Manifesting the Manifesto: Why One Genre Has Been Ignored

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I started this project because I was interested in the manifesto as a text. It kept cropping up in reading assignments and research throughout my undergraduate, and now graduate, career. After some time, I began to see the manifesto as this little thing doing a whole lot of work. Namely, the manifesto seemed to be a text seeking to find a space for an author to find her/his place within a conversation, or to start a conversation where there was none. Thus, I began to do my research to explain why the manifesto has been largely ignored as a literary text worth studying. Thankfully, Galia Yanoshevsky did a large portion of my work for me. In her 2009 article for Poetics Today, “Three Decades of Writing on Manifesto: The Making of a Genre”, Yanoshevsky unearths and discusses all the criticism surrounding this critically elusive text. She writes, “…many scholars have studied its history and its general features without doubting its legitimacy as a genre of its own. Yet researchers have repeatedly complained about the neglect of manifestos in literary criticism” (Yanoshevsky 257). For me, this helped explain why I have been asked to read the manifest on several occasions; also, that there isn’t enough work done out there on it as a literary text. So, I have sent out to find out why.

What is the Manifesto?

To ask what genre is comes first. Genre is not easy to define; it is a fluid entity that floats between identity and definition—much like the manifesto. According to Ralph Cohen, Professor Emeritus of the University of Virginia and genre theory extraordinaire, “The reason a genre cannot be present in its entirety is that it undergoes change with each new genre member so that there is no ‘entirety’” (vii). Cohen defines genre in the special edition of New Literary History solely focusing on genre theory, which takes up a group of scholars working to define genre on
their separate—and collective—terms. Cohen’s “Introduction” points out that genre changes within its own conversation. He works off a statement from Margaret Cohen to describe this: “Cohen makes the point that genres ‘take shape in a generic system where different poetic patterns engage the same intractable social questions but respond to them in different ways’…” (Cohen viii). Because a genre reflects different voices, voices usually playing off one another, its form is without formation—ever fluid and ever-changing shape.

If genre is constantly moving and shifting its appearance, there is a need to understand how. Gregory Bowden discusses the significance of defining the form of genre in his research article “Radical exclusions, empty signifiers and an anti-war genre.” He says,

I quickly encountered a problem recognized by genre analysts: the indeterminancy of category boundaries. Rick Altman (1999) lists two difficulties with defining genres absolutely: firstly, we cannot determine the properties that an element must have to belong to the genre without excluding some elements that people, in practice, treat as belonging to the genre. Secondly, the elements of a genre are not necessarily exclusive to that genre alone. Any generic element may belong to multiple genres. It is this ambiguous participation and these permeable boundaries that are relevant here. (Bowden 391)

Attempting to define genre permits the ability to see it as a culmination of “elements” from other genres. There is no need to “belong” to a genre exclusively. The elements of each genre only constitute an “ambiguous participation” on “permeable boundaries.” Genre, like the manifesto, is tricky too. There is no “exclusive” genre, nor is there one way to study how it moves.

How does this relate back to the manifesto? Martin Puchner, a professor at Harvard, similarly looks at the genre of the manifesto when he discusses how Wittgenstein spent so much
effort resisting the Vienna Circle’s use of the manifesto as a discourse, yet ended up writing *Tractatus* in the form of a manifesto anyway. Puchner states, “‘Manifesto’ is the name for the genre most clearly defined by its investment in the effects and the efficacy of its own language, and for this reason one can use it to uncover the performative dimension of the *Tractatus*” (Puchner 291). The point is not to focus on this specific manifesto as part of one’s research, but to notice how Puchner defines the manifesto in general. He stresses “the effects and the efficacy of its own language” as the performance behind the rhetoric. The manifesto becomes something that works from the inside out because of its very identity of being a product of language—just like other literary texts. Thus, one must read the manifesto on many levels, not one.

Since so many people believe the manifesto is solely a political discourse, it is imperative to see it as something more. As all genres are a form of social action—political in their hegemonic tendencies—the manifesto is no different. (IS THIS TRUE, LES? DO YOU EXPLAIN YOURSELF. NO. YOU MIGHT WANNA) Yet, it is a text of meta-discourse; it is a text strategically self-aware of its internal properties to effect movement. Yanoshevsky, additional to Puchner, relates to this in her article. She states,

>This characteristic may account for the numerous typologies that can be found in the work on the manifesto, grouping families of polemical discourse. It also seems to be responsible for the confusion between political declarations and their literary counterparts, which runs through the work on manifestos: if the manifesto can assume all shapes and forms, then it can be political or literary as well.

