A

This claim extends to the variety of women's movements in the twentieth and twenty-first century that may be collected under the name of feminist politics; in fact, the conscious discovery that being female is bad for you might be described as quintessentially feminist. Perhaps the oldest right-wing accusation brought by men and other women against feminists, whether they demanded civic equality or anti-male revolution, was that feminists were really asking, quite simply, not to be women anymore. There was a kernel of truth here: Feminists didn't want to be women anymore, at least under the existing terms of society; or to put it more precisely, feminists didn't want to be *female* anymore, either advocating for the abolition of gender altogether or proposing new categories of womanhood unencumbered by femaleness. To be for women, imagined as full human beings, is always to be against females. In this sense, feminism opposes misogyny precisely inasmuch as it also expresses it.

Or maybe I'm just projecting.

RUSSELL. One of my more interesting points is I'm very bitter.

I first read the *SCUM Manifesto* in college, back when I was a boy. It was autumn, and I was living in Brooklyn, a theater major on loan from a university in the South, catching as much live performance as I could and taking acting classes at a studio in Chelsea. Those months I became obsessed, in a sophomoric way (although I was a junior), with the New York School, the name sometimes given to a loose avant-garde of poets, dancers, and painters working in Manhattan in the fifties and sixties. I remember preparing a monologue from *Red*, a small, cerebral play in which the painter Mark Rothko, known for his moody color fields, debates theories of art with his assistant Ken. (The roles were originated by Alfred Molina and Eddie Redmayne in 2009.) I'd chosen a bit where Ken finally reaches the end of his rope. "Christ almighty, try

working for you for a living!” he roars at his employer. “I can’t imagine any other painter in the history of art ever tried so hard to be SIGNIFICANT. You know, not everything has to be so goddamn IMPORTANT all the time! Not every painting has to rip your guts out and expose your soul! Not everyone wants art that actually HURTS! Sometimes you just want a fucking still life or landscape or soup can or comic book!”

I was full of rage then: red, male, viciously intellectual. I got it into my head that for my final project that semester, I would get my hands on a piano and do art things to it. I found one for free on Craigslist, a worn but fully functional eighty-eight-key spinet piano at a community center in Jamaica, Queens; somehow, I persuaded my two roommates to allow me to keep it dead center in our small dorm room. In the weeks that followed, I molested the thing. I tore out the wood paneling over the hammers, clumsily modifying the strings so that the piano would snap and hiss metallically when certain keys were struck. I tore pages out of used books, including the pop psychology classic *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, and papier-mâchéed them to the instrument’s aging flanks. *Feminism*, I thought. For weeks, my hands and clothes were covered in DIY paste, making me look like a compulsive masturbator, which I was. But this was

Art, and I would not be stopped. I had just cheated on my girlfriend, and I was very sad.

Piano keys, like human teeth, are buried in the gums. When ripped out, they have roots: slender rails of soft, blonde wood, often at a slight angle. I discovered early on that the flesh of a key received ink gladly, yielding under pressure. On a whim, I inscribed one key with a quotation, before carving the name of the author into the ivory with a screwdriver. I decided I would do this with all the keys. I developed a suite of formal constraints: that I would write in black ink; that I would write in a tiny hand, as I have done from a young age, considering it a mark of erudition; and that each key would be devoted to a different text on the politics of art. Most of these texts were manifestos and avant-garde writings from the second half of the twentieth century. One of them was *SCUM*. *Me too*, I thought.

BONGI. You're wrong—I'm not a
watcher; I'm a woman of action.

When he learned that she had shot Andy Warhol, Valerie's publisher, Maurice Girodias, wondered in alarm if he had been wrong to take the *SCUM Manifesto* as an elaborate joke. "But it *was* a joke. It had to be!" he wrote. "She could not possibly have convinced herself that she was about to carry out the greatest genocide in the history of mankind single-handed!" This is the question everyone always asks about Valerie: How could she be serious?

Easily, I suppose. Jokes are always serious. At an academic event, I was once asked what I had meant by the term *ethics* as I'd used it in a publication. I hesitated and then I said, "I think I mean commitment to a bit." The audience laughed, but I meant it; they laughed *because* I meant it. In stand-up comedy, a bit is a comic sequence or conceit, often involving a brief

suspension of reality. To commit to a bit is to play it straight—that is, to take it seriously. A bit may be fantastical, but the seriousness required to commit to it is always real. This is the humorlessness that vegetates at the core of all humor. That's what makes the bit funny: the fact that, for the comic, it isn't.

Solanas was always known as “incredibly funny,” her biographer reports, noting that Valerie herself had commented on the uses of humor in the campus newspaper during her years at the University of Maryland, College Park. “Humor is not a body of logical statements which can be refuted or proved,” she wrote, “but is rather a quality which appeals to a sense of [the] ludicrous. Nor can humor, if it is truly good humor, be triumphed over by mere ‘massive education.’” Or, as a disgruntled reader put it in a letter to the editor, “It would appear that Miss Solanas establishes a point so she can stab something or someone with it.” This would become the first principle of the *SCUM Manifesto*: Valerie would make statements not because they were accurate or provable, but simply because she *wanted to*. Readers would be confronted by desire, not truth, peeking out of the text like a tattoo from a sleeve—a reminder of the flesh behind every idea.

Hence Valerie's choice of the manifesto as her preferred form of expression. The paradox of the