

Manifesto Writing as Populist Praxis (Within the University Classroom and Beyond)

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This essay situates itself at a junction where university teaching and populism might meet. A compendious survey of populism is not my objective, but, rather, an encouragement to write in an often-populist genre – the manifesto – to see what this might bring to and channel out of the classroom. Populism promises to broaden political enfranchisement, usually by exploiting a chasm dividing “the people” from the elite. On a modest, everyday level, can students producing manifestos together – working in this frequently populist style of change- and demand-writing – query and trouble an historical and escalating set of determinations for university education that see it serving the latter rather than the former? In what follows, I hope to suggest how manifesto writing exercises might disrupt two forces for segregation widely propagated within the academy: the long-established exclusivity endowed by proficiency in the critical essay format and the newer neoliberal insinuation of university education as a motor for individualized human capital.

For several years now and in a variety of Humanities-based classes, I have tested out inviting students to write manifestos, sometimes on more of a voluntary basis (an assessment option), more regularly as a group project. I, personally, work within Film Studies, but the invitation is to imagine what the following would entail within any discipline. The process is fairly simple. Manifestos assume a leading role amongst a course’s set texts where they exemplify or elucidate the topic or historical moment being covering. Often, but not always, these publications evidence how writing can achieve some sort of impactful change. Students dig deep into these documents, certainly to ascertain what the manifestos were calling for and why, but, equally, to hunker down into the stylistic turns that have occasioned the convincingness of those ultimatums. In groups, class members create fresh manifestos that address the iniquities they see as remaining, as still in need of redressal, from whatever it is they have been studying and discussing.

To help ground this proposition, I will be referring mostly to examples from Film Studies courses I teach, as well as from workshops I have convened within Gender Studies.

Consequently, I shall reference historical manifesto examples from my own discipline's literatures, alongside a few dwelling beyond those parameters, in order to illustrate certain common approaches typical of the genre. For certain, each manifesto is different. Different objectives, different situated possibilities, different sites of production and different authors all flavour the outcomes. A full academic course furnishes the space unavailable right now to burrow into manifestos' historical bases, motivations and outcomes. I forego these now only partially for expediency because I wish to concentrate instead on similarities (which I shall delineate presently), the qualities that bind the genre and incite the reader. I purposefully deviate from the particular towards the general to explore the potential opened up by direct, collectively-authored, change-focused and often utopian expression, doing so deliberately at the expense of acquaintance with or critique of the circumstantial intricacies of any given document. That is an approach whose shortcomings I grapple with below.

Manifestos are plentiful across most Humanities arenas; any educator should be familiar with suitable texts to bring to their own classes. Straightforward political tracts can also fit the bill. The standard literatures of Film and Media Studies, for instance, embrace influential examples like "For an Imperfect Cinema" (by Julio García Espinosa) or "The Niamey Manifesto of African Filmmakers." Scott MacKenzie's comprehensive collection *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology* brings together nearly two hundred such touchstones from an expansive array of geographical, aesthetic and political contexts. For my own part, and for the purposes of this essay, I sidestep the avant-garde manifesto, the genre at its least populist. However, what even these manifestos share with more grassroots political ones – what I want to stress against manifestos' distinctiveness from each other – is that they are, in the main, purposefully easy to read and very much alive in both their exuberant turns of phrase and the challenges they continue to present. It is this vitality that I privilege.

In stopping short at merely studying published manifestos as set texts and thereby only encouraging our routine critiques and historical investigations, I argue, we risk replicating distances from the crises and political iniquities manifestos illuminate. Moving into group *writing* manifestos forges an immediacy through shared claims and shared revelations of what is found wanting. In so doing, manifesto writing functions,

predominantly, as an *exercise*, a word connoting both development and limitation. Alone such student-authored manifestos will overreach the transformations for which they strain. Be that as it may, manifesto writing still provokes more than intriguing thought processes; it can generate, I am hoping to demonstrate, alternative modes of sociality and politics that strike out well beyond any given course unit. Manifestos assertively diverge from a particular and debilitating biopolitics, sometimes via topic (which is left somewhat to choice), more so via their very methods of knowledge generation. The upcoming section of this essay details what these constraining conditions are. The subsequent one extrapolates how manifesto writing might battle against them. In closing, I examine how the manifesto, in its populist incarnation, has also built close ties with a populist commons. The manifesto formulates different ways of working and being in the world that, most importantly, foster inter-relationality. These are bold claims, the kind that populism readily throws on the table.

It is for these reasons that populism can carry a pejorative taint within academia: we examine it rather than adopt its principles. The same pertains to the manifesto: too sweeping, unsubstantiated or biased. Not so far removed is the Humanities' marginalization of pedagogy, to be explored in more detail presently. University instructors are rarely required to train at any length, almost never become versed in literatures on these practices, an evasion that serves to diminish these activities in favour of others, like specialized research. In enjoying the confluence of these three somewhat disregarded streams, this essay is likely not careful or theoretical enough. It wants, instead, to investigate what the partialities and rumbustiousness of populism can contribute to fighting some of the injustices that populism rightly emblazons on its placards.