(Yanoshevsky 261)

To see the manifesto as a literary discourse shifts those boundaries of genre into another form—something, as just stated, genres naturally tend to do. The conversation then moves away from
dismissing the political motives of the manifesto, and analyzing them as literary conventions instead.

An article of leading scholarship by Marjorie Perloff (a critic the following scholars turn to for their research in this field) establishes a new way of thinking about the genre of the manifesto. In her analysis of F.T. Marinetti’s manifesto, as well as other high-Modernists, Perloff slams a new form of the manifesto onto the researchers table: “Not exposition—the controversial statement, the daring generalization—but narrative: this invention was one of Marinetti’s master strokes” (71). Looking at the manifesto as a genre capable of literary conventions, aside from an only political register, means that it is a discourse meant to be read. (AS OPPOSED TO MANIFESTOS NOT?) Marinetti’s narrative qualities in his manifestos evokes new reception that moves away from “the controversial statement” and, instead, echoes the voice of prose. Bowden explains what this means. He says, “If genre is an open category or something to which an element can participate but not belong, how can we conceptualize it?...A category is not an objective, unchanging set; social practice produces it” (Bowden 392). Marinetti’s “social practice,” his willingness to participate in both political and literary conventions of genre manifests the manifesto into those generic elements that pull from different registers. Combing Perloff’s explanation with Bowden’s work enables the reading of the manifesto as a genre built on threads of other genres—resisting the category of it as a subgenre of literature and defining it as its very own.

The Functions of the Manifesto

Once the knowledge of the manifesto as its own literary genre becomes evident, the manifesto becomes a form based on function. William Malcuit, professor (OF?) at Loyola University, discusses the manifesto’s ability to appeal to a large audience. He states, “The
technologies of modernity and the development of modern media are largely what made this ambiguous self-positioning possible: little magazines, for example, provided the perfect forum for the propagandistic and antagonistic writings—above all, manifestos—that became central to literary production in the early twentieth century” (Malcuit 57). The identity of the manifesto is not separate from the way it is presented—its image—but is, rather, constitute of it. By being accessible, the images of the manifesto are those subset “elements” of the genre that makes its “self-positioning possible”. This is something Cohen mandates as part of a genre: “Compositional elements”: “Every text possesses features or components that connect it with a genre, but it also includes elements such as typography, illustrations, interpretations, interventions that provide meanings beyond the formal elements” (vi). The one reason why the genre of the manifesto is hard to pin down is that it may not look like a “regular” text. Reading the non-formal elements means looking at the elements that make up the genre—meaning the aesthetic properties of the manifesto—as parts of the text.

Often enough, especially in the Modern-era, the manifesto was an undercover text cropping up everywhere in forms one would hardly expect:

“The placard, the sandwich man, the poster, the sign, the advertisement, the leaflet, the broadside, prospectus, prié d’inserer, ticket, handbill—all these methods of calling out, shouting, if you will, were devices of circumventing traditional language, imitating the sound of speech, and hence restoring to a kind of primacy, the original spoken rhythm which had been for millennia abstracted by written language.” (qtd. in Perloff 77)

What appear to be subtexts, minor scraps of texts, are literally discourses in it of themselves. Each has these moments of identity placement and information headings guiding participation in
the imitation of discourse. Perloff goes on to mention that titles and subtitles can also become manifestory subtexts to convey meaning through language: “To be memorable, Marinetti posited, a title must be concrete and provocative enough to catch the eye as well as the ear” (Perloff 77). Therefore, the aesthetic of the manifesto relies on those non-formal elements of its form to play off classic rhetorical registers like sound; the manifesto impacts discourse through the additional function of oration, proving that the more elements employed, the better.

Sometimes the images are in the presentation, or form of the discourse, and other times they are more imbedded, compositional elements. Perloff extends the course of analyzing the manifesto down to basic lexical structures like pronouns. She says,

But these images do not point inward to the self; they reflect neither inner struggle nor the contours of an individual consciousness. On the contrary, Marinetti’s selfhood is subordinated to the communal “We” (the first word of the manifesto), addressing the “you” of the crowd, the mass audience whom he hopes to move as well as to delight. (Perloff 72)

For the writer of a manifesto, utilizing precision (a word Perloff emphasizes Marinetti’s use of) evokes participation from the “mass audience” in order for the genre to move. This attention to lexical dynamics shows whose participation the author asks for, and what they are required to do: move. Much of what makes the manifesto encourage its readers to participate, or at least remember, is the form of the sentences. Puchner’s analysis shows one compositional element of syntax:

