

Leslie Feinberg showed us that transness belongs to everyone

written by Tourmaline

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Photo: Leslie Feinberg

I was a preteen when the first edition of *Transgender Warriors* — the foundational text by the late, great Leslie Feinberg—was published in 1996. It came into the world at a pivotal time for me, providing the life-changing context that would help

me to understand who I was and who came before me. Context that, before this book, could only be found scattered in disparate places, passed down in whispers and folklore, or translated and excavated from bigoted depictions of historical trans figures deemed deviant by the status quo.

In *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie writes, “I couldn’t find myself in history. No one like me seemed to have ever existed.” This is a reality that so many trans people have faced early in their lives, myself included. Our histories have been erased and whitewashed. We are told that transness is new, that transition is unprecedented. We know this to be patently untrue, but anti-transness continues to find new ways to protect the binary (see the contemporary emergence of gender reveal parties). It remains up to us to track down and preserve our own histories for ourselves. Leslie’s work showed me that it was possible to *make* history—to find, create, and archive the histories of those who laid the groundwork for us, who showed us how to move beyond the gender binary, and who existed all throughout time as their most full, beautiful, and expansive selves. “Making history” in this way would become central to my own archival work and artwork, and it was *Transgender Warriors* that remained my constant reference point in these explorations.

Leslie’s worldview is truly inclusive, showing us transness belongs to everyone. As a kid, I was a basketball fanatic. A budding athlete, I loved sports, but felt alienated from much of the straight, hyper-masculine culture that surrounded the NBA. Watching Dennis Rodman publicly and proudly play with his gender presentation, wearing sparkly tops and wedding dresses, hanging out at gay bars, refusing to conform to anyone’s repressive expectations, and [telling USA Today](#), “If you don’t like it, kiss my ass . . . I’m the guy who’s showing people, ‘Hey, it’s all right to be different,’” changed my life. I wanted to be him: a Black superstar being themselves in the public eye, having so much fun in the clothes that made them feel good. I bought Rodman’s memoir, his Chicago Bulls basketball jersey, and pierced my ears to feel myself in the gender abundant space, to which Leslie directs us so poignantly.

In [his memoir](#), Rodman opened up about how he had dressed “as a girl” since he was a child. Many mocked him, but many others expressed gratitude and support. Leslie writes of Rodman: “Bulls Coach Phil Jackson remarked to the media that Rodman ‘reached a heart space with other members of the team I’d never anticipated. Dennis has been a real blessing for us, because he’s like a heyoka.’ Jackson explained that among the Lakota people a heyoka ‘was a cross-dresser, a unique person . . . respected because he brought a reality change when you saw him.’” Rodman and Leslie both changed my reality, unlocking so much inside of me that I had been afraid to let out.

Many years later, I started a short correspondence with Leslie by email, shortly before hir death. Leslie captured the essence of our conversation in the newly released version of [Stone Butch Blues](#). We were discussing the incredible organizing and advocacy happening both on behalf of and led by CeCe McDonald, a young trans woman who had been criminalized and incarcerated for fighting back against [a racist and transphobic attack in 2011](#). It was deeply meaningful to be in touch with Leslie at this time, and to have the opportunity to speak about freedom with someone who had, at such a core level, shaped and changed my life for the better. Leslie understood the intimate connections between labor organizing, anti-capitalist organizing, and prison abolitionist organizing. Zie understood that none of us are free until all of us are free; that, though painful, it was also hopeful and liberating to fight alongside our fellow warrior CeCe, who was braving the front lines of the inhumanity of incarceration, paving the path for the decriminalization of Blackness and transness.

Many transgender warriors came before Leslie, and many will come after. The moment we exist in right now—a moment that continues to expand in its willingness to recognize the massive political, cultural, and aesthetic contributions of trans people, both today and throughout history—was made possible in no small part by hir work. And every time we platform and learn from trans writers, workers, artists,

storytellers—including those who are disabled, who are poor, who are incarcerated, and who have been previously silenced—we allow Leslie’s immeasurable legacy to live on.

About the author

Tourmaline is an activist, filmmaker, editor, and writer. She is most notable for her work in transgender activism and economic justice, through her work with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Critical Resistance and Queers for Economic Justice. She is co-editor of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* with Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton. She served as the 2016-2018 Activist-in-Residence at Barnard Center for Research on Women.

[Source: Beacon Broadside](#)

