

QUEERING COSPLAY AND CONVENTIONS: AN INTERSECTIONAL STUDY OF  
COSPLAY, COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY

by

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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to my professors, my family, my pets, and the friends and colleagues who helped me get to this point. I also dedicate it to my Aunt Debbie and Dr. Gwen Hale, two people who are no longer here but who I carry with me every single day. Thank you to everyone has supported me during this journey.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

Assigned Female At Birth..... AFAB  
Assigned Male At Birth .....AMAB  
Female to Male ..... F2M  
Male to Female .....M2F

## **ABSTRACT**

### **QUEERING COSPLAY AND CONVENTIONS: AN INTERSECTIONAL STUDY OF COSPLAY, COMMUNITY, AND IDENTITY**

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Cosplay is a form of fan interaction in which one dresses as a particular character from a fixed medium such as a TV show. Cosplay is also an example of fan translation of popular culture into folklore and a method through which cosplayers can explore their identity/identities and experiment with gender through the liminal, ritualesque space of the cosplay convention. This thesis draws upon ethnographic fieldwork to examine the performance of cosplay, cosplay conventions, and the broader cosplay community from a folkloric lens to learn how fans use cosplay to help them express love for a character and/or a particular fandom as well as find community within fandom spaces. Further, it will provide insight into how cosplay can be used as a tool for self-exploration and a form of self-expression of various identities—with a focus on LGBTQIA+ identities—that fans have both within a fandom and outside of it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years in the United States, there has been a shift in how geek culture has been perceived by the general public. The “obscure media” and genres that encompass geek culture (e.g., Japanese anime and manga, sci-fi, fantasy, comics, video games, role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, etc.) has often been “looked down upon” by those who are not fans of them, and geek culture (and geek culture fans) have tended to be viewed “nerdy” (McCain et al.; Liptak 2022, 87). Around the mid-1990s and into the 2000s, however, fantasy movies such as *Lord of the Rings*, comic-based movies such as *Spider-Man*, and movie adaptations of *Star Trek* began to hit theatres and became blockbusters, offering potential fans more opportunities to be exposed to some of the genres associated with Geek culture, the stories within them and also causing a surge in fan and media culture (Liptak 2022, 87-89). This trend has continued even through today in 2023 as fans continue to consume different geek culture genres and media from around the world such as shows, movies, books, anime, manga, and more (Liptak 2022, 87-89). Fans themselves have created communities surrounding the love of certain genres and the characters within them, often referred to as “fandoms,” which are “organized subculture of people who share a common interest” (Vicente 2022, para. 2). There are many different ways fans can engage with their fandom that could be considered folklore, and

one such way is cosplay. The term “cosplay” is a portmanteau of “costume” and “play,” and it is believed to have first been coined by game designer Nobuyuki Takahashi the 1980s<sup>1</sup> in a few pieces of his writing in which he discusses how many manga and anime fans had begun to dress up as characters at the Comiket Convention in Tokyo, (Burke 70; Kirkpatrick 63; 201). According to Burke, since Takahashi coined the term, the “performance art of cosplay... has become an increasingly visible part of popular culture” that has only continued to grow even today (Burke 2022, 85)

Though there are numerous ways to define cosplay, it can generally be described as the act of dressing up as and embodying a character from a variety of media genres (Hale 8; Lamerichs 199). There is a creative and artistic process when putting a cosplay together, including making and/or buying cosplay pieces in order to portray a particular character from a fandom, and some cosplayers may possibly incorporate their own vision of a character in order to express an identity or challenge the static appearance of a particular character as well (Liptak 2022, xvi). Lamerichs states that cosplay can also be an emotional or “affective” process because many fans and cosplayers are very dedicated to their fandom and take on emotional labor while putting a cosplay together in order to do the character justice (Lamerichs 208). Such an affective process may also involve an embodiment process that some cosplayers go through while working on portraying the character; for instance, cosplayers may embody the characters they are cosplaying by

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<sup>1</sup> There is actually quite some debate surrounding when Takahashi first used “cosplay.” Some sources say that he first used it in a photo-essay in the June 1983 issue of the *My Anime* magazine after he attended Comiket (Tokyo, est. 1975) while others say that he first used it in 1984 when he wrote about his experiences at WorldCon, an LA science fiction convention (est. 1939) (Burke 70; Kirkpatrick 63; Lamerichs 201).

acting like the character through what Matthew Hale calls “performative action,” a type of performativity some cosplayers may engage in to not just look like the character but to *be* the character as well (Hale 2014, 8). Through this type of performative action, some cosplayers may also act as or embody certain identities that particular characters share, and this particular aspect of cosplay is what made me interested in writing about cosplay for my master’s thesis.

For those who cosplay, cosplaying a character can be a form of expression as well as a method to make social connections and to engage in fandoms of which they are a part, which also offers them a chance to find and form community. And for cosplayers like me who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, the act of cosplay could be seen as an escape from conventional gender norms that permits them to not be themselves and feel less pressure of being judged by those who are not part of the community and/or who are not allies.

I first began my research on cosplay in late 2020 when I was working on a paper about the intersections of cosplay and gender identity. However, while gender had been the focus of that particular paper, it had not been my only motivation for researching cosplay. Another aspect of the cosplay community I was curious about was the role of cosplay conventions as potentially being a place similar to raves where gender norms are not strictly enforced, as folklorist Anthony P. Avery (2005) writes about in “‘I Feel that I’m Freer to Show My Feminine Side’: Folklore and Alternative Masculinities in a Rave Scene.” Avery describes raves as a liminal space where “people of different classes, sexualities, and races dance together and form a new community configuration” that is

ritually separated from the ordinary world. The same could be said of cosplay; similar to raves, cosplay and the cosplay community could be considered “carnavalesque,” a term that some researchers use to describe spaces “in which individuals can challenge, ridicule, and play around with gender norms” (Seregina 2019, 456).

When working on this paper, I used several methods in order to better understand how cosplay intersected with the LGBTQIA+ community and/or fans who identify with the community. I conducted library research to find scholarly sources, and I also looked at digital sources such as blogs and social media spaces such as Instagram and Tumblr; however, as the project had evolved, I focused less on the blog posts and social media spaces and more on the academic sources, participant observation, and interviews. In order to learn more about the motivations of cosplayers and how they view cosplay conventions as well as the community as a whole, I conducted six interviews with cosplayers online via Zoom between October 13, 2020 and November 20, 2020. While there were limitations to the paper, one of the major conclusions was that though not always tied to gender, cosplay as an act, cosplay conventions, and the cosplay community can provide a liminal, carnivalesque space separate from conventional gender and sexuality norms and allow for various methods of expression for fictional characters and exploration of gender and sexuality.

This finding had, on one hand, seemed to fall in line with some of other articles I had read about cosplay and gender, but it fell a bit out of line as well because of the fact I had been unable to find other sources that focused specifically on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ cosplayers at the time I had written the paper. Along with the gap in

focusing on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ cosplayers, I noticed a major gap of the study of cosplay within the field of folklore itself. In fact, the only scholarly article I could find about cosplay from a folkloric lens was “Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic” by Matthew Hale, which was published in a 2014 issue of *Western Folklore*. Even as of 2023 it is one of only a few articles I can find about cosplay within the field of folklore.

