

A MANIFESTO IS AN INVOICE

*Parachute silk, iron ore, gasoline,
exclamation marks—we used them
to exclaim about the men
that were rationed, too. With two women
for every man, each allotted cards,
the youngest, most fertile, first,
we spoke shyly, our eyes flashing,
when hearing the words
manpower, manhunts, mandates,
manifestoes*

The function of a manifesto is to name names, to decide who's in and who's out, who's arrived and who's late to the party. Packaged in the relentless emotion of a PowerPoint presentation, literary manifestoes are concerned with logistics, with product, with time to delivery. They are meant for upwardly mobile people diagramming their network of influence. They speak to the middle managers of poetry, third-tier literary magazines, people "in the know": they are the ultimate back-office solution.

This is why a manifesto has more in common with an invoice for salted peanuts than a political/cultural platform. Isomorphic with the manifest—the bill of lading, the passenger manifest—the etymological root means making knowledge obvious, evident, and available. But the only clear knowledge is the form of knowledge that can be logged, summed, and chronicled: and this is what manifestoes produce, in abundance. This is the vision of the shopkeeper taking stock of the current inventory—in hindsight, did we get what we paid for when we said he was a good Surrealist? Behind every "state of the union" address is an army of bean counters.

Lest you discover that the manifesto is yesterday's news—the deep fear of a manifesto writer is being stuck with outdated goods; he or she likes to keep up with the Joneses—the document simultaneously pretends to be outside of time while paying lip service to avant-garde conceptions of newness. This takeschutzpah. To support this theory of originality, it must engage in a sort of Mormon expansionism, retroactively anointing dead authors as earlier manifestations of a final, fully developed idea. Let us call it manifest destiny... To the audience, it says: this is your last chance; we are at the end of history, or at least at the end of the fiscal year; would you like to be a subscriber?

It's no coincidence that a British marketing strategy firm has named itself Manifest. Manifestoes have little to do with getting writing done, and everything to do with branding. It's a seductive thought, that one can elect a political or aesthetic platform rather than write one's way to it, because it implies that we have some choice about how we write and for whom we write. But I'm not sure I do. I am claimed by subjects and vice versa, and this effects a partial disappearance. The words that result are never wholly "mine." Manifestoes, however, work with publicity, not the public. This is because manifesto writers distrust the public, and exist in a negative relationship to the lived present. They live instead on billboards and confessional blog entries; they feed off of the ability to make secrets manifest, and, in the process of doing so, claim ownership over them.

As a working author, I think we could both use some privacy in the work we do, or at least some complexity. If poetry must be a transaction between writer and reader, public and private, I prefer not knowing what I've bought.