



CRYSTAL/CHARLEY: LESSONS ON YOUTHFUL QUEER IDENTITY

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This article gives a view of queer youth culture as seen through the author's newly focused eyes. While serving as mentor to a young butch dyke/drag king, I learned much about youthful conceptions of female masculinity and queer identity. Theory, history, and narrative are used to communicate my schooling.

In this article, I introduce readers to Crystal, a shy, young butch visual artist, and Charley, her alter ego, who nonchalantly seduces crowds of adoring fans. To put this story in context, I offer a brief overview of the history of male impersonation and drag kinging and discuss tensions and changes that have arisen as drag kinging comes of age. Following the historical overview is a synopsis of scholarship on drag kings and a discussion and analysis of theoretical stances on the phenomenon. Consideration of female masculinity—both in and out of drag—is a thread that runs throughout the discussion.

Extrapolating from my experiences with Crystal/Charley (and taking into account the difficulties inherent in categorizing phenomena that rest, ultimately, within individual notions of gender identity) I propose a fluid conception of gender that does not cement performers or practices into single categories. Gender rendition allows room for individuality, paradox, and change. The notion of gender rendition is applied to the ways Crystal enacted gender in her daily life as well as how Charley performed it on stage. While I tried to help Crystal negotiate college entrance exams, fight workplace discrimination, and strengthen her art portfolio, she taught me important lessons as well. My understanding of drag kinging, gender identity, and youthful queer desire have all been enriched through this work. I am thankful to Crystal and Charley for giving me that opportunity.

Introducing Crystal/Charley

I met Crystal on a tour of an art gallery in a local high school. “Hey, Crystal,” said Ms. B., the art teacher who was giving me the tour, “I have someone I want you to meet.” A handsome young butch, Crystal stood at least a half-foot taller than me. Soft-spoken and shy, however, she still managed to seem little. Crystal looked at me only in quick, side-ways glances while Ms. B. made her introductions. In those glimpses, I took in hazel eyes outlined by thick, dark lashes, high cheekbones, and a strong jaw. Ms. B. didn't say why she thought we ought to know one another, but it seemed clear that it had to do, not only with a mutual interest in art, but also, with us both being queer.

Several months later, I attended a drag king show with friends at Milwaukee's gay pride celebration. We watched squeamishly as amateurish kings hammed it up on an improvised stage, which was set up under a low-slung tent. In fits and starts, the kings came out, blustering their way through stand-up shtick, lip-synced love ballads, and rollicking rockabilly tunes. The air in the tent was thick and heavily cologned. We stood there sweating, not only because of the close quarters, but also on account of the fact that we were embarrassed, by proxy, for the performers.

Suddenly the atmosphere changed. Out came a swaggering, Justin Timberlake-esque character called “Charley.” He danced provocatively, opposite “Brittany Spears,” who was poured into a curve-revealing Catholic schoolgirl uniform. The crowd (which previously seemed to have lost consciousness) went wild as the two teased one other—and us—under the steamy cover of the tent. Charley strutted across the stage with a cock-sure bravado that was more convincing than any of the previous kings had been. Toward the end of the song, he shoved Brittany aside and scanned the room, looking for his next conquest with a seductive snarl on his face. Boys and girls alike swooned; several adoring fans stormed the stage.

Months passed. I had all but forgotten about my brief encounter with Crystal in the high school gallery, and my equally brief brush with Charley, when the phone rang in my office. It was Crystal calling to ask if I would be interested in working with her to finish her last credits for high school graduation. I said I'd be delighted.

Then she said, “Hey, I saw you at Pride Fest.”
 Surprised, I asked, “Oh, why didn’t you stop to say hi?”
 “Well,” she replied, “at the time I was performing with the Mil-
 town Kings.”

Suddenly, it hit me. Throughout the performance, I kept thinking that Charley looked vaguely familiar. Watching him strut across the stage commanding the attention of the crowd, I was too distracted by the power of his performance to realize that Crystal and Charley were one and the same. Crystal was not at all like that swaggering, brash boi.¹ But when s/he applies a razor sharp goatee and takes to the stage, s/he is transformed. (See Figure 1).



