

May 20, 1996

Porcupine said her last new words.

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reread "Odyssey of a Unicorn" and
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Older than Methuselah

New book reveals that those who blur "man-made" gender boundaries have been around forever — and have even been considered sacred.

Transgender Warriors:

Making History From Joan of Arc to RuPaul

by Leslie Feinberg

Beacon Press

ISBN 0-8070-7940-5

\$27.50

by Craig Hickman

Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul watermarks a turning point in the transgender liberation movement, the movement for gay, lesbian, and bisexual liberation, and, indeed, for the liberation of all peoples bound by oppression, shackled to apathy.

Part manifesto, part social theory, part pictorial history, part personal narrative, part revisionist history, part philosophy, part revolutionary tract, part poetry, part reference book, part liturgics — all blood, and spirit, and fire — *Transgender Warriors* defies categorization as vehemently as the sex/gender identities unveiled and explored within its pages. No book since Toni Morrison's *Beloved* gives so much and holds itself so well. History becomes art, the political becomes transformative, the personal becomes universal.

Responding to the news about the Stonewall Rebellion, Feinberg, author of the award-winning novel, *Stone Butch Blues*, begins his* quest, asking in Part I, "Have we [transpeople] always existed? Have we always been so hated? Have we always fought back?" In searching for answers, Feinberg chronicles a world history dating back to the Paleolithic period, and finds evidence of transgender, especially in ritual, on every continent on the planet. Feinberg argues that with the first division of society into haves and have-nots, the breakdown of feudalism, the rise of the Church, and the rise of industrialism and capitalism, the powers that be sanctioned the torture, murder, and oppression of all people who didn't fit neatly into male and female categories, and the roles generally associated with them. In this way, Feinberg makes clear the links between class and gender oppression.

Men, Women and the Rest of Us

Still, those of "ambiguous" sex/gender expression have led some of the greatest revolts in history, including Joan of Arc, "Rebecca and her daughters," a group of armed Welsh peasants, dressed as women, who, in 1839, led local constables and British troops in a revolt against turnpike toll taxes, and "General Ludd's wives," two male weavers, dressed as women, who led crowds of exploited workers in Stockton, England in 1812 to smash the looms and burn down the factory. In his exhaustive research, Feinberg digs deep and cross references texts from a variety of disciplines in order to lay bare an understanding of human nature in an

evolving world that not only oppressed people of all sexes, genders, and desires, but also presented a history that suppressed transgender warriors and their contributions to making the world a safer place for all people as they fought against injustice and servility. As Kate Bornstein declares on the book jacket, "Women and men have had their histories. This is the history book for the rest of us."

Feinberg's chronicle of fascinating facts, events and interpretations is interwoven with a personal narrative that gives the book its razor-sharp edge. In Part Two, s/he describes hir restriction from foreign travel because s/he refuses to change her birth certificate to Male in order to obtain a passport that reads Male, so as not to risk serious felony charges if the authorities were ever to discover that hir sex is Female. If all this sounds too complicated, that's because it is; but Feinberg would rather fight the policy of having to legally align sex with gender expression than take the easy way out and secure access to other lands, a freedom many Americans take for granted. Feinberg relates the facts of this predicament without self-pity or sentiment. I, nevertheless, was pained by the sacrifices we have to make in order to move forward.

Feinberg never backs down from hir quest as a living, breathing, transgendered, Jewish, butch, lesbian activist. Feinberg carries the reader with hir on hir journey, highlighting points where hir research nearly dead-ended, or when clues for where to find answers seemed to fall from the sky. Consequently, *Transgender Warriors* reads like a good mystery; what s/he uncovers is mesmerizing, mind-boggling, revolting, inspiring, and always educational.

At one point, I forgot that I was actually devouring a book. I felt as if I was caught up in the epic sweep of a great documentary seasoned with the kinds of delicious insights and observations at which the film adaptation of *The Celluloid Closet* could only hint, but never actually state in its overly self-conscious, politically-correct agenda. Upon completing *Transgender Warriors*, one might view *The Celluloid Closet* as a film that, beneath the cover of examining the depiction of gays and lesbians in film, explores transpeople and transperformers — gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, asexual, or otherwise — and their realities in film.

Fighting Exclusions

Feinberg also never retreats from hir "communist" ideology as a member of the Workers World Party — that the world-wide majority of laborers have the power to overcome the divide-and-rule tactics of capitalism, fascism, and imperialism, but must first un-learn the patterns that perpetuate disunity and self-oppression. In addressing the current Women's and L/G/B/T movements, Feinberg doesn't just push the envelope, she tears it up. S/he takes to task some elements of modern feminist theory, posing tough questions about what makes a woman "woman enough" to be respected within the movement, and offering concrete suggestions for forging real "sisterhood" and unity in our diverse communities. "The women's movement," Feinberg offers, "has an opportunity to make a tremendous contribution by reaching out to all who suffer from sex and gender oppression... Let's open the door to everyone who is self-identified as a woman, and who wants to be in women's space... Together we can plot tactics and strategy for movement building."

