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Letter from the Executive Director

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letter from the executive director

Heterosexuality is under attack--not by the authors of a new "I hate straights" broadsheet, not by vacationers in Provincetown, but by state judges in the US. In August, New York's highest court ruled that the New York State Constitution "does not compel recognition of marriages between members of the same-sex." Their reasoning? In part, the decision declared, because opposite-sex relationships are "often too casual," and thus result in the production of children by "accident or impulse." And so, "unstable relationships between people of the opposite sex present a greater danger that children will be born into or grow up in unstable homes than is the case with same-sex couples."

CLAGS board member Joe Rollins, who teaches political science at CUNY's Queen's College, has examined the judicial rhetoric in the same-sex marriage cases. As he points out, the New York decision is part of a larger trend in several states in which the right of same-sex couples to marry is denied partly because of the assumed irresponsibility of heterosexual people, and their greater need for the benefits and stability provided by institution of marriage.

Legal marriage certainly confers many vital benefits--over a thousand federal benefits from social security and inheritance rights to a myriad of federal tax protections. The many legal protections granted through marriage by the states are also of vital importance, most notably the rights, as Rollins points out in his work, not so much of marrying couples but of divorcing ones, including rights to child custody and the legal recognition of one's role as a parent. Unfortunately, it's not at all uncommon for a non-biological lesbian or gay parent who lives in a jurisdiction that bans same-sex second-parent adoption, or who can't afford the high fees that often accompany it, to be denied even visitation rights once the relationship ends.

According to the New York Court of Appeals, it's not just the purportedly inherent tendency of straight people to engage in rampant, disorderly, sexuality that justifies the harms inflicted by barring same-sex couples from marriage. The court also concluded that "in the absence of conclusive scientific evidence," a state may limit marriage to heterosexual couples because of the "common-sense premise that children will do best with a mother and a father in the home."

To be sure, there is much often intense disagreement within queer communities on what priority the struggle for same-sex marriage should have in our movement--see, for example, the recent "Beyond Same-Sex Marriage" statement at www.beyondmarriage.org. But the recent decisions in New York and other states unquestionably show that there we need more academic work that shows why heterosexuality should be "disestablished" from the state. We need critical work in the law, the humanities, and the social sciences that challenges the idea that children do best in households with two opposite-sex parents, that contests the framing of gender different children and adults as pathological, and that shows how people can flourish in a wide diversity of households and families, among other things.

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Most importantly, we need to produce and circulate new knowledges that will transform the “common sense” notions about sexuality, gender, and family that surface again and again in these opinions. As CLAGS’s 2005 Kessler honoree, Carole Vance, said in her speech (reprinted in this issue), without this work and the critical tools it provides, it’s all too easy for policymakers and others to fall back upon “naturalized and unexamined ideas,” the kind of folk knowledge that justifies the denial of equality to LGBT people.

Providing support for this essential research is what CLAGS and our sister institutions do. This year, CLAGS celebrates its fifteenth anniversary. That’s fifteen years of conferences, panel discussions, colloquia, critical fellowship support for emerging and established scholars, David R. Kessler Lectures, Seminars in the City--you can read about the most recent seminar on page 15--and new initiatives such as the International Resource Network and the Global Sexualities Thesaurus (see page 16).

CLAGS’s contributions to sexuality studies are widely recognized and appreciated; the behind-the-scenes labor that keeps CLAGS’s doors open, however, is less known. In this issue, former CLAGS executive director Jill Dolan recounts the kinds of endless bureaucratic efforts necessary to establishing and maintaining CLAGS’s relationship with the Graduate Center. Still, in an era of declining funding for public higher education in the U.S. that support is now minimal: after fifteen years, the City University of New York provides less than seven percent of CLAGS’s operating expenses. As a result, the important work CLAGS supports is only made possible by our members, our donors, and a few forward-thinking foundations.

In her Kessler lecture, Vance stressed the need to imagine sexual rights “as crucial to the project of democracy and citizenship.” The New York marriage decision, and, as described in the Beyond Same-Sex Marriage statement, “the ‘family values’ agenda that includes abstinence-only sex education, stringent divorce laws, coercive marriage promotion policies directed toward women on welfare, and attacks on reproductive freedom,” show how absolutely vital the project of establishing sexual rights is. I am confident that the next generation of queer studies scholars, including Taylor Black, now an undergraduate at Hunter College (and whose article you’ll find on page 10), will carry on this work, with the support of institutions like CLAGS--and you.

CLAGSnews is published twice a year by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. All submissions related to the study of gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual experiences are welcome. Please address all inquiries to CLAGSnews, The Graduate Center, The City University of New York, Room 7.115, New York, NY 10016. Phone: 212.817.1955; email: clags@gc.cuny.edu.

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