

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives
Northampton, MA

Esther Rothblum, Class of 1976

Interviewed by
Sunny Lawrence, Class of 2017

May 14, 2016

Abstract

In this interview, Esther Rothblum talks about coming to Smith as an international student and learning how to be an American. Rothblum also reflects on her time at Smith as raising and engaging her feminist awareness. A clinical psychologist, Rothblum also reflects on what it was like to be a women pursuing a PhD in a male dominated field in the 80s.

Restrictions

None.

Format

Interview recorded using Sony EX1R camera, XDCam format.

Videographer

Video recorded by Kate Geis.

Transcript

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Rothblum, Esther. Interview by Sunny Lawrence. Video recording, May 14, 2016. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Esther Rothblum, interview by Sunny Lawrence, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

Transcript

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Alumnae Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection
Smith College
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 14, 2016, with:

ESTHER ROTHBLUM
Northampton, Massachusetts

by: SONIA LAWRENCE

LAWRENCE: OK, so hi. I'm Sonia Lawrence. It is March 14 — I'm sorry, May 14 of 2016 and I am doing this interview as part of the Smith College Alumni Oral History Project and I'm here with — could you say your full name and your graduating year?

ROTHBLUM: Esther Davida Rothblum, 1976.

LAWRENCE: Hi Esther, thank you for being here with us. So I wanted to start by asking about your life before Smith. I know that you grew up in Austria. Were you born in Austria?

ROTHBLUM: Yes, I have a very complicated life. My father came here during the Holocaust, to the US, and then joined the Marshall Plan — the reconstruction of Europe as a US citizen and married my mother in Vienna who was a ski racer who then also immigrated to the US. So my brother and I were actually born stateless. We had refugee passports even though our father was a diplomat and my father then worked for USAID which is the Agency of International Development, so we lived all over. We spoke German at home but we went to English-speaking schools in Yugoslavia, Spain, Brazil, Nigeria. And then from eighth to 12th grade in Vienna, Austria. So Austria at that time was not very pro-American, it was not a NATO country. It was neutral so very few people applied to US colleges. In my American-international school, my graduating class had 35 students. Many of whom applied to colleges in other countries so typically students who apply to US colleges got in everywhere and then flunked out and so I was sure that I would also get in and flunk out. Because, you know, all these colleges like to have a long list of countries. I only call it affirmative action for Austrians. If I had been in Germany with all of its US military bases, it would have been really hard to get in. So I got here and I really loved it, you know? Just being in a women's college, but I was terrified I was going to flunk out.

LAWRENCE: What was your introduction to Smith like? What was your first [year?] like?

ROTHBLUM: First of all, my father had a best friend — Uncle Heinle— who was a college professor at Tufts and he was the one who had suggested the seven sisters colleges. Yeah, when I got here, I mean I was 17. I was very young for my age even. I sounded American, I had been educated in US schools, but I knew nothing about US culture so I had to practice writing a check and I didn't know how to use a checkbook. I didn't know how to use a payphone, which we had in those days, and I was in Gillett House. Gillett House has a top floor — it's the fifth floor — you're in Northrop, right? — that I think once was for the students who brought maids back in the, you know, 100 years ago. So there were these tiny rooms, but the six of us really got along up there and one of them is here today. And so yeah, the early years were academically because I was sure I was under qualified, I worked really, really hard. As soon as the professor would announce the term paper at the end of the semester, I'd start working on it and go to the library as we did in those days. I just loved it, being with women, and became a feminist right away and so on.

LAWRENCE: Did you find most of your community in your house or did you also find friends and community other places?

ROTHBLUM: Really both. I mean, my best friend Jill Timbers who here was very good at kind of socializing me to be an American. So she would smile at everybody. She knew everybody's name including the staff and said hello to people on campus and liked the idea of getting invited to eat at other houses. In those days, you know, we ate at our own house. Every house had the same meal every day, and so I did that too, you know? If I met somebody in my classes, I'd invite them to my dorm or they'd invite me, so I pretty much knew people all over. I got very involved with Hillel, the Jewish organization. You know, we were raised Jewish but I had hardly ever met anybody Jewish because of the countries we lived in. So the Jewish students used to say Smith was very WASP and I actually had never met so many Jews so I learned how to be Jewish at Smith, you know? How to eat a bagel, I'd never heard of a bagel. But I delivered the newsletter for Hillel, you know, in those days you delivered house to house and so I got to know a lot of the houses and so on.

LAWRENCE: What was it — can you say more about what it was like being Jewish at Smith because there's historically been a small Jewish presence here.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, well I think it was about 12%, which you know is four times the national average of Jews in the US. When I look at the reunion classes, the class of '66 which were the people coming for their fiftieth reunion — look very WASP to me but my class, which is very white still, had a lot of Jewish students and then we you get to the younger students you see more. I'm the only lesbian, I feel like, in my reunion class. The

younger classes have more lesbians and later on more students were queer or trans. Much more multicultural. But yeah for me, it was quite multicultural meeting other Jewish students.

