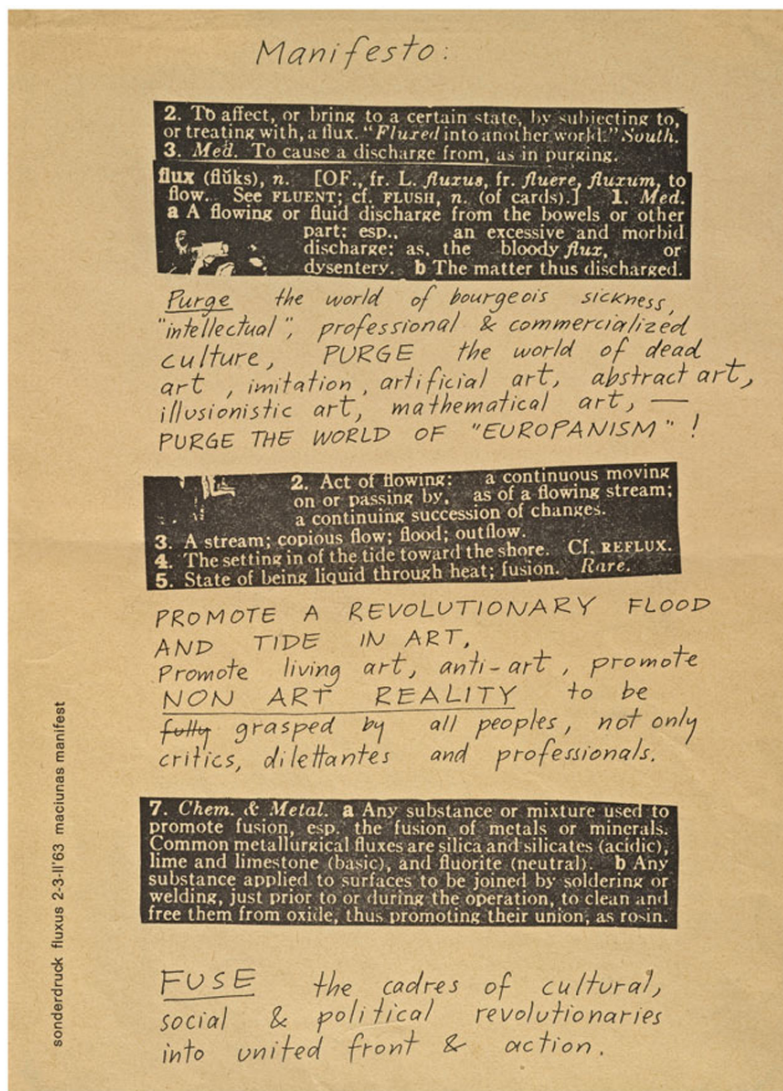


RADICAL TEACHER

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Writing with Blood: The Transformative Pedagogy of Teaching Students to Write Manifestos

by Breanne Fahs



FLUXUS MANIFESTO, GEORGE MACIUNAS (1963)

In 1981, Audre Lorde wrote, "It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment" (Lorde 130). Drawing from this activist framework of not only learning how to value women's anger, but also "tapping into" anger as a source of social justice and political transformation, I outline here the significance of teaching students to write their own radical agit-prop (i.e., political propaganda) manifestos in the university classroom. In this essay, I first discuss the genre of manifestos and the distinct features of their style and tone, followed by an argument for manifestos as a lively conduit for the expression of rage, anger, and pushing back against oppression. I then describe the "manifesto assignment" I created in one of my courses, alongside my descriptions of the challenges and rewards of using this genre with students. I also discuss the multifaceted applicability of manifestos to courses ranging from English/literature, history, women and gender studies, critical race studies, and sexuality studies, ultimately arguing that they work as a tool for anti-oppressive composition pedagogies.

What are Manifestos?