I stutter here at the brink of a narrative arc that wants to rescue the manifesto from a relegation to the vulgar and the denigrated. A populist approach most probably would not, and there is something to learn from how that might unfold. Teresa L. Ebert, for example, establishes such terms when she announces that, "The manifesto and the polemic are, as might be expected, marginalized in mainstream discourses and treated in the academy and knowledge industry, in general, as modes of non-knowledge" (Ebert, 2003: 553). Populism frequently pulls this move and forgoes further substantiation of such

claims; the divorce itself leverages populism's appeal. No need, of course, to pity the manifesto, whose social traction has proven more mobilizing than academic writing. Momentum from this hostility can expose academia's distinctly normative tastes for the subtle, the understated, and the reflective that counter the moves the manifesto will make in the opposite direction. The adversarial arrangement allows, for Ebert, the supposition that manifestos:

are critical acts that cut through the reified layers of ruling ideas masquerading as 'common knowledge.' The manifesto demonstrates that the 'common' is, in fact, not at all common and that the ideas and practices advocated by the common [within academia] are knowledges and practices that serve a particular class (Ebert, 2003: 553 & 555-6).

In what ways, then, can the forthright and approachable modalities of the manifesto allow a group of students, from wherever in the world, to disrupt some of these formulae of knowledge production and imagine alternatives to (while within) academic confinement? First, a sense of the context in which manifesto writing might try to do so. What I am saying will, again, seem generalized, but it derives from experience of manifesto writing workshops held in a variety of sites in North America, Europe and the Middle East. Despite the geopolitical and demographic diversity, certain elements remain the constant. Perhaps that reflects a common condition worthy of our attention, one seated within education and well beyond.

The End Games of Academia's Modes of Production

Before arriving at the manifesto form itself, let us (as populism might) ride this hunch about bad objects to embroil ourselves in the hegemonic privileging of certain academic pursuits over others. In so doing, we uncover how these judgments craft and uphold attitudes towards value and professionalism that are in no way neutral. The regular ostracism of research from teaching not only re-enforces certain capitalist relations of production, it also proliferates a particular kind of surplus, including outputs and subjectivities, that support this system. In moving forward on this issue, I mean not to damn a professoriate in general (ever so many in this sector are dedicated pedagogues), but to scrutinize the structures in which we reside. Academics consistently find their productivity

marshalled towards exclusive forms of intellectual property, novel above all else and often aloof from “the people.” Likewise, most standard forms of assessment required of university students encourage, through their very formats (first and foremost the essay), an individualized and evaluative yet rarely interjectory response, neatly cordoned, and whose goal, in large part, is a grade. This is the milieu to which the manifesto writing elaborated below responds, hence the need for something of a manual of its machinery. With an eye to more pervasive schematizations, Jerry Zaslove opines that:

Pedagogy now means mostly *how to teach* in the classroom, how to make the universities into measurable, accountable, mobile, and ‘nimble’ benchmarks of the larger society. Universities have become ‘sites of excellence’ where totalities of knowledge and particularities of experience are collapsed into performance indicators (Zaslove, 2007: 97).

Such pursuits, with their sights set on distinction, encourage competition more than they might a commonality or collective working-through that we can appreciate (warily if you prefer) from populism.

When teaching is figured thus, it strikes a division of labour and upholds a class system. It positions research more loftily than the heavy workloads required of populous classes, classes increasingly dispatched to casualized employees and those on teaching-only contracts. Wage differentials affirm this. Time exhaustively dedicated here, and not to blue chip peer-reviewed articles and books with university presses, positions promotion and tenure as increasingly remote. In every university that has employed me, from the UK to Canada to the US to Egypt to India, this has been the case. The casting of teaching as a less elite pursuit lowers its market value; in higher education, as previously noted, it barely demands training. And, with that, what might it gain by associating with populism? With teaching perceived as the grunt work of the wage relation, how, also, could it actually unite academics more than their rarified specialisms might?

The manifesto exercises I write about below take place in this encircling context of the degree and the university – spaces that have proven ideologically containing, discriminatory, disciplining, colonial, and capitalist to both myself and much

student consensus. The university biopolitically prepares us all in ways that are not easy or possible to shake. A degree stands as both a measure of this training and as a commodity, even in countries where it was once considered a public good and offered for free. A manifesto, as assessment requirement, arrives into such an environment compromised, yet in a form and content that can answer back to it too. I say this because I have been regularly swept up by the inspiring (let us apprehensively name them) “results” of student manifesto writing and particularly the enduring sociality and practicable knowledge they foster. This is my main impetus for writing about them now. How, then, can populist expression bust into this motivated conceptualization of pedagogy?

I will start, as populism might, by appealing to common and general sense in order to assert how a university education is treated as a commodity. It has not always been so everywhere, but in what scarce corners is this elision lessening? With all its corresponding customer relations, higher education regularly advertises itself as an investment, but one whose undependable deliverance into a desirable job is still, despite its unreliability, one of the forcefully shaping factors for expectations all round. I would maintain that the latter is the myth which fuels the commercialization of the former, justifying its price on shaky promises. Furthermore, the very pedagogies students encounter profess to endow them with specialized skills that will discharge them competitively into the job marketplace and supposedly future-proof them against its vicissitudes with the aim of training winners rather than losers. As Alberto Toscano plausibly contends, “students are precarious workers not *a priori*... they are above all a ‘commodity-in-formation’, moulded by the type of learning on offer, by credits, devalued degrees, modularisation, lack of control, sped-up, constant evaluation, and so on” (Toscano, 269). By force of its constant and engulfing investments, teaching whittles a worker subjectivity that endures well beyond the classroom. In short, educators partake in ideological manoeuvres that, at one and the same time, they might rail against in their research. At core, most students understand full well the toll individualized competition takes on them, the unlikelihood of their success within projected future realms. They may also well wish to produce work other than a packaged, discerning critique of what they have read, written largely alone and in test-like conditions of one order or another. In acknowledgement of this, surely it seems right to experiment with more communal and more

challengingly utopian writing? To reach for the commons and commonality inherent to living knowledge. Not in order to diversify any one student's individual portfolio of skills, but to perhaps problematize the very idea of one.