LAWRENCE: Did you feel like it was racially diverse at all?

ROTHBLUM: Well, very little. Certainly not coming from Nigeria or someplace like that. So in that regard it was still very white. I think the students of color — especially African-American students — really felt very isolated, you know? Even though in our class was Coretta Scott King, the daughter of Martin Luther King, who has since died. But compared to now, it was very white. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: So you mentioned that you became a feminist as soon as you came to Smith. Can you talk a little bit about the development of that identify?

ROTHBLUM: Yes, so the first week in Gillett House, our house president Lynn Kramer, called a house meeting at 10 p.m. And to show you how young I was, I had never stayed up that late. So Jill Timbers, my best friend and I, went to sleep at 9:00, set our alarm clocks to wake up at 10 and then got up in our nightgowns. And Lynn Kramer stood — you know, Gillett House, like Northrop, has that stairwell where you can stand — and had us introduce ourselves and had all these things we had to discuss. Then she said, “Now I want to tell you that a man has been seen on the fourth floor,” and I was sure she was going to say lock your doors, don’t walk around at night, be careful, but instead she said, “So if we see him, let’s all tackle him,” and I thought Wow! There are 80 of us and there’s one guy. I was just a feminist like that. I sort of got it that there was this women’s power, you know? That was my moment of awakening but just being on the Smith campus where every leadership position was held by a female student, you know, every volunteer group had women running it. We still had a male president, we had a lot of male faculty, but it just was so amazing to see all these powerful women. In my high school, even though it was tiny you could be either popular or smart and not both and that was great to see all these smart students who were socially skilled and so on.

LAWRENCE: It seems like the early-’70s are when feminism really like hit Smith and Roe v. Wade passed and then suddenly there was all this feminist consciousness everywhere at Smith. Were you aware of that?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, the ’60s, you know, 1968 to 1972 really changed Smith. So the alums who are here from ten years before us, they had house mothers, they had curfews, they had distribution requirements, they had to take English and languages. The ’60s sort of did away with all that. I was in high school in Austria where there was no ’60s. In fact after the war, Austria had very few youth to begin with, so my generation was not the baby boom, it was like the opposite. And so we were well aware that

we didn't have house mothers, we had head residents, our head residents talked to us about where to smoke pot and where not. The drinking age was 18 in those days so there was a lot of alcohol. There were no distribution requirements just like you all don't have them. We didn't have minors. We just had a major but the only requirement was eight quarters of gym. Really amazing. So there were all these sports and you had to take them for two years, for eight quarters.

LAWRENCE: So I want to ask you a little bit about lesbian identity too. Were you — was that an identity that you had before you came to Smith?

ROTHBLUM: Well, I always tell people I first really became a lesbian in first grade on the school bus. I didn't know the word, but there were these — this was in an American Air Force school in Madrid, Spain. I took the school bus and we lived very far out in the country and these two older girls — probably in fourth grade — would sort of cuddle with me. I was really turned on, I mean, this wasn't just like, you know, sort of nice or cuddly. So that's when I date first being a lesbian, but the first time I heard the word was when I was in high school. I had long braids and I would actually drive my bike once a week to the hairdresser who, for one dollar, would undo my braids, wash my hair, and do my braids up again. That shows you how infantilized I was. Austrians don't believe in washing hair too often because they say it takes out the natural grease, so that's what I did.

At this hairdresser there were teen magazines that I never would have been allowed to read at home and one day I was reading this column and somebody had written in and asked, you know, she's 14 and she's attracted to girls, is that normal? And the expert wrote back yes it is, but when you're 16 it will become abnormal. And I remember telling myself I've got two more years and then I have to go underground. I mean, I knew that these feelings I had for my friends were not going to go away so it felt very much like a [centralist?] part of myself, not a choice or anything. But I have to say when I came to Smith I was probably the most — not only closeted because obviously I hadn't come out to anyone, but really worried because a lot of people said, "Oh Smith, isn't that a school where all the lesbians go?" Now, this is before Smith became known as a lesbian school. So I made sure to find some guy somewhere and bring him to the dorm and introduce him and then tell him sorry, I got to go study. So I this — we know call a beard. I pretended I was straight. In a way it seems very comical now, but I just wanted to -- that's one thing I didn't want people to know about. And at that time, there were — I mean, I only knew of I would say two lesbians. One was in our house and we heard that she lived somewhere in town with another woman and the other one was in one of my classes and one of my friends said, "You know she's a lesbian?" So the message I was getting very much is this is not typical, it's abnormal, and really at this reunion I haven't heard one alum, even now, come out to me. They're all straight.

LAWRENCE: Did you eventually come out to anyone at Smith or were you closeted the whole time there?

ROTHBLUM: I was closeted the whole time I was here. I later came out. One of the first people I came out to was my honors thesis adviser who was a man, Diedrich Snoek, and he was delighted. He was a real, sort of, hippie liberal and I think he saw me as rather conservative so he was delighted to see I was doing something that, you know, was sort of off the main street path.

