

(Wo)manifestos
[introduction to the special issue]

Bernardo Alexander Attias

California State University, Northridge

Jeanine Marie Mingé

California State University, Northridge



The moment that first inspired the theme of this special issue—the public burst of misogyny onto the U.S. political scene by a fringe political candidate who had managed to get the nomination of a fractured and seemingly disintegrating Republican party—today seems like a distant memory of an alternate universe like those explored in science fiction. Not because the misogyny left politics by any means, but rather because what seemed like an anomaly—the fleeting popularity of a venal, self-serving, and morally execrable celebrity-cum-politician playing the demagogue—has since become part of a new normal in which we can only breathlessly keep up with the latest outrage.

Our call for participation went out during the 2016 Presidential election campaign, shortly after then-candidate Donald Trump called the Democratic contender Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman” during the final Presidential debate on October 19th (Woolf, 2016). At the time most of the polls were telling us that Clinton would handily win the election despite the fascistic vitriol her opponent was able to whip

Jeanine M. Mingé earned her PhD from the University of South Florida and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies. She is currently serving as the Director of Community Engagement at California State University, Northridge. She directed *CSUN's Performance Ensemble: Creatives for Social Justice* for the past ten years. Dr. Mingé has won the Visionary Community Service Learning Award; the Don Dorsey Teaching and Excellence Award; and OSCLG's Feminist Teacher/Mentor award. She is co-facilitator of Bridges: A Teaching Excellence Program. Her areas of research interest include Community-Based Performance, Community Activism through the Arts, Health and Wellness, Space/Place and Qualitative Methods. All of her work is dedicated to cultivating social justice through use of narrative, visual imagery, poetry, installation art, and performance.

jeanine.minge@csun.edu

Bernardo Alexander Attias is Professor of Communication Studies at California State University, Northridge; his teaching and research specialties include rhetoric, cultural studies, performance studies, and freedom of speech. His research is at the intersections of communication, technology, and media as seen from the perspectives of rhetoric and cultural studies; he has published on the rhetoric of war, the history of sexuality, and electronic dance music culture. He coedited the book *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomsbury). Other recent publications include an article on authenticity and the Velvet Underground for *Rock Music Studies* and a coauthored chapter on “Female Supremacy and Feminist Heterotopias” for a collection recently published in France. Dr. Attias is also a DJ and performance artist.

bernardo.attias@csun.edu

up against her at rally after rally (see Bradner, 2016 and Stokols, McCaskill, Shafer, Culhane & Arrieta-Kenna, 2016). Meanwhile the label “nasty woman” was embraced gleefully by many feminists as a rallying cry (Ali, 2016; Kingston, 2016).

The theme of this issue was originally conceived not so much to linger on what we thought at the time was an ephemeral reminder of an undercurrent of misogyny and anti-feminist backlash in U.S. politics and popular culture, but rather to reconsider the role of the *manifesto* as we look to the future of feminist movements. Hence the concept of “nasty womanifestos”: we playfully took up the “nasty woman” label from the debates, but this choice was borne from opportunity rather than desire. Our intent at the time was to focus not on electoral politics but on the genre of the manifesto (a public proclamation of political identity, belief, and proposed action). The goal was to rethink that genre in the context of the *remix*, another genre that has garnered much academic attention in recent years (Borschke, 2017; Navas, 2017).

The manifesto plays a significant role throughout the history of feminism, going back at least to Olympe de Gouges’ 1791 “Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen” and, the following year, Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 “Vindication of the Rights of Women” (Francis & Gouges, 2013; Wollstonecraft & Poston, 1988). Feminist manifestos have articulated reasoned critiques of male supremacy, offered analyses of power relations, and suggested detailed programs for systematic social change (e.g. Loy, 1914; Firestone, 1970; Orvis & Stanton, 2013). Manifestos have expressed rage, hope, excitement, and humor; they have imagined utopias and dystopias, egalitarian worlds, worlds ruled by women, worlds without men, and worlds beyond gender (e.g. Francis & Gouges, 2013; Gilman, 1979; Solanas, 2004). They have made the case for solidarity, poked fun at their foremothers, and explored the limits and blind spots of feminism in terms of race, gender, and sexual identity (e.g. Third World Women’s Alliance, 1970; Haraway, 1985; Romo-Carmona, 1997). They have been outlets for anger, sources of wisdom, vehicles for satire, and much, much more.

The genre of the manifesto, of course, is nothing if not masculinist in its orientation—it doesn’t ask questions or suggest possibilities; it declares final answers and demands programmatic change. As a genre, the manifesto is generally not open to multiplicity; its literal meaning suggests clarity and certitude; it even appears to have a gendered prefix, “man”. As Kimber Charles Pearce (1999) has shown in her study of New Left manifestos, the masculinist bias of the genre allowed feminists to appropriate a voice of authority in order to legitimize a feminist critique, but at the same time constrained the discursive possibilities from which that critique could be expressed.