To narrow in towards this essay's fulcrum, what is furnished by an invitation to students not simply to contemplate the populist machinations of manifestos, but also to collectively write such documents? As noted, manifestos often strike us as crass and demanding, urgent and unruly, clearly-spoken but evasive of nuance. There exists a distinction (for it is that) between such treatises and what Ebert identifies as "[s]ubtle thinking, which is naturalized as deep thinking, [and] is always a mode of conservative intellectual consolidation" (2003: 556-7). I bring this observation to the fore again because such attitudes also brush aside the manifesto's sense of aspiration, of public scale, in the name of what is safe, "realistic" (by which we might intuit a curbing status quo) and governable. This leads us to a potent question put forward by decolonial scholar Julie Reid: "[H]ow do our own habitual teachings and research practices further substantiate and naturalize dominant power, and what can we collectively do to change this?" (2018: 138). Of the numerous stagings of manifesto writings I have helped facilitate, two absorbed paid academics as well as students and these (admittedly just two) corroborated for me Reid's concerns. The workshops' structures ran as follows: we looked at various well-known manifestos and then each group generated some of our own. During the latter phase, it was the students who led. The academics felt much more compelled to dwell in nitpicking the failings of the manifesto examples. Students routinely relish the opportunity to assemble collective demands, a propensity to which they have had more exposure through the course, rather than workshop, format. On the other hand, participants further down the line of academic professionalism seem entirely anxious of moving beyond the defective sentence structure of any given historical document. This attitude we might consider to join forces, say, with the symbolic violence of university assessment systems (grading and other forms of evaluation) that, while couched in "objective" values, create and re-inscribe subordination and social stratification. All this stands very much at odds with the inclusive draw and co-production processes central to most manifestos and populism at large.

Here it seems fruitful to heed Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's proposition that critique, in and of itself, is largely a means of

perfecting a system as it stands and, moreover, “To distance oneself professionally through critique, is this not the most active consent to privatize the social individual?” (2013: 38) – to find oneself at odds with the very principle of a collective future? Both Emma Dowling and Jay Koh, coming from very different disciplinary orientations (the former a political economist, the latter an art practitioner), diagnose the critical tendency as a symptom and promoter of neoliberal governance, part and parcel of how its elites devolve social provision to personal responsibility and self-management. Such models expand across the academy when individualized thought (aligned with anti-neoliberal politics though it might be), contoured by the rubrics of human capital, dominates over collective engagement (Dowling, 2011: 195-210; Koh, 2016: 64-7). The stress falls on empowering distinct people (students or salaried research workers) to best situate themselves in the current economy.

Even if not consciously intending to buttress the hierarchies of academic labour and refinement delineated above, the scholarly impulse to endlessly find fault and render complex still permeates into what is counted as the actual work of serious thought, which, in turn, exerts a suspended temporality for political action inverse to the manifesto form’s importunity. Academic critique’s compulsion to produce “the new” corresponds with the manifesto ethos, but in search of an altogether differently fetishized outcome, devoid of the manifesto’s proposals or petitions. To what extent, then, is not being reckless and impossible subsuming salaried academics within the stratification of labour sketched out above? What do we lose by actively dissociating from certain of the affordances of populist modes, namely their collectivism and vigour?

It feels clumsy writing this, as I am, within the parameters of academia. The stark terms and exigency of populist rhetoric will burst through repeatedly, hopefully exposing beneficial unevenness that, like populism, highlights unfair root causes and motivations. My sources, deliberately, are academic, certainly as submission to the genre at hand, but also as a means of pointing to useful proximities between the two registers. Fundamentally concerned with radical change beyond the reach of novelty’s market value, the manifesto offers possibilities here. While it also carries critique, it does so to prompt transformation.

