

## Politics and Celebration Manifesting the Rainbow Flag

Lisa Hagen-Smith

Volume 19, Number 2, 1997

Amalgam  
Amalgam

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087684ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087684ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

### ISSN

1481-5974 (print)  
1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Hagen-Smith, L. (1997). Politics and Celebration: Manifesting the Rainbow Flag. *Ethnologies*, 19(2), 113–121. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087684ar>

### Article abstract

Traditionally, organizers of the Winnipeg Lesbian, Gay, Bi PRIDE Day event have constructed two arenas (The Social and The March) which separate and contain expressions of celebration and protest. In 1996, Winnipeg organizers created a third space for the festival between these two spaces. Organizers also consciously began the transition from March to Parade. This paper discusses ways in which rainbow symbolism mediates the tensions between protest and celebration. Whether in its original form as flag or in its various manifestations, rainbow symbolism creates and daims various sites of conflict, transformation and inspiration. The meaning created by its use sometimes privileges celebration, other times protest and occasionally, magically transforms the space into a hybrid of both. Using the concepts of synthesis and synthesis I explore the strategic nature of this culturally significant symbol. It has only recently been collectively adopted by gay, lesbian and bisexual Manitobans and therefore, although well established in the United States, locally, it represents an emergent communication of pride.

# POLITICS AND CELEBRATION

## Manifesting the Rainbow Flag

Lisa HAGEN-SMITH

*University of Winnipeg*

PRIDE<sup>1</sup> Day in Winnipeg is smaller and more reserved than it is in larger centres. Consequently, over the years, many queer flatlanders have escaped to the anonymity of larger North American cities to participate in more spectacular PRIDE events. Intoxicated by the freedom, the overwhelming variety, and the sheer magnitude of commercial, sexual, and political possibilities, we return home from our<sup>2</sup> tours with tokens of the rainbow flag and a desire to reproduce the experience of PRIDE/pride that our souvenirs represent. My participation on the Winnipeg Lesbian/Gay/Bi/Trans PRIDE Day Committee since 1995 has been from the perspectives of an assistant researcher, an organizer, and a lesbian feminist. In each of these locations, I have felt pressures to conform to some standard of queer<sup>3</sup> pride. My journey here to discover pride and its relationship to the rainbow symbol and PRIDE Day celebrations begins with an acknowledgment that there is no essential truth contained within an image. Truths are found within relationships. Robert Plant Armstrong (1982) offers two models — synthesis and syndesis — for coming to terms with this unsettling concept.

Synthesis is the more commonly used model for analyzing cultural objects and concepts. It characterizes them as dialectical and developmental and requires that they be judged authentic or fraudulent, complete or incomplete, true or false. It is the form of representation to which science and logic have devoted most of their attention. Armstrong describes his alternative model, syndesis, as “naming a copulative relationship” (Ibid.:329). Those seeking a less heterocentric metaphor may reframe it as a “pollinating relationship.” It

1. I use upper case letters for PRIDE to signify the Pride Day Committee's method of differentiating between official queer PRIDE and generic pride. PRIDE refers to events or promotions organized or sponsored by the PRIDE Day Committee. I extend its use to refer to any externally generated concept of PRIDE. Lower case letters refer to an internal concept of pride which stems from a relationship with oneself, community etc.
2. The use of 'we' and 'our' here refers to queers. It is customary to read and write about gays and lesbians as 'they.' I include myself in the pronouns 'we' and 'us.' Being in the closet is perpetuated by the objectivising, third person style of academic writing. 'We' may all be different, but 'we' are all queer.
3. The term queer is problematic because of its historical association primarily with gay males and because of its popular usage referring to fashion and fad more than to sexual orientation and the discrimination associated with it. I use it here, however, as a way to include all who have been constructed by heteropatriarchy as sexually deviant, including gay males, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals (pre- and post-op), transgendered, and culturally specific manifestations thereof. I use lesbian and gay specifically to refer to euro north american female and male engenderings thereof.

describes the “isness or has-ness of an object” (Ibid.:330). In other words, meaning and power arise through the object’s associations, uses, and relationships. They are not dependent on its aesthetic qualities but rather on the “energy generated by its invocations and investments — its received sacrifices” (Ibid.).

