



# DON'T TELL ME NOT TO LIVE

BY AMANDA RANDONE

*The celebration and social significance of inner city parades*



On a sweltering Manhattan morning in July, the U.S. women's national soccer team partied their way along the famed stretch of Broadway known as the 'Canyon of Heroes'. A ticker-tape parade was being held in honor of their second-consecutive World Cup victory, swallowing the athletes into a glorious storm of confetti and paper, some of which was shredded pages of the team's equal pay lawsuit. The procession ended with a victorious assembly in front of City Hall, with purple-haired co-captain Megan Rapinoe at its helm, a rockstar in her own right, wearing John Lennon-like sunglasses to boot.

As she spoke of the group's resilience and acceptance of its players across the entire spectrum of race and sexual orientation, Rapinoe called for more love and less hate in a moment that felt particularly meaningful on the heels of LGBTQ Pride Month. These back-to-back celebrations of diversity reinforce the notion that parades have long been significant cultural, social, and sometimes even political threads in the tapestries of urban living.

The following week, just a borough away, over a hundred men lifted a 4-ton, 72-foot spire known as "the Giglio," which they hauled on their shoulders as part of a ritualistic march through the streets of Brooklyn. This performance is central to the annual Our Lady of Mount Carmel Feast, a Catholic festival dating back over a century. Once a way for immigrants to make room for the traditions they carried from Southern Italy, the feast has since evolved into a reclamation of the historic but dwindling Italian-American presence in Williamsburg. For today's generation of its inaugural patrons, many participants must come from afar after being forced out of the now-gentrified neighborhood and replaced by the kombucha-drinking millennials that can actually afford its exorbitant rents.

When it comes to parades, city dwellers love the pageantry of it all as their streets become clogged with a fleeting yet genuine sense of joy. But for marginalized communities, these sorts of spectacles are so much more than

their entertainment value. Parades tell the story of an existence throughout time. They are an expression of collectivity and will, and an opportunity for organizers, and also attendees, to choose exactly how they want to present themselves to the world.

"[This is] the community representing itself to itself, as it would like to be seen, and as it would like to have its history be known and understood," says Dr. Susan G. Davis, professor emerita of folklore and communication at the University of Illinois. She cites the parades and marches of the civil rights movement as a powerful portrayal of black America's political activity and moral stance. She also explains how, starting from the 1880s, Labor Day Parades – or May Day as it's known in other parts of the world – have allowed for contested reform movements to occupy physical space within their cities. By showing up and rallying around a common goal, parades keep the needs of their communities part of mainstream conversation.

It's necessary to recognize, however, that these gatherings are not inherently good. In the U.S., for instance, courts have consistently ruled that when private speech is made public through parading, it is constitutionally protected under the First Amendment. This explains how a different breed of performance can exist with more nefarious and hateful intention. Consider how the Ku Klux Klan used this exact format to demonstrate their collective force and intimidate others – a tactic employed by racist organizations even today.

Still, the "urban phenomenon" of parade, as Davis calls it, is a crucial assertion of identity that often prefaces a group's expanding visibility within its greater community. "It takes some nerve and strength to get out in public and say 'this is who we are,'" Davis says. "Once that strength is found, it is powerful, and that power is usable for progress in innumerable ways."

*Amanda Randone is a writer, editor, and language and culture consultant.*