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FANTASTICAL BODY NARRATIVES: COSPLAY, PERFORMANCE, AND
GENDER DIVERSITY

By

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B.A., La Sierra University 2007
M.A., La Sierra University 2009

A Dissertation
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College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Humanities

Department of Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

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March 22, 2017

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the people who have influenced my life, small or large, and to those who have supported me through the dissertation. Without them this project would have never happened or become what it is today.

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ABSTRACT
FANTASTICAL BODY NARRATIVES: COSPLAY, PERFORMANCE,
AND GENDER DIVERSITY

Tiffany M. Hutabarat-Nelson

April 1, 2017

This dissertation aims to explore how the phenomenon of cosplay has been able to produce and sustain a diversity of gender expression due to its emergence from an activity-based community that emphasizes creative play. This creative energy is manifested through cosplay as an active, ritualized practice in which gender diversity is invited to be realized as a distinct possibility, resulting in a display of a full range of masculinities and femininities as well as crossplays and genderbend cosplays. I argue that cosplay can therefore be understood as a phenomenon that destabilizes the gender binary—its active practice promotes the production and interpretation of gender as being within a spectrum for cosplayers and their audiences alike. I also assert that the degree of diversity of gender expression observed through cosplay at fandom conventions is better accounted for as social change achieved through ritualized practice rather than as a subversive performance. This dissertation hopes to demonstrate that the sustainment of diversity of gender expression hinges upon the interdependent relationship between a ritualized, repeated practice and the individuals, community and space that promote it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE: FANTASTICAL BODY NARRATIVES: COSPLAY, PERFORMANCE AND GENDER DIVERSITY.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: COSPLAY AS A STUDY OF GENDER EXPRESSION DIVERSITY RATHER THAN OF SUBVERSIVE GENDER ACTION.....	43
CHAPTER THREE: THE BODY, DRESS AND PERFORMANCE OF INDIVIDUAL COSPLAY PRACTICE.....	75
CHAPTER FOUR: THE SPACE AND COMMUNITY AROUND COSPLAY PRACTICE.....	107
CONCLUSION: FINAL THOUGHTS ON COSPLAY, GENDER, AND PERFORMANCE.....	133
REFERENCES.....	141
APPENDIX.....	148
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	161

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE	PAGE
1. Okageo as Jinx from <i>League of Legends</i>	15
2. Charle Slime as Belle from <i>Beauty and the Beast</i>	16
3. Kira Masquerade as Midori from <i>Aoharu x Machinegun</i>	98
4. Kira Masquerade as Neptune from <i>Hyperdimension Neptunia</i>	98
5. Kira Masquerade as <i>Sailor Moon x Saint Seiya</i> crossover Sailor Moon.....	98
6. Kira Masquerade as Speed-o'-Sonic from <i>One Punch Man</i>	98
7. Standesu, Miso Tokki, Potat0piece and Tenderbroembrace as Mihawk, Crocodile, Shanks, and Buggy from <i>One Piece</i>	125

CHAPTER I
FANTASTICAL BODY NARRATIVES: COSPLAY, PERFORMANCE, AND
GENDER DIVERSITY

“Traditional societal perceptions of gender are no fun anyway. I can’t fire, earth, water, or air bend so I Gender Bend.”¹ Lialina, veteran crossplayer

“When I put on my costume, I feel like I look very different from everyone else around me and it makes me feel stronger. I also like the way that people look at me and notice me—it’s good to have admirers. And when I wear the costume with my Cosplay friends at a convention or party, I feel really happy just relaxing, having fun and sharing everything with my Cosplay family.”² Rinka, veteran cosplayer from Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

Cosplay is the shortening of “costume play” as first coined in Japan referring to fans who would dress up as their favorite anime, game or comic character. In recent years, cosplay has garnered more attention within cultural studies as well as within the

¹ Qtd. in Leng 89.

² Qtd. in Pierson-Smith 78.

mainstream media. In the United States this is in no small part due to the rise of comic, gaming, and anime cultures in mainstream media spheres. Increasing numbers of Americans are attending and participating in those comic, gaming, and anime conventions, at which cosplay has become a major activity.

Previous scholarship on cosplay has posited that there is a link between the phenomenon of cosplay and the development of self and group identity, yet there has been little work done on the implications and potential impact of this phenomenon on gendered identities or gender representation. Existing work on cosplay has employed textual analysis and ethnographic methodology to determine some of the reasons why people of all ages—particularly young adults—choose to participate in this particular activity (Hale, 2014; Jenkins, 2012; Okabe, 2012; Peirson-Smith, 2013; Rahman et al, 2012; Winge, 2006). These inquiries have primarily been centered on identity, specifically cosplayers' need to forge unique self-identities while simultaneously building and connecting to larger fan-group identities. Though research specifically on gender and cosplay does exist (Gn, 2011; Leng, 2013), critical examinations of gender within cosplay are currently limited and fail to fully account for the variety of gendered cosplay experiences, especially in those forms most visible, of late, as in social and mainstream media.

In a microcosmic sense, issues of gender in cosplay may provide great insight into issues of gender in society at large. This project seeks to contribute to gender studies discussions by bringing attention to cosplay as a playground of gender expression performance. The project also seeks to demonstrate how the cosplay community has

sought to achieve central goals of contemporary feminism and gender studies. For example, recent demands for more varied portrayals of women in real life are being met in cosplay through widening varieties of female iconography. Meanwhile, questions over gender expression and who has the right to embody femininity or masculinity are mirrored in the growing variety of people participating in cosplay. Similarly, notions of gender fluidity are finding their match in genderbend cosplay and “crossplay.”

Scholars viewing gender as a product of social performances and interactions should find cosplay to represent a cultural arena brimming with potential. Similarly, thinkers promoting that the study of gender should be treated as embodied and situated experience should discover much to explore within the cosplay realm. Those interested in Judith Butler’s approaches to social change through performativity as well as feminist phenomenologists like Gail Weiss and Iris Young who put body and performance at the center of identity development, may view cosplay as an interactional laboratory for that change, as non-normative genderplay gradually meets acceptance within that larger community, departing from original fandom texts—the shows, comics, and anime that fandom communities are based in—through mechanisms of practice. Indeed, as a liminal space, cosplay allows for safe experimentation with gender by both cosplayers and viewers. While not all cosplay participants aim to make deliberate political statements, cosplayers and their audiences constantly engage in gendered interactions. As such, cosplay is an ideal site of display, performance and interactivity through which to explore gendered representations, gender fluidity, and their ramifications. Cosplay also highlights vital elements of gender performance: its basis in the social contract between performers, audiences, reproductive practices, and interpreters as well as its spatial and temporal

natures, as it rests on both the social theater and reception. As cosplay brings these elements together routinely—at, for instance, annual fandom conventions—it allows for observation of play that exceeds the traditional gender norms of everyday, non-liminal public spaces.

SECTION TWO: THE PHENOMENON OF COSPLAY

Far from a childhood Halloween gimmick, cosplay has become a way for fans of many ages to share their investments in fandom, dress and identity at any age and during multiple times of the year. Cosplay has been recognized as a staple activity within fandom circles since the 1980s, and has seen a notable surge in recognition in the United States due to the global popularization of Japanese anime as well as a parallel rise in the incorporation of comics and superhero fandoms into mainstream television and film. Nearly every fan convention, nationally recognized or not, has some sort of costume competition, sometimes called a “Masquerade,” to showcase the best cosplay done there. However, for the majority of members of the convention-going fandom community, such competitions are not the end goal. Simply showing up to the convention dressed as and emulating one’s favorite characters in a shared space with other appreciative fans is reason enough.

There are many other reasons to participate in cosplay. Some do it to become more involved within their particular fandom circles. Others pursue cosplay for the artistic design challenge of bringing fantastical characters and worlds into reality. Some cosplay for recognition and fame within such circles, as competition to see who can most closely recreate a character’s look can be fierce. Perhaps above all, cosplayers seek to

feel themselves part of an alternate universe created within the confines of the convention hall. Common sights at fandom conventions include groups of participants in colorful spandex bodysuits, men with hairy legs and bright yellow “booty shorts” strutting down the middle of a hall, and women in gallant armor posing for clamoring fans. Such scenes are expected and even desired.

The atmosphere found within a convention hall, with its mix of play and the spectacular, is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. As summarized by Mary Russo, Bakhtin’s carnivalesque is a scenario of cultural inversion in which costumes mask class identity, thus destabilizing habitual power relations. Russo says that the “masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society...[suggesting] a redeployment or counter production of culture, knowledge, and pleasure” (325). In the convention setting what is masked is less class but essentialist forms of identity such as race and gender. While most cosplayers and convention-goers do not cosplay for overtly political motives, the same kind of creative possibility exists within the convention space and cosplay practice. Personal identity and status in the outside world are suspended during the duration of a convention, as cosplayers take on the identities of the characters they portray. Within the carnival of a convention hall, convention-goers are able to create new possibilities for social performance and gender standards. Through a shared interest in fandoms, cosplay has done much to bring together people of various backgrounds within any given fandom.

However, importantly, as in “real life,” criticism and shaming are also prevalent within the cosplay community. In this case, shame culture fixates on the bodies of

cosplayers—particularly of female cosplayers, cosplayers of color, and cosplayers with non-normative body types—and in several cases has sufficiently dehumanized those bodies to lead to physical and sexual harassment. Cosplaying can become difficult, especially if a cosplayer’s body build or skin color differs from that of the character. Frequently, criticism is reduced to comments like “this character isn’t fat like you are,” or “you can’t have a dark-skinned such-and-such.” While waiting for people to disperse at the end of an Anime Expo panel, a friend and I heard a couple of young girls whispering to one another about how a Peorth cosplayer shouldn’t cosplay such a character if she couldn’t pull it off. Peorth is a character from the show *Ah! My Goddess* that typically wears a black bikini-esque suit with a leather harness that wraps around her waist and arms, and a moment later we saw such a cosplayer exiting the room. The cosplayer had the costume right—even down to the stitch patterns and buckles of the harness and the blue diamond markings found on the original character’s face—but her body was not as shapely, nor her skin not as tight over her belly or thighs. Since costume, hair and makeup weren’t the problem, the logical conclusion was that the young girls criticized the cosplayer for not having a body fit to be wearing a bikini-based outfit, and therefore not fit to cosplay Peorth. While the cosplay mimics a fictional character, responses to cosplay closely mirror the shaming comments found in real life when criticism is leveled at dressed bodies in the everyday. Nevertheless, cosplayers as a general community tend to be fairly accepting of a diversity of gender expressions.

The rise of fandom culture in America has been significant enough to merit academic interest in the phenomenon of cosplay. This activity also provides a rich ground for the exploration of feminist and gender concerns because it can and has brought issues

of gender and bodily narratives to the forefront. The fandom community takes a very traditional approach to its aesthetics even though these communities are frequently seen as lying outside of the mainstream. When fandom communities see art reproduced, the common expectation is for the artist to remain as true to the original character as possible. There is relatively little room for artistic license to be taken with designs because fans hold creators and their reproductions so closely to the “canon” standard created by the original text. This concern for fidelity is shared by certain scholars who have argued that cosplay does not present anything intellectually provoking. Within fandom studies, this is seen through a privileging of transformational fandom at the expense of what Matt Hills terms “mimetic fandom.” Transformational fandom includes activities like writing fanfiction or vidding (producing fan videos based on original films), in which a fan “twists” or transforms the original source “to the fan’s own purposes” (“From Dalek Half Balls”). In contrast, the activities of mimetic fandom, such as prop replica and costuming, aim to replicate the source material.

Hills speculates that academics have favored transformational fandom because the newly created works can themselves merit critical examination. Though the works are based on pre-existing material, the act of their creation can promote new ways to experience or understand the original text as well as a novel ideas of the author themselves. Hills also notes that, politically, academic circles have been more open to works of transformational fandom because those works are perceived as underwritten by Marxist or feminist perspectives. Fanfiction, as an example, is actively dominated by female readers and writers within greater male-centered fandoms; it has also been portrayed as a non-sanctioned subculture positioned as the underdog struggling against

dominant capitalist consumerism. In both cases, transformational fandom has garnered itself a need of “academic attention and valorization.” Mimetic activities, being fundamentally replicative, have not found similar scholarly interest. While prop replica and costuming—both activities essential to cosplay—may require high technical skill, they aim to produce material that remains as close to the original comic, film, or game as possible. Therefore, Hills notes that mimetic activities are viewed as having “nothing new or exceptional to say to fans or scholars, as there is “little transformation worthy of analysis” (“As Seen on Screen”), even when designs are transformed from fictional 2D images into real-life 3D objects. Hills feels that the disregard for mimetic fan activities is unfortunate, and that they should be seen as a “key part of [the] multi platform transmedia storytelling” (“As Seen On Screen”) that has been central to the history of fandom communities. Because cosplay’s roots are highly mimetic and the majority of the cosplay community still adheres to communal ideals of accuracy and authenticity to the original text, fandom scholars have largely overlooked cosplay due to the idea that it simply restates its source material.

Hills posits that another reason that mimetic fiction has not been taken up by academics is a scholarly bias that privileges narrative text over “static” visuals. Hills’ observation is not unfounded—the same bias has been noted in other disciplines as well. Film studies illuminates how visuals—including dress—have traditionally been forgotten or ignored while attention has been focused almost exclusively on plot and character development. A substantial amount of work has classified costume or dress into two categories: “support” or “spectacle” (Street 4-5). Costume as support means that dress takes a secondary place to narrative and solely serves to support the progression and

development of the narrative. Costume as spectacle refers to when dress takes the spotlight from the narrative and becomes the focus. According to Jane Gaines, costume must avoid becoming spectacle, as doing so disrupts the narrative flow and diverts attention elsewhere, effectively “breaking the illusion and the spell of realism” (Gaines 193). Bringing attention specifically to costume is therefore viewed as harmful and antithetical to the goals and purpose of film. It is interesting to note that, even in the classic days of Hollywood, well-known for the production of fashion as spectacle, assumptions of good costuming practice dictated that costuming should “[enhance] performance rather than draw attention to itself” (Berry 52). In textual readings of gender in popular texts, narrative plot and character development are prioritized as the primary factors to be studied in visual narratives like film, television, and comics. Costume is relegated to secondary importance along with setting and props as part of the *mise-en-scène*. In this capacity, costume fulfills only a supporting role, being simply a tool by which to express whatever the narrative dictates. Any greater role than this becomes spectacle and is deemed distracting. This is, however, an unfortunate mistake, considering how much of an individual’s identity, especially one’s gender identity, is developed and negotiated through dress.

Helen Warner argues that scholarship on media texts must move beyond its bias of perpetually privileging narrative over dress, especially to prove better able to deal with the changing relationship modern media texts have with their viewerships. For Warner, an increasing number of media texts—particularly television shows—display signs that audience members interact with the texts beyond the phenomenon itself, such as the screening of the show. She notes that textual analysis is still important, but audience

members are discussing elements of the show—in this case the fashion—beyond their viewings through blogs and games and they evolve their mannerisms and ways of living and dressing due to their interactions with the show. Warner then argues that costuming should be taken more seriously precisely because it becomes a launching point for audience members to expand and continue the effect of the show in their own lives—particularly in respect to identity development—in the same way narrative does (190). While Warner’s argument is founded upon an examination of the television show *Gossip Girl*, a show that emphasizes costume as spectacle by traditional notions of spectacle, her observation that people are interacting with the show outside of screen time can be applied to a larger array of media texts that produce the same kind of outside interaction, as cosplay does with media figures. Cosplay, while inspired by media texts, ends up bringing dress to center stage, thus any issues or implications of a character’s design that may have been bypassed in deference to plot and character development are now brought to the foreground. Writings on cosplay typically start by stating that cosplay is a word derived from “costume” and “play,” immediately focusing not on narrative, but on dress and performance.

Dress is the definitive aspect of the cosplay phenomenon. According to Anne Peirson-Smith in her study exploring the meaning and motivation behind cosplay’s rapid popularity growth, she identifies dress as a major “catalyst for escaping the boundaries of self and acquiring multiple identities” (77). For cosplay participants, the donning of costumes serves as a duo of seemingly opposite social functions. Costume is used both to distinguish the wearer from those who do not cosplay—mainly the general public—and to simultaneously communicate membership with a “variously costumed neo-styled

tribe” of cosplayers and fandom (81). This is done to create an alternate space separate from reality in which the cosplayer has the potential to co-create with other cosplayers or convention-goers in the “ultimate expression of their collective and individual creative imaginaries” (82).

Osmund Rahman, Liu Wing-Sun and Brittany Hei-man Cheung also promote the centralization of dress in cosplay by expressing that more recent usages of the term “cosplay” have expanded to include almost any type of dressing up outside of traditional standards (318). This has come to include categories like specific historical figures such as George Washington and general character types such as zombies. Rahman et al. make a note to distinguish this deliberate imitation from dressing in a subculture style like punk or hip hop. They note that cosplay is the act of dressing in the style of a pre-existing reference, not simply dressing differently from the mainstream. They cite that this distinction is particularly strong with subculture groups like those who participate in Japan’s “Lolita” fashion subculture. The Lolita subculture follows a hyper feminized, innocent and girly aesthetic (Kawamura 65-67). It can often be recognized by its plenitude of frills and ruffles on fitted blouses and extremely puffy, petticoat-filled skirts and dresses. Lolita members are often assumed to be cosplayers because Lolita culture comes from closely related Japanese street cultures that have ties to cosplay. The Lolita style is also worn by prominent anime characters from time to time. However, Lolita members are adamant that they are not cosplayers, as they do not emulate any particular character and instead following stylistic dress codes of their own subculture (Rahman et al. 318). For cosplayers, the defining point is how a person is dressed in relation to a particular reference character, not a mode of dress. The relation of the performed costume

to the source material demonstrates how media representation is being interpreted, adapted, and evolved in real life.

Disregarding costume underestimates the capabilities and possibilities costume adds to representations as a whole and limits the conversations concerning how visual aspects of representation via costume influence the development of social identity and positioning. Of course, though scholars of media have downplayed dress, scholars in sociology and dress have urged recognition of costume in this way for years. Classic thinkers like Georg Simmel and Thorstein Veblen noted the power of clothing to boost or cripple one's social status in the early twentieth century. Clothing functions as physical markers that publicly signal one's sociological attributes such as class. Contemporary scholars of dress have further explored the relationship of dress to identity. Fred Davis calls forms of dress "visual metaphors" (25). Though the elements of identity are fluid, dress is part of the negotiation that positions an individual's sociological aspects like age, gender, class and race within the spectrum of "culturally anchored ambivalences" (25), typically defined in part by a culture's prescriptive notions of what those aspects symbolize. Joanne Entwistle takes the relationship of dress to identity a step further by directly tying dress to the body that wears it. In *The Fashioned Body*, she notes that "clothing does more than simply draw attention to the body and emphasize bodily signs of difference. It works to imbue the body with significance, adding layers of cultural meanings" (141). She considers dress as if it were a second skin, as much a part of a person as his or her face or arm rather than pieces of material than can be easily donned, taken off or exchanged. Entwistle goes on to say that this is one of the key reasons why scholars cannot help but bring attention to and speak about gender when discussing dress.

By bringing attention to the body, clothing becomes one of the most “immediate and effective” ways that gender is brought to the forefront and made feminine or masculine (141).

A cosplayer’s primary interaction with the larger fandom community comes from his or her ability to “generate an association between his or her [dressed] body and the text referred” (Hale 8). But while dress may be the primary means of generating that association, the second aspect to cosplay—performance—is equally important, especially within discussions of the participatory angle of cosplay and in attempts to better understand how gender representations are produced. Performance in cosplay often employs an “alternate body rhetoric” consisting of gestures, poses and utterances that are iconic or pertinent to the character or text as a whole (Hale 8). In his study of cosplay at Dragon*Con, one of the largest fan conventions in the United States, Matthew Hale found that cosplay often involves a transformation not simply of aesthetics, but of behavior as well. During an interview with a cosplayer dressed as Dr. Byron Orpheus from the American animated television show *Venture Brothers*, Hale asked for the man’s name for his records. The man responded in his natural voice, “My name is Don and I’m dressed as...” but shifted to a melodramatic tone to announce “Dr. Byron Orpheus, necromancer extraordinaire!”, upon which Don laughed, quivered his eyebrows, and raised his right arm to gesture to the devil horns on his hand (11). Don did not settle for a mere visual emulation of his target character—he also had to embody the character’s behavior. This selective adaptation of a character’s canonical traits is key to cosplay performance, as cosplayers must rapidly establish credibility through linking their cosplay to its source material. The more recognizable the motto or mannerism used, the

more strongly cosplayers can associate their performance with the original character. This process of legitimization through clothes and behaviors mimics the process by which gender ideals are performed through the same media—in fact, the two play off of each other.

Despite the dominance of traditional aesthetic approaches within cosplay, cosplayers as individuals are still artists, and it is not uncommon for them to branch out with the desire to break traditional norms with artistic license. Two of the most common innovations within cosplay involve notions of gender: crossplay and genderbend cosplay. This sort of experimentation is of particular interest to studies of gender because it creates tension among the physical body of the cosplayer, the gender performance of the imitated character, and the resulting performance of the cosplay itself. In crossplay, an individual of one sex cosplays as a character of the opposite sex while staying as true to the original as possible. Crossplay is judged under many of the same traditional criteria as regular cosplay—a male is allowed to cosplay a female character as long as he can adequately pass as a female version of that character. The same holds true for female-bodied cosplayers wishing to cosplay male characters, as the cosplayer Reika is famous for doing. Reika is currently one of the most well-known cosplayers worldwide, whose every post on Facebook readily garners thousands of “likes.” A quick glance over the comments of their posts will find comments of admiration, however just as frequent are posts curious about their sex. Reika—who tends to use neutral pronouns to minimize associations to their physical body—frequently cosplays male characters, and it is argued by some that they do so even better than male-bodied cosplayers do. This form of cosplay asks similar questions of gender stereotypes as drag does, such as whether there are

qualities that belong to a certain sex if bodies of both sexes are able to accomplish the same result. Reika, for instance, has built their entire professional cosplay career on the fact that they are one of the best portrayals of male anime characters. In the eyes of many fans, they go beyond merely passing for, or imitating, a male character. They become those male characters.

Genderbend cosplay is the other form of cosplay that is known for breaking traditional body narratives. Genderbend cosplay seeks to reinterpret a fictional character as being of the opposite sex—such as in the case of cosplayer Okageo crossplaying the character Jinx from the game *League of Legends* (see fig. 1). Jinx is a petite female-bodied character, typically characterized by her bikini top, shorts, tattoos and guns. To genderbend this cosplay, Okageo has gone barechested and worn shorts that fit in a way typically seen on men, but has kept the same tattoos, gun and hairstyle that is associated with character so it becomes clear to those familiar with the game that this cosplay is a male version of Jinx. Another popular instance of

genderbending happened with genderbending Disney characters, and the trend was to post reimagined illustrations of them on social media. A variety of artists re-imagined the



Fig. 1. Cosplayer Okageo as Jinx from *League of Legends*.
Photograph by Tiffany Ho

Disney princesses as men, using the same costumes and colors, but translated to menswear. Similar posts submitted have seen Disney villains and love interests given the same treatment. Cosplayers were quick to do the same, and seeing genderbend cosplays of male-bodied cosplayers emulating Disney princess, or female-bodied cosplayers emulating Disney princes also became a popular trend. There is a full spectrum of approaches to designing genderbend cosplays. Some try to stay as true as possible to the original character while translating key details to recognizable markers of the opposite sex. More interestingly, some genderbend designs combine elements from the original character's original sex with elements that reflect the sex of the cosplayer. A good example of this combination is of male-bodied cosplayer Charle Slime and his crossplay of Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*

(see fig. 2). While he designed a costume identical to that worn by the original Belle as a female character, the cosplayer allowed his bare muscular arms to be exposed and his face unadorned with the more traditional make up that one might see on a Belle cosplayer. The distinct masculine shape traditionally attributed to a male body



Fig. 2. Cosplayer Charle Slime as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.
Photograph by Jose Badillo

can be seen amid the form-fitting, frilly attire. Such examples demonstrate the transmission of differing narratives of gender through a dressed body. While genderbend

cosplays are often viewed with admiration or amusement, negative reactions such as confusion or disgust are not uncommon and reveal implicit biases towards traditional norms and a reluctance to understand or accept outlying body narratives. Feminist and gender perspectives that focus on how gender is produced and “done,” as theorized by scholars like Candace West and Don Zimmerman, are especially helpful to better understand how examples of non-normative gender expression like Reika and other crossplayers who perform drag fit within the larger cosplay community. They are also helpful for examining how cosplay works to destabilize stereotypical understandings of gender through crossplay and genderbend cosplay. If gender can be understood as being created through repeated practice, a gender-focused study of cosplay through performance and interaction then allows critics to analyze how cosplay is informed by, interacts with, and complicates cultural notions of gender.

