

Interview: Phyllis Chesler on Aileen Wuornos and Valerie Solanas, icons of female violence against men

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Breanne Fahs: Aileen Wuornos and Valerie Solanas are both known by many people as perpetrators of homicidal violence against men who wronged them. Looking closely at their stories, as you do in your new book, *Requiem for a Serial Killer*, and as I did in my biography of Solanas, *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote SCUM (and Shot Andy Warhol)*, their violent rage reflected the profoundly oppressive conditions in which they lived. We can read Wuornos and Solanas as feminist characters or as aberrations of feminism. Why should they be embraced? Alternatively, are there aspects of them we should reject?

Phyllis Chesler: They are both feminist icons, armed Amazon figures, and, at the same time, lone, non-political actors, badasses, folk heroes, like Billy the Kid or Jesse James. They work with no one, trust no one, are literal, concrete, specific; as Solanas might say, they *act*, while feminists are too often women who just talk. They are also mad women, in both senses of that word. However, Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* is brilliant and daring, as well as crackpot — political theatre at its best. Wuornos does not think or write in feminist terms. Although both women have lived at the edge of the ledge, endured enormous sexual violence, and gave up babies for adoption when they were teenagers, Solanas did not become a serial killer; Wuornos did. Both women refused to be rescued by feminist leaders who came to their aid. They gave us all a right royal run for our money. I found that I was the revolutionary idealist who wanted to overthrow patriarchy and Wuornos was a petit-bourgeois capitalist, who only wanted a piece of the pie. She did not enjoy the luxury of a life of ideas.

BF: Tell me more about that — the tension between the life of ideas and the act of violence. Solanas's writing straddled the edge of satire and seriousness, and until she shot Andy Warhol in June 1968, most considered her a “crazy” polemicist, using the *SCUM Manifesto* as (what she called) a “literary device” rather than as something serious. Yet, her publisher later admitted that if she hadn't shot Warhol, he never would have published *SCUM Manifesto*. This suggests that women like Solanas and Wuornos need to “scream to be heard,” that there is no place for them to express rage in moderated, polite, or mediated ways. At the same time, I think we'd both agree that homicidal rage leaves a wake of destruction, particularly for women struggling with severe mental illness. Neither could really get the help they needed after committing this violence. Where does that leave those of us wanting to express rage, or (like Solanas) express radical ideas, while also wanting to embrace non-violence?

PC: I am not sure that Wuornos wanted to be “heard.” All her life she was secretive — even more so after her arrest. But once she was in jail, she became very invested in her own fame, notoriety. She was proud that she'd “made history,” zealously tried to collect all her clippings, and agonized over others being able to make money “offa” what she alone did. This behaviour is also typical for male serial killers. I do not believe that the anger you and I may feel about genocide or femicide, or what we do about it (name it, analyze it, teach it, pass legislation against it, reach out to its victims, march, even go to jail) has anything in common with individual acts of final-straw homicide. We are lucky. We are privileged — we can “de-construct” such concrete acts and try to connect with the actors. Clearly, in both Solanas's and Wuornos's case, they viewed the feminist do-gooders with suspicion, contempt, and perhaps hatred.

BF: It is a luxury to be able to think and write *about* these characters rather than live through their specific material conditions. You've just written a book about the much-misunderstood character of Aileen Wuornos. It is an astonishing portrait of Wuornos, filled with a sympathetic understanding of her righteous anger, her severe mental illness, and her drive toward violence. Can you talk about what drew you to her and why she matters, particularly in this moment of COVID-19, the Donald Trump presidency, #MeToo, and the intensification of women's righteous rage?

PC: I began this book 30 years ago, set it aside, published some law review and op-ed articles about her case, forgot about the book, and then picked it up, liked the five chapters that I'd written, reconstituted my entire Wuornos archive, read everything, and then steadily worked on the book from the summer of 2019 through the summer of 2020. I was originally drawn to Wuornos's case in 1991 and felt compelled to organize a pro bono team of experts (she wanted this) to educate her first jury about the kind of violence that so many prostituted girls and women routinely face. Her claim that she killed in self-defence was entirely believable to me, but not to anyone who has not studied prostitution,

interviewed prostitutes, and who is not familiar with cases of women who have killed in self-defence and with how their cases are handled. These are burning issues that remain with us today. They are as timely now as they were in the 19th and 20th centuries. I agree with you: Wuornos may be of greater interest now than she was in her day. Women are righteously “riled up” about racial and class injustice, sexual harassment, and rape. Also, we are now watching so many movies about female assassins, women dealing with domestic violence who fight back and who kill, female detectives who carry and use guns, female counter-terrorist special agents, etc.

