

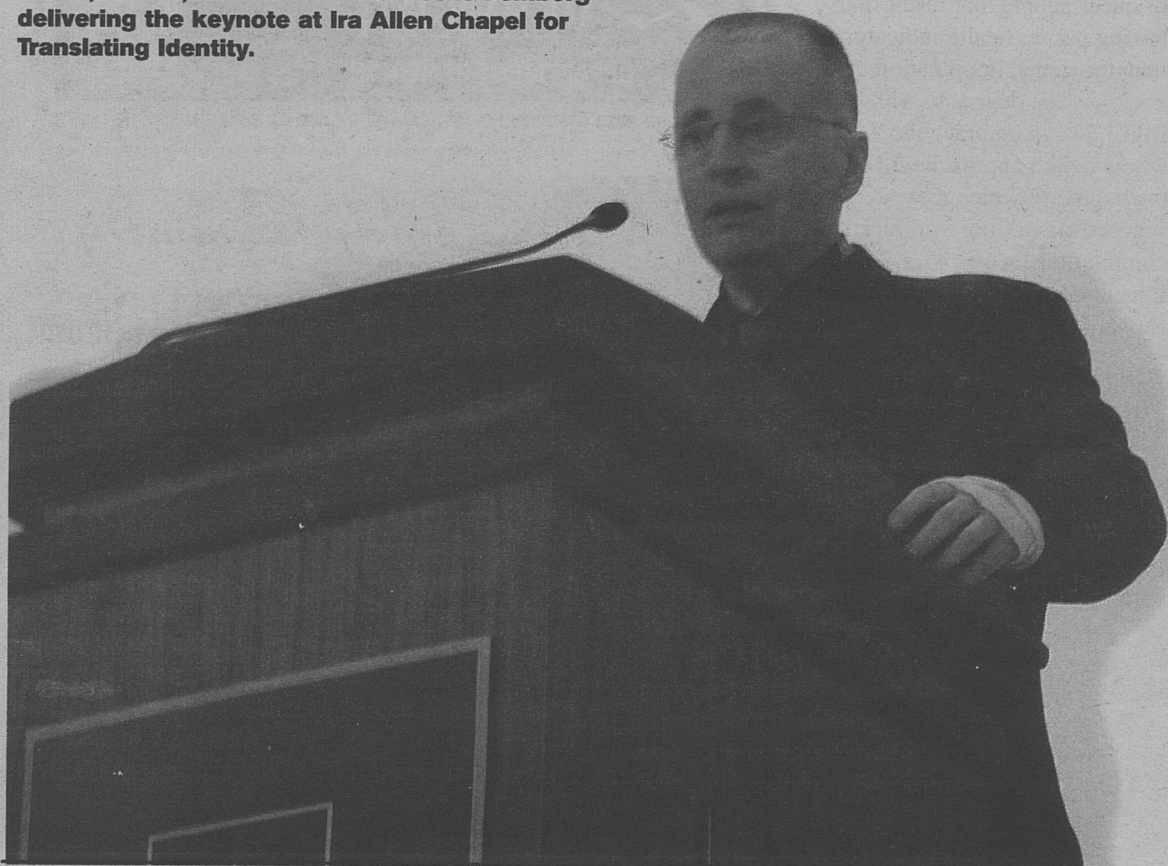
# Translating Identity

BY EUAN BEAR

From powerful opening plenary (see Eli Clare's condensed address in this issue) to wide-ranging closing keynote, the Translating Identity Conference – planned and staffed entirely by the students of Free to Be and their allies at the University of Vermont – was a rousing success. Anytime 700 people from around the United States and from as far away as New Zealand register for and attend a free conference on a Saturday, that's got to be considered success.

With two-dozen workshop and caucus sessions split among four time slots, there was no dearth of choices for anyone seeking information about transgender people and issues. From the history of transmen and butches attending women's colleges, to sex, to dealing with medical providers, to spirituality, the choices covered a wide range of concerns and stories.