From 2020 to 2023, I have seen an increase in scholarly attention to cosplay, but much of this scholarship is located within media and cultural studies despite the fact the field of folklore also has tools and theories that could be applicable to study cosplay and gain new insights about this creative process and form of expression. As I continue to research cosplay, I have found that much of current research either utilizes frameworks we utilize in folklore studies and other adjacent fields such as Anthropology, or they use folkloric terminology despite the majority of this research not being rooted in folklore studies itself. For example, current research on cosplay conventions describe the space of the convention as ‘carnavalesque,’ or liminal (Jacobs 2013, 22; Seregina 2019, 456; Winge 2019, 11). In their article “Impersonating and Performing Queer Sexuality in the Cosplay Zone,” Katrien Jacobs writes how “Several scholars have borrowed the theory of ‘liminality’ or ‘rite of passage’ from cultural anthropology and performance studies to theorize the tentative and temporary impact of identity transgression within visual fantasy cultures” such as cosplay (Jacobs 2013, 29).

Another example of such “borrowing” of theories, concepts or terms is the idea of there being ‘rites of passages’ or ‘rituals’ such as when Thèresa Winge, in the

introduction to the book *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination*, states: “The social rituals associated with Cosplay are numerous, providing Cosplayers with expected experiences before, during, and after Cosplay-related activities” (Winge 2019, 12). Scholars in other disciplines are utilizing and applying terms and concepts (e.g., carnivalesque, rites of passage, and ritual) within their research on cosplay, though they are often using them differently than how folklore scholars would. While such interpretations are valuable to the study of cosplay, it is also valuable for folklorists to interrogate how other scholars are using these concepts in other disciplines by studying cosplay ourselves. This is not to say that these terms and concepts are exclusively within the realm of folklore, but the fact that current scholarly discussions surrounding cosplay is occurring in other fields and that folklorists are not a big part of them speaks to a need for folklorists to join in as well.

In other words, if other people in other disciplines such as media studies and cultural studies are using similar terminology, concepts, and theories we also often use as folklorists when studying cosplay, why aren't many folklorists studying cosplay and why hasn't there been more attention to cosplay in the field of folklore? How can folklorists join the conversations to provide a folkloric, and potentially interdisciplinary, perspective? And what could folklorists' methods, theories, approaches, and other perspectives add to the study of cosplay?

The goal of this thesis, therefore, is to explore the intersections of cosplay, identity, and fan communities (or fandoms) through folkloric terms and concepts in order to argue that cosplay is more than just a costume; rather, cosplaying, cosplay



communities, and other fans spaces provide avenues through which fans can express their love for a character and/or fandom, explore various identities through performance in (e.g., gender and sexuality), and find connection(s) and communit(ies) of like-minded fans (i.e., “folk groups”).

Initially, I had planned for my entire thesis to be focused on cosplay and gender identity, but as I continued to do more research about cosplay as new sources have come out, I felt the need to expand the thesis so that other intersections of identity and community can be discussed in order to create a larger picture of how cosplay integrates into fan communities, fan interactions, and other identities. I also felt the need to expand the thesis as I noticed the methods scholars have been using to frame conversations about cosplay as well. Though it would be impossible to include every aspect of cosplay within this thesis (or any other type of scholarly work), my hope for this thesis is that it will provide other folklorists who are interested in cosplay some insight that they may not have already had before and to be a way to open up further conversations about cosplay in folklore studies; to help folklorists understand the value of cosplay to cosplayers, fans, fandom and fan culture, and communities; to provide insights into how cosplayers may use cosplay as forms of fan, identity, and community expression and exploration; and to raise further attention to the fact that folklorists could also have a lot of insights and differing perspectives within the scholarly work on cosplay that has already begun in other fields.

While this first chapter serves as an introduction to the thesis, the second chapter provides some further background about cosplay, cosplay spaces, fandoms, and my

ethnographic fieldwork. I have included a literature review of some current cosplay research, particularly focusing on how scholars have used frameworks like liminality, ‘carnavalesque,’ and rituals who are studying cosplay in various fields. The literature review opens space for discussing some of these frameworks from a folkloric lens, particularly paying attention to how cosplay spaces and communities provide avenues for cosplayers and/or fans to connect with one another because of the ‘carnavalesque’ and liminal qualities. I end this chapter by discussing different types of cosplay, variations cosplayers may dress as, and some of the motivations for why people choose to cosplay and select characters.

The third chapter is about intersections between cosplay, gender, and sexuality. I analyze a series of interviews that I conducted from 2020-2023 and the results from a survey distributed in September 2022 in order to understand how participants use cosplay to explore their gender identities and how the liminality of cosplay spaces challenges yet also reinforces gender norms; as previously mentioned, this had been my initial thesis topic because many previous studies that have focused on cosplay and gender often come to the conclusion that cosplay is not tied to gender identity, and I wanted to interrogate this claim (Tompkins 2019; Gn 2011; Winge 2006, 2019). I also incorporate a more intersectional approach by also exploring how cosplayers navigate other intersectional identities. My findings from these interviews and survey results indicate that some cosplayers, especially those who identify as queer and/or questioning, use cosplay to explore and express their gender and/or sexual identities. These results contradict some of the previous sources I’ve found about cosplay, which is why I also discuss how there

needs to be more attention to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ cosplayers in all fields of study.

The fourth chapter focuses more explicitly on women cosplay players with attention to how gender intersects with other identities. This chapter is especially important because it provides insights into how women explore gender as well as insights into some issues that affect women within the cosplay community. Since there is more literature about women and cosplay, much of this chapter references literature as well as some interviews and survey responses.

Finally, the fifth chapter is the conclusion that summarizes some of the main findings and will discuss potential avenues for future research.

## **METHODS**

I used several strategies to explore how cosplay connects to queer identities when I began researching this topic in 2020. The two main methods were library research and virtual and face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, interviews, and a survey.

Since 2020, I have conducted library research about cosplay through George Mason University's library in order to find scholarly articles and other sources about cosplay and fandom. As a cosplayer myself, I have conducted ethnographic fieldwork via participant observation at various cosplay conventions in the D.C./Virginia areas: Katsucon, which occurs every January or February in National Harbor, MD; Otakon, which occurs every July or August in Washington, D.C.; and NekoCon, which occurs every November in Hampton Roads, VA. I have been attending these conventions off

and on since the summer of 2016, and I will discuss my own observations at these conventions and reference particular convention guidebooks I have from past conventions: the NekoCon 23 guidebook (2021), the Katsucon 2022 guidebook, and the program book for Otakon 2022. These guidebooks contain information about the convention, such as programming, main events, guests who had attended the conventions, and other types of entertainment featured at the conventions. Because there is such a large cosplay presence through virtual communities and social media, I also engaged in participant observation within virtual cosplay communities (mainly Instagram), but I primarily focus on the interviews and survey responses in the thesis.

I also interviewed nine cosplayers between 2020, 2022, and 2023.<sup>2</sup> In the fall of 2020, I conducted a total of six interviews over the course of two months (October and November 2020) with cosplayers in the hopes of being able to learn more about their motivations for cosplaying, if part of the reason they cosplay is tied to gender, and their thoughts on cosplay conventions and the broader cosplay community/communities.<sup>3</sup> Demographically, all of the interviewees were between the ages of 21 to 25, lived in either Virginia or Maryland at the time of the interview, and have attended cosplay conventions that take place in the Washington D.C. area (e.g., Otakon, Katsucon and/or NekoCon). Four out of six interviewees identified as white, one identified as Black, and one identified as South Korean. Four out of six identified as female while two identified

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<sup>2</sup> I had originally interviewed ten cosplayers/fans, but I have not received a signed consent form from one of the 2023 interviewees, so their insights are not currently included.

<sup>3</sup> Though some of the interviewees stated that they were comfortable not using a pseudonym, since others did want to go by one, I made the decision that all of the interviewees from fall 2020 would go by pseudonyms for this project for the same of consistency.

as transgender men. All but one identified as being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community and the other, though straight and cisgender, identified as an ally.