The genre of manifestos has largely remained understudied and overlooked, seen more as a literary tantrum than as a serious entity worthy of study. Manifestos are, by nature, rather peculiar. They are wild-eyed calls to arms intended to provoke radical social change, often moving at breakneck speed and invoking the collective "we" as they envision a new world order. As I wrote in my introduction to *Burn It Down: Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution*, "The urgency of manifestos—that clear sense that they sit right on the cutting edge—leaves a palpable feeling that the ink has yet to dry, that we are...on the 'bleeding edge' of things. Regardless of when they were written, manifestos pulsate with newness and freshness. They pry open the eyes we would rather shut, forcing us to reckon with the scummy, dirty, awful truths we would rather not face" (Fahs *Burn It Down* in press). In this regard, manifestos work by immediately feeling out of date, as if they were meant only for an audience of the immediate moment: "Full of contradictions, ironies, and clashes, manifestos operate on unsteady ground. The genre combines a romantic quality of dreamers and artists imagining something new and whimsical together with the crushing power of a Mack truck bulldozing over established traditions, trashing accepted/acceptable modes of thought, and eradicating the past. Manifestos do the transformative work of hoping *and* destroying, reflecting *and* violently ending things" (Fahs *Burn It Down* in press). These contradictions make manifestos all the more exciting and pulsating with life, as they simultaneously create and destroy. As Julian Hanna wrote, "Part of the attraction of the manifesto is that it remains a surprisingly complex and often paradoxical genre: flippant and sincere, prickly and smooth, logical and absurd, material and immaterial, shallow and profound" (Hanna, "Manifestos"). Manifestos are keenly interested only in the new and the fresh, the immediate and the contemporary (Yanoshevsky 257).

In this sense, manifestos may seem performative—full of theatricality and bigness—but they only work when rooted in the author's actual feelings about the world. Manifestos rely upon a deep and profound sense of sincerity at the root of them. And, more importantly, they have little regard for careful or tempered claims and avoid (almost religiously) notions of citational practice, homage to other thinkers, or an imagining of their ideas as "lowly" or "unworthy" of huge overreaching claims about the world. They are meant to communicate and convey an urgent sense that the world *must change*, and that social and political power belongs to *everyone*. They have no regard for "wait and see" politics, tempered claims of incremental social change, or the more liberal sentiments of politeness and respectability. These documents instead present *radical* visions for change that starts at the root structures of things.

Manifestos are hot-tempered and angry, sweeping and smashing, destructive and wildly creative. They challenge many traditions of writing, preferring to use the sweeping "we" pronoun, all capital letters, and frank emotionality (particularly anger). The writing conveys the message that there is no other reality but the author's reality just as the writing also emphasizes differences, polarizes, perturbs, annoys, and commands attention to its subjects. (These work, at times, as a permanent contradiction.) As I previously wrote about feminist manifestos, "Reading manifestos can feel like we as readers have caught fire. We light up, aflame. Manifestos operate as an infectious, contagious kind of document, one that purposefully ignites readers or listeners with its messages, making little room for disagreement or rational back-and-forth discourse. We are left raw and exposed when in the presence of a manifesto. The manifesto author tells us how to think, assumes we agree with them, imagines no possibility for refusal or resistance. They do not invite us to carefully piece apart the claims; rather, they want an *emotional* response. We should laugh, shout, or feel fear" (Fahs *Burn It Down* in press). Pushing this a bit further, Charles Jencks wrote, "The good manifesto mixes a bit of terror, runaway emotion and charisma with a lot of common sense The genre demands blood" (Jencks as cited in Hanna "Manifestos").

Can Students Write Manifestos?