I am concerned with the problem of how images may convey meaning and power because, as an organizer and a lesbian feminist, I struggle with the tensions that result from conflicting expectations and definitions of PRIDE/pride. Organisers face tremendous pressure to choose either politics or celebration, but labour to produce an event that is both empowering and performative.<sup>4</sup> My own unwillingness to privilege one or the other has led me to investigate how a cultural icon like the rainbow flag has potential to become a symbol of liberation and power, or of standardization and commodification. I will consider its manifestations, contexts and strategic uses within two PRIDE events: the parade and the festival.<sup>5</sup>

Concepts of synthesis and syndesis can provide frameworks for constructing the physical, mental, and emotional landscapes of our realities. Both models can be deployed to encourage forces of colonization or to foster its opposite, and thus to affect our relationships to pride or shame. The goal of colonization is to establish power and privilege as the coloniser’s exclusive right. They — we —<sup>6</sup> maintain this position of control by (re)creating and enforcing relations of power and privilege which depend upon categories of dominance and submission. By containing queers as “inferiors,” heterosexuality is, by comparison, deemed superior, and represents the synthetic standard. However, an increasing number of queers have escaped this dichotomy with the help of PRIDE/pride. Colonizers attempt to re-establish power over us by strategically deploying homophobia and heterosexism.

Homophobia attempts, by brute force and intimidation, to eradicate queers. It attacks pride, inducing fear and hatred, and inciting physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional violence against and among queers. PRIDE counters these forces by creating a context in which celebration renders violence absurd. The PRIDE parade in Winnipeg appropriates a parade route with waving

4. The friction between these ostensibly conflicting expectations is apparently shared by gays and lesbians from as far away as South Africa (Gevisser and Reid 1994).
5. The analysis applies equally to a third PRIDE event, the social. Socials are prairie fundraising dances, often associated with weddings but now common in many other contexts as well. Sausage, pickles, cheese, and buns are served, and drinks are cheap. Tickets are generally sold to people identified within a social, political, or family group.
6. Queers may function simultaneously as the colonisers and the colonized. Our status as an oppressed group sometimes results in a desire for comfort and power within our own cliques, defined by gender, race, and so on. This leads to a reluctance to share power with queers perceived as a poor fit within queer communities. When PRIDE/pride is based on a single definition that queer is good, self-determination of some groups within our constituency is undermined.

banners, drag queens on roller blades, dykes and their dogs, balloons and rainbow flags, but it is also constructed as a site of protest.

Its history marks both aspects. The first Winnipeg PRIDE event was a celebration of the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Manitoba Human Rights Act in 1987, but arose from the fertile ground prepared by lesbian-feminist organizers of the Canadian Women's Music and Cultural Festivals of 1984, '85 and '86. During these events, Winnipeg lesbians emerged from the category of women, as indicated by spirited debates on the editorial pages of the Winnipeg Free Press. Paul Laforet wrote:

While taking in the surroundings in Kildonan Park...enjoying the workshops in tents, appreciating the talents and skills and recognizing the vast contributions that women can contribute...a warm atmosphere quickly turned to shock as I noticed signs of "Lesbian Circle, bring a dyke with you"....I wondered if the festival was not really a type of political front for the lesbian movement (1984).

Many of these women also lobbied for human rights and organised PRIDE 1987.