In Fall 2022, I conducted three additional interviews. All of the interviewees were between the ages of 24 and 33 years old, live in Kentucky or Florida, and have attended cosplay or other types of fan conventions. Two of the interviewees identify as white, while one identifies as white/white-passing racially but also identifies as ethnically Hispanic. All three interviewees had identified as being members of the LGBTQIA+ community, with two identifying as genderqueer and on the asexual spectrum and one identifying as a cisgender man and bisexual. One of the interview participants identified as neurodivergent and since I am also neurodivergent, we began a conversation that indicates a need for more research about cosplay and neurodivergent fans (this will be further discussed in chapter three and in the conclusion).

I also created a survey about cosplay, gender, and sexuality, which was distributed through Qualtrics in fall 2022. The questions focused on cosplay and intersections of LGBTQIA+ identity. As of February 18, 2023, I have received seven total survey responses, and the responses not only encompassed intersections of cosplay and queer identities, but intersections of race and disability as well. The respondents were all between 18-27 years of age, and they have cosplayed for at least five years—some even cosplaying for as long as 10 years. The participants represent diverse racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, disability, and national identities. Below are two tables with more information about the demographics and responses I received from the survey.

*Table 1: Survey Demographics (7 Total Participants)*

Age Range	18-27
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic (1), Ashkenazi Jewish (1), biracial (half Asian, half white) (1), Quechua/Indigenous (1), white (3)
Gender	Nonbinary (1), female (1), genderfluid (2), genderfluid man and demiguy (1), trans man (2), panromantic (1)
Sexuality	Demisexual (1), straight and demisexual (1), bisexual (1), bisexual and demisexual (1), asexual (1), pansexual (1), panromantic (1)
Other Identities	Neurodivergent/autistic (1), neurodivergent and vision impairment (1), able-bodied (1), American (1), Australian (1)

*Table 2: Survey Responses about Cosplay*

Years of Cosplay	5 years and up
Cosplay Participation	Hobby (1), conventions (6), cosplay events (1), panels (3), cosplay groups (3), idols/idol groups (2), Tik Tok (1), Instagram (3), sponsorships (1), online (2), car modeling (1), meet ups (1) photoshoots (2), at home (1), couples cosplay (1)

Why they Cosplay Certain Characters	Exploration of gender identity (1), confirmation/affirmation of gender identity (1), love of a character (2), characters with shared identities (1), creativity (1), aesthetic/design (1), gender envy (1), gender euphoria (1), male characters (3)
Cosplay Variants related to Gender	Crossplay (1), genderbend (1)
Other comments	Cosplaying makes them feel safer (1), fear of unwanted attention and/or sexual harassment (1), cosplay has helped with dysphoria (2), cosplay as art form (1), cosplay is for everyone/ gender doesn't matter (2), feels like gender is irrelevant (1), cosplay spaces as open-minded and/or supportive (1)

I am writing this thesis as a white, middle-class, AFAB genderqueer, asexual, neurodivergent (Autism and ADHD) folklore graduate student, so I am writing this thesis with my own intersections of identity and positionality in mind. However, my interest in studying cosplay and gender, in part, stemmed from the fact that I am a fan and cosplayer myself; I have and still continue to use cosplay in a way that allows me to explore gender and express my identity, which also offers me the perspective of a researcher and the perspective of a fan who participates in cosplay and attends cosplay conventions.

### **Limitations**

Like any other study, there were some limitations to this research. I will go into some of these limitations in more detail later in certain chapters, but one of the main limitations was that I have only been able to attend cosplay conventions within the D.C./Virginia area because of where I live, expenses related to travel, lodging, cosplay itself (e.g., cost and time to prepare cosplay for conventions), and due to COVID-19 restrictions. Another limitation of this study was that the pool of interviewees was not as diverse as I hoped it would be and that it should be: the majority of my interviewees were white (7 out of 9), though one of the seven identifies as Hispanic but white-passing, and there were some participants I had to omit because I never received a consent form for them; therefore, more research with diverse participants (especially related to race, ethnicity, disability/ability, and neurodivergent) is needed in the future. Also, while some of the interview participants and survey responses mentioned involvement with virtual cosplay communities, the responses were primarily related to their experiences as fans who engage in the participatory culture of cosplay conventions; in other words, my discussion of cosplay spaces is primarily focused on in-person fan events such as cosplay conventions.

There are a few other things I would like to note about this thesis and my research. As a disclaimer, I want to add that while many of the interviewees' answers overlapped regarding certain questions, each individual is unique and has their own beliefs and opinions, but they are only just a few voices in the cosplay community and, in some cases, in the LGBTQIA+ community. It is also worth noting that when it comes to terminology, there are some terms and issues that have neither solidified definitions nor



have received adequate academic attention. In these cases, I have used non-academic and/or popular public sources such as Urban Dictionary and fandom-created content to define such terms (“fandom,” “headcanon,” “comfort character,” etc.).

Terminology is always subject to change, but I have done my best to use terminology that is more frequently used in my research and by the participants to be as respectful of the participants as possible. For instance, I am aware of the fact and acknowledge that the western term “queer” has its limitations since it cannot encompass all identities and all people who may identify with the LGBTQIA+ identity within the U.S. and globally. It is nearly impossible to find an umbrella term that can perfectly encapsulate a particular identity and/or identities, but since the majority of the research I have been referencing has used the word “queer” and since many of the interview participants used “queer” during their interviews as well, I have decided to use it for this thesis written in spring 2023; however, I am aware that there will probably be a time when a different word or words will be more appropriate as terminology continues to change and evolve over time, and I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge that as well.

## CHAPTER TWO

### FANDOM, PARTICIPATORY CULTURE, AND FOLKLORE

The rise and increased visibility of fandoms, and fan interactions have led to a shift in how audiences relate to fixed media such as books, anime, movies, and TV shows (Jenkins 2006, 2). This shift has, in turn, led to the emergence of what some researchers consider to be “participatory culture.” Participatory culture (or “fan play,” as Contessa Small calls it in an article from 2016) refers to the traditional ways fans creatively engage with and celebrate their fandom, individually or in a group, to produce new expressive forms of emergent folk culture” such as fanfiction, fanart, and other fan-created content within a fandom (Small 2016, 256). Over time, participatory culture has evolved as “new technologies [continue to enable] average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content” and has led to the emergence of convergence culture, which Jenkins defines as “a moment where fans are central to how culture operates” (Jenkins 2006, 1). In this case, it can be argued that the “average consumers” mentioned could be framed as the “folk” because they share an “unofficial level of cultural understanding” as fans within their fandom and they engage in participatory culture as well as convergence culture because they are the foundation of fan culture (McNeill 2013, 4; Jenkins 2006, 1). Specific examples of how the folk participate in fandom culture include multiple modes or genres of fan expression, from fanfiction to fan art to cosplay— forms of expression that could also be considered folklore.

Cosplay is one of the many types of methods fans can use to engage with the participatory nature of fan culture by expressing love for their fandom(s) and the characters within them (Tompkins 2019, 0.1). This chapter will provide an overview of the scholarly literature and the ethnographic fieldwork I've done at cosplay conventions focusing on how scholars have conceptualized the cosplay spaces and cosplayers themselves.