This rhetoric informs the Tractatus, most clearly so in its staccato rhythm, which is that of a hammer hitting in sentence after sentence, nailing down point after point. This rhythm and tone becomes audible by analyzing the Tractatus through
a kind of reader response criticism, gauging the experience of having to jump
from sentence to sentence, taking in all those absolutist claims, commands, and
polemical directives one after the other without transition or explication. (Puchner
293-4)

In this way, the audience/reader participation is nearly passive; the statements hit them, giving
them no time to reflect. All the reader can do is take each one in, and move on to the next.
However emphatic this seems initially, it allows for participation. Puchner calls this emphasis
out as a lead in. He says, “Due to its orientation toward action, the manifesto is impatient with
‘talk’ and privileges action, it is a genre intent on changing the world rather than just interpreting
it” (Puchner 297). Giving the audience little time to “talk” back before reading the manifesto is
finished justifies the “action” that is “intent on changing the world” after it has been read.
Movement can occur once the passivity is over.

For the reader, knowing how to move is often ambiguous. The conversation between the
author and the audience must be recursive. Maegan Parker utilizes the significance of why James
Forman’s “Black Manifesto”—a spoken text that called for its white audience to experience their
own oppression by becoming slaves—failed. She takes up the presence of ironic registers
imbedded in the “Black Manifesto” to discuss how the manifesto is dependent on audience
participation. Parker argues,

“The rhetorical significance of the “Black Manifesto” thus did not lie in its
prophetic logic or its retributive justification, but rather in its complex ironic
structuration that sought to circumvent the cycle of racial violence. To accomplish
this, Forman left the tragic plot of the “Black Manifesto” unresolved, thereby
enlisting the participation of his black and white auditors. (Parker 325)
The open-ended plot of the manifesto implies audience participation in order to name where the movement can go. But as she goes on to discuss, this tactic can be problematic. Parker says, “By leaving the plot of the “Black Manifesto” open for his black and white auditors’ contemplation, Forman invoked emotion to elicit active participation, though he was unable to dictate the outcome of this participation” (328). Parker sees a necessary dependence on providing the audience with at least a direction for movement, if not some attempt at an answer. The “outcome” needs to be defined in some way.

Ironically, it is in the form of the manifesto that movement begs participation toward outcome. Parker continues her argument to say that the flaw may not come from the author, but the audience. She states,

> Irony is found not in the relativism of the monologue, as Burke notes, but in the perspectivism that dialogue fosters, so we must account for audience reception to appreciate a text’s full ironic range…This negative reception might be the result of an unproductive combination of ironic registers, which worked for some black audiences, but not for most whites. If, however, considering the ironic text as part of a dialogue also entails paying attention to the substance of audience responses, then this critical consideration should imbue the audience with a degree of accountability for the productivity of the encounter. (Parker 337-8)

By holding an audience accountable to the interaction they have with the text, function signifies involvement in conversation—knowing one’s place in a “dialogue”—to invoke movement. The audience must take up participating with the text. Again, passivity can only occur during the interaction, but action must take the lead thereafter.
Since the author wittingly initiates the conversation, the need to have done her/his work in the field becomes mandatory; one must know the conversation to write into the conversation. Yanoshevsky regulates the author of the manifesto to the top the hegemonic order of its genre. She asserts,

Lastly, the manifesto may be viewed as a programmatic *discourse of power* because it aspires to change reality with words; the manifesto is a discourse where knowledge is asserted rather than developed because used by the person who utters it as a revolutionary tool representing his or her discovery of knowledge:

“The author of a manifesto sees himself first and foremost as a researcher, an inventor, a discoverer. (Yanoshevsky 264-5)

Calling the manifesto “a programmatic *discourse of power*” places the author at the top of the hegemony because of her/his establishment of the conversation. If the author has done the work in the field, the function of the manifesto will be as apparent as the form. S/he has established the assertion, leaving the movement up to the people, so to speak. Whereas this statement is so profound, and encompasses so much possibility, Yanoshevsky holds back one crucial point here; since the manifesto is a genre, and dependent on readership, there needs to be criticism mitigating the line between the two.

