

Outwrite

An Interview with *Transgender Warriors* author Leslie Feinberg



BTL Photo: Tim Reitzloff

J Katzeman meets author Leslie Feinberg

Leslie Feinberg is a longtime transgender activist and author of the Lambda Literary Award-winning novel Stone Butch Blues. Her most recent book, Transgender Warriors, is a history of transgenderism from a multi-cultural perspective. A groundbreaking work, Transgender Warriors boldly and clearly draws links between transgender oppression and class oppression throughout history. This interview was conducted by Ann Arbor writer and poet J Katzeman just prior to Feinberg's speech before a packed house in Ann Arbor on Nov. 1.

J Katzeman: How do you respond to gay people who feel reluctant to identify themselves with transgender people?

Leslie Feinberg: I basically think that we're all in this together whether we want to be or not. We have to come to the realization that we are. Those who would like to strip us of our rights don't make those kinds of distinctions around identity, and none of us can fight back against them alone. I think also that the best example of where we overlap is with the drag queen sisters at Stonewall. Were they fighting back because they were drag queens or transsexual women or gay or black or Latino or homeless or poor or what? It's that our lives are really inextricably bound. All those truisms about "united we stand, divided we fall" have become hackneyed because they're so true. And I think more and more people are waking up to that.

JK: Obviously not all transgender people are gay either. How would you respond to a trans person who feels no connection with the gay rights movement?

LF: I remember a friend telling me about her close friend being hacked to death with machetes by four men who were shouting "Die, faggot, die!" And this person's wife was home over a burnt dinner worried sick. It didn't matter to the people who took this

person's life what their affectional or sexual preference was. It didn't matter who was waiting for them. It's just queer. Trans expression is considered queerness by bashers, on every street corner and every level of government. It's in a coalition that we can express that not all of us are gay, not all of us identify as lesbian. I know people who would be called lesbian who don't think of themselves as lesbian, who think of themselves as dykes or queer or gay women. But when someone drives by and shouts "Queer!"—that's that giant umbrella we're organizing under. So if all trans expression is seen as gay and you're heterosexual, do you stand up and say, "I'm not gay," or do you get on the front lines with other heterosexual people and say, "You can't get a dime between us"?

JK: People aren't usually bothered by their inability to readily identify a person's race or even sexuality. Why are so many people disturbed when they can't readily identify another person's gender?

LF: I think it depends on the historical period and the circumstances. For example, I have some friends who are ambiguous as to whether they are white and Italian or Latina, and I find from talking to them that when you're talking about the fact that they can't be identified as being white or a person of color in a very racist society then people are constantly nudging

and asking manipulating questions to find out. And certainly during a very apartheid situation, like with Jim Crow segregation laws, blurring or bridging that great divide was an enormous crime.

I think in some ways the same thing is true in this society, that a great deal of status (or lack of it) or vulnerability to certain kinds of violence accelerates based on whether you're perceived as being male or female, and the fact that all inheritance passes through male heirs necessitates knowing the difference between men and women. I also think for women on the other hand it's become important to know whether they're dealing with someone who's male or female because whether or not they feel safe depends on knowing. However, one of the things I've argued a great deal is that, first of all, being in a room full of all women doesn't make you safe, and having men in the room doesn't make you unsafe, but not being able to tell if someone is male or female, I want women to recognize that person as a potential ally. If someone is gender ambiguous, it's not whether or not they're a wolf, a friend or a foe. If you can't tell if the person is male or female then this is somebody who is suffering from a gender oppression similar, and inextricably bound, to your own.

JK: One of the things that comes out in *Transgender Warriors* is that traditionally, ancient people valued the transgendered for their ability to translate between the two genders. Do you see modern day transgender people occupying this same role?

LF: Today I see the transgender movement, like the bisexual community's movement, putting the spectrum back into what has been imposed on us as polar opposites. We've been taught there's man and woman and whatever you're born it's an immutable fact and there's nothing in between. You're straight or gay, straight is normal, gay is not. So bisexual people and trans people of all kinds put that rainbow back in between the two poles. I think that has a bridging effect. And that every movement—the women's movement, the black liberation movement, the lesbian, gay, bi communities movement—all are challenging human thinking about what is the norm, about what we've been taught is the norm in this country. And in that sense too, we are bridges. By that gift of consciousness, that expansion of consciousness.