### **Cosplay Conventions: Overview and Ethnographic Fieldwork**

I have attended cosplay conventions in the D.C./DMV area since 2016, including Katsucon, Otakon, and NekoCon. Below is the description of Katsucon from its website:

Katsucon is an annual 3-day fan convention held in the D.C. metro area for multicultural enthusiasts and entertainment... produced by Katsucon Entertainment, Inc. (KEI), an educational organization dedicated to bringing information about Japanese animation, society, and traditional and popular culture to fans everywhere. (“Katsucon—About Us”)

As can be inferred by Katsucon's description, the convention (along with other similar conventions) not only offers opportunities for fans to come together to share their passions for cosplay and their fandoms, but it also offers opportunities to learn more about Japanese media, entertainment, and other aspects of Japanese culture. Similarly, Otakon, which was founded in 1994, is “an annual convention held in the summer months to celebrate Asian pop culture (anime, manga, music, movies, video games, etc) and its fandom. The event runs from Friday to Sunday and is packed with a schedule that has tons to do” (“Otakon—About”). NekoCon is a three-day anime convention that also

connects with charities; in the case of NekoCon 23 (2021), the two charities were a nonprofit, no-kill cat shelter called “The Cat Corner” as well as the Carolina Manga Library, which had a room at the convention where cosplayers and other fans could read manga for free while they were at the convention (*NekoCon 23*, 4).

These conventions usually take place over three days (most commonly Friday-Sunday) and feature an opening ceremony (where attendees can get a preview of upcoming events and hear any announcements) and a closing ceremony (where winners of certain contests will be awarded, announcements for future events and conventions can be made, and attendees have the chance to give the convention organizers feedback about their experience) (*Otakon 2022 Program Book*, 11). There are also a variety of events and programming that people can experience at the convention, such as panels with topics ranging from fandom to Japanese language and culture; crafting; dances; cosplay contests; gaming; autograph sessions with celebrities in the industry; and events for attendees 18 and up (*Otakon 2022 Program Book*, 11-14; *NekoCon 23 2021*, 9-10).

All of these conventions also have what is either called a dealer’s room or exhibition hall, which is where fans can buy merchandise (often referred to as “merch”) related to their respective fandoms as well as cosplay supplies such as wigs, props, and cosplay pieces (*NekoCon 23 2021*, 45). Along with the dealer’s room or exhibitor’s hall, these conventions also usually have an “artists’ alley,” “a place for amateur, hobbyist, and up-coming professional artists to sell and promote their work. Handcrafted items, custom artwork, commissions, props, toys, handmade textiles, artist merchandise and more!” (*NekoCon 23 2021*, 43). These artists sell artwork that ranges from prints of

certain characters from media to original work, and many even feature pride-themed items such as pride pins, flags, and scarves. The atmosphere of the convention, with all of its opportunities for fans to engage in different aspects of fandom participatory culture, tends to be very open, accepting, and friendly—and so are the majority of those in attendance.

### **Literature Review**

When I was beginning my research on the intersection of cosplay, folklore, gender, and sexuality in the fall of 2020, I noticed that much of the literature I was able to find discussed cosplay in three different ways or themes: cosplay as an act and a process, cosplay conventions, and the cosplay community as a whole. These themes are still prevalent in more recent literature. Another very important aspect of cosplay that is mentioned in the literature and is interwoven throughout is identity, including identity exploration and expression. In the 2022 article “Cosplay as Vernacular Adaptation,” Liam Burke provides a brief overview of some of the literature on cosplay he found, mainly in media and cultural studies, writing that much of the current research on cosplay has been through “the lens of identity,” “transnational media flows,” and “performance” (Burke 2022, 85). Due to the nature of my own research, this literature is valuable for providing a brief background on cosplay research and ‘aca-fans’ and will be further divided into three sections based on the themes of cosplay and cosplayers, cosplay spaces (particularly focusing on cosplay convention spaces), and cosplay communities.

#### ***Cosplay Researchers and Aca-Fans.***

For the majority of cosplayers, cosplay goes beyond just wearing a costume, and this fact alone has been a draw for academics to study it. Adam Savage, in a foreword to Andrew Liptak's book *Cosplay: A History*, writes how cosplay is not solely a hobby, stating that "Cosplay is expensive. It's a bona fide art form, and an inclusive one—there's precious little gatekeeping overall"<sup>4</sup> (Savage 2022, ix). He further adds that:

For me, cosplay is most simply described as the practice of wearing a costume with the possibility that something important (aesthetically, emotionally, philosophically, socially, etc.) might happen during the wearing of that costume. Like all art, it can be produced and consumed in countless different ways, and like all art, cosplay is about transformation and transmission. (Savage 2022, ix).

Savage himself is a cosplayer and many scholars who research cosplay, including myself, also identify as cosplayers—including Andrew Liptak, Anastasia Seregina, Nicholle Lamerichs, Henry Jenkins, and Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols, just to name a few. In "Playing with Identity: Gender Performance, and Feminine Agency in Cosplay," Nichols describes [herself] as an "aca-fan," a term Henry Jenkins defines as "a hybrid identity that straddles two very different ways of relating to media cultures" (Nichols 2019, 271; Jenkins 2006, 4). Jenkins, in "Confessions of an Aca-Fan," writes that academic discussions of fandom began in the early 1990s and how since then "it has become increasingly possible for people to merge the roles of fan and academic" (Jenkins

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<sup>4</sup> Though many cosplay communities and spaces do not have issues with gatekeeping, this is not true for all such communities and spaces. Some prevalent issues related to gatekeeping within the cosplay community are racism, sexism, an fatphobia, which will be further discussed in later chapters.

2006, 4). He further adds that aca-fans' intersections of fan identity and scholar identity allow these researchers to relate to media culture in two ways: as researchers and members of fan participatory cultures themselves (Jenkins 2006, 4). Thus, many of these aca-fans use their positionalities as aca-fans to provide their unique perspectives to the study of cosplay, and they split many of their articles between their own personal experiences as cosplayers and their perspectives as scholars to employ scholarly research methods such as library research, and ethnographic fieldwork including participant observation and interviews.

*Cosplay and Cosplayers.* Cosplay is a form of participatory fan culture and a social art form that involves both transformation and transmission through the process of putting together a cosplay and the performative aspect of cosplay once a cosplayer is in the cosplay itself (Savage 2022, x).

*Cosplay as a Process.* Scholars such as Nicholle Lamerichs, Liam Burke, Andrew Liptak, and Theresa Winge write about how cosplay involves a creative process through which cosplayers buy and/or create cosplay and cosplay pieces in order to portray a particular character. There is a creative and artistic process when putting a cosplay together, including making and/or buying cosplay pieces as well as possibly incorporating their own vision of a character in order to express an identity or challenge the static appearance of a particular character. Some other types of cosplay processes involve further cosplay construction, including “designing patterns, sewing garments, and adjoining complex pieces of plastic and foam together” (Liptak 2022, xvi).

Nicolle Lamerichs describes cosplay as an “affective” process because there is an emotional component to cosplay that often originates from the love a cosplayer has for a character or a fandom, and that emotion feeds into the process of putting the cosplay together and bringing the character to life (Lamerichs 2018, 208). Such affective processes can even include “[sinking] decades into a single costume, painstakingly getting each and every detail exactly right” (Liptak 2022, xvi) in order to portray the character as authentically as possible. On the other hand, some cosplayers may engage in a different creative cosplay process that involves, interpretation, alternative representations of characters that may be less about portraying a character authentically and more about the creative challenge of creating an alternate costume and/or representation of a character (Nichols 2019, 278). Thus, Burke writes that there is a “tension between fidelity and innovation” within cosplay and other types of fan interactions and adaptations (Burke 2022, 88).