Homophobic counter demonstrators at the first PRIDE march tried to intimidate and shame revellers with signs reading: "Wanted: Queen Sized Closet with Padlock" and "A Gay Parade is Indecent Exposure" (Anon 1987). Ten years after the human rights victory, homophobia's effectiveness in some contexts has been curtailed by the increase in our visibility. As the victims of bashing and other violence become identified as family members and friends of heterosexuals, so-called "straight" people may experience tensions over whether to support their personal relations or continue to invest in the status quo. The city of Winnipeg distributes a pamphlet called "Homophobia and Homophobic Violence" in which it warns: "Being Gay or Lesbian Isn't a Crime: Bashing Is" (Winnipeg Safe City Committee, c.1996). But the same city's Mayor continues annually to declare everything from Walk-a-dog Week to Denturist Awareness Month while she refuses to proclaim a Pink Triangle Day.<sup>7</sup> Our increasing visibility makes some heterosexuals intolerant and/or disapproving of direct confrontations and violent expressions. But where homophobia is inhibited from overtly attacking pride, heterosexism flourishes.

Heterosexism manages threats to the status quo by making gay and lesbian relationships between lovers invisible, causing them to disappear along with relations within and between lesbian and gay cultures, and the interactions of our cultural symbols. It denies the legitimacy of queerness, unless it reflects the needs and desires of heterosexuals. When queer is good for academics, fashion, television, and marketing, it is acceptable within heterosexist terms.<sup>8</sup> This commodified queerness fills the space, amoeba-like, and pushes

7. Nazis identified gays by pink triangles and lesbians by black triangles.

8. Vaid notes that "while 36 million viewers tuned in for the *Ellen* coming out episode, many gays and lesbians among those millions remain in the closet in their daily lives (1997:88).

relationships which are too difficult to digest onto the margins, where they are seen as extreme, if they are seen at all. Queers who make themselves more palatable to heterosexual culture mistakenly believe that the amoeba's consumption of them equals acceptance. Colonizers use heterosexism to make PRIDE/pride vulnerable by limiting the space in which self-definition can be deployed.

However, colonizers are not content to leave queers in the margins. They want us off the page! Their objective is to completely eradicate relationships that do not rely on domination and submission. Borg-like, they adapt to our attempts to resist them, often incorporating queers by referencing other axes of power we share with the colonizer: sexism, racism, and classism. Cultural symbols like the rainbow, which can be effective in increasing visibility and protesting against homophobia, become a special target for colonizers. Corporate Canada's enthusiasm to develop a "market-penetration strategy of the gay and lesbian community" may result in spending "more money perfecting the pink triangle or rainbow images than on ways of truly understanding and contributing to the gay and lesbian culture these symbols represent" (Bursey 1996).

Colonizers begin by gaining control over production and consumption, relying on a synthetic model to assist them in manifesting the rainbow flag in their image. A synthetic understanding begins by setting a standard which will be recognized as consistently representative (see Armstrong 1982:329). The original two rainbow flags created in San Francisco in 1978 were hand dyed and sewn by thirty volunteers. They consisted of eight horizontal stripes from top to bottom: hot pink for sex, red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunshine, green for serenity with nature, turquoise for art, indigo for harmony, and purple for spirit. The effects of standardization were felt the following year when pink and turquoise were dropped, and indigo was changed to royal blue because of the switch from hand dying to commercial manufacturing (Anderson 1993:25). The remaining stripes now add up to a very peaceful symbol. The two colours holding the most potential for stimulating conflict and passion — art and sex — have been stripped away.

Thus, each individual stripe of the flag represents a particular quality. When combined in a particular sequence, they always produce a concrete meaning. In synthetic thought, if the rainbow flag takes a different form, it is less whole or true and therefore its meaning is suspect. The more standardized the image, the more authority it musters to speak the truth. Synthesis thus achieves the second step towards colonization, by breaking the relationship between the inspirational force and the creation. The potentially endless reproduction of a fixed symbol increases the likelihood that control over the production of meaning, as well as of the objects themselves, will eventually shift to those who make the standardized product.