Figure 1. The photographs in this article were created by Patience Roundtree, an artist friend of Crystal’s. They do not document Charley as he is regularly performed. Rather, they are a sort of exploration of the territory between Crystal and Charley. The darkness of the facial hair, for example, makes it obviously fake, and the exposed softness, such as unbound breasts, mark the artist’s subject as not fully masculine.

¹ Boi is a term for used by young queers for both feminine males and masculine lesbians.

A Brief History of Drag King Culture

Male impersonators and female to male (FTM) cross dressers are not new. Women have passed as men for eons, for reasons ranging from personal safety and survival to social ambition and sexual desire. According to Amy Linn:

History has always included women in drag. Penthesilea, an Amazon, impersonated a male soldier to fight in the Trojan War, only to be slain by Achilles, who fell in love with her corpse, according to Greek mythology. Joan of Arc, of course, was burned at the stake. (1995a, p. 1)

As Linn points out, tragedy often befell women who dared to appropriate male privilege. There are also accounts of women who passed as men to less tragic ends (see Duggan, 1993). Jazz musician Billy Tipton passed for most of his adult life, during which he married five times and adopted three children. He was not outed as biologically female until he died in 1989, at the age of 74 (Middlebrook, 1998).

By most accounts, Tipton switched from she to he after unsuccessfully auditioning for gigs as a woman in the early 1930s. For some masculine women, passing as a man was the only way they could see to live in times before there was a notion of transgender identity (for more, see Prosser, 1998). On the whole, society is becoming more tolerant of masculine women than it was earlier. Yet passing can still be risky, as we learn from the tragic story of Branden Teena, the youngster who was murdered for trying to pass as male and made posthumously infamous in Kimberly Peirce’s acclaimed 1999 film, *Boys Don’t Cry*.

Also closely related to drag kinging is the history of women who have performed in the theatrical settings in male attire since the late nineteenth century (Rodger, 1998; Solomon, 1993). More recently, individuals have performed as drag kings for at least a couple of decades, often as emcee of and/or comedic foil in drag queen shows. I remember attending such shows when I first came out in the early 1980s, when a friend of mine would don a disco suit, slick back her hair, and stuff a pair of tube socks down her pants to play host. These shows were actually showcases

for drag queens; back then, a king was just a prop for the real stars of the shows. Hence, drag king culture is a fairly new phenomenon.

Most trace the birth of the drag king to Diane Torr, a New York-based performance artist (Linn, 1995; Surkan, 2002). According to Torr, the power of passing as a man came to her when she attended an opening at the Whitney in drag. That night, Torr discovered a great deal about herself, other women, and being a man in a man's world. To give other women access to this experience, she developed drag king workshops. Torr has now taught hundreds of women to act like men and to experience male privilege. Some of them went on to found drag king culture.

According to Judith Halberstam (1998), in the 1990s drag king culture became something of a sub-cultural cause célèbre. The trend continues, and as it developed the culture shifted conspicuously from subculture to mainstream popular culture. What was once a rare sight—the drag king in his natural habitat—has become a regular feature of daytime talk shows, feature films, and nighttime club scenes.

New York, San Francisco, and London are typically regarded as the early hotbeds of drag king culture (Halberstam, 1998; Troka, 2003). The original venue for New York kings was Club Casanova, founded by Maureen Fischer, or Mo B. Dick, as her performance persona is called. Also in New York, the HerShe Bar began holding regular (though less flashy) drag nights for kings. San Francisco's early gender rebels, including Elvis Herselvis, gathered at the Eagle Bar and Klubstitute. London's scene seems to have started in earnest a little later, with the first drag king competition held in 1995.