LAWRENCE: There was actually a lesbian activist group at Smith while you were here. [Sophia?] Sisters. Did you know about that?

ROTHBLUM: No I didn't.

LAWRENCE: Oh yeah, I think they were very small.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, that's interesting. I was just telling people we used to get these long, sort of, bulletin board fliers that we would post at every house and they would announce what's happening. This week at Smith, you know? We had no internet. And never can I remember seeing that. I wonder if they were ever even on that official --

LAWRENCE: They weren't like a charter board. They were just a group.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, interesting.

LAWRENCE: The Women's Resource Center was also founded while you were here. Did you ever interact with that at all?

ROTHBLUM: No, in fact Smith had an offer to get what became the Wellesley Center on Women — did you know that? — and turned it down. I think they were afraid of being seen as I don't know what. Too radical, too feminist, and it was a big deal that Wellesley got this and had this. But I don't really remember specifically going to the Women's Resource Center. Yeah.

LAWRENCE: So you came out to your major adviser. What was your major?

ROTHBLUM: Psychology and also German literature, but this was my psychology adviser

LAWRENCE: How did you choose that?

ROTHBLUM: Well, I was in touch with him and I probably knew that I would tell him. I was doing a post-doctoral fellowship at Yale so I was close by and I was visiting Smith. And he actually told me that the psych department

had just hired two women who were a lesbian couple. Carla Golden? Does that ring a bell to you? And Leanna Standish. Anyway, so here suddenly I knew about these two professors that were lesbians. Neither one is still here.

LAWRENCE: What was his reaction?

ROTHBLUM: My adviser was delighted. When I told friends, I told some of my grad school friends at the time and Jill, my best friend here, people were taken aback. They'd never met anybody who was a lesbian obviously. I'm sure they probably were a little freaked out. What did that mean? What did that mean in terms of my relationship with them and so on.

LAWRENCE: When did you end up finding lesbian community?

ROTHBLUM: Well, so I went to grad school at Rutgers and got my PhD and the last year in clinical psychology — it's an internship — and I picked Jackson, Mississippi which was known for one of the handful of programs if you wanted to be a researcher where you could see clients but also get research experience. And interestingly in Mississippi you always knew if a woman wasn't wearing a hoop skirt, she was probably a lesbian, so in my class of interns — there were 13 of us, six of whom were women — two of them clearly seemed to me to be lesbians. We were paid so little. I think we got \$7,000 for the year which even then was very little and they had decided to split that to come together. So near the end of it I came out to them and I also had my first relationship with a woman in Mississippi so that's when I started telling people. That was illegal still in Mississippi so I had to be very careful not to tell any of our professors or things like that.

LAWRENCE: If I could back up and ask about Smith some more. What was it like knowing you were a lesbian but not being able to tell anybody here?

ROTHBLUM: Well in those days I really — I don't know what I thought my future would be. I was very focused on getting into graduate school, doing something with my psychology major, so it wasn't like I was desperate to be in a relationship. I think I was just closeted enough that I just wanted to get through and have nobody guess. I don't know. I probably thought that all psychology professors had ESP or something because they were clinicians and they would take one look at me and they would know. So I had to be careful. Again, I would mention some guy I had met. So I can't say it was terribly traumatic but it was just a period of being underground in a way.

LAWRENCE: Did you feel like you fit in at Smith in all parts of your identity? Do you feel like you fit in?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, absolutely. I mean ironically, even though I came from so far away, it was just such a wonderful, feminist, women's community so definitely feminism was more important to me in those days than lesbianism.

LAWRENCE: Were you engaging with feminist theory, feminist ideas?

ROTHBLUM: Well, there was still very few courses on women and gender. I think the first woman. This may have — I don't know if this is true in other departments, but in psychology the first woman who was hired to teach on psychology of women came, I think, my junior year and even though I knew her, I didn't take that class with her. But feminism was everywhere. They would show free movies at Sage Hall on Sunday afternoons and if there was anything sexist in it, everybody would hiss. There was always something sexist in movies in those days. It was just so empowering to see these powerful women. My mother had been a homemaker so to see women who were doing all kinds of things. Our house president, Lynn Kramer, the one who turned me into a feminist, was going to law school and her mother was a judge. And who had a mother who was a judge in those days? Nobody had a mother who was an attorney to begin with. I think Lynn is now a judge herself. So that was really empowering.

LAWRENCE: Was there anyone who you looked up to as a mentor, like an older student or a professor?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, I mean I think my generation of feminists learned the most from our peers because really the professors were often men and the people who I would say really wowed me were my peers. And that was also true in my internship for example where all the faculty were men and there was one intern who was just fabulous. A little bit older than the rest of us and I would try to sort of imitate her chutzpah, you know, her assertiveness and so on.

LAWRENCE: Yes, Smith definitely fosters that kind of confidence.