Consequently, let us sincerely experiment with the manifesto's eagerness about revolutionary change rather than let academia's other ways and means squeeze the life out of it. For this, I would like to take cues from the tradition of *conricerca*, co- or militant research, which is a praxis of knowledge generation that has sat uneasily within the university. Its central foundations lie within *operaismo*, a mode of political analysis that came to full force in Italy in the 1960s and involved carrying out situated inquiries into largely industrialized sites and the labour conditions they enforced. As a later adaptation out of *operaismo*, *conricerca* strived not simply for "outsiders" to study such sites in solidarity, but more so to reorganize subjectivity and upturn hierarchy through common research conducted by scholars and workers together (Borio et al 2007, 163-185 & 186-200). Whether either strand attained its ideals for a solid union between workers in factories and those of the academy certainly remains a point of contention. However, as I hope to illustrate, *conricerca*'s attitudes and techniques still have much to offer a struggle against how the university preserves and proliferates particular social stratifications. To underscore, *conricerca* aims to forge deep alliances between community members, who need not all be researchers in the textbook sense, working together to realize radical and situated change. It is expressly motivated by the needs and priorities of those involved and looks to squarely acknowledge their labour and ideas. The approaches associated with *conricerca* do not aim towards inquiry or critique from a comfortable remove, couched, as these assumed positions often are, in supposed "objectivity," which, in the main, obscures the conditions or prejudices of scholarly production. Instead, *conricerca* seeks to take seriously all such restrictions encircling its communities, along with more immediate political and social ones, to better enact whatever action is deemed necessary. It does not apologize for its partiality, nor does it amass research to then transfer it out of the immediate or to pass on the baton of responsibility (for a fuller glossing of *conricerca*, see: Borio et al, 2007; Colectivo Situaciones, 2007).

Typically, *conricerca* brings together scholars and workers. In the classroom context, our aim (confined as it plainly is by the short-term modularization of a single university course) narrows in somewhat: to get to grips with the scholar-as-worker. With manifesto writing, we might possibly focus in on students' relationships to ideas encountered through their courses (historical, geopolitical and so forth), or, more directly,

on the inflection of students' subject positioning by broader systems of oppression via the labour and commodification of education. Gigi Roggero efficaciously recaps some of the issues at stake as follows:

the becoming-cognitive of labor also means the becoming-cognitive of measure and of exploitation, becoming-cognitive of class hierarchy, of the regulation of the salary and of the division of labor. It means, on the one hand, to highlight the firm materiality of the capital relation within forms of so-called immaterial activity; on the other, to analyze how the production of knowledge permeates, modifies, and creates hierarchy within occupations defined as 'traditional' or 'neo-Taylorist' (Roggero, 2011: 46).

Within *conricerca*, such an understanding of work asks us not simply to write about labour, but to undertake writing-as-struggle, appreciating that radicality, right down to its etymology, looks to its roots. *Conricerca* inflects what it touches thanks to the momentum it has gained from its historical uptake by autonomist activism. It sees the potential and potency of the activities of labourers as a means of disrupting states of inequality and subordination. It therefore helps problematize the labour requested of students and opens up their actual productive capacities as a possible site of struggle through, although not exclusive to, their participation and social organization. Consequently, we might tussle with the everyday conventions established by systems of learning, questioning and upending their status and ramifications, rather than confirming their meaning-making through gestures that assign, aspire to or absorb their authority. Such activities cannot presume a prudent distance; a distance like that would strike a manifesto writer as detrimentally detached and timid in troubling times.

Experimenting with Change-Writing

The one thing that manifestos share and which is hardwired into their generic conventions is the compulsion to change something. In Marxian terms, they aim not simply to interpret the world, but to alter it, involving their readership in that very ambition. A manifesto's objectives, as Felicity Colman neatly summarizes, are "to take action, to intervene, to re-imagine and

re-remember different forms of existence” (2010: 380). Manifestos’ infectious fighting spirit rouses us to explore the potential writing itself can activate. We cannot forget that the manifesto has proven a pivotal, populist genre familiar to everyday politics and its citizenry, the basis even for governance in a number of countries. In this, manifestos have become praxis, fusing thought and action as they endeavour to engender actual subjectivities (their authors’ included) that are ready for action and the transformation of reality. Manifestos build on the faith that writing can produce something far in excess of comprehension or even rupture and intervention. This strikes out from standard university thinking or writing, the kind you are reading right now, and which places this essay as an equivalently awkward prelude, but one aware of this, contending unsuccessfully with elements too long habituated.

Manifestos themselves do not stop short at emphatically pronouncing what is wrong. In almost the same breath, they compel practical means for change and concrete plans for acting otherwise. They align with Jack Halberstam’s alluring portrait of the subversive intellectual, “who does not want a room of his or her own, she wants to be in the world, in the world with others and making the world anew” (“The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons” in Harney & Moten, 2013: 10). Manifestos’ avowed participation in broader politics stimulates their concoction of correctives and solutions, dreams and perfect scenarios, simultaneous to their onslaught against oppression. For sure, they are “biased” (their Achilles heel for the learned), but so too, they might reveal to us, is the considerable energy expended on the deeply hegemonic project of critique, as just presented.

Education, after all, is premised on change and hope, in almost every shape it assumes, even when brutal and hierarchical. The reasons for our investment in it, despite and because its selling points veer us so adamantly towards individualized human capital, maintain vestiges and foundations in education for and as public good (mismanaged inevitably). Writing manifestos in university classes speaks to Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski’s entreaty that we ask:

what education, upbringing, school, studying, thinking, and practicing are. This reclaiming entails no longer a critical relation – revealing what is really going on – nor an instrumental relation – showing

what educators ought to do – but creating a space of thought that enables practice to happen anew (2016).

Education of whatever form helps constitute society. If so many of its models propagate alienation and competition, then a group-written manifesto opens out to the possibility of a cooperative future that diverts education's reproduction of the conditions of capitalism, or innovation in its name, towards other avenues. At the heart of the manifesto is its insistence on being, in the words, again, of Ebert "militant change-writing," ill at ease with existing social organization (2003: 554). Allowing, within the systems that bind, for at least a chance of this is what this essay proposes: to wield the potential still latent in education against its current disciplining and economies.