Once the relationship between inspiration and cultural object has been severed, the colonizers' next step is to externalize the meaning. The new meaning

does not come from an expression of pride that is inspired by relationships to events, times, actions or people. It comes from our ability to consume. For example, along the parade route in Winnipeg, some businesses sport rainbow stickers in their windows and doors, presumably to indicate their acceptance of queers. They don't earn the sticker by demonstrating a commitment to the well-being of the queer community, although they may do so. They can simply buy one. Since they own the "Flag", they also control its meaning. The sticker equates pride with queer consumer power.<sup>9</sup>

A synthetic model values the event — social, festival, or parade — if it measures up to some preconceived notion of Gay/Lesbian/Bi/Trans PRIDE. Most often, value is measured by its ability to attract tourist dollars and corporate sponsorship. This requires queers to unite under a non-threatening flag, and emulate a "bigger is better" model. If Winnipeg doesn't compete with Toronto or New York in terms of size and spectacle, it's not as good, not as proud. Demanding respect for our relationships threatens the status quo. As Ron, a straight tourist visiting the Winnipeg gay bar Happenings said: "I don't have a problem with being approached (by another man) as long as they're not rude, but I don't like it when there's a bunch of flamers around" (quoted in Lawson and Phillips 1994).

But in the absence of tourists, corporations are quite content for us to consume ourselves. Either way, a synthetic model of manifesting PRIDE makes money for businesses. The corporations sponsoring PRIDE want us to be cutting edge enough to appeal to a youth market, without our alienating the traditional mainstream. The bigger the event, the more we depend on their contributions and the more they can construct our image to sell their products.

The colonizer is capable of appropriating our cultural objects by separating inspiration from object and producing cheap replicas. Each one is like the other, stuck in that first moment of their creation, constrained by the original mold and separated from the deepening and enriching influences of time and place. Our challenge is to prevent this empty reproduction from occurring.

The Rainbow Flag, when manifested synthetically, also has a predetermined set of behaviours and uses which must be associated with it<sup>10</sup> if it is to convey

9. VISA has produced "the Rainbow Card," which pictures the March on Washington with a large crowd waving rainbow flags (see VISA 1997). The card is endorsed by Martina Navratilova and encourages gays and lesbians to "Get It, Use It, Got It?" VISA offers "world-wide acceptance" and promises to donate an unstated percentage of profits to The Rainbow Endowment Fund each time you use the card; the more you buy, the higher "their" donations. Is VISA equating civil liberties sought after in the March on Washington with purchasing power or pink dollars? Who does *this* synthetic representation of the flag represent?
10. Flag protocol is often regarded with great seriousness. The Winnipeg Sun reported in "Gimli legionnaires to boycott Icelandic festival parade:" "For the second year in a row, no members of the Gimli branch of the Royal Canadian Legion will march in the Icelandic parade.... some of them feel the flag is being slighted...the flag should be at the head of the

the “truth” of pride, as my 1996 close encounter with synthesis shows. That year, we wanted to mark the PRIDE march as a celebration by adding Rainbow Flags. Winnipeg had no lesbian or gay businesses that sold standardized rainbow flags. So, some dedicated and talented lesbians and gay men got together and sewed twelve rainbow flags. They looked beautiful! We were very proud, not only of their majesty, but also of their creators. After the parade, someone asked me, hesitantly, if we had mistakenly flown the flags upside-down. Honestly, it had never occurred to me that there was any order to the stripes. Viewing the situation from the rigid synthetic viewpoint, I experienced a moment of horror. After checking ours against a store-bought flag, I realized that we had, indeed, flown them upside down. As a civilian Canadian, I have a very distant relationship to the protocol surrounding flags. I had a vague sense that flying one upside down had some link with disgrace. Perhaps all of the feelings of pride we had associated with the flags during the day were not real. Perhaps instead of pride, we should feel shame at our stupidity for not getting it right. I initially consoled myself with the realization that most people didn’t notice.