ROTHBLUM: Yes, in fact there was a woman hired in psychology. I never had her in class, but she apparently was diagnosed with cancer and quite a terminal form of cancer. I remember a student in Gillett House saying to someone else, "Boy, just when we finally meet a woman who's normal," meaning she had a husband and children. You know in those days it was very few women professors actually could balance both career and children and I remember thinking that is not me. That is not what I would consider normal. I just want to be a researcher and if that means never being in a relationship, fine. So I couldn't see this children husband thing.

LAWRENCE: I think a lot of women who don't see the nuclear family thing as sort of working for them devote themselves to intellectualism instead. So maybe that's true for you.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah.

LAWRENCE: Can you talk a little bit about your major here and the work that you did?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, so I put down psychology on my application because when I was in high school in Vienna I had worked in the school library so I got to read all the books that came in every summer and I remember reading a book on psychology. It was either an intro text or abnormal psych or something and I thought, Well, what the heck. This sounds interesting. You can learn about people. So I put that down as my major and that meant I was assigned to a psychology professor, Peter Poofall, as my major adviser and then I took psych one and every said psych one is boring which it is. Most student expect to learn about human behavior or children and what you learn is rats and bar pressing and that's psych one even today. But Diedrich Snock taught my section and again, I'm impressed at Smith that each professor taught an intro psych section of maybe 20 students whereas in most universities you have a class of 500 and maybe a lecturer teaches. Yeah, so I took a lot of psych courses and approached Diedrich about doing an honors thesis and that was on self-disclosure which was something I found hard to get used to in the US. In Europe you don't really talk to a stranger. You don't make eye contact. You don't smile. And here everybody would ask me pretty intimate questions, so I think there was a scale of self-disclosure and I tested high school students and then college students and then had people rate their roommates level of self-disclosure. Anyway, so it was exciting to do that and we each had an office in Burton Hall. Even my grad students don't get their office now and really got to know the faculty and each other. So that was an exciting field.

LAWRENCE: Were you thinking at all yet about feminist psychology?

ROTHBLUM: Well, you know that concept didn't really exist. I don't know how often I would read an article and the article would refer to we had 80 subjects — subjects meaning participants — without even mentioning their gender and it was assumed they were all male. If the researcher had studied women, they would then mention that because women were kind of a minority group. Usually we studied male college students. Forget about mentioning race or ethnicity or anything. So yeah, I don't remember any of my faculty members including the women in any way particularly focusing on women at Smith even then.

LAWRENCE: Was it something that crossed your mind to study?

ROTHBLUM: Again in my thesis of course all my participants were women because I was at Smith. I wasn't interested, for example, in how do men compare to women. I think in my literature review I probably found some articles because women tend to self-disclose more. But that didn't really hit me until the end of grad school and by the way I was then told by a well-meaning mentor, "Don't study women. It's too narrow," and I actually think he was right. It was very hard to do work on women and be taken seriously.

LAWRENCE: I want to ask more about Smith community. It sounds like there was a certain ideal of womanhood. You talked about the professor who was normal, this idea of womanhood of like husband and kids. Did you feel like there was pressure to live up to a certain image of womanhood?

ROTHBLUM: Well, I do know that when I was at Smith, people would say that if anybody wanted just to get married and have kids and that's it, they would go to the counseling center because there was already the pressure to be a woman meant to be a feminist, meant to achieve, or to have a career, so things were changing. So I did not feel like an oddball wanting to go to grad school or wanting to focus on academics in that sense.

LAWRENCE: What was a typical Smithie like? Was there a stereotype?

ROTHBLUM: No, in fact I was a gold key guide. I was often asked that by the families. I mean it was a very white campus at that time so in Gillett House maybe we had two or three students of color. I wouldn't say it was as international as it is now. The typical Smithie, I would say if anything, was sort of bubbly and wholesome. That was sort of how you were supposed to be.

LAWRENCE: You were active in Hillel. Were you part of any other organizations?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, so I was a gold key guide which I loved. I still have my little key and yesterday we went on a gold key tour and I was correcting her on some things. Let's see, I would say those were the main things. We did all these sports because they were required. Yeah, a lot of it was really for me academic and having lots and lots of friends. People to do things with.

LAWRENCE: What were students — I know there was a lot of concern with feminism, were there issues that students were concerned about, talking about, thinking about that you were aware of?

ROTHBLUM: I know that students really wanted a woman president. It was huge when Jill Conway came my junior year. I'm sure there were many things. I can't remember real angry petitions, although I'm sure they existed. I'm sure you know of some historically, but for me it was sort

of this idyllic time. Being able to walk around this beautiful campus, know a lot of people, do my work and so on.

LAWRENCE: What were your impressions of Jill Conway?

ROTHBLUM: Well first of all, a lot of my friends went abroad their junior year so just to do something similar, I applied to the 12-College Exchange Program and went to Wesleyan and was miserable. There I was while Jill Conway was starting here and it was the centennial and everything so after a semester I came back. Gosh, did I ever? I would have heard her give commencement address or I think I was invited to the president's house once or twice when some Austrian singing group came. In those days she was very shy. She was very awkward still, I think. She used to get really red when she talked. I get very red because I have hot flashes and of course I've read all three of her books. But I think later on she was very popular but I really saw her that first year or two.

