

The Gender Frontier

Reviewed by: Gwendolyn Ann Smith

Having grown up as the child of a professional photographer, I feel a certain connection to the photographic image. Through the lens of a camera, we can capture moments and memories that would otherwise be lost to time.

This can be especially true for the transgendered community. While things are evolving, decades have passed with few taking notice of our triumphs and tragedies, and our history runs a day-to-day risk of vanishing into the wind.

It's with this in mind that I look at a book like Mariette Pathy Allen's latest book, *The Gender Frontier* (Kehler Verlag, 2003).

I purchased her first book, *Transformations: Crossdressers and Those Who Love Them* (E.P. Dutton), way back in 1993 or so, while I was still self-identifying as a crossdresser. At a time when most of the published texts on transgender experience were in the medical community, and where few transfolks were really willing to be shown visually, her book managed to capture voices and images of so many strong people.

The Gender Frontier is not so much a follow-up to *Transformations* as it is a book that shows how much the community had shifted in the last decade. For example, rather than focusing solely on crossdressing, many of those in the new book display a great diversity in transgender presentation, including a sizable number of female to male individuals.

Another big difference from Allen's first book is the shift from portraits taken in seemingly safe environments to photographs captured at trans rights demonstrations and such. This parallels how the transgender community has shifted in the decade-plus since Ms. Allen's first work. We've started to show a more transgressive, more visible face, and she is there to capture this shift.

Those pictured represent the more politically active and strong voices of the transgender community over the last decade. The James Greens and Nancy Nangeroni's of the nascent transgender movement.

Allen's photos are as compelling as some of those seem in her first book, yet show a maturity in her art. I also find myself glad that *The Gender Frontier* does not have near as much text as the previous book: the photos really can speak for themselves. While so many of the images in *Transformations* were static portraits – interesting in their own right -- *The Gender Frontier*'s photos tend to tell a complete, complex story in each frame.

There is an East Coast bias to the book, and I note a few missing folks from the overall mix. No Kate Bornstein, no Loren Cameron, and so on. A focus on Southern Comfort conference shots and a good smattering of D.C. and right coast politics, but a dearth of things elsewhere tend to make it seem as if "transgender" is an East Coast phenomenon.

I know that Ms. Allen can only be in so many places at a time, and the book is not so much a "comprehensive" view as it is a personal chronicle. Nevertheless, I still wish there were shots – for example -- of San Francisco City Hall when the transgender health

benefit package was passed. This is a small complaint about the book, and one that doesn't truly mar the work as a whole.

The book deserves a spot in any list of valued transgender-themed books, and will be one I will gladly recommend for some time to come. I also will have to make sure to share it with my own father, knowing that while he may be uncomfortable with the theme, I am assured he'll appreciate the photography.

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