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Prospectus

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“Andersrum”: Exploring Intersectionality within the LGBT Rights Movement in Berlin,  
Germany in the 1970s

**Abstract**

My final project will consist of a 15-minute documentary and a research paper. Through examining parts of the life and work of activist and artist Rita “Tommy” Thomas, someone very active in both the political and artistic sides of the gay and lesbian movement in Berlin throughout most of her life, I plan to explore broader themes about the role of women in the gay and lesbian activist movements as well as the collaboration of women’s activist and homosexual activist groups that in turn produced the rise of lesbian groups and activism in the 1970s. While the Berlin LGBT rights movement at this time was often seen as mainly pursuing sexual freedom and focused heavily on cisgender, white men, the intersectional goals of the movement and cooperation with organizations fighting racism, sexism, and colonialism are often overlooked (Evans). Using archival media from newspapers, photography, and recordings/films, I hope to not only bring to light these goals and the stories of groups and individuals less visible in the movement, but also display a sense of attitudes towards lesbian and activist women, both within and outside of the LGBT community. I have been able to find two women as interview partners who were involved in this cultural and political scene to incorporate anecdotes and first-hand accounts that flesh out the material I already have about Tommy. I am also hoping to find at least

two more interview partners experiencing intersecting forms of oppression along with homophobia who can provide me with their perspective on queer community and identity today.

## **Introduction**

By using a documentary format, I hope to be able to not only gain crucial media skills and experience that I will take into my career, but I also hope to vividly display the distinct visual culture and communities in Berlin, Germany at this time. The 1970s were a very important decade for homosexual activism, especially in Berlin, and I hope to display what an impact media had on both the creation and proliferation of these LGBT rights organizations, as well as how they were received by the general population.

By choosing to highlight Rita “Tommy” Thomas’ life, I plan to also examine the role of women across both artistic and political queer movements and how gender played a role in these communities. In the past 15 years, the goals and language of LGBT activists have undergone major shifts regarding gender and identity, with sexual freedom and sex-based oppression taking a back seat while many gender-based issues and discriminations have found their place in discourse. How were these nuanced identities expressed in the past without this vocabulary? How can we use a modern lens of intersectionality to interpret events and trends of the past?

Directly after the amendment of Paragraph 175 which previously criminalized homosexuality, much of the homosexual media and activism was very male-centric, until the collaboration of women’s activist groups and women’s sectors of homosexual activist groups created a space for lesbian issues and voices as well. How do modern organizations and communities tackle issues of gender equality and representation? How are gender nonconforming and lesbian women treated in today’s media? By examining the struggles and

shortcomings of an era often touted as a “golden age” for LGBT people culturally and politically, one can see how these issues have either continued to be perpetuated in society or have changed in wake of societal shifts.

### **Amendment of Paragraph 175 and Resulting Culture and Activism**

In 1969, the Paragraph of the German constitution that made homosexuality illegal, Paragraph 175, was amended to not include consensual, adult homosexual sex. While in East Germany this Paragraph had been mostly disregarded since the late 1950s, this act of legalization nevertheless resulted in a wave of culture and activism among the LGBT community in both West Germany and East Germany (McLellan, *Glad to be Gay Behind the Wall*). Politically, groups such as the *Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin* (HIB) in the East and *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin* (HAW, Homosexual Action West Berlin) in the West were formed to provide spaces for gay people politically to organize and discuss their hopes for the future while culturally, club scenes, open air TV shows, art galleries, and cabaret performances began to blossom (McLellan, *Glad to be Gay Behind the Wall*).

As I plan to highlight the life of Rita “Tommy” Thomas, I will be specifically focusing on performance events such as the Hibaré cabaret shows put on by the HIB of which Tommy was a part, and political organizations and artistic works that resulted from the collaboration of the women’s rights movement and gay rights movement such as the *Lesbisches Aktionszentrum*, the first editions of *Lesbenpresse* and the documentary film “*Zärtlichkeit und Rebellion - Zur Situation der homosexuellen Frau*” (Affection and Rebellion – the Situation of the Homosexual Woman) (Wolf and Afken).