Since the early 90s, the population of drag kings has grown exponentially. Today, nearly every major city in the U.S. and abroad, as well as many smaller towns, boast troupes of their own. And boast they do! A visit to the Web site of the H.I.S. Kings, of Columbus, Ohio, offers the following challenge: "Go ahead—strap yourself in for the most brilliantly electrifying boost of lesbo-queer entertainment on either side, or the middle, of the Midwest" (H.I.S. Kings, n.d., ¶ 1).

The H.I.S. Kings have reason to crow. As co-hosts of the first International Drag King Extravaganza (IDKE), in 1999, the Columbus kings sit in the historical seat of international drag king culture. According to Donna Troka, a founding member of the festival, IDKE 1 "was a

first-of-its-kind event in that it was a collaborative, non-competitive gathering of drag kings, their fans, and the people who studied, photographed and filmed them" (Troka, 2003, p. 73).

In 1998 Halberstam lamented, "The drag queen has long occupied an important place in the American drama of gender instability. ... But in all the articles and studies and media exposés on drag queen culture, very little time and energy has been expended on the drag queen's counterpart, the drag king" (p. 231). Since Halberstam made this claim, however, a much more intense focus on drag kinging has emerged in popular media. Though drag king culture did not begin in earnest until the early to mid-nineties, now it is possible to find kings documented textually, photographically, on television and in films (see for example: Baur, 2004; Volcano & Halberstam, 1999; Jamneck, 2003; Pearlstein, 2003; Waters, 1999).

According to Web-based *GLBTQ: Queer Encyclopedia of Visual Arts*:

The shifting status of transgender practices within the queer subculture has resulted in a renaissance of drag that has taken it into the mainstream culture of mass media, fine arts, and high fashion. Thus, Demi Moore has been featured in a suit and facial hair in an *Arena* magazine drag spread. Drag kings have also appeared prominently in such varied mainstream publications as *Marie Claire*, the *New York Post*, the *London Times*, *Penthouse Magazine*, and *The Face*. (Ashburn, n.d., p. 1)

Drag kings have appeared, not only in films like John Waters' (1998) *Pecker* but also in mainstream television programs such as HBO's *Sex in the City* (2000). The range of people who do FTM (female to male) drag these days is enormous. If it is still possible to see Demi Moore as a cultural bellwether, soon every gal who is anyone will be donning a three-piece suit and sporting a goatee.

"Scholars(hip):" On the Project of Theorizing Drag Kings

The previous section focused on popular attention to drag king culture.

This section looks at scholarly work on the phenomenon. I begin with a brief overview of the rise of scholarly works on kinging. Following that, I explore various theories regarding the performance of masculinity. The ways in which these theories apply to my young, queer protégé Crystal (and Charley), are discussed in an attempt to shed light on such performances more generally for queer youth. Finally, I relate *gender rendition* to my understandings of Crystal's relationship to Charley.

According to the editors of the *Drag King Anthology*, prior to the late 1990s "there was a dearth of information about drag kings within the context of rich and nuanced queer and feminist scholarship" (Troka, Labesco & Noble, 2002, p. 4). Thus, when Halberstam published the groundbreaking book *Female Masculinity* in 1998, it appears to have been the first scholarly work to take on the drag king as part of its project.

Scholars had wrestled with drag in the past, but before 1998, "drag" signified only men dressing up in women's clothing and performing (usually) campy and outrageous versions of femininity (see for example, Tyler, 1991). Esther Newton's 1972 book, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, gave birth to a small but vibrant scholarly specialization in cross-dressing and queer gender performance. Even today, in the bulk of scholarly writing on cross-dressing and drag, the male performer of femininity is limned more brightly than her counterpart, the drag king (see for example Egan & King, 1996; Ferris, 1993; Suthrell, 2004).

There have been historical studies on women who passed as men. However, distinctions can be drawn between cross-dressers and our modern-day drag king. While some of the motivations given for cross-dressing in historical accounts may be related to those of drag kings such as access to the social and sexual power associated with masculinity. However, the essence of the act of cross-dressing in these cases can be quite different from the motivations of drag kings. Distilling these essences is at the heart of the efforts of a new breed of academics.