SECTION THREE: FROM FICTION TO REALITY

Despite the potential utility of crossplay and genderbend cosplay to studies of gender, there persist assumptions that fictional representations of gender in mainstream media do not have cultural power beyond entertainment value. This bias was shown recently in reactions to the sexuality of Marvel’s world-renowned female spy character, Black Widow, in the latest *Avengers* film.

Social media criticised the emphasis on Black Widow’s sexual history within *Age of Ultron*. Within the film, Black Widow is noted to have romantically pursued many of the other Avengers, a feature which caused her character to be “slut-shamed”—negatively criticized for supposed or actual sexual activities—not only

by fans, but even some of the other actors on the set. Jeremy Renner and Chris Evans—Hawkeye and Captain America respectively—had referred to Scarlett Johansson/Scarlett Johansson’s character as a “slut” and a “whore” during an interview with DigitalSpy promoting the film. The backlash from fans was immediate, and both men were criticized for having made such statements. Many were quick to point out that being sexually active was a trait not unique to Black Widow—Iron Man’s character is in fact canonically more notorious for promiscuity yet he is rarely questioned on his moral character. Shortly thereafter, both Renner and Evans released statements of apology, but Renner’s is of particular interest because he attempted to downplay the impact of his words because they were directed at a fictional character and were not slandering an actual person: “I am sorry that this tasteless joke about a fictional character offended anyone. It was not meant to be offensive in any way. Just poking fun during an exhausting and tedious press tour” (Dornbush). If fictional characters stayed in their fictional worlds, defamation might not be an issue, but in light of the rise of fandom culture all over the world, fictional characters—especially iconic ones—never remain solely in the fictional space.

The question of whether fiction has any merit beyond its entertainment value or not has been faced by fiction writers for centuries. In the 18th century, the first British novelists persuaded their audiences to purchase novels instead of pursuing other pastimes by promising that the novel provided elucidation and education in addition to entertainment. Novels were therefore introduced with elaborate prefaces beseeching readers to learn from the following story and so benefit from having read of the trials, misdeeds or successes of the characters within, despite their fictional aspect. A prime

example of this tactic comes from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which insists to readers that the facts contained within the novel are legitimate:

If ever the story of any private man's adventures in the world were worth making publick, and were acceptable when publish'd, the editor of this account thinks this will be so....The story is told with modesty....to the instruction of others by this example....The editor believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it. (3)

By setting his novel within this preface, Defoe attempted to legitimize his fiction so that it would be read as seriously as non-fictional accounts. Defoe, as the creator of a fictional text, believed in the real-life application of the values contained within his text and urged his readers to engage with *Robinson Crusoe* in the same way.

John Gibson joins this argument that there is merit to the reading of fiction beyond its entertainment value. Citing Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept concerning the Paris Archives, Gibson argues that the import of fiction is not challenged when its fictional status is recognized. Wittgenstein uses the Paris Archives to discuss the vitality of having a common cultural backdrop with which to agree or disagree. As a physical building in Paris, the archive houses many of the foundational and defining texts of France's history and culture, which are in turn used by the French people to define and evaluate elements of their own lives. Some of these items involve abstraction; for instance, the archive holds the text that formalized the definition of a meter as being a certain length that could then be used to provide a standardized concept of measurement ("Reading" 117-120). As no one can own an actual meter, the concept formalized within the Paris Archives is referenced whenever a common standard—vital for communication

and societal harmony—is required. Despite the notional nature of the meter, it is a functional and significant entity in everyday reality. Likewise, despite their fictional makeup, novels, films, comics, video games, and more can have meaning and impact “real life.”

Fiction realms can provide communal touchstones for otherwise complex concepts such as love, pride, or suffering, against which perceptions of the world can be affirmed, rejected, or reworked. They can also present circumstances with much more depth and nuance than factual definitions or documentations. Through fictional texts, readers interact with stories that “tell of ourselves [and show] us how this could be” (Gibson, “Reading” 121). Gibson points to Othello as an example. He notes that while Othello is a fictional character, audiences experience Othello’s life undone by his own jealousy, such as when he smothers his wife Desdemona. Gibson writes, literature brings to view the possibility of such complex feeling and thought. So when one asks, what does it mean to be affected by and damaged by jealousy, one can draw upon Othello as a serious attempt to express and explore the world (“Reading” 121). People similarly draw such import from fictional characters in fandom texts. The visions presented through these fictions also provide a view of how one might perceive and understand their reality. For instance, the X-Men, in the justice-oriented popular series of the same name, find other mutants who have developed superpowers and teach them to harness and control their powers for good. Due to their nature as mutant heroes, the X-Men raise questions of the value of difference and how to interact with the Other. The events of the series also complicate the concept of justice as the actions of the heroes do not always resolve favorably. As tales of fictional characters unconstrained by human limitations, the X-Men

cannot be literally mapped onto real-life situations. Yet the moral agenda of the texts imparts a humanitarian message regarding the treatment and behavior of individuals with differences.

Adaptational interpretation engages the scholarly process of close reading, as well as practices by which teachers attempt to impart understanding of real life scenarios and values through literature. As Gibson writes, to engage with fiction is “to bring to light what we find of consequence in this world...[and] be much more than what we find stated on the printed page” (“Interpreting” 444-445). This is not to say that fiction becomes a substitute for reality, but that the two are continuous. When people interact and struggle with fiction, the fiction becomes an activity that asks readers to try to “articulate an understanding of our way in the world” (“Interpreting” 449). It also provides a way for the reader to expand his or her horizon of expression, where characters from novels to comics and films shed light on the complexities of reality, whether that means reaffirming one’s beliefs or re-evaluating them. As an example, as African American actress Whoopi Goldberg relates, she grew up exposed to media images of black women limited to subservient roles. However, exposure to the *Star Trek* character Uhura, a functional, active character portrayed by a black woman, allowed her to consider that she too could be more than a subservient character in her own life. While reminiscing about her love for *Star Trek*, Goldberg recalled the following jubilation upon seeing Uhura on screen: “Well, when I was nine years old *Star Trek* came on. I looked at it and I went screaming through the house, ‘Come here, mum, everybody, come quick, come quick, there’s a black lady on television and she ain’t no maid!’ I knew right then and there I could be anything I wanted to be” (“Goldberg, Whoopi”). Decades later,

Goldberg was able to manifest that possibility by playing the character Guinan in the *Star Trek* revival of the 1990s.

Nichelle Nichols herself, the actress who played Uhura, recalls in her autobiography *Beyond Uhura* the effect that media representation had more generally. Nichols played Uhura from the premier of the *Star Trek* series in the late sixties, a role that came with the racism and hardships common at the time. Discrimination at her workplace due to her skin color became so bad that she briefly resigned from the show. But shortly afterwards a fan of hers—one Martin Luther King Jr.—made Nichols realize what kind of impact her presence as a black woman on a science fiction show was having. When, during an NAACP fundraising event, Nichols confided to King her plans to leave *Star Trek*, King replied as follows:

You cannot, and you must not. Don't you realize how important your presence, your character is? [...] Men and women of all races going forth in peaceful exploration, living as equals. Don't you see that you're not just a role model for little Black children? You're more important for people who don't look like us. For the first time, the world sees us as we should be seen, as equals, as intelligent people—as we should be. (164-165)

While Uhura was a fictional character, Nichols' presence on *Star Trek* manifested a possibility for black women—a possibility grasped onto by others who made it a part of their own lives. Examples like this illuminate the importance of representation, even—perhaps especially—in fictional narratives. Media representation, even fictional, creates physical and visible manifestations of possibilities and legitimizes the right for those possibilities to exist in reality. Once the representation exists, then there is the possibility

to others to also perform as such. As Geena Davis's mantra for the importance of this representation for girls' development goes, "If she can see it, she can be it." The same principle applies to cosplay: if a cosplayer can see something—be that a black, female space captain or a queer prince with magical powers—they can emulate that persona through cosplay, at least within the convention. With regard to possibilities of gender expression, cosplayers reap the added benefit of not only seeing new gendered identities made possible by fictional characters, but "doing" the new gendered identities they see fit.

Cosplay has the potential to be a community-building practice in which non-normative gender expression, when it occurs, is expressed as a constructive form of deviance that promotes possibilities of social change rather than the erosion of current social systems. However, this understanding can only be achieved when sex and gender are properly understood as separate concepts. Pushback against this agenda stems not only from conservative social institutions but as well as from the prioritizing of mimetic artistry by the cosplay community as a whole, which would prefer that their art remain apolitical. Nevertheless, the growing prevalence and acceptance of crossplayers and genderbend cosplayers demonstrates an increased willingness to isolate a body's sex from the gendered cosplay performance. In this way, the form of gender deviance facilitated and encouraged by cosplay and crossplay work constructively towards an understanding of sex and gender as separate concepts in line with current trends in feminist and queer studies.

Much of the contemporary western world (perhaps all the world) still conflates sex and gender. While there have been multiple attempts through academic and social

media to make people aware of this and its injustices toward humanity (most notably toward people who engage in non-normative gender behavior), even the most well-meaning people will still conflate the two terms, to detrimental ends. Cosplay as a practice confronts this conflation because of the variety of bodies and gender expression that can occur at a given fandom convention. When there are cosplayers who will dress as male characters one day and female the next, or biological males dominating the scene with performances of feminine characters or vice versa with females crossplaying as masculine characters, the experience of cosplay cannot be captured without separating body from performance, sex from gender. This is not to say that sex does not influence gender, or vice versa, but that if they are dealt with as two distinct entities they can be dealt with a better nuanced understanding. This also leads to the possibility of treating sexual identity as a complimentary side rather than inextricably tied to either sex or gender in black and white terms. While this argument focuses solely on cosplay, the implications of this discussion are also applicable to gender diversity outside cosplay proper and the fandom community scene.

SECTION FOUR: LITERATURE REVIEW OF GENDER STUDIES

The traditional gender system in place in western society is rooted in ideals of biology and procreation, producing what is commonly known as the gender binary. This gender system categorizes human lives and differences on the idea that there are biologically only two types of humans—female and male—and from this division stem essential differences in behavior, opposing natural extensions of being “female” and thus living in a feminine-gendered manner or being “male” and living and performing

“masculine” behaviors. This binary is held to determine everything from one’s self definition and self expression—including speech mannerisms, emotionality, dress display, and sexuality. Early studies of gender modeled themselves on contemporary understandings of procreation-focused biology, frequently emerging from the field of “sex roles” (Lorber 2). As such, gender was believed to normatively correlate with one’s sex, and non-normative behaviors such as homosexual or gender bending activities were explained away as abnormalities of the brain. In this way, gender expression outside of the dictates of the gender binary were stigmatized as unnatural.

The major flaw of the biologically-grounded approach to gender is that limits itself to only two sexes and two genders, each set in a determined pattern of correlations deemed natural and unchangeable. With the term “natural,” this gender system safeguards its definitions and expectations of gender in an untouchable realm that cannot be questioned without significant risk and consequence. Nevertheless, it fails to account for the variety of gender diversity that is regularly expressed in the world. From the existence of biologically intersex individuals to the competing ideals of masculinity and femininity unthinkingly accepted by western society, it is clear that the gender binary promotes a model too simplistic to accurately describe any individual’s behavior. Despite this, many examples from current media show that traditional categories from the gender binary are held near and dear and breaking these categories is cause for public anxiety.

While the spectrum of public gender performance has widened considerably over the course of recent decades, most gender performance is held to standards of a gender binary split between ideals of masculinity and femininity. The current gender binary also links masculine traits to being biologically male and feminine gender traits to being

biologically female, with the result that gender is perceived to be essential and determined by one's biological sex. These gender traits include but are not limited to behaviors, psychological traits and visual signs. Being classified as masculine is an instant cue of male-ness, while anything categorized as feminine is assumed to be naturally female. Nevertheless, neither masculinity nor femininity are homogenous ideals. Multiple standards of masculinity and femininity compete with each other, sometimes even on the same body. Unfortunately, when the combination of a body and its performed gender do not align with the dominant mode of masculinity or femininity within a culture, the non-conforming individual is liable to being socially or even physically punished. In an interview for the documentary *The Examined Life*, Judith Butler recalls the story of a boy who was beaten to death because he walked with a sway in his hips. She ponders, "How can it be that someone gets beat to death just for walking down the street?" Here social anxiety toward non-normative gender expression turned lethal. The boy had the right to be on the street, but once his gender performance was deemed to be outside the conventions associated with his sex—in this case, a style of walking—he was deemed worthy of punishment. Despite repeated statements of Americans' rights to freedom of expression, gender expression is still heavily policed.

Even in adulthood, despite relatively equal access to public activities and venues, gender performance is still disciplined. During the 2015 Wimbledon matches, Victoria Azarenka called out reporters who fixated on her grunting during the match—typically a male-associated behavior. Azarenka responded, "I'm so tired of these questions all the time...It's so, in a way, annoying because guys grunt...let's put aside the noise and how she looks and look at the game" (Associated Press). Azarenka highlighted that while both

women and men occupy tennis professionally, the general audience was more interested in how the women broke conventional gender behavior by grunting while equivalent male players were examined solely on their athletic performance. Azarenka was questioned because her behavior fell outside of what “everybody knows” women should behave like, whereas the male players’ grunting was not questioned because “everybody knows” men should grunt. Ironically though, almost no one knows where this knowledge came from.

Hanne Blank cites anthropologists’ use of the term “doxa” to explain cultural information that “everybody knows,” especially regarding assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality. Blank defines doxa as “the understanding we absorb from our native culture that we use to make sense of the world” (25). To illustrate, she presents a history of male bed-sharing from the 1800s. Blank notes that male bed sharing, now considered a purely homoerotic activity, was once unquestioned and commonplace, due in no small part to housing design and lack of central heating. Nevertheless, as heating improved and Americans increasingly enjoyed private rooms in the home, bed sharing became less necessary for warmth, and the cultural doxa surrounding the practice shifted from it being a practical action to being erotic and forbidden (23-25). While contemporary American society deems that two men sharing a bed must be essentially homosexual, Blank exposes that idea as doxa that has shifted over time in reaction to culture and changes in the use and allocation of private space. While working to separate the ideas of sex, gender, and sexual identity, Blank also seeks to expand notions of sex beyond the male-female binary. Sex is fundamentally a biological factor, but while sex is usually determined by the appearance of one’s genitalia, Johns Hopkins sexologist John Money establishes no

fewer than seven ways to determine an individual's biological sex, including "genetic chromosomal sex, internal anatomy, external anatomy, sex hormones, and the types of gonads an individual possesses" (Blank xx). Not all of these metrics will produce the same diagnosis, especially when taking into account the existence of intersex individuals with Klinefelter syndrome (chromosomal pattern XXY), those born with ambiguous genitalia, or anomalous hormone levels. With the idea of an easy binary between male and female disrupted, the traditional model of heterosexuality and homosexuality also fails. While the myth of only two sexes is certainly convenient to an understanding of the majority of the population, it fails to account for a wide variety of naturally-occurring intersex individuals, and should therefore not be held as essential.

Jason Cromwell illustrates how the theory of the gender binary fails to describe and account for those who fall outside of heteronormative conventions. Cromwell describes himself as a female-bodied transman. While born with female genitalia, Cromwell and other transmen grew up "seeing and believing ourselves to be boys who would someday grow up to men" (2), eventually undergoing various transitional therapies. As a transman, Cromwell already complicates the gender system by having female genitalia and chromosomes while also having a male appearance and identity and engaging in masculine behavior; his social identity complicates things a step further. Cromwell recounts being rejected by local transsexuals because he did not feel a need or desire for reconstructive surgery and he desired to pursue a career as a writer, for which he was rejected as being both "less than a real man" and not "really" being a transsexual (5). Though Cromwell's rejection by the trans community is not necessarily representative of responses from the trans community as a whole, he does show that there

is a hierarchical spectrum of gender, even within a single community such as the trans community. Additionally, Cromwell complicates the sexual expectations of gender by being attracted to both men and women (3). What Cromwell has described is a correlation of gender, sex and sexuality that defies all of the “natural” relations of gender, sex and sexuality endorsed by the gender binary. Cromwell’s points out the necessity of defining the trans experience for two principle reasons. Firstly, doing so recognizes, acknowledges and validates the experience of a whole community of people. Additionally, Cromwell hopes to promote an understanding of “the existence of more than two genders and the fact that all genders are constructed” (99-100).

Cromwell argues that the presently dominant gender binary limits gender expression and does not allow for gender diversity by unjustly constraining gender and sexuality to be a mere extension of biological sex. While these three aspects of identity may be intimately linked, it is fallacious to consider any one as equating another. This point is equally important for trans and cisgender individuals alike, because ultimately, gender diversity allows for the expression of a range of gender expressions by implying that there is a spectrum of gender manifestations that occur even within stereotypical understandings of gender. If sex is biological, gender is social. Gender has only recently expanded its usage from being a purely grammatical term to being used to describe a set of behaviors which are acquired, not essential, meant to align behavior with existing cultural norms.

In order to address the complications these examples have depicted, the study of gender has shifted from being based on biology to a focus on gender as a social construct. Social construction, as introduced to academia by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in

The Social Construction of Reality in 1966, states that people and groups produce the concepts, representations, meanings, and values attributed to their world. These concepts become habituated as people repeatedly play off one another's behaviors, becoming institutionalized and embedded as the reality of that society. The turn to gender as a social construct takes away the immutability of "naturalness" and "natural gender"—if concepts can be shaped and produced, then there is the possibility for variety outside of what is determined by the rigid categories of two sexes with two corresponding genders.

Early French feminists like Simone de Beauvoir brought to attention that gender is a matter of social practice and teachings that determine and define what someone becomes. Her famous idea is that one is not born a woman, but instead becomes a woman. Implied by this idea is that it is society, not some immutable law of nature, that produces the expectations and values of gender that are subsumed into everyday living. Around the same time, Marxist feminists looked to social relations based on work and economics to find factors that influenced and defined the gender system. While these early approaches still viewed gender in terms of a binary, they opened a path to discuss why gender can be manifested outside the generalized expectation. Their approaches defined gender as a social process in which "man" and "woman" were not natural outcomes determined at birth, but rather changes that occur as one matures, changes that can be inflected by factors such as where one is born and how one is raised. A constructive approach to the gender system has proved extremely beneficial, especially as more and more theorists have brought attention to the multitude of factors currently understood to participate in the construction of gender.

Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks in their respective works *Black Feminist Thought* and *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* point out that the intersection of multiple factors that produce the stratification of gender within a given gender system so that conversations on gender can be broadened to topics beyond the simple differences between men and women. Both authors argue that the experience of white women is not the same as that of black women, therefore to argue for gender inequality from the standpoint of a white woman would not and could not answer the problem of gender inequality for the black woman. They also extend their arguments to how class intersects with race and gender, highlighting that the social stratification created by the gender categories of man and woman is complicated by other stratifications created by race and class by which privilege in one identity may be enhanced or negated by another part of one's identity. The classic example used is that despite the cultural hierarchy of dominant men over subordinated women, factors of race and class can cause upper-class white women to have more social prestige than lower-class white men or upper-class men of color. The identity trinity of gender, race, and class also implies that stratification occurs within a given group based on the other two metrics, explaining the relative privilege of an upper-class black man over a lower-class black woman. While race is an important social factor with strong and documented influences on the perception of the production of gender, a thorough examination of its effects lies outside of the scope of this project. The conclusion will attempt to lay out a more detailed direction for further studies regarding the intersections of race and gender in cosplay, for now it must suffice to acknowledge that race can and does alter the performance, reception and potential acceptance of gender play within cosplay.

Alongside those promoting intersectionality, cultural feminists also attacked the gender binary as a system, arguing that it erases many identities. Arguments like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" focus on how the body and self are constructed entities and therefore cannot be faithfully described by only two rigid concepts of biological determinism. As such, Butler and Haraway press a radical agenda in which oppressive systems like the gender binary must be subverted and rewritten. Their work paved the way for an understanding of gender as being fluid and shifting rather than fixed.

As gender studies developed, delving deeper into what it means for gender to be socially constructed, gender discussions have been complicated further by the emergence of studies of masculinity and patriarchy. Most discussion on gender construction was previously dominated by topics centered around women and the LGBT community; thinkers like Michael Kimmel added that men, even white heterosexual men, were part of this gender construction. Kimmel picked apart how the concept of "being a man" is a construction and that there are varied manifestations of being born with a male body and living as a man. He argues that the kinds of generalizations and gender stereotypes that have typically been focused on depicting the oppression of females also exist for males. While it may be said that the stereotypes are not necessarily oppressive, they can still have detrimental effects on a developing psyche and cause men to have varied experiences in relation to several ideals of masculinity. The gendered experiences of men must therefore also be considered when examining a gender system.

The combined work of scholarship in gender studies such as the examples above have highlighted that the construction of gender is complex and intersectional. To speak

of gender is not to treat it as a blanket concept, but to understand that it is shaped and lived through a networking of multiple factors that produce a unique concept of gender in a particular time, space and person. However, despite the many scholarly voices who have called attention and advocated for the social construction approach to gender, the gender binary has remained the dominant gender system in western society, being culturally institutionalized to be treated and taught as a natural part of the social system. Candace West and Don Zimmerman explain the tenacity of the gender binary as a system through their exploration of the mechanisms of what they term gender recruitment.

The tie of deviant gender behavior and shame is socially instilled at a young age. West and Zimmerman argue that even if gender is conceived of as a property of a person independent from sex and biological behavior, people are still subject to social pressure to achieve gender competency. They suggest Spencer Cahill's idea of "recruitment" to gender identities, in which gender identities are not just socialized learning, but rather they are effectively categorized as children grow. An example is the frequent admonishment "Stop being a baby. Be a big girl/boy." This phrasing teaches children that there is a level of competency achieved when one acts in accordance with the ideal of the given category—in this case, "big boy" or "big girl." As West and Zimmerman phrase it, children must therefore "behaviorally choose between the discrediting identity of 'baby' and their anatomically determined sex identity" (142). While some might say this usage of a category should not make a difference, Cahill goes on to explain that children quickly learn that "big boy" and "big girl" correlate to different sets of behaviors, typically to ones associated with stereotypically "essential" male or female traits. West and Zimmerman state that the "recruitment" process involves "not only the appropriation

of gender ideals...but also gender identities that are important to individuals and the strive to maintain” (142) them in a sociocultural shaping of behavior that echoes Foucault’s model of panoptic behavior policing that has dominated gender study theories up to the present. In this case, the punishment for not behaving correctly and the lack of self-policing is labeled as self-incompetence. By phrasing this transition as competency achievement, having and regulating self-behavior according to the behavior sets of “big boy” and “big girl” becomes a mark of competency of self—a statement of one’s status and self-worth. In this way, orthodox gender behavior becomes inextricably entwined with self-worth from a young age.

West and Zimmerman’s approach to “doing gender” is apt for expressing how gender is done through cosplay. They establish this by arguing that gender is an interactional achievement which they define as a recurrent act situated within the dynamic relations that make up everyday interactions with others. In other words, gender formation is a continuously repetitive performance that is co-dependant with its context. West and Zimmerman additionally argue that while gender may be a cultural product, the recognition of acting clearly as associated to one’s sex is an idea made mandatory by society as an institution. These identificatory displays allow one to clearly “see” whether one is out of place or not. West and Zimmerman phrase the consequences of not fitting into these roles in the following manner: “if they [those who are recognized as not properly conforming] were not there, their current troubles would not exist” (140). This is a curious observation, as it highlights the exact problem of being recognized as conforming or nonconforming, yet it also begs the question of where would a “there” exist in which there were no troubles? What kind of place would have to exist in which

gender display could interact with its surrounding context without trouble? In other words, what external factors would be necessary for a successful gender achievement to occur? For West and Zimmerman the answer lies somewhere within the overarching cultural narrative that informs everyday interactions and encounters.

