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The Fantasy of Embodiment: Afrofuturism, Cosplay and the Afrodiaspora

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School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Media Studies)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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Abstract

The Fantasy of Embodiment: Afrofuturism, Cosplay and the Afrodiaspora

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Cosplay, or costume play, refers to the act of dressing up as characters from Japanese manga and anime, television, film, comics, cartoons and video games. Costumes are infused with the imaginative power capable of transporting cosplayers into different realms of existence. Cosplayers step into the narratives of the characters that they dress up as. For people of colour (POC), most especially those who belong to the Afrodiasporic community, cosplay can be understood as a social experiment that creates a discursive space to play with preconceived racial stereotypes. Commonly, cosplay is described as being an expressive realm to show passion for a fandom, but by melding cosplay subculture with Afrofuturist theories on play, the power of the imagination, and the creation of alternative systems of being and belonging, it can be conceptualized as a tool that possesses the capability to (re)signify and (re)present blackness by encouraging cosplayers to take control of self-visualization. Along with building from the theoretical framings of Afrofuturism, this project makes use of interviews with Afrofuturist scholars and artists, as well as cosplay participants to interrogate the relationship between cosplay and authentic visual representation. This work culminates in a research-creation project that depicts a visual and interactive guide that expounds on how conceiving cosplay, as an Afrofuturist tool, can encourage a desire to play with embodiment to create new narratives that allow for greater expression from and for racialized cosplayers.

Keywords: Cosplay, Costume play, Afrofuturism, Afrodiaspora, Self-visualization, Play, Bricolage, Visionary fiction, Embodiment

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Introduction

The Fantasy of Embodiment: Afrofuturism, Cosplay and the Afrodiaspora is very much a project about storytelling; storytelling as a medium, as a mode of knowledge production and as a vehicle of resistance. Stories are how we come to know the world around us. We are told stories of conquest and nationhood in our academic institutions; we are told stories of sacrifice and spiritual fortitude in our places of worship, and we are told stories of ancestral lineage and cultural customs in our familial circles and friendship groups. We are told grand historical narratives about the nature of our 'becoming' that are meant to guide important decisions in our lives. Yet, as Nalo Hopkinson reminds us within the first episode of the *Cinema Politica Documentary Futurism Podcast*, "Fiction, like history, is about *who* tells the story" (Winton, 2018). It is that question of agency that informs this work.

As a black feminist scholar interested in identity, race and representation, the foundation for my research is, first and foremost, grounded in Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory. These theoretical and applied frameworks provide an anchor to expound the importance of storytelling and oppositional images as an integral force to counter repressive formations of blackness (hooks, 1992; Lorde, 1984; Adichie, 2009). Stories rely on language, a system of representation that utilizes "signs and symbols—whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects" to communicate ideas and emotions (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Thinking of language as a practice of meaning-making that goes beyond orality, forces us to look at other significant ways through which meaning is produced and knowledge is transferred. Race relies on language, whether it be the spoken or visual, to add "colour" to it. Thus, this project hones in on the language of visuality; the way in which representational images speak. It is an amalgamation of the stories I have encountered that have dictated to me how to be a black woman in Canada who is interested in fantasy, science fiction, anime and video games.

Taking control of formative narratives and distinguishing the disparity concerning who is given license to create them is what led to the genesis of Critical Race Theory. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) denotes this social constructionist framework as emerging in the late 1980s due to "post-civil rights institutional activism that was generated and informed by an oppositionalist orientation toward racial power" (p. 1260). The foundational beams for Critical Race as a philosophy, theory and conceptual critique is largely attributed to black American scholars and

activists such as W.E.B Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, who championed for the advancement of black communities, and exposed the unequal power relations installed by colonialism. Du Bois wrote endlessly about the black experience from an American perspective, transitioning to a Pan-Africanist perspective in his later years. It was through his interrogation of what it felt like to be black and exist within America at the time of Jim Crow segregation that he developed his formational theory of double-consciousness and the veil. Double-consciousness is a concept that describes the strange experience of being divided, existing as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings," forced to see yourself through the eyes of your oppressor (Du Bois & Alexander, 2018, p. 11). The veil represents a mirror that reflects how others see you. Like Du Bois, Fanon drew from his own personal reflections and experiences of dehumanization to develop a critique of anti-blackness and racism. For Fanon (1986), the importance lies in examining the processes involved in making the colonized develop an "inferiority complex…created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality" (p. 18).

Race relations in Canada are often perceived to echo what have occurred in the United States due to the country's proximity to the latter and its role as a settler colony of the British empire. Though similar perceptions and antagonisms for people of colour do exist, the overarching narrative of Canadian benevolence often obscures the struggle that black Canadians face (Walcott, 2003). Yasmin Jiwani (2006) speaks of the "reasonable person" as a Canadian national mythology which specifies someone who, among other things, "is most likely to be born in the country and who is white," complies with governmental regulations, aspires to the idea of upward social and economic mobility, and does not agitate against inequalities in reference to race or gender, or other social disparities (p. xiii-xiv). Jiwani highlights how Canada "as a nation, practises denial when it comes to issues of sexism, classism, and especially racism" (p. xv).

Canada's multiculturalism narrative helps to propagate this denial. The creed of multiculturalism is ideally meant to welcome racial and ethnic minorities and ensure their right to hold onto their cultural traditions, rituals and spiritual practices once entering Canada. In actuality, the multicultural narrative "renders people as from elsewhere and tangential to the nation state" (Walcott, 2003, p. 75); and even though Canada is a settler state filled with migrants from all parts of the world, white Anglophones and Francophones are positioned as "the founding peoples of the nation" (Walcott, 2003, p. 79). Furthermore, Robyn Maynard (2017) asserts that the way in which multiculturalism molds Canada into a steward of tolerance

and diversity, provides a smokescreen in which its history of colonization, slavery and subjugation (both past and present) of racialized communities are blurred out (p. 55).

One example of this is the widespread tale of the Underground Railroad that shepherded African Americans towards Canada in search of freedom that is prevalent in history books across North America. This story of Canada as the safety net for runaway slaves serves to displace the country's own participation in bondage, its anti-black attitudes and policing of black bodies (Maynard, 2017; Walcott, 2003; Nelson, 2016; Cooper, 2006). It nullifies the presence of black nationalists who agreed to fight alongside the British for freedom and property in Canada. It is reflective of Canada's guilt for participating in the transatlantic slave trade, segregation and discrimination; and it negates the significance of longstanding historically black communities such as Chattam, ON and Africville (Maynard 2017). Maynard (2018) stipulates that since the history of slavery and anti-blackness in Canada are obscured, African Canadians are "too frequently deprived of many of the (Afro)futurisms of [their] now-deceased ancestors" (p. 31).

Within Du Bois and Fanon's conceptualizations of race and racism, there is the plea for black people to create their own narratives as an integral undertaking to reclaim the Afrofutures that were previously denied. This is a plea that is echoed within black feminist theory, which takes up the helm for speaking about racialized oppressions and includes a perspective on gender, sexuality, class and ableism that was lacking in earlier formations of race advocacy. My own feminist awakening is propelled by the writings of bell hooks, a black feminist theorist and activist. hooks (1992) writes in her introduction to *Black Looks: Race and Representation* that one of the greatest challenges for black people when it comes to visual imagery is furthering the discussion on race and representation to think outside the dichotomy of good and evil (p. 4). To disrupt the "conventional ways of seeing blackness" there must be a goal that inspires an act of altering images while "shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, and ways of looking" (hooks, 1992, p. 4). What hooks is arguing for, then, is that one must first recognize that "looking involves relationships of power" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 9). Once the "dynamics of social power and ideology" are identified then it is possible to revamp how those images are formed to convey meaning (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 22).

Ruminating on black vs African

Since the beginning of my engagement with Critical Race Theory and Black Feminist Thought, I have used the term black when discussing African-descendent people. It is a term that "constitute[s] a specific cultural group" according to Crenshaw (2011) who chooses to capitalize the term because she positions it as a proper noun (p. 1255). The interaction that I had with Minister Faust[1], a Kenyan-Canadian novelist, educator and journalist, touched upon the matter of "what we call ourselves"—a topic I had not originally planned to address. Minister Faust made the point of stating that "black" creates a distance from space and place – thereby neglecting the landmass of the African continent and its histories. He urged Africans in the West to reclaim the use of African in their identification, dispelling the prefix *afro-* and instead preferring *afri-* because it keeps intact the link between the ancient histories of the African continent and the diaspora. This is by no means a new argument, and as Lerone Bennett (1969) points out, can be charted back to when African-descendent people were forcibly removed from the continent (p. 402).

While I consider Minister Faust's argument valid, to me, "black" points to a diasporic coalition of ideas, groupings, patterning, and bridging. This is similar to how Walcott (2003) speaks of "blackness as a discourse" where meaning is acquired by paying attention to the process of doing (p. 78); Walcott specifies that "[t]he temporality and spatiality of meaning as applied to blackness requires an acknowledgement of black cross-cultural resonances (creolization/hybridity)" (2003, p.78). For me, black does not signify a lack of place, it incorporates all places in which African descendants reside and have created cultures anew—which I find the most alluring part of the term. It highlights the constructs of race, especially when considering how black is used within North American contexts. Furthermore, it acknowledges the gap that distinguishes cultural knowledge as not being inherent, but as learned practices and rituals pertaining to the environment and worldview that one is affiliated with (Rahier 2003). Furthermore—being a champion for the natural hair movement and of the opinion that natural hair for African people is a political statement—the prefix *afro-* brings to mind the hairstyle associated with the radical activism of the Black Power and Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, "black" became an identifier that gained significant

[1] Involved as a participant for the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project.

political traction and aligned with the overarching principle of self-determination for African descendants in the West. To identify as black was to embark on an ideological emancipatory journey that championed for Afrodiasporic people to govern their own lives and possibilities (Bennett JR, 1969, p. 400). Thus going forward, to express the sort of diasporic identity that I stipulated above, I will aptly switch between the terms black, Afrodiaspora and African descendants.

The Project

The seed for *The Fantasy of Embodiment* was planted in the summer of 2016 after I read Ernest Cline's (2011) *Ready Player One,* a dystopic science fiction novel where people immerse themselves within a virtual universe called OASIS (Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation). To exist within the OASIS, users must first create an avatar, otherwise known as a digital icon that is meant to visually represent the human being controlling it. Cline's conception of a utopic virtual escape is not unique. That idea had been propagated from the inception of the Internet and its legacy continues through platforms such as Linden Lab's Second Life (Nakamura 2002). For me, Cline's most valuable literary intrigue exists within the presence of Aech (pronounced "H"), an embodiment of trans-raciality or digital passing.

Readers are introduced to Aech—the protagonist's best online friend who holds a penchant for 80s popular culture and first-person shooter games—and pointedly told that Aech's OASIS avatar looks like "a tall broad-shouldered Caucasian male with dark hair and brown eyes" (Cline, 2011, p.37). This observation is expressed with a note of skepticism since the OASIS gives its users the freedom to choose the "skins" they want when navigating the virtual terrain outside of the educational institutions. Aech takes advantage of these affordances to transform herself from Helen Harris, "a heavyset African American girl…with short, kinky hair and chocolate-coloured skin" (Cline, 2011, p. 317), to someone better representative of the title "renowned gunter[2] and the most feared and ruthless arena combatant in the entire OASIS" (Cline, 2011, p. 37).

[2] Contraction of "Egg Hunter" - One who has dedicated time in the OASIS to search for hidden messages left by the creator of the virtual platform.

Being a black woman interested in video games, the reveal of Helen offers a dualistic function: it is both a welcomed plot twist and a loaded signifier of marginality and oppression. Helen's projected persona, as she exists within the dystopic rendering of the United States in 2044 and within the OASIS, brings forth questions of identity fluidity, self-visualization, representation, and access. Cyberfeminist and technocriticism scholar, Lisa Nakamura, has written extensively on online identities and a phenomenon she designates cyber-tourism. Cyber-tourism treats race as a prosthesis that can "be donned and shed without 'real life' consequences" (Nakamura, 2002a, p. 323). However, to limit Helen's embodiment of a white male to an experience of cyber-tourism would be to erase the interlocking oppressions that she deals with daily. Not only is she black, she is also a heavyset lesbian from a lower class, single-parent home. She details her reasoning for choosing to present as a white male as something first suggested by her mother, stating that the older woman believed "the OASIS was the best thing that had ever happened to both women and people of colour" because using a white male avatar created more opportunities (Cline, 2011, p. 320). At first glance, this perception of cyberspace as a universalizing space of identity fluidity is one circulated by early advertisements of the Internet and heavily critiqued by technology scholars (Nakamura, 2002b; González, 2000).

Upon a second glance, Helen's figuration led me to think metaphorically about the functions of the online avatar, and how the experience of embodying an alternate subject position to avoid the limitations of marginality might be implemented outside of the virtual experience for Afrodiasporic people. The "fantasy of embodiment"—which is the title I have adopted for my project—is a phrase that is in conversation with Jennifer González's (2000) analysis of the avatar and the fantasy of being the Other (p. 44). However, this project moves beyond the concept of the avatar creating a fetishistic experience of race, and instead suggests that adopting the framework of the digital avatar creates an open field to discuss alternative realities for racialized bodies. The avatar, conceived as a visual icon for identity, incorporates what I believe are four central characteristics: it is (1) temporal; (2) symbolic; (3) visual; and (4) fluid. These same characteristics find a physical permutation in the act of dressing in costume, otherwise known as cosplaying, at an Anime, Comic and Gaming (ACG) convention.

ACG conventions, and by extension cosplay subculture, fall under the classificatory umbrella of geek culture, which within fan studies has been largely constructed as "white, middle-class, cisgendered, male, and heterosexual" (Woo, 2017, p. 248). Geek culture, which

was previously regarded as a countercultural realm that often provided a refuge to those considered socially awkward, overachievers, academically astute and technology obsessed, has recently shed its taboo allocation (Woo, 2018, p. 15). What was once geeky is now finding its way into mainstream North American popular culture; seeping into movie theatres with a heavy focus on Marvel and DC superheroes, spurring the creation and viral promotion of fandom conventions like San Diego Comic-Con, and giving clout to video gamers who stream their progress on services like Twitch. In the simplest terms, geek culture (synonymously known as "nerd culture") refers to a participation in countercultural phenomenon that triggers an escape into the fantastical realm of alternate universes (Weldon, 2016, p. 9). From *Star Wars* (1977) to *Game of Thrones* (2011), *Pokémon* (1998) to *Overwatch* (2016)—geek culture comprises science fiction and fantasy, superhero comics, video games, manga and anime. It includes a community of enthusiasts (or fans) who avidly participate in the consumption of the aforementioned media (Woo, 2018, p. 15).[3]

Cosplay, or costume play, refers to the act of dressing up as characters from "*manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (cartoon animation), *tokusatsu* (special-effect movies or television shows), video games, science fiction/sci-fi, and music groups" (Rahman, Wing-Sun, & Cheung, 2012, p. 318). The idea is to imbue the costumes with the imaginative power to transport cosplayers into another way of existing within a space. Stefan Lundström and Christina Olin-Scheller (2014) speak about cosplay as an act of prosumption, which describes the undertaking of fans consuming and producing media (p. 149). Traditionally cosplay relies on the mimicry of fictional characters, thereby cosplayers step into the predetermined narratives of the characters that they dress up as (Hale, 2014). Often, these narratives are strongly attached to an image that is imprinted on the public's imagination. Through repetition the image becomes the central referent for what the character "should" look like i.e. Superman as a strong, dark-haired, white male (Wanzo, 2015b). Thus, this circumstance may create an anxiety for cosplayers who wish to embody a character but do not share the same racialized category. Furthermore, since geek culture and the science fiction realm were built from the perspective of white, heteronormative, cisgender men, the inclusion of people of colour within this space is sometimes met with derision (Jenkins, 2017; Woo, 2017, 2018).

[3] More about nerd culture and its dynamic can be understood by viewing the *Geek Girls* film trailer: https://vimeo.com/121713062

Fortunately, cosplayers possess the creative liberty to alter the dominant narratives of fictional characters. Lundström and Olin-Scheller (2014) remark that by embodying characters "fans show their affection for the story at the same time as they interpret, perform, extend and remediate the narrative by putting the characters in new contexts" (p. 150). For people of colour (POC), most especially those who belong to the Afrodiasporic community, cosplay can be mobilized as a social experiment that allows for complex formulations of identity that wrestle with preconceived racial archetypes. Commonly, cosplay is described as an expressive realm to show passion for a fandom, but by melding cosplay subculture with Afrofuturist theories on the power of the imagination, the importance of envisioning other systems of social belonging (Imarisha, 2015) and play, it can be conceptualized as a tool that possesses the capability to (re)signify and (re)present blackness.