Therèsa Winge writes about cosplay as a process typical of rituals, writing that the “dressing process” of cosplay can be divided into a ritual process of separation, liminality, and incorporation as outlined by Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Winge 2019, 132). The separation stage involves the removal of everyday clothes in the private sphere and moving into the mindset of the character and the cosplay space; the cosplay transitions into the liminal space as they begin to “become” the character themselves without an audience; once the cosplayer has finished donning the cosplay, they begin the incorporation stage by beginning to act and engage in performativity of the character, which will be discussed in the next subsection



(Winge 2019, 132). Winge also discusses what she describes as “social rituals” that encompass cosplay that “[provide] Cosplayers with expected experiences before, during, and after Cosplay-related activities” (Winge 2019, 12). While some of these rituals are more related to the space of the cosplay convention itself, Winge outlines some rituals relating to cosplaying itself, including “selecting the character; dressing in the costume; practicing poses in the mirror; posing for pictures; and performing in front of an audience for a Cosplay competition;” in fact, the love of a character is one of the main reasons why some cosplayers cosplay the characters they do and why they cosplay in general (Winge 2019, 12).

*Cosplay as an Act/Performance.* Cosplay, as an art form and a type of vernacular creativity and expression, can also be a performative act that extends beyond creating and wearing cosplay; as Savage mentions, the “performative aspect of cosplay is intrinsic in its nature” (Savage 2022, x). Thus, Savage sees cosplay as a “social art form” that can have parallels to a theatrical performance due to the spectacle and the process some people may undergo in order to portray the character they are cosplaying through roleplay or other means (Savage 2022, x)

Cosplayers may embody the characters they are cosplaying by acting like the character through means of performance and performativity. As mentioned in the introduction, Matthew Hale terms these types of performances “performative actions,” which can involve “[manipulating] posture, gesture, and language” and other characteristics to match the character (Hale 8, 12; Burke 2022, 86). In order to achieve such performative action, some cosplayers do a character study of sorts that involves

watching and/or reading the materials the character is featured in to learn and/or imitate their speech patterns, mannerisms, and other traits unique to them, which can further help them come up with ways to pose for pictures and/or interact and with others in character within cosplay spaces (Winge 2019, 132). Through this type of performative action, some cosplayers also act as or embody certain identities that particular characters share such as gender, which will be touched on in this chapter but further discussed in a later section of the thesis.

This performative aspect of cosplay, in some ways, aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which scholars such as Seregina have used in their analysis of cosplay. Butler describes gender as a cultural process formed through repetition and imitation, and some cosplayers may use a similar method to embody a character itself and the gender of the character they are cosplaying (Butler 199, 309). As with gender in everyday life, cosplayers' processes of repeating and imitating characters behaviors allow to them to create a gendered performance through their cosplay; this process and performance can lead to undoing gender through the performance of a gendered other and gender play (Seregina 2019, 455). Gender play can occur in cosplay in a variety of ways, including cosplay variants such as crossplay or genderbend. Crossplay is when a cosplayer cosplays a character of a different gender identity, and genderbend refers to when a cosplayer changes the gender of a character, possibly to align with one's personal gender identity (Burke 2022, 90; Nichols 2019, 272). Some cosplayers who are questioning their gender identity engage in this type of gender play in order to explore their gender and use their cosplay as a safe way to confirm and/or affirm their identity (as

indicated by some of my interview and survey participants). Cosplayers may also attend cosplay conventions and/or find a home in virtual cosplay spaces where they can engage in this gender play in different settings.

*Cosplay Spaces.* Another important aspect of cosplay that scholars frequently discuss are cosplay spaces, including cosplay conventions and online communities. The majority of the literature I was able to find about cosplay spaces focus on the cosplay convention as a space, but I will also discuss some aspects of online cosplay spaces in later chapters.

*Cosplay Conventions as Liminal Space.* When discussing the cosplay convention in many academic contexts, scholars often use frameworks such as Victor Turner's concept of liminality and Mikhail Bakhtin's "carnavalesque." Winge seems to view the cosplay convention in a similar manner, describing the convention space as a "temporary and ephemeral fan space created within a physical venue (hotel, arena, or convention center) to facilitate the gathering of fans around a specific theme, activity, and/or genre..." (Winge 2019, 10). Such spaces are marked by the fact that they tend to take place within a certain time frame, serving as a form of temporary escapism from everyday life outside of the convention (Winge 2019, 11; Avery 2005, 162). Within this time frame, conventions offer a physical space where cosplayers and other fans can come together to share their love of their fandom(s), meet other fans, and find potential community through shared interests and passions for cosplay, particular fandoms, and characters (Winge 2019, 10).

Winge's conception of the cosplay convention, along with other scholars' descriptions of the cosplay convention as a liminal space, are akin to folklorist's Anthony Avery's discussions of raves as carnivalesque and liminal spaces. Avery states that "Raves generate a liminal existence, ritually separating, by various means, the ordinary world from the dance environment" (Avery 2005, 165; cf. Weems 2008); thus, raves, like cosplay conventions, are liminal by nature, creating a world separate from our own ordinary world. He further describes raves as "Temporary Autonomous Zones" (TAZ) because of the fact that they tend to be "one-night" parties that occur within a specific window of time (Avery 2005, 158).

Avery further frames raves as both liminal and having ritual qualities, referencing Lynette Lewis and Michael Ross's statement that "social engagements" such as raves" provide the social vehicle for the enactment of social transformation (separation from their everyday reality), for a prescribed period of time (Transitory) and re-integration (incorporations) back into the wider social order" (Lewis and Ross 1995, 136 quoted in Avery 2005, 162). Avery's thinking about raves is similar to how Winge thinks about the "dressing process" of cosplay being divided into the stages of separation, transition, and integration as mentioned in the section about cosplay as a process (Winge 2019, 132). Both applications of the ritual process point to the fact that not only is cosplay itself a ritual process, but cosplay conventions, like raves, can be considered a different type of ritual process.

*Cosplay Conventions as Carnavalesque.* Another framework some scholars who study cosplay use to conceptualize the cosplay convention as well as other cosplay spaces

is the “carnavalesque.” A term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, Anastasia Seregina writes that “the carnivalesque... is a temporally and spatially limited performance that is apart from “real life,” unbound and free from rules and structures” (Seregina 2019, 456). Winge also utilizes the carnivalesque in the book *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination*, stating that cosplay conventions and other spaces can be “best understood” through the carnivalesque (Winge 2019, 163). She explains that cosplay conventions allow cosplayers to “experience ‘carnavalesque’... within the larger spectacle of the fan community” (Winge 2019, 162). As further support for the idea that cosplay conventions are carnivalesque, in his 1968 book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the carnival—and, in turn, carnivalesque—as follows:

Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While the carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part. (Bakhtin 1968, 7).

This description itself combines elements of spectacle, participation, inclusivity (e.g., “embracing all people”), and liminality, while also including the idea that during the carnival (i.e., the convention), rules of everyday life are challenged, subverted, and may not even be applicable in the liminal realm of the carnival. Seregina particularly writes about the carnivalesque qualities of cosplay and LARPing (Live Action Roleplaying) in their 2019 article “Undoing Gender by Performing the Other.” While I will go into more

detail about Seregina's research related to the carnivalesque and gender play in chapter three, one of the most important key points they make is the fact that it creates a "topsy-turvy world" for the duration of an event such as a convention, and this topsy-turvy nature can both subvert and reinforce particular dominant norms, rules, and assumptions (Seregina 2019, 456). Nevertheless, because the carnivalesque offers an escape from everyday life with different rules and expectations that are exclusive to the space and time of the carnival. The carnivalesque nature of cosplay spaces and communities can also allow for the opportunity for cosplayers and other fans who enter carnivalesque cosplay spaces to experience an alternate world (Seregina 2019, 456).