In addition to the larger narrative, West and Zimmerman argue that responses to an individual's display of gender must be considered. When an individual is "doing" gender, the success or failure of the display is dependent on recognition as such as well as the positive response from others when it is successful. West and Zimmerman turn to the case study of Agnes done by Harold Garfinkel as an example how gender is dependent on both performance and reception. Agnes was a transsexual raised as a boy, but then identified as female at 17 and underwent sex reassignment surgery. She lived during a time where there were distinct gender norms of what it meant to be a man or a woman, so while she still had male genitalia, she had to make sure she performed as a woman. She had to display to the world that she was "in all ways and at all times feminine" whether it was to let men light her cigarette or not to sunbathe on the lawn outside her apartment (134-135). Agnes' display as a woman, albeit with a penis, had to be recognized as successful by others because doing gender is behavior "at the risk of gender assessment" (136). As an interaction, her gender accomplishment was not just that she performed the feminine norm, but that others responded normatively toward her display, thus validating her display. In many ways West and Zimmerman's view mirrors many of the tenets Foucault outlines in his discussion of social development.

Michel Foucault and others who have theorized on the socialization of gender, despite the social construction of a society, note that there are other factors that push

people to police their own behavior and that of others in one manner or another. The most commonly cited reason is the fear of punishment. If one conforms to the dominant norm, one can fit in and be safe within the community. If one does not conform, one risks punishment in the form of criticism, shame, ostracism, or even physical harm.

Non-conformance is then viewed to create unnecessary hardship. In the case of gender, gender conformance is held as a key to upward social mobility as well as emotional, financial, and physical well-being. These issues of a larger gender institution must also be considered when analyzing the construction of gender.

The gender system implied by social construction highlights that gender is a multi-faceted concept that includes sex category, identity, marital and procreative status, sexual orientation, personality, processes, beliefs and display. All of these factors are further impacted by other intersecting aspects of one's identity like race and class to feed into and reflect how gender is manifested and applied as a social institution. How these elements come together in an individual and how they interact with the larger gender system of a society is what determines the limitations and opportunities that can affect an individual (Lorber 30-31). When the gender elements are consistent and congruent with the perceived physiology as determined by the dominant gender system, that person is considered cis-gender. The traditional gender binary defines a cis-gender female as someone with female genitalia who is sexually attracted to males and presents herself visually and behaviorally in a feminine manner expected of someone with a female body consistent with the social norms of her culture. The same is said of being male and performing masculinity. Currently, the state of being cis-gender has been considered normative and unquestioned within society. It has also recently become associated as a

privileged category. Of the many facets of gender, the most important to this study are sex category, sexual orientation, gender identity and their relationships to one's gender display. To distinguish gender identity from display, I borrow from Judith Lorber. She clarifies gender identity as an individual's "sense of gendered self," such as aligning one's self as a man, a woman or a combination thereof in relation to the larger surrounding community. Gender display, in contrast, talks about the "presentation of self" through mannerisms, behaviors and/or dress—in other words, the performance of an individual (30).

Another concept useful to the discussion of the production of gender systems is the terminology of being female-bodied or male-bodied. This approach, as discussed by Cromwell, is used to define sex category. In the case of Cromwell, it helps to clarify his position of living and identifying as a man while still having a female body. Cromwell discusses that a "female-bodied man" is akin to but not the same as "man with a vagina," nor is it meant to imply women who have become men (29). The term female-bodied recognizes that biologically, from birth, the individual was assigned as female due to genitalia, chromosomes, and/or phenotype. This gives Cromwell a vocabulary to describe sex category that he says is more apt to describing the experience of transpeople. While Cromwell utilizes this language explicitly to help express and describe the varied manifestations of being transgender, his terminology is equally relevant and important to use in discussions of gender more generally because as Cromwell notes, these terms signify sex while also making a "move away from generalizations and toward specificity and the equal marking of females and males" (30). These terms also allow for discussions of the physiology of sex without the baggage of biological determinism that woman/man

or even female/male imply. Most importantly, defining sex categories as female- or male-bodied allows for the acknowledgement of an individual's physiology without necessitating the alignment of that individual to a corresponding gender identity. This leaves room to keep in consideration issues of embodiment specificity (such as how one's lived experience is also changed and shaped by one's materiality—discussed further in chapter 3). As such, these terms acknowledge what is natural—that being one's physical self—but do not limit what can or cannot become of that natural material.

This approach better compensates for the limited terminology available to discuss the relationship of sex, sexuality, and gender as they relate to one's gender performance. Instead of the binary of man and woman, the continuum from masculine male-bodied man to feminine female-bodied woman as the expected normative categories opens up the possibility of masculine female-bodied men (like Cromwell), feminine male-bodied females, feminine male-bodied men, and so forth. While this terminology is still limiting, and still does not adequately describe some bodies—such as a person born male who had breast implants but not bottom surgery or hormone replacement therapy, or a person born female who had top surgery (double mastectomy) and HRT but not bottom surgery—using the terms male-bodied and female-bodied allows for a degree more of specificity. This versatility is key for discussions of cosplay and fandom communities as there are so many varieties of combinations expressed by these communities. Even if a cosplayer identifies as cisgender, there are myriad possible non-normative combinations that can be addressed when their own gender identity and expression is merged with that of the cosplayed character. The continuum of male-bodied and female-bodied allows for the ability to recognize a given combination of traits and to break down the stereotypical

expectations of that combination, as well as the ability to depict how and why a non-normative combination exists and can be accepted in a normative manner within the larger fandom community. Practices that encourage greater awareness and use of body specificity is critical since despite the increasing normalization of queer identities in pop culture, there is still the tendency to conflate sex and gender and problematize non-normative gender expression. Even well-meaning and progressive causes frequently fall back into heteronormative patterns despite their best intentions.

CONCLUSION

Riki Wilchins notes that the fight for gender equality has centered around the aim of a “different but equal” philosophy, within which people are recognized for their differences without being discriminated against for the same (12). Most notably seen in the feminist and gay activist movements, “different but equal” attempts for equality fight to gain equal access to public activities such as working and marrying for their respective constituents. But despite the success of these movements, they have rarely addressed underlying social struggles with gender. Even as women have been increasingly able to move into the workplace and men are increasingly accepted in the domestic sphere, Wilchens notes that “women in suits and ties or men in dresses still make us profoundly uncomfortable” (14). Additionally, while homosexuality has become more publicly acceptable, it has only managed to do so by conforming to heteronormative standards. Wilchens notes that only performances of homosexuality that matched existing behavioral gender expectations were accepted. Being gay was fine as long as one did not come off as a fag, and being lesbian was only permissible if one did not come off as a

dyke. Those who expressed their homosexuality while breaking the conventions of their gender found their sexuality continued to be treated as a matter of personal shame, with the inability or unwillingness to remain within gender norms viewed as analogous to not being able to master toilet training (24). Encouraging an awareness of body specificity is an important step to take toward breaking stigmas of shame because bodies can be treated on a more equal plane that is a step removed from institutionalized concepts of heteronormative gender norms. Cosplay both addresses the need for more body specificity as well as performing a diversity of gender expressions in public through cosplay performances within fandom conventions.

Cosplay disrupts the stability of consistency that feeds into standards set by institutions of normativity, such as heteronormative gender norms. This is because within a set shared space there can and does exist a diversity of gender expressions as performed through cosplayers. Cosplay as a practice encourages this diversity of gender expression because its underlying principle is play of identity, gender being of the aspects of identity that gets engaged with. Cosplay produces performances where male-bodied cosplayers dress as princesses and sorceress and female-bodied cosplayers dress as knights and warlords. All of these performances can be done by the individual and engaged with by the community within a shared space. The combination of these three entities creates what Jacques Derrida calls an “excess.” This excess is the potential of meaning that can shift, be reinforced, or re-written between a word or physical thing and its meaning (75). Derrida’s work examines how changes in linguistic meaning happen, as in the meaning of a word or different readings of the same text. These different shifts of meaning occur because there is a gap between the thing signified and its meaning. In this gap, there is

potential for meaning to shift depending on outside factors. In the case of institutionalized heteronormative gender norms, these norms can become destabilized and shift, sometimes in anticipated ways, but sometime not. Cosplay's display of a diverse array of gender expressions creates this excess of gender, destabilizing heteronormative assumptions of gender.

At a given convention one can find the extremes of gender expression, a male-bodied person performing as a traditional masculine persona to a female-bodied person performing traditional femininity as well as a male-bodied person performing that same traditional female persona or a female-bodied person performing traditional masculinity. The presence of such extremes, and all sorts of variations in between the spectrum, causes a destabilization of heteronormative gender norms because there is a clear display of multiple bodies that perform narratives that do not abide by the gender binary. Therefore one cannot make immediate assumptions about the character or sexual identity of the person as traditionally are made based on the connection of body to gender performance. The fact that this all occurs within a set, shared space is a key, defining point of this phenomena. Whether one cosplays or not at a convention, the engagement with the diversity of gender expression is imminent and convention attendees are faced with those questions of gender expression. For some people this engagement might mean immediate acceptance of such diversity in their community, for others it might mean questioning what such diversity means for self. However, since overall, the convention space is seen and treated as a place where the diversity of gender expression is welcomed, attendees find themselves in a community that ritually comes in contact with and having to engage with that diversity, hence repeatedly having to deal with questions of gender.

The destabilization of gender norms does not destroy or get rid of gender, but it complicates it and produces a scenario where gender needs to be treated and considered with more specificity. Through examining the particular connection of the cosplaying individual, the fandom community and the convention space, this project seeks to better understand what factors encourage and sustain such a diversity of gender expression within a community.

The breakdown of this dissertation project is as follows. Chapter Two deals with current studies done with gender and cosplay and how it fails to capture best the kind of gender play that is occurring in cosplay. Instead I argue that rather than classifying cosplay as a kind of subversive gender action, it should be approached as interdependent ritualized activity that encourages and sustains the diversity of gender expression. Chapters Three and Four break down the specifics of what factors contribute to that encouragement and sustain of diversity. Chapter Three centers on the individual's performance of cosplay, looking at how the concept of play is what allows for such variation of gender expression to occur with the dressed body and performance of cosplay. Chapter Four turns to how the qualities of the convention space facilitate the success of diversity of gender expression in the community as well as how the fandom community itself has contributed to how diversity of gender expression through cosplay has thrived. The last chapter provides a short conclusion that looks beyond this project to where studies of gender and cosplay can possibly go next.

CHAPTER II
COSPLAY AS A STUDY OF DIVERSITY OF GENDER EXPRESSION RATHER
THAN OF SUBVERSIVE GENDER ACTION

“Utopian fantasies can provide an important first step toward political awareness, since utopianism allows us to envision an alternative social order that we must work to realize and recognize the limitations of our current situation.” Henry Jenkins¹

INTRODUCTION

The activities of fandom culture provide an escape from the limitations of daily life. As one fan noted, sci-fi and fantasy provide an escape to an ideal: “I wasn’t very happy with my world as it was and found that by reading science fiction or fantasy, it took me to places where things were possible, things that couldn’t happen in my normal, everyday life” (Jenkins 94). By extension, fandom communities frequently bond by celebrating that which is fantastical and out of the norm. Celebration rituals such as cosplay work to bring at least a part of that fantasy into a lived and— in the particular case of cosplay— embodied reality for participants. Cosplay and its fandom communities are therefore what Henry Jenkins refers to as “utopian fantasies” (94). Within the space of a convention, cosplayers come together to create a utopian fantasy in which they can

¹ Qtd. in Jenkins, *Fans* 94-95.

transcend or at least put aside the limitations of their daily lives, including but not limited to gender expression.

Cosplay, simply by the nature of what it is and how its practice is structured, is a performance that manifests generative potentiality. In particular reference to gender, cosplay manifests a scenario in which one's physiology and gender performance can be accepted and received as congruent with that of the surrounding community without necessarily adhering to the standards and stereotypical expectations of the world, culture, or society outside of that performance. The diversity embodied by an individual's performance is acknowledged and engaged through cosplay, thereby validating that individual's choice of identity. Cosplayers can become space pirates like Han Solo or superheroes like Superman; they are allowed to bend the gender of a character or even mix series to end up with a male-bodied cosplayer dressed as a Sailor Moon-styled Disney princess. As long as the principle of authenticity to a fandom reference is upheld, the utopian potentiality of cosplay allows for the exploration of gender and other identities. The utopian potentiality of cosplay is plausible because the possibility for a diversity of gender expression has been integrated within the practice of cosplay itself.

The importance of cosplay on discussions of gender therefore comes not from its ability to subvert or reinforce gender norms. While it may do so, the real cultural import of cosplay comes from it being a practice that has made visible gender diversity a possibility within an environment where that possibility can develop into potentiality. As will be explained in chapters three and four, this arrangement is dependent upon the performances of individuals and communal ritualized practice taking place within a shared physical space such as the convention hall. Nevertheless, current studies of

cosplay have focused too intensely on the individual's involvement with cosplay through a linguistic lens. Shaped too much by Judith Butler's theory of performativity, these studies have cut out the involvement of the larger social system on readings of how individuals navigate gender expression as well as their impact on the larger community that engages with them. In order to better capture and understand how cosplay is a practice that encourages diversity of gender expression that is interdependent on the larger social structure of fandom, a study of gender of cosplay must examine cosplay as an embodied practice rather than as a linguistic sign that is signified to subvert. Additionally, current studies have failed to fully flesh out the influence of play as an underlining factor as to why diversity of gender expression can and has been manifested through cosplay. Finally, a Butlerian approach to cosplay neglects to address the interdependent nature of how individual cosplay practice, community engagement and shared communal space feed into the encouragement and maintenance of the gender diversity that has been incorporated into the larger fandom community.

SECTION TWO: CURRENT STUDIES OF GENDER AND COSPLAY

By far, the majority of studies done on cosplay through a gendered lens have been influenced by the works of Judith Butler and her concept of performativity. Butler's conception of performativity—of gender as a performed reality, something that becomes real after being repeatedly performed—builds a case for how performance can be used to identify as well as to subvert stereotypical representations of gender within culture. Butler's works on theorizing gendered subjectivity such as *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* have been influential in articulating a way to express gender formation as a

cultural production through repetitive doing. Drawing from Foucault's work on discourses, Butler argues that the body is the site of social discipline, in particular the site in which gender practices are established as normative. Discourse, as argued through Foucault, fosters gender inequalities. This phenomenon can be observed by examining the power relations in a given social system. According to Foucault, a population will ingrain social norms—typically those established by the group with the most power or privilege—by disciplining their own bodies to conform to those norms as a means by which to either derive pleasure or to avoid social punishment.

Butler's concept of performativity grounds gendered subjectivity in social construction by providing a method for understanding that gender norms are not biologically determined and are only treated as inherent or natural due to dominant discourses demanding that bodies conform in certain ways. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler addresses the materiality of the body by echoing Derrida's idea of iterability, wherein the naturalness of a gender norm is established by the continuous repetition of gendered actions, causing it to become normalized. In both of these works, the emphasis is placed on discourse and how the meanings and values inscribed on the body are created by the larger systems imposing social inequality. Butler's view emphasizes the social construction of gendered subjects, which in turn emphasizes how linguistic events maintain or change norms. Power is exhibited through the fact that people willingly police not only their own bodies, but those of others. The repeated disciplining of the body then tricks people into believing that socially constructed norms are biologically natural. Butler's explanation of gender subjectivity highlights two things. First, discourses manifest themselves on and through the body. Second, the body is the site of

social meanings that influence the social positioning of that body. Therefore, through the social policing of gender norms on bodies, gendered subjects become constituted and perpetuated through the actions of the individuals who strive for those norms.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler concedes that language and the vocabulary of linguistic signs fails to completely capture the significance of the body. Here appears the idea of “excessiveness.” This concept argues that the body can and has escaped the boundaries of language. It is within this excessiveness that discourse can be subverted by playing with alternate formations of the body. Following the approach of Derrida, Butler’s argument continues that iterability, the side effect of discourse, creates the possibility for change. The whole motivation behind deconstructing discourse is to reveal the underlying logic that has such a pronounced effect on the people who live within the discourse. Derrida describes that this logic is most frequently based in binary oppositions that are constructed to privilege one side as inherently superior to the other, as is the case with the binaries of male/female, subject/object and culture/nature. Holding on to these binaries also works to maintain a structure of power and domination of the privileged category over the other (Butler, *Bodies* 172-173). If change is to be enacted, then the dominant discourse must be subverted. Iterability then posits that if a bodily activity is repeated enough in different contexts, that subversion of the dominant meaning of that activity could incite change. Writers on gendered readings of cosplay have latched on to Butler’s notion of performativity to argue that cosplay is this type of activity—that it subverts the norms of the gender binary by disrupting them. Writers on gendered readings of cosplay have latched on to Butler’s notion of performativity to argue that cosplay is this type of activity—that it subverts the norms of the gender binary by disrupting them.

This style of gender disruption has been the primary focus of many cosplay theorists such as Craig Norris and Jason Bainbridge. These authors are quick to point at cosplay's potential to break gender binaries and provide opportunities for gender disruption. Norris and Bainbridge view cosplay as holding great possibility for gender play and disruption, and their argument is also filtered through Butler's notion of performativity. Cosplay brings into focus the performative nature of gender and how it can be interpreted and performed as a dynamic state rather than being a fixed set of notions attributed to each sex. Norris and Bainbridge phrase it this way: Cosplay is not simply the fannish act of dressing up, but rather that act of "queering" gender roles and stepping outside of heteronormative behavior through the assumption of fictional identities, and they note that this performance can be further queered by the selection of the cosplayed subject (par. 11). They cite character models like Zoltar, the villain from G-Force who exhibits gender-liminal traits that can be embodied through traditional cosplay regardless of the bodily identity of the cosplayer. These same ambiguous traits can also be further emphasized through crossplay or genderbend cosplay. The existence of such characters who lie outside of traditional gender expectations means that by bringing that identity onto oneself through cosplay, cosplay has the ability to "liberate [a] cosplayer from traditional gender role" (Par. 10). By saying this Norris and Bainbridge recognize that beyond identification and alignment with the fandom community at large, the practice of cosplay offers to the individual cosplayer a "vantage point from which the gender of the wearer can be critiqued, negotiated and explored" (Par. 11).

SECTION THREE: CRITIQUES IN RESPONSE TO BUTLERIAN APPROACH TO GENDER AND COSPLAY

Performativity has offered a helpful way of understanding gender within cosplay. Butler's notion of performativity asserts that gender is a production that is created through repeated bodily stylization and performances, with the implication that people should ideally have free reign over how they choose to perform identity. This iteration of performativity easily explains how cosplay produces and reproduces gender when one changes from everyday self to the costumed self. Cosplaying requires constant bodily stylization and performance in order to construct and convey the identity of the cosplayed character. As a foundational idea behind the notion of gender as a social construct, performativity's emphasis on gender as repeated bodily performances also helps to explain how cosplay has produced performances that lie distinctly outside of the limited notions of gender accepted by the gender binary. However, performativity is not without its limitations and struggles to account for many features unique to cosplay.

Butler's approach to performativity seeks to ultimately destabilize the gender binary through repeated behavior that subverts dominant discourse. This approach is problematic to understanding the gender production in cosplay for two reasons. The first is that Butler's analysis of gender functions on the proposition that all gender performances are evaluated as being normative or non-normative as evaluated by the gender binary, with the additional stipulation that normative behavior is accepted and celebrated by mainstream society whereas non-normative behavior is alienated and considered abnormal. This approach has in fact been very helpful for evaluating where gender discrimination can and has occurred in social systems, as can be seen through the

work of Sandra Bartky and Susan Bordo and their application of Butler's ideas to the production of female bodies and women's lives in the late twentieth century (Bartky, 1970; Bordo, 1993). Nevertheless, cosplay and the fandom community do not function under the same discourse as mainstream culture. Due to being a subculture group, many of the social regularities imposed by social classes such as gender, race, age and class do not hold the same weight as they might in mainstream society. Additionally, because cosplay as a practice emphasizes creativity under a different social paradigm, the standards set by the gender binary are not often followed so rigidly when one constructs a fandom identity via cosplay. The performances of gender that occur within the fandom community are much better accounted for by a view of gender as a spectrum, not a binary. Within cosplay, one can observe a community where traditionally normative and non-normative gender performances coexist as part of the same social system without the same degree of hierarchy found in the mainstream. Therefore, while someone who crossplays would be considered both non-normative *and* subversive in everyday society, within the context of a fandom convention, their behavior fits well within the boundaries of what cosplay culture has deemed appropriate. This means that while cosplay can be discussed in terms of performativity insofar as gender is a production created through the repeated performance and stylization of the body, arguments that argue that cosplay destabilizes the gender binary because of that fact alone are too simplistic and glosses over the complicated network of entities that work interdependently to influence the production of gender within cosplay.

The second reason performativity falters when applied to cosplay stems out of the first. Because Butler's approach functions under the idea that people are always

performing in opposition of heteronormative gender binary discourse, Butler phrases performativity in terms of examining how one's gender performance can subvert the dominant discourse. By phrasing performativity in this way, Butler effectively presents a dichotomizing system in which non-normative, or subversive, performances are privileged over normative performances that support discourse. Linda Alcoff writes, "The only way to break out of this structure [of the gender binary], and in fact to subvert the structure itself, is to assert total difference, to be that which cannot be pinned down or subjugated within a dichotomous hierarchy. Paradoxically, it is to be what is not" (417). Thus, the way to achieve destabilization is by functioning in the negative—in other words, to perform in a way that isn't already relegated by discourse. So while there is the promise of "free-play" that allows people with different kinds of bodies to be accounted for, in effect, this approach actually can be exclusionary. Hence, for the case of cosplay, this approach would not work to account for a community where both normative and non-normative gender performances are perceived, and function, as a part of the same larger community. Butler's approach places too much emphasis on identities that function in the negative and therefore is limited in terms of its scope of who it applies to.

Toril Moi puts a similar criticism of Butler's abstractness this way: "It is not clear what lived problem [Butler's theory] addresses or how the concepts help people understand and describe their experience" (15). Butler's approach provides a way for talking about those who do not fit within the gender norms, such as those from the LGBT community, but what about those who do conform? For instance, from a feminist perspective it is not clear how to talk about women who do desire motherhood yet still want to be a part of feminist politics. In terms of cosplayers, using performativity to

discuss gender in cosplay excludes those who are male-bodied yet perform traditional masculinities or those who are female-bodied yet perform traditional femininities through the character they are cosplaying. Though performativity is supposed to be more inclusionary and more aware of what factors affect gender, it does not provide a way to account for the variety of cosplay performances that are produced even within the same discourse.

With the above limitations given to Butler's approach to gender production, cosplay falls into the same pitfalls that scholars have noted about drag performance when performativity and arguments of subverting the gender binary are used in an examination of the phenomenon. Though drag and cosplay performances are not the same, they do share some similarities when it comes to the play of the dressed body and performance. Both drag and cosplay treat the body as a malleable canvas that can be shaped and reshaped to create different perceptions of the body. In addition, it is easy to align drag with cosplay by turning to an examination of crossplayers since both types of performances have a person of a certain sex performing a gender that is typically associated with the other sex. So on one hand, both drag and cosplay seem to manifest subversive potentials because the performance readily depicts ways in which gender would not be seen in the everyday (Butler 1990, 1993; Lorber, 1994; Munoz, 1999; Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro 2010). Yet on the other hand, these performances are also not completely subversive because their gender displays rely on traditional and institutionalized forms of heteronormative gender norms (Gagne & Tewksbury, 1996; Schacht, 1998, 2000; Tewksbury, 1993). Cosplay adds the extra complication of cosplayers who do perform traditional heteronormative gender through being of a certain

sex and cosplaying characters of the traditionally accepted corresponding gender. So, while performativity and subversive gender practice may apply to some cosplay performances, there is still a significant group where it would not apply as readily. Therefore, while there are some interesting non-normative gender practices happening, it is a misnomer to say that cosplay subverts gender binary norms.