## “Nicht der Homosexuelle ...“

The film „*Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt*“, directed by Rosa von Praunheim, a popular gay filmmaker in Berlin, was released in 1971. This film acted as a call to action for homosexuals all over Germany to stop being complacent with their, in Praunheim’s eyes, often unsatisfactory, secluded lives and to take to the streets in the fight for gay acceptance (McLellan, *Sexual Culture* 90). “*Raus aus den Toiletten, rein in die Strassen!*“, or „out of the toilets into the streets!“ became the slogan of this new movement, referencing the culture of gay men having sex in public bathrooms, something Rosa von Praunheim saw as symbolic of shame and short-lived, superficial pleasure. The film’s call for public action is seen as a cultural event that spurred the formation of activist groups like the *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin* and the *Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin*, who adopted an ideology called “radical gay visibility” (McLellan, *Private Photography* 413). Homosexuals did not want to just be tolerated, they wanted equal, safe, and fulfilling lives. However, this film was received differently in West Germany versus East Germany due to the differing cultures and stages of the gay rights movement. In West Germany, the film was interpreted as an “attack on the established gay subcultures, and attracted criticism and hostility... In the East, where the gay scene was far smaller and more rudimentary, it was interpreted first and foremost as a call to create a gay community” (McLellan, *Glad to be Gay Behind the Wall* 109, 110).

### Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin (HIB)

The *Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin* was established in 1973 as the first gay and lesbian activist group in East Germany. The HIB was active not only in their demand for equality, but they played an important role in the community as well, organizing “meetings,

discussions, parties, [and] social events,” (McLellan 105). Active in the artistic and performance scene as well, they developed their own films and organized cabaret performances. Two of their main goals were to create a family-like environment for those who were rejected from their own families and to create a visible, public space for homosexuals. While the group included men and women, Tommy recounts only about ¼ of the members being women (McLellan 114).

“According to Stasi records, there were attempts to set up a women-only branch of the HIB in early 1976, led by Christiane Seefeld, but the group's key activists were, with a few notable exceptions, mostly male” (McLellan 112). Other key female members were Tommy and Regine Steidten (McLellan). The HIB is also an important example of the communication between East and West Germans at this time and how the movements differed on either side of the wall. While the West has a so-called “sexual revolution” which was mostly also inclusive of homosexuals, in the GDR, “levels of popular homophobia remained high” (McLellan 108).

### **Rita “Tommy” Thomas**

Rita „Tommy“ Thomas (1931 – 2018), born in Berlin-Weißensee was a lesbian activist, photographer, and performer who challenged gender norms in every aspect of her life and work. Choosing the name “Tommy” at 15 years old, her extensive\* collection of photography shows not only her personal life as a gender non-conforming lesbian who continued to live a nontraditional lifestyle owning her own dog grooming salon and taming animals for performances in shows and variétés, but also her involvement in and dedication to gay and lesbian activist movements throughout her life. Even before the amendment of Paragraph 175, in the 50s and 60s her Friedrichshain apartment was a local party address for the East Berlin LGBT scene (Schwules Museum). In 1973, she was a founding member of the previously mentioned prominent activist group HIB (Schwules Museum). One of the most prominent female members,

she was the sole woman to perform in the HIB's cabaret show, Hibaré. However, true to her gender-nonconforming lifestyle, she performed only in male roles (Wikipedia, 2021).

## **Hibaré**

The Hibaré cabaret shows that the HIB put on were a public display of challenging gender norms and heteronormativity in German society and an integral part of their policy of performative activism. The shows served the dual function of being able to criticize traditional family lives and roles, especially as they stood in the GDR, and also become a place of gathering and culture for LGBT people in Berlin to celebrate their "otherness."