Afrofuturism uses a Pan-African cultural lens to recuperate historical narratives that have misrepresented individuals belonging to continental African and Afrodiasporic communities (Womack, 2013; Rollefson, 2008). Though the term Afrofuturism did not come into being until 1994, when it appeared in a literary interview between Mark Dery, Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose, its processes and implications have been around for much longer. Both Afrofuturism and cosplay place an emphasis on the imagination, play, and creativity. For this reason, Womack (2013) includes a short critique on cosplay and its ability to "break past rigid identity parameters" (p. 14). As an aesthetic and cultural movement, Afrofuturism toys with the tropes of technology and science fiction to interrogate dominant ideologies and decolonize the imagination. It responds to the request that bell hooks (1992) made in *Black Looks* by crafting images that go beyond the dichotomy of what is good and what is bad or, what Patricia Hill Collins (2000) refers to as "controlling images".

Donald Bogle (2001) identifies these images as "character types…to entertain while stressing Negro inferiority" (p. 4). They are loaded, prescribed archetypes that represent Africans and their descendants as mammies—"the faithful, obedient domestic servant" (Collins, 2000, p. 72), the welfare queen, and the promiscuous jezebel. For black men, Bogle (2001) states that these archetypes take the form of the tom who is utterly devoted to his master, the coon who is lazy and trifling and the black buck who is overly aggressive, feral, and "sexually repressed" (Bogle, 2001, p. 13). These images have been continually recycled and repackaged in various forms of media representation in North America. Afrofuturism asks African and Afrodiasporic

dreamers and thinkers to uproot from these liminal constructs of race, sex, gender, etc., and inspire the creation of worlds that are organized differently (Imarisha, 2015).

Along with building from the theoretical framings of Afrofuturism, this project makes use of interviews with 5 Canadian Afrofuturist scholars and artists, as well as 14 cosplay participants to interrogate the relationship between cosplay and authentic visual representation. It uses a research-creation method to create the space for experimental visual storytelling. Research is used to fuel the creation process, but also retrospectively look back on the creative proponents to inform the inquiry (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012). This project not only analyzes cosplay culture and Afrofuturism, but also toys with the processes that both practices utilize to distribute knowledge in order to craft a visual guide that presents alternative methods to the act of dressing in costume.

Cosplay as Tactic

Rafael Roncagilolo (1991) notes that the alterative is "that which has the power to stir things up and create change" (p. 207). According to him, the alterative is what fuels the alternative (p. 207). Afrofuturism and cosplay can both be classified as "alterative" modes of expressing and representing identity. In this respect, the *Fantasy of Embodiment* is enmeshed in the politics of alternative media. The ethos of this project aligns with Michel de Certeau's (1988) expression of tactics as opportunistic, isolated, and in many instances, ephemeral—occurring for a particular instance in time until another strategy of control is implemented (p. 37). de Certeau describes "the space of a tactic" as "the space of the other" (1988, p. 37) and in the context of this project, the Other refers to those who are marginalized and underrepresented. Thus, a tactic becomes "an art of the weak" because of the way that it intervenes with the organization of structures by searching for "cracks" within the junctures of the environment created by "propriety power" (de Certeau, 1988, p. 37). Afrofuturism as a tactic infiltrates the dominant socio-historical narratives of nation, modernism and progress, and transforms them to question what it means to be human, an African or African-descendent, and what the future can look like for those people (van Veen, 2013b, p. 10). Cosplay intervenes in the normative operation of everyday tasks by utilizing the structural systems of fictive universes to alter reality for a brief amount of time.

This *Fantasy of Embodiment* project examines how cosplay can provide a space to imagine different subject positions and empower Afrodiasporic participants who are situated within and outside of the subculture. The results of this project are presented as a visual guide using an interactive storytelling software called Klynt. By expanding on what Womack (2013) started when she first placed cosplay in conversation with Afrofuturism, this project seeks to realize how this pairing can be wielded as a tool to combat the biases that are present within the cosplay community, but also to reclaim and reimagine stories about blackness. Supplanting cosplay in Afrofuturist philosophy results in the formation of what I deem visionary cosplay, which prioritizes the reshaping and command of visual source texts (whether they be prescriptive character types for Afrodiasporic people or repetitive superhero imagery). Lastly, the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project seeks to answer the following questions: In what ways can cosplay be used to (re)present the ethos of Afrodiasporic members within public spaces while disrupting the white hegemonic discourse in geek culture? Furthermore, how can cosplay and the affective experience of 'embodying the Other' inform theories on identity politics and racial performativity?

In the following chapter, I expand on the theoretical underpinnings that guide *The Fantasy of Embodiment* project. Thereafter, in chapter two, I detail the methodological process of the research-creation component. The third chapter offers an analysis of my creative process and research-creation project peppered with assertions offered by the Canadian artists and scholars, and an analysis of the discussions I have had with Afrodiasporic cosplayers in Canada. I conclude with what the research conducted for this project adds to cosplay subculture and Afrofuturism, at large.

Chapter 1 – Literature Review

> "*They back there in the past, a past that somebody manufactured for 'em. It's not their past, it's not their history.*" – Sun Ra in *Blutopia* (Lock, 2000)

What sort of possibilities become available when Africans reject and reconfigure colonial narratives that uphold debilitating systems of oppression? Traces of this question can be found simmering within the literature, philosophies and aesthetics that may carry the label of Afrofuturism. This question was asked by Herman Poole Blount when he moved to Chicago, changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra (Sun Ra for short) and began his cosmic journey, reformulating his experiences through the conception of being an intergalactic pharaoh from the planet Saturn who comes to Earth to bring the jazz to the masses (Eshun, 1998; Rollefson, 2008). It was present when George Clinton, inspired by the groove and tenacity of the musicians around him, decided to put together a band called Parliament-Funkadelic, which brought skilled musicians under a haven to free their minds, bodies and souls through the power of funk (Letts, 2006). It was the nagging query when Octavia Butler's womanist novels carved a space for black female characters in science fiction. Or, when Grace Jones decided that it was far more beneficial to *live* fantasy, rather than daydream about it, and created an identity that glorified ambiguity.

Throughout my perusal of Afrofuturism, I have discovered that it is recognizable by the following themes: liberation and decolonial practices that inspire radical black consciousness; the use of science fiction tropes, such as space and time travel, alien encounters both allegorically and metaphorically; technology as prosthesis and techné that reconfigures the process of racialization; and a collapsing of time. Additionally, the most distinguishable science fiction trope within Afrofuturism remains the distinction/characterization of the transatlantic slave trade as an alien abduction. This is a statement often exemplified by the exclamation "Armageddon had been in effect" by a New York 80s rap group, Public Enemy (Bould, 2007; Maynard, 2018; Sinker, 1992; van Veen, 2013b). Sinker (1992) refers to "The ships [that] landed long ago" synonymously as both sailing vessels and alien spacecrafts, used to enslave and disrupt the livelihood of "whole societies" (para. 22). Thus, Sinker positions Africa, America, Europe and Asia as "Alien Nation[s]" because a "return to normal is [not] possible" (Sinker, 1992, para. 22).

Kodwo Eshun (2003), a British-Ghanaian literary theorist, expertly refers to this revisionist mode of understanding the creation of African diasporic communities through the expression of alien abduction and apocalypse as extraterrestriality. Eshun states that extraterrestriality is "a hyperbolic trope to explore the historical terms, the everyday implications of forcibly imposed dislocation, and further the constitution of Black Atlantic subjectivities: from slave to negro to coloured to evolué to black to African to African American" (2003, p. 298–299). Instead of escapism, extraterrestriality should be comprehended as providing an outlet for speculation amidst racial hostility (Eshun, 2003, p. 299). Dery's (1994) "Black to the Future" articulates a similar idea and is credited for the coining of the term Afrofuturism. The alien is used allegorically to speak about black diasporic experience post-slavery and post-colonialism. Within Dery's essay, Greg Tate expresses his belief that the alienation that Afrodiasporic people encounter in America corresponds with the expressions of alienation that writers of science fiction convey (Dery, 1994, p. 211). In accordance with this line of thought, Tiffany F. Barber (2018) posits that the result of "captive slavery and forced diaspora" have created a connection to "instances of bodily transformation and alien invasion" that are seen in science fiction, thereby resulting in constructions of, "Robots, cyborgs and androids as well as interstellar adventures and time travel [that] feature prominently in the otherworldly, intergalactic narratives at the core of Afrofuturist visual, literary and sonic texts" (p. 137).

The collapsing of time is represented through a reclamation of the past that intertwines with the present and speaks about a radicalized future for people of African descent (Eshun, 2003; Rollefson, 2008; Yaszek, 2006). In some cases, this is referred to as *chronopolitics* (Eshun, 2003; Maynard, 2018; van Veen, 2013a, 2013b; van Veen & Anderson, 2018; van Veen, 2018), a conception often used by Eshun (2003). To be exact, Eshun delineates a chronopolitical intervention as "creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress" and thus "adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory" (p. 297). More recently, coinciding with the current push to theoretically and culturally align Afrofuturism with Pan-Africanism, this merging of past, present and future has been referred to as sankofarration (Brooks, McGee, & Schoellman, 2016; Jennings, 2018; van Veen & Anderson, 2018). The root of the term, Sankofa, comes from the Akan tribe in Ghana and means "go back and fetch it" thus referring to the act of taking socio-cultural and historical knowledge from the past and instilling it in the present, then using it to guide the future (Berea

College, 2013; van Veen & Anderson, 2018). According to Brooks, McGee and Schoellman (2016), sankofarration is a portmanteau of Sankofa and narration created by comic illustrator and scholar, John Jennings. It suggests "a cosmological episteme" that looks towards the future as well as the past, understanding time as cyclical (2016, p. 238). Though the usage of Sankofa within the context of Afrofuturism is becoming more commonplace, there is documented history of the attribution of the term to collectives (such as the Sankofa Film and Video Collective). For example, in 1993 Haile Gerima released a film entitled *Sankofa*, depicting an American fashion model being transported into the past during a visit to Ghana to experience chattel slavery and then freedom through a colony of Maroons (Gerima, 1993).

Against this backdrop, to insist that Afrofuturism began in the early 1990s during a conversation between, Mark Dery, Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose, is a matter of perspective. The coining of the term by Dery did mark the beginning of something. It was the naming that created an identifier—a way to interpolate the processes and implications of radical Africentric imagining that had been occurring within America and the UK, most dramatically in the 1950s to 1990s (Anderson, 2015; Anderson & Jones, 2016; Eshun, 2003; Rollefson, 2008). What the coining of Afrofuturism did was create a tangible chain to encapsulate the various phenomena occurring in music, literature, art and technology within Afrodiasporic communities, creating a locator for other thinkers, creatives and dreamers to latch onto. However, the initial linking of these occurrences was not started by Dery. Traces of this work can be found in an earlier collection of essays entitled *Flyboy in the Buttermilk*, by Greg Tate (1992) that discussed artists who would come to be known as exemplars for some of Afrofuturism's philosophies, like George Clinton, Samuel R. Delany, Public Enemy, Jean Michel Basquiat and Amiri Baraka. Those traces are further discussed by Mark Sinker in his 1992 article for *The Wire*, after a conversation with Tate (Bould, 2007; Eshun, 2003). Perforating the writings of contemporary Afrofuturism is the rejection that it was birthed in the 90's, and instead a dedication to unearth the far-reaching roots of the creative processes that coalesced into it (see: van Veen, 2018b).

Afrofuturism as a praxis uses a black cultural lens to recuperate historical narratives that have misrepresented individuals belonging to African and Afrodiasporic communities, which then fuels the projects for a radical black future (Rollefson, 2008; Womack, 2013). Working from the critical thought spurred by participants involved on the Afrofuturist Listserv created in 1999 by Alondra Nelson and DJ Spooky, Alondra Nelson's 2002 *Afrofuturism: Social Text*, and

other works of that era, Anderson and Jones (2016) define Afrofuturism as originally being "a techno-cultural perspective accompanying engagement in a form of cultural production, originating in practices of black urban dwellers in North America after World War II" (p. viii). It is important to note that the beginnings of Afrofuturism are largely rooted in Western philosophies of blackness and African diaspora.

A significant percentage of the major players within the speculative literature, art and music scene that are mentioned in relation to the early age of Afrofuturism are not only from the West, but from the United States. For this early configuration of Afrofuturism, scholarly and artistic traditions that propelled the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s are recognized as being the driving force for the "Black Power period of Afrofuturism" (Anderson, 2015, p. 181), along with what was occurring with black speculative fiction, jazz, R&B and hip hop (Anderson and Jones, 2016 p.ix). With the advent of the "post-black" period signalled by the election of Barak Obama as the 44th President of the United States (Crenshaw, 2011), there came a resurgence of Afrofuturism (Anderson & Jones, 2016). The contemporary formation of Afrofuturism, what Anderson and Jones (2016) and their contemporaries refer to as Afrofuturism 2.0, considers how black radical imagining occurs more globally, expanding the field to incorporate dimensions of thought that were previously neglected. For Anderson and Jones, this integration of Afrofuturism "is now characterized by five dimensions…metaphysics; aesthetics; theoretical and applied science; social sciences; and programmatic spaces" (p. x). Accordingly, it acknowledges the centricity of Western perspectives that informed most of the foundational theory of the movement. I return to this issue in the last chapter of this thesis.

Afrofuturism, Fantasy, and Playing with Costumes

> "*The imagination is important. The imagination is a lifeline. The imagination is an extension of the resilience of the human spirit. And when it comes to Afrofuturism, the imagination is one of the core tenants, as I like to discuss it."* – Ytasha Womack (IGSF McGill, 2015)

Ytasha Womack (2013), the author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* likes to describe Afrofuturism "as an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (p. 6), and more recently adding mysticism to the matrix. The quote that introduces this section is from a keynote talk that Womack delivered at the Montreal 2015

HTMelles Festival where she outlined that the imagination is a key component of Afrofuturist thought because it is the origin of resistance. This sentiment is carried forward by Walidah Imarisha (2015) who states that “the decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is” (para. 9). I find that this is the aspect of Afrofuturism that I am most drawn to. My alignment with these women, and with others like Ingrid LaFleur (2011), Marleen S. Barr (2008), Sofia Samatar (2017) and Valorie D. Thomas (2018) is rooted in their formations of Afrofuturism as a womanist space—as seen through Barr’s Afro-future female construction that focuses on a “woman-centered Afro-Futurism” (2008, p. xvii) or Thomas’ Afrxfuturism.

In “Unenslaveable Rapture: Afrxfuturism and Diasporic Vertigo in Beyoncé's *Lemondae,*” Thomas implements the political positioning that buoys the classification of “Latinx” to her own concept of Afrxfuturism. In doing so, Afrxfuturism is repositioned and able to invoke “the reflection of white patriarchal and cis-hetero gender binaries and queers the space of black identity” (Thomas, 2018, p. 52). The ‘x’ also calls out the “historical phallocentrism” of Afrofuturist scholarship that focuses largely on male figures when discussing artistic practices and fantastical allegories that proliferate in Afrofuturist discourse (Thomas, 2018, p. 52).

Much of my work focuses on the idea of alternate stories or visualizations of identity. Imarisha (2015) coined the term visionary fiction to speak about speculative fiction from the margins that interrogates systems of oppression and works to envision other ways of existing. Imarisha conceptualizes this subgenre of science fiction as a useful tool for social justice movements, as well as for marginalized bodies, because it liberates the imagination—it asks its users to uproot from the liminal constructs of race, sex, gender, etc., and build worlds that are organized differently. My utilization of Afrofuturism is operating through three dimensions: racialization as a technology, cosplay subculture, and the creation of multi-egos.

The Foundation of *The Fantasy of Embodiment* Project

Race as Technology

In my exploration above, I mentioned that one premise of Afrofuturist praxis was the configuring of technology as prosthesis and as techné that addresses processes of racialization. In her 2011 TEDx Talk *Visual Aesthetics of Afrofuturism,* LaFleur speaks about an Afrofuturist consciousness that must first be awakened and can then encourage "the creation of a future with no boundaries" that "recognizes the power to manifest what is imagined." This statement also aligns with the conception of Astro-blackness, which severs the link between the master/slave dialectic first proposed by Hegel and expanded upon by Fanon to speak about the effects of Western colonialism; instead empowering the individual to grow in ways of their choosing (Anderson & Jones, 2016, p. vii; Maynard, 2018). However, to awaken this consciousness one must first re-think how the concept of race operates.