In the 2011 article "The Carnavalesque and the Ritualesque," Jack Santino proposes that folklorists should pay attention to what he calls "ritualesque" aspects of public events, also writing that "Very often, festivity, celebration, and the carnivalesque are the modality of the ritualesque: they are the way norms are questioned and alternatives suggested" (Santino 2011, 67). Drawing on Seregina's and Santino's ideas about how carnivalesque spaces offer the chance for those who attend to see an alternate view of the world or experience a different type of social structure, it seems that some cosplay conventions and other cosplay spaces allow cosplayers to experience alternate, topsy-turvy social structures and world, some of which may be more ideal than the social structures and dominant hegemonic discourse we are accustomed to in everyday life.

***Literature Review Analysis and Gaps.*** Aside from some of the frameworks many previous studies (e.g., Tompkins, Lamerichs, Gn, Winge, Nichols, Burke, etc.) use to study cosplay such as ethnographic fieldwork, performance, liminality, and the

carnavalesque, another method to think about cosplay from a folkloric lens is to conceptualize cosplayers as the folk and fans of certain anime, shows, video games, movies, etc. and/or members of specific fandoms as folk groups in order to understand how different fans (or folk groups) interact with each other interpersonally and outside of their fandom affiliations. Physical cosplay spaces, in general, can also serve as a liminal space for cosplayers to express their love for a fandom and their topsy-turvy nature (and virtual cosplay spaces) offer the chance for cosplayers to explore their identity/identities through performative acts such as cosplaying/portraying a character from media. They also are a space where one can learn about other identities by interacting with other attendees and through convention panels, some of which can be educational and related topics such as portrayals of race in anime. However, while cosplay can be used to explore and express identity, much scholarship that examines gender and identity tends to come to the conclusion that cosplay is tied to a love for a character rather than to identity expression and exploration (e.g., Winge; Tompkins; Gn), though cosplay can be used as an avenue to explore and express identities such as gender identity, racial identity, and religious identity (e.g., Seregina; Liptak; Thomas; Gittinger). These ideas will be further discussed in chapters three and four.

#### **FILLING THE GAP: FURTHER RESEARCH AND ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK**

My goal for this this thesis has been to gain more insight into the gaps within the study of cosplay that I found during my review of current literature, including more about the various reasons why people may cosplay, how people may participate in cosplay both more generally and in cosplay communities, and what cosplay means to them as a whole.

Like Savage, Nichols, and Jenkins, I consider myself an aca-fan because I am a researcher who is also engaged with certain fandoms, and I have been cosplaying and attending cosplay conventions since 2016. My first cosplay convention was Otakon, “an annual convention held in the summer months to celebrate Asian pop culture (anime, manga, music, movies, video games, etc.) and its fandom” (“What is Otakon?”). Ever since that first experience, I had been aware of the fact that the overall atmosphere of the convention space felt different. In some ways, being in the convention space felt more relaxed than everyday life, and like Avery and Winge allude to in their works, I felt as if I was out of place in time and as if I was in a world where outside, everyday expectations/norms did not have much presence in this space, if at all. Overall, though I didn’t have the vocabulary to describe it at the time, I could almost intuitively feel the liminal and carnivalesque aspects of the convention space.

I also found myself amazed at how big the cosplay convention itself was and how much programming can occur at conventions, including panels (some of which are run by fans), cosplay competitions, raves, and masquerades. At the conventions I have attended, panel topics range from discussions of particular anime and manga, Japanese language crash courses, and even panels about issues related to diversity and inclusion within cosplay and representations of race in anime. Celebrities such as voice actors, creatives in the industry, and famous cosplayers also often attend cosplay conventions, and they sometimes offer opportunities for fans to get their autographs (*NekoCon Guide Book* 2022, 11-17). Some fans organize meetups or photoshoots at certain times throughout the duration of the convention so that fans can come together and socialize with other



fans as well as form communities. People tend to be very kind and easygoing, especially if another fan comes up to them to compliment their cosplay and/or ask for a picture. Many cosplayers are also happy to share their social media handles (most commonly Instagram in my experience), and such connections can lead to formation of friendships and communities online.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on library research, interviews, and the survey responses, cosplay provides avenues and spaces for people to engage in gender play; explore gender and other intersections of their own identities; express pride for their fandom(s) and any other identity they may have; and open opportunities for dialogue and education through physical spaces such as a cosplay convention and virtual cosplay communities. The liminal qualities of the cosplay space and the community can provide an escape from everyday life during the temporary carnivalesque nature of the cosplay convention.

While researchers in media and cultural studies use such folkloric frameworks, the current literature raises the question of how they are using such frameworks in disciplines outside of the field of folklore and what aspects of these frameworks are lost in their translation and application in different fields. Also, the majority of current scholarship tends to come to the conclusion that cosplay is tied to a love for a character rather than to identity expression and exploration, though cosplay can be used as an avenue to explore and express identities such as gender identity, racial identity, and religious identity. In the next chapter, I plan to focus particularly on intersections of cosplay, gender, sexuality, and identity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### COSPLAY, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND IDENTITY

My personal experiences as a genderqueer cosplayer were one of my main motivations for wanting to research intersections of cosplay and gender. Cosplay has played a large part in how I began to explore and continue to explore my gender identity, especially the experience of being able to cosplay male characters. This act of cosplaying a character of a different gender is called “crossplay,” which is a common practice of cosplayers. Crossplay is not typically a form of parody, but an “authentic transformation of a mundane, gendered body into a cross-gender body of a mediated character” (Tompkins 2019, para. 1-2). People may crossplay for a variety of reasons, such as in order to express appreciation for a fictional character or fandom, or to explore gender (Tompkins 2019, paras. 6.5, 6.10). For me, what started off as a general appreciation for a character from an anime called *My Hero Academia (MHA)* led to me questioning my own identity, though it was by no means the first sign of this revelation. Though it is difficult to describe, wearing a costume of a different gender and the process to look like the character, such as binding and using contouring makeup techniques was an eye-opening experience to how I viewed myself and how others viewed me, especially in the context of a cosplay convention. Because of my own experience with cosplay and its pivotal role in my journey of questioning my gender identity, I was curious to know how cosplay may impact others, whether they be cis, questioning, or transgender.

However, as the literature review indicates, the majority of cosplay scholarship does not have or has very little focus on the LGBTQIA+ community and cosplayers who identify as trans, nonbinary, or otherwise gender non-conforming folks. Sexuality is often not mentioned either despite the fact many cosplayers are not cisgender and/or straight. Therefore, the original main focus of this thesis was specifically on cosplay and gender, with the thesis being that cosplay as an act, the cosplay convention as a place, and the cosplay community can provide a carnivalesque space separate from conventional gender and sexuality norms and allow for people to explore their gender identity through the embodiment of a character in a relatively safe space for members of the LGBTQIA+ community more broadly. While I still stand by this particular statement, I also believe that the cosplay space also allows people to explore other intersections of identity as well. In this chapter, I analyze the fieldwork materials I gathered to explore how individuals who cosplay discuss their participation in relationship to their intersectional identities, and I will also provide a brief overview of the survey results I received.<sup>5</sup>

## **DESCRIPTION**

As a form of folklore, cosplay interests with gender and sexuality in three main ways: the act of cosplay, cosplay conventions, and the cosplay community as a whole. First, for those I interviewed who had previously or are currently questioning their gender identity, the act of cosplay has served as a tool in allowing individuals to explore their identities in a relatively safe way. In general, variants of cosplay such as

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<sup>5</sup> To understand the limitations of this study, please refer back to chapter one.

crossplay and “genderbend,” where a cosplayer reimagines a character who is canonically of a different gender as another gender, play with gender norms and tie into Judith Butler’s theory of performativity (Nichols 2019, 278). To Butler, gender is a construct that is a repetitive and imitative act that derives itself from “cultural [norms] which [govern] the materialization of bodies” (Butler 1993, 1-3). Many of the scholarly sources I found about cosplay used performativity as a framework for the way through which the authors studied cosplay, one of which is Anastasia Seregina.