Cosplay should be seen foremost as facilitating the production of a fandom identity, which may or may not incorporate elements of play with gender identity. When cosplay occurs within the fandom convention space, fan identity typically takes precedence over the expression of one's identified gender identity, though it can be argued that the latter is closely tied to the shaping of the former. As such, while many discussions on cosplay have emphasized the potential for cosplay as a phenomenon to script new gender identities and subvert gender binaries, it is difficult to make that argument as all encompassing. Nevertheless, because of the nature of cosplay, this same facilitation opens up the possibility for cosplay to be used to explore alternate gender identities and give a platform for representation for/of those who already identify with non-heteronormative gender identities. The overlooked contributions of cosplay to gender studies can thus be found not by looking at cosplay as a whole necessarily as a subversive form of gender play, but rather by examining the instances and communities in which cosplay has facilitated a form of systematizing gender diversity within a larger community while still recognizing the flux that individual identities have. Theoretical work written in response to studies done with a Butlerian approach to gender and cosplay, the emphasis on gender identity over fan identity is the biggest critique.

Joel Gn contends with arguments made on cosplay breaking gender binaries, arguing that there are “limitations to interpreting animated bodies as materializations of sexual differences,” and that cosplay “does not directly translate into an expression of the individual’s gender identity” (583). Gn’s main critique of the prolific use of Butler’s performativity to readings of cosplay is that that approach keeps interpretations of bodies and images “within a logocentric frame of meaning” (587). Gn is not opposed to reading gendered difference in cosplay, as he says “cosplay provokes one to think of gendered difference as an ongoing, mediated, and exponential process” (587). However, he feels that Butler’s approach overemphasizes the role of conscious deviance in gender play and therefore cannot adequately express the cosplay experience and its emphasis on mimetic artistry. Gn argues that rather than displaying a desire to be deviant, the average cosplayer cosplays as “playful engagement with [an] animated body,” and has “minimal relation to an expression of a certain gender identity or a conscious desire to be deviant” (587). This is because the primary intent to cosplay for most cosplayers comes from “an intense attraction toward the character to which they were exposed” (587). The primary intent of these cosplays is to celebrate, honor, or otherwise come closer to the character cosplayed, and as such, a correlation to gender identity cannot be adequately established by an approach so dependent on intent such as Butler’s performativity because the intent of the cosplay is towards a pre-existing character, not towards a concept like gender. Readings of cosplay through performativity too often cause cosplay to be aligned with arguments of breaking gender binaries and to be viewed as an act of deliberate subversion. To treat cosplay in this way distorts the stated intent of the majority of cosplays—to imitate a specific, pre-existing character—making cosplayers appear to

participate with the intent to further gender politics, when in reality, gender politics and gender play are frequently only secondary concerns if they are considered at all.

According to Gn, Butler's approach fails to factor in the interactive effect that the characters cosplayed have on the cosplayer and the audience alike, rendering it an ineffective approach to the cosplay experience. Gn aligns Butler's approach as viewing gender identity as an "essentialist form of deviance" and asks the question "are cosplayers consciously devoted to exploring multiple gender identities or are they also expressing their pleasure with the image?" (588). Gn stresses that categorizing cosplayers as deviants would be a misnomer, as cosplayers are moved to cosplay on a subconscious, pre-linguistic level, emphasizing that cosplayers and their audiences interact primarily with the identity of the character cosplayed, not with the identity of the cosplayer. Discussions of gender identity are hence better directed as readings toward the character rather than as a reflection on the cosplayer and their gender identity. This more accurately describes the experience of the majority of cosplayers, who cosplay for the love of the character and to celebrate the character and the associated show with other fans. Therefore, the social implications of cosplay designs reflect with greater fidelity the dynamics of fandom culture at large rather than those of cultural conceptions of gender.

Gn's argument also brings up problem of aligning cosplay with deviant behavior. This connection has arisen from cosplay's frequent association with Butler's ideas of performativity and her emphasis on subversive gender practices. The tensions between various subgroups of cosplayers and other groups of non-normative dress come down to the fight against gender stereotypes and the label of "deviant." For example, both straight crossplayers and gay men attempt to assert their own normativity by arguing that their

practices are different from those of crossdressers. Despite the similarity in sartorial choices by those communities, they resist association with crossdressing in order to avoid implications of political and sexual deviancy. Cosplayers in particular resist those deviant associations for two reasons. First, there is a move to get away from the idea that their practice and activities are in any way detrimental, especially when they find the primary motivator to cosplay is the fun and community elements. Markers of deviance can help one to stand out from the crowd, but they can also set one apart from the community. From a mainstream view, deviance is a quality more frequently associated with people, things, and ideas that will tear down systems rather than helping to construct a better system in its place—rather than allowing for more inclusion, deviance is perceived as leading to destruction and chaos. This perspective is manifested in the commentary of cosplayers by mainstream media. Journalist James Pethokoukis once commented his concerns with cosplay as it may show a side of people who are “disillusioned with reality” or “fleeing reality” (“Why the Rise”), and this stance is often shared by many outside of the cosplay community who view it as deviant for so closely engaging with fantasy. However, to those within the community, cosplay is held to be a practice of community building. It is a practice that depends on a cosplayer connecting well with themselves and with others. By doing so, a cosplayers insert themselves into larger conversations with other fans who also want to feel part of a fandom. While fandom participants are frequently stereotyped as secluded nerds who cannot function in a group, cosplayers show that they are, in fact, the opposite.

Second, an association with deviance has implied that cosplay is an activity that is political and laden with more subversive intention than what cosplayers actually want to

be known for or associated with. These two factors are not entirely independent—for some, being associated with political agendas could potentially lower their cultural capital within the larger cosplay and fandom community, which prioritizes having fun with the community. To use cosplay as a tool for identity politics would be seen as destroying what it means to cosplay. There is also a sense that adding a political factor creates walls and deterrents rather than building bonds within the community. Cosplayers have been known to frequently resist being associated as social justice advocates either because the alignment seems to make unwanted assumptions about a cosplayer’s self-identity or because that association robs them of the “fun” that comes with cosplay. Rachel Leng identifies these unwanted assumptions as the key cause why some cosplayers overtly stress that gender politics are not the reason they cosplay. Leng’s argument is focused on the experiences of male-to-female (M2F) crossplayers.

Leng argues that cosplay—specifically male-to-female (M2F) crossplay—reflects how larger society mediates identities across fiction and reality. The ability to transform the body through dress/cosplay to be more masculine or more feminine echoes the gender political idea from drag that gender binaries are unstable while simultaneously reinscribing those binaries. However, Leng distinguishes M2F crossplay from drag by holding that drag is geared toward “sociopolitical interventions” and typically “signifies the emergence of gay inclinations” while M2F crossplay “mimics feminine behaviors as a style of artistic self-expression representative of their aspirations as a fan, and their performances may not have integrated issues of gender or sexuality intentionally” (98). Leng makes this argument under the premise that most M2F crossplayers identify as

straight and “assert their heterosexuality” upfront, being “self-assured about [their] masculinity, but also very confident about [their] ability to convey femininity” (107).

Leng is more accepting of Butler than Gn is in that she allows that there is something in the performance of cosplay, especially that of M2F crossplayers, that complicates hegemonic norms of gender, but she stresses that the implications of such can only be taken so far. Like Gn, she states that cosplay is not an overtly political practice and should not be treated as such. Most cosplayers cosplay for fun and to be part of a larger fandom community. Leng adds to Gn’s argument that cosplayers and their audiences focus more on the celebration of a character through the dimension of craft than the advancement of a gender identity. Leng notes that in M2F crossplay, there is much crossover between the practice of crossplay and drag performances. At least for crossplaying, Leng does connect a bridge between the possible gender play in crossplay and Butler’s approach to drag and performativity. However, like Gn, she is hesitant to label crossplay as subversive gender practice. M2F crossplay seems perfect for talking about gender disruption, but Leng cautions that while drag tends to have political undertones, crossplay doesn’t necessarily. Many cosplayers engage with crossplay as a challenge to push one’s cosplaying skills that has multiple benefits if successful. Cosplaying successfully as a character of the same sex is seen as a great achievement within the fan community, but to successfully crossplay adds a layer of distinction by accomplishing a more challenging level of sartorial and performance skills. Therefore, for those who can successfully crossplay, rather than a gender statement, they have achieved an “exemplification of fan devotion and artistic expression” (99).

As much as Leng's work tries to stay out of the politics of gender, her argument inevitably comes back to issues of gender rights and why they are important to address in experiences of cosplay. Regardless of whether it is a heterosexual man or homosexual man acting feminine or a hetero- or homosexual woman acting masculine—without even accounting for transgender cosplayers and genderqueer cosplay subjects—there can still be much exception taken when an individual does not perform the gender expected of their sex. Leng highlights that heterosexual men in the cosplay community speak out against the misconception that crossplayers are typically gay, bisexual or transsexual, and are more often than not the victims of the “discrepancy between what crossplay is perceived to be like and what it actually represents” (15). Often this stereotyping comes from the frequent equating of crossplay to drag performance by people outside of academic circles. This has created much of the unjust gender stereotyping that associates gender performance to sexual orientation. The first issue this highlights is how problematic it is for people to see another dressing as a gender other than one's sex dictates. The judgement is doubled by the assumption that this problematic behavior only comes from people with non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Combined with the added stigma when male bodies visually perform in overtly feminine ways, this is an especially difficult problem for M2F crossplayers. Ultimately, the statements of the heterosexual male cosplayers underscore Gn's point of cosplay not necessarily reflecting one's gender identity. Instead, they call for more specificity when dealing with their identities, because gender is an important feature displayed through their cosplay, but it is not the defining factor of their identity as a whole.

While the community is not immune to the prejudices of mainstream culture, as noted above, many from within the cosplay and fandom community state that there is appeal in cosplay, at least at conventions, because there is a supportive community in a safe space and cite the cosplay community as generally comfortable with accepting and even celebrating crossplay and gender bend cosplay. To extend this to gender, participants have the freedom to be whomever and whatever they wish to be with the expectation that they will be treated like any other person at the convention regardless of whether one wears and performs a character that aligns with the traditional norms as expected by their gender, sex and sexuality or not. Perhaps there is something to be said about the focus being on the character and not as much on the everyday identity of the cosplayer that allows that suspension of belief and acceptance of non-normative gender performances and identities; however non-normative gender performances are observed, especially once a cosplayer builds enough of a name, and fans will take note of one's body in relation to his or her cosplay performance.

Regardless of (a)political intent, a non-normative gender performance existing in a space in which it is treated as normative is allowed to declare its existence, expressing its right to exist and be a part of a community just the same as the next person. What this shows is that rather than gender subversion, cosplay is ripe for discussion of gender diversity in a way that asks questions about how a spectrum of diversity exists within a single community. The great diversity of gender expressions promoted by the various forms of cosplay resembles less the rigidity of the gender binary and more the complexity of queer theory. As Mimi Marinucci elaborates, queer theory recognizes that life is complicated and complex. Queer studies examine ways of being that “challenge deeply

held assumptions about gender, sex and sexuality. Thus, queer encompasses even those who do not identify as homosexual (or even as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender), but find that we are nevertheless incapable of occupying the compact spaces to which our cultural prescriptions regarding gender, sex and sexuality have assigned us” (xv). As a diversity of gender expression has been seen to be more and more accepted in the cosplay and larger fandom community it is worth noting what factors allowed for such gender expression to get that kind of acceptance. It is important not just to the cosplay and fandom community, but in a larger way of showing how community with gender diversity is possible and permissible.

SECTION FOUR: AN ALTERNATE APPROACH TO COSPLAY AND THE FANDOM COMMUNITY

Ultimately, defining cosplay practice in terms of subversive action limits discussions of how gender is played out within cosplay practice and the larger fandom community. An approach that acknowledges the spectrum of gender expression, from the non-normative to the traditional normative, would better suit the kind of presence gender plays within cosplay at fandom communities. As an alternative to Butler’s theory of performativity, Pierre Levy introduces the concept of the “imagining community” to describe how a sense of affiliation emerges from an active process of self-definition and reciprocal knowledge transfer, creating something that is larger than the sum of its parts (217). Levy’s idea of community is centered on online communities, but can easily be seen in how fandom communities function at conventions. Henry Jenkins comments that Levy provided a way of thinking about fandom “not in terms of resistance but as a

prototype or dress rehearsal for the way culture might operate in the future,” recognizing that the approach of “collective intelligence” creates an “achievable utopia” (134). This is not something that “grows inevitably” from the production of some fiction, but rather a setup which must be actively worked toward and fought for. The kind of community that cosplay has influenced as well as emerged from with fandom conventions, produces a kind of community that can be viewed as a “achievable utopia” where diverse expressions of gender have been integrated and have become part of the mainstream of the fandom community.

Jenkin’s point that it this utopia must be worked toward speaks to how examinations of gender expression diversity must be grounded in practice, in this case that of the individual and of the community. The creative engagement with characters through cosplay offers what Jackie Marsh calls “a re-telling [of] narrative as a multi-modal...kind of ritual which can be used to establish social practices and identity” (42). Since cosplay, with its gender expression diversity possibilities, has come to become one of the ritualistic traditions at fandom conventions, the performance has the possibility to establish new forms of social practices and identity as well as reinforcing those that already exist. Therefore, a better way of discussing gender and cosplay is by way of discussing how culture morphs and adapts through repetition of practice and practitioners. The idea of cosplay as embodying gender expression as expressed in the notion of repeated practice is a dynamic, open-ended process—a generative structure. In other words cosplay is about manifesting a fiction—a fiction that includes gender expression diversity.

Part of what also feeds into cosplay’s ability to manifest this potential for gender

expression diversity is that it already includes characters to cosplay who are also gender expression diverse. Just as there are stories of many people who complicate and problematize the gender binary system, even within fandom exists those who do and not adhere. To add to the practices through cosplay that complicate the binary, there are notable amounts of characters who are beloved within various fandom groups—and who do get cosplayed frequently and/or by prominent cosplayers—who are known for not fitting well within the confines of the gender binary and have made openings for gender play as they are characters that exhibit gender queer or gender ambiguous tendencies. An examination of the anime series *Sailor Moon* will demonstrate how media started to authorize and validate queer identities. Twenty years later, with the arrival of the game Pokémon GO, fandom culture had normalized queer identities to the point that characters without clear gender identities were readily interpreted and embraced as queer then cosplayed as such.

Sailor Moon is a Japanese Manga written by Naoko Takeuchi in the early 1990s that has grown to be held with high regard by the LGBT community. Spawning 18 volumes and an anime series with its own cult following in the United States, it has since become a staple of anime classics within the western fandom canon. *Sailor Moon* follows a fairly traditional gender story, falling into the conventions of the mahou shoujo (magical girl) genre, in which schoolgirl Usagi Tsukino and her friends defend Earth from the forces of evil with their ability to transform into magical girls with special powers, becoming the Sailor Scouts. Like many mahou shoujo series, the characters of *Sailor Moon* reflect the norms of traditional Japanese femininity, with sub-plots focused on topics like falling in love with a boy and desiring marriage and a family. However,

each of the Sailor Scouts, while being traditionally feminine in their desire for romance and love, also exhibit traits more typically reserved for masculine characters. Usagi (Sailor Moon) is not quiet or demure. Ami (Sailor Mercury) is both smart and academically ambitious. Makoto (Sailor Jupiter) is physically strong and shows signs of being capable of aggression. These characters developed strong fan followings for breaking the traditional gender norms of the 1990s and having multiple strong female leads.

As the show progressed to include more Sailor Scouts, the LGBT community found more direct representation, as Haruka and Michiru (Sailors Uranus and Neptune) were presented as a lesbian couple, with Haruka being noted for masculine behaviors such as dressing in a boy's school uniform and using speech patterns primarily associated with men. While Haruka and Michiru's gender expression seems to reinforce a gender binary in that Haruka exhibits clearly masculine traits while Michiru is overtly feminine, Haruka's lesbian sex identity presented a complication of the traditional gender binary narrative. While this lesbianism was enabled due to a traditional pairing of masculine and feminine characters, Haruka's masculine performance in a female body attracted to another female body reinforced the decoupling of sex and gender as determining traits for a character's behavior. Though characters like Haruka and Michiru do reinforce the idea that relationships are made up of one who is "the man" and one who is "the woman," they still provide a more diverse representation of gender for fans watching the show and for cosplayers, especially if they desire a way to embody such characteristics, to emulate through cosplay.

Season five of *Sailor Moon*, “Sailor Stars,” further complicated the gender binary with the introduction of the Sailor Starlights, a trio who pose as a male idol group by day but take female Sailor Starlight forms in battle. In the original manga, the trio is depicted as merely posing as the male idols, revealing that they are biologically female once they transform. In the anime, however, the Sailor Starlights are truly trans, being actual male idols with a cis-gender masculine gender performance who transform to females with feminine gender performance when in Sailor Starlight form. As such, fan communities took the Sailor Starlights as prominent examples of transgender or at least gender-fluid representation. When people cosplay as the Starlights they have a wide range of gender expressions to choose from. Convention attendees are met with a striking statement when they get to see cosplayers who cosplay as the male Starlight pop singers next to cosplayers who cosplay the female Sailor Starlights.

Western cartoons now also have their share of gender-queer characters. *Steven Universe* by Rebecca Sugar is a cartoon currently airing on Cartoon Network that has been repeatedly praised for how it has complicated and problematized the gender binary. The show follows a young boy named Steven as he and a group of rogue alien gem warriors protect and defend Earth from other gems who desire to enslave or destroy Earth. The concept of the gem aliens complicates the gender system because as gem aliens, their biology is of gender neutral gemstones; however because of their powers they can take on human-like forms. All of them chose women-like visual manifestations, though some are very feminine women and others are very masculine women. As such, the show makes a delineation between sex and gender by showing how the behaviors and visual displays of a person do not necessarily correlate with a specific sex or the

traditional correlations between sex and gender. They also complicate the gender system further as gems are shown to be attracted to both males and/or females. What is probably most interesting is the gender play that occurs within Steven. As the titular character, his gender expressions and thoughts toward gender in many ways carry the most weight, within the show as well as for the fan base that follows the show. As the main character his ideals will be heard the most frequently and with the high probability of a large fan base, he will also have a high probability of being cosplayed.

Steven makes for a fascinating gender study because by most traditional gender binary standard, he is both cis-gendered and not. In fact he fluctuates in dramatic ways between being cis-gender male and presenting a fluid gender presentation while maintaining that he has a singular, albeit very complex, gender identity. There are moments where he can fit the cis-gendered male definition, other times where he bends it, and also moments where he completely steps into something else. Sometimes during battles, he can be the traditional male who exhibits characteristics of bravery, desire to protect family and leadership. In many ways he is definitely not traditional. Rather than being aggressive and showing strength through violence or mental superiority, Steven's approach to many problems in the show is through care and trying to build relationships. His visual performance is the most fluid factor. While for most of the show he maintains his male boy looks, due to the power of fusion, there are episode where he has a female-like body. In one episode Steven takes the place of his friend Sandy by performing a song and dance that she is supposed to perform for the town's beach festival. However, by taking her place, he does her exact dance number and wear her exact dress and makeup for the performance. What's important to note is that he didn't

have to perform Sadie's piece at all as the performance was a "special, surprise guest" performance and no one would have known what Sadie would have originally intended to perform. Still, Steven performed what would have been seen as a very feminine performance in front of the whole town as a male-bodied boy in a dress and makeup as if that were the most natural solution. In addition, and perhaps more intriguing is that the beach community that sees this performance takes it as normative. One character, Ganga, even says about the performance that it "had Steven written all over it" while everyone else is celebrating the performance by cheering and enjoying Steven's performance. Steven is a character that has given the cosplay and fandom community at large a main character who demonstrates a kind of gender fluidity that is treated as normative alongside everyone else's and if one desires to cosplay Steven, the tolerant attitude toward gender expression is an expected part of embodying his character.

A final example, *Pokemon GO*, demonstrates that in some cases, fan followings can canonize non-normative readings of ambiguously gendered characters. In a fan's "headcanon," or where the content of the game is reorganized according to the fan's narrative desire and accepted as a legitimate way to always understand the game, which on a communal scale, can manifest into what Levy notes as a "collective intelligence," as the community is a site of "collective discussion, negotiation, and development (217)." It is precisely this sort of development that occurred shortly after *Pokemon GO* was released in July of 2015. A spin-off of the main *Pokémon* series, the premise of the game is to have people walk around to discover virtual creatures in real-life settings. While the main goal of the game is "To catch 'em all!," there is also a competitive element found in the gyms, in which members of the three teams—Valor, Mystic, and Instinct—can battle

their pokémon against each other. Near the beginning of the game, players are encouraged to choose one of these teams by the three gym leaders—Candela, Blanche, and Spark. These gym leaders play a minimal role in the game and consequently have received almost no characterization, yet the fandom community quickly decided to adopt them as figureheads of genderqueer character design. Candela, sporting a pixie cut, a fashionable coat, and black stockings has been headcanoned as a butch lesbian. Blanche, in a bodysuit and a longer lab-style coat with colors similar to that of the transgender flag, has been canonized as non-binary. The androgynous but athletic Spark, who wears a hoodie and jacket over slim black pants, has also been canonized by Pokemon GO fans as a trans man. As parent company Niantic has never issued a statement clarifying the gender identities of these characters, the queer readings of the gym leaders from Pokémon Go have taken hold of fanfiction and fanart (Grobman). The ambiguous design of these characters combined with the fandom community's desire to see greater gender diversity has resulted in the establishment and celebration of increasingly diverse media models. For cosplayers, these character provide not only the diversity of gender expression and identity from which cosplay can be based in, but also shows how community engagement is important to the development of these identities that cosplayers can choose from.

The route to understanding cosplay at fandom conventions as a system that can work toward an “achievable utopia” is to approach it as practice. Central to understanding cosplay as a practice is viewing it as an embodied practice. Emphasizing embodiment should be central to studies of gender and cosplay because doing so recognizes that visual perception is one of the main proponents of gender formation. As Linda Alcoff

recognizes, all forms of social identity add to something to the constitution of self, but gender and race identities are particularly manifested through bodily materiality. Alcoff highlights that these particular social identities are “most definitely physical, marked on and through the body, lived as a material experience, visible as surface phenomena, and determinant of economic and political status” (102). Perception and visual markings bear a similar importance to the constitution of self-identity as linguistic signs do—the visual is connected to recognized meanings. Nevertheless, Alcoff is quick to make the distinction that while the materiality of the body acts similarly to linguistic signs, inviting others to discern and interpret it, it would be reductionist to imply that the meanings attached to the body as simply “conceptual items pasted over physical items” (102). Talk of perception, such as via the body, dress and performance, should instead encourage more awareness between what one sees, knows and enacts.

Embodiment is only one piece of gender identity—it does not necessarily reveal how one identifies with regards to gender, sex, or sexual identity—but it clearly demonstrates the malleability and fluidity of gender through the connection of the body to gender performance. The relationship of these two establishes the foundation for the visual perception of gender that provides the basis for social perceptions and reactions. As Alcoff says, “There is no perception of the visible that is not already imbued with value” (185). The value given by perception is quickly realized within the convention space through the reactions cosplayers receive when engaging with other cosplaying and non-cosplaying attendees. Unlike the breaking or unbreaking of linguistic signage and significance, perception is an embodied trait through which one must examine the practice of an individual to see what the individual does and can do, and also what that

individual is limited by. Viewing cosplay as an embodied practice allows for a better understanding not necessarily of how associated gender meanings are subverted or reinforced, but rather of how gender meanings can be built and sustained. This generative approach allows for cosplay to provide an example of gender diversity rather than merely of gender deviance.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the practice of cosplay shows that it does not align with the rigidity of dominant gender systems—it demands that a more flexible system be in use during the duration of the convention space, where the rules of fandom culture are able to override the rules of mass society outside of the convention space. With this in consideration, examining the development of a gender system in relation to the space, to the performance of the individual, and to the needs of the community begins to resemble more closely the system found within the LGBT subculture of ballroom (Marlon 383). Instead of viewing the cosplay gender system as being subversive or not, it is more helpful to see how the elements of cosplay practice have built a community where a certain kind of gender system has emerged (albeit its existence being deviant from the dominant mainstream gender system) that allows for gender play and provides a space where alternative gender identities are possible and a kind of gender diversity exists. When ballroom talks about the performances in its community, they make a point of defining that these performances promote a broader approach to gender, sex and sexuality at play. Cosplay, however, does not make this point, instead choosing to define different kinds of performances that have come to be accepted as cosplay, some of which happen

to fall into categories outside heteronormative definitions of gender. Nevertheless, the performance categories established by cosplay practice—cosplay, crossplay and genderbend cosplay—also function under a different gender system than what is dominant, showing that at least within the cosplay community and the space of a convention, an alternate gender system can be observed. This alternate gender system may not in all cases deliberately subvert the dominant paradigm, but there is still much to be gained by scholars analyzing the cultural production of this alternate gender system from a variety of disciplines. Elements from this alternate gender system can also certainly produce the possibility of gender subversion if taken out of the convention space and attributed to everyday space.