**The Reason to Study the Manifesto**

How does a critic begin to participate in a conversation with an author and an audience? Like all other forms of literature, the critic listens to the conversation that has taken place. Bowden’s own participation in a conversation on generic forms points to a place of entrance:

One would have to speak with the artists, distributors, audiences, and users of this poster, to see whether they consider it part of a particular genre, and why.
Analyses of content and reception play a fundamental role in the social production of genre; what is at stake here is an exploration of structural properties of categorization or genre that may complement those approaches. (396)

Analyzing those “structural properties” discussed earlier provides a place where a critic can come in as part of the conversation. The critic, then, “complement[s]” the discourse, by bridging the gap of communication between author and audience, “content and reception.” This establishes the manifesto as a genre, and a discourse meant to be studied and talked about, not to only do the talking.

Talking about the aesthetic properties of the manifesto directly relates to the manifesto itself; it is a co-dependent companion to the generic form that has its own significant implications. Perloff explains, “For the real point is that theory, in Russolo’s as in Marinetti’s manifesto, is the practice that the text foregrounds what Giovanni Lista calls ‘the problematic of the precedence of project to work, of metalanguages to creation’ (Lista, p. 103). To talk about art becomes equivalent to making it” (74). Since the conversation is as much a part of the genre as the original discourse, the hegemonic order of the manifesto places the critic next to the author, not below. Studying the manifesto means coming at it like a researcher. Cohen details the need for “generic analysis,” but also what kind of study to apply. Because the manifesto’s purpose has changed over time, it serves the critic right to study its “role” in literature. Cohen asks a research question to begin: “—what functions do these short genres perform especially to the longer forms of which they become a component?” (Cohen xi). Like the researcher delving into understanding the discourse on the manifesto, the critic must ask questions related to function—much like Parker asks of the “Black Manifesto.” Her own criticism reinstates the dismissed “Manifesto” into its genre because she forms a question not on form, but on function. Parker’s
role as a critic means looking at the critical discourse of the manifesto in order to see the “Black Manifesto” in spite of its problematic, ironic registers.

Naturally, the resistance to embark on analyzing a forgotten text like the “Black Manifesto” is daunting, to say the least. However, it is mandatory if one is to keep spaces open in the conversation of genre. To lose these spaces means losing to the discourse of power. Cohen details this:

> It is obvious that institutional authority and power can control the production of genres by punishment or threat of punishment. They can by such threats cause writers and readers to turn to so-called innocent genres. But it is also the case that writers deliberately compose in genres that resist the restraints the authorities impose. Genres are thus political or religious action. Thus the answer to the question of who decides what genres to practice is that writers, readers, critics and institutions make such decisions. (xii-xiii)

To take one’s place in the conversation—to ask a question—is more than mere participation; it is to decide and to create space. The “writers, readers, critics and institutions” are all participants in establishing space within genre. This is the source of action. None of these can do the job as individuals and keep the conversation open; it takes collaboration from all sides to break down that power—sometimes this means daring to move out of “innocent genres” and into more politically driven ones like that of the manifesto.

**What the Manifesto Can Accomplish that Other Genres Cannot**

The complexity and intensity of the manifesto as a genre makes the manifesto unique in its function of movement. Looking at Perloff’s analysis of the genre initiates this appeal. She states, “Manifesto art thus paves the way for the gradual erosion of the distinction between
‘literary’ and ‘theoretical’ texts—an erosion not nearly as recent as current polemic would have us think” (Perloff 93). The capacity of this genre is compelling; the manifesto breaks down boundaries, binaries and “distinction” as a means of dispelling power, and as a mechanism for reinstating new venues of potential. She goes on: “Such calls for freedom, for the necessity of inventing a New Art, go hand in hand with the spread of literacy and the use of print media in the later nineteenth century” (69). Considering those variant forms of the manifesto, the function of the genre is an accessible discourse of power via literacy. Malcuit adds to Perloff’s analysis to elaborate on this shift. He says, “One way Pound did this was by reconfiguring the form of the manifesto, the most powerful tool of the Italian futurists and the other Continental avant-gardes, turning it from a tool of propaganda into a tool of pedagogy” (Malcuit 60). The function of the manifesto is one of action and instruction, both go hand-in-hand.