BF: I agree that images and stories of women fighting back are in ascendancy, and I also feel haunted by how many images and stories we have of women being victimized and terrorized. I can’t help but think that this impacts women’s consciousness. You and I are both feminist psychologists and have worked with many women in bad romantic, sexual, financial, workplace, and mental health situations, including many women who have been abused, beaten, dismissed, trivialized, and discarded by (more) powerful men. How does this work — grounded in the material conditions in which women often live — inform how you see Wuornos and Solanas? What do Wuornos and Solanas teach us about how women survive violence enacted by men?

PC: Most severely battered women and child sex abuse/rape victims rarely fully recover. They tend to repeat their original traumas, which have rendered them *more*, not less, vulnerable to life-long abuse. Solanas and Wuornos got guns, got even, punched up, so to speak. Wuornos took down johns who towered over her in height and outweighed her. Some had been cops and Wuornos viewed such authority as corrupt and hypocritical, just as Solanas viewed Andy Warhol and her publisher Maurice Girodias as rip-off artists who bought and owned her work for a song and planned to hold it hostage for their amusement and profit.

BF: Do you consider their acts of violence a rational — or even predictable — response to the conditions they lived in?

PC: These acts are “rational” given the abuse they suffered for so long. However, these acts are also unpredictable. Most abused women do not kill men. Their abuse has made it difficult, perhaps impossible, for them to get out of harm’s way or to defend themselves from continued harm. To kill, even in self-defence, is rare. Many battered wives have been given life sentences for finally taking the law in their own hands and killing their batterers who had vowed to kill them. Absolutely no one else stopped these batterers.

BF: In that sense, Wuornos and Solanas *were* aberrations. Both Wuornos and Solanas had complicated relationships with men. Solanas lived with several different male partners, was sexually abused by men, worked as a sex worker with men, publicly derided men, shot two men, and wrote a manifesto calling for the elimination of all men (*SCUM Manifesto*) — a manuscript written for, in her words, “whores, dykes, criminals, and homicidal maniacs.” Wuornos was sexually abused by both her brother and grandfather, worked as a sex worker with men, and shot seven johns after they raped (or attempted to rape) her. Both women expressed rage at men in extreme and violent ways. That said, they both had many complicated and arguably justified reasons for feeling the rage they felt. How are these representations of men, as imagined by Wuornos and Solanas, a reflection of normal versus extreme toxic masculinity? Additionally, because both of them relied on men as a means of financial survival, does that relationship of economic dependence predict rage, anger, and violence toward men? How do we draw lines between childhood abuse and later acts of rage and violence?

PC: The economic dependence on men alone should drive women to violence. It does not. Because, as you say, it’s “complicated.” We are (falsely) reared to see men as our protectors; Daddy will take care of us if we take care of Daddy. By and large, for many women, this “peculiar arrangement” (which is how slavery was described) works, or is acceptable. They see no other alternative. As I reveal in *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*, Wuornos insisted that she did not hate men; in fact, she viewed many of her johns as “boyfriends,” and was atypically very affectionate with them. She had a series of non-john boyfriends with whom she physically fought. She did not think of herself as a “lesbian” although the only person she was able to live with for 4 1/2 years was a very butch gay woman, one whom she said

she “loved.” Tyria, who took the stand against her, also said that Wuornos was not really a “lesbian.” As you’ve shown in your excellent biography of Solanas, she, too, had boyfriends — and, at the same time, in blazing prose, told us that we had to eliminate the male sex. If you read enough about who the real serial killers are (men) and if you understand the nature of battering, and prostitution (mainly driven by men for money and “pleasure,”) it is not hard to understand Solanas’s point.

BF: Both Wuornos and Solanas are figures of anger but also of tragedy, resilience, and victimization. You’ve written extensively about how, when anger turns inward toward the self, it appears as depression. Both Wuornos and Solanas managed to resist a deeply depressive way of relating to their conditions of abuse and degradation. Why is it so hard for many women to validate and nurture their own anger? What lessons should we learn from Wuornos and Solanas?

PC: Women who act as if they are men — who act out their anger — were once diagnosed as “crazy” and punished as criminals. They have not been forgiven as many men are. I am not sure that anger turned outward is a way of expressing or avoiding depression. It might not even be “anger.” Women who kill their rapists or batterers in self-defence are often given life sentences. Wuornos killed in self-defence, at least the first time. Women do or should have the right to kill in self-defence, regardless of whether they are working as prostitutes, perhaps *especially* if they are, because many are battered and raped by multitudes of men, not just by one man. Most women are not permitted to express anger and then to let it go. It would be better if we learn how to do so.