For experimental filmmaker, Cauleen Smith, thinking through science fiction led her art collective to distinguish how blackness has been implemented as a technology to dictate "movement, access, and privileges" (qtd in Womack 2013, p. 137). Womack suggests that because Afrofuturism looks at race as a construction, it therefore speaks about black identity as a technology (IGSF McGill, 2015). Reynaldo Anderson and John Jennings (2014), both active voices in the contemporary formation of Afrofuturism, view race as a technology because of how it organizes society (p. 43). They believe that to participate in Afrofuturism is to not only acknowledge this conception but also to see "the world through a 'pantechnological' lens whereby artifacts and constructs can be attributed to technology, hacked and change its representation until it becomes a simulation with no signifier or referent in reality" (Anderson & Jennings, 2014, p. 43). This is to say that practitioners of Afrofuturism are operating through a framework of denaturalizing race. Not just in a way that points towards structural systems of violence but also to expose the performative vernaculars that inform the idea of race.

Understanding race as a technology is to look at *how* we *do* race. This notion became the topic of discussion in the 2009 issue of the *Camera Obscura* titled "Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies: Race and/as Technology." Both Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2009) and Beth Coleman (2009) take on the task of extrapolating race from an episteme of biological essentialism and instead exposing "the continuing function of race, regardless of its essence"

(Chun, 2009, p. 14). Chun asserts that race has largely been dependent on visualization to map the body and link it to what is believed to be its "innate invisible characteristics" (2009, p.10). Throughout her Introduction, Chun explains how race as an ideology of difference was constructed and used as a tool of subjugation. Starting first by linking geographical groups together based on physical characteristics in the fifteenth century, and then eventually moving towards the codification of race fueled by the effects of slavery, eugenics and segregation, Chun ends her introduction in "Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things to Race," by stating that the best way to combat racism may not be to designate race as a social construction and negate it, but to change the way it is assembled: "make race do different things" (2009, p. 28).

Coleman (2009) furthers the argument established by Chun (2009). She looks first to distance race from its dominant socio-historical understanding. For Coleman, separating race from biological and genetic systems of organization is necessary. Her comparison of race to a "levered mechanism" is an effective analogy to think through how race can be seen "as a function that can be manipulated in one direction or another, [enabling] greater freedom of movement" (Coleman, 2009, p. 194). Most importantly, similar to what Chun (2009) gestures towards in her Introduction, Coleman recognizes that throughout history race has had a sliding value—shifting to suit the temporal period (2009, p. 179). Akin to Anderson and Jennings (2014), Coleman sees race as being able to be reprogrammed or hacked to disrupt the "algorithm" established during the "age of Enlightenment" (2009, p. 184).

Cosplay Subculture & Fan Studies

The melding of Afrofuturism with cosplay subculture is a topic that is rarely addressed within scholarly circles, though it does make visceral appearance within the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) that has emerged in the United States and in Canada. Throughout my perusal of Afrofuturist scholarship, Womack (2013) and tobias c. van Veen (2018a) are the most vocal about how cosplay fits under the umbrella of black speculative art. Womack (2013) highlights cosplay as imaginative play—saying the act of dressing up is akin to what Grace Jones or George Clinton would do (p. 14). She labels the embodiment of fictive heroes as a break from restrictive barriers that dictate how to exist in the world (Womack, 2013, p. 14). tobias c. van Veen sees cosplay from an Afrofuturist lens as offering "ways to imagine alternative futures in the present by reinventing characters from the past" and when cosplay "blurs the lines of gender,

race, and class…[it] intervenes in the social order" (2018a, para. 2). Therefore, the "breaking" and "blurring" that Womack and van Veen speak about represents a detachment from the fixity of social categories. As Chun (2009) would say, it's toying with the *how* of race, sex, gender, etc.

Before further discussing the ramifications of the cosplay subculture, I think it is important to briefly outline how fandom communities operate, since cosplay is fueled by fandom participation. A fandom is community that comes into existence through the act of communicating and placing value on esoteric knowledge (Mendlesohn, 2014; Woo, 2018). Relative to Farah Mendlesohn's (2014) work, the term fan within this project denotes those who engage in the consumption, production and dissemination of science fiction and fantasy media texts (p. 71). Henry Jenkins sees fandoms as sometimes being referred to as "a shared cultural space that emerged from science fiction fandom in the early 20th century" and now encapsulates "forms of cultural production" (qtd in Woo, 2017, p. 248). For these early 20th century fan culture participants, fandoms were built on collected letters to science fiction fanzines before there were Internet chatrooms and microblogging platforms to express their devotion and textual knowledge (Mendlesohn, 2014).

The cosplay subculture depends on the presence of fan communities to sustain it. As a participatory culture, cosplay is a semiotic and intertextual performance that hinges on affiliating oneself with the fictional narrative of the character that one embodies, displaying that affection through altering the body, and then presenting the result of the creative embodiment to a public versed in geek iconography (Hale, 2014). This public or what might more accurately be labeled as a counterpublic, commonly refers to the Anime, Comic and Gaming (ACG) convention space. In fact, according to Teresa Winge (2006) and Michael Bruno (2002), the story goes that the term cosplay (which is actually a portmanteau of costume play) made its reveal in the 1980s after a Japanese anime publicist, Takahasi Nobuyuki, witnessed fans in costume while attending WorldCon in Los Angeles (Winge, 2006, p. 66); thus, cementing the physical space of the convention as an important transitory portal to the fantastical realm of spectacle. The convention is an example of Johan Huizinga's conception of the magic circle, which can be defined as a space that enacts play by having the "[r]ules of real life become displaced by the rules of the game," or in cosplay's case, the performance (Woo, 2018, p. 187).

Both Woo (2018) and Winge (2006) align environments such as the convention as possessing aspects of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, evoking a "suspension of mundane order" (Woo,

2018, p. 170). Working from Margaret Mackey's theories and studies on play, Lundström and Olin-Scheller (2014) construct cosplaying as a practice of semiotic remediation that immerses the body in a text as "a way to continue the narrative and remain in the meaning creation process of a source text" (p. 155). Similarly, cosplay scholars Rahman et al. (2012) write about the transference of cosplayers into "dreamlike states of hyperreality" that open the pathways for frivolity and fluid identity constructions (p. 320-321). Joel Gn (2011) refers to this transference as a "a form of 'psychological transportation'" (p. 588) made possible by transforming texts, consuming character images and mimicking their bodies. As evocative as these ideas may sound, none of the scholars listed above extend the discussion of cosplay to question how this subversive embodied experience might be applied to constructions of race. Criticism about cosplay subculture tends to hone in on gender and sexuality, with a superficial nod to the experiences of cosplayers of colour.

To address the relationship between cosplayers and their character depictions Winge (2006) constructs a spectrum to assess commitment. The "cosplay continuum" posits that a cosplayer may commit to an embodiment of a character based on, but not limited to, the following: "humor, accurate depiction, and casual participation" (Winge, 2006, p. 68). Accuracy, or accurate depiction, tends to be the most sought after criterium for cosplaying because it is the purest form of character embodiment; it keeps the origin stories of fictional characters intact and ensures recognition and praise from members of the shared fan communities (Hale, 2014). However, as Jenkins (2017) points out, claims about who may have license to embody certain characters pop up within cosplay communities to disavow "fans of color from playing the heroes" (p. 387). The superhero genre, which Gateward and Jennings (2015) so poignantly reveal, is a "white-male-dominated power fantasy that is itself very much based in ideas around physical performance and power in relation to the negation of identity" (p. 4-5). Relinquishing that power to those outside of the white, male, heterosexual construct, especially to those who are African descendants, is often met with a struggle.

I speak of cosplay for Afrodiasporic members as an assertion of radical agency that hijacks visuality and hands the control over to the individual so that they may create themselves. However, I would not go as far as to say that black cosplay is always a conscious act of interrogating oppressions. Most cosplayers engage in the activity because they are passionate about a fandom and their political identity has little to do with their choice of costume (Gn, 2011;

Lundström & Olin-Scheller, 2014). I will say that cosplay in general is about accessing alternate worlds and can provide a well-needed outlet to flex the imagination and play with other ways of being. Pairing cosplay with Afrofuturism is a tactic that shifts the importance placed on accurate depictions of pop culture motifs and instead focuses on the process of embodying the character and co-opting the narrative. This is where it becomes important to question how race operates.

Cosplay Multi-egos

> "*Individuals tend to wear different masks to construct, transform, or reshape their temporary roles or identities over the course of self-formation and transformation*."
>
> (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 318)

This observation about cosplay subculture, along with the statements made about immersing the body into a text, fluid identity constructions and psychological transportations, closely echo Eshun's (1998) theories of heteronyms and multi-egos. Each new convention spurs the desire for cosplayers to present another fandom persona. Eshun (1998)—who is known for his comparative analysis of Afrofurutist musicians—established the concept multi-egos to speak about the various personalities of Kool Keith. A multi-ego disperses the idea that the self must be constrained into one all-consuming "I" – instead the I becomes "a crowd of synthetic subjects" (Eshun, 1998, p. 27). In this way, multi-egos introduce a designation of "parallel states" (Eshun, 1998, p. 106). For instance, Eshun explains that children "identify with toys and dolls, subjecting themselves to and projecting onto the inanimate: every 12-year-old knows that I is an other and another and another" (1998, p. 106). Here, we can implement the analogy of the online avatar. The multi-egos would be the variance of characters that a user has created to be able to navigate the digital environment as a multiple—existing within the space as both this, that and the other.

Taking it a step further, a typical cosplayer cycles through a variety of different characters over the span of their participation in the subculture. To be able to craft new garments that will pay homage to other media texts but also showcase an evolution in craftsmanship is one of the rewarding experiences of cosplay subculture. Rather than dismiss the variegated collection of costumes within a cosplayer's closet as a taxonomy of "what has been done before," I will instead suggest that these costumes are an extension of the cosplayers' radical subjectivity, much like Kool Keith, George Clinton, Sun Ra, Grace Jones, and Janelle Monáe, among others. The name associated with the multi-ego is a heteronym, what Eshun (1998) explains as "a many-

name…which distributes and disperses you into public secrecy of open anonymity" (p. 106). For instance, some of Kool Keith's heteronyms are Dr. Octagon, Rhythm X, and Black Elvis; also, George Clinton when he took on the roles of Dr. Funkenstein, Starchild, and Funkipus; and Janelle Monae who used Cindi Mayweather. These heteronyms and multi-egos carried a narrative weight for these artists. The most prominent purpose was to take the listener on a ride through unknowable and life-altering sonic journeys. They also granted access to different purviews; Kool Keith as Black Elvis is at once embodying the King of Rock and Roll while commenting on legacies of appropriation in the industry of American music (Rollefson, 2008, p. 101). Similarly, the names associated with the characters that cosplayers embody become heteronyms for the cosplayer themselves. This action is what grants the cosplayer access, or transcendence, so that they can immerse themselves into different narratives that they may tweak and enact as they see fit.

To further illustrate the points made on cosplay and psychological transcendence, the following chapter will discuss the methodologies that I utilized in the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project, and introduce the participants who were a part of the study. This will create a tangible connection to the conventions that take place in Canada and the Afrodiasporic cosplayers that attend them, as well as, illustrate my own positioning as a researcher and cosplay enthusiast.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

My research methodology involved a multi-pronged approach consisting of (1) autoethnography; (2) participant interviews; and, (3) the development of an interactive storytelling guide incorporating insights gathered from analytical research, Anime, Comic, and Gaming (ACG) convention participation, along with the data gathered from the interviews.

Autoethnography

I identify with Rebecca Wanzo's (2015a) construction of the acafan—referring to scholars who are also participatory members of the subcultural group that is their topic of study. Wanzo's construction acknowledges how particular identities may alter the interpretive process, in this case I am referring to my own identification as part of the Afrodiaspora (Wanzo, 2015a, sec. 1.6). As such, utilizing an autoethnographic method allowed for "subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence" while conducting my research (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, para. 3). According to Ellis et al. (2011) autoethnography "expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research (para. 4)." Since my work is in conversation with philosophies on revisionist and decolonial methodologies, and about a culture often considered to be frivolous, this construction provided a valid outlet to approach my research.

My own experiences, reflections and grievances with cosplay culture were the blueprint for how my research manifested. They also become the foci to how I connected with the personal histories and motivations of Afrodiasporic cosplayers that attend Canadian ACG conventions. The start of my autoethnography began with the attendance to three ACG conventions: Montreal's Otakuthon (August 2017), Toronto's Fan Expo (September 2017), and blerDCon (June/July 2017) in Virginia. Having been absent from convention culture for a year since relocating from Ontario to Montreal in 2016, these conventions provided an introspective moment to think about the performative actions involved in the convention experience. This included costume planning and the gathering of materials, crafting, reviewing the program schedule to plan your day, and wandering the convention space. It also provided the opportunity to look at three very different cosplay environments and compare how they changed the dynamic for those who attended.

Montreal Otakuthon typically takes place annually near the beginning of August. It is the largest anime convention (and overall con) in Montreal bringing in over 20,000 people per year (Pineda, 2018). Guests are encouraged to contribute to the entertainment of the convention by applying to host panels that touch on various aspects of fandom culture. These topics are often apolitical, obscure, very specific to Japanese *otaku* culture[4] or focused on advancing technical skills (drawing comics, costume design, fan fiction). When I attended, there were very few panels that presented a critical interrogation on fandom culture.

Fan Expo is the largest convention in Canada, bringing over 125,000 people from around the country and across the border ("About Us," n.d.). It hosts many highly acclaimed celebrities as well as major gaming and media corporate entities. For this reason, not only does it draw the attention of cosplayers (many of whom plan their whole year around this con) but also nerd culture enthusiasts because of the celebrity talent and comic book illustrators that attend as guests. FanExpo 2012 was my initiation as a cosplayer, since then I have noticed the rapid expansion of the convention's popularity due to the mainstreaming of nerd culture as evidenced in the interest in superhero films, and the growing demand it places on capitalist ventures.

The first ever **blerDCon** convention started in June of 2017 at the Hyatt Crystal Hotel in Virginia, U.S, and hosted about 1,800 attendees (Page-Kirby, 2018). Due to its infancy, the artists/vendors room for the convention was significantly smaller, unlike the previous two conventions, thereby, shifting the focus of material consumption to the involvement in panel discussions and event entertainment. There were a series of discussion panels with material specifically targeted towards Afrodiasporic guests and guests who are people of colour. Though the convention uses the term blerd (black nerd) in its title, the con did not restrict its content and guest outreach exclusively to African diasporic communities. The intimacy of the con allowed for numerous opportunities for people to gather in groups and build meaningful relationships; a prime example was the Rockband station that was set up near the stairs and became a jubilant karaoke corner each night.

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[4] Referring to the consumption and fan obsession with Japanese anime and manga, video games, and culture at large

Participant Interviews

My interviews for cosplay participants were initially split into a two-part process: an open-ended survey that cosplay participants could fill out about their experience (see Appendix 1); and an opt-in secondary interview that would be carried out over a Skype or Facebook call to expand on the cosplayer's previous answers and involvement. When I first conceived of the idea to interview cosplay participants, the main requirement was that those who wished to participate in the study would identify as an Afrodiaporic cosplayer over the age of 18. I did not ascertain that any of the cosplayers would be able to speak about Afrofuturism, as it is still a subject that is not as widespread in Canada among those outside of the academic circle. My intention was to observe what cosplayers were doing and see if there was something out of the ordinary in terms of their replication of fictional characters.

After having 7 cosplay participants fill out the survey, I quickly realized that following up with a secondary interview required a great deal of organizing and delay. It proved to be more efficient to offer to speak with participants directly rather than have them do the survey first. This was the approach I took for the remaining 7 cosplay participants. The interview protocol was based on the open-ended survey questions that can be found in Appendix 1, and also included questions directly pertaining to the participant and informed by my own participation in the subculture to engage in a fruitful discussion about cosplay. Speaking with participants one-on-one in the form of a conversational interview allowed me to further relate to them as a fellow cosplayer and to ask questions that would divulge how they personally approach their involvement in cosplay subculture. Such questions included: asking about the inspiration behind certain costumes that they created which may deviate from traditional representations, speaking more in-depth about exclusion and unappreciation of Afrodiaporic cosplayers within cosplay subculture, whether or not they have some sort of familiarity with Afrofuturism and, whether they believe that striving for accuracy when creating their costumes is particularly important.