Today, there is more scholarly attention to drag kings as a cultural and social phenomenon than ever before (see, for example, all authors in Troka, Labesco, & Noble, 2002). I have come to call this phenomenon "scholars(hip)." It is not only hip to appear in male drag, but also to theorize it. Some folks, such as Donna (dj love) Troka and Judith (Jack) Hal-

berstam, do both. It is academically fashionable to deconstruct the drag king (Middlebrook, 1998; Sennet & Bay-Cheng, 2002; Suthrell, 2004). If we are to fully understand the influences that masculine drag may have on gender and sexual identity (and vice-versa), we must dig more deeply into this fertile soil.

Though research of this kind may hold its charms, researching drag kings is not necessarily easy to do. Speaking about the resistance she faced trying to collect data from drag kings, Halberstam lamented, "Interviews can be a frustrating obstacle to knowledge as much as they can produce important ethnographic information" (1998, p. 242). After many meandering conversations with Crystal about her take on drag, I agree with Halberstam. In spite of participants' resistance to interrogation of the subject, in-depth case studies of individuals or groups who perform as drag kings would contribute greatly to our understanding of the phenomenon. Despite the upswing in scholars(hip), much more work remains to be done in the area of drag performance and its relationship to gender and sexual identity, especially where young queers are concerned. The following is an overview of the work done to date.

Performance-Based Theories

New York-based performance artist Diane Torr is often credited with the early development of the drag king. Torr's characters render visible the transparency of masculinity. This transparency lies at the heart of performative theories of drag kinging, which rely heavily on Judith Butler's (1990) notion of "gender performance." Being the first, Halberstam's analysis of the performative nature of drag kinging, and its relation to queer gender and sexual identity, became a subject of much debate. Though she devoted only one chapter of *Female Masculinity* to the topic of drag kings, Halberstam managed to stimulate a significant scholarly dialogue.

One criticism of Halberstam's early work, leveled by transgender activists and others, is that it contributes the false essentialization of sex categories. Either/or, female/male gender constructions are propped up by the fixed categories Halberstam assumes. About this, Sennet and

Bay-Cheng (2002) said, “Despite a detailed examination of the complexities and paradoxes of performing masculinity, Halberstam’s reliance on a stable, definable body ‘underneath’ the drag king performance remains essential to her definition of drag” (p. 40).

It may not be only the body underneath that gets fixed in Halberstam’s female masculinity schema. Troka, Lebesco, and Noble (2002) argue against Halberstam’s treatment of drag kings, saying: “Their exposure came at the expense of the fluidity of identity many of her subjects had worked hard to achieve” (p. 4). It seems that Halberstam’s overly categorical conceptual framework locked drag kings and other masculine women into unrealistically static positions.

For Halberstam, and others (see, for example, Maltz, 1998), the performative (often parodic/satirical) nature of kinging sets it apart from passing as a man or having a butch identity. In this schema, male impersonation is typically done in a manner that seeks not to draw attention to the performance of masculinity for fear of discovery and retribution for falsely claiming male privilege. Yet this may be an outdated way of thinking about “male impersonation” and drag in the transgender age. Indeed, trans-activists Jay Sennet and Sarah Bay-Cheng (2002) stress the “ambiguous relationship between performing gender on stage and in everyday life, differences in audience reactions, and the consequences of those reactions” (p. 42).

Sennet and Bay-Cheng (2002) take issue with Halberstam’s categorical treatment of drag kings, male impersonators, and drag butches. They offer a more nuanced understanding of these issues by problematizing the relationships among manifestations of drag and transgender/transsexual performance of masculinity saying, “separating trans performance from drag or assuming a fixed body beneath a performance or gender remains problematic” (p. 46). Noble (2003) would seem to agree, saying, “The bottom line is this: drag kings are situated in and play with the ironic no man’s land between ‘lesbian,’ ‘butch,’ ‘transman’ and ‘bio-boy’ where the self-evident is neither” (p. 251).