Ironically, and usefully, something that the manifesto legacy shares with scholarly writing is the orchestration of the abstract, but usually with an eye to more concrete needs. The pivot arrives in the form of the *ideal*: the what we could do right, rather than (only) the exposure of flaw. The manifesto's utopianism, for sure, could seem a relative of the alienated formulations that congregate in academic writing and that render it exclusive while sheathed in universals. Yet the manifesto's genre conventions drive such texts with purpose towards practicality. Manifestos carry a strong organizational compulsion distinguished by clear-cut and exigent directives; they routinely incorporate lists and bullet points of what needs to be done. Think of the very structure of the Black Panther Party's "Ten-Point Program." Accordingly, manifestos not only lay out principles, they also seek, through their very means of expression – its conviction as carried by both enthusiasm and clear-sightedness – to conjure them. What is not in place already is strongly called forth, pictured in detail, through comprehensive description of what needs to be done and what those ends would be. Over the past ten years, for example, in a class I teach called "Women's Work," student manifestos have insisted on something uncompromising but eminently achievable: that at least half of the media screened for them at university should be produced by women. They were making these demands well in advance of more recent moves towards curriculum diversity overhaul across our campuses. With these operable elements as its generic hallmark, the manifesto, historically, has become a beacon and a vehicle for not only awakening collective consciousness, but also solidly planning a future. Accordingly, manifestos, like *conricerca*, generate new

horizons both in spirit, but also through a long hard look at available resources.

For such a punchy format, the manifesto marshals a more complex weaving of temporalities than does the additive gesture of critique. Staging leaps across time, manifestos bind frustrating past, the intolerable present and the wishful future (a rare beast in academia's own assessment structures). Latin America's perhaps most influential film manifesto, "Towards a Third Cinema" (1969), for instance, declares:

It is in this harsh and daily search that a culture of revolution will be able to emerge, the basis which will nurture, *beginning right now*, the *new man*... capable of arising from the ashes of the old, alienated man that we are and which the new man will destroy by starting to stoke the fire *today*. (Grupo Cine Liberación/Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" in Martin, 1997: 36-7, emphasis in the original)

Formulating the "after" of struggle prompts the creation of vistas that suggest (student) writing can be involved in social and political change, in search of recognition, not stultified by the pecking orders fashioned by critique. Solid though these through-lines are made to seem, they cast their lots in an unknowable future. Bishnupriya Ghosh, drawing on Antonio Gramsci, identifies how, through such populist renditions, "Historical becoming reorders the social as a 'people to come'" (2011: 21). Ghosh continues with an astute recognition of how a forecast also transfigures the now. Within a classroom-generated manifesto, the subject (plural) is in similar formation, thanks to a potent chemistry of the actual, the wishful and the rhetorical. Never mind that even the world's most influential manifestos have rarely attained all they want for "us." The labour of rehearsing, gathering and consolidating metamorphoses something current. What is "inherently" impractical and fanciful is arguably no more doomed to failure than the social use-value of the majority of our current repertoires of thought and expression.

By scrambling the chronologies of potential, manifesto writing as part of a class vexes the temporality of scholarship in a number of ways. Presenting manifestos as a viable approach, in

the here and now, not just as an object of study, rearranges how students can consider themselves to be ready (and against how they are cast as apprentices) for political proposition. Envisioning upsets the university's compartmentalization of time into teaching units and apportioned accomplishments. The broader ambitions for the future that are vested in education – so precarious, conformist and job market-focused in its typical timelines – might be distracted towards prospects that draw on the immediate collective and its accumulated knowledge, always shared and always in excess.

The excess can come across as bombastic, but that boisterousness might also embolden a group of students, rarely given this sort of licence. As manifesto style follows objective, we regularly find in them enlivening flourishes less acceptable to scholarly discourse. Consider the opening lines of Zoe Leonard's manifesto that also give it its title: "I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president... I want someone with no health insurance" (Leonard "I Want a President..." in SPIT!, 2017: 28). Unquestionably, experimentation with the format reveals how exclusive forthright expression like this typically is. The question thus arises (one just as necessary for academic extemporization): what is the potential within manifestos' strategic speaking positions to still try to dispel certain notions of authority, despite and through their stridency? More than merely providing the scope to articulate with audacity, manifestos allow for, in fact often knowingly assume and temper, writerly artistry as a labour of social change enacted on the level of style. Manifestos feel free to refuse the hierarchy that would divorce plain speech from flights of fancy, as Leonard does, thereby offering up creativity as a welcome texture within their futures. Never shy of emotional turns like hers, the manifesto knows full well that vision and transformation demand desire and will. They appeal to the heart and the imagination as they anchor a sense of reason that is closer to populist sentiment in its operational ambitions. When manifestos outstretch, they consequently prod us, in the name of aspiration, to question the confines we place around the possible or the logical. We need, the manifesto insists, to both think and act beyond our current constraints to render hope as concrete as possible, especially when it is constantly knocked back into a corner by critical measure and apprehension about populist impulses (see Weeks, 2011: 174-225 for a strong argument to this effect). In the hands of students, this can

become an opening out, rather than a narrowing down to the plausible and the attainable within a single unit of a curriculum.