Altogether, 14 cosplay participants agreed to participate in the research project. Four men and ten women between the age of 20-40 years old. The cosplay participants are located in Ontario (10) or Quebec (3), with one cosplayer (LaurenAshley) from Buffalo who regularly attends conventions in Canada. The cosplayers represent a spectrum of varying degrees of experience: from amateur to more seasoned, as shown in Appendix 2.

DieuvaCheetah (F), The Montreal Flash (M), and Stormee Grey (F) are situated in Québec. DieuvaCheetah expressed that posing for cosplay photographs has shown her that she really enjoys modelling. The Montreal Flash takes his cosplay name after the heroine of *The Flash* (1940) comics, finding that he had something in common with the superhero: he used to be involved in competitive track and got injured, turning to *The Flash* comic books to pass the time as he healed. As for Stormee Grey, I was introduced to her after seeing her participate in the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) – Montreal convention that took place in October of 2018. I was put in contact with her and her friend and fellow cosplayer, Christian (M), with the help of Quentin VerCetty—the coordinator for BSAM Canada.

Alanna Mode (F), EscoBlades (M), FadhiliTheOne (F), WonderWoman905 (F), AwesomeXcosplay (M), DijahCosplay (F), Nadine (F), DizenDoll (F), and Pencils & Pincushions (F) are all situated in Ontario. Alanna Mode is a well-known cosplayer in the Toronto area who has been outspoken about the challenges that Afrodiasporic cosplayers face when participating in cosplay subculture. Most recently she appeared in an episode of *Living in Colour* by Global News entitled *Cosplay community's sci-fi fantasy full of real discrimination*. I first became aware of FadhiliTheOne after stumbling upon a blog post she wrote for *Black Nerd Problems,* detailing what she has learned through her participation in cosplay and her need to define what blackness means in her own terms.

AwesomeXcosplay, EscoBlades (M), DijahCosplay and WonderWoman905 were found through their participation with BSAM – Toronto. AwesomeXcosplay also participates in cosplay modelling. He regularly engages in genderbent[5] cosplay because many of his favourite characters are women. EscoBades is a cosplayer who has captured the attention of many. His cosplay costumes have often been widely circulated online, making their way to video game blogs and websites like *Kotaku* and *IGN.* Similar to The Montreal Flash, WonderWoman905 takes her namesake from her primary cosplay identity, which is modeled after the DC comic superheroine, Wonder Woman. DijahCosplay is an artist who takes great pride in her costume creation and her goal to attain perfection with her costume design is the main reason why she tries to replicate a character as closely as possible.

Nadine is the founder of the panel "Black Folks Like Anime, Too" which takes place at Anime North, a manga and anime convention that occurs in Toronto. The decision to start this

[5] Changing the gender of the original character, usually to match the one that the participant identifies with.

panel was spurred by a need to create a space where the "non-Asian, non-white passing people of colour" are able to congregate and feel comfortable. Nadine introduced me to DizenDoll, Pencils & Pincushions and LaurenAshley. DizenDoll has participated on Nadine's panel. She's a seamstress who studied fashion design in school, and found fulfillment through challenging herself in costume design. Pencils & Pincushions became deeply intrigued with 19th century Victorian costuming when she was young, which led her to learn how to sew. She discovered cosplay in University and then learned about Steampunk[6] subculture a few years later. After viewing the interpretations of Victorian fashion designed by Yinka Shonibare, Pencils & Pincushions started to engage in African Steampunk. She founded the "POC Cosplay" panel at Anime North, which builds from a panel she originally co-founded with two other Steampunk enthusiasts that spoke about fusing cultural elements with Steampunk costuming. LaurenAshley is friends with Nadine and Pencils & Pincushions, she is also a panelist on the POC Cosplay panel. At the time of the interview, LaurenAshley was pursuing an MFA and used her cosplay costumes as part of her portfolio submissions. She is the only cosplayer I came in contact with who actively uses Afrofuturism in her research and costume creation. She created an African Sailor Moon (1992) costume that went viral on Tumblr, a microblogging platform.

Afrofuturist Scholars & Artists

The inclusion of scholars and artists within my project developed from a need to involve Canadians actually working on projects using Afrofuturism as a guiding lens (see Appendix 2). I realized that merely theorizing about Afrofuturism and its manifestation in Canada did not capture how intricately it was actually being wielded. Altogether, 3 men and 2 women were asked to comment on the meaning and development of Afrofuturism and how it is used in their work. These interviews were conducted digitally using voice software (Skype) or by meeting up in person. Below is a summary of the Afrofuturist scholars and artists incorporated within *The Fantasy of Embodiment* project:

Dr. tobias c. van Veen is a Critical Race scholar and artist who wrote his PhD dissertation on Afrofuturism at McGill University. He co-edited *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* – "Black Lives, Black Politics, Black Futures" and edited a special issue on Afrofuturism for

[6] A subculture that incorporates science fiction and costuming inspired by Victorian era industrialization and machinery.

Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture. tobias hosts a podcast entitled *Other Planes: Speculative Cultures* and recently turned his attention towards examining cosplay as radical Afrofuturist becomings.

Quentin VerCetty brought the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) to Canada. He is an artist who uses his art to mobilize social change, wielding Afrofuturism to speculate on representation, marginalization and decolonial processes. At the time of my project, Quentin was enrolled as a Concordia graduate student in the field of Art Education, researching Afrofuturism and its application as artistic pedagogy, looking at carnival and masquerade as performative social sculptures.

Minister Faust is a Kenyan-Canadian speculative fiction author, journalist and broadcaster. He also hosts the *MF Galaxy* podcast where he speaks about science fiction themes and ideas, and interviews creatives who are engaging with what he labels "Afritopian" concepts.

Sharrae Lyon is a writer, filmmaker and workshop facilitator. She uses futurism and healing to think about sustainability and community relationships. All of the creative work that she has established feeds into a lifelong project that she refers to as Alien Nation

Camille Turner is an educator, performance artist, and founder of Outerregion which is an Afrofuturist performance group. Much of her work is concentrated on slavery and uncovering the buried histories of African Canadians such as, the *Afronautic Research Lab*, a travelling project that focuses on uncovering black presence, and creates a speculative space for visiting researchers to connect the past to the present and the future.

Recruitment process

To validate the project, a website (https://pbmentality.myportfolio.com) was created to pass on information about the goals of the research project. In addition, a Twitter and Instagram account called Psy-Borg Mentality (PBM), dedicated to this project, were also created and used to contact participants digitally. Psy-Borg Mentality is a reference to having a cyborg consciousness and existing outside of the limitations of human. It is a nod to Donna Haraway's

(1991) “A Cyborg Manifesto” while also acknowledging Maynard’s (2018) positioning that “the black condition can be conceived of as cyborg: figured at once as machine, fungible commodity and monster” (p. 29). It was the original name for the proposed website, which is why I kept the title for the project’s social media and recruitment website.

Cosplayer Recruitment

The process of recruitment for cosplay participants began by utilizing Instagram and my personal Facebook to search through pages like “Cosplayers_Canada” and “Officialfxc” examining the cosplayers that were featured. Afterwards, I began to search through the following hashtags on Instagram related to Canadian ACG conventions that I had attended myself: #FanExpo2017/2018 and #Otakuthon2017/2018. I looked for cosplayers who, according to my own observations, seemed to be people of colour (POC). This was then triangulated by their appearance, or by a hashtag like #BlackCosplayer, or their participation in #28DaysofBlackCosplay—a hashtag activist initiative that correlates with February’s Black History/Black Future’s Month that was created by Chaka Cumberbatch to draw attention to the presence and creative prowess of Afrodiasporic cosplayers (Lawrence, 2019). Then, because I was interviewing Quentin VerCetty from the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) Canada, I also searched for cosplayers who might have used #BSAMToronto2017/2018 and #BSAMMontreal2017/2018 in their photo description.

Scholar Recruitment

The other participants I recruited were either scholars implementing conceptions of Afrofuturism into their own academic and/or creative work or, literary, visual and performance artists. The selection of these participants was based on their contributions to the field of Afrofuturism, and their presence in initiatives surrounding Afrofuturism that were taking place in Canada.

Research Creation

My approach to research-creation heavily aligns with what Natalie S. Loveless (2015) outlines in her article, “Towards a Manifesto on Research-Creation.” Accordingly, my “research story” probes the representation of bodies of colour within the media while placing considerable

weight on the imagination and the shifts of qualifying signifiers that are enacted during costume play (Loveless, 2015, p. 54). Loveless' (2015) observation that "research-creation marshals new methods that allow us to tell new stories…that demand new research literacies and outputs" (p. 53) echoes the Afrofuturist sentiments that I am incorporating in my work, but on a pedagogical scale.

Furthermore, my undertaking of research-creation as a methodology straddles two of Chapman and Sawchuk's (2012) categories "research for creation" and "research from creation" (p. 15). As Chapman and Sawchuk highlight within their seminal article "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and 'Family Resemblances'", *research for creation* involves the "gathering together of material, ideas, concepts, collaborators, technologies" to work towards a reveal "enabled through an artistic perception of technology as a practice or craft" (p. 15). *Research from creation* refers to "the work…being used to generate information" which can stem from the intended audience being involved in the creative process (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012, p. 16).

Since I am also incorporating the reflexive method of autoethnography, the aforementioned approach to research-creation is a fitting pairing. It enables research to fuel the creation for the initial establishment of the design and the content of the visual storytelling guide, but it also retrospectively looks back on the creation to inform the research. Hence, that which comes out of the conversations, photographs narrative stories, and graphic designs that are collected to be displayed on the website are then fed back into the research process to flesh out the theoretical underpinnings of the work.

The result is presented as a visual guide using an interactive storytelling software called Klynt, which is often used for journalism and production. When I first conceived of the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project I planned on creating a website akin to Sonja Vivienne's (2012) Rainbow Family Tree project, which started out as a workshop and then grew into a digital community. *Rainbow Family Tree* is a digital space for members of the GLBTIQS community and their family to share introspective stories about their experiences. These stories are meant to be an engagement in social activism. However, researching Afrofuturism alongside cosplay led to the discovery that it would be more beneficial for me to create a visual guide, which would be smaller in scale and serve as an introduction. Thereby, the visual guide is an initial presentation of the alternative approaches to cosplay subculture that my research led me to conceive. I chose

to use Klynt because of the software's interactive capabilities. I wanted my project to operate like a story that could be non-linear, and since I am approaching cosplay subculture utilizing an experimental framework, I also wanted the platform to be able to reflect that.

The explorative guide incorporates Afrofuturist theories to decolonize the imagination, investigate the experiences of Afrodiasporic cosplayers and interrogates the current cosplay subculture. This project aims to create an interactive digital space where Afrodiasporic (though not exclusively) nerds and cosplayers can discover alternative approaches to dressing in costume. It is organized into four component parts which are described in detail in the following chapter. These components developed as a result of combing through the literature relating to Afrofuturism and locating the analytical frameworks that resonated with my research interests and through the discussions that I had with the participants of the project. I see the designated components, Imagine, Discover, Create and (Cos)Play, as four stages of awareness or radical awakening. They are meant to fuel experimentation through costuming, with the last stage highlighting the unique experiences of Canadian Afrodiasporic cosplayers.

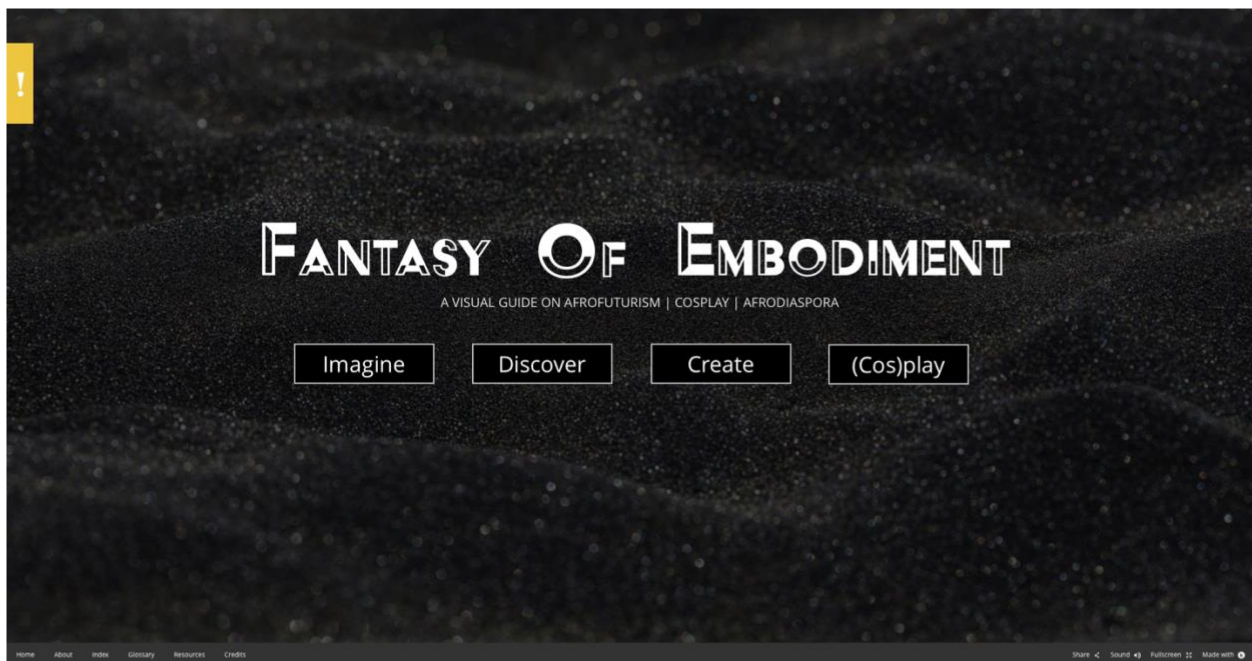

Figure 1: The front page of the Fantasy of Embodiment project. The project is divided into four components.

The background of black sand that introduces the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project frames the visual language for the design. The images of galaxies, chrome and celestial phenomenon that we have been conditioned to think of when hearing the word *future* did not inspire the contemplative feeling invoked by social science fiction that I find myself intrigued by. I started

thinking about the Earth and the idea of being molded from the sand (see: Figure 1). Through perusing a free image database, I came across the image of black sand with the sun radiating off of it causing little glaring spots reminiscent of crystals or piles of little daydreams. This image captures the idea of magic and fantasy that I believe my project is interacting with. By adding a glowing overlay to this image, I was able to change its composition so that it could appear like a clustering of celestial lights or stars within the stratosphere.

My approach to the overall style of the graphic design was to make legible complex conceptual theories using simplified visuals and blank space. The expansiveness of the background that seeps through the spacing of the shapes and pictures is meant to invoke contemplation. I wanted the background images to be seen just as much as the content. I utilized geometric shapes to organize information and to draw the eye because of their clean lines, but also because of how playful they can be.

With the exception of the colour scheme, all of the artistic choices were influenced by the research that I conducted on Afrofuturism as an epistemology and as an aesthetic, while also including references from popular culture to speak to the idea of consuming fandom. The colour scheme for the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project consists of five colours: deep yellow/gold, pale yellow, silver-blue, white and black. This selection of colours is inspired by the ways in which the future has often been expressed using metallic shades and chrome. It is further informed by the colour palette that I would see appearing in Afrofuturist artwork—such as the work of John Jennings (see: the cover of *Afrofuturism 2.0*. (2016) and the illustrations in Womack's (2013) *Afrofuturism*).

The silver-blue is a hint towards the metallic sheen often associated with new, high-tech appliances and the future. The gold is used as an accent colour to punctuate various actions that users can do throughout the guide. Yellow is a colour often associated with warning and gold is often associated with royalty and opulence (Singh 2006; Lundberg 2018). I envision the gold as expressing the richness of African histories and narratives and the value of bringing those things to the future. The pale yellow is used to counteract the brightness of the gold against the black backdrop whenever I wish to highlight or add emphasis, but want it to be more implied.

White and black are used as base colours. I especially like using white as a font because of how immediate it is at capturing attention. In the context of comic illustration, white normally suggests borders and transitions, and I utilize that design property throughout the project. Black

in this project symbolizes many things: *blackness* and Afrodiasporic identity; its association to night and mysticism; its link to outer space; and how astoundingly vibrant things seem to be against a black background, as if they are emanating energy. The following chapter will discuss the design that went into the research-creation component of the thesis and analyze the responses gathered from the participant interviews.