In many ways, manifestos stand at odds with the traditions and practices of academia (and certainly oppose the formal training I received in clinical psychology and, to a lesser extent, women and gender studies). Manifestos are hot-blooded and full of passion, unreasonable and "unprofessional" in tone, and revolutionary in intent. When I first imagined the bizarre and somewhat contradictory idea of *teaching* students to write their own manifesto within a university classroom setting, I first had to consider: Can students write manifestos? Is this a genre accessible to them? Will they meaningfully understand the tradition of what the manifesto genre is, and can they extend and apply this to their own realities/lives? Overwhelmingly I believe the answer to all of these questions is: YES. Manifestos tap into a completely different emotional and psychological register than other forms of academic writing. Rather than working on precision and form, citational style and practices

of mastering bodies of literature that have come before them, and writing with small, tempered, nuanced claims that they *earn* through careful research, manifestos reject all of these things. Instead, the manifesto genre asks students to *start* from their own emotional feelings of rage and anger at oppression. It invites students to first think: What angers/enrages/upsets me most about the world? Next, students consider: What kind of world can I imagine that eradicates this oppression, and how can I write forcefully, impactfully, and creatively about such a world? How can I *show others* this world, using emphatic language? The starting point for manifesto writing assumes (rightly) that students are experts on their own emotional experience of the world. And, by stripping away academic conventions, we get to see their voices come through vividly and beautifully, raw and pulsating with energy and vitality.

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Too often, I think, academic writing strips students (and, to a lesser degree, faculty as well) from their own sense of authority about the world. They learn in conventional academic settings to fear making claims that are too big or too far-reaching (and therefore not supported by empirical or textual evidence). Students hear that they must first cite all of the “big names” on a subject before they are allowed to think anything themselves. They spend a lot of time practicing respectability politics and learning how to “position themselves” and strategically imagine securing jobs or getting into graduate school. Students learn about conventions of academic journals and the gatekeeping practices of nearly all facets of academic life. They are taught to envision themselves (often uncritically) as within this hierarchy and as invested in the institutional dysfunctions of academia, producing distant and sterile academic writing that lacks feminist praxis. Manifestos push back not only against the traditional practices of academic writing, but they also defy traditional ways of academic *thinking*. In this sense, if students write excellent manifestos, they can sense the risky-ness of that document as it collides with conventional academic practices. (I have had students tell me they fear their manifesto would “ruin” their career if it was leaked, or that they imagine it would stop them from getting a job.) Part of the transformative pedagogical process lies in the creation of this consciousness—that writing can be *dangerous* if done well.

The Manifesto Assignment

I first designed the manifesto assignment for a class I teach called “Hate Speech, Manifestos, and Radical Writings.” This course revolves around the dual tasks of reading and studying other people’s manifestos from the last 200 years alongside students writing their own manifesto on a subject of their choosing. The course typically has between 15-30 upper-division students from women and

gender studies, ethnic studies, American studies, or social justice and human rights. Typically, the class attracts about one-third men and two-thirds women along with at least a few gender nonconforming and non-binary students each semester. As is typical for my university (a public university in Southwest USA), students have a wide range of age, race, class, and sexuality backgrounds, including a fairly sizeable number of students who come from nearby Native American reservations and a relatively high proportion of Latinx, working-class, and LGBT students. Most students have never heard of manifestos prior to taking this course and most have never accurately understood what the word “radical” means (that is, going to the root structures of something) prior to enrolling in the class.

In this course, we read documents from the 19th century to the present, from anarchist texts from the 19th century through to manifestos of the alt-right and, by contrast, anti-Trump manifestos. As stated on the syllabus, together we examine topics as diverse as the problems of marriage, the surveillance implications of Facebook and Twitter, the cultural and symbolic meanings of female suicide bombers, exploitation under capitalism, racial and colonial oppression, internet trolls and online hate speech, and the myth of the vaginal orgasm. We travel through the early days of organizing Chicana/o labor rights to the turbulent and politically progressive 1960s to the present-day struggles about whether pornography is itself a form of hate speech. The course is designed to move far beyond the sanitized and pre-digested writings of typical university textbooks, far beyond the more well-known and well-traveled versions of social movements students may be familiar with (e.g., feminism, queer rights, black power), and into realms that are, by all accounts, radical, perverse, hateful, or transformative.