In making these moves, manifestos are frequently captivated by hybridity of expression, drawing on the best from multiple modes and engrossing them in generative conversation. Analysis and prognosis synthesize, biting criticism meets utopia, straightforward expression locks with the imagination. Stylistic co-existence is not the anticipated result. The manifesto is cognizant of how each mode of communication will be driven by the other, or how any given reader could be attracted by one mode yet will need to reckon with another. Dialectically, the interchange of outwardly different types of address can dissolve the boundaries ascribed to each, repudiate limitations and instead draw on the multiplying outcomes of their meeting to propel social change. It is crucial to acknowledge this playfulness as also the very real labour of knowledge workers – students included – when the act of writing, in whatever genre, always creates value as well as long-lasting subjectivity. These combined counterforces simultaneously mirror the prerequisites of political struggle: frenetic urgency and forceful motion advance what is achieved by poised calm, sage judgement and readying for the steps ahead, and vice versa. As “Revolution Triptych”, written by members of the Egyptian revolutionary media collective Mosireen, all but concludes after some biting political observations, “Fuck awareness... we ask for your bodies on the streets of your cities, we ask for your ideas and your energy, we ask for your resistance” (Mosireen, “Revolution Triptych” in Dickinson, 2018: 122). Through all these oscillations, the manifesto form produces and reproduces particular actions. A different access to the performative nature of writing will also emerge, one that troubles the presumed humility of quiet scholarly conclusion.

Martin Puchner’s *Poetry of the Revolution*, in its shrewd analyses of the formal structures of manifestos and their capabilities, identifies two stylistic turns that aid this conveyance from caution to courageousness, from present to future. They are theatricality and performativity (Puchner, 2005: 5). Performative language supposes to effect actual change: the how-to and tangible next stages offered by the manifesto, the belief in itself. Theatricality, conversely, involves:

the projective usurpation of the speaking position of the sovereign... the theatricality of the manifesto describes a pose of authority without which it could not utter a single word. More precisely still: theatricality describes a space between absolute powerlessness and the secure position of the sovereign, a play that the manifesto exploits without yet knowing whether the project of usurping power will work out. Without theatricality, in other words, there would be no pose, no presumption, no projection, no futurity; without theatricality there would be no manifesto (Puchner, 2005: 26).

In conjoining these two allusions to theatre, the swagger buoys us along, but, with performative assertions, also helps set a scene and flesh out a proposed scenario. Theatre more generally gives us both fiction and liveness, just as writing of the revolution is not quite revolution itself, but certainly does not stand aloof from it. Performativity and theatricality also allude to the activities of *rehearsal*. Such writing becomes at once a crucible for change, an insistence on the fundamental right to incorporate artful expressiveness and inventiveness in (planning) post-struggle life, and, for a class, a trialling of public declaration amidst individually-directed assessment structures. It is to this last characteristic, this reach to an outside away from the encroaching privatization integral to most student work and ambition, that I now turn.

The Public and the Communal

The proclamatory and directive messages that manifestos issue are meant for public digestion (how ironic that the passing of time, group authorship and university privacy protocol make it nigh impossible for me to share student writing here). Manifestos seek to draw in and convert their people rather than alienate them and, in this, they audaciously vest themselves as a common voice of some kind. Note the first person plural right from the start of “Liberate the Image: A Manifesto to Restitute Collective Memory” (“Today, multinational conglomerates own our image. We demand the same right”, https://themanifesto.documentary-convention.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Liberate-The-Image.Engl_.pdf). Manifestos’ populism, like any other, is an intricate blend of the rhetorical and the actual, expounded in legible tones that seek a meaningful connection between the writing-we – who take on

the responsibility of production (or privileged claim to it) – and the abstract inclusive-we.

Inherent to the manifesto, even as only a dummy run, is the fact that its efficacy only runs as far as it draws us towards what it deems necessary. It is to this broadened context – and its sense of a people or a community, ultimately – that the manifesto is obliged. A question to ask, if only hypothetically in class, is who is the “us” for and with whom the manifesto throws itself onto the barricades? The parameters of any “us,” we will notice, stretch or contract for any given manifesto. Nonetheless, every one, through the manifesto’s generic insistences, calls upon a grouping larger than merely the authors. A manifesto aims to galvanize, to speak to an assembly, a grouping larger than merely its producers, that it also helps forge. Struggle rides on such expectancies and projections of a collective. Clearly, this un-pollled mass will have to conform, accommodate, negotiate and even suffer manipulation when it confronts complex quandaries. Before that, as any public musters around open declaration and participation, it simultaneously abides by a historical notion of what “public” can stand for in any given time or place. Guided by these somewhat abstract sensibilities, the group finds itself at odds with current inscriptions of “the public” and their treatment by the powers that be (the multinational conglomerates of “Liberate the Image”, say). Yet, like populism, it still invests in this very perception as its means of change, which is also a common projection for education.