Chapter 3 – *The Fantasy of Embodiment* Project[7]

The *Fantasy of Embodiment* project stems from a desire to address the bias and prejudice within the cosplay community, to highlight Afrodiasporic cosplayers for their contributions, and to seek out an alternate approach to cosplay performance that would allow Afrodiasporic cosplayers to feel joyful, liberated and safe while in costume. The result of this motive is the creation of what I refer to as visionary cosplay. As a tactical approach to cosplay subculture, it errs on the side of what Hale (2014) refers to as "textual transformation" which sees "a source text…adapted and (re)animated (p. 19). This process uses the conditions of correspondence and contrast to transmit recognizable cultural signs while working through creative distance to "generate commentary through parody, pastiche, satire, burlesque, and caricature" (Hale 2014, p. 20). Though with visionary cosplay, the cosplayer's social and cultural identity is just as much a referential apparatus for costume creation as the text. Furthermore, I see the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project as addressing two absences: an interrogative discussion of cosplay and race as it pertains to Canadian cosplayers, and an infusion of a Canadian presence into Afrofuturist scholarship.

As mentioned previously, the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project is divided into four components: Imagine, Discover, Create, and (Cos)play. This chapter will unpack the function of each of these areas, the conceptual frameworks and theories that went into establishing them, and some of the instrumental design decisions used to propel the message.

Imagination – Unearthing the Power of Imagining

The design for this section was inspired by colloquial saying "thinking outside of the box." In the most literal explanation, the imagination is fundamental for instances of pretend play and creating new expressions for oneself. In a more conceptual framing, the grey box is a symbol of normative constructions of gender, race, sex, ableism, etc., that restrict and constrict people. Thereby, the imagination becomes the weapon to break through the barriers. The background image (see: Figure 2) of exploding colour is symbolic of possibilities and creativity. The chalk dust gives off an ethereal feel, but can also be likened to coloured powder that may be thrown at

[7] **Link to the Project:** The Fantasy of Embodiment Project (http://jiwani.concordia.ca/wp-content/uploads/Fantasy_of_Embodiment_Project_Aug1/)

festivals (like Trinidad & Tobago's J'ouvert or India's Holi festival)—thereby signifying jubilation.

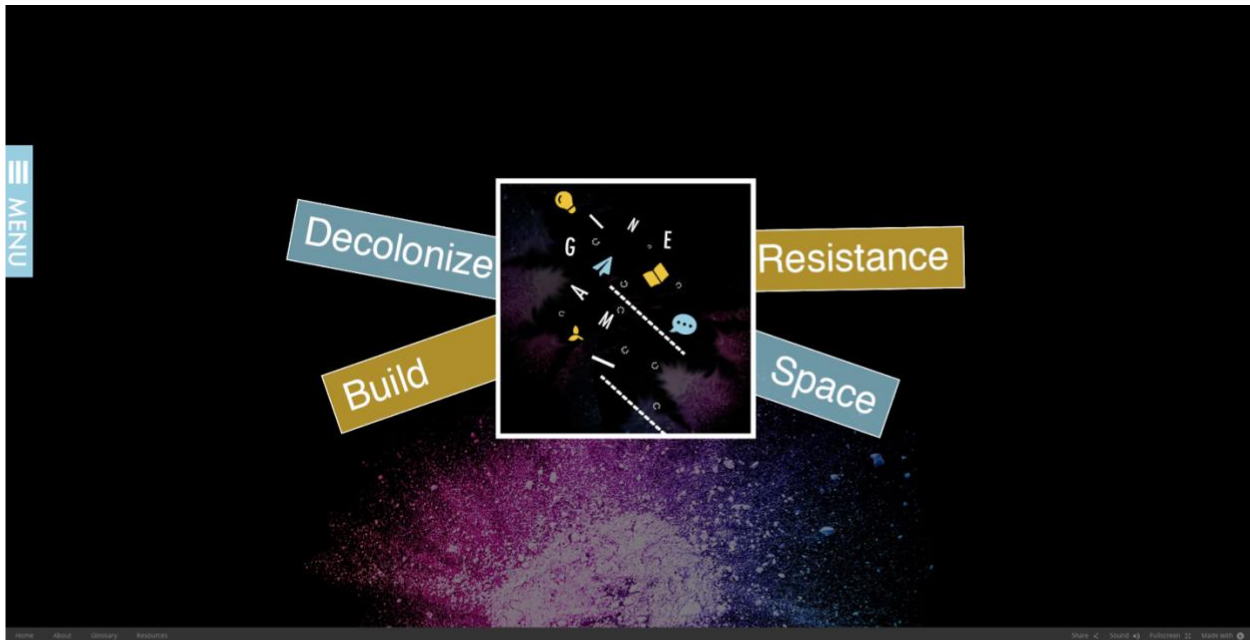

Figure 2: Imagine: Unearthing the Powers of Imagining component

The Mundane Afrofuturism Manifesto documentary (2015) by Martin Symes features author Tisa Bryant who believes that Afrofuturism is about space—in its most literal distinction. Bryant's conception refers to "A continuum of boundaryless space where there is an encounter and exchange across time" (Syms, 2015). This contemplation is echoed by Womack (2013) who identifies space—in all its varied forms—as a recurring theme in Afrofuturism (p. 142). Reflecting on the physical, cosmic or virtual figurations of space, Womack (2013) concludes that "there is this often-understated agreement that to think freely and creatively, particularly as a black person, one has to not just create a work of art, but literally or figuratively create the space to think it up in the first place" (p 142). This statement directs the reader's attention to the plethora of value-laden images that already exist in the ether to tell Afrodiasporic people how they should see themselves, and to a process of unlearning conditioned colonial metanarratives.

In an anecdotal story about a discussion that participant Sharrae[8] had with her grandmother regarding Africans travelling the world before the transatlantic slave trade, she observed that there has been a warping of African identities in order to govern bodies of colour and to dictate the dreams and aspirations that are possible. Minister Faust's dismissal of the term "black" to

[8] Refers to artist and writer, Sharrae Lyon who was interviewed for this project.

identify African people in the West relates to the process involved in warping mentalities, and the concentration of power. While reflecting on the whipping of Kunta Qinte in *Roots* (1977) to force him to adopt the Westernized name of Toby, Faust expands on this, stating:

> So, that is the historical equivalent of Africans in the West being told you are not African because if you're an African you'll want to go to Africa to get what was stolen from you. And if your dominator does everything in his power to take something away from you, then there's probably freedom in it. So, who poisoned us to hate Africa and to refuse to call ourselves Africans?

Idealistically, Afrofuturism positions the imagination as a decolonization tool, that concentrates on healing and recapturing the freedom of African belief systems and spiritualities. Recognizing the imagination as a radical weapon of resistance that is able to utilize the power of visuality to exist unencumbered within a space. Cosplay has the potential to harness that imaginative force because, as scholar Camille disclosed to me in our interview, cosplay can be "a powerful way of thinking beyond the present."

Discover – The Pillars of the Project

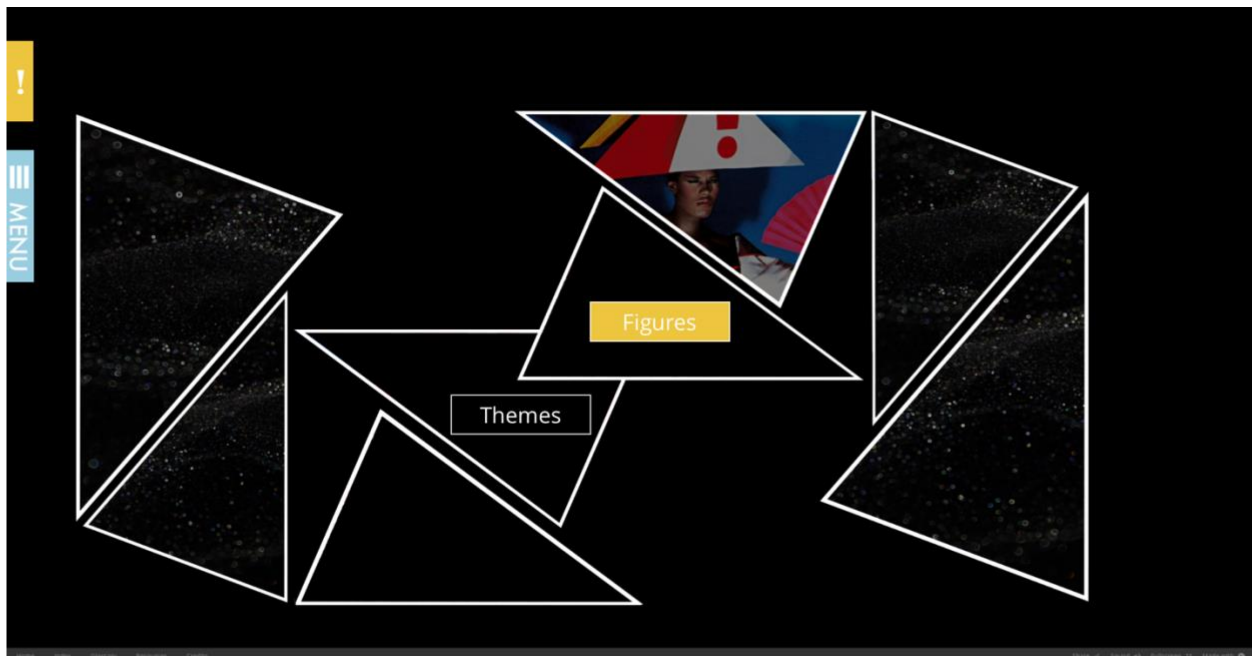

Figure 3: Discover component. Capture of what happens when hovering over the figure button, which reveals an image of Grace Jones. Adapted from J. P. Goude, 1988, Retrieved from https://libguides.scf.edu/c.php?g=847004&p=6077102.

This section specifically emphasizes the research that went into the formation of the visual guide and contains two sections (see: Figure 3). As mentioned previously, the fluidity of time is a central theme of Afrofuturism. The expression for Sankofa is symbolized by a bird with its head turned towards its tail. The first area touches on some of the Afrofuturist themes that I am in conversation with and incorporates the Sankofa bird as a constellation (see: Figure 4); playing off the idea of looking towards the stars to gain knowledge of previous histories and ancestors, and of the futures yet to come. The second section documents the musical, visual, literary artists, and theorists that I am in conversation with. Each figure is pictured as a dial, reminiscent of the nobs and controls that may be found on George Clinton's Mothership[9].

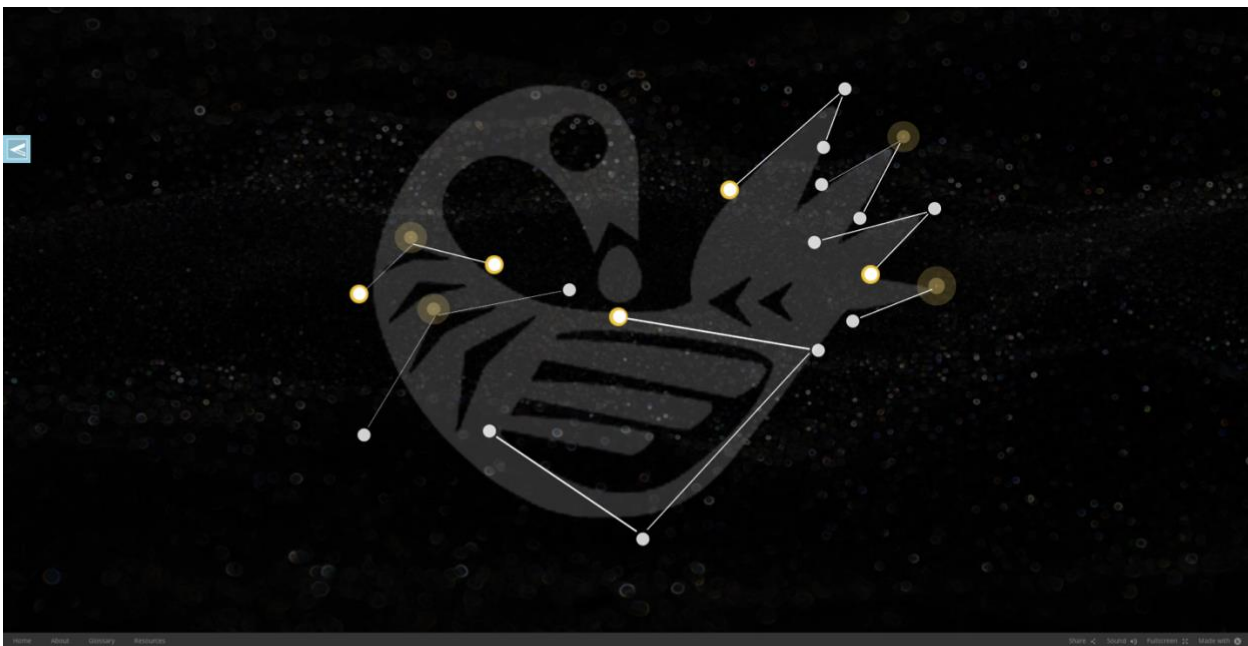

Figure 4: Themes page that features the Asante Adinkra symbol of a bird looking back

Figure 4 incorporates four glowing stars that highlight the most central themes that I believe are useful to distinguish the operations of race as technology and how it can be made to signify differently. These themes are: remix, bricolage, multi-egos and extraterrestriality. What follows below is an analysis of this assertion.

Remix is a culture of repurposing. It incorporates chopping and jumbling narratives. Throughout my research on Afrofuturism, I became deeply fascinated by John Akomfrah and Edward George's data thief from the 1996 video essay, *The Last Angel of History*. Akomfrah, a

[9] Appears in the 1976 *Mothership Connection* album by George Clinton's band Parliament, which uses funk to escape the confines of Earth (Rollefson, 2008).

British sound technician with Ghanaian and Nigerian ancestry, founded the Black Audio Film Collective along with George, with the goal of preserving and promoting Afrodiasporic sound and film ecologies (Samatar, 2017). Akomfrah and George's depiction of data thief is of a trickster; a shapeshifting Anansi-figure that redesigns, rediscovers and re-orients the stories of the past, present and future. It surveys the Internet in search of "lower case history" (Akomfrah & George, 2013). According to Samatar (2017), lower-case history is a rejection of the capital H history virus, that has excluded Afrodiasporic members of the world from its narrative (p. 176-177). As Samatar (2017) suggests, "the data thief's fluid gender & cyborg consciousness, all underscore the unfettered ease of movement that is the cream and engine of Afrofuturism" (p. 177). The way in which the data thief manipulates aggregated information and transforms it is a methodology focused on privileging subjugated knowledge and also a reformatting of subaltern identities. The application of this method to cosplay subculture is intriguing because it encourages the hacking and scrutinization of the source texts that inform the visual representation of fictional characters that cosplayers embody.

During my interview discussion with critical race scholar tobias[10], we touched on what he referred to as a "constitutive tension in Afrofuturism," which he first describes in the "Future Movements" introduction. Within this introduction, van Veen and Anderson (2018) mention Afrofuturism's link to Afrocentricity, which places it in conversation with the politics of representation and essentialist ideas about black culture (p. 10). The other side of this tension is the poststructuralist, posthumanist configuration of Afrofuturism—and the way its futuristic symbols unpack how "race and identity" are conceived across cultures (van Veen & Anderson, 2018, p. 10-11). Elaborating on what was first positioned as a constitutive tension in Afrofuturism, tobias stated that:

> …there is no one definition of Afrofuturism and there can't be because the Afrodiaspora is composed of multilayering and bricolage roots and routes and crisscrossing. And there are many different identities, narratives and personal histories. It can't be collapsed into a singular mold.

This is how I understand Afrofuturist praxis. Additionally, Sofia Samatar (2017) relates the data thief to a bricoleur—what Levi-Strauss defines as a scavenger who "makes use of 'whatever is at hand'" (Samatar, 2017, p. 177). In turn, bricolage is conceived as a "time-travelling practice"

[10] Refers to Dr. tobias. c. van Veen who was interviewed for this project.

that refutes ontology narratives and instead seeks to discover potential (Samatar, 2017, p. 178). For example, as part of his art practice, Quentin[11] mentioned to me that he likes to fill his work with an abundance of visual metaphors. Using the framework of "sankofanology," Quentin expands on the idea of nonlinear temporalities. He stated, "I'll put things in my work that contrast different time periods to show them all existing in one place and one space. Essentially, I am using that to start talking about the way we talk about time and the way that we learn."