In their article “Undoing gender through performing the other,” Seregina explores Butler’s theory of performativity from the perspective of live-action role players (LARPer)s, some of whom also engage in the act of crossplay and thus “undo gender through performing the other” (Seregina 2019, 455). They conclude that the experience of crossplaying and undoing gender can help individuals understand gender as an element of performance and as a fluid social construct rather than a fixed binary, and that crossplay has helped some crossplayers better understand how they engage in performativity (Seregina 2019, 467-471). A few of the cosplayers I interviewed who had previously or are currently questioning their gender shared a similar sentiment to Seregina’s observations about the role cosplay can have in better understanding performativity and their own identities.

Nearly all of the participants expressed that conventions are a “safe shared space” to explore multiple gender identities akin to Avery’s description of a rave being “a safe shared space to explore multiple masculinities based on a developed value system of ‘Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect’ ... at the core of a constructed folk event” (Avery

2005, 158). Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols, whose article “Playing with Identity: Gender, Performance, and Feminine Agency in Cosplay” focuses on female cosplayers, relays back to Butler in describing cosplay as a place where “social expectations and the ‘policing of gender’ are relaxed” (Nichols 2019, 272). This sentiment was echoed by most of the cosplayers I interviewed (one example being that bathrooms are designated as “gender neutral” during some conventions), though some also mentioned that no matter where one is, there will always be someone who will not be supportive. Cosplay conventions also often include what is called the “Artist’s Alley,” where amateur artists often sell their work, some of the work being related to pride, examples being pride pins and pride flags, something that deserves more study in the future (“Artist Alley”). Though there is little, if any, research about the queering of cosplay, many cosplayers do incorporate pride symbols into their cosplays—in fact, one of the interviewees, Alec, mentioned that he had even worn a cosplay for a Pride Parade.

The cosplay community intersects with not just self-identities, but the LGBTQIA+ community. Folklorist Jack Santino’s article “Carnavalesque and Ritualesque,” describes Pride Day Parades as “festive, but... intended to accomplish a change or transformation in society” (Santino 2011, 67). Though it is unclear if that could also be said of cosplay conventions, they could arguably be a method through which people can learn more about the LGBTQIA+ community through social interactions with those whose identities intersect between the cosplay community and the LGBTQIA+ community. In regard to the overarching cosplay community, all of the interviewees alluded to the idea that by attending conventions and interacting with the

community, they have learned more about alternate gender and sexual identities, which has helped them become more open-minded than they may have been previously.

*Initial Thoughts and Academic Research.* Before conducting research and interviews for this project, I was very curious to better understand the relationship between cosplay and gender. Readings I found on the topic ranged from book chapters to theoretical articles to case studies, and while a couple of the articles were based in folklore, most of the articles I found were based in media and/or cultural studies. In one particular case study, “Is gender just a costume? An exploratory study of crossplay,” author Jessica Ethel Tompkins conducted an online survey about the possible motivations for why cosplayers may crossplay and their “lived experiences” (Tompkins 2019, para. 0.1). In her introduction, she mentions a few scholars who have different views about how cosplay is related to gender. One scholar is Nicolle Lamerichs, who believes that people may crossplay for a variety of reasons such as for parody, a preference for a certain outfit or character, or to “[declare] the fluidity of gender” (Lamerichs 2011, para. 3). Another is Joel Gn, who argues that cosplayers are primarily motivated by the love or attraction toward a character (Gn 2011, 587). Ultimately, Tompkins’ study found that the majority of the cosplayers crossplay for the love of a character or the creative challenge of crossplay rather than to explore gender, which she believed confirmed Gn’s theory more so than Lamerichs’ (Tompkins 2019, para. 7.1).

However, examining Tompkins’ study, I noticed that while gender was one aspect of the participants’ demographic information that she included in her online survey, there were only three categories: “male,” “female,” and “other.” While Tompkins describes

these categories as participants' "self-identified gender," her categories were limited and do not account for the fact that some gender identities that fall under the category of male or female could be transgender as well as demiboy or demigirl. With the category of "other," there was no option for those who selected this choice to further identify themselves, thereby potentially lumping gender identities such as nonbinary, agender, bigender, or any other genderqueer identity together. Another aspect of the demographic information Tompkins collected that I noticed was that participants' sexuality was not included in the questionnaire and therefore not taken into account (Tompkins 2019, Table 1). Once I realized this, I also became interested in understanding the relationship to cosplay, gender, and the LGBTQIA+ community, even those who may be cisgender, but might not be straight. Therefore, all six of the people I interviewed are either a part of the LGBTQIA+ community because of their gender or sexual identity or are familiar with the community as an ally.

## **CHARACTER SELECTION, GENDER IDENTIFICATION, GENDER PLAY**

### **Melissa**

My first interview took place over Zoom on October 13, 2020 with Melissa, white, straight, 25-year-old cisgender woman. Though she is not a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, she is an ally and has many friends within the community. She had been interested in manga and anime for a long time and she was later introduced to conventions by friends because of this interest. When asked about the types of characters she cosplays, she mentioned that she typically cosplays female characters because as a female herself she finds that cosplaying female characters is a way to look at female

empowerment. For her, cosplay is empowering because of the characters she cosplays, one of which is Lucy Heartfilia from the manga and anime *Fairy Tail*. She explained that Lucy resonated with her because there are traits of Lucy that she sees within herself, and that she loves the character because through her she learned that she can be “badass” while wearing a skirt. In general, she loves how empowered many female manga and anime characters are, which tends to fall more in line with Gn’s argument of cosplayers cosplaying (or crossplaying) for the love of a fictional character rather than to explore gender.

I asked Melissa whether she would ever consider crossplaying or genderbending a cosplay, and she replied that she is interested in potentially doing a genderbend or crossplay of Deku from *MHA*, mainly because he is a character that she feels she can pull off because he has a “soft masculine” look to him. In essence, Melissa does not necessarily cosplay to explore gender but rather to express her pride as a woman, only showing interest in cosplaying a male character if she believes she may be able to pull the cosplay off. She explained that she started cosplaying in high school and ever since, she still uses it as a way to explore her identity, not for the sake of gender but for the sake of better understanding herself and how she relates to the characters she cosplays. When I asked her about whether she viewed cons as a relatively safe space, she said she did with the caveat that just like anywhere else, there will always be unsafe people. However, she believes cosplay to be a safe space to explore gender for those who may be questioning.



## **Morgan**

Morgan was the next cosplayer I interviewed, and the interview took place over Zoom on November 9, 2020. She is 24 years old, white, bisexual, and questioning her gender, but at the moment uses she/her pronouns. She has been cosplaying for about three years and explained that it was something that she had always wanted to do. Her main motivation for cosplay is to have fun, and her first cosplay was Lup from *The Adventure Zone*, a Dungeons and Dragons-based podcast. As a trans woman, the character Lup is representation for the LGBTQIA+ community, something that Morgan emphasized during the interview. Another character she has cosplayed is Karamatsu from the manga *Osomatsu-kun*. The character is male, and she really enjoyed the crossplay experience; in fact, during the interview she told me that cosplaying as Karamatsu may have been one of the hints that she may not be a cisgender woman. Though she is still questioning and unsure, when asked if she would ever consider crossplaying again, she said she definitely would. Therefore, deviating from Tompkins' study about crossplay, for Morgan, cosplay became a way to explore gender as well as sexuality, as Nichols and Lamerichs note in their articles (Nichols 2019, 276).