In the end, Halberstam acknowledged the problems with her categories. Those who successfully persuaded Halberstam to question her dogged determination to categorize drag kings were, themselves, drag kings. Writing just one year after *Female Masculinities* (Halberstam,

1998), Volcano with Halberstam wrote, *The Drag King Book* (1999). Halberstam acknowledged that a number of the drag kings she interviewed challenged her social science-based categorical constructions:

The interviewees expressed frustration at my insistent questions and constant formulations and interpretations of performances and styles. What I was doing by questioning, looking and learning was sometimes seen in opposition to what others were doing, namely, “having fun.” In other words, if I would only loosen up about my categories of drag acts, my strategies of impersonation, my forms of butch drag, the reasoning went, I would soon be able to sit back and have a good time, maybe even get up on stage myself! (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999, p. 2).

Metaperformance

The performative nature of drag kinging provides a set of categories for some scholars and an infinite range of possibilities for others. An extension of the performative theory of drag kinging is Noble’s “metaperformative,” in which drag kings create performance about performance (2003, p. 251). This conception of metaperformance sets kinging apart from simply acting a part. Theories of metaperformance generally go something like this: Parody, as well as other forms of performance about the performance of masculinity, is used by contemporary drag kings to expose the performative nature of gender in general. Drawing distinctions between contemporary drag culture and stone butch identity, Maltz (1998) says:

Contemporary US drag king performers appear as youthful pencil-mustachioed faces on the cover of trendy urban magazines and are the topic of lurid TV talk shows. The contemporary performer unlike her stone butch uncle is a parodic performer of manliness. (pp. 281-282)

Dianne Torr exemplifies the drag king as performer of masculin-

ity. Many of the generation of drag kings who came after Torr, who perform masculinity and maleness in an over the top, hyper-macho manner, exemplify the metaperformer. As longtime lesbian feminist/queer activist Alix Dobkin noted, today's drag kings are "exploiting and ridiculing, rather than emulating, crude macho stereotypes" (1999, p. 15).

An example of this type of drag performer is Mo B. Dick, whose giant pompadour has dazzled viewers on stage at Club Casanova in New York, on the big screen in John Waters's *Pecker* (1998), and on the small screen on HBO's *Sex in the City* (Thomas and Bick, 2000). Kings like Mo B. Dick swagger in magnified performances of maleness. The pseudonyms of some drag kings give a glimpse into the high octane, faux-misogynistic nature of their approach to performing: "Oliver Cloughshoff," one of Charley's fellow Miltown Kings; "Jack Hoff" of the Chicago Kings; "Buster Hymen," part of the Club Casanova scene in New York; "Ben d'Over" with the *Kingz of Berlin*; and, of course, "Elvis Herselvis."

According to Noble, "what drag kings do is stage the things that Whiteness and masculinity do not want to know and can not know about themselves, to use irony to make these subjects strange and make their ambivalences work against what they think they do know" (2002, p. 258). Drag kings like Mo B. Dick certainly fall within this category, however, to say that all drag kings use irony and metaperformance as their tools of choice is to be guilty of over-generalization. Some drag kings simply want to be "real," though "butch realness," as Maltz (1998) and Halberstam (1998) have called it, is not necessarily seen as real drag king in the metaperformative realm.

Realness

Scholars of FTM drag and some drag kings contest claims of realness, or authenticity. Volcano and Halberstam (1999) quote Maureen Fischer (founder of Club Casanova and the woman "underneath" Mo B. Dick) complaining that she had "been to some [drag king contests, at the HerShe bar for example] ... which were awful because the women entering them wouldn't do anything, they just walked up on stage and it was like a beauty contest or a popularity contest" (1999, p. 111). Fischer does

not consider the winners of such competitions to be drag kings rather they were "just very butch women" (p. 112). For Fischer, who helped establish the metaperformative genre of drag king performance, butch realness is not true drag performance.