This special issue was born in part from a desire to find a way out of that impasse. From our perspective, the “man” in manifesto has always been an illusion. Indeed, this is literally (and etymologically) accurate, as root of the Latin word *manifestus* is most probably *manus*, which translates as *hand*, for the Romans a symbol both of *proximity* and of *work*. While it seems likely that *manifestus*, an adjective that meant clear or evident (“manifest”), drew its meaning from the idea of closeness or proximity implicit in the term *manus*, we prefer to invoke the idea of *work* in order

to highlight the act of labor involved in producing the manifesto as well as the material effects of the manifesto (i.e. the work that it does in the world). Hélène Cixous reminds us in her own well-known (wo)manifesto that feminine writing is disruptive because its gesture involves a (feminine) reinscription of the meaning of work:

Nor is the point to appropriate their instruments, their concepts, their places, or to begrudge them their position of mastery. Just because there's a risk of identification doesn't mean that we'll succumb. Let's leave it to the worriers, to masculine anxiety and its obsession with how to dominate the way things work—knowing “how it works” in order to “make it work.” For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to “fly.” Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly. (1976, p. 887)

Cixous plays here on two senses of the French word *voler*, which means to fly but also means to *steal*, as she explains in an oft-quoted passage that both performs and describes the essence of what has since been referred to as remix culture:

It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They (*illes*) go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (1976, p. 887)

Feminist manifesto writers from Mina Loy (1914) to Valerie Solanas (2004) to Donna Haraway (1985) to Chimamanda Adichie (2017a; b) have stolen and flown in ways that have helped unravel the “man” of manifesto over the last century. We specifically imagined this special issue would attempt to remix the (wo)manifesto in the context of what seemed in late 2016 to be a contemporary moment of post-“third wave” feminism—a moment in which discourses “rape culture” and “male privilege” seemed no longer confined to the academic seminar. Nonbinary gender identities were increasingly visible and movements around the world challenging sexual violence, and even well-known celebrities like singers Beyonce and Taylor Swift, or actress Emma Watson, had embraced the term “feminist.” Indeed, it was a moment in which the election of a woman to the “leader of the free world” seemed a distinct possibility.

Like many of our colleagues we then watched in horror on election night as key battleground states turned red and the man we heard boasting of sexual assault on the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape—the 2005 “grab ‘em by the pussy” recording that surfaced in October 2016—was declared the 45th President of the United States (Berzon & Palazzolo, 2016). Our call for participation was born more of playfulness than fear; at the time we saw the “Trump phenomenon” as a hiccup in a slow but steady narrative of progress, a desperate but futile paroxysm during the demise of backlash culture. The election derailed our confidence in that narrative.

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The arduous journey since then has been marked not only by perpetual political scandal but also by historic women's marches, the seemingly sudden visibility (and remarkable successes) of the #metoo campaign, and the rise of a movement against gun violence led by high school students, among them Emma González, a young woman who was derided by Maine political candidate Leslie Gibson as a "lesbian skinhead" (Stevens, 2018). Public reaction to that comment ended, at least for the moment, the candidate's political ambition (Stevens, 2018), suggesting that American political culture may not be as hopeless as it may have seemed the morning of November 9th.

The advent of the Trump era may have normalized the unspeakable—from the open advocacy of sexual violence to the new centrality of neo-fascist, misogynist, and nihilist backlash subcultures—but it also served, at least partially, as a catalyst for myriad moments of resistance. Indeed, Trump is simply symptomatic of the larger backlash culture in this regard; the visible movements that have emerged since January 2017 are only crystallizations of political awakenings that have been unfolding over the past several years. And these awakenings have manifested not only around such issues as abortion rights, workplace harassment, sexual violence, and economic equality, but also around dismantling rape culture and undoing the sex/gender system that perpetuates it. New vocabularies have identified some of its many manifestations—mansplaining, gaslighting, slut-shaming—and new political passions are igniting in various expressive forms. Discussing "a new wave" of recently published feminist manifestos, journalist Melissa Benn (2017) remarked on "the astonishing rise of new forms of female protest, with millions of women galvanized globally to rise up against the new misogyny and the old injustices." In the past 18 months, we've felt realistic cause to believe we were on the verge of both a real-life *Handmaid's Tale*, and a radical feminist revolution (see Hargraves, 2018; Robertson, 2018; Weigel, 2017).

Our pre-election narrative of progress, was itself in many ways, a masculinist enterprise, involving a sense of certainty and inevitability, declaring facts rather than exploring possibilities. And our loss of confidence after the 2016 election likewise shared these traits; indeed, the story of "lost innocence" we imagined reflects a regressive paternalism. What has emerged since then has given us cautious hope—hope that a new world is possible; hope that feminist social change will not be squashed in what appears to be a rising tide of populist nativism, xenophobia, and militarism; hope that enough of us who identify as feminists will rise up against this tide to make a meaningful difference.

Our contributors rose to the challenge, not with a unified manifesto of masculinist heroism, but as a barrage of powerful voices against male supremacy. These womanifestos take form as multimedia installations, poetry, digital artworks, audio recordings, performative texts, and essays. These "remixed" creative, scholarly and performative voices take a stand; they stake their artistic claim and they will be heard.

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