It is important to notice that the manifesto’s function relies on the previously mentioned classical rhetoric of speech. For as the manifesto permeates the mind via repetition and emphatic declaration, it is recursive, recalling itself from the participants as an inner discourse once the interaction has occurred (this is the end of that passivity). Malcuit credits this as an outcome of William Carlos Williams’s work: “…the poet produces free and unconstrained writings, which then somehow work their way into public language” (65). The manifesto can infiltrate on the sly in that it represents an aesthetic appeal based on its multitude of registers—one certainly being oratory. Once it makes its way into everyday “public language”, the manifesto becomes a natural utterance. Cohen adds to this, “Genres offer possibilities for the reconstitution of periods and for the understanding of ambiguities in generic concepts such as ‘novel,’ ‘literature,’ ‘culture.’ And they offer procedures for their own transformation” (xvi). The manifesto beckons adaptation and adoption into practice; it squirms into the subconscious. Whether one recognizes it or not, the
manifesto is there in the mind—a text alive as an image well past the first sight of it. Those hammered sentences and its pamphlet style keeps the manifesto around, even if in dark recesses, ready to come out as spoken texts at any given time. This is a “procedure” for its “own transformation.”

The mode of social action in the manifesto’s function works toward a specific goal. Professional editor, Johanna Vondeling, tells of this: “Relatively distant from the economic and ideological constraints of mass circulation, the manifestos offered a space to interrogate and disrupt claims to truth, such as the assumption that politics and high art are mutually exclusive categories, or that form and content are separate concerns” (131). This is the place to affirm that space affords function—that lines between genres and form may not even be there. She then takes on a popular modernist movement’s view on manifesto discourse: “the Dadas contended the only ‘truths’ are the ones the artist and his audience construct; they viewed art not as the creation of beauty, but rather as a making, a mode of invention (and intervention)” (132). By being dependent on co-dependence of the “artist” and the “audience”, “truth” is a collaborative construction. The boundaries do not exist, but the interaction between participants does. And, with something as abstract as truth, it is not hard to see that the critic’s role is thusly important in helping to shape that construction.

The fact that structure plays a part in the genre, the participation of upcoming artists as critics bent on making their mark on the discourse is paramount. Vondeling’s research takes up Mina Loy, a feminist manifesto writer of the Modern-era—someone these other researchers overlook and who was ignored by her own contemporaries for literary and political reasons. Vondeling asserts, “Loy attacked the social institutions that craft artistic identity on a daily basis. Moreover, she approached those institutions as constructed and therefore mutable…Her solution,
however, was more freedom, not less…” (135). Vondeling puts Loy’s work at the foreground of what makes the manifesto unique: it can take on any construction because of its “mutable” structure. Being formally evasive and fluid means that the participants in the genre have the “freedom” to rewrite it consistently. There is nothing more open than a discourse that is recursive, rewritable and revolutionary.

If there is to be some summation of the conversation over manifesto discourse, it is that the manifesto is indeed a social action, but a social action meant to continually ask how language impacts meaning. Vondeling’s scholarship takes the conversation there. She details three points of Eugene Jolas’s manifesto that “challenges assumptions of linguistic immutability”:

“Revolution of Language

(1) An attitude which regards modern language as inadequate for the expression of the changing background of the world, and which posits the necessity of a radical revision of its communicative and symbolic functions.

(2) It regards both the individual creator and the collective folk speech as mediumistic instruments for bringing about the change.

(3) It envisages creative language as a pre-rational process. (Rothenberg 1974; 148-49)” (Vondeling 132)

To approach language on these terms, as conveniently detailed by three consecutive, verbal slams, “The Revolution of Language” becomes a manifesto for the manifesto. Questioning the function of” language”, participating in the conversation, and being “creative” in one’s “process” is the mode of recursive action. There is a constant need to write manifestos for the manifesto based through (not on) its own language.
Of course, the reader—who can now freely become any, and all, of the participants in the genre through embracing the discourse—should indulge on the myriad of possibilities in engaging in the conversation. The genre requires endless participation. Bowden’s own work in questioning genre as a discourse leads to a place where perpetual dialogue can occur. He quotes, “So too might a genre be subject to perpetual rearticulation: …the relationship between the individual text and the series of texts formative of a genre presents itself as a process of the continual founding and altering of horizons. The new text evokes for the reader (or listener) the horizon of expectations and “rules of the game” familiar to him from earlier texts, which as such can then be varied, extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced. (qtd. in Bowden 401)

The options exist above; Bowden names them. Manifestos embrace the dynamics of an identity without limitations. As a discourse, they perform like a function of genre, making them stylistically different than other genres in their hyper-aware properties. They pursue active questioning as a process, and as a performance. They are the things aesthetics are made of—intangible, but right in front of us nonetheless. The manifesto, thus, becomes any text where an argument is made, read (or heard), and then responded to; it is our job as rightful participants in generic creation and reconstruction to jump in all points to keep the conversation alive. This means having a voice—and using it.
Works Cited