At the same time, manifestos’ theatrical claims are tenanted through a casting process that is both inclusive (us, the people) and antagonistic (an enemy or set of faults which we can immediately grasp), as “Liberate the Image” so quickly sets out. Each has its historical coordinates, which shape the manifesto’s invitation. In many instances (and this is fundamental to the patterning of a people), the aggressor is constituted as disenfranchising and hostile governance, the very entities that are supposed to be taking care of us. Including through their systematizations of education. “I Want a President” seeks not to abolish this mode of leadership, but, rather, culminates with:

I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown: always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never

caught.” (Leonard, “I Want a President...” in SPIT!, 2017: 28)

As Janet Lyon remarks, the manifesto is “the genre of the broken promise” (1999: 31). It does its best work in an environment where some contract regarding public provision or ethics (of whatever scale) has been fashioned and where a citizenry, its audience, can lay claim to and challenge authority for its rights (Lyon, 1999: 34). In this frame, the insistence and impatience of a manifesto measures itself against something that is expected but has not been delivered. At the same time as its distance from governance eschews typical channels of remonstrance, or has been denied them, the manifesto as a format acknowledges the possibility of speaking to power (however dangerous, whether heard or not) and how its writers’ tenacity might insist on a recognized space for marginalized discourse.

But not utterly marginalized: historically, the manifesto’s proclamations emerge overwhelmingly in languages at least readable by power, pointing out failings of governance to assert their own legitimacy. These moves problematize any relegation of the manifesto’s “us” to absolute outsider-dom and consciously so because they mean to enfranchise. Key to the manifesto’s approach is how it seeks to represent in two senses of that verb: it demarcates a collective, but also speaks for it. The latter demands legible tones and a profound connection between the writing-we and the abstract inclusive-we. A sense of this relationship is crucial to both political efficacy and manifesto preparation. Even though the inclusive-we remains somewhat unknown (and usefully so for the purposes of mass mobilization), the “we” is invoked both demographically and dutifully. The question thus arises as to what sorts of authors can invoke and constitute a public? They clearly presume (even if only within an exercise) a particular status whose fluency aspires to comprehension by those from whom greater freedoms and rights are demanded. Manifesto authors therefore conjure communicative bridges of sorts, and, as such, insinuate a socially useful role for higher education. In this way, manifesto writers simultaneously recognize their particular modes of production as a site of struggle, revealing crucial capacities available to students at work within the university. Students reside within specific mechanisms of exploitation, variously mobilizing, turning on, or transforming them. To this end, manifestos can recognize that the means of production and

reproduction (here defined by the education industry) bring forth and can compromise political change.

A simple pronouncement by Nicholas Mirzoeff and Jack Halberstam guides how I see the negotiations embroiled in the act of manifesto writing: “Decolonizing learning is method” (2018: 123). *How* pedagogy functions being as crucial as the contents it presents. Producing manifestos, “if only” for class still animates a different kind of world-building and sociality. On the small scale, authoring manifestos together, rather than individually, involves work that is less competitive and less distinguished as personal accomplishment. A manifesto written collectively by students interrupts the streamlining of subjectivity for labour inured by the practices described above, at least in form, if not necessarily content (which might strike out in any direction whatsoever). Group work antagonizes students’ preparation for the capitalist job market that divides labour by means of individualized competition.

Instead it materializes collective sociality as praxis and as goal. Although the history of the manifesto form embraces many named and individualized authors – Marx and Engels serve as evident examples – it is noteworthy that many assert authorship under group names (Committee for Free Cinema, Fédération panafricaine des cinéastes, Palestine Cinema Group...), an enticing move in the face of individualizing and alienating modes of university assessment and knowledge commodification. Such anonymity, for sure, has endued a necessary shield of clandestineness for public declarations and invectives in troubled times, but it does more besides. In the disciplinary context of the students with whom I work – Film Studies – where the auteur is accredited arguably too much influence over what is almost always a project conceived by many, often hundreds, such renunciations of personal attribution re-establish the joint endeavour that is film and video-making and the inclusive “we” that group authorship summons. When they leave their given names off the credits, manifesto writers both stress their deeper immersion in the dissatisfied masses by dodging the individual spotlight and insist on collective production as a more apt revolutionary modality. Even in the instances where contributors are named (be that a well-known manifesto or a class endeavour), the singling out of those individual voices is difficult and productively obfuscated. We would never care so much about who wrote any given sentence. Instead, group manifestos foreground how popular disquiet and

revolt relies on unheralded delegation and negotiation, just as it looks to confound the deeply hierarchical practice of ascribing creative agency.

The actual, embodied toil of producing a manifesto also necessitates listening to one another, thereby digressing from how most student assignments ultimately cloister their authors away to grapple solo with their supposedly unique ideas. Manifesto writing similarly reconfigures the typical goals of “experiential learning” when presented as a broadened personalized portfolio, akin to the finishing school ideal of the fully-rounded (implied: more affluent) learner. Instead, their activities enmesh students-as-already-workers in group-negotiation of shared principles. In my own experience, at least, these negotiations usher students towards the crystallization of a shared demand, a bottom-up populism in miniature. I have observed the process following a pattern confirmed by Ronald Strickland that results:

either in splits and realignments into new collectives [rarely the case in lower stake manifestos requested in class] or stronger positions which have been tempered by the process of internal debate worked through to consensus. In either case, the level of critical thought achieved in collective work is always higher than that achieved by the same students working as isolated individuals (1990: 299).

Assumptions are contested, a move that queries contributors’ (even eventual readers’) comfortable status quo and hastens them towards the horizon of demand. For certain, tensions between inclusion and exclusion, articulation and rejection, are industriously worked through in the manifesto as process and as completed document.