**Editor, author, and transactivist Leslie Feinberg delivering the keynote at Ira Allen Chapel for Translating Identity.**



Perhaps one of the more controversial sessions was presented by Dr. Terri Lomax, an information technology lecturer and Ph.D. chemist from Auckland, New Zealand. Lomax, who identified herself as a transwoman, presented the premise that childhood sexual abuse – and perhaps other early trauma – can play a part in crystallizing or precipitating a gender identity crisis for some transgender people. That premise is based in part on her own experience and in part on her interpretation of research literature on the effects of trauma on the brain.

"It is not politically correct," Lomax acknowledged, "to connect transgenderism to abuse." The tense discussion during the session bore out that statement. Lomax said her point in bucking the tide was to encourage therapists to explore the possibility of childhood trauma with transgender clients and to open minds to the possibility that gender identity may not be fixed at birth for all transgender people. Another outcome of the discussion was the reminder that a single "cause" for any

given gender identity is unlikely.

A rousing speech by transactivist Leslie Feinberg closed the conference. Dapper in a well-tailored black suit and Windsor-knotted silk rainbow necktie, Feinberg celebrated this "moment in history, a moment that exemplifies the Chinese character that means both 'crisis' and 'opportunity.'" Ze (Feinberg's preferred pronoun) announced that the moment is simply the current embodiment of "not just decades but centuries" of transgender history.

Feinberg declared the intention of doing away with age-ist divisions between older and younger transactivists. "How can we work together to build a multi-generational movement?" Ze claimed multiple currents of activism and identity – gender bending, gender queerness during the repressive McCarthy era when queers were routinely purged from government jobs, butch lesbian, drag king, and cross-dresser – "all those currents run through my body," ze said.

"It's one thing for someone who despises my identity to label me, and another for me to stand up and face that label and say, 'Yes, I am, and I will defend all who fall within those parameters.'"

Ze said it was important to recognize the Second-Wave feminist movement as a "huge swinging forward of the pendulum" that "shook up all consciousness about what it meant to be female-bodied." Feinberg identified the push toward "androgyny" as that movement's "great gender experiment" meant "to liberate all of humanity from the concepts of masculinity and femininity."

But, Feinberg added, "Androgyny is liberating – if you're androgynous." If oppression – rapes, beatings, torture, jail, even deaths – did not change "masculine women and feminine men," then why would the "liberation" of the feminist movement? Ze characterized the experiment as a "gift, the awareness of the institutional system of gender oppression," but said the experiment's effect was "to build a world where we [transgenders] don't exist. Well thanks, but no thanks."

For those who live between easily-read extremes of the expression of masculine and feminine, "there is no simple action, including using a toilet, that is not fraught with danger. I go through airports and see whole walls of [the book] *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. I'm here to tell you that for the intersex, there are no separate planets, just heavenly bodies. ... To those who want to fight genital mutilation, I say 'Yes! Let's start here in the United States!'"

Feinberg spoke of how Sojourner Truth, "six feet tall, with massive muscles," was "transbaited," forced to strip in front of male witnesses to find out whether she was really a female. Ze spoke of Frederick Douglass the freed former slave, who was a strong ally to the feminists at Seneca Falls. "Right is of no sex," Feinberg quoted Douglass. "He could have come here today and those words would still be relevant." Douglass and other men who stood up for women's rights were called "Aunt Nancy's men," a term "meant to emasculate" them.

Finally, Feinberg said, any credible social or civil rights movement "must stand up to war as an issue." Ze cited history from World War I to today, lingering on the anti-Viet Nam war movement and the Gay Liberation Front's solidarity with anti-war organizations as well as with the civil rights and black liberation movements of the time. Ze quoted Black Panther co-founder Huey Newton: "Wherever the forces of Black liberation meet, the forces of gay liberation are also!"

Ze wondered whether Sylvia Rivera, a transgender person, a "combatant at Stonewall," would feel welcome in today's lesbian and gay organizations fighting for marriage rights, and where are our lgbt voices in protesting the increased racial profiling and the anti-youth ready-to-roll proposal for a compulsory military draft that are consequences of September 11 and the Iraq War. Trans and gay and lesbian and bi-must stand up to war as an issue, Feinberg declared, for all of our issues for us and all our natural allies are "tied to this war. Feinberg closed a fiery speech saying, "I would wish for us to be the best fighters against each others' oppression" and calling for everyone to demonstrate against the war. ▼