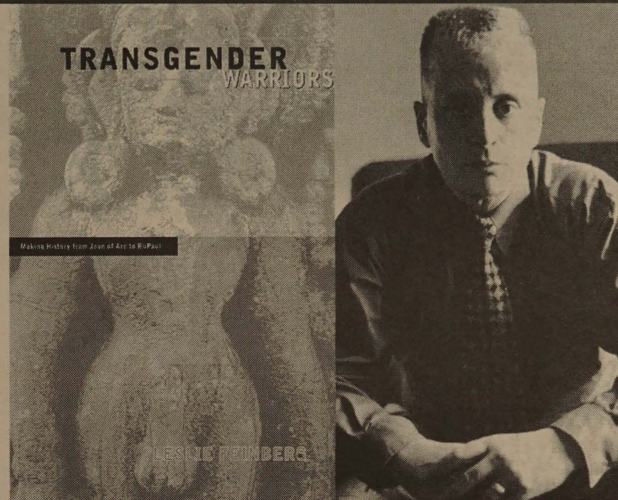
"I am queer and Proud of it."

For the benefit of the L/G/B/T movement, Feinberg asks us to reflect ignorance back to its source, and not use it to wound ourselves. In response to a newspaper editorial which baited, "What do these people want, men in high heels to be fire-fighters?" Feinberg insists that the only correct answer is, "Any cross-dresser would know to wear sensible shoes on a job like that! This is gender-phobia and job discrimination as well. We won't stand for it!" She goes on to state that, "A timid denial that 'we're not all like that' only serves to weaken the entire fight-

S/he takes to task some elements of modern feminist theory, posing tough questions about what makes a woman "woman enough" to be respected within the movement...



Leslie Feinberg, 1973



back movement. We can never throw enough people overboard to win approval from our enemies. Should we try to argue that we're as 'normal' as those who organize against our civil rights? Forget it! I am queer and proud of it."

Such a recommendation stands as a welcome and refreshing antidote to the kinds of criticism some members of the community — many gay, white men concerned with keeping their ephemeral, pristine image untarnished — have launched against the transgender movement. Jeff Epperly, editor of one of the largest gay and lesbian newspapers in the country, pontificates in a recent editorial, "The move to lump 'transgender' issues in with the politics of same-gender desire continues in all its trendiness... Gay and lesbian community leaders should continue to resist the efforts of transgender activists to blackmail and threaten our community groups into taking on a burden they are ill-equipped to handle. Our issues ... are deserving of attention not muddied by peripheral issues." This statement captures Feinberg's assertion that misunderstanding, the lack of appropriate language, and an adherence to binary systems of sex/gender only serve to perpetuate all sex and gender oppression in this society. While some Doubting Thomasinas and Thomases may not always be ready to accept Feinberg's interpretations, conclusions, or recipes for change, it remains difficult to challenge the importance of the questions s/he raises, and the attendant consequences any search for their answers ushers out.

A Collective Achievement

The making of *Transgender Warriors* is itself a testament to the power of the many people who came together to assist in its publication. A cursory glance at the acknowledgments reveals that the book is a collective achievement of the transgender communities. There is a thirty-two page portrait gallery of contemporary transgender warriors and makers of history, from Quentin Crisp to Storme Delarverie (a Black woman with a masculine gender expression who toured with the Jewel Box Review as a male impersonator), who speak their truths and victories in their own words. The appendix includes selected listings of transgender organizations, publications, and a copy of the International Bill of Gender Rights adopted by the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy, Inc.

I could not close without making a remark about the extraordinary look of the book as well. Making wonderful use of historical images and photographs, many previously unpublished, Lucinda Hitchcock's design is visually stunning and metaphorically beautiful, giving the book the kind of flamboyant artifice a drag queen like me holds so dear.

Transgender Warriors is a seminal work, a must-read, a powerful tract based on the "crystallized resin of experience." *Transgender Warriors* is a call to arms for all oppressed peoples to bind together against a common enemy. *Transgender Warriors* secures Leslie Feinberg's place at the helm of the transgender movement. Ultimately, s/he cannot move alone. This magnum opus will swell and grow in your mind and heart, and, I dream, inspire action instead of reaction, hope instead of despair, and unity instead of division.

*Throughout this review, the pronoun "hir" is used to replace "him/her", and "s/he" (pronounced "see") replaces "he-she" or "she-he."

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