## **Feminist Movement and Christa Reining's Lesbian Feminism**

While the public may have perceived the Berlin LGBT rights movement of the 1970s as a fight purely for sexual freedom and visibility in society, many other veins of activism that were intertwined with the goals of the LGBT rights movement were finding societal prevalence at the same time. In 1975, Verena Stefan's book *Häutigen* was seen as a "pivotal event for the West German women's movement in terms of the establishment of a public realm for women" and similar to the effects of Rosa von Praunheim's film *Nicht der Homosexuelle...*, this novel was a crucial element to the growing number of feminist organizations and publications such as the magazine *Frauen und Film*, the publishing house Frauenoffensive and bookstores such as Labrys and Lilith in Berlin (Raham). Christa Reining was one of the influential lesbian feminist writers at this time, and through her work it is possible to explore some of the broader themes and ideas of feminist literature at this time, especially with regard to how misogyny interacts with sexuality and concepts of gender identity. An important feminist development in the late 1970s was the concept of "*das weibliche Ich*" (the female/feminine I), something further explored by Reining.

Reinig stated, “Literature has been a forcefully male business for three thousand years. Every female author must learn this when she uses the word ‘I’. From there, you suddenly cannot continue” (Raham 14). In a lesbian context, Reinig saw homosexual women as free from the oppression of heterosexual marriage and encouraged relationships between women both in platonic and romantic senses. While Stefan’s book *Häutigen* is seen as an example of “cultural feminism” which emphasizes dichotomies between women and men, Reinig’s writing unsettles the female/male binary through critiques such as how women also participate in and allow oppressive behaviors (Raham). This acknowledgement of the fabricated nature of social gender divisions is part of how multiple forms of oppression allowed for an intersectional view of feminist goals from women who were also gay, bisexual, or transgender.

### **Cooperation of Women’s Movement and Homosexual Movement / Lesbisches**

#### **Aktionszentrum**

In 1974, the women’s section of the Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin (HAW, Homosexual Action West Berlin), another influential gay and lesbian rights group along with the HIB, broke off and created the West Berlin Lesbisches Aktionszentrum (LAZ, Lesbian Action Center). This sparked an outpouring of art, literature, and television specifically for lesbians, including the first issue of *Lesbenpresse* in 1975 and the first *Lesbenpfingsttreffen* the year before (Mehl). Even a year before the formation of LAZ, the documentary film highlighting the lives of gay women “*Zärtlichkeit und Rebellion - Zur Situation der homosexuellen Frau*“, directed by Eva Müthel, was released. This collaboration was important because it publicly addressed the unique discrimination that lesbians faced on the axes of both sexism and homophobia.

## **Societal Attitudes in East and West**

West Germany and East Germany each had unique ideologies regarding homosexuality. While West Germany is often credited as being more liberal regarding expressions of sexuality, personal freedom and the pursuit of individual happiness, East Germany was ahead of the curve when it came to at least the tolerance of homosexuals by the time of reunification (Taylor 304). Although they did not see homosexual lifestyles as conducive to the construction of socialism and therefore did not encourage LGBT people to have open, public lives by any means, the highly secular aspects of East German socialism fostered tolerance earlier than in the West (Taylor). However, there was still no possibility of establishing associations, renting rooms for events, placing ads, or printing and hanging posters in order to invite people to a collective meeting. Therefore, lesbians often met privately in apartments and bars (Kenawi 21). Tommy was intimately involved in this, using her own apartment above her dog salon as a meeting place for homosexuals starting in 1961 (FFBIZ).

## **Documentary Filming Plans**

For my documentary style, I plan on incorporating intermittent hand-drawn animations along with archival material and B-roll that symbolically supports the main ideas and themes of the documentary. Although I do not plan to solely focus on Tommy's life since access to photos and information about her is limited, I plan to use the framework of her life and involvement in activism and performance art to highlight broader themes in German society and media regarding attitudes towards lesbian and gay rights movements at this time. I also plan to include media examples reflective of societal attitudes towards this movement, such as clips from films I mentioned in the earlier sections or media examples of the persisting dominance of heteronormative gender roles. Finally, I am hoping to collaborate with a few interview partners



who either knew/knew of Tommy or were otherwise involved in the LGBT rights movements and cultural scenes, who are willing to share personal anecdotes and opinions with me about their experiences in this pivotal time period as well as how they perceive LGBT rights organizations and culture of the present. These interviews will flesh out any information that I am not able to find regarding Tommy as well as give weight to any claims I might make or questions I would like to explore.

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