But in a later discussion with friends, someone offered that they had heard that flying the flag upside down was a sign of distress. We were cheered by this information. Certainly, as gays and lesbians in this political climate, we *are* distressed. Perhaps we should continue to fly rainbow flags upside down until society “gets it right” and starts valuing our relationships. Inverting the conventional meanings of symbols and actions is one way of releasing the syndetic possibilities of the flag. Also, because the rainbow’s manifestation as a flag invokes society’s values concerning the sacred, syndetic potential can be released when queers, outsiders to the mainstream, embrace the conventional norms surrounding the honouring of flags.<sup>11</sup>

The process of decolonization begins by exchanging a synthetic frame of reference for a syndetic one. A decolonizer’s world values relationship over ownership. Unconcerned with gaining power over others, it seeks instead the freedom gained by empowering us all. A synthetic, colonizing model tries to generate fear and shame through external judgments. A syndetic, decolonizing version of pride promotes self-determination (see Armstrong 1982:329).<sup>12</sup> It

---

parade. Nobody but the RCMP should be ahead of the Canadian flag (“Gimli” 1997).”

11. See: “Why John Stout, Former Homophobe, Fought to Fly His Rainbow Flag.”

One thing that holds special meaning for Stout is his ritual of hanging a colourful 3-foot-by-5-foot gay pride flag from his balcony every weekend. “It’s a symbol of my support for the gay community; it shows my sense of belonging.” Stout felt his new landlords tried to “silence my speech on a subject of vital importance” by threatening legal action if the flag was not removed. He filed suit against the owners and managers of his apartment building, contending that they had violated his right to free speech.

12. “Coming out,” on our own terms, courageously expresses this concept, in claiming one’s sexual orientation despite risking the benefits and privileges gained when passing as

doesn't exist to define meaning, but rather to envision possibilities and open them up. This open system is not directed toward creating a whole. The object or person is whole as it exists, with or without all of its pieces and arranged in any order it pleases. Therefore, the rainbow flag shows its true colours in many forms, from tattoo to dog leash. It can be present as one colour, all of the colours, or none of the colours. Increasing its value does not rely on correction to some standard, but instead on a relationship that supports the spirit within it — making flags together, or making love together. Instead of confirming expectations, "syndesis embraces the delight of surprise" (Ibid.:332).

Syndesis also encourages the creation of alternative models for celebration and participation. We refuse to divide the event into performers and spectators, or organizers and consumers, or to ask for the token representation which occurs when people are invited to support an already-existing framework. Instead, we seek to create a multitude of opportunities for participation in both the process and the goal, opportunities to share in the responsibility for and the privilege of influencing the very fabric of the event. We ignore imposed boundaries of context.

The rainbow flag's public display in the parade proudly declares our refusal to keep our sexual orientation in the bedroom closet. We can also refuse to stay in our place within the very narrow context of the single issue of sexual orientation rights. If queers are truly everywhere, let's show it by flying our rainbow flags in aboriginal justice marches, at violence against women vigils, at unemployment or labour rallies. By bursting the boundaries of PRIDE, we transform situations that encourage an "us versus them" view of the world. We employ tactics of disruption, spontaneity, originality, and improvisation, without resorting to intimidation (which doesn't mean people won't feel threatened) and without falling into the trap of thinking that only artists and activists "own" inspiration.

At PRIDE '96 there were some wonderful examples of such syndesis at play.<sup>13</sup> Rainbow symbolism created and claimed sites of conflict, transformation, and inspiration. As the parade wound through Osborne Village, we were raucous and vibrant: umbrellas and yellow raincoats mixed with rainbow flags, bicycles, strollers, and club music. The rain didn't dampen our spirits at all, but they were momentarily doused by a silent group standing at the corner of Stradbrook and Osborne with placards proclaiming gayness a sin. I was immediately enraged by their smug judgments. No response. One parade participant aimed her supersoaker at their signs; a bike cop immediately appeared. The absurdity of the threat changed my mood. Finally, the rainbow in its disembodied form of dancers and coloured, affirming church banners, inspired us to transform this site of conflict by standing in front of the

---

heterosexual. Coming out is an ongoing process which continually presents us with choices between integrity, survival, and acceptance on the coloniser's terms.