Conversely, de Certeau (1988) refers to tactical practices as "clever tricks" to maneuver around a system (p. xix). For de Certeau, bricolage—which is described as "artisan-like inventiveness" (1988, p. xiii)—is a component of "making-do" i.e. to acclimate and/or adjust established structures so that they fit the need of the bricoleur. This same survivalist tactic is a topic alluded to by Refinery29 in a mini documentary entitled *Why Black Millennials Are Dressing Like Comic Superheroes* (2019) that featured African American cosplayer, Delta Major, from New York. When told about the critique that African Americans seem to superficially incorporate bits and pieces of African identity that lack a defined anchor, Delta stated: "You're correct, it's not authentic and that's not our fault. We can pull from all over and still be African American and of Africa and of the diaspora" (Refinery29, 2019). The clothes that Delta Major creates are a blend of textiles refashioned from an array of cultures. She refers to this act of bricolage as a way to form connection, to give a "sense of grounding and home" (Refinery29, 2019). As a cosplayer and as an African American, Delta Major uses her clothing to tell a story, and they are a way for her to self-determine what it means to be an African descendent in the West. Pairing cosplay with what Samatar (2017) deems "Afrofuturistic bricolage" (p. 178), pulls from established narratives and then crosses them with nuggets of socio-cultural phenomena that speak to the cosplayer to determine what is authentic for them.

An important function of Afrofuturism is said to be its conceptual approaches and countermemorial practices that facilitate access "to triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, [and] previously inaccessible alienations" (Eshun, 2011, p.298). This assertion by Eshun is in conversation with the Du Boisian construction of double conscious. Though Du Bois' theory is used to explain the debilitating process of Othering, Eshun (2011) turns it on its head to say that multiple consciousnesses are actually desired.

[11] Refers to Quentin VerCetty who was interviewed for this project.

Each cosplayer that was interviewed for this project has embodied more than one fictional character—thereby crafting a variance of multi-egos. Even The Montreal Flash, who fashions his cosplay persona after the comic book hero the Flash, has also been Sub-Zero from *Mortal Kombat* (1992) at one point. These multi-ego experiences are emblematic of accessing different consciousness. They provide an outlet for the cosplayer to tap into another realm of existence that may have previously been out of reach. This is further ascertained by participant cosplayer, Alanna Mode's statement: "You sort of realize in who you're choosing to cosplay as, what parts you're either missing out on or that you see in yourself."

Commonly, these mentally transitory acts usually provided the cosplayer with heightened confidence and self-esteem. AwesomeXcosplay attested to feeling more confident in costume than within his everyday clothing. LaurenAshley went as far as to say that cosplay also helped make her transition to wearing her natural hair an easier process. Pencils & Pincushions stated that her forays with African Steampunk made her more comfortable when it came to wearing African traditional dress outside of a costumed convention setting.

When asked about the act of dressing up, writer and filmmaker Sharrae viewed wearing a costume, or even personal dress, as a way to "shift energies" elaborating, "that the capacity as human beings and the ability to shift into different states of consciousness…and abilities...is an essence of being able to expand and settle into our potentials." Thus, toying with dress brings forth an immersive paradigm, which then creates a space to engage with alterative (as defined by Roncaglioli) ways to experience the surrounding atmosphere. It facilitates Eshun's (2011) conception of extraterrestriality, which provides distance to then contemplate the dynamics of existence (p. 299). Extraterrestriality is associated with dislocation, but also emphasizes transformative agency (Eshun, 2011, p. 298-299).

Create – Visionary Cosplay

The primary aim of this project was to discover what a convergence of Afrofuturism and cosplay would look like and how it could be used in a radical manner similar to the philosophies, aesthetics and cultural phenomena that propel the Afrofuturist movement. Womack (2013) suggests that there is a power in "adopting the persona of one's favorite hero" because of its immersive properties (p. 14). This project set out to identify the labour involved to start

developing strategies to access the radical potential of that power; how it may be wielded within the carnivalesque realm of the convention and how it can be embodied in everyday life.

As has been discussed in detail by other researchers on cosplay culture (see: Gn, 2011; Lundström & Olin-Scheller, 2014; Rahman et al., 2012), the participants in my research project also utilized cosplay to straddle the realm of fantasy to escape from the normative routines of everyday life. Cosplay invokes a draw into different narrative ecologies or what can otherwise be described as the immersion into other worlds. This escapism component of cosplay culture was discussed by 10 of the 14 cosplay participants interviewed. AwesomeXcosplay describes his cosplay experience as an act of character personification, in other words, acting as the character would place him in their world. Dizendoll referred to her experience as "a chance to be in the character's shoes." Pencils & Pincushions described it as "bringing characters to life." Henceforth, the embodiment process involved in the cosplay experience displaces and re-orients the participant into another state of *becoming* (Gn, 2011; van Veen, 2018a).

For tobias who has shifted his research interests towards Afrofuturism and cosplay, the idea of "becoming"—in the most simplified philosophical explanation—refers to "expressing and understanding of the world as worlding, as process, as perpetual change; perpetual shifting and mutation." tobias went on to say that the philosophy of becoming is "understanding the world not as essence but process, as becoming and not being." Within the context of Afrofuturism, the framing of becoming (or what tobias refers to as "black radical becomings") is about the interrogation and rejection of what it means to be human. This is responding to the Cartesian and Enlightenment philosophies that were laid out in the "17th and 18th centuries especially" (tobias). tobias understands cosplay as "a lens to look at other forms of radical black becoming," because it is able to provide a language to then start to parse through the life and creative praxis of other Afrofuturist icons and their performances. Relatedly, Quentin compares cosplay to black African and Caribbean spiritual practices and masquerade that tap "into a spirit of liberation." He stated that cosplay is a way for Afrodiasporic people "to break away from [notions of colonial infrastructure] and allows us to have that fluidity that we always had in our spirit," thereby reclaiming agency.

However, to thoroughly open this realm of creative freedom, first cosplay must be denatured from mimesis/replication or what Winge (2006) labels "accurate depiction" (p. 68). My project utilizes Afrofuturst philosophies to disrupt the idea of cosplay accuracy. For

Afrodiasporic cosplayers, replicating a costume may prove extremely troublesome when depicting a character that does not share the same phenotype. It is my belief that to engage the radical black becomings or the agency that tobias and Quentin refer to, radicalizing cosplay must be associated with decolonial processes and a concentrated effort to emphasize the performative—or the 'play' aspect. Lundström and Olin-Scheller (2014) describe play in cosplay subculture as a reflexive process stating, "the cosplayers' movements between 'the Self' and 'the Other' are dynamic transformations from mind to sign and back to mind—i.e. a movement between text and life" (p. 156-157). This hints to the introspective processes involved in the creation of costume, character, and persona. As Lundström and Olin-Scheller (2014) have outlined, cosplay involves stepping into the different narratives of the characters (p. 155). The attributes of the fictional character are then transposed onto the cosplayer, like a scientific mutation (Hale, 2014, p. 27). While acting within and through these narratives, cosplayers are then able to manipulate them, which can be especially useful for people of colour who have historically been positioned as more sidekick than hero (Francis, 2015).

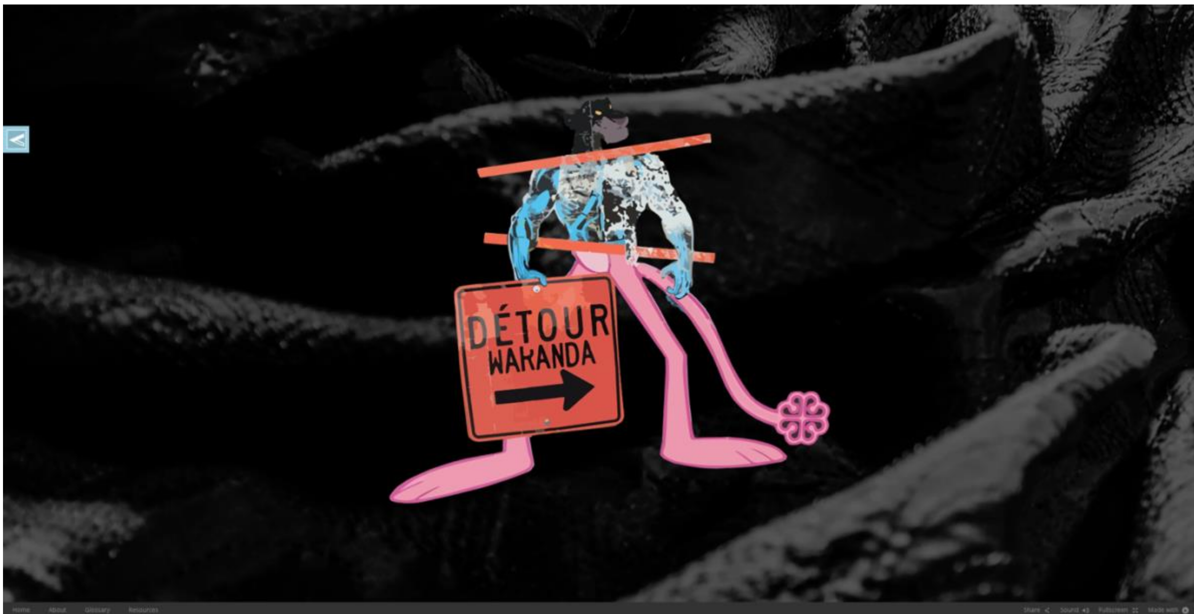

Figure 5: Create: Graffiti art of the 3 panthers merged together that appear on the wall of an abandoned shop front on St. Laurent in Montreal. Photo taken on May 26, 2018 by the researcher and turned into vector art using Adobe Illustrator.

My conception of visionary cosplay places greater concentration on the experience of embodiment and the qualities that are gained from engaging in the immersive world—on the cosplayer's terms. The focus is on playing with the motifs that represent the fictional characters while incorporating facets of the cosplayer's own socio-political narratives. Within this realm of

play, authenticity takes on a new meaning. It invokes the power of visualization, which Sharrae described to me as a skill "that allows us to push beyond our circumstances," which then "helps us improve our own individual lives but can also be connected to community." This act of cosplay involves four tenets, which are elaborated upon below.

The most pivotal image for the *Fantasy of Embodiment* project appears in the Create section and directs the viewer to the tenets of visionary cosplay (see: Figure 5). It is an image of three panthers meshed together: the head of Bagheera from *The Jungle Book* (1967)*;* the torso of T'Challa from *Black Panther* (2018); the legs of Pink Panther (1969); and a sign reading "DÉTOUR: Wakanda." This image originates from a graffiti print found on a wall while walking down St. Laurent in Montreal, Québec during the summer of 2018. I captured the image on my phone knowing that it spoke to my research, but I was not sure in what way at the time.

The film *Black Panther* was released earlier that year and introduced the aesthetics and basic philosophies of Afrofuturism to a broad populace. Furthermore, *Black Panther* created what Sharrae referred to in our interview as a "pulse that people are waiting for." This film created a dynamically affective experience for the Afrodiaspora that was felt most passionately in North America, but also worldwide. Sharrae revealed that for a while after the movie was released, she would notice Afrodiasporic people greeting each other with the Wakandan salute, or asking each other if they saw the film. Along the same vein, when asked what he thought about the *Black Panther* film, Minister Faust remarked that it was remarkable to see actors that reflected himself and were "not Africa-denialists, but they are 100% obviously continental Africans in an aesthetic that embraces and loves everything about them." Like Sharrae, he also commented on a "pulse" that the film stirred, one that encouraged people to dress up in African continental clothing that he stated "could've [been] worn out to a fancy restaurant, to a graduation ceremony or to a wedding" and this was "an expression of their love of Africa." Not only did the film, which featured a majority Afrodiasporic cast, inspire an alternative perspective of the continent of Africa and its relationship to technology through the presence of Wakanda, but as Minister Faust mentioned, the people who did dress in continental African clothing would have gone to shops to purchase them, thereby "creating an economic impact on the vendors as well as the creators."

However, I do find it important to acknowledge that the *Black Panther* film is the product of Hollywood, an institution known for distributing images of Africans that have been damaging

and uninspiring, as well as shutting out people of colour from positions of artistic power. Alease A. Brown (2018) remarks that while the film provides the vision of an African state unaffected by colonialism that was free to form its own sanctions, governmental legislations and spiritual rituals, it still purports a neoliberal discourse. Brown points out that the CIA, which has historically caused great unrest in Africa, is positioned as a friend to Wakanda, and the technologically advanced African state is scrutinized for “hoard[ing] mineral wealth to the detriment of the world” (2018, par. 12). When I asked BSAM Canada coordinator, Quentin, about *Black Panther* (2018), he critiqued the film and the mainstreaming of Afrofuturism for placing too much stress on the sci-fi aesthetics, pushing the construction of Afrofuturism as a tool of political “resistance and resilience” to the background.

I understand the graffiti image of the three panthers as speaking to the aforementioned pulse and also incorporating a political commentary. It offers the observer a detour to an African nation that is filled with the hopes and aspirations of what-could-have-been without the dredges of colonialism, but also what-could-be if we work towards decolonizing our minds. At the same time, it also acknowledges a mythology of “panthers” that have come before Wakanda’s Black Panther, creating an intertextual narrative. Whether or not the artist meant to express that the three interconnected panthers are intrinsically linked is not for me to say. I see this image as a visual schema of what I imagine an alternative approach to cosplay to be like, and so it serves as the portal to invite viewers to contemplate the tenets of visionary cosplay.

The Four Tenets

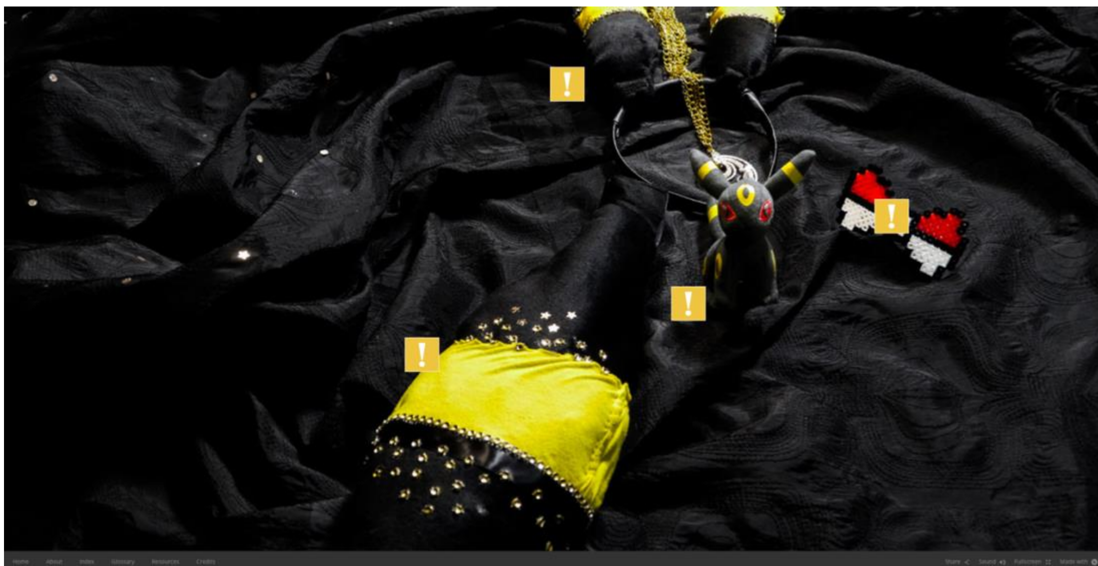

Figure 6: Users must click on the question mark blocks to reveal the four tenets of visionary cosplay. The background image is a photograph containing pieces of the researcher's Umbreon cosplay costume. Adapted from S. Bernicky, 2019, Montreal.

Visionary cosplay is inspired by Imarisha's development of visionary fiction. It is deeply steeped in the practice of intertextual layering and bricolage. Hale (2014) refers to the intertextual practices in cosplay as "embodied citational acts" that are "engendered and circumscribed by a specific character or text, its history, and the audience" (p. 8). Thereby permitting self-expression through the bodily animation of the text (Hale, 2014, p. 12). This project frames cosplay intertextuality similarly to Hale, but also understands it as a correlation between the multitudinous texts that construct the fictive character, the cosplayer and the social environment; rather than a sole interaction with the source text. Building from the practices of the data thief, visionary cosplay is a revisionist and multifaceted approach to cosplay culture. The tenets of visionary cosplay, as outlined below, extend the meaning of performance. It uses "play" as the more active word—concentrating on how the verb distinguishes all kinds of possibilities.