LAWRENCE: Were you anxious to have a woman president?

ROTHBLUM: Oh yeah. That to me was fabulous. I remember TIME magazine had an issue which I still have — every year they have the man of the year, they called it and that year they said the year of the woman and they had 12 women. As if you couldn't just have one woman. You had to have 12 and I'm pretty sure Jill Conway was one of the pictures on that as well as Gloria Steinem.

LAWRENCE: I don't know if you were paying attention to this, but right before Conway came in, Mendenhall had a sex discrimination suit brought against him —

ROTHBLUM: No I didn't know that.

LAWRENCE: — for not giving some women professors tenure. So he was very much on the mind of students.

ROTHBLUM: Oh wow, did they win the suit?

LAWRENCE: They did win the suit. He appealed it. I don't remember what ended up happening.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, it's very hard to sue about tenure legally I've found. Because everything is right there and it's very hard for faculty to persevere, but I'd be curious what happened.

LAWRENCE: So it really sounds like Smith was an idyllic time in your life. Do you feel like you made the most of your years here? Is there anything you wish you had done?

ROTHBLUM: No, I really loved it. We took, in those days, four courses at four credits each. Are you courses still four credits?

LAWRENCE: Mm-hm.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, so I took 20 credits each semester. I just really felt I wanted to take the biggest advantage of the academics. Took a lot of psych courses and then German literature. I thought that if I can't get into grad school in clinical psych which was hard to get into, I would apply to get into a doctoral program in German literature because I was a US citizen so I would have advantage in hiring. None of my courses ever mentioned Austrian literature which has a very rich history, so I thought I could then teach Austrian literature. Nowadays there's a lot of Austrian literature. Yeah, academically I really took huge advantage and once I was in grad school, it was so much easier. In fact I sent tapes to my parents every two days. I found an old letter, so I must have run out of tapes and I must have gotten the tape so I didn't send the letter but sent the tape instead. And in this letter I was telling them that in my German course that semester, we would be reading 13 books in German, which when you think about that is remarkable that a group of students, many of whom were not native German speakers, would be reading that many books. Whereas in graduate school it was nothing like that.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, I know that this was ten years before Smith College got a women's studies program, but there was some movement to include more feminist topics in the curriculum. Did that ever interact with what you were doing?

ROTHBLUM: You know the first time I heard that during my one semester at Wesleyan, I was taking abnormal psychology and there was a student in class who asked the professor — who was a man — to use he or she and that was just so new to us that he sort of — I don't know if he agreed to do or not but people would use he obviously, in a class of women.

LAWRENCE: As a general.

ROTHBLUM: Generic. Right. In fact one student once wrote instead of "he/ she," she had "s(he)," and the professor wrote on the paper this is all a bunch of "s(hit)." So it goes to show what people were getting away with.

LAWRENCE: So did you go to grad school right after Smith?

ROTHBLUM: Yes.

LAWRENCE: What was that transition like?

ROTHBLUM: That was quite a shock. I went to Rutgers. So I was in a doctoral program in clinical psychology. Psychology now is a very feminized

profession, but when I was there there were very few women. The department had only one woman professor and she taught child psychology which was typical and they really were not interested in the women. Ironically the women got scholarships where we didn't have to do anything, we just got the money for tuition and living and so on. The men would have to work with the male faculty, but they didn't like — I think they felt awkward working with a woman. So the men would work in a lab or in a clinic and the women just basically, you know, we had all the free time but that is a bit of a disadvantage because if you work with a professor you get letters of recommendation and so on. Yeah, so I came in there as a feminist and I just couldn't. In fact I was living in student housing with three other grad students in an apartment and the first week one of my roommates who I still talk to on the phone every Sunday, said to me, "Ugh! I just want to find a man to marry me." I was horrified. I had never heard anyone say that. That was a big transition.

LAWRENCE: How did you retain and keep growing your feminist consciousness while you were in this really male-dominated environment?

ROTHBLUM: So my brother went to Amherst. He was a year younger. So the first year I went back to this area a lot to see my brother and also I wanted to publish my honors thesis with Diedrich Snoek, my adviser, so I was sort of pushing him actually to get it out. He was going to be first author which is typical when it's a professor that gives a student the idea. So I would be back in this feminist environment and tell everybody about the real world and so on. In grad school in clinical psych, it's common to have kind of a consciousness raising group to sort of learn how other people perceive you. One of my classmates wanted us to have one with our most famous professor at Rutgers and I was worried that somehow he would guess that I was a lesbian. So this is sort of the beginning of really trying to be closeted and he actually had us go around and talk about our first decade so we all did. Then our second decade. He would talk about his affairs with women even though his wife would come to pick him up. So I just would make up stuff about boyfriends. I knew I couldn't possibly say I'd never had a relationship yet, I was attracted to women, you know? Forget it.

