

By Tim Retzlaff

"I was stunned by them, by their incredible lives." Roey Thorpe was describing her research on lesbians in Detroit during the 1950s and 1960s. A doctoral student at SUNY-Binghamton, Thorpe talked about her project during an interview at her home in Ithaca, NY prior to the March on Washington.

Thorpe was drawn to her subject when she became bored with earlier plans to write her dissertation about the industrialization of fashion. Seeing herself as a radical lesbian professor in the making, she decided that "you become who you want to be by being it." Maybe she wouldn't get a job, but she had to do lesbian history.

Despite initial concern that Thorpe would be wasting her talent, her advisor at Binghamton supported the decision, in part because the growth of gay studies has helped legitimize lesbian history as a potential topic. Still, Thorpe feels pressure to prove herself.

A belief that race is often more important than gender as a category of analysis led her to focus on Detroit. "I knew that I wanted to write not only about white women, I wanted to write about black women," she explains.

Detroit, considered the "Arsenal of Democracy" during World War II, would also be a good test of a theory that the mobilization for the war fueled the emergence of homosexual communities in the United States.

Thorpe began the project by making contacts throughout the city. She then made a scouting trip, posting flyers,

visiting bars and coffee houses, attending events, and placing notices in gay and lesbian media. Detroit's lesbian and gay community, especially Reverend Renee McCoy and the Full Truth Fellowship Church, gave her tremendous support.

Finding the women to interview was slow at first, but became easier on subsequent visits as people realized she was doing serious research. Thorpe said a surprising number of women decided to use their real names instead of pseudonyms. Several felt inspired by young people who are out.

Reclaiming Detroit's Lesbian Past



From forty-eight interviews comes an emerging portrait of lesbian life in Detroit forty years ago. The climate of the city was "tremendously hard" according to Thorpe's sources, but not without hope. Those lucky and diligent enough found other lesbians who had created some sort of social community. "You could not only survive, but you could have a good time and you could begin to have a kind of pride in who you were," explains Thorpe.

Contrary to common perceptions, she found that earlier generations of lesbian were more out that they get credit for.

The women were constantly negotiating how visible they would be—on the job, at home, and with their families. Thorpe says, "People in lesbians' lives had a good idea that they were lesbians, even if they didn't talk about it."

The era of her study saw incredible racial tension in Detroit, including race riots in 1943 and 1967. Lesbian black and white communities were almost entirely separate.

Despite commonality as lesbians, the women had different ways of living, a point Thorpe intends to stress in her dissertation. "African American lesbians are African Americans, and white lesbians are white, and the way they choose to socialize has everything to do with their race," she said. House parties, for instance, were more important in the lives of black lesbians, whereas white lesbians met primarily in bars.

From the interviews, Thorpe found that African American women tended to have stronger relationship with gay men. Their social circles were fairly mixed, which added to the fun. Though some white women valued gay men, the majority didn't have many as friends. Some middle class white lesbians, however, double-dated with gay male couples as a cover.

Social roles played themselves out differently as well. In the black community, many women organized themselves around "stud-femme" roles, while in the white community it was

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"butch-femme." The roles, usually affected by status or class, were important and positive for many women in Detroit.

Although churches have often been homophobic, religion was central for many lesbians. Particularly in the African American community there was a tradition of lesbians and gay men being incorporated into the life of the church. Congregations would look at the good work that someone did and overlook "that other thing."

Thorpe believes there was no so-called "lesbian norm" for the 1950s and 1960s. She attributes notions of a "gay way" or a "lesbian way" of doing things to middle and working class whites who were most visible.

One awkward aspect of Thorpe's research has been the necessity of coming out to strangers who ask what she's studying. "Even though I'm a person who's very out, it's still very hard," she said.

This wariness of strangers' reactions was reinforced by a sour experience at the State Archives of Michigan. She found that once she told the archivists she was working on lesbian history, they suddenly didn't give as much help.

She felt frustrated and vulnerable there. "The things I'm reading about (at the Archives) are tremendously painful, about gay men getting institutionalized (in hospitals), and the kind of treat-

ment, like electroshock therapy, all kinds of drugs and lobotomies... and yet the very Archives I'm in isn't there to help me..."

Employees of the State Archives, contrary to its professed value of open access, seemed unwilling to disclose information that might relate to lesbians and gay men. Thorpe asserts, based on an anonymous phone message saying taxpayers wouldn't approve of her use of the Archives, that "they don't want that history to be written." She was repeatedly ignored, too, while walk-in genealogists were given favorable attention.

Thorpe does not know what she may have missed because of archivists unwilling to guide her. This denies us our history as much as a lack of documentation, or people's fear of sharing their stories. "It makes you really realize that history getting erased is not entirely arbitrary," she said.

Her negative experiences with homophobic institutions have been offset by the experience of tapping into a network of other gay and lesbian historians. She has presented some of her findings to academic audiences, including the 1992 annual conference of the American Historical Association.

Thorpe feels strongly about giving this history back to the lesbian community of Detroit. She envisions evenings where people get together to tell stories, reviving an oral tradition she said used to play an important part in lesbian and gay life.

In writing about people's lives Thorpe feels a responsibility to do the stories justice. She would also like to publish a book of the interviews, without any interpretation, believing that the women's words stand alone.

If she is able to obtain grant money, Thorpe expects to finish up in a year. Meanwhile, she is running for a seat on Ithaca's city council.

Roey Thorpe discovered that the women who participated in her study now think about their lives differently. Because their lives are now written down, they feel they are part of a larger history.

The project goes beyond capturing an uncharted part of Michigan's history. "One of the things that makes this such an amazing topic to study is that I feel like I'm making a difference in my own life, as well as a difference in the lives of the people I interview, as well as a difference in the world."

Persons interested in the Detroit Lesbian History Project may write Roey Thorpe at: 711 N. Tioga Street, Ithaca, NY 14850; or call collect at (607) 272-4328. Tax-deductible donations for the project are accepted through: Triangle Foundation, 19641 W. 7 Mile Road, Detroit, MI 48219; (313) 537-3323.

For a future issue of Between The Lines Tim Retzloff is researching gay and lesbian activism in Michigan during the years immediately following the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Individuals with stories may write him at P.O. Box 3701, Flint, MI 48502. ▼