Despite the positive implications of the relative prevalence of gender expression diversity in cosplay, the fandom community is not without its issues. In fact, a good handful of thinkers are quick to highlight issues of sexism and racism that run well through the fandom community. Aja Romano points to the experience of cosplayer Mandy Caruso when she attended New York Comic con in 2012 dressed up as the character Black Cat from the Marvel Universe. For the most part, things went as expected for a cosplayer with a quality costume—she got excited shrieks when people recognized her character, she stopped and posed for pictures with other attendees, and answered the occasional question about how she had made a part of her outfit. She was then asked to do an interview by a group vlogging for a site doing coverage of the convention. The request was not unusual, as typically at a variety of groups documents and provides coverage for fans who could not attend a given convention. Caruso accepted the invitation, thinking it would be another round of questions asking how she like the

convention or how long she had been cosplaying for. She was not immediately concerned by the fact that the interviewer, camera crew, and much of the growing audience was male. Unexpectedly, questions immediately ignored her cosplay and sexualized her. After leading with an invitation for her to spank him, the interviewer asked Caruso, “What is your cup size?” to which she responded “That’s none of your fucking business.” Undeterred, the interviewer continued to speculate and even turned to the crowd for their take on her size. Caruso promptly declared, “This is not an interview, this is degrading. I’m done,” and walked away (Romano).

Stories about race and gender harassment are also big topics within the cosplaying community as well. Robert Grubbs posted on his Facebook page the negative reactions he’s received for being a black cosplayer. The image he posted was of his cosplay of Ash Ketchum, the main protagonist from anime *Pokemon*. Grubbs captures the main details of Ash with his jeans, blue and yellow jacket, and red and white baseball hat. He has taken some liberties to create a cool looking version of Ash, such as adding aviator sunglasses and unzipping the jacket so his bare chest is exposed, but overall he is recognizable as a version of the character. However, anyone will quickly see the big difference between Grubbs and Ash—Grubbs is a dark skinned black man while Ash is a very light skinned character. This difference is the cause of many of the derogatory comments he has received online, some of which he cut and pasted over his image of his Ash cosplay. Three of those comments included "Is the black guy wearing shades or is that just a black hole?", "Minority Weirdos," and finally "Black cosplayers are the bottom of the cosplay food chain." Grubbs takes a positive stance toward these comments as he sees himself as

a successful cosplayer despite the negative comments, and writes in his Facebook post that he is “not going anywhere.”

These examples show that the mainstream academic concerns of race and gender must be kept in mind when examining the cosplay community. Nevertheless, while these issues persist, cosplay still manages to present a system where attendees are forced to face and grapple with the concerns brought about by the visible and interactive diversity of gender expression at a convention—concerns such as the (in)stability of heteronormativity. Just as within ballroom culture, the crux of producing a variety of gender identities is centered on the performances of the individual, where the connection between body and performance is brought forward in a social system where the performances are engaged with and given value by a larger community (Bailey 372). The ritualized engagement of the community with the performers gives value to the individual’s performances, which in turn provides a place of validation for that person’s performance of gender. Examining cosplay in the fandom community also shows that ritualized practice is center to the production of diversity of gender expression as a natural part of a community’s composition. The focus placed on the individual’s engagement with a larger social system emphasizes that diversity and change are not simply a matter of subverting dominant perceptions and meaning, but also includes the range of normative and non-normative expressions and finding a community in which that kind of practice is included within the community’s routines and rhythms.

Cosplay within fandom conventions needs to be discussed as an alternate social system precisely because of the practices seen in cosplay. It must be acknowledged—both in fandom culture and the greater surrounding culture—that many

participants are not deliberately performing overt politics. It is possible that some might, but for the majority of cosplayers, the goal of cosplaying is to show one's affection for a particular character and show, or as a way to show membership with other fans at convention. However, regardless of whether a cosplayer crossplays to be opposed to the dominant gender system in western society, or genderbend cosplays in order to celebrate a beloved character, the practices and experiences of cosplay cannot be captured within the traditional concepts of gender. This dissidence therefore encourages and in fact declares that at least within the realm of a convention space, an alternate gender system is accepted by participants. At least within a western context, this system is generated by the needs of the cosplayers, the convention goers, and the phenomenon of cosplay itself.

CHAPTER III
THE BODY, DRESS AND PERFORMANCE OF INDIVIDUAL COSPLAY
PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

For those who cosplay on a regular basis, the cosplay process is a routine practice of engaging with the body as a malleable canvas on which to play out multiple narratives as based on the characters cosplayed. Cosplay offers the ability for cosplayers to play with the narratives they choose to embody. For some, cosplaying means embodying a character that is just like them, so they can highlight a trait they are known for. For some, cosplaying means embodying a character or trait they can only pursue while in cosplay. Either way, individuals are able to pursue a diversity of expressions because cosplay's foundation is play. Cosplay practice, backed by the support of the fandom community, encourages play, and this fuels the ability for cosplayers to push boundaries and explore different aspects of self and one's craft in a unique mixing of the cosplayed character's narrative and the cosplaying individual's. Gender expression is one of the aspects that, unintentionally or not, ends up coming to the forefront of cosplay practice. Whether it is through embodying gendered aspects in one's performance and bodily expression, or through how one shapes the body through dress, gender is one of the qualities of the individual that get immediately perceived and engaged with once a cosplayer performs.

The body narratives that cosplayer produce through play also produce a kind of gender narrative, and then that narrative is embodied by the cosplayer. However cosplay shows that the body itself is prone to flux, and as it is shaped, distorted and restored, the narratives can change completely or evolve. Part of this flux is due to the ease of altering dress and through cosplay, cosplayers play with how gender expression can also change or evolve due to how they dress the body. Just as one can practice the switch from one cosplay to another, performance also shows that practice can produce change. Through cosplay, cosplayers have the opportunity to engage with different gender expressions, and sometimes those performances can have lasting effects. It is also through these visible qualities of dress and performance that the flux of gender expression, and the instability of heteronormative gender norms, shows how gender expression diversity is encouraged through the individual's cosplay practice.

SECTION TWO: PLAY IN COSPLAY PRACTICE

Cosplay performance produces a unique relationship between the cosplayer and the character cosplayed, as it demonstrates with unique clarity how identities are worn, appropriated and produced. Since cosplayers demonstrably change in identity upon donning a cosplay, it is easy to see two distinct entities: the persona of the cosplayer and that of the character. However, though the expression of a character can be considered a separate entity disparate from the cosplayer, the construction is interdependent. The persona of the character is dependent on the successful incorporation of aspects of the cosplayer's own persona during formation. In other words, both personas feed off of one

another as the narrative of the character engages with the cosplayer's own narrative in order to produce the final performed identity.

In this way, cosplay is similar to drag performances. Both cosplay and drag are characterized by the production and sustaining of a distinct persona. They are therefore different from simple dress up, as one might see at Halloween. Nor are they acts of long-term identity transformation through dress and performance, which characterizes those who construct identities based on alignment with a particular subculture (punks and goths), cross-dressing, or heteronormative ideals (fashionable people). Cosplay and drag may be for a moment's performance, but the production of identity through the performed persona affects the individual's persona as much as it does that of the character. Steven Hopkins remarks about drag: "The resultant personality appears complete yet cannot exist independently of the individual who creates it. The female persona commonly highlights aspects of the male persona that the performer may not feel comfortable expressing as a male, and those the female persona can serve as a conduit for personal expression" (45). Applied to cosplay, Hopkins' argument can be read that the cosplay persona can be used to assert specific qualities of the cosplayer and bring out desired traits that cannot be expressed in typical everyday life. Through the process of play a new kind of persona is born from the interaction of the "real" narrative of the cosplayer and the "fictional" narrative of the character. This created persona is just as real as the cosplayer as it gets embodied and performed by the cosplayer at conventions.

The cosplayer's process of building a cosplay persona mirrors scholarly late twentieth century approaches that describe reality as a series of social constructs. In the modern west, identity became a predominantly individual project in which one's sense of

self was developed through the narrative one developed for self, and therefore the key to one's identity was one's capacity to maintain that narrative of self (Giddens 54). This notion of identity acknowledged that identities are often made of multiple selves that are fragmented and diverse, and that narrative creation is more of a process rather than a concept. Dorothy Holland et. al describe this process as a "self-in-practice," a selfhood that is constantly refashioning itself as an embodied self in context (32). Erving Goffman approaches this idea of identity development from a dramaturgical view, observing that one narrates a sense of self to others through the performance realized through social interactions (13-14). In essence, he describes a process in which in doing, one becomes. Arjun Appadurai describes this process of identity development as involving "the work of imagination," as seen in engagement with media, as a "constitutive feature of modern subjectivities" and has led to "experimenting with self-making" (3). The collective emphasis of these approaches on the narrative aspect of identity in a social context resonates deeply with the practice and experience of cosplay.

When cosplayers interact with texts, they are attempting as much to bring the 2D to life as to develop a stronger connection to a wider variety of personal motivations. While cosplayers express a variety of reasons for cosplaying, these reasons typically fall under two categories: craftsmanship and identity. For some, the artistic appeal of the craft and the process of costume creation are rewarding; others appreciate the development of an identity, whether that of one's self, one's relationship to the fandom community, or even to the character itself. For the most part, cosplayers tend to describe the appeal of cosplay as it being "fun" and that it gives them "pleasure and unforgettable experiences" (Pierson-Smith 99; Rahman et al. 331). It is then through this enjoyable activity that

cosplayers find validation in having the ability to express a personal identity while also feeling like they belong within a community.

Cosplay's engagement with fictional characters facilitates play, inviting participants to approach the activity of creating a character on one's personage with an imaginative presence. Aesthetically, cosplayers have to decide what kinds of materials to use as well as how to shape and construct them in order to successfully emulate the look of the character. The seasoned cosplayer must also devote several hours to the practice of the character's signature expressions and mannerisms. Many cosplay veterans find immense satisfaction in creating and achieving a cosplay that is as close as humanly possible to the design of the original character. For others, the process of creation is a call to take more artistic liberties. Elizabeth Licata, a US Cosplay Champion from the World Cosplay Summit in Japan says, "A lot of people are crazy for accuracy, but that's not interesting to me....if the construction is simple and something I've done a hundred times, it probably won't keep my attention, so I might do things to it to make it more interesting to me" (Kawamura 82). Licata aspires to make her cosplays more intricate without compromising accuracy. The sentiment of intricacy seems to be a widespread sign of skill—if a cosplay has an emblem that is beaded, these cosplayers would rather bead by hand than glue the beads to the outfit. Such a demand of technical skill is why some find cosplay to be an opportunity to showcase their abilities. For those more interested in the performance of cosplay than merely its aesthetics, gender-bend and crossplay provide a parallel challenge. The ability to successfully cosplay a character who is the opposite of one's identified sex and associated gender performance is typically read as a mark of great skill within the cosplay community.

The crux of the cosplay process is its engagement and interpretations of a given fictional text. Cosplay done well involves becoming a character so completely that attention is given not only to the details of dress, hair, makeup and accessories, but also to posture, attitude and gait (Kawamura 79). This is not typically felt to be onerous, as cosplayers typically, especially when starting out, choose to cosplay a character based on their love for that character. Sometimes this attachment comes from having grown up with a character, as is the case with long-running shows and film franchises such as the Disney princesses, *Star Trek*, and *One Piece*. Other times, a character is chosen for what they represent in the show, such as being the strong one, the brave one, or the secretly kind anti-hero. A cosplayer may also choose a character with whom they personally identify—one cosplayer reported that she chose a character because she’s “cool and strong and weak too” (Roland 151). A shared physical appearance can also determine if a character is cosplayed. Whichever way, cosplayers tend to pick characters because of a pre-existing connection—be that physical, mental, or otherwise—that serves as an outlet for the cosplayer to pursue an identity that allows for liberties. Cosplayers understand that cosplaying allows for exploration and “playing with identity [to find] their own layers of meaning” (Duchesne 18). Play is therefore expected of cosplay because reinventing the imaginative self in reality is a kind of “affective” play wherein cosplayers have to negotiate the boundaries of self with what’s “real” and what’s “imagined” (Grossberg 59). Cosplay enables cosplayers to present their everyday self in a new guise through roleplay so that “by donning extraordinary dress....play may proceed. Playing the role of the orbiter requires that the player dress out of the role or roles that are acknowledged to be his own” (Stone 31).

Studies on the connection of play to identity construction in child development are also useful towards an understanding that identity is built within practice and that play offers opportunities for transformations of self and identity development that still apply well into adulthood (Wohlwend 2009; Marsh 2005; Moje 2009). If identity is an entity in flux and can be constructed during social interaction through performance, then even adults can find ways of exploring or transforming identity if they are given spaces of improvisation and play such as are offered by cosplay. Cosplay's engagement with fictional characters facilitates play by inviting participants to approach the activity of creating a character on one's personage with an imaginative presence.

Cosplay can be understood as a kind of productive consumption, where cosplayers produce cosplay performances as a means of consuming or engaging with their media text. As Karen Wohlwend explains her take on de Certeau's concept, engaging with a multimedia text is simultaneously an "act of consumption and an act of production as consumers make sense of products and produce personal meaning and statistic uses" (44). This accomplishes several things for identity development in cosplay. First, it transforms the static images of fandom into realized actions. Second, the performance of cosplay projects play identities. Third, this kind of engagement expands opportunities for transformation as cosplayers work out their identities. And lastly, the play involved with this kind of consumption allows cosplayers to experience dissonance as they engage with a character. This often prompts cosplayer to improvise to overcome the obstacles met when dealing with bringing a 2D character to life through cosplay (76).

The notion of production consumption explains how cosplayers take up familiar media narratives, encounter limitations in the character's identities, improvise character

actions and dress, and revise story lines to produce counter narratives of their own through "reproducing and exploring, perhaps even improvising and revising, identity texts" (Wohlwend 79). This is to claim that one's life can now have a piece of this identity, to be able to embody that change even for a short moment, or to embolden something about one's identity that could not be emphasized before due to other situational factors. The cosplayer has to negotiate the discrepancies between self and character, such as if the character is tall and beefy in stature and the cosplayer is short and slight. Play in cosplay comes from considering the sex and gender performance of a character and then translating it to the body of the cosplayer. As such, the cosplayer must figure out how to best embody the desired or key qualities and personality of the character that the cosplayer wishes to display. For example, if cosplaying a brave character, the cosplayer must figure out how to translate and adapt that quality into their own body and perform it in such a way that will be recognized by other fans at the convention, regardless of how timid the cosplayer may be in their own public identity.

What is seen here in the production of identity in activities such as cosplay is described by Paul Ricoeur as how creativity via the use of imagination and play is a constitute of action (126). First, play helps determine a course of action as one can imaginatively test different courses of action. Lois McNay describes it as the "overlapping of narrative play with pragmatic play" that then an individual can evaluate to decide which course to pursue (99). Arguably, play also propelled the birth of crossplay and genderbend cosplay when cosplayers were confronted by the limitations of which characters they could cosplay due to their physical sex. This kind of practice encourages creative behavior not just as "unanticipated actions," but also as the position

of a new type of behavior, or as Castoriadis phrases it, an "emergence or a production which cannot be deduced on the basis of a previous situation" (44). This is not to naively believe that creative action and behavior, like cosplay, should equate to "goodness" or the creation of "positive values" (McNay 135). Nor is this to signify that those who engage in play and creative behavior are free agents able to will anything into existence. In fact, as Appadurai notes, though imaginative, creative behavior "provokes...agency" it is not to say that they are free agents. These are not necessarily people "living happily in a world of safe malls, free lunches, and quick fixes" but sometimes people engaging with imagination and creative behavior as a form of resistance, whether to escape for the moment a cruel reality or as a means of surviving a larger social pressures or prejudice (7). Whichever way people utilize imagination, creative behavior can be viewed as "creating ideas of change" and "staging ground for action" (7).

SECTION THREE: THE DRESSED BODY

Playing and experimenting with different narratives can already engage the cosplayer with thinking about how different aspects of identity, like gender, are produced through a practice like cosplay and open to flux. Next, the process of cosplay engages the cosplayer with the dressed body and another layer of flux is added. Much of how gender is perceived is through the dressed body, and just as it is easy to change and alter dress, gender expression is also subject to those same things. The process of dressing the body in cosplay reiterates that gender is a process that includes the body but is not dictated by it.

The way cosplay encourages cosplayers to play and experiment with different narratives also encourages the cosplayer to consider how aspects of identity such as gender are produced through practice and are open to flux. This flux is further amplified by the dressed body that is given so much primacy in cosplay. The process of dressing the body in cosplay reiterates that gender is a process that includes the body but is not dictated by it. The dressed body is one of the primary means through which gender is perceived, and because it is so easy to change and alter dress—especially within cosplay—it is consequently easy to alter gender expression. In line with what feminist phenomenologists have noted about the nature of the body, the use of the body by cosplayers shows that the body does not dictate what and how an individual should be. Instead, it demonstrates that corporeal existence has an open-ended nature, or what Lois McNay describes as a “dynamic, mutable frontier” (32). Within cosplay specifically, the body is not a docile canvas that the cosplayer can dress up like one might dress a doll. It is an active entity that works with the dress and then through performance reacts, reproduces and modifies the larger social system in which the cosplayer is performing (26).

Cosplay requires an approach to identity development that allows for a generative paradigm while centering on a conceptualization of a malleable body with regards to the construction of self. A coherent identity need not be singular, as many contemporary identity theorists suggest. Discussing the body as central to identity development helps to support an understanding of identity as multiple and embodied—an approach particularly apt for describing cosplayers who have become famous for not dressing in accordance with the expectations of their physiology. Some of the most famous and popular

cosplayers have gained their followings for performing crossplay so well that in some cases, fans prefer their crossplays to traditional, gender-conforming cosplays of the same characters. Reika, one of the most internationally known cosplayers, is known and beloved in the cosplay community for crossplaying. Others, like Hana from the Taiwanese cosplay group Baozi & Hana, have also achieved large fan bases for flawlessly emulating and crossplaying female characters on male bodies. Regardless of whether one is crossplaying or not, however, cosplay as a phenomenon forces participants to consider how to embody the identities they are attempting to construct on their own malleable bodies. Cosplayers attempt to align their existing bodies and mannerisms to match the fictional ideals of the characters being cosplayed, and yet when there is disparity between the two—such as when a crossplayer attempts to cosplay a character of the opposite sex, when a timid cosplayer portrays a flamboyant and confident character, or when a non-human character is cosplayed by anyone—the embodiment of that fiction must be adapted by the ways in which the body is formed and stylized. Models of identity development applied to cosplay must therefore account for how the agency and generative power exercised by the development of a cosplay identity are dependent upon a malleable body that can be manipulated, dressed, and made to perform in ways not confined by traditional assumptions of body and gender.

Via Merleau-Ponty's work on embodied consciousness, the body is central to describing the experience that an individual reflects on and how the individual experiences. Both of these aspects are necessary to understand how the self and the world connected to the individual are shaped. Because phenomenological accounts are typically considered from an individual as the point of reference toward the world, specificity must

be considered. There is the specificity of the materiality of a body as well as that of the psyche of the individual. Because an embodied individual is always situated within the context of the facticity of the world around it, any larger discourses that the individual is a part of must be included and accounted for. These two aspects, the individual and the world, interdependently constitute each other, and at the boundary between them, body is the “point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological” (McNay 32). The body is malleable and constructed from birth by several external factors such as dress. However, before discussing the external factors of embodiment, I will discuss embodiment via the individual and how that relates to play and identity development.

Theorizing identity as embodied means understanding how identity is shaped through a lived body—how a person is situated and actively engaged with the world via their body. If the body is held as central to the way that identity is understood, then factors that alter the body must also be understood to influence identity. As Iris Young articulates, the embodied subject lives “in tangible encounter with human and non-human others” (15), meaning that one’s embodiment is always informed by its relation to those that surround it. Elizabeth Grosz elaborates further on this subject: “The body is not simply a materiality which outruns any attempt to conceptualize it; it is actively involved in processes of change and transformation” (Ausch et al). Grosz captures the important nuance that the body is intimately involved with any sort of self-development that may occur. In other words, if something happens to the body, then by proxy, the self has also been altered. This is not to say that it is a permanent change, but like identity, the body/embodiment too is always in flux. The body is therefore crucial to the development of self-identity. The body is a site of action as well as of reaction, and it is the point

through which individuals interact with the world. Gail Weiss describes the importance of the body in this way: “We incorporate the body...in order to ground our own sense of agency and to establish our “real” presence in the world as a material force to be reckoned with” (36). This conceptualization of the body establishes that self and self-identity are open to the possibility for change and the establishment of self in a given situation.

An embodied approach allows the body to be treated as produced, in accordance with approaches to identity as a social construct. While anatomy is necessarily central to this approach to the body, it is no longer anatomy but also contextual factors that explain the consequences of having a certain kind of body. This approach furthermore weakens the associations between a body’s sex and its gender performance. When a body dressed in cosplay disrupts heteronormative standards of how sex and gender are meant to correlate under a gender binary, it is therefore useful to address and examine that body as an identity that is lived, embodied and situated in context. Discussing the malleable body in the construction of identity in cosplay is more pertinent than ever with the prevalence and popularity of gender play within cosplay. Two cosplayers in particular, Reika and Hana are excellent case studies as they have garnered massive fan followings for defying gender expectations through crossplay.

Reika is a particularly interesting case as a crossplayer because they have made a point of emphasizing the ambiguity of gender in their cosplay performance, as is reflected by their deliberate use of neutral pronouns. Reika is female-bodied, but the only evidence of such comes from old posts reviewing their work that use the “she” pronoun and comments on photos that explicitly state admiration for their work being crossplay.

Reika's current bio pages on Facebook and Cosworld carefully maintain body ambiguity by listing "neutral" or "it" any time the sex/gender category appears. Reika stresses the malleability of the body to the flux of identity production in a couple of ways. First, as cosplay is Reika's main career, they are constantly engaging with cosplaying a new character (or more frequently, several characters) every new anime season. Reika adapts to embody different identities with what seems like effortless grace—from brooding corporals to flamboyant singers, Reika captures not just the look but also the facial expressions, tonality and body language of each character flawlessly. Moreover, Reika has made a point to build their career on the point of ambiguity, politely but firmly playing down questions asked online or at conventions about their biological sex. Reika performance evokes that with cosplay, as long as you can emulate the character, the sexual identity of the body should not matter. Reika is an even more interesting case for studies of gender because while they have founded a cosplay career on maintaining ambiguity, they have also made a point to emphasize gender fluidity. Reika's reputation has been established through the consistently successful crossplay of masculine and hyper-masculine male characters, once in awhile they will cosplay feminine female characters with the same fidelity, proving to fans that Reika's versatility is unmatched.

Reika is probably most known for their male crossplay of Levi Ackermann, to the point where many fans instantly associate them with each other. Nevertheless, in 2016, Reika cosplayed Enoshima Junko from the anime *Danganronpa*, a visually hyperfeminine female character with a short uniform skirt, pink twin tail hair, and a curvaceous body. This cosplay was completed with the performance of Junko's calculating, apathetic character and signature poses. Reika's diverse exhibition of

characters points out the constructed nature of the body and identity production. Since Reika has kept their cosplayer identity carefully defined as neutral, it is difficult to make an sort of assumption of identity based on the connection of bodily sex to gender performance. Their performance shows that Reika's identity is fluid, and that they have an excellent mastery of using the body to perform gender expression in multiple ways.