LAWRENCE: And you had your first relationship with a woman in grad school, right?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, but not until my internship with was 1979. It was really a tossup whether my PhD or my first relationship would come first. I was very late to do that.

LAWRENCE: Do — oh no, keep going.

ROTHBLUM: I was going to say it was a big risk in those days. When you came out to somebody or you told someone you were attracted to them. They

could turn you in. They could tell someone. In fact my first lover in Mississippi. I forget what she said, but one of our clinical supervisors said to her, “If I ever knew that somebody was homosexual,” he said, “I would have to kick him out of the program.” He assumed it would be a man and I was really freaked out. So that was still the reality then.

LAWRENCE: Do you want to talk a little bit about that relationship? Was she also an intern?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, but given that this is going to be on the internet I probably shouldn't mention her name.

LAWRENCE: No worries. Yeah, let's see. So you got your doctorate?

ROTHBLUM: Mm-hm.

LAWRENCE: Cool. What did you do after that?

ROTHBLUM: Then I did a two-year post doc at Yale in epidemiology which is kind of the study of large groups of people, like looking at demographics. So rather than clinical psych where if a person comes in who's depressed you see them in therapy, this would be sort of looking at in the country as whole, what factors put people at risk for depression? And by that time I was a feminist. My fellow interns in Mississippi — just to back up a bit, in Mississippi we had some kind of social event in 1979 and one of my classmates said, “You know, I'm studying agoraphobia which is fear of open spaces, and most of my research participants are women and so are most of my clients,” and I said, “Hmm, let me think about that. I'm studying depression and come to think of it, most of my research participants are women and so are my clients.” Another one said, “Well, I'm studying weight loss.” Another one said, “I'm studying assertiveness.” So this was astounding to us. We'd never thought about that. Notice we didn't mention race or ethnicity even though we were in Mississippi So we decided to apply to a conference and each of us would talk about our area of research and why women predominate. And the conference was going to be in Washington D.C. So at the time, Jimmy Carter was the president and Rosalind Carter, his wife, was very into mental health issues. So we actually contacted her office to see if she would be the chair or the mediator and they put us on their wait list, their maybe list. Then they said no. So we had to scramble to find someone and when I was at Rutgers, there was an adjunct professor who was the wife of a major professor, Violet Franks, who had taught a course called women and therapy. I had not taken her course, but we invited her to be our chair. After the end of this panel, she said to me, “There's a new journal starting called Women and Therapy. Would you like to edit a special issue of it?” that she would be editing. So we did that. I invited all these students to write about their area and then we invited some other women — they were hard to find — who were doing

anything. There was one woman studying violence against women, that was still pretty rare and things like that. Then the journal fell through so we ended up editing a book, Violet Franks and I, when I was still in grad school. So when I got to Yale, I picked this post doc because the post doc adviser was Myrna Weissman who had written a really classic article on why women predominate in depression. To this day I think is brilliant. They go through all the possible hormonal factors and rule them out and genetic factors and rule them out. Then sort of sociocultural factors and it turned out she was not at all a feminist. She had just written this great article. She at the time — Yale had only nine tenured women in the entire university and she was one of them. She was afraid and I think rightly so that if this radical feminist post doc she had hired — me -- with this Mississippi southern accent started to give a lot of talks and publish on women's issues that she could very well in some ways lose her job or be marginalized. So she would always find out when I was giving a talk and she would tell me not to do it. I really struggled to do my work with Myrna Weissman so that was the post doc. I was already a feminist. My group of interns in Mississippi had been these strong women and now I was sort of struggling to wind my way around doing this post doc with Myrna.

LAWRENCE: Did you find that you were also encountering sexism in resistance to feminism in your work?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, I mean it was more outrageous comments people would make and just the level of sexism. What people would feel free to say was really outrageous. So I often tell people the reason I like our department to be called women's studies is because the word "women," — it's hard to believe now, but it was said with such venom. The way you might say tarantula or something. People just thought women's issues was like so ridiculous. Are you studying women again? I always believed that if you publish enough, they can't touch you, so from a very early start I just knew that as long as I did my research and got it published, it's very hard to me to derail you so I can't really say that I personally experienced that much sexism other than people all around me.

LAWRENCE: It was like the water, kind of?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, it was in the water. What I did around Myrna Weissman — she was in the medical school in epidemiology. In the psychology department there was a guy called Ed Ziegler who had started Headstart and he had this Bush fellowship loosely connected to the George Bush family and he had asked me if I wanted to be part of that group. I wasn't getting paid by him but now I could publish — and instead of putting down department of epidemiology which meant Myrna got to police it, I could write down Bush Fellow Yale University. Many years later I thanked him for that ability to sidetrack.

LAWRENCE: When did you start thinking about the intersection of lesbian and feminist and psychology?