The manifesto assignment is discussed as the centerpiece of the class, a combination of working with both form and content of the manifesto genre. After reading numerous articles about the history of manifestos and the style/tone of manifestos, they work on writing their own manifesto. I write in the assignment description:

Your task is now to write your own manifesto, drawing from the stylistic guidelines we have discussed and reviewed during class. Your manifesto can be about anything you like, but it should be something you take seriously, and it should advance the cause of social justice in some way. Try to make it specific, forceful, creative, thought-provoking, and interesting. This project is as much about practicing your ‘voice’ in the manifesto as it is about the subject matter. Consider what potential impact the manifesto can have if it is circulated. Try hard to step outside of traditional modes of communication, paper writing, or argumentation. Rather, you are writing a sweeping document of social reform that should sound urgent and compelling. Build a case for the necessity of the change you seek and use the methods of radicalism to guide your work.

Students are encouraged to start thinking about their manifestos from the first day in the course, so that they can trace their most raw sense of what angers them through to the more developed sense of this as they read more and

more manifestos throughout the course. I require students to turn in a rough draft of their manifestos halfway through the semester so that I can read it and give some pointers. Typically, my feedback includes comments like, “This part is wonderful—see if you can make it even more explosive” or “I feel like you’re holding yourself back from the anger you feel about this—don’t hesitate to let it rip!” or “You can’t just say ‘shit’ and ‘fuck’ to express anger—try to dig in with more precise language instead.” Sometimes it feels clear that students are trying to copy or mimic the style of other manifestos, so I also often point out to students that they can make this manifesto whatever they want without homage to others. As long as they understand what manifestos are and what they are for, they produce work that is usually remarkably well-written, dramatic, and startling.

The Rewards of Teaching Manifesto Writing

In the span of the last eight years teaching this course, I have seen manifestos that have addressed a wide range of topics: globalization, fatness, anti-technology, privacy, sexual violence, racism, religion, money, art, politics, bodies, work, immigration, capitalism, and more. Every single semester I have read manifestos that I consider exceptional in their power, tone, style, and expression of anti-oppressive ideologies. Even the less intense and commanding manifestos show creativity, intention, and hone in on students’ unique impressions of the world. In addition to showcasing the very real material oppressions students encounter, their manifestos reveal deeply creative and intensely emotional aspects of their lives that otherwise stay hidden in their more conventional academic papers.

In a book chapter I wrote on student manifestos a few years ago, I noted that student manifestos successfully accomplish three major things: 1) Their work resists gendered norms of politeness and deference; 2) Their work inherently functions in intersectional ways, fusing together struggles of race, class, gender, size, and sexuality; and 3) Their work collectively imagines words as contagious and emotional (Fahs “Words on Fire” 228-229). Each of these accomplishments works as a form of anti-oppressive pedagogy, as students not only learn about intersectionality but *embody it* in their work. They imagine other ways to “do academia” via pushing back against respectability discourses and notions of gendered politeness and deference. And, in homage to feminist practice, they embrace emotionality—including emotions not typically ascribed to women (or people of color, or poor people)—rather than running from those emotions.

One of the most rewarding parts of this assignment is that the class collectively works to organize a public manifesto reading event on campus toward the end of the semester. This has taken many forms: one semester students organized a night called “MANIFEST THIS” in conjunction with music students, where students read manifestos while the music students composed background music and “intermission” music that fused electronic and punk genres together. Another semester students

