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### Letter from the Executive Director: An Accidental Protester

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*CUNY Graduate Center*

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# LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



James Wilson  
CLAGS Executive Director

## AN ACCIDENTAL PROTESTER

This past January, I spent a cold, wet, and fabulous week in Paris. One evening while strolling along the Left Bank, sauntering in the shadows of the imposing grandeur of L'Hôtel national des Invalides, I found myself caught up in a massive wave of protesters, who were dispersing from a demonstration in front of the Eiffel Tower. The crowd moved like a protean organism through the narrow Parisian streets, growing in immensity as other protest groups siphoned into the throng from criss-crossing thoroughfares. My French is not nearly what it once was, so I had difficulty discerning the gist of the chants and call-and-response rallying cries, but I still read hieroglyphics with relative fluency. Looking at the protesters' signs decorated with stick-figured, perfectly gendered families (i.e., a tall stick-figure man holding hands with a tall stick-figure woman, flanked by one each stick-figure girl-child and stick-figure boy-child), I knew that this was not a protest among which I wanted to be counted.

I tried to extricate myself from the human amoeba, and at every turn, every boulevard, every Rue de Something or Other, I encountered more protesters. I started to make out some of the declarations, such as "Opposition to Gay Marriage is **Not** Homophobic" and "Paternity, Maternity, Equality," but I was trapped in a Kafkaesque vortex as I got swept along with the tide of impassioned anti-gay marriage, sign-carrying non-homophobes. Finally, by ducking into a Japanese restaurant and settling down to a glass of Côte du Rhône red wine and a plate of sushi I could watch the protest run its course and leave when the coast was clear. I do hope that as final numbers of participants are tallied, the organizers can subtract one, citing the presence of an accidental protester.

Just about a week later I was back in the States, and using language I could fully understand, newly inaugurated President Obama referred directly to equality for his "gay brothers and sisters," citing Stonewall as the flashpoint for the lesbian and gay

civil rights movement. It was, as bloggers blogged and twitterers tweeted, an historic occasion. This was the first time a president used the word gay (at least in its same-sex connotation) in an inauguration speech. Even more impressive was the fact that it caused hardly a stir (even among the Fox News pundits).

So then why did I feel that something had been lost in translation? First, Obama does a disservice to our revolutionary forbears who took part in the Stonewall Riots by metonymically linking that event with the rights of gay men and women to marry. As all accounts have it, a good number of the instigators on that June night in 1969 were drag queens and street kids, and they were not protesting for the right to file joint tax returns but exploding with long-suppressed rage to ongoing humiliation and abuse from the law. Second, I am afraid that gay marriage has to a degree subsumed all other LGBT issues, and we are marching along, becoming accidental protesters focused on

# CLAGS FACEBOOK PAGE IN NUMBERS

350,636

Number of times content from the CLAGS Facebook Page was seen on Facebook

1,388  
Number of new fans

119,595

Number of people who have seen any content associated with the CLAGS Facebook Page

3,479

Number of users who clicked any of the content on the CLAGS Facebook page

2,600

Number of stories created about CLAGS

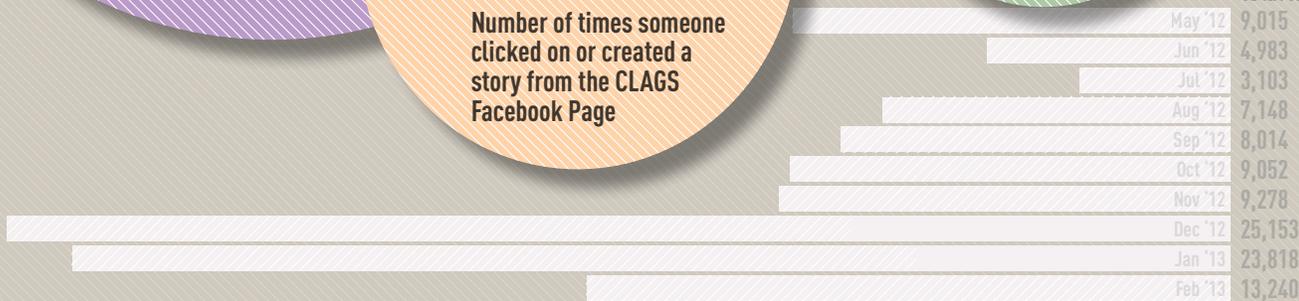
2,164

Number of people sharing stories about CLAGS

4,977

Number of times someone clicked on or created a story from the CLAGS Facebook Page

Total Reach\*:



\* The number of people who have seen any content associated with our page

Data collected May 2012-Mar 2013

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one aspect of equality that benefits only the coupled, the moneyed, and those in the mainstream.

Offering (for me) a corrective to this interpretation, CLAGS hosted a number of important events in the fall, and I was energized anew by the nuances within and among the multiple discourses arising from our diverse communities. The Harry Hay conference in September situated LG-BTQ militancy through particular historical moments and reflected the potential for realizing new communities unbound by constraints of gender and sexual desires. The celebration of the book *Born this Way* was a forceful reminder of the agony, courage, and pleasures associated with coming out as LGBT. Nina Arsenault embodied and celebrated through performance and praxis what it means to be a trans woman and art-

ist, and playwright and drag artist Charles Busch hilariously described the process of working in the margins of New York theatre with a group of like-minded misfits to hobnobbing with the show-biz elite. And finally, capping the semester with his inspiring Kessler Award Lecture, Martin Duberman offered a call to arms to consider the costs of sacrificing radicalism for normativity.

The spring calendar offers even more opportunities to deepen the conversation and broaden our understandings of LGBT issues locally, nationally, and internationally. We will continue to provide opportunities for artists to share their creative processes and challenges through the enormously popular Performing Que(e)ries series, and we will host a number of scholars and activists who will share their own work in their varied fields and disciplines. The highlight

of the spring, though, will most certainly be the Homonationalism and Pinkwashing Conference, which sold out its registration within days of announcement and has already generated considerable buzz and anticipation.

I do not want to minimize the historical significance of gay and lesbian marriage equality. Beyond its symbolic importance, marriage equality is crucial to the lives of our gay brothers and sisters raising families across the country (and not just the nine states that legally recognize same-sex marriages). Yet, we must resist the centripetal force that binds us to a single issue. At CLAGS, we welcome the opportunity to throw away the guidebook and set out in new directions. ■

In Review

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