In a contrasting claim of authenticity, Maltz appraises old-school male impersonators and stone butches more favorably than present-day drag king performers:

[Stone butches] are not simply performers of masculinity but critique masculinity as being the privileged gender expression of males. Drag kings, conversely, lack integral masculinity on and off stage and their performances of maleness do not work to critique normative sex/gender but rather reproduce the notion that "real" masculinity is intrinsic to males. The commodification of drag kings works against the possibility that masculinity can be owned with authority by queer females. (1998, p. 285)

Such commentators on drag and female masculinity seek to lay claim to truth. One camp privileges ironic, metaperformances over realness, while others claim that stone butches, not drag kings, are the authentic bearers of female masculinity. Neither adequately explains what I observed while working with Crystal/Charley.

On Drag, Queer Youth Identity and Shifting Paradigms

My work with Crystal/Charley leads me to find all of these theories limited. None adequately explain the fluid and multiple ways young queers enact gender in public and private spaces. It has been my experience that young queers have an un-categorical understanding of gender performance, both as performers and as audience members. For example, when Charley organized an open mic night for underage "drag bois," at least one young person who performed was transitioning from female to male in daily life. In what category could one place such performer, when the body "underneath" the drag performance is in transition? That same evening, I overheard a young man comment on Charley saying, "I don't

care if he really is a girl, he can be my baby's daddy!" Here, we have a (presumably) gay male audience member swooning over a girl in male drag—using a phrase that denotes pregnancy. Where would one place this youngster in relation to Charley? How does Charley's performance of masculinity change when the consumer is a young gay man? What happens when femmes occupy the territory of masculinity? For me, these questions bring to light the need for less regimented understandings of queer identity, and I believe that young people have much to teach in this regard. Clearly, present-day theories do not adequately explain the multi-dimensional gender renditions of queer youth.

Existing theories of female-to-male drag performance simply do not seem to fit for a newer generation of drag performers. Performative theories are inadequate, metaperformance often does not apply, and realness stands on unsteady ground. Young queers seem to think more radically than scholars have thought thus far. Younger people seem to be much less attached to a fixed, gendered body. Also, differences in the way people conceive of drag kings, gender construction, and sexual desire seem to have generational, regional, and class-based foundations that have not yet been adequately addressed (Surkan, 2002).

At present, we find ourselves in a political and cultural backlash against sexual and gender diversity; however, notions of gender are evolving. Change is coming slowly, but surely, as science sheds new light on the subject (see Fausto-Sterling, 2000) and public attitudes change. With these evolving conceptions of identity, it seems, the drag king has come along for the ride and we need to be able to conceptualize gender more broadly than we have thus far.

Gender Rendition

According to Wilchins, "gender is always a doing rather than a being ... all gender is drag" (2002, p. 12). As I wrestle with new ways of thinking about gender, I have come to replace the notion of gender performance with that of gender rendition. For me, rendition is a more apt term because it encompasses performance, but it also can mean "translation," which applies more readily to off-stage gender identities. Also, ren-

dition does not put realness at odds with performance; they coexist.

The notion of gender rendition works well to describe Crystal and Charley. Crystal's performance of Charley is not as self-consciously constructed as the notion of metaperformance suggests. Yet Charley deliberately performs, so he is not simply a manifestation of butch realness either. For Crystal, Charley seems to be a sort of foil—an empowering contrast to the female masculinity rendered in her off-stage life. As Crystal struggled to negotiate the many social barriers that stand in the way of a 17 year old butch dyke, Charley seemed to provide a way to summon a less problematic outlet for, and source of, youthful queer desire for both performer and audience. Crystal's rendition of masculinity through Charley, allowed her to claim power she does not have access to in her workaday life.