organized “MANIFEST THIS,” a night that combined manifesto reading, a social gathering for food/drinks, and anti-oppressive art-making. Each of these evenings has given students the chance to read aloud their work, something that I have found profoundly moving as their professor. Even when students are nervous, the words themselves are powerful and real enough to transcend their presentation and infect the room with radical possibilities. Students also learn to support and affirm each other’s work, which gives manifestos a different “life” beyond the (rather unfortunate) limitations of me reading and grading it as their primary (or sole) audience. Instead, they express the work through a wide emotional range: ranting and raving, militant anger, timidity, tearfulness, collectivity, deadpan readings (and more). Students invite their friends and family, share their manifestos widely with others, and engage with each other’s work in generous and supportive ways. I also see this as a form of transformational pedagogy—that is, pedagogy that pushes students to invest themselves in new and unfamiliar ways into their own work and into the projects of social justice more broadly—as their written work becomes performative (also much in line with the genre of manifestos).

As another unexpected benefit of teaching students to write manifestos, many students have used their manifestos as the foundation for larger academic projects, whether undergraduate thesis work, or masters or dissertation projects later on. While manifestos do not necessarily work as ideal writing samples for graduate school or post-graduate employment, they do tap into students’ deeper beliefs about what matters to them and what angers them, which is a good basis upon which to build larger thesis and dissertation projects. In fact, many students told me later on that it helped to focus their attention *not* on what was feasible or pleasing to their dissertation committees, but on what they felt enough passion about, to help them endure and overcome the hardships of dissertation writing. Further, some students use their manifestos as the basis for many of their later activities, whether grassroots activism, picking a career trajectory, or working on finding others interested in similar themes and topics. (Position papers—another type of writing assignment more often taught at the university level—can also do this, but they differ from manifestos in tone, style, urgency, and impact. Manifestos are not only opinions, but rather, an urgent revolutionary document.) In the process of writing their own manifesto, students can better understand that marginalized voices matter and that they can nurture their own radical voices that attack the root structures of patriarchy and misogyny.

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The Challenges of the Manifesto Genre

While teaching manifesto writing is primarily a transformational pedagogical practice (both for me and for the students), there are many challenges in teaching manifesto writing as well. One of the bigger challenges revolves around the irony of teaching students to write outlaw manifestos *within the institutional framework of academia*, an educational setting that often reproduces class, race, gender, and sexuality hierarchies. The fact that I have to give them a grade on their manifestos, or the risk of them writing a manifesto to please *me* rather than themselves, may end up undercutting student agency and stripping their work of some of its rawness or “bite.” We physically sit in classrooms talking about manifestos, which does not necessarily allow them to engage as much with *the world* when dreaming up their manifesto. Students often struggle to find balance between their respectable student persona and their manifesto writer persona, which can lead to tensions and frustrations for them as they write in a new style and tone.

Consistently I have seen that the manifesto genre seems to work more easily for students who already think about and experience oppression in their lives. Students of color, women students, sexual minority students, poor and working-class students, disabled students, and fat students often generate topics for their manifestos more easily and readily than do straight white thin middle-class male students. Manifestos from straight white male students often include vague, incrementalist, and moderate topics like “improving the music industry” and “better parenting” and rarely land with the same impact when read aloud to other students. They often tell me and the entire class that they cannot think of good topics or feel uncertain about what is wrong with the current world (much to the chagrin of fellow students who are living the social problems that other students can overlook). It is one of the only literary genres that truly *disadvantages* white male (and other privileged) students and *advantages* people from lower status groups, particularly when students *write* manifestos. This is a fascinating reversal of typical academic experiences (as white men are typically catered to within academia to rather extreme degrees, see Armato 578; Styhre and Tienari 442-444).

The writing process for manifestos can also have some jagged edges. Some students struggle to come up with topics (see above), but others find that they do not know how to *write* about anger as a source of political engagement. They only experience anger as an unruly emotion that, when unleashed, sounds like a flurry of “fuck you” expletives rather than a more sophisticated and biting revolutionary argument or analysis. Helping students to write to *an audience* and think about how their words will land matters in this process. Encouraging them to swear less, and write with more *blood*, helps them to make documents that have more impact. (I typically tell them that they can swear as much as they want as long as they *earn* it and do not just use profanity to stand in for more interesting ways of expressing anger and outrage.)