In contrast to Reika, Hana is a crossplayer who has made it clear to fans that he is biologically male. While he is known for cosplaying popular male characters like Sasuke from *Naruto* and Yuri from *Yuri on Ice*, he is more remarkably known for convincingly emulating popular female characters like Emilia from *Re:Zero* and a bride version of Judy Hopps from *Zootopia*. Emilia is a hyper-feminine character. Her character design, predominantly white and lavender, includes a white flower accenting long white hair, an off the shoulder sleeve bodice over a pleated skirt and over the knee boots—all of which is accented with lace and ruffles. She is a reserved and polite character that tends to act on the shy side. By traditional gender standards, this character fits all the trope of being a female bodied character depicting a hyper-feminine performance. However, Hana complicates this narrative through cosplay by being a male-bodied cosplayer who can also successfully embody this same hyper-feminine performance, effectively creating a different kind of gender expression. Like Reika, Hana depicts how the connection of body to gender performance is fluid and flexible as he shifts from one character to another. In fact, since Hana identifies and displays his physical maleness, his crossplays can be viewed as making a stronger point about fluidity than do Reika's, as he explicitly shows that his body does not determine whether he will engage in masculine or feminine behavior and practice.

It seems almost too obvious—change the outfit, and in turn change the identity. Cosplay enables cosplayers to present their everyday self in a new guise through role play. As such, cosplay is a highly visible phenomenon, as its interactions—whether between cosplayer and character, cosplayer to audience or audience to cosplayer—are based in visible perception. This is one of the reasons gender identity is so central to cosplay, even if it is not always acknowledged as a primary intent for its practice. One of the most interesting facets of cosplay is the fact that any given character can be interpreted with a diverse array of cosplays, most commonly manifested through choices of dress. It is not uncommon to be able to see a variety of masculine and feminine gender expressions embodied despite being a cosplay of the same character. The multi-representation of a character through cosplay opens up the possibility of a spectrum of gender expressions that cosplayers can embody and in turn present to the larger fandom community to see. The issue of dress is a vital element of how bodies are lived and encountered in public space, therefore dress must be included as an integral part of the discussion of cosplay and identity as embodied.

Connecting dress to the body is not difficult. In fact, within anthropological and sociological studies of dress, that connection is a given. As Joanne Entwistle note in the opening to her book *The Fashioned Body*, “Fashion is about bodies. It is produced, promoted and worn by bodies” (1). Entwistle expands her discussion to include dress beyond fashion, but the principle stands: it takes bodies to produce dress, and it is also bodies that wear and thus further the purpose of dress. In the inverse, it could also be said that to talk about the body also means to talk about dress. One cannot talk about the body without discussing how the body and its perception have been altered by dress. To talk

about dress is to talk about the body's visuals. So just as much as to discuss dress is to observe how the body is ornamented or augmented, it is also to consider how it is un-dressed.

Anthropologists have made the argument that no culture leaves the body unadorned. Whether through clothing, tattooing, accessories, or even nakedness itself, dress is a fundamental element of social situations (Entwistle 6). Quentin Bell describes the inescapable nature of dress and its connection to the body in terms of what has been called "sartorial conscience," a constant awareness that even though there are people who might not be interested in one's appearance, they will dress at least enough to be able to be seen in public with others. As such, dress becomes so much a part of a person's daily existence that most treat it as if it were "entirely indifferent to their condition: it is as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body" (Bell 9). Even the naked body is discussed via the conventions of dress. Ann Hollander notes regarding the treatment of nude bodies in art that "art proves that nakedness is not universally experienced and perceived any more than clothes are. At any time, the unadorned self has more kinship with its own usual dressed aspect than it has with any undressed human selves in other times and other places" (xiii). Even the naked body is subjected to the demands of situation—time and place provide the conditions upon person as to how they should engage with their own body and the bodies of others, an engagement that is always filtered through how the bodies are dressed or undressed.

Entwistle argues that different practices of dress "raise phenomenological questions" about the nature of consciousness of self, and that "if dress is varied and always 'situated,'" then "it might be that there are some moments when the act of getting

dressed constitutes an unreflective act” while at other times “the act of dressing is brought to consciousness and reflected upon” (31). This is clearly true of cosplay as the cosplayer has to plan and decide exactly how to dress their body and in what kind of dress. Sometimes it may be as straightforward as buying pieces straight from a store that are similar to the clothing of the character that already come shaped for the cosplayer’s body type and size. More often than not though, even if cosplayers are able to source pieces of clothing ready-made, they must be thoughtfully altered and/or embellished to fit on the body in the precise manner dictated by the cosplay subject to produce the desired look. Achieving that look may not be as easy as just putting on the right clothes. Dress refers to anything and everything put on the body to embellish it for the cosplay performance. This includes wigs, make-up, armor, shoes and heels, outrageous wigs, or even power packs to make sure LED lights running up and down the body flash as needed. Cosplay is not always comfortable, and cosplayers adjust and rework their bodies to accommodate the costumes that they are wearing, whether that means figuring out how to jerk the body so that robotic arms look natural, bending the body in unfamiliar ways so that a skirt can sit and drape off the hips in a manner reflective of the cosplayed character, or even just figuring out how to walk in a restricted costume. It is for these elements of dress—everything beyond the obvious clothing—that Entwistle’s argument that it is necessary to study dress as connected to the body and as an embodied practice is pertinent. It is not enough to say that there are meanings placed upon clothing. Those meanings must be held in relation to the meanings ascribed to the body and its interdependent relationship to its dress. Only then can embodied identity development be properly described and accounted for. For cosplay, understanding how meaning and

value is produced through a relationship of body to dress is especially appropriate as the value of one's cosplay is determined not just on how well the body is dressed, but then how that dressed body interacts with others at conventions.

Fred Davis notes that one of the most fascinating and problematic parts about dress is that while dress carries meanings, these meanings are ambiguous and imprecise—though part of the power of dress lies in this very instability. Therefore, while comparing dress to language in terms of its ability to communicate is a valid approach, it cannot be held as a straightforward 1-to-1 equation (27). This is especially true when dress and dress practices are observed in everyday public spaces. The linguistic approach of signifier and signified becomes too constricting in this context, especially if the meaning of the sign is meant to equate to the self. Talking about dress is as much a visual negotiation of a symbolic system as much as it is how one's own gender expression is altered because of that negotiation. The process of doing a genderbend cosplay depicts how this kind of negotiation is dealt with by the individual.

Genderbend cosplays occur when a cosplayer wants to cosplay a character of a different sex but transforms the dress of that character to match the gender of the cosplayer. For instance, if a female-bodied cosplayer wishes to cosplay as Batman, she might adapt Batman's bodysuit to fit the curves of a female body but keep everything else—the cape, the equipment—identical to the original Batman design. She might also feminize the design by wearing a skirt over a leotard paired with tights and boots in a similar style. Visually this costume will retain Batman's original color scheme and detailing, but in this case the cosplayer has appropriated more feminine-associated dress. The spectrum of diversity for a given character tends to be particularly wide for

characters from highly popular media or from long-running franchises. For instance, a Google search for “Disney princess cosplay” will reveal that cosplayers have adapted the Disney princesses into every imaginable style. Some have reimagined the Disney princesses as warriors with customized armor and weapons while others have grouped together in swimsuits or maid costumes. This amazing variety multiplies even further if genderbend and crossplay variations are included. Genderbend cosplays of Disney princesses typically include vests and pants in the signature color scheme and motif of the princess. Doing genderbend cosplay will still say the same lines and perform the same key actions as postures as the character, though they may adapt their body language to gender performance associated with their physical sex.

Cosplayer Kelton of KeltonFX, for example, is well known for his genderbend cosplay of *Sleeping Beauty’s* villain, Maleficent. His genderbend cosplay takes the dominant features of Maleficent’s costume—the black outfit with purple and magenta trimming, the dramatic high collar, black horns and a staff with a green crystal sphere on top—and gives them a twist. While he keeps Maleficent’s horns and staff identical to the original, his costume opts for a fitted black and purple bodice with a belted jacket over it, black pants, black over the knee leather boots and a long cape. Rather than the body concealing robe that Disney’s Maleficent wears, Kelton’s bodice sports a dramatic, low V, which exposes part of his chest. Paired with the pants and should accentuating metal shoulder pads, Kelton’s Maleficent dons clothing masculine associated clothing that also emphasizes the features of his male body.

Even though this may seem like a reinforcing of heteronormative associations—as in Kelton’s case a male body wearing masculine dress—it is important to recognize that

the borrowing of these stereotypically “female” or “male” dress and actions by a cosplayer with a non-corresponding body type to the original character demonstrates variety within the spectrum of gender performance. Not only does this expose the flux between the body and gender performance, but it also shows that the stereotypical actions associated with one kind of sex-to-gender-performance correlation are now being disrupted by the performance of that action being embodied by and successfully exhibited by a different sex. If much of how one expresses and experiences self identity is communicated through dress, then dress—particularly for those in crossplay or genderbend cosplay—re-emphasizes the malleability of the body as well as the embodiment of one’s experience of that particular kind of gender expression.

Race presents an interesting dynamic to the discussion of body malleability and cosplay. On one hand, discussions of cosplay also need to be aware of the race issues and debates that have surfaced due to cosplay. This usually occurs when someone lightens/darkens skin in order to achieve a closer visual look to the character cosplayed or if a cosplayer cosplays a character with a different skin tone than the character. Tumblr personality Yamino is frequently quoted in debates over white people cosplaying characters of color when they (neutral they) stated, "Skintone is not a costume." Their statement opposes cosplayers darkening their skin with makeup to match a character with darker skin, echoing the sentiment of "black-face" when they call this kind of cosplay doing "brown face." However, not changing one's skin tone can also be seen as problematic. If a dark skinned person cosplays someone who is light skinned, then the cosplay can be seen as not being accurate. Or, if a light skinned person cosplays as someone who is dark skinned it can be labeled as whitewashing (Bravo). These examples

show that tensions revolving around race and cosplay do exist and these can bleed into discussions of gender production. However, overall the attitude at conventions from cosplayers and attendees seem to suggest an overall acceptance of diversity as a major stance at conventions. Like the advice cosplayer Voodoo Howyacall gives, "Do you love a particular character? THEN COSPLAY THEM. This is YOUR time to shine." She says this as a black person cosplaying, and because for a long time she hesitated from cosplaying because of all the horror stories of black cosplayers being shamed and called out for being a black cosplayer or being a black cosplayer. In many ways the the attitude toward race is similar to that of gender: if a cosplayer can accurately embody the spirit of the character, then even if skin color and complexion or body type aren't the same as the original character design, it is negligible. The evaluative qualities used to evaluate cosplay authenticity tend to stress the importance of embodying the character through dress and performance rather than through the attributes of one's body; however, when dealing with gender and cosplay, it is important to understand that these attitudes toward race can and have also influenced reactions and understandings of gender production, and is important to keep in mind because they add another layer to the evaluation and validation of cosplay by the community as well as the effects these evaluations have on the individual and his or her identity development via cosplay.

SECTION FOUR: COSPLAY PERFORMANCE

For many who consider themselves cosplayers, this transformation of identity is not a one-time affair. The performance of cosplay allows cosplayers the ability to engage with multiple body narratives through cosplaying different characters over a short period

of time. For some cosplayers this also means engaging with a diversity of gender expressions as well. Shifting from cosplay to cosplay means also shifting how the body is posed, how it acts in public and how it reacts to the larger social system. Since cosplayers take painstaking efforts to embody the character cosplayed, performing as the character, or their version of the character means repeating how that character would perform over and over until it becomes part of the cosplayer's natural movement. Hence, embodying the performance associated with one kind of gender expression means adapting one's body to be able to produce the correct kind of performance. If one is cosplaying multiple characters, that means that the body must also be able to adapt to a spectrum of typically gender defined actions, again breaking any kind of assumption that the body should define what kind of gendered performance a person should engage in.

While a character might only be cosplayed for one event, the cosplayer typically cosplays at at least one convention per year. As Osmund Rahman et al articulate, for cosplayers, "the image and identity of an individual is never stagnant. It is not uncommon to see many cosplayers move frequently and fluidly between different characters" (320). Those who have made careers out of cosplaying—or those who simply desire to be with the fandom community as frequently as possible—may cosplay at multiple conventions during the year, sometimes cosplaying multiple characters at each of those conventions. For instance, cosplayer Kira Masquerade typically attends four conventions over the course of a year. In general, she tries to cosplay a different character every day of the convention, though sometimes she may recycle one or more cosplays from a previous convention. For the 2016 Anime Expo (AX), she prepared four cosplays, two female characters and two male: a crossover between *Saint Seiya* and *Sailor Moon*, Neptune



Fig. 3. Day 1 of AX '16. Kira Masquerade as Midori from *Aoharu x Machinegun*. Photograph by Nicholas Ruiz



Fig. 4. Day 2 of AX '16. Kira Masquerade as Neptune from *Hyperdimension Neptunia*. Photograph by Nicholas Ruiz



Fig. 5. Day 3 of AX '16. Kira Masquerade as *Sailor Moon x Saint Seiya* crossover inspired Sailor Moon. Photograph by Ariz Guzman



Fig. 6. Day 4 of AX '16. Kira Masquerade as Speed-o'-Sonic from *One Punch Man*. Photograph by Nicholas Ruiz

from *Hyperdimension Neptunia*, Nagamasa Midori from *Aoharu x Machinegun*, and Speed-o'-Sound Sonic from *One Punch Man* (see figs. 3-6). As practiced by Kira Aina and many other cosplayers, cosplay is a routine production of identity centered on the flux of narrative play, body and identity.

Another way to talk about this embodied flux of identity is to speak of it via habitus—an approach that is particularly suited to the performative nature of cosplay. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus has been frequently used when talking about identity as a process. What he offers is a way to understand how the ingraining of habits, skills and dispositions is an embodied experience that is socially situated through daily practice. It is this process of situated bodily practice that creates the effect of fixing over time. Judith Butler uses this to express the naturalization of the body to heteronormative standards as a “laborious process” (“Gender Trouble” 95) of repeated acts. She explains how social norms are not essential but rather created, pointing out how the primacy of heteronormative socialization as the dominant discourse has consequently prompted contemporary society to perceive heteronormativity as natural and logical. Bourdieu's habitus brings an element of dynamism to this model of social construction. If people practice at being socialized in a certain way, they can also practice to perceive the world in a different way through coming into being and enacting change through repeated performances and everyday practices.

As a repeated process and performance, cosplay can establish new forms of social practices and identity as well as reinforcing those that already exist. While the actions can be seen as interrelating within some larger social structure, the performance is still produced through individual actions. Therefore, habitus can also be viewed as an active

power that reproduces the social structure and provides a way of discussing how culture morphs and adapts through generations of practice and practitioners. The idea of embodiment expressed in the notion of habitus is a dynamic, open-ended process—a generative structure. With habitus, the potential for innovation or creative action is never foreclosed. Instead, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences and is therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures (Bourdieu, *An Invitation* 133). Therefore habitus, empowered by improvisation from play, is not just a static, recurring habit; instead, it is always "skidding" and "taking off" while being powered by mass-mediated master narratives (Appadurai 55). This habitus reinforced by improvisation accounts for identities that are frequently in flux (56), such as those found within the cosplay community.

This process is something that occurs over time and is a temporal structure. As such, the body is reinforced as being dynamic and mutable. Holding identity as a temporal structure means that the development of practice takes time and occurs as a process over time. Thinking in this way, processes too can change, as can practices and habitus. If identities hinge on process and practice, then identities centered on the body must also be dynamic and mutable. The concept of habitus includes the embodiment of traits to the point that they are learnt by the body but cannot be articulated explicitly in words (McNay 104). This is a form of "practical mimesis" in which the body "believes in what it plays at" (Bourdieu, *The Logic* 73), and opens up the development of identity—gender identity included—to even the most "routine reproduction" of identity (McNay 101). What can be seen through the routine that comes out of the practice of cosplay is a kind of habitus that can cultivate the aforementioned creative behavior that

becomes ingrained in the body. Anne Pierson-Smith notes from her interviews with cosplayers that many "felt" and "behaved" differently when in cosplay and observed "behavioral changes in other players (88-89). This makes sense, considering the degree of commitment that cosplayers devote to achieving the embodiment of a character. The habitus produced by cosplay in some cases may even become ingrained sufficiently to affect the cosplayer even after the performance at the convention.

The cosplayer Zero recounts seeing another cosplayer after he had taken off his costume. He was no longer performing as the character to anyone, yet he still "[walked] down the stair like the robot character that he plays" (Pierson-Smith 89). Zero goes on to explain that doing cosplay can form habits that "just [become] part of you and... you really can't break" (89). This suggests a departure from a simple superficial identification with the character by the cosplayer. Just as the cosplay persona is dependent on the cosplay for its production, so too are cosplayers affected by the characters they choose to cosplay. For some, the embodiment may not manifest as a full transformation of bodily postures, but in more subtle terms such as how one handles oneself or a situation. Some cosplayers have noted that cosplaying a heroic or powerful character was so empowering that even afterwards, they could cope with a bad day by "mentalling assuming the role of their superhero"—one cosplayer notes that "On bad days I mentally put on my blue wig and red contact lenses and imagine that I am queen of that office!" (89). Very much like summoning a superhero to fight a battle, these cosplayers were able to recall how they had previously cosplayed a hero in order to embody that same persona to deal with an everyday situation. In this case, the transformation of identity is more than a mere

boosting of morale through imagination and belief—it is an actual recollection of what it was like for the individual to actually be and perform the traits they are envisioning.

The fact that cosplay is a routine, ritualized practice implies that cosplayers are routinely engaging in a practice of bodily flux and exploring the boundaries of diversity of gender expression. Within any one single cosplayer is the potential to engage with the whole range of masculinities and femininities as needed to successfully embody the desired character. It can be argued that the material-ness of a specific body will influence the success of an attempted cosplay experience, and it is in fact this variability that widens the possibility of what bodies in cosplay can do when it comes to gender performance. Cosplayers seem to have an awareness that their bodies are a site on which they can work and that they can transform into something else. Even though standards of masculine and feminine performance are not deterministically bound to one's nature, habitus encourages those qualities to be perceived and enacted upon as positive and normalizing for the cosplaying individual.

CONCLUSION:

A great hindrance to the responsible acknowledgement of the relationship between cosplay and gender play is the danger of oversimplification. Chimamanda Adichie, African novelist and feminist icon, notes that once after giving a talk at a university, she was approached by a student who commented that it was a “shame that Nigerian men were physical abusers like the father character in [her] novel.” Adichie herself had recently read the novel *American Psycho* and responded that “it was such a shame that young Americans were serial murderers.” With this retort, Adichie captured

the danger of what she terms having a single story. She notes that perceptions fuel our understandings of the world and of people, and that these perceptions are influenced by the narratives that are available to us. Consequently, when we only have access to or are only exposed to a limited selection of stories on a given group, the danger of the single story is not only that it may be untrue, but that it is "incomplete" and is likely to be held as "representative of all" of an identified group. Cosplay presents bodily narratives brought to attention through body, dress and performance. The production of identity is therefore in part formed through acts of perception—influenced in this case by bodily narratives. This perception lays the groundwork for identity production of self and of other. Because cosplay is so heavily grounded in perception, visual identity markers such as gender and race stand in the forefront. Unfortunately, this perception is too often colored by heteronormative assumptions that establish themselves as the basis for the production of identity.

Crossplayer Lialina says, "For me, my way to indulge in my feminine side is to crossplay my favorite female anime characters. I'm not gay, but I crossplay. I'm not trying to say that I want to become a woman, but just that I appreciate how dressing up and being a female, especially a female anime character, can be fun" (Leng 102). Lialina's comments of being a male-bodied cosplayer crossplaying very feminine characters and their personas reflect the fears of his identity being misread due to the heteronormative assumptions about identity called the principle of consistency. As summarized by Mary Anne C. Case, a "simple vision of sex, gender, and orientation sees them as coming packaged together such that once one is identified, all the rest are determined" (14). Lialina's admittance of feminine desires in a male body juxtaposed with denial of

homosexual orientation and of being transgendered demands a more nuanced view of the relationship between his body and dress than the principle of consistency allows. This is not meant to take away from the visibility of gay men who perform femininity or of straight, male-bodied crossdressers whose identities revolve around performing daily in a feminine-identified dress and behaviors, but rather to restate that while such individuals engage with similar performances associated with other genders and/or sexual identities, those performances are not the sum of any of their existences. Acknowledging diversity should not be about dividing people into groups because of their differences, but rather acknowledging those differences in a way that does not delineate immediate conclusions. Jason Cromwell describes this acknowledgement as a need for specificity. He says that if we engage with being able to communicate and think of one another with more specificity, we will be able to “move away from generalization and toward [...] the equal marking of females and males.” He adds, “It is important to recognize and acknowledge overall similarities as well as those of detail[...] Failing to recognize and, accordingly, acknowledge similarities as well as differences as diversity[...] has a coercive and regulatory effect” (30).

Is the experience of an M2F crossplayer the same as that of a drag queen, of a male-bodied transperson living a woman-identified life, or that of a female-bodied woman? It is not, which is why in examining and trying to understand each experience, the specificities of context and situation must be acknowledged. Nevertheless, there are areas of overlap between these experiences, and it is by recognizing that common ground while respecting diversity that the differences can be dealt with. Particularly within the group of cosplayers at fandom conventions, there are already so many reasons why a

cosplayer may have chosen to cosplay, crossplay or genderbend in their own way that the display of body and gender performance presents only one part of the cosplayer's identity narrative, and even that narrative is in a constant state of flux. Lialina, for example, can be identified as a male-bodied individual who is able to and finds enjoyment from embodying feminine aspects. However, remembering specificity compels the analyst to recognize that this does not necessarily say anything about sexual orientation. As for gender identity, a specific gender identity can frequently only be concluded from more information than is typically on display by a given cosplayer. Acknowledgement of this difficulty does not mean that discussions of gender and cosplay should be disregarded or considered as ambiguous, but rather that more extensive connections should be made before meaning is attributed to one's perception of self or other. Recognizing that identity is in flux and that there is much diversity in gender expression—especially in relation to the body and performance—should promote an awareness of the instability of heteronormative assumptions about gender.

This recognition is why it is so important to have multiple body narratives visible and thriving within a situated space. The presence of multiple body narratives promotes greater awareness of diversity, and with more awareness of diversity, discussions can attempt to prompt for greater specificity—in this case, specificity of body to gender performance. There is a need to approach identity as being specifically grounded in embodiment and situation. Diversity displays how similarities and differences intersect, and it is at those intersections that people must take note of how they as individuals engage with one another in order to achieve the ideal of being able to share space despite personal differences. The presence of multiple body narratives—not just in the diversity

shown through the presence of multiple characters, but through the presence of multiple kinds of embodied performances—is needed for the recognition of variety and diversity as they are actually lived through people. It is then a matter of learning to engage with the specificity of an individual experience. In the scope of the convention center, cosplay reflects—in fantastic, otherworldly ways—the basic tenets of social living. When individuals encounter and have to share space with others who are different from themselves, how do they engage with one another in ways that are respectful and constructive? Dealing solely one’s visual performance, individuals must negotiate what their perception of another’s performance means. Whether being more specific with the treatment of one’s self or with others, recognizing specificities is the beginning of acknowledging and living with diversity.

While the creative efforts of the individual are central to the ability for diversity of gender expression to thrive as an individual practice, it is equally important for it to have a social system that allows for growth. Two key components of this system—the physical space and the social community—are usually forgotten in discussions of gender and cosplay, and yet it is these two that have enabled gender diversity to thrive within cosplay. Cosplay demonstrates that diversity of gender expression can be normalized if it is given a space in which it can become accepted through communal ritualized practice. Within such a space, diversity of gender expression is given value by the community and becomes treated as normal behavior. Even as gender diversity becomes “institutionalized” by and within a community, cosplay’s inherent emphasis on creativity and creative performance will allow for diversity of gender performance to remain a central possibility without becoming hegemonic.

CHAPTER IV

THE SPACE AND COMMUNITY AROUND COSPLAY PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

As an act, cosplay is performed predominantly by individuals, but as a practice, its ritualization is interdependent on the larger fandom community that must consistently give it a place within its communal rhythms. Once ritualized, cosplay can work to encourage and sustain diversity of gender expression because the community gives to cosplay practice—in all its forms—value, validation, and a physical space in which it can thrive. It is this interdependent relation of individual and community factors with the space itself that keeps the diversity of gender expression sustained. Even if an individual’s practice provides an opportunity to play with a variety of gender expressions, that individual will not necessarily continue to perform in that manner unless there is a community that will embrace or tolerate that form of expression and a space within which that expression may be performed without the need to seek out permission or the fear of being shunned. An individual’s gender expression may be in a state of continual flux, or what Lois McNay calls a state of “permanent revision,” so for a non-normative kind of gender expression to have any lasting force beyond a single, individual performance, it must have “some impact on social structures” (193). Cosplay has managed to achieve this impact because as a practice it emerged out of the

already-developed social system of fandom communities. The social changes that happened as a result of the emergence of cosplay therefore found within its parent fandom community a space to expand and grow while receiving communal validation of the diversity of gender expressions from individual cosplay performances. More specifically, the phenomenon of cosplay has come to be able to sustain diversity of gender expression because its ritualized practice within convention spaces has established places within which individual practices of diverse expressions of gender through cosplay can be and are validated by the social structures of the fandom community at large.