Crystal's rendition of masculinity in daily life was strengthened through Charley. This isn't to say that Crystal became more masculine, just that she became more comfortable with herself. It is interesting to note that, by and large, Crystal and Charley do not dress very differently from one another. This observation hit me one morning when I saw her standing slightly apart from a crowd of folks who were waiting for a bus. At a distance she really didn't look much different from Charley. She was wearing the same baggy cargo pants and baseball cap that Charley often wears. With the oversized hooded sweatshirt and knitted scarf she wore around her neck, there was no need to bind her chest in order to disguise breasts as a signifier of femaleness. I noticed that she seemed less little than she had been on the first day we met, but still nowhere near as big as Charley. I wondered how the folks at the bus stop read her gender, guessing that they understood her to be male.

The differences between her and him lie more in action than costume. I have most often seen him perform in Crystal's regular, everyday clothing. Apart from the facial hair, Crystal and Charley look the same. It is his swagger and confident air that really sets him apart from her. For Crystal/Charley, drag performance provides not only access to power, but also a safe place to experiment with gender and masculinity.

In addition to the support Charley receives from his adoring fans, he is also supported in a very caring manner by fellow drag kings. The kings have given Charley a sort of second home that I feel s/he finds very

comforting and empowering. Once, when Crystal and I were working in my studio, her cell rang, and following a brief exchange, s/he hung up, shook her head, said, “That was Leo [Long, one of the Miltown Kings], he wanted to know if I could get together with some of the guys to make winter soup!” Clearly, the kings mean more to each other than their performances might belie.

The kings always refer to each other by their drag names and use masculine pronouns. This was difficult for me to get used to at first, since I knew Crystal much better than I knew Charley. But switching between her two personas did not seem to pose much of a challenge for Crystal/Charley. Young people are creating queer ways of life that are new and sometimes mysterious to those of us who came of age in gender-rigid times.

As Halberstam (2005) points out:

[Young, urban queers] think of themselves as part of a ‘post-gender’ world and for them the idea of ‘labeling’ becomes a sign of oppression they have happily cast off in order to move into a pluralist world of infinite diversity. In other words, it has become commonplace and even clichéd for young, urban [White] gays and lesbians to claim that they do not like ‘labels’ and do not want to be ‘pigeon holed’ by identity categories, even as those same identity categories represent the activist labors of previous generations that brought us to the brink of ‘liberation’ in the first place. (p. 19)

Conclusion

After spending the past year working with Crystal and Charley, my eyes have been opened to the widening possibilities of queer identity. How differently young people see things now from the way I did at their age! I came of age in the early 1980s. It was a time when butches and femmes were denounced for buying into patriarchy by feminist lesbians. Now young queers are opening a door to a new world order before me. At the drag boi show, in particular (where there was a very high concen-

tration of young queers), there seemed to be an open atmosphere about gender identity.

My understanding of gender is growing through my work with Crystal/Charley. Judith Butler has claimed of the term lesbian, “[It is] permanently unclear what that sign signifies” (Butler, 1991, p. 14). I came out in 1981, when it was only too clear what that sign was supposed to signify. Thankfully, that time has passed. A younger generation of queers can teach us much about how to think more fluidly and freely about rendition of gender and how we might possibly be ourselves. My new vision of gender unfolded through some wild evenings with Charley, but also through many less dramatic days with Crystal. After learning to see things from those perspectives, I have come to agree that “all queer categories contain multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting subjectivities,” as Maltz asserted (1998, p. 273).

Through this process, I have learned that gender is the new civil rights movement (Wilchins, 2002). I have discovered that some young people slip on gender like old-school lesbians used to slip on Birkenstocks! The concept of gender rendition represents, for me, a new way of thinking, not only about Charley and other drag kings, but about myself as well. By working closely with this young gender queer, I feel that I am beginning to shed a previously unrecognized shame that my butch-ness has carried all these years. This new understanding of gender is exciting. It speaks to the tomboy I was as a kid, declaring, “It is right to be who you are!” These lessons give me hope for future generations of queer youth.

Again, I thank Crystal and Charley for being my teachers. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2: Crystal/Charlie portraits. Photographs by Patience Roundtree © 2006. Used with permission.

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