There is still no way to sweep aside the aggressive unevenness of social access here, nor the ramifications of a context where, in most cases, students pay rather than are paid to work, absorbing costs, including debts (in most countries where this essay might be read), that estrange higher education from populism’s sense of a broad public. What, then, is the scope to explore how collective political declaration, within an environment increasingly founded in human capital-oriented bourgeois individualism, can help recalibrate measure itself? To what extent can we challenge how work is marshalled using the masters’ tools on loan with interest?

Conricerca's principles incite us, first and foremost, to confront impasses as we encounter them in situ. We can turn here against the alienation (of study, of specialization, of assessment and its barriers against inter-relationship) that is deeply felt by almost every student, including how it is gendered and racialized, but not only, given that these are mechanisms for differentiation and selection in the broader sense. Without being nostalgic about a more halcyon public education system (much of the previously enumerated biopolitics have been taking their toll for a longer duration), the lineages of education's civic function endure unevenly. Through them, there are allowances for a sociality that looks beyond the individual, even if we might cynically intuit social administration rather than radical communality from it. Simply put, the struggles for equality, or against unbearable workplace exploitation (presuming students can see beyond their slim chances and amidst this multitude) depend upon collective action. Writing politically together is a modest preparation for and embodiment thereof as *method*, which is one of our weakest points when it comes to organizing a *how*.

The *how*, of course, encounters a hurdle in the form of a routine complaint (one or less in each class I have convened) regarding the very nature of a group-based task. What if I do more work than the others, what if someone doesn't pull their weight? This concern duplicates the quandaries of any system of populist governance, any revolution: how to distribute labour and how to agree? To address the former, my own limited experience breeds faith in a more regular and reliable process that inscribes and engages the totality of a class more than singular projects do. I have yet to arbitrate a gross avoidance of responsibility, which suggests how delicate and horizontal peer negotiation can be. Such efforts tessellate diverse abilities and energies into more than the sum of their parts. And, in short, there is something to this process that requests subjectivities less hooked into alienation and competition, one that I can only observe – but will confirm from other communal projects – as generating a community that at least, conceptually, offers both respite and promise.

By tackling the arduous of reaching agreement, consensus, or some sort of functional harmony, by drawing up a set of claims and demands the group can all stand by, we find ourselves in complex terrain. Familiar power struggles and the inability to “hear” more marginalized languages or concerns, so blighting to almost every evolution of populism can emerge (see: Gómez-

Barris 2018 for insightful reluctance about the manifesto's capacities in this respect). It would be naively utopian to imagine that a class group, just by being friendly and nice, will transcend such ingrained iniquities, and particularly while still within the confines of the university's ways, means, conventions and economies. All I mean to say here is that, by moving away from the presumed neutrality of the academic voice, these inequalities become more apparent. Because the manifesto invites true conviction, that may spur both unity and conquest. As a minimum, in very simple terms, the foundations of private (knowledge) property asserted through lone production are evaded. Such interactions bring us, hopefully, to the way solidarity – again, essential for more encompassing social struggle – might emerge. Fundamental here is how one might sign up for a run of principles that will not exactly be “one's own” in their entirety. Their flux and variegated patterns speak to the nature of larger scale change.

With these tensions to the forefront, there arises a need to grasp manifesto writing as the peopling of a particular way of being, a means of folding our scholarly activities into templates for social, cultural, political and economic life. In its collectivized ambitions, the manifesto stands as a gesture by which its writers and their “we” mean to carry on. Concurrently, the very procedures of writing a manifesto concoct a political formation in the now. This inhabitation seems sadly neglected by most of the genre's scholarly analysis, deriving as it often does from literary studies and a concentration on structure and language. Springing from collective and somewhat anonymous ingenuity, the fruit of collaboration, and departing from individualistic principles of creative production, a manifesto, in spirit at any rate, repositions us as communal and in the service of more ambitious and sustained goals. For Henry Giroux, following Ernst Bloch, such “utopian thinking is anticipatory, not messianic; it is mobilizing, not therapeutic” (2007: 32). The search for some form of egalitarianism, justice or freedom can itself become a lived experience, bold and principled, starting now. Manifesto writing not only models and encourages this but dwells within it during any such tract's inception. As praxis, manifestos take on the difficulties along with the exuberance encountered by sharing impulses, establishing common ground, disputing and making concessions, envisioning, and assuming political agency. These actions are thereby rehearsed, but also actualized.

In striving so, we also realize that we do not so easily complete education when we, let us say, graduate. Fighting what is embedded and modelled in education certainly does not ever “succeed,” or, at least, not for long. The many student manifestos I have seen produced in this context call out and do their best (without attaining perfection) to be inclusive, infectiously strident, practical, creative, liberating and visionary. Like populism, they can be rough around their edges, but this texture provides traction. The praxis these manifestos personify serves us better as a tool than something on which to hone our (likely expensive, often distancing) individual critical abilities. Far from establishing mastery or a dubious sense of (often personal) accomplishment, they are experiments in the inevitably unpredictable that do not (yet) overturn what they wish to. But better to have tried and experienced how manifestos stretch outwards and towards communality than to have remained lodged within a “known” and a “reasonable” that stitches itself into something that rarely actually delivers a more just popular politics.

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