BF: What would you say, drawing on the experiences of Solanas and Wuornos, to those who claim that people can engage in sex work in a consensual manner? How do their stories complicate the notions of consent, sex work, and mental health?

PC: Perhaps one to two per cent of prostituted girls and women, working alone, without pimps or Madams, especially as dominatrixes, may view what is a forced (economic) choice as a free choice. Everyone else has been trafficked into hell, especially young women of colour. As I write in *Requiem*:

“As an abolitionist, I do not view prostituted women with distaste or disgust — but I do see them as human sacrifices. I understand all the forces that track 98 per cent of girls and women into the ‘working life’: Dangerously dysfunctional families; physical and sexual abuse; drug addicted, absent, or imprisoned parents; serious poverty; homelessness; being racially marginalized; tricked or kidnapped into prostitution by a trafficker; sold by one’s parents; having too little education and few marketable skills; and, having absolutely no other way to eat or to feed your children.”

However, I do not view prostitution as an act of feminist resistance any more than I view marriage as one. The proposed solutions (legalization, decriminalization, etc.) will not abolish sexism, racism, poverty, war, genocide, or rape. What will? Until we find that magic bullet, starving and homeless girls and women will do whatever they can in order to afford their anesthetizing drugs so they can endure their work and put food on the table. And, as Wuornos said, men will keep taking their penises out of their pants and their money out of their pockets.

BF: Perhaps what you’re saying most clearly here is that options are limited for how oppressed people regain power, dignity, and autonomy, and that sex work cannot serve as a panacea for taking back power and dignity. One thing that sets these two women apart is their relationship to violence, and their use of violence as a way to regain dignity and power. Aileen Wuornos and Valerie Solanas exist on the margins of feminist consciousness as women who embraced violence as a form of fighting back against patriarchal oppression. Frantz Fanon wrote, in *Wretched of the Earth*, of the necessity of violence for oppressed people:

“From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence... And it is clear that in the colonial countries the peasants alone are revolutionary, for they have nothing to lose and everything to gain. The starving peasant, outside the class system is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms; colonization and decolonization is simply a question of relative strength.”

I wonder if we can also read Wuornos and Solanas in this way, as the question of violence as useful must be seen through the lens of both class and gender simultaneously. Do people engage in violence if they have other options? Is there a place for violence in feminism? How can we make sense of women's violence toward men outside of the framework of crimes of passion?

PC: I used to teach Fanon and Freire — Memmi too — in Women's Studies but I'm not sure I'd do so today. Women's position is a caste position, one that class, race, geography, education, luck, etc. does not seem to change. A girl or a woman cannot say: "No FGM for me, I believe that I'm really a boy;" "No sexual harassment my way, I'm an important scientist who is about to solve the three-body problem;" "You can't rape me, my father is a wealthy and important man;" etc. Class and anti-colonial/anti-racism struggles have required a violent overthrow of kings and masters but have focused far less on incest, rape, woman-battering, trafficking, FGM, honour killing, femicide, etc. Legislation against sex slavery hasn't done so, nor have conferences, brilliant books, or individual acts of sacrifice and heroism. Even vibrant feminist movements, which have named and analyzed violence against women, have failed to do so. What will? Solanas's shot landed her in a psychiatric facility. Wuornos's shot landed her on death row and in an execution chamber. True, if there were millions of women out there, targeting known and specific pimps, sexual harassers, pedophiles, and rapists, that would eliminate those particular fiends. But would that eliminate such practices among others and among future generations? And do we really favour vigilantism? Or mob rule?

BF: I know our job is not to provide answers to the provocative questions you raise, because in part your work is so valuable because it highlights the way that we are trapped within these systems and there is no easy solution. We are not creating a feminist utopia here, but rather, trying to better understand the nature of the trappings we are in. What do you want readers of your book, and those interested in Wuornos and Solanas more broadly, to understand about the particular conditions women are living in today?

PC: Radical feminism has been neutralized and disappeared both in the academy and in the media. Had our early 1970s work (both academic and activist) on sexual harassment and rape been continuously taught and updated, we might have had a #MeToo movement much sooner.

BF: That's why we need radical critiques of sexism and misogyny, a "going to the roots" approach to why oppression exists in the first place. When we work in solidarity with each other on radical critiques of the status quo, new worlds open up.

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