The four tenets are guideposts informed by forays of cosplay experimentation circulated throughout cosplay subculture using social media platforms, my own relationship to cosplay subculture and evolving revisionist praxis, and from the stories that cosplay participants' involved in this project have shared with me. The tenets encourage introspection, taking command of the visual language that surrounds the embodiment process, and the remediation of established fictional narratives. They are listed as follows:

1. Distancing/reframing accuracy

The idea of denaturing cosplay from accuracy is an important goal. It encourages the possibility of experimentation that can change the way that race, gender, sex, age, etc., are constructed and understood.

2. Playing with visual codes of recognition

This involves locating the key components of the fictional character that serve as recognizable motifs i.e. Mickey Mouse has his black ears; Superman has the S on his chest. These symbols serve as the main identifiers when crafting a costume.

3. Transformative discovery and storytelling

This is a two-step process of doing research that allows you to extend the narrative of the character, and then trying to imagine them in different settings or time periods. For instance, while speaking about the cosplay philosophy of ZiggZaggerZ the Bastard, tobias mentioned that

ZiggZaggerZ "talks about cosplay as a transformative life practice." Her cosplay of Hippolita involved a "chronopolitical activity" by researching the mythology of Amazons to bend "time to recover or reinsert blackness into a predominantly white narrative."

4. Entwining the personal with the fantastic

Instead of allowing the embodiment to completely transfer the cosplayer into the fictional character, this tenet emphasizes fusion and hybridity. Aspects of the cosplayer's socio-cultural identity are infused with the costume. For example: incorporating diasporic ethnic aesthetics and traditions, or playing with the tones of skin colour and the texture of hair to wield it as an aesthetic tool that upsets the way in which race is perceived in cosplay subculture.

(Cos)play – The Stories Behind Playing Fantasy

I asked every cosplay participant that I interviewed about how they felt when they were in costume. When I posed this question to Christian, a cosplayer from Ottawa who co-hosts a YouTube series reviewing geek culture media, he responded with the following comment that left an imprint on me: "When I first looked up the definition of cosplay, in Japan and in the early conventions they really put emphasis on the play part. So, when you put on the costume, you become the character."

As previously alluded to, this project addresses the way in which, for cosplayers, the costume becomes the vessel that instruments play in variegated forms: playing fiction (as Lundström and Olin-Scheller's (2014) article is aptly named); playing with signification; and playing with identity categories. Thus, extending the realm of pretend playing where children are first exposed to the stretching of the imagination and the transformation of objects (Russ, 2016, p. 22). People's ability to engage in play encourages "divergent thinking" (Russ, 2016, p.23) which then can push forth the realms for liberating expressions of becoming.

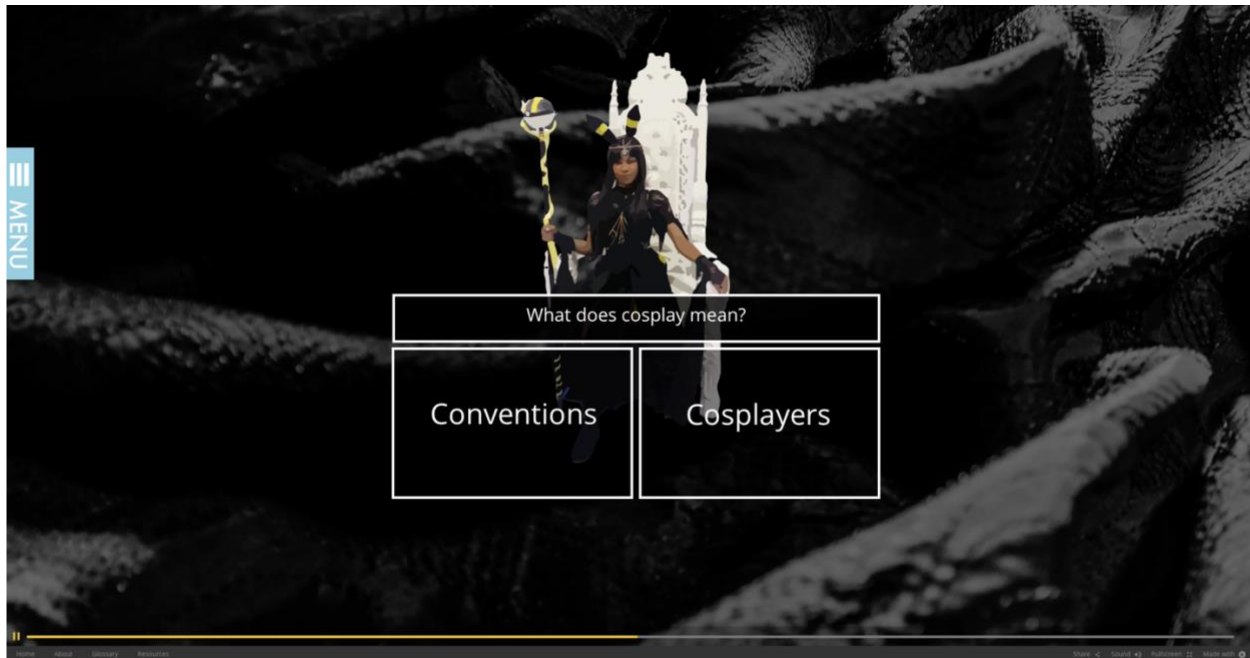

Figure 7: (Cos)play section. Showcases a vector image of the researcher in costume leading to two exploratory areas with interactive graphics. Background image is a photo of the researcher's cosplay costume. Adapted from S. Bernicky, 2019, Montreal.

The design of this section (see: Figure 7) opens with a vector graphic of me in costume and an audio recording from my trip to FanExpo in 2017 to further immerse viewers into convention culture. There are two areas for users to view: the "Conventions" which contains information about the Anime North panel discussions that Nadine and Pencils & Pincushions founded, and information on other conventions that explore cosplay and/or speculative fiction and art, and the "Cosplayer" area which contains stories and reflections from the cosplayers that I interviewed for the project.

As suspected, many of the participant cosplayers dress in costume to express a love for fandom. They also create costumes with the intent of replicating what they see on the characters they admire. However, there were some cosplay participants who approached the subculture differently and are implementing practices that relate to what I understand as visionary cosplay. For example, Alanna Mode drew on her family's Jamaican background and the Brazilian background of the *Overwatch* (2016) video game character, Lucio, to create a Caribbean carnival-inspired costume. She described her process as an embracement of a shared culture: "I took some inspiration from Caribana (The Toronto Caribbean Carnival) and some from Rio's Carnival and then put those elements into the design and used aspects of Lucio's design to hint at things."

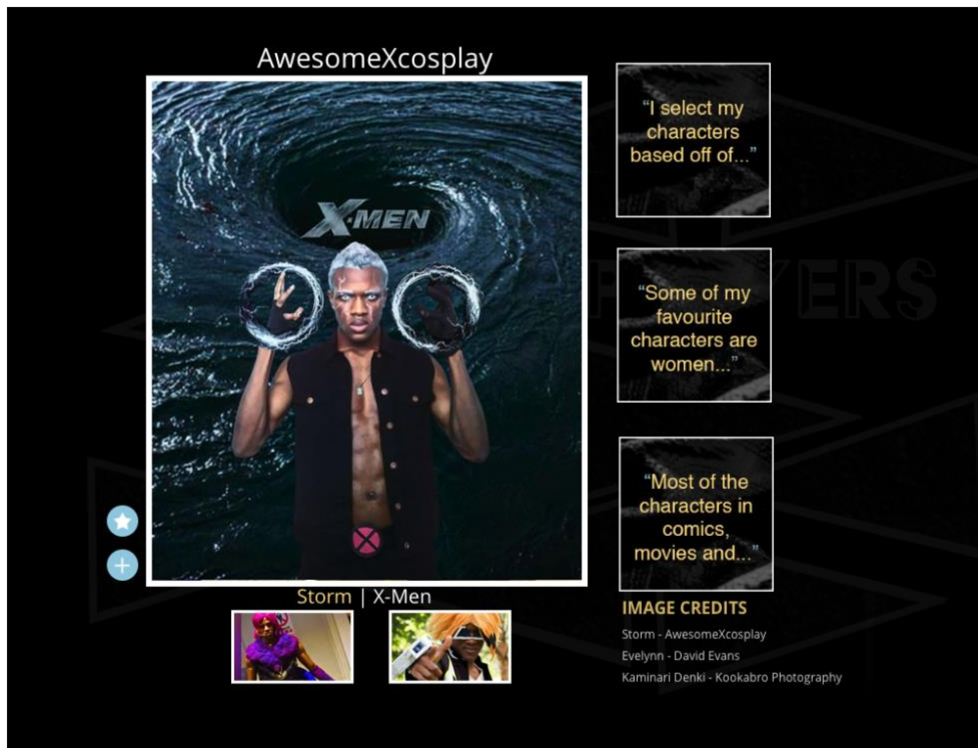

Figure 8: Page featuring information that AwesomeXcosplay provided as a project participant. Image adapted from D. Evans, 2019.

AwesomeXcosplay (see: Figure 8) is a male cosplayer who regularly engages in genderbent and cross-racial[12] cosplays. When he cosplays as a female character, he stated: "I like to add my own design to their outfits while keeping signature components of the female characters in the cosplay as well."

LaurenAshley, the cosplayer who had her Sailor Moon costume go viral on Tumblr, refers to her costume creation process as cosplay remix and utilizes Afrofuturist praxis in her costuming. She takes fictional characters and creates their costumes using Ankara print fabric and African cultural hairstyles—most notably box braids. She explained that implanting aspects of her authentic identity within her costume creation is very important to her, stating:

> Because cosplay is escapism period. And you're dressing up as someone who doesn't exist within this reality, but I feel I'm taking this a step further. It's like, ok, I'm becoming Sailor Moon, but not like Usagi who has blond hair and blue eyes, but this different person who has kinky twists and West African dots like with my makeup and who wears Ankara print. (LaurenAshley)

[12] Cosplaying a character who does not share the same race as you

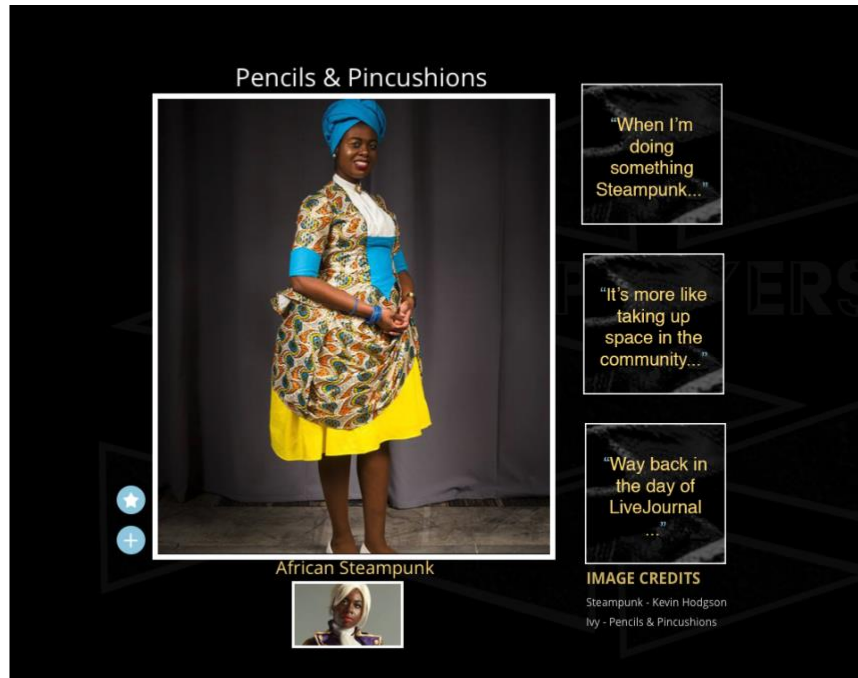

Figure 9: Page featuring information that Pencils & Pincushions provided as a cosplay participant. Adapted from P. Dixon, 2018.

Pencils & Pincushions mentioned that she is second-generation Ghanian and the Steampunk costumes that she creates reflect that. Influenced by Yinka Shonibare, a designer who uses Dutch wax print fabric to explore facets of colonialism and globalization, Pencils & Pincushions decided to engage in African Steampunk. She stated that because African wax print has such a convoluted and buried history of migration, it lends itself well to Steampunk because of the subculture's dalliance with what Pencils & Pincushions referred to as: "alternate histories and authenticity, and time and dialogues between different cultures."

Similar to LaurenAshley, FadhiliTheOne also inserts aspects of her African heritage into her costuming and created a reimagined version of Sailor Moon, referred to as Sailor Muezi or what she described as "an African Sailor Moon." For her costume, FadhiliTheOne stated: "I've used fabric that is typically used for traditional Congolese garments (to better align with my culture) and used a lion instead of a black cat to accompany my cosplay."

Figure 10: The researcher in her Umbreon cosplay costume. Retrieved from D. Harper, 2015, Toronto.

In regards to myself, my cosplay journey has led me to discover that I prefer creating my own narrative and selecting symbolic accoutrements that will then help deliver the message. The seed for this discovery first occurred in 2015, when I created my Umbreon *Pokémon* (1999) costume. I had the choice to either mold myself into a cat-like figure or draw on the allegories of the moon and the folkloric mysticism associated with lunar deities. I realized that I gained far more from the costume and the embodied experience by fashioning myself to resemble a goddess inspired by the fantastical stories that surrounded me.

Conclusion

When comparing cosplayers to stage performers, Gn (2011) states that "cosplayers place a greater focus on the 'likeness' and *aesthetics* of the imitation" (p. 589). Though the study conducted by Rahman et al. (2012) concluded that cosplayers believe *looking* and *acting* like the embodied characters are mutually constitutive, Gn's statement is more accurate to what I observed visiting the three conventions in North America. Cosplay is a subculture that utilizes the language of visuality as its main means of communication. As a cosplayer, *what* you are wearing is the first and most important qualifier to identify *who* you are. Thus, in this instance costuming becomes a transformative element to cosplay that acts as a catalyst to the immersion into different worlds.

Recognition within cosplay subculture becomes a significant indicator of success. This success is often determined by the following: how many times you are stopped for a picture; the praise gained from a fan of your character series; or whether you are approached by other members cosplaying within the same realm. Thus, recognition functions as what Sarah Thornton labels "subcultural capital" (qtd in Hale, 2014, p. 9) within the cosplay community. To acquire said capital, cosplayers are often compelled to mimic the costumes of fictional characters as closely as they can (Hale 2014, p. 17).

Within my research I found that recognition takes on two different forms. Firstly, there is the character recognition that results in praise and "The ritualized practice of posing for photos" (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 331). DieuvaCheetah, WonderWoman905 and Christian all expressed their enjoyment at being complimented or photographed by others while in costume. When asked about his *Teen Titans* (2003) Cyclops costume, Christian stated, "Obviously, a lot of people recognized it and it was really good, it was a lot of fun and it was the most recognized costume I've done up to that point." Thus, the acknowledgement that cosplayers receive from other fandom enthusiasts factors into the overall gratification of being in costume.

However, not all musings on recognition were wholly positive. AwesomeXcosplay spoke on the microaggressions he had experienced cosplaying outside of his racialized category that resulted in the reception of "awkward confrontations or suggestions:"

> A lot of the time if you are a black cosplayer and you are cosplaying a character that is not black, people attending the con will often recommend that you cosplay a black character or they won't recognize who you are cosplaying.

Afrodiasporic cosplayers then find themselves faced with the suggestion (or an inert obligation) to dress as fictional characters that share their race. Though the majority of the participants I interviewed had experience with cross-racial cosplay, several cosplayers asserted that to acclimate to cosplay subculture they started out embodying Afrodiasporic characters, or felt more comfortable embodying characters whose skin tone they shared.

There were also remarks about spotlighting characters that gain little attention, which are often black anime characters (DieuvaCheetah) or black characters in general (Alanna Mode). DijahCosplay commented on the sparse inclusion of black characters in television shows and experiencing a certain obligation to cosplay Afrodiasporic characters when they finally do appear in a series. She stated that when she notices a proliferation of cosplayers flocking to the same Afrodiasporic characters, it leads her to wonder "do you actually feel a connection to that character or do you feel forced to [cosplay them] because society is shitty?" Afrodiasporic cosplayers may also find that they are misidentified for highly-visible black characters—which occurred to Alanna Mode (mistaken as someone from *The Help* (2011) when cosplaying as waitress Princess Tiana from *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)) and DijahCosplay (mistaken as Winston from *Overwatch* (2016)—an armoured gorilla—when cosplaying as Shiro from *Voltron* (2016)). Lastly, they may be pushed to the margins of the cosplay community and ignored. This last statement is exaggerated if said cosplayer is outside of a normalized body standard or has a physical disability.