SECTION TWO: THE FANDOM COMMUNITY AND OTHER SUBCULTURE COMMUNITIES

The community structure of cosplay and the fandom community resembles that of many other subcultures. The fandom community is a kind of tribal or “liberated community” that determines its identification and basis of communal membership not by a set geographical location, but rather through shared emotions, styles of life, and consumption practices through which commitment to the community can be ritually manifested through activity (Mesch and Manor 504; Cova and Cova 597). Compared to mainstream culture, these types of communities have a higher respect for individuality and a higher tolerance for diversity. Because the community is brought together by similar experiences or shared activities rather than by a belief system, the community is not necessarily restricted by the typical social boundaries of gender, race, age, or class. In some cases, such as with the goth and punk subcultures, being brought together on

common ground results in what is at least a visually homogenous community. Goths, for example, are known for sticking to dark clothing while punks define themselves through anti-establishmentarian behavior. Nevertheless, the cosplay community defines itself through such a broad shared interest (enthusiasm for any fandom subject) that it ends up being characterized by diversity itself.

Unlike the punk, hip hop and goth subcultures that restrict themselves to specific looks and personas attached to their cultures, behaviors, and beliefs, cosplay is based on a culture that is defined by the near limitless number of characters that have been and are being made to choose from. Even with these options, as explained in the previous chapter, each character can further be modified and customized so that a wide variety of performances can be realized through cosplay while still staying true to the original source. So whether it is the diversity of an individual's cosplay practice or that of the fandom community at large, diversity (including diversity of gender expression) has been established as part of the foundation of the practice of cosplay, thus keeping variety an open possibility and visible diversity as a constant and accepted practice for individuals and the community alike.

Another factor that sets cosplay and the fandom community apart from other subcultural groups is that cosplay is extra dependent on having a space in which to cosplay. While the clothing aesthetics of punks and goths may stand out from the casual wear around them, they can still be found in everyday spaces like the mall or in a restaurant. Cosplayers, in contrast, don even more extraordinary outfits that would not be accepted outside of the convention hall due to concerns of either practicality or public perception (Rahman et al 334). More fundamentally, the cosplay performance is

dependent on a certain kind of communal interaction that is unlikely to be found outside the convention space. Osmund Rahman et al note that central to the practice of cosplay is that cosplayers are able to find a “comfortable space in which to express themselves” (333), without which cosplay will not occur.

SECTION THREE: THE INTERNET

Pierre Levy has noted that one of the major spaces that has aided in the explosion of fandom communities worldwide in the early twenty first century is the internet. The internet provides connection to many other people who also may be a fan of and celebrate a particular fictional work as well as access to those fictional works and the kind of fan production that comes out a fandom like fanfiction and cosplay. The internet gives geographically disparate people the ability to create online communities that are focused on “the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary culture” (Jenkins 137). Some of these communities are so developed that one could envision why the online community could and have replaced IRL, or in-real-life, communities. Cosplay is no exception, as much of the information about how to cosplay, who cosplays, and what cosplay performance looks like, is circulated through the internet.

Both internet space and convention space provide places where people can come together from all over the world and celebrate the things they love about fandom, including cosplay. However, internet space only allows certain kinds of engagement with cosplay to occur. On the internet people can have access to a variety of gender expressions, but it will not be as immediate or necessarily diverse. People’s accessibility

to cosplay on the internet is filtered through a media lens which may or may not showcase the kind of gender expression diversity that is possible. For instance, if a person does a general Google search for “cosplay” the search will yield the most popular images of cosplay at the moment, which may or may not have a variety of gender expressions. If a person becomes a fan of cosplay because of a particular fandom or a particular cosplayer, again, the exposure of cosplay will be mediated through what that person may find about cosplays of that fandom or what cosplays a cosplayer will choose to post. Unless the cosplayer is already someone who engages with a variety of cosplay styles, the viewer may or may not be exposed to different kinds of gender expression through cosplay. Another way that people encounter cosplay is through cosplay “music” videos that cover a particular event. If someone missed San Diego Comic Con and wanted to see what kind of cosplay happened there, a cosplay “music” video would present a montage of cosplays that happened at the convention to the background of some catchy tune. A quick search on Youtube produces dozens of videos just for SDCC and many more for the hundreds of other conventions that go on around the world. Just as different news channels will cover news with a particular slant, so is the coverage of cosplay. Depending on who covers the event, a viewer could get multiple impressions of what cosplay at that event is like.

A second reason why this study emphasizes convention space of any other place where cosplay occurs is because of the kind of engagement that occurs between the individual and community within this space. While people can view, admire, and comment on cosplay online, there is a lack of the ritualized performance that occurs at

conventions. At fandom conventions¹ attendees, cosplaying or not, are seen interacting with each other in particular ways. For the cosplayer, there are certain expected performances, like posing for the camera, and also impromptu ones that no one would think otherwise of. The impromptu performances, sometimes between cosplayer and another cosplayer or between cosplayer and non-cosplaying attendee, produce the kind of ritualization that allows for gender expression diversity to continue and thrive. An important convention community characteristic to take note of is that conventions can be a family event. Whole families come to fandom conventions, and sometimes families attend doing a group cosplay, or at least each comes in a cosplay of his or her choosing. Either way, by being in the space, the whole family gets exposure to the diversity of gender expressions at the convention whether they want it or not. This is a kind of immediacy and the ever present sense of shared space that a person will not get from exposure to cosplay on the internet. One cannot filter who will be seen, or what kind of gender expression one will come across at a convention. Also, it is less likely online that a person will get to see the immediate reactions of others in the community to cosplay. At conventions it is all about cosplayers interacting with the community around them and vice versa. Since this kind of interaction is achieved best in the convention space, that is the site of the fandom community which will be focused on.

¹ I am referring specifically to western conventions in this discussion. For instance, in Japan, cosplayers have a specified space within conventions in which they can do cosplay, pose for pictures, and have other attendees meet them. However, in the United States, cosplayers roam the convention halls like any other attendee. Cosplayers can wander with other attendees in the hallways, walk the exhibit hall or attend panels while in cosplay. In this situation the cosplayer, regardless of what kind of gender expression he or she exhibits, participates in conventions in the same space and in the same activities as everyone else.

SECTION THREE: SPACE

Space is an important interdependent factor that must be discussed during identity production along with the relationship of an individual and a community's influence. Cosplay in particular needs a location where it can thrive, and this has been provided by the convention space. Regardless of whether a convention is in Brazil, Korea, Germany or the United States, there are certain elements that one expects to see at a fandom convention. Cosplay is one of those key elements, and many people attend conventions in order to cosplay or just to be able to see and interact with cosplayers. The position that cosplayers hold within the fandom community calls for viewing them as embodied social agents, or as a person a part of a social space. Social space is not just the abstract concept of the context of the large social structure that an individual is a part of, but literally the physical space where social interactions occur. The space of fandom conventions—typically a city's convention center or somewhere with an equally large and open event space—is transformed into a place that is open to both cosplayers and the fandom audience, allowing for the interactions between embodied characters and a participatory audience that is integral to the practice of cosplay. The convention hall provides more than just a space to observe cosplayers, it provides a space in which cosplay can thrive in its many forms.

Space is a symbolic structure that is often overlooked by scholars, but it maintains just as much influence as communal pressures or individual will/volition. It is often forgotten that without a space in which to exist—a space to call one's own in which to feel at ease—identities cannot be forged or sustained. Control over a particular physical environment is just as effective a way to control social order as policing social

aspects like gender or class expression (Cromwell 102-103). While the space itself may hold no inherent influence, it develops value and meaning through the actions that occur within it, and these values are able to exert that influence. As Yi-Fu Tuan puts it, “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value (6). This transformation from abstract “space” into a “place” that is defined, shaped and understood by some sort of meaning can be made through a number of means. Sometimes events, like wars, give significance to a place. Other times meaning is established through usage, such as when a library is built on a site, which causes people to understand that that space has become a place of learning and research. At base, the meaning of a place is constructed as people interact with a space—it is produced through the “needs and functional rhythms of personal and group life” (178). Simultaneously, a space that is shaped by people also creates and imposes criteria that shape those same people.

Space is much a part of the social structure as the community. If space is interdependent with identity like community is, how a space is shaped will also shape the individual and the community that shape it. By this logic, if gender diversity is part of a practice, its continued embodiment and ritualized practice is in part due to the space in which that practice occurs, or more importantly, in which it is allowed to occur. While it is ultimately people who actively shape a space, the space itself must be shaped in a way that it will have the ability to facilitate whatever values and traditions the individual and the community wish to promote if they are to be successful. In this case, the cosplay and fandom communities need a space that socializes and facilitates

practices that encourage and give value to non-heteronormative gender practices.

Cosplay has found such a place within the halls of fandom conventions.

The convention space itself must also be understood as being interdependent on the individuals and community that act within it. While the space is shaped by the fans and convention staff who set up and structure the convention, the space also has the ability and even the tendency to shape the needs and experience of the fandom community. The convention hall provides the formal space necessary for the development of individual and communal identities. As individual cosplayers and their cosplayed characters are brought into interaction with others, the fandom community as a whole finds within the convention hall a space in which their shared ideals and beliefs are celebrated and given worth as a community. The typical convention provides sufficient space that convention goers can mingle and feel together as a unified group in a single space, thereby shaping their communal identity, which in turn informs how the space is produced for future events. Following in the logic of Henri Lefebvre, Kristen Simonsen phrases this aptly by saying that "bodily practices...give rise to socially constructed modes of space and time [that] are at the same time definitions of selfhood internalized within the body" (2). In other words, the space shapes the community which shapes the space.

In a more literal sense, space defines the access and limitations given to a person, thereby defining who is allowed to be a part of the community that inhabits the space. For example, for someone in a wheelchair, having a ramp to gain access to the front door of a restaurant is an immediate sign of whether that establishment readily accepts disabled people or not. While it may be policy to not discriminate against

anyone, unintentionally, the space itself can define that people in wheelchairs cannot gain access to the services offered in that place unless a ramp is provided. In an analogous way, cosplayers and their practice may be excluded from certain spaces unless certain provisions are put in place. For the cosplayer, this can take the form of having hallways that are large enough to hold the size of one's costume or the presence of pathways that make it easy for one to move in one's cosplay from one side of the convention to the other while still accommodating the hundreds of other attendees in the same space.

Conventions aim to provide enough space that convention goers can mingle and feel together as a coherent group in a single space. This can pose a significant challenge, as many conventions around the United States draw in tens of thousands of attendees yearly, and the largest conventions like Anime Expo and San Diego Comic Con have drawn in over 100,000 attendees each. In these cases, organizers have had to rent out the entirety of the Los Angeles and San Diego convention centers respectively. Such large crowds are attracted by the many fandom-specific events hosted at conventions. The biggest attractions include the exhibitor's hall, where convention goers can purchase products of their favorite shows; artist alley, where fan art is always a big draw; one of the many guest panels, where attendees can see a special guest from the industry who has come to speak, such as voice actors, actors and actresses from movies and television, singers, directors, animators or comic book artists; and of course there are also a variety of special topics panels offered around the convention space, along with special events such as concerts, competitions and dance parties. Altogether, the convention space is designed to hold both fans and activities and becomes a welcoming

place for any who celebrate in kind. As cosplaying has become a more staple activity at fandom conventions, conventions have begun to react to cosplay as well. There are now panels dedicated to Cosplay 101, how to build garments and weapons, and how to use materials commonly used among cosplayers (such as worbla for armor and weapons²). Also, it is no longer uncommon for a convention to have at least one special guest who is a leader or well-known persona in the cosplay industry or community at large. As such, the cosplay community and its ideals are given exposure and credence in the convention space.

Most importantly for cosplay, the convention space is open for use for cosplay-specific events like the masquerade competition and meet-ups. The masquerade is a pageant-like event for cosplayers to show off their costumes in a more dramatic setting and compete, often involving short skits or mock fight scenes and such. Meet-ups are fan-based and often arranged by fandom—cosplayers cosplaying characters from that fandom and those who want to see those cosplays gather together at a certain place and time to marvel at each other's work, take pictures and meet others who share their love of that fandom. For instance, if someone posted that there was a Sailor Moon meet-up, anyone cosplaying as a character associated with the Sailor Moon original Japanese manga, the animes, or some kind of mashup of Sailor Moon with something else (like Disney princesses costumed in a Sailor Moon style) could show up. In addition, anyone interested in seeing Sailor Moon cosplays will come to marvel at the variety of cosplays and the sheer amount of people cosplaying as certain characters.

² Worbla is a type of non-toxic thermoplastic. Worbla is a popular armor and weapons material because it is lightweight, moldable and paintable.

While there is an exciting sort of interaction that takes place when a convention goer and a cosplayer interact, there is something perhaps even more exciting that happens when cosplayers of the same fandom come together. It is here where nerds get to be nerds with other nerds. When entering a convention space, cosplayers expect to have the ability to celebrate their craft and their fandom and meet others who share their enthusiasm. They can be loud, they can be excited, and they can wear outlandish outfits and strike dramatic poses. It is not uncommon that cosplayers from the same fandom will, as if on cue, burst into improvised performances based on the characters they are cosplaying. For instance, if a cosplayer cosplaying the character Vi from the game League of Legends runs across a person cosplaying Jinx, it would not be weird or questioned to see the Jinx cosplayer start to taunt and pretend to shoot the Vi cosplayer with her giant bazooka gun. In turn, it would be expected that Vi would retaliate using her gigantic mechanical fists to punch back at the Jinx. This is because in the game world Jinx is a criminal figure while Vi is from the police force, meaning they are natural rivals. Convention goers who watch this performance and recognize the characters might join in by cheering for the side they want to win (perhaps due to their love for that character or character type, or because they themselves frequently play that character in the game). Because the convention space is organized to allow room for these interactions and improvisations, the hall becomes a powerful symbol and statement that cosplayers and any practices associated with the cosplay activity—including gender diverse performances—are accepted within.

The convention space signifies a gathering of people who have come together to express themselves through cosplay, which also implies the possibility of gender

diversity that cosplay entails. By knowing that the space exists for the purpose of a fandom convention, cosplayers can have ready expectations of how that space will receive them—in this case, anticipating acceptance and value. With this kind of setup, the convention space becomes what Jeffery Segrave terms “symbolic refuge,” or a place where a person can get away from the “quotidian drudgery...of [one’s] daily existence” (61), and where the individual identity may not have as much leeway to perform gender as one would at a convention. The convention space is a site of ritualized interactions that establishes a celebration of gender diversity as one of the shared values.

Fandom convention spaces further promote the diversity of cosplay because they are a kind of “festival” space, that is to say, they have the ability to be a space of flux. Depending on how it is being used, designed and decorated, the convention space can be adapted to a range of events and activities. As such, the space exhibits what Lefebvre calls “festival”: it is a site of “participation” where the “possibility of poesis,” or creation, produces “new situations from desire and enjoyment” (Simonsen 11). More often than not, when people are asked why they cosplay or attend cosplay conventions, they respond that it is “for fun,” usually with others. Along with the generative activities as described above, this creative energy is transferred to the space as well. As such, the convention space’s identity as a place of festival is inscribed and reinscribed as it is used for festive activities, and by doing so, people come to expect a certain type of energy from being in that space. For newcomers to the community, this can be a hopeful thing, as the expectation of festivity can lead people to want to be a part of a community in which they can explore elements of self identity through dress while also being part of a larger membership.

Because the ritualized practices of the cosplay community have established convention halls as symbolic refuge from everyday performance and as a festival space in which identity is in flux, fandom conventions are discussed in terms of the carnivalesque—as a time and place where the traditional rules of dominant society, such as the traditional assumptions about and performances of gender, do not apply. As tempting as this approach may be, reading cosplay exclusively in terms of the carnivalesque fails to satisfactorily account for the vast array of cosplay performances from those who do break gender norms as well as from those who still perform under them. Readings of cosplay through postmodern performativity share this weakness. Looking at the convention space through festival, however, better captures the generative influence of space on identity and how space and community contribute to the sustaining of gender diversity in cosplay. Being able to see a genderbend Jack Frost conversing with a Queen Elsa cosplayer who might in turn run off to another part of the convention with a Snow White crossplayer, only to see those same cosplayers appear as different characters the next day shows not only that gender fluidity exists within the convention space, but that the community has crafted the space into a place in which that kind of flux of play and creation are accepted. While some cosplays fit within the realm of traditional gender norms, others clearly do not. And yet because the community privileges first and foremost the gathering of individuals within a shared space to celebrate a common interest in fandom, forms of play such as gender diversity have come to be accepted and perhaps even expected, or at least anticipated. Because the community has created a habitus that is inclusive of the possibility of gender diversity within the space of the convention hall, those within the fandom community as

well as outsiders can come to anticipate that gender diversity will continue to occur within such a space.

SECTION FIVE: COMMUNITY

A cosplay individual's interdependent relation to the larger community is the other major factor that impacts the kind of gender expression diversity that emerges from the cosplay practice. The main identity a cosplayer develops is their fandom identity—how they fit within the larger fandom community. Cosplay's part in developing a fandom identity is unique in that it develops a dual identity with the individual and the community, as explained by cosplay's role in identity development. Cosplaying provides a kind of “corporeal duality” simultaneously “expressing a visibly communicated difference from other non-cosplayers” while also “signaling group identity as the member of a variously costumed neo-styled tribe” (Pierson-Smith 81-82). Through the material flux of dress and performance, cosplay is able to express both individual and collective identities and ideologies, which play off of both cosplayers and the community around them. While the dressing of cosplay engages the individual, the community is also responsible for the making of a successful cosplay performance as it is the entity that validates the individual's performance. However, before turning to how the community validates a cosplay individual, it is first important to examine the kind of unique relationship between the individual and the fandom community.

While cosplayers are certainly drawn to cosplay by the possibility to assert one's identity as part of the larger fandom community, cosplay is also particularly appealing because it grants the cosplayer a degree of agency over what that identity will look like

and by extension some sense of self-identity. For cosplayers, these options are vast, from choosing to cosplay predominantly characters from *Pokémon* or from *Batman*, to deciding to cosplay only characters whose costumes are of a favorite color or becoming known for taking creative license with the characters through crossovers or gender bending. Within a social context in which these choices are considered not only plausible but appealing, cosplayers are granted the freedom to more easily make choices that would fall outside of the norms of everyday life. In the case of gender and the fandom community, the limitations in association with gender practice hold far less pressure than in the mainstream, which means the individual can pursue identity development and exercise agency more freely than they might anywhere outside of the fandom community, resulting in, for example, decisions to genderbend a favorite character to match one's body or to cosplay a character whose expression of masculinity or femininity differs from one's own. Within the cosplay community, the opportunity to claim agency over the formation of one's identity is pursued with the acknowledgement that gender play is an accepted part of the equation.

Cosplay's ability to encourage and sustain gender diversity is directly supported by this ability for individuals to exercise autonomy while also claiming membership within a larger community. This may seem counter-intuitive at first, as autonomy is usually associated with individualism and a separation of the individual as a self-reliant entity a part of a community (Mackenzie and Stoljar 6). It is thus helpful to understand the connection of the individual cosplayer to the larger fandom community through terms of relational autonomy. This approach to autonomy is based on the supposition that people need autonomy to flourish at the same time that they are socially embedded.

Therefore, their identities are produced through having an agency in a “world of interacting and interpersonal agents” (10). This means that as individuals, people are able to exercise agency over a range of “significant options” (26). These options are limited to and by the social context in which the individual is found; however as significant options any of them can have significant meaning to the individual.

Therefore, even if the options are limited by context, the individual can still fulfill the need for autonomous choice. Fortunately for cosplayers, the social environment of cosplay encourages a massive range of options, offering not only the entirety of fandom culture, but also creative adaptations thereupon.

Particularly at large fandom conventions, attendees are guaranteed to be exposed to a diverse selection of varied performances of myriad characters from many series. Touching back on the concept of excess, the perceived deviance of a gender bending cosplayer is less startling when within just a few feet there are others dressed as robots or fantastical beasts. Reactions to cosplays at a convention are expected to range from “fascinating” to “weird and creepy” (Rahman et al. 323) There is an acceptance that cosplay is likely to appear in all of its forms, so the sight of male-bodied cosplayers dressed as princesses or female-bodied cosplayers dressed as warlords do not invoke the same reactions of “consternation” or “rebuke” that could be anticipated in another context (Pierson-Smith 193). For the most part, convention goers expect that diversity is all part of fandom convention fare, and cosplayers come to conventions with the expectation that their performances—whether gender-normative or not—will be accepted as such. In fact, sometimes choosing a non-normative performance works in the cosplayer’s favor if for no other reason than the appeal of novelty. Sometimes the

spectacle of a particular cosplay will compel convention goers to ask for a photo or inquire about that choice, but most frequently, the success of a cosplay as evaluated by the fandom community is not by novelty, normativity or spectacle, but instead by authenticity.

Rahman et al. define authenticity within the cosplay and fandom community as a “display of interest, affection, and involvement [to/with the character]” (327), and this display by the cosplayer is shown to the public through visual and narrative authenticities. Visual authenticity (the physical attributes of a costume) and narrative authenticity (the mimetic and performative aspects of a cosplay) are the standards by which cosplayers and audiences alike evaluate the success of a cosplay. Validation based on these criteria garners community recognition and respect as well as legitimizes the cosplayer as a fan of that fandom. This form of validation is, as Zubernis and Larsen phrase it, accruing of “cultural capital” (Lynn and Larsen 30). Even for those who play with the traditional boundaries of cosplay, the fandom community is likely to accept and celebrate any cosplay that can be recognized for its technical merit and performance. For an activity-based community like cosplay, merit is central to the accrual of cultural capital and is garnered by having substantial skill at a given activity. In the case of cosplay, merit promotes those who can perform successful cosplays based on the factors of authenticity listed above. Since identity formation and gaining recognition within the community is based on an individual’s merit and the response of the community to the cosplayer’s work, the activities of cosplay have the ability to start bonds that surpass traditional gender, racial, age, intellectual and socioeconomic boundaries and can create personal empowerment for the cosplayer and lasting attachments to others in the

community. The emphasis on merit also promotes the continued enabling of gender diversity in cosplay because fandom identity and membership are contingent upon authenticity, and as established above, authenticity in cosplay is not contingent upon gender or a particular gender identity, and in the case of crossplay, authenticity may in fact directly promote non-normative gender performances.

Cosplay performances must be validated within the setting of a community. When a cosplayer attends a fandom convention, the community is responsible for evaluating how successful the cosplay was and how accepted and respected it will be within the community. Much of the time, the interplay of the individual and the larger community is shown through the ritualized practice of taking photos of cosplayers at conventions. As a cosplayer walks through the convention space, they will often be

called out to by convention attendees who will ask if they can take a photo of the cosplayer. In response, the cosplayer will/is expected to strike a pose fitting of the cosplayed character and is then



Fig. 7. From left to right. Cosplayers Standesu, Miso Tokki, Potat0piece, and Tenderbroembrace posing as *One Piece* pirates Mihawk, Crocodile, Shanks and Buggy. Photograph by Valdenis Iancu

photographed (see fig. 7). This sequence of events will repeat dozens upon dozens of times within the duration of the convention. The more successful (usually meaning more spectacular) cosplays will immediately draw a crowd of other attendees who hope

to also catch a photo of the cosplayer while they are already posed in character. For some cosplayers, it can then take up to an hour just to walk down a 100 foot hallway, as they are constantly being stopped by one group of convention attendees only to be stopped again for another photoshoot only a few feet later.