ROTHBLUM: So after my post doc, I actually applied for academic jobs and was hired at the University of Vermont. Let's see, I had a friend from my internship, Laura Solomon, who also was applying for jobs. She discovered that she and I had both been asked to interview in Vermont. I mean, Vermont to us was meaningless. We didn't know anyone there, so she offered to withdraw her application. I offered to withdraw my application and then she said jokingly, "Let's see if they'll take the two of us." So I thought, Come on. So I flew up to Vermont and on the plane I sat next to a woman who told me the most crucial piece of information that nobody had told me and that was the department was on probation for having no women faculty. So I knew at that moment that Laura and I could negotiate for a lot. I just interviewed and I did my talk and then Laura came up later than week and she interviewed and she gave her talk.

Then the department chair actually said to her, "What would it take to bring you here?" Which is code for what salary do you want and she said what it would take to bring me here is if you also hire Esther. They were really amazed because on our resumes the only thing we'd done in common is we both did our internship in the same place. So they did. They hired us together. So in a way everybody, of course, assumed we were a lesbian couple, you know? That sort of helped in a way — the whole lesbian community was there, so I was already cautiously out to a few people.

But once I got to Vermont, the department wanting to get off probation, would do anything. I mean they told me, "Why don't you teach a course on psychology of women?" They just pushed me into we need to get our APA accreditation back and so that was a time when no other clinical psych program would have even considered research on women. The first time I really got into lesbian — so I was editing. After I did this edited book that came out the very first year of my year in Vermont, I then was on the editorial board of this journal *Women and Therapy*. Then I was the editor. I remember our publisher who was a gay man, telling us to do an issue on lesbians which we did. We called it "Loving Boldly: Issues Facing Lesbians." Then one of my colleagues who had been the president of the American Psychological Association nominated me for the committee of lesbian and gay concerns just based on that journal issue and that's when I decided I really, now that I'm on this committee, I haven't done anything on lesbians. I really should.

LAWRENCE: Did you ever encounter resistance to writing about lesbians?

ROTHBLUM: No not really. Ironically it was far more radical to study women in 1979 than to study lesbians in, say, 1985 or something. I mean I think people thought, Lesbians. Maybe there's two in Vermont. I think what threatened men so much about women was there were a lot of women

and I think they could see that women could take their jobs away if you really started to hire lots of women. Lesbians were always seen as kind of rare and not so threatening.

LAWRENCE: Yeah, when I think about lesbians in psychology, I think of the ways in which homosexuality has been pathologized. Was that ever something that you addressed or that you were aware of in your work?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, so our diagnostic and statistic manual which is put out by the American Psychiatric Association, they voted in 1973 to remove homosexuality. It was a narrow victory — 58% — but what people forget. People talk about 1973 like homosexuality was gone. That version of the DSM — that was the second edition — did not end until 1980 when the DSM III came out. So until 1980 — and I still show my students this book — you open it up, it says homosexuality. It was listed as a personality disorder along with alcoholism, drug abuse, and illegal sexual activities. It wasn't until 1980 that the new version came out and then until 1987, they listed it as ego-dystonic homosexuality, which meant if you were gay and wanted to change, if you were gay and unhappy about it, it was still a mental illness because then your insurance company would pay for you to be straight. So it wasn't until 1987 that that was finally removed and 1987 was the height of the AIDS epidemic, so in a way we sort of went from being an illness or a mental illness to being seen as this stigmatized group. I mean lesbians too. People knew so little about AIDS that if you came out as gay or lesbian, you were seen as having AIDS.

LAWRENCE: What was your experience of the AIDS crisis?

ROTHBLUM: Well at that time I was in Vermont and nobody I knew in Vermont was HIV positive. Of course, people might have been, but it was a pretty small gay male community. A very large lesbian community. To this day, I think the only in-patient unit that treats people with HIV/AIDS has maybe nine in-patients. What happened is there is this money available called the Ryan White Fund based after a little boy who actually got HIV I think through a blood transfusion and then couldn't get services and so every state based on their population got this Ryan White money. Well, Vermont has so much even though they only have half a million people, because so few people were coming in as diagnosed with HIV, they were giving people free rent and free housing who had HIV. So the services were excellent, you know? But my research was heavily focused on women so I wasn't specifically on AIDS or HIV.

LAWRENCE: It sounds like you have stronger ties to the lesbian community than to the general gay community. Does that feel true?

ROTHBLUM: Yes and no. Yeah. I think early on anybody who was an ally, even if they were a straight feminist woman, was sort of a part of your group. But yeah in Vermont, the faculty I got to know were all lesbians really. There were a few out gay men even. My research was heavily on lesbians, but a lot of my early — the committees I was part of or the organizations were LGB in those days. So in fact often there were a lot of gay men involved.

LAWRENCE: Did you have any kind of gay or lesbian community outside of academia or was it all academic?

ROTHBLUM: I mean Burlington, Vermont was a bit like Northampton In fact, when we took grad students into our PhD program, any lesbian student in the country either would apply to work with Bonnie Strickland at UMass or me. So I was always competing with the Northampton Burlington and they usually picked Northampton because it was already known for its lesbian community. Yeah, so Vermont had so many lesbian groups and a newsletter and lesbians working in feminist groups like the rape crisis center and the battered women's shelter. So there was a very strong community and very good relationships between our university and Vermont.