The second form of recognition that was revealed through my research refers to the overall credit that Afrodiasporic cosplayers receive from the larger cosplay and convention community. Over half of the cosplayers interviewed had something to say about the lack of attention paid to POC cosplayers either on popular websites and photography pages that feature cosplay subculture, in visual media that would discuss convention culture using digital video or print, or the convention setting itself. FadhiliTheOne remarked that "The cosplay community has never been so diverse and yet the same people are getting praises and recognition time and time again." WonderWoman905 stated that she feels being a cosplayer of colour affects who follows her on her social media channels. Pencils & Pincushions, DijahCosplay and Alanna Mode

pointed out how under-represented black cosplay guests are within convention settings, with Pencils & Pincushions stating that “a lot of people still treat black cosplayers as if they are less or second class.” LaurenAshley admitted that her style of cosplay is inspired by her ethnic background but also a reaction to the lack of attention paid to black cosplayers for doing “regular cosplay.” As a result, some of the cosplayers found that their participation in Chaka Cumberbatch’s #28DaysofBlackCosplay was done to bolster attention and connect them with other racialized people who are engaging in the community. Furthermore, for the 14 cosplayers who identified themselves as a “black cosplayer” rather than simply a generalized “cosplayer”, eight of them did so as a political statement to claim space and agency within the cosplay community.

Often cosplay subculture is hailed as a refuge for divergent identities. Within his interview tobias reflected on his own nerd status and described science fiction as being a domain where marginalized people turn to for solace. Since sci-fi begot convention culture, it would seem that conventions should also be conceived as a countercultural space incorporating the same qualities. However, based on my own participation within cosplay subculture and convention culture along with the discussions that I have had with cosplay participants, there is a need to expose the pervasive hierarchy and negativity. Cosplayers Nadine and Pencils & Pincushions both felt compelled to create discussion panels for Anime North, a popular Anime Convention in Toronto, that would draw attention to the presence of Afrodiasporic nerds that enjoy Japanese media. Nadine stated:

> Anime conventions are a safe space but there not always a safe space for everyone. And we need people to know that and that’s part of the reason that I encourage everyone of all colours and creeds to come to the panel to listen and engage.

This statement was echoed by FadhiliTheOne who spoke about navigating convention settings as a black woman and having encountered a cosplayer in blackface and being touched without her consent. Over the years there has been active progress in combatting sexual harassment at conventions, with signs popping up along the convention halls that read: cosplay is not consent. Unfortunately, blackface is not always met with the same derision in cosplay subculture because of its conflation with accuracy and authenticity.

Philip S. S. Howard (2018b) poignantly outlined in his discussions on blackface and Halloween costumes, that the decision for non-African descendent people to darken their skin is

often construed as comical, harmless and a bit of fun. The connection to this form of race parody and oppressive and racist caricatures of blackness (i.e. the minstrel show originating in the United States) is often disregarded (Howard 2017). Blackface in cosplay culture manifests differently than it does in comedy sketches or Halloween. It is buoyed by the need to expertly replicate the physical characteristics of a character—cosplayers conceive of altering their skin colour as a way to convincingly embody the character. Due to the fact that there is no contempt behind the act, just a dedication to mimic the character as precisely as possible, blackface becomes a slippery site of tension with some cosplayers against it and others willing to tolerate it—and that includes those who are a part of the Afrodiaspora. Due to cosplay subculture's insistence on being a space of enjoyment and fandom revelry, the implications of blackface are ignorantly divorced from its sordid history and implications.

Critique of Afrofuturism

Samatar (2017) opens her article, "Towards a Planetary History of Afrofuturism," by mentioning Tade Thompson, a Yoroban science fiction novelist who has been vocal about the skewed nature of Afrofuturism—which he determines is so enmeshed with African American science fiction that eventually they will be one in the same (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, in recent months, the Nigerian-American speculative fiction writer, Nnedi Okorafor, has been very vocal on Twitter about distancing herself from being labeled an Afrofuturist. In a 2017 interview with *OkayAfrica* she discussed the complex relationship she had with the term, stating that "Afrofuturism is a word, a label that, over the years was typically assigned to African-American visions of the future, and mainly through music" (Oke, 2017). She added that the roots of Afrofuturism should be from the African continent and then extend out towards the diaspora (Oke, 2017). Thompson and Okorafor's arguments point to what Samatar (2017) believes is a disregard for discussions on how geopolitics and nationalist ideology may affect how continental Africans engage with Afrofuturism (p. 176). Instead, she argues that Afrofuturism places "emphasis on blackness rather than nationhood and its orientation toward outer space, in which Earth figures as one star among others rather than a map carved up by borders" (Samatar, 2017, p. 176). Although Afrofuturism is said to be a globalized movement and is certainly moving in that direction, one of my largest critiques is the role the West (particularly the United States) has taken in shaping the scholarship surrounding Afrofuturism that then informs the theories.

Although I do desire to know more about the ideas and concepts of continental African futurism, I do not feel it is my place to take up any more space distinguishing what Afrofuturism might mean for continental Africans. Instead, my research focused on the input of Canadian voices within Afrofuturist scholarship, which have been few and far between.

Along with the participants who have been included in this study (many of which were found through their participation in Canadian events) the only other Canadian presence within Afrofuturist discussions that I came across was Robyn Maynard who submitted an article to the 2018 issue of *Topia* on the subject, and Nalo Hopkinson who is known for her creole science fiction stories. tobias c. van Veen responded to this absence by stating the following:

> Minister Faust as an OG[13] Afrofuturist way before the term was invented and the fact that he's not in the American canon speaks a lot to the general American exclusion of Canada. So, now we have a national boundary that is coming in to play where often Canada gets excluded and African Americans particularly forget that there are black Canadians.

The topic of a "missing" Canadian black presence when speaking on African diasporic histories is one that has been the focus of many Canadian critical race scholars. Walcott (2003) states that often "conversations about blackness in Canada is hampered by the proximity of the states and the impact of American Cultural production" (p. 20); a sentiment that was echoed in my discussion with Camille, one of my scholar and artist interviewees. She believes that pre-1830s the black Canadian experience was silenced because of the focus on America, and the interconnection with the Caribbean. Quentin, another artist that was interviewed, also remarked on how African Canadians have been "written out of history." So, it may come as no surprise that there was a missing Canadian presence in Afrofuturism or within the larger narratives of social justice work being done for black cosplay initiatives.

Furthermore, the coining of Afrofuturism as a term is a highly contentious. As mentioned previously, Dery (1994) put a name to something that was already occurring for millennia in African cultural practices, and disparately throughout North America (Barber, 2018). Several of the artists and scholars I interviewed took issue with the name. Camille stated that though Dery may have created the term, he did not create the phenomenon— "it didn't need a word, it just

[13] Slang for "Original gangster." It means they are an old-school practitioner/veteran of whatever they are involved with.

was," Camille told me. She sees Afrofuturism as a multitude of things, and the word as a way "to frame a way of thinking," though she suggests if thinking within the confines of the word becomes a limitation, then we can do without it. Author, Minister Faust uses Afritopianism to refer to Africentric speculative fiction. He explained that the use of the term "comes from a need for self-determination that begins with self-description." For Minister Faust Afrofuturism, having been a term created by a white European that uses the prefix *afro-,* creates a displacement. Minister Faust conceives of Afritopianism in this way:

> Afritopianism, like the world utopia suggests, is about realizing the place (topos - place) the place of Africa. Not only in the future, but currently and throughout thousands of years of recorded history, and of course absolutely embracing Ancient Egypt as well as all of our other classical civilizations, and you know, another aspect of the word utopia is the implication of a better future.

This project has revealed several different ways to refer to Afrodiasporic futurism: Afrofuturism, Afrxfuturism and Afritopianism. Each with a new set of principles that are working towards liberation.

The Culmination of the *Fantasy of Embodiment* Project

The visual guide is an initial attempt to have academic investigation deal with the subject of race in cosplay culture and to do so by incorporating a language that the subculture operates in: Visuality. Many of the studies I reviewed referenced issues about sex, gender, economics and the historiography of dressing in costume—but all discussions about representations of diverse ethnic and racialized identities were either very briefly mentioned or sidestepped altogether. I recognize that there are many factors that can affect a cosplay experience – age, size, gender, etc. Moving forward, implementing more of an intersectional framework would greatly benefit this study. As well, being more selective with the cosplay participants involved to focus on those who have a more experimental relationships to cosplay culture so as to thoroughly deconstruct that process, would also be highly beneficial. As Gn (2011) observed in his own analysis, many cosplayers do not engage in the subculture with the intention of being transgressive or subversive (p. 587). The majority of cosplayers that I spoke to, participate in cosplay subculture because it is a way to express adoration for the fan communities that they are a part of. Though, as evidenced above, there are cosplayers who are changing how that expression of adoration takes form. What

my research-creation adds to the overall discussion of cosplay is a critical reflection on how cosplayers interact with their characters that is driven by visual narrative, and a denaturing of cosplay from accuracy in order to radicalize it by supplanting it in an experimental Afrofuturist praxis.

During the interview I had with Sharrae, an artist who uses Afrofuturism for spiritual healing, she commented on the emphasis placed on science fiction imagery. She mentioned that sometimes Afrofuturism is pigeonholed to look a certain way and asked the question of whether there can be realist Afrofuturism, which would "just be black folks talking about the future and looking at it from the perspective, not just as being artistic creative, but about how does that actually look on the ground? In our everyday lives?" An answer to this question resides within *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto* by Syms (2013), a sobering, realist take on Afrofuturism that asks listeners to deal with the reality of what is happening on this Earth. It dispels the ideas of escaping to the cosmos, aliens, the presence of Egyptian myths and symbols that commonly grace the imagery of Afrofuturist artwork or the origin stories of the black race—i.e. as exemplified by Sun Ra. In short, it takes to task all of the sci-fi and speculative tropes that have been used to ground Afrofuturism and dismantles them. When I first encountered Syms' (2013) manifesto during my early perusal of Afrofuturism, I rejected it. Now, having immersed myself in several months of research, I am able to see value in creating some distance from the legacies of figures like George Clinton and Sun Ra. This project tries to grapple with the fantastical aspects of Afrofuturism along with the reality of what it means to be African Canadian and participate in nerd culture.

While interviewing the participants of my study, I was often asked how I am conceptualizing cosplay—how would I describe it? I found myself saying to cosplayer Alanna Mode that I have come to this point in my own cosplay journey where, in terms of costume design, I am satisfied with creating something that does not exude perfection. I have realized that I desire to create my own things and pick and choose the symbols that I want to incorporate, which will hint at the character that I am embodying. In conclusion, my current approach to cosplay subculture is about drawing on qualities that I want to emphasize about me, my body, my culture, and my relationship to the fandom experience. When I first started cosplay my goal was to stick as closely as possible to the character source text to increase the recognition that I

would receive from the fandom community. Now I see the value in interrogating those stories to make them fit me, instead of making me fit them.

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Appendices

APPENDIX 1

The Fantasy of Embodiment: Cosplay & Black Identity
This survey is comprised of 10 questions that are divided into 3 sections. It should take you 15 to 20 minutes to complete. You will be asked a series of questions that will focus on your identity as a cosplayer and as a member of the black community. You will also be asked to submit 3-4 photographs of you in costume that showcase some of the things you spoke about in your answers.

Answer the questions to the best of your ability. If you find that you are uncomfortable responding to a question, you may skip it. Please note that your answers for this survey will be used as content for the digital guide and will therefore be accessible by the public. You may also choose to contact the researcher if you would rather answer the questions through email or orally. Contact email is: nicole.taylor@concordia.ca

You can contact that email up until March 15, 2019 if you would like to withdraw from the study.

Thank you for your time participating and your enthusiasm! This is a reminder of the consent form that you submitted previously.

The Fantasy of Embodiment: Cosplay & Black Identity is an ongoing project with plans of expanding. Please indicate if you consent with the information that you give being a part of pbmentality.myportfolio.com, or you would only like it to be available during the duration of the study

- ☐ I consent with being a part of PBMentality (Psy-Borg Mentality)
- ☐ I only want my information to be available during the duration of the study

Basic information
Please use your cosplay pseudonym when filling out this questionnaire. If you do not possess a cosplay pseudonym, then only put your first name.

1. Cosplay Name:
2. How many months/years have you been cosplaying and why did you start cosplaying?
3. What are some of your favourite cosplays that you have done?
4. How do you feel when you are in costume? Especially when you wear the costumes that are your favourite.
5. How do you select the characters you want to cosplay i.e. what sort of characters are you drawn to?

Cosplay and race
These questions will focus more specifically on the cosplay subculture in relation to black identity.

6. Do you identify as a black cosplayer?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

6a. If you do identify as a black cosplayer, what has been your experience attending Canadian Animation, Comic and Game conventions?
6b. If you do not identify as a black cosplayer, please explain why not.

7. Have you ever done any cross-racial cosplays (cosplaying a character who does not share your race)?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

7a. If you have, how did you feel and what was the response?
7b. If you haven't, is there a specific reason why?

8. Have you ever altered or experimented with the characters you've embodied so they better align with your identity categories? (i.e. your race, gender, disability, etc)

Cosplay Experience

9. Have you learned anything new about yourself since you started cosplaying?
10. What is cosplay to you?

Photo Submission

Please include 3 or 4 photos of yourself in cosplay that are an example of some of the things you spoke about in this survey. Just a reminder that these photos will appear in the visual guide.

*Please email those images to: nicole.taylor@concordia.ca

This project also includes an opt-in, secondary interview that will delve deeper into the responses you gave for this survey. Please state whether you are interested in further participating in this study.

- ☐ Yes, I would like to participate in the in-depth interview
- ☐ No, I only want to participate in the survey

APPENDIX 2

Questions for Non-Cosplay Participants

1. Why science fiction or fantasy? What draws you to these genres?
2. What was your moment of discovery? How did you come across Africentric fantasy/science fiction?
3. How does Afrofuturism inform your work? How do you use it?
4. What do you think Afrofuturism or speculative fiction affords its users? In other words, what kind of possibilities present themselves when thinking through an Afrofuturist framework?
5. Are you familiar with cosplay (costume play) and if so, in your opinion, how might cosplay and Afrofuturism work together?
6. How might cosplay be used to experiment and unhinge racialized categories?
7. How do you see the artistry and scholarship around Afrofuturism taking shape in Canada?
8. Lately, in mainstream popular culture, there has been a surge of black superheroes taking up space cinematically. How do you think the presence and popularity of say, *Black Panther*, *Into the Spiderverse*, etc has informed Afrofuturism?

APPENDIX 3

Cosplay Participants

Cosplayer	Gender	Location	# of Years Doing Cosplay	Identified as a Black Cosplayer	"Black Cosplayer" Identification as Political
Alanna Mode	F	ON	10+ years	Yes (black cosplayer + just a cosplayer)	Yes
AwesomeXcosplay	M	QC	3 years	Yes	
Christian	M	ON	6 years	Yes	
Dijah Cosplay	F	ON	8 years	Yes	Yes
DizenDoll	F	ON	11 years	Yes (black cosplayer + just a cosplayer)	Yes
DieuvaCheetah	F	QC	4 years	Yes	Yes
EscoBlade	M	QC	2 years	Yes	
FadhiliTheOne	F	ON	5 years	Yes	Yes
LaurenAshley	F	US - Buffalo	10+ years	Yes	Yes
Montreal Flash	M	WC	6 years	No	
Nadine	F	ON	10+ years	Yes (black cosplayer + just a cosplayer)	Yes
Pencils & Pincushions	F	ON	10+ years	Yes	Yes
Stormee Grey	F	QC	4 years	Yes	
WonderWoman905	F	ON	3 years	Yes	

Canadian Scholar/Artist Participants

Name	Gender	Location	How They Were Found
tobias c. van Veen	M	BC	Scholar, DJ, experimental filmmaker and photographer.
Camille Turner	F	ON	Founder of Outerregion, an Afrofuturist performance company. Responsible for the Afronautic Research Lab.
Quentin VerCetty	M	ON	Art educator. Founder of Black Speculative Arts Movement in Canada
Sharrae Lyon	F	ON	Artist

			Took part in the HTMlles Festival - Zero Future "Afro to the Future: Paving Pathways to Liberation"
Minister Faust	M	AB	Journalist, Broadcaster and Speaker and author of several science fiction books. Found through tobias c. van Veen's podcast "Other Planes"