The fandom community is also responsible for validating behavioral elements of a cosplayer's performance. One way validation is done is by interacting with cosplayers as if they were their characters. For instance, if a pair of cosplayers decided to cosplay Steven and Connie, two major characters from the show *Steven Universe*, a convention attendee could very well strike up a conversation with them merely from knowledge of the show. The attendee might say, "Hey! Let's see Stevonnie!" who is the fusion of Steven and Connie. In the show, fusions are performed when two characters dance in time with one another in order to fuse into a brand new character who possesses traits of both original characters. In such a case, veteran cosplayers could respond to that call by waltzing together right where they stood in the convention hall, then striking a pose that would symbolize that they had fused together, mimicking the mechanics of fusion from the show. This performance would elicit claps and cheers from the attendee who had requested the performance as well as from any other onlookers who happened to be around. It is this kind of cosplay performance and community interaction that defines the success of a cosplayer's identity as well as the acceptance of that identity within the fandom community. Cosplayers are evaluated on their ability to prioritize and mimic the identity of their cosplayed character, and because of this expectation, non-normative gender performances through cosplay can also be ritualistically validated.

The character Teemo from the game *League of Legends* exemplifies how the communal prioritizing of successful character performance can allow for the validation of non-normative gender performances. Teemo is a small, squirrel-like character who wears a signature green hat with red goggles. While Teemo cosplays all borrow these accessories, a Teemo cosplay is equally recognized by performance. Teemo is considered one of the most frustrating characters in the game as he deals considerable damage to his opponents, but is fairly hard to kill because his moves are sneaky and stealthy, he is able to move quickly, he can attack from a distance, and he can leave mushroom bombs in his opponents' paths before hiding himself a safe distance away. Because of this kind of game play, Teemo has earned the nickname "Satan" amongst many in the *League of Legends* community. Regardless of whether Teemo is cosplayed by a male-bodied or female-bodied cosplayer, they are validated not just for their costume, but for successfully embodying the obnoxious persona that Teemo has come to be associated with, such as performing sneak attacks on unsuspecting convention-goers. Typical responses from convention attendees who are familiar with *League of Legends* are to yell "It's Satan!" or "Get away, Satan!", an interaction that the Teemo cosplayer can continue by pretending to sneak attack again or by snickering and dashing away. This kind of interaction would signify a successful performance, as both parties—the cosplayer and the convention goer—will have engaged one another in a way that shows that they both understand the *League of Legends* narrative as well as the jokes and ideas of the larger fandom community and have in turn acknowledged each other in a fun impromptu game. Jinx, a more visually feminine character from the same game also known for being mischievous and pulling pranks, is also likely to

provoke similar impromptu games with spectators, even when cosplayed by male-bodied cosplayers. Encouraging character performance in this way also encourages gender diversity to continue, as such characters can be portrayed by both male-bodied and female-bodied cosplayers and still successfully engage with and be validated by the larger community.

The engagement of cosplayers and convention attendees as outlined in the above paragraph comes back to the idea of gender as interactional achievement by Candace West and Don Zimmerman. However, unlike in the case of Agnes (see Chapter 1), where Agnes performed femininity to visually fit normative standards of gender, cosplay presents gender as fluid and interactionally achieved. While sometimes gender expressions through cosplay will fall into the categories outlined by traditional gender norms, they are not fixed, as a cosplayer has the opportunity to shift from one character to another over the course of a convention, or cosplay a character that explores a side of gender that the cosplayer may not pursue on a daily basis. By interacting with the larger fandom community at conventions, the cosplayer's gender expression (normative or non-normative) has the chance of being validated and hence, successful. Gender through interactional achievement via cosplay is reinforced by standards set by character emulation rather than normative gender categories. As seen through how cosplayers play with a fictional character through cosplay, a given character is not necessarily fixed to a particular sex or gender. Cosplay shows that gender expression cannot be fixed to a category. Instead, gender expression is continuously produced during social situations and is negotiated through the interaction of the cosplayer with other fandom convention attendees.

A final important communal factor that promotes the diversity of gender expression in cosplay is the presence of a diverse array of individuals in positions of influence within the cosplay community. Because cosplayers can gain prestige in the fandom community through the merit of their cosplay, it is possible for a diverse array of influential cosplayers to take the stage and set the tone for the rest of the community, and indeed, such has been done. Cosplayers worldwide—like Reika and Hana in Asia to others not discussed within this project such as Yaya Han (United States), Kaname (Japan) and Kamui (Germany)—have made names for themselves by developing signature styles of gender performance through their cosplays. These cosplayers have been asked to speak at conventions on cosplay topics and to be ambassadors of what cosplay can be. Having diverse figures in positions of influence within the community is then reflected by the attitudes of the community at large. As summarized by Yassmin Abdeil-Magid, it is from these places that influential perceptions of a given group are derived and then enacted upon by the larger community. These places of influence set standards and give voice to the important issues and beliefs that a community should be aware of, and their representation of a given social group gives power to that social group as well as defines what that group can be capable of. Those who inhabit positions of influence within cosplay have been able to promote diversity of not only their own gender expression, but that of the community around them.

CONCLUSION

Gender diversity is an active practice. While people may acknowledge its possibility, for it to fully exist within a community takes the active and habitual

participation of both individuals and the social structures around them. This is accomplished through a community's rituals—the activities that are used to solidify and establish social values and identities (Marsh 41). Just as the individual's cosplay practice produces a habitual engagement with the flux of gender production, so do the community practices that involve the individual cosplayer produce a ritualized communal practice that routinely encourages the ideal of gender diversity for individuals and the community alike. Cosplay performances, as ritualized within the fandom community at convention spaces, have established gender diversity as a value, one that can foster bonds and pride for individuals and the community that engages them. These elements and social agents play off one another, brought together and connected by the physicality of a space that has been made open to such play. Altogether, it is the active, matched interconnectedness of individual practice, community structure, and supportive space that keeps gender expression diversity alive and thriving through cosplay.

As a practice, the individual's cosplay process leading to the performance at conventions, and the performance at the convention itself, are best discussed as a kind of embodied habitus. In order to emulate a character for cosplay, cosplayers must repeatedly engage with how characters' personas mix with their own. This is through a combination of translating how the character's dress would fit on the cosplayer's body, and also through how his or her body can emulate the character through body actions and poses. Therefore, through the course of practicing before a convention, and then when performing at a convention, a cosplayer must repeatedly engage with the character in order to best emulate him or her. Sometimes this cosplay practice means engaging with

gender expressions that are not typical of the cosplayer, and sometimes this can even lead to practicing gender expressions that are not considered normative, such as through crossplay and genderbend cosplay, according to traditional understandings of the cosplayer's sex. The malleability of the cosplayer's body shows the instability and limitations of normative fixed gender categories in terms of accounting for the diversity of gender expressions as seen of cosplay at fandom conventions.

Cosplay displays that gender diversity, as an active practice is a multi-entity production that involves the individual, the surrounding community, and a supportive space. An individual provides the majority of the performance through the dress and emulation of a character through cosplay performance. Sometimes cosplay can provide interesting commentary on the gender binary because of how a cosplayer has chosen to play with the relation of his or her body to that of the cosplayed character. However, not everyone cosplays in ways that subvert the gender binary. In fact, when one observes cosplay at fandom conventions, the chances are more likely that the observer will find a spectrum of gender expressions from those who fit within normative gender categories and those who do not. Hence, it is more beneficial for anyone studying cosplay and gender to examine this phenomenon within the communal setting and a shared space where the community as a whole demonstrates an excess of gender expressions unique to cosplay as experienced at fandom conventions. Therefore, the phenomenon of cosplay at fandom conventions better lends itself to gender being examined as a product of specific interdependent interactions rather than fixed gender categories.

Finally, as the above demonstrates, cosplay encourages and sustains gender expression diversity because it is routinely practiced not just by individuals, but also with

a larger supporting community. The encouragement and sustainability of gender expression diversity in cosplay derives from the fact that cosplay has been ritualized within the communal rhythms of the fandom convention. Cosplay, as a ritualized communal event, guarantees that the individual, however he or she chooses to cosplay, will have a place within the community structure. The spirit of cosplay at conventions tends to focus more on character emulation rather than any particular social category like gender, race or age, and as such, the success of a cosplay is grounded in how authentic a cosplayer can make his or her cosplay. With authentic emulation being the measure of standard, all cosplayers have the opportunity of engaging successfully with the surrounding attending fandom community through impromptu performances with other convention attendees, the practice of posing for pictures, or even just the simple nod of acknowledgement from a passing fellow fan.

CONCLUSION

FINAL THOUGHTS ON COSPLAY, GENDER, AND PERFORMANCE

The primary aim of this dissertation has been to explore how the phenomenon of cosplay has been able to produce a diversity of gender expression due to its emergence from within an activity-based community that emphasizes creative play. This creative energy is manifested through cosplay as an active practice which allows gender diversity to not only be realized but also sustained as a distinct possibility. Cosplay may therefore be understood as a phenomenon that destabilizes the gender binary—its active practice engages cosplayers and their audiences alike, encouraging them to interact with performances of gender as productions within a spectrum rather than as natural consequences of an immutable binary.

Membership within the cosplay community is determined by a shared interest in the fandom community and its activities—other identity concerns are naturally subordinated beneath the primary concern for the relationship between the cosplayer and the characters they cosplay. Combined with the communal emphasis on creative play, this dynamic finds little use for the gender binary's prescriptive ability to discount non-normative gender performance as unnatural or wrong. Instead, as evidenced by the reception of a wide variety of cosplays, crossplays, and genderbend cosplays, the cosplay community acknowledges that allowing gender to be produced and perceived as

pertaining to a wider spectrum helps cosplayers to produce the best cosplays possible. Furthermore, cosplay's occurrence within convention halls has given cosplayers a space in which to experiment with diverse gender performances without fear of the consequences those performances might provoke outside in the mainstream. Because cosplayers develop not only character identities but also their own fan identity, cosplay promotes a freedom of expression for participants far beyond the constraints of the gender binary and encourages audiences to engage with these diverse performances.

Cosplay has been able to provide the means for gender play because the practice itself is founded in that very act. As one already chooses from a range of "significant options" to cosplay—those being any character from fandom culture—so too are cosplayers enabled to choose from a range of significant options regarding the gender expression of the character to be cosplayed, a choice which implicates the cosplayer's individual autonomy. The individual practice of cosplay gives cosplayers the ability to explore self-identity as well as their identity as a part of the larger fandom community, allowing individuals to also engage with gender expression as a central component of that practice. Therefore cosplay produces a high diversity of gender expressions that spans the spectrum extremes of masculine males of feminine females to feminine males and masculine females.

Furthermore, the space in which cosplay occurs keeps gender diversity in engagement in ways that show community bonding while also building new bonds that are in part due to that diversity. Because the nature of shared space is to come into contact with what and whomever is also in that space, attendees who come to fandom conventions will encounter an excess of gender expressions in the cosplayers and their

cosplay performances. The variety of cosplayers that attends fandom conventions—especially larger conventions—presents a spectrum of gender expressions through the combinations of sexed bodies, the visual presentations of those bodies and also the performances made by those bodies. The excess of gender expression witnessed through cosplay therefore destabilizes heteronormative gender assumptions because those assumptions fail to describe the diversity that convention attendees are compelled to witness within that shared space. Even if the engagement is as simple as walking down the hall or seeing a crossplayer across the room and acknowledging them as such, the shared space of a convention hall promotes interaction with all kinds of gender performance.

I assert that the encouragement and sustenance of gender diversity through cosplay is an active practice. By examining the relations between the individual, the community, and the space involved with the phenomenon of cosplay, this project hopes to have cast light on the circumstances that have led diversity of gender expression to not only be promoted but sustained within the fandom community. In cosplay's particular case, it has come down to the fact that cosplay has become established as a ritualized, repeated practice within the shared space of a convention hall of fandom conventions where an excess of gender expressions is present and interacting with attendees, causing all involved to engage with a variety of gender expressions while also noticing that these expressions can be and often are in flux. As this excess of gender expressions is encountered by cosplayers and audiences alike, they are encouraged to perceive this excess as existing as an integral part of a community rather than evaluating it as being normative or non-normative. The questions of validation and condemnation asked by the

gender binary can then be put aside in order to explore a much wider range of possibilities better accounted for by a spectrum of gender. Cosplay offers to cosplayers an expanded set of opportunities to explore and remodel gender expressions and to consider what a spectrum of gender means for self, especially when cosplayers engage in crossplay and genderbend cosplay. Cosplay also offers these same opportunities to cosplay observers, who are invited to engage with the full spectrum of cosplay performances and consider the implications of the performances produced by a spectrum of gender.

Since the dominant discourse within the cosplay community is more comfortable with diversity of gender expression than mainstream culture is, questions of gender such as “Is that a man or a woman cosplaying?” are able to be asked and answered in less heteronormative ways than elsewhere. While that question may initially appear to be an attempt to classify a non-normative gender performance within the confines of the gender binary, the specificities of cosplay as a phenomenon allow that same question to be asked with a wider variety of motives and answers. The ambiguities of gender leading to that question within the context of cosplay could come from an ambiguously-gendered character choice, a convincing crossplay, or a cosplay that masks the usual identifiers of gender, such as a robot or alien suit. All of these possibilities interact with cosplay’s emphasis on the construction of a fan identity distinct from but related to the identity of the character cosplayed and that of the cosplayer themselves. While “is that a man or a woman?” may still be asked with heteronormative motivation regarding the sex identity of the cosplayer themselves, the question is just as likely to inquire about the cosplayer’s fan identity or the identity of an unknown cosplayed character. When all this takes place

within a community context in which non-normative gender expressions are destigmatized or even celebrated, the question can be freed of its heteronormative implications.

The cosplay community's relationship to and validation by the larger fandom community also allows for the diversity of gender expression it produces to be sustained. The gender play of cosplay is embraced and valorized by the larger fandom community that shares its interest in mimetic fandom as they interact through their own ritualized performances. Photo requests, character improvisation, and even just admiration all bring validation and attention to the gender expression and performance qualities integral to cosplay practice. Gender expression in cosplay has managed to avoid overt politicization because membership within the community is never founded upon one's gender expression, but gender expression still inform the cosplayer's individual identity and their identity in relation to the larger fandom community. Though cosplay may not be performed to explicitly bring attention to issues of gender, when cosplay is done well, other convention attendees typically want to engage with those cosplayers, and in so doing, they encounter gender expressions that facilitate engagement with issues of gender and implications of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary. This sort of repeated ritualized practice characteristic of cosplay is what has allowed it to achieve its utopic potential rather than becoming defined as a resistance movement. Characterized as such, the cosplay community offers small scale social systems that could have positive impacts if applied to the mainstream. This approach helpfully describes that the fandom community offers a dress rehearsal of sorts for what communities in the mainstream world could become. With this in mind, when examining the phenomenon of cosplay

within fandom conventions, something even better than a dress rehearsal appears: a lived community that has promoted and sustained gender diversity through its rituals and practice. Cosplay participants and scholars alike can now start asking questions of how to transfer the progress this community has developed into other communities in order to foster a greater acceptance of gender diversity, hopefully towards ends of increased visibility of and engagement with a diverse spectrum of gender expressions.

FURTHER STUDIES

This study sets a foundation for many further studies of gender based on its interpretation of cosplay practice as a ritualized communal event occurring at conventions. Studies on diversity on fandom conventions can further analyze the diverse identities in play beyond looking for race and gender, asking questions about gender identity and sexual identity. From these questions, further studies can investigate how cosplay practice feeds into, influences, or changes how people have negotiated their own gender and sexuality. Another interesting study might examine non-cosplaying convention attendees to see if their experiences coming into contact with cosplayers have influenced their outlook on gender and sexuality, and if their engagement with cosplayers within the convention have influenced in any way how they engage with a greater diversity of people in everyday life, especially with those with non-normative gender expressions.

Because the phenomenon of cosplay has centered the production of gender in ritualized practice and the interdependent exchanges between the individual, community and space, there are a few further directions that may be taken from this project. First, an

examination of diversity of gender expression leads nicely into an examination of the genders and sexual identities of cosplay participants and how the practice of cosplay feeds into one or both of those identities. A project in this direction can better pursue how one's performance reflects one's identified identity and how cosplay performance may be used to emphasize or negate a particular part of one's identity or to test out a new kind of identity that the individual wants to pursue. Since cosplayers have mentioned that the behaviors and mental states fostered in order to complete a cosplay performance have not infrequently stayed with them after the cosplaying event itself, it would be interesting to see if anyone has used cosplay as a way to habitualize a certain kind of gender identity.

In a similar vein, another examination of gender and cosplay could take a deeper look at the relationship of convention attendees perceiving and engaging with different body narratives at conventions. While that project could see how this effect seems to feed into a tolerance of gender expression within the convention space, it would also be just as important to see how the engagement of diversity within the convention space might affect convention attendees' perceptions of gender outside of the convention space. On one hand, a project like this may show that people's expectations of conventions are so radically different than when in everyday, public space that they are able to suspend their traditional views of looking at the world and take the excess of gender performance as functioning as normal within the convention space. Results of this finding might then ponder how to expand what is perceived as the festival space within which the gender play associated with cosplay is tolerated. Alternatively, engagement with the variety of cosplay performances at conventions might also have an effect on how people perceive non-normative gender performance in their everyday lives outside the convention hall.

A second direction from this project would seek to better document the complexity of how other social factors like race and class inform the production of gender in cosplay performances. This dissertation merely touched on those subjects in order to acknowledge the complexities that produce perceptions and understandings of gender production in cosplay. Research on this topic would be well served by a better grasp of how the cosplay and fandom communities actually react to instances where race or class are brought to attention through cosplay and in relation to cosplay. It would be worthwhile to pursue examining if people are tolerant to gender and/or race bending through cosplay at conventions because that is the expected attitude of the fandom community at conventions, or if people actually see cosplay as a practice where all forms of identity can and should be explored provided that they respect the fundamental elements of a cosplayed character.

Finally, given that cosplay has shows that a kind of gender diversity can exist within a real community, it would also be productive to study how the factors that enable that diversity to exist within cosplay and the fandom community can be transferred to other social systems. If the goal is to encourage more gender diversity, the topic of such a study would focus on how the individual is engaged with ritualized communal practices and what those practices offer the individual in terms of identity production and exploration. The merit of cosplay is that the practice of cosplay itself already includes an element of identity exploration, so it would behoove researchers looking to encourage more gender diversity into a community setting to incorporate play or a stance of gender expression diversity into their production of the larger communal identity.

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APPENDIX

Photo Release Forms from Cosplayers and Photographers

PHOTO RELEASE (Cosplayer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

This release shall inure to the benefit of the assigns, licensees and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well as any party(ies) for whom the photographer may have taken said photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 3/12/17 Signature: Jaylen Brown

Address: [REDACTED]

Witnessed by (Signature): [Signature]

Address: [REDACTED]

PHOTO RELEASE (Cosplayer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

This release shall inure to the benefit of the assigns, licensees and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well any party(ies) for whom the photographer may have taken said photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: Signature: Mohal

Address: 

Witnessed by (Signature): Ben

Address: 

PHOTO RELEASE (Cosplayer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

This release shall inure to the benefit of the assigns, licensees and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well any party(ies) for whom the photographer may have taken said photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 03/09/17 Signature: *Valeria Janca*

Address: [REDACTED]

Witnessed by (Signature): *[Signature]*

Address: [REDACTED]


PHOTO RELEASE (Cosplayer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

- (a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.
- (b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.
This release shall inure to the benefit of the assigns, licensees and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well any party(ies) for whom the photographer may have taken said photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 4/25/17 Signature: 

Address: 

Witnessed by (Signature): 

Address: 

PHOTO RELEASE (Cosplayer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) described, the following:

- (a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photograph(s), in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if any or others.
- (b) The right to publish said photograph(s) in any non-profit academic publication the right to use, including but not limited to the internet.

I hereby release, release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photograph(s), including without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

This release shall benefit to the benefit of the assignee, successors and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well as any parties for whom the photograph(s) may have been taken and photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the foregoing and fully and completely understood the contents thereof.

Date: 3/1/2017 Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Address: [Redacted Address]

Witnessed by (Signature): [Handwritten Signature]

Address: [Redacted Address]

PHOTO RELEASE (Caption)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson (the individual, identifiable right and personality, known and throughout the world, in connection with the photographs) requested the following:

- (1) The right to use and reuse, in any manner and all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by direct or indirect publication with other photographs, in any form or by indirect publication, as well as using my name, in connection therewith, if these data are;
- (2) The right to publish said photographs in any newspaper, magazine, publication, etc. except, including that not limited to the above-mentioned.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson, her heirs and all others, in present and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including without limitation, any and all claims for damages of present and future.
This release shall stand in the benefit of the original, however and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well as any parties for whom the photographs may have taken and photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the foregoing and fully and completely understood the contents thereof.

Date: May 16, 2017 Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Address: [Redacted]

Witnessed by (Signature): [Handwritten Signature]

Address: [Redacted]

PHOTO RELEASE (Cosplayer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

This release shall inure to the benefit of the assigns, licensees and legal representatives of Tiffany M. Nelson, as well any party(ies) for whom the photographer may have taken said photographs.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 3/14/17 Signature: *Hysa Bunn*

Address: [REDACTED]

Witnessed by (Signature): *Aurita Bunn*

Address: [REDACTED]

PHOTO RELEASE (Photographer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 3/12/17 Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Address: [Redacted]

Witnessed by (Signature): [Handwritten Signature]

Address: [Redacted]

PHOTO RELEASE (Photographer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 3/9/2017 Signature: Jose Rodolfo

Address: [REDACTED]

Witnessed by (Signature): Nataly Campos Ponce

Address: [REDACTED]

PHOTO RELEASE (Photographer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: Ariz Guzman Signature: *Ariz Guzman* 8/8/2017

Address: [REDACTED]

Witnessed by (Signature): Angeline Mariam *Angeline Mariam* 8/8/2017

Address: [REDACTED]

PHOTO RELEASE (Photographer)

I hereby give Tiffany M. Nelson the absolute, irrevocable right and permission, forever and throughout the world, in connection with the photograph(s) requested, the following:

(a) The right to use and reuse, in any manner at all, said photographs, in whole or in part, either by themselves or in conjunction with other photographs, in any non-profit academic publication, as well as using my name in connection therewith, if she so desires.

(b) The right to publish said photographs in any non-profit academic publication she may select, including but not limited to the dissertation.

I hereby forever release and discharge Tiffany M. Nelson from any and all claims, actions and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of said photographs, including, without limitation, any and all claims for invasion of privacy and libel.

I represent that I am over the age of eighteen years and that I have read the forgoing and fully and completely understand the contents thereof.

Date: 3/13/2017 Signature: Nicholas Ruiz



Address: _____

Witnessed by (Signature):



Address: _____

CURRICULUM VITA

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AWARDS: GSU Graduate Association Travel Funding
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NATIONAL MEETING PRESENTATIONS:

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Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference,
New Orleans, Louisiana, April 2.

- 2014 “Designing Difference: Uniforms and the Formation of Identity,” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. Chicago, Illinois, April 16.
- 2012 “Clothes of Consequence: Phenomenologically Examining Fashion” Interdisciplinary Coalition of North American Phenomenologists. New York City, New York, May 25.
- 2012 “Modernist Fashion: Bridging the Tension between Art and Commercialization” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. Boston, Massachusetts, April 13.
- 2012 “Modeling Behavior: Fashioning British Identity in Eighteenth-Century English Travel Literature.” Humanities Education and Research Association (HERA). Salt Lake City, Utah, March 8.
- 2011 “Mad Clothes for a Crazy World: Analyzing the Fashion of Vivienne Westwood” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. San Antonio, Texas, April 22.
- 2011 Roundtable—“The Library and Popular Culture.” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. San Antonio, Texas, April 21.
- 2010 “Dressed to Dominate: Fashioning Female Power Politics in Young Adult Literature” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. St. Louis, Missouri, April 6.
- 2010 “Who Are You? Readings of Wonderland Icons in Japanese Manga.” La Sierra University “Natures” Graduate Humanities Conference. Riverside, California, February 19.
- 2009 “Beyond Tolerance: Examining Diversity Through Friendship in Children’s Literature.” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. New Orleans, Louisiana, April 10.
- 2009 “Shattered Mirrors: Or Why Wilkie Collins’ Independent Women Aren’t Always What They’re Cracked Up To Be.” Sigma Tau Delta ‘Reflections’ Convention. Minneapolis, Minnesota, March 27.