LAWRENCE: Were you part of any of those activist groups or did you interact with them at all?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, many of them. There was a group called the Mayor's Council on Women that later was called the Burlington Women's Council which consisted of women who — each woman represented one feminist group in town so it was fabulous because you would know. I was representing the Vermont Psych Association committee on women and minorities, but I would learn about every possible thing happening and then would attend those events or whatever. For me it was mostly through either the National Psych Association or the state psych association. I also published a monthly syndicated column called "Dyke Psych" that was in some really tiny lesbian newsletters that probably don't exist anymore.

LAWRENCE: And you talked about lesbian psychology?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, I talked about different issues.

LAWRENCE: Was it well received?

ROTHBLUM: Oh you know, who knows? In those days if people wanted to contact me, they'd have to write a letter. You know?

LAWRENCE: It must have been alienating working a field where lesbianism was pathologized for the beginning of your career.

ROTHBLUM: Well, psychology. We were so much better off than other departments because at least we had some women. So I was hired with another colleague, right? I have this theory that the first time a department hires a woman, she's always crucified. Either she is made to feel crazy by an all-male department or they hire somebody who's already such a bad fit that it makes sense that she's not a good fit, you know? So our department had hired a woman the year before me who everybody sort of bullied. And she was a very bad fit. Then Laura and I came along and we were just like one of the boys. We didn't have husbands, we didn't have kids. We could stay up all night in the lab, you know? So we felt pretty welcomed but it took me awhile to sort of see this progression. I call it three generations. The first person of college. The first lesbian. The first woman is crucified. The second one who comes along is just like one of the boys but has to be pretty mainstream. And then the third generation. They say they're feminists, they say they want to have kids. It's a different kind of world.

LAWRENCE: So you feel like you're the second generation?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, definitely. So I was mentored by my father. I had a male honors thesis adviser, a male dissertation adviser. I knew how to work with the boys. I came from a fairly privileged background economically so I didn't sort of feel like an imposter in terms of the big class issues which I would say in academia in my generation were a far bigger deal than race or gender. If you came from a working class background, it was still very much with an ivory tower in some ways.

LAWRENCE: Do you now see the third generation starting up again?

ROTHBLUM: Oh yes. Our grad students were definitely the third generation.

LAWRENCE: And it's easier for them do you think?

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, they were the ones — for example, they wanted a course on feminist therapy so I taught that many times. The first time I taught it it was a big risk for the students to take it. They were kind of scoffed at, again, by maybe their other advisers. Last time I taught it people would say, "Well, this is what we learn in all of our courses," so things had really changed. Yeah, slowly but surely all my colleagues — all the men — started to introduce gender issues into their curriculum. Again, psychology is to this day very US based and I would say very white. It's not a very multicultural or even transnational discipline. Now that I'm in women's studies in San Diego State, I really — it's been a steep learning curve to really internationalize my courses.

LAWRENCE: Do you feel like you've taken your self-experience with you into your career?

ROTHBLUM: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it's just amazing to see the women here. The quality of their writing and just sort of knowing what the standards are. I really think that any students who have even been either in a girl's school, even a Catholic school or a women's college or even in a sorority to some degree have such an advantage, you know? Being with other powerful women.

LAWRENCE: I think it fosters a certain confidence that you take with you once you're not in a women's only space anymore.

ROTHBLUM: Yeah, in fact last night we had our dinner at the Alumni House for the class of 1976 and our class president Anne Cohen was saying that somebody invited her to go to Paris this weekend and she said to this straight couple, her friends, "You know I can't because I'm class president. We're having our reunion," and one of them said, "Did you go to a women's college?" And she said yes and she realized that in our generation in a large co-ed school, there's no way the class president would have been a woman. And she said, "That was one of the many challenges I didn't have to face."

LAWRENCE: Well, we're almost out of time and I think it's a good place to stop.

ROTHBLUM: OK, good. Thank you very much.

GEIS: I have a question.

LAWRENCE: Oh yeah, go for it.

GEIS: You talked about the first, second, and third generations. Is there a fourth?

ROTHBLUM: No not really. I consider even the sort of gender queer, trans generation as very much part of that third. Meaning they have the power and the privilege and the peer support to question anything. In their case, gender and gender identity. I don't really see it as that different from the third generation, but maybe you all do. Yeah, just walking down the Ivy Day Parade, the class of '66 -- that's their fiftieth reunion -- look completely WASP to me. White and based on their names. My group has a lot of Jewish women, although very few women of color and I couldn't meet one alum who told me she was a lesbian or anything other than my husband, my children. The group ten years after us, so that would be '86, has a lot of lesbians and it's much more multicultural. Then as you get into '96, you have more queer-identified women, very multicultural, very international. Then with the younger women, you know, you see transmen walking through the Ivy Day today. So yeah, it's interesting the progression.

LAWRENCE: Thank you.

ROTHBLUM: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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