13. Play can, of course, be serious business.



counterdemonstrators and making lots of noise. From the street, it appeared that the bobbing heads of the counter demonstrators standing behind us were cheering with the rest of the crowd.

The Festival site at Memorial Park, across from the Manitoba Legislature, became a focus for syndetic expressions. It takes up public space for queers. It's free. It's wheelchair-accessible, and interpreters are available. It has a children's area and there are places for people to do spontaneous activities. It has bathrooms!!! Claiming the space meant building a horseshoe-shaped fence out of two-by-fours and broad pieces of rainbow coloured cloth. People phoned me at home later to comment upon how good the space felt, how intimate, safe, and nurturing.

As we prepared and created the place on PRIDE morning, we discovered that the lampposts had been plastered with hate literature by the European Christian Defense League. (They too, were busy trying to transform the space.) We used coloured PRIDE posters to cover them, which added more festivity to the whole area. As we covered each one, I invoked the colour's original meaning, to keep the hatred at a distance. Purple for spirit, yellow for sunshine.

At the end of the day my girlfriend and I took the twelve handmade rainbow flags home and hung them out to dry on the fence. The flags engendered a silent moment of beauty. While I was detaching them from their poles to prepare them for packing, I couldn't resist trying out just one to feel its inspiration. I discovered that it wasn't just the colour that felt proud. It was also the way I had to plant my feet, extend my arms and sway my body back and forth. I felt strong.

Rainbow symbolism can be found in any venue, shapeshifting and shimmering, tying the pieces of PRIDE into a holistic presence, at once conspiring with the status quo and challenging it. On PRIDE Day we celebrate *self-determination*. Our relationship to the rainbow must embrace a syndetic notion of pride, one in which our total self—woman, aboriginal, low income, feminist, butch, drag queen—is allowed to be *out*, both in the streets and on organizing committees. Red for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunshine, green for serenity with nature, indigo for harmony, purple for spirit, turquoise for art, and hot pink for sex.

---

**References Cited**

- Anderson, Steven W. 1993. The Rainbow Flag. *Gaze*, 191, May.
- Anon. 1987. Wanted: Queen Sized Closet with Padlock. *Winnipeg Sun* 3, Aug, np.
- . 1987. A Gay Parade is Indecent Exposure. *Winnipeg Sun* 3, Aug, np.
- Armstrong, Robert Plant. 1982. What's Red, White, and Blue and Syndetic? *Journal of American Folklore*, 95: 327-346.
- Bursey, Bruce. 1996. Corporate Canada and the Gay Nineties. *Globe and Mail*, 6 July, np.
- Gevisser, Mark and Graeme Reid. 1994. Pride or Protest?: Drag Queens, Comrades, and the Lesbian and Gay Pride March. In *Defiant Desire: Gay and Lesbian Lives in South Africa*. New York: Routledge.
- Gimli. 1997. Gimli legionnaires to boycott Icelandic festival parade. *Winnipeg Sun*, 28 July: 5.
- Hunt, Joseph. 1989. Did you hear the one about the tenant and the landlord?. *Advocate*: 46-47.
- Laforet, Paul. 1984. Unhealthy display (letter to the editor). *Winnipeg Free Press*, 17 September, np.
- Lawson, Stephen and Carol Phillips. 1994. Straight looking, straight acting: are the bars still gay?. *Swerve*. premiere issue, fall: 6-7.
- Vaid, Urvashi. 1997. Last word: activism phobia. *Advocate*, 735, June: 88.
- VISA. 1997. The Power of One (advertisement). *Advocate*, 735, June: 4.