Manifestos themselves also have certain built-in limitations that present challenges when teaching students

how to read and write manifestos. The genre operates in a rather reckless and destructive manner; even though this at times can serve as a strength, it also poses certain challenges for students. Understanding the difference between far-right manifestos (e.g., pro-eugenics, Nazi, etc.) and far-left manifestos (e.g., revolutionary anarchy, indigenous taking back of land, etc.) can be tricky if the manifesto genre is generally intended to *over-stimulate* its readers and overwhelm them. I work to contain the far-right manifestos into one or two separate weeks so that we can think about the difference between hate speech and manifestos first, and then move to more of the left-wing based manifestos.

Writing manifestos also has its hazards and limitations. For example, students at times latch onto the notion of *destroying things* without thinking more carefully about what that might mean. “Killing cops,” smashing patriarchy, ending capitalism, canceling gender, and destroying the government emerge rather often in student manifestos, but these kinds of concepts can produce some unintended consequences in students’ writing: vast overgeneralizations, romanticizing political violence, not seeing beyond one’s own experience/life, usurping dogmatic (and obnoxious) language, and idealizing an ethic that moves away from empathy, community, and shared experience. I try to work with students to use manifestos as a way of communicating their own truth rather than using manifestos to sound “extreme” or “cool.” Inauthenticity is the death of a good manifesto; they are performative, but students have to actually *mean* what they write. My role is to help them to find a voice that is truly angry, not performatively angry.

The challenges of teaching manifestos also point to the bigger challenges of situating critical fields like women and gender studies and ethnic studies within the academy. Women’s studies, for example, began as an extension of the women’s movement and was initially seen by feminist activists as the “scholarly wing of an activist movement” (Fahs *Firebrand Feminism* xii). Women’s studies was designed as the university extension of feminist grassroots activism and therefore initially served the activist movement (Smith 48-51; Stake and Rose 403). Women’s studies morphed over the years away from these activist roots and toward the politics and priorities of scholarly respectability, rarified language, and less teaching about activism, consciousness-raising, and feminist praxis (Sarachild “Feminist Revolution”). Many women’s studies professors have exceptional academic credentials but have little connection to grassroots activism or feminist organizations, an idea that would have been unthinkable in 1970 when women’s studies courses first appeared on university campuses (Stanley 3). Teaching students to write manifestos serves as a way to connect them with the intentions of what women’s studies was designed to do, that is, encourage students to serve the interests of a liberatory *activist movement*.

A Call for Manifesto Writing as Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

I conclude this essay with a call to other professors to teach students how to write manifestos. While such an assignment does not need to occur only in a course on manifestos, some history and background of what manifestos do, what the genre is, and what others' manifestos sound/feel like is essential. Beyond that, I could imagine feminist manifesto writing as a topic for upper-division women and gender studies courses, performance art or performance studies courses, English or literary courses, women's/black/indigenous history courses, ethnic studies/American studies courses, or courses on community organizing, social movements, protests, and revolutions. I could imagine this as an "extra credit" project, a graduate level collaborative effort, or a women's history month project, on campus and beyond.

Manifesto writing could be a collaborative exercise or an individual one, and it could take many forms and shapes (reading manifestos aloud, performing manifestos at rallies or protests, writing manifestos to university administration, and many others). Getting in touch with anger, tapping it as a source of empowerment (and embodiment), helps students to write themselves into their own work and validate anger as basis for *knowledge-making* and visions for social justice. As professors, we have an obligation to see our students as purveyors of knowledge, not just as recipients of knowledge. We want them to feel that they help to *shape* the field of women and gender studies, for example, rather than merely accept it in its current form. Most importantly, we want students to understand themselves as powerful and fierce, as provocative writers even if they lack some of the formal academic pedigree that permits them to write, and as emboldened forces of resistance in their own right.

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