The questions I asked Morgan was about future characters she may want to cosplay. While two were female characters, one she mentioned was Yellow from the *Pokémon* manga. She expressed great interest in this character because though the character is female, "you don't know she's a girl until the end." In this sense, Morgan said that she valued the character because of her androgynous design. Other cosplays Morgan expressed interest in doing in the future included some male vocaloid characters

because she loves some of the outfits, though she did not specify which characters. However, between genderbending the characters or crossplaying them, she would rather crossplay them and would only do a genderbend “if it’s cute.”

Morgan also had a lot to say about her experience at conventions. She said that because of her experiences of living in a small town in southeastern Virginia and growing up with a more conservative family, cons feel like a safe place to express herself and her pride for being bisexual. She mentioned that even though you have to watch where you are in certain places, she still believes that cons are a relatively safe space to “explore who you are” because when at cons people do not typically question cosplayers about their gender, supporting the idea that cosplay and cosplay conventions can reflect Butler’s theory of performativity and the undoing of gender. Her comments fell in line with cosplay conventions being carnivalesque, especially for those who are questioning or not cisgender, because carnivalesque “is a topsy-turvy world that subverts and liberates dominant assumptions,” which for a cosplay convention, means dominant assumptions about gender norms (Seregina 2019, 456).

### **Lucille**

The third interview I conducted took place over Zoom on November 13, 2020 with Lucille, a 24-year-old Black woman who identifies as bisexual and polyamorous. She told me that she got interested in anime as a freshman in high school and had friends who were interested in cosplay, and when she went to college, she was able to finally have the opportunity to attend a convention. Lucille primarily enjoys cosplay for creative expression rather than for exploring gender identity. However, she

told me that as a plus-size woman, she often has to make or modify her cosplay or pieces of it, so it is both an enjoyable activity for her but also a necessity as many cosplays made by other parties would not fit her; in particular, she mentioned the issue of a lot of cosplays being sized based on Asian sizing (which tends to be smaller than American sizing) as well as the fact that cosplays made by American parties oftentimes only go up to 1X.

Despite the frustration of having to make most of her own cosplays, she is very proud of her Ursula cosplay (from *The Little Mermaid*) that she created. She described the process of putting it together as well as the validation she felt when she received compliments at the convention. As we talked more, Lucille talked about some of the other factors she considers when creating a cosplay, such as practicality (how easy the cosplay is to put together), time constraints, and comfort. She stated that the Ursula cosplay was the most complex cosplays that she has put together and that the others she has done were simpler. One such cosplay is a Bakugou from *MHA*, but a fantasy AU (alternate universe) version. Bakugou is a male character, but when I asked if her Bakugou cosplay was a genderbend or crossplay, she said it was neither; instead, she was going for a more androgynous look. She said the same thing about a Bucky Barnes cosplay she created, which was inspired by a “Stucky” (the ship name for Captain America x Bucky from the *Marvel* comics and films) fanfiction called “Something to call You Home.” Though Lucille has never crossplayed by standard definition, she has considered doing so in the future. Ultimately, Ursula’s motivations are also more related to creativity and love for a character rather than for exploration of gender, and her

interview provided me with a lot more issues to think about, including the experiences of plus-size members of the cosplay community and variations of cosplay not relating to gender but instead to AUs. And like Morgan, Lucille felt that conventions were a safe space for her as someone who is still “in the closet” and who does not feel safe revealing her sexuality at home.

### **Jayden**

On November 14, 2020, I had an interview with Jayden, a 21-year-old white woman (although she used to identify as nonbinary) who is graysexual with a preference towards women. Though she started cosplaying around 2012 as Hinata from the anime *Haikyuu!*, she is no longer as interested in cosplaying as she used to be. She said that part of her phasing out of cosplay has been because of other aspects of her life that have become more of a priority, but another major factor was toxicity. When I asked her what she meant, she explained that when she had first begun cosplaying it was primarily for fun and the community felt more friendly. Nowadays, she said, it seems to her that some people are not in it for the fun anymore, but instead “for popularity,” referring to the fact that some cosplayers oversexualize cosplays, as if, as she put it, “people want to be popular through the body.”

In the interview, she also mentioned issues within the community such as gatekeeping, especially for Cosplayers of Color, since many receive criticism for cosplaying characters with lighter skin tones. Her answer contradicted with previous answers about cons being a safe place, and when I asked her about whether she believes that cons are safe in respect to the LGBTQIA+ community, she did say that when she

was still attending cons it was. However, this poses a major problem, as her answer indicated that while gender norms are not strictly enforced during cosplay conventions because of its carnivalesque nature, racism is still present.

Even with the issues that Jayden currently struggles with in the cosplay and fandom communities, she did say that during the time she did cosplay that the community felt safer and that during her teen years when she was questioning her gender, she used cosplay as a form of exploring her gender and that was around the time her pronouns were “they/them.” Doing so helped her realize that there was a broader range of gender and sexual identities than she had previously thought because she met people of all different identities through cosplay conventions. Jayden cosplayed to express both expression and gender, and also said that she was grateful for her experience in the cosplay community because it helped her realize that “the world is a lot bigger than anyone thinks” and she will always be grateful for the relationships she’s made and the knowledge she has gained about the LGBTQIA+ community, ethnic communities, and cultural communities. Something else worth noting about my interview with Jayden was that she mentioned how cosplay helped her realize that she was graysexual, which leads to more questions about how the cosplay and the community, even with its issues, can be a tool for better understanding the self.

### **Alec**

For my fifth interview, I talked to Alec, 24-year-old, white transgender man, over Zoom on November 17, 2020. Alec was very open about how cosplay was a major part of his journey to discovering that he was transgender. His first cosplay was Eren Yeager

from the manga and anime *Attack on Titan*, a character he cosplayed during his junior year of high school. Eren is a male character, and Alec had cosplayed him because he had started to question his identity around that time. He has only cosplayed one female character at a time when he believed he was genderfluid, but has since only cosplayed male characters, and by the time he began cosplaying characters from *MHA* in 2018, he knew he was a guy. He told me that his main motivation for choosing characters to cosplay is to “just look like a dude,” but that he also enjoys the social aspect and the fact that when he is dressed up as a male character many people automatically assume he’s a guy.

Alec’s favorite character to cosplay is Dabi from *MHA*, though he has cosplayed many other characters from the anime, such as Bakugou, Shigaraki, and Hawks. He described the experience of cosplaying Dabi as “euphoric” for him because he feels like he looks manly. “Wow, that’s a whole dude there,” he had said when talking about his experience of cosplaying the character, also describing Dabi as “a state of being.” His candid openness about his experience highlighted the significance of cosplay for questioning, nonbinary, and trans people because of the chance it provides to be lost in a character but also to explore gender. In the future, he plans to cosplay Natsuo from *MHA*, as well as Kiba or Hige from *Wolf’s Rain*, all of whom are male characters.

Alec expressed a similar sentiment to Jayden about how he didn’t know much about how vast gender and sexual identities can be until he attended cosplay conventions, which also helped him realize that he was asexual with homoromantic tendencies. He has attended cons wearing a pride flag, and, as mentioned earlier in the paper, he attended

the 2019 Washington, D.C. Pride Parade in his Bakugou cosplay. However, when I asked about crossplays and genderbends, Alec told me that he doesn't mind crossplay, but he stays away from genderbends because some people associate them with transphobia and homophobia. To be honest, when I heard about that, I was shocked; I had never heard that before and none of the articles I had read had mentioned that either. This prompted me to search for more information, where I found a Tumblr post by user shiphitsthefan from June 13, 2015. Shiphitsthefan believes that the concept of genderbending is not problematic, but the term "genderbent" is; instead, shiphitsthefan suggested the term "cis-swapped" or "sex-swapped" to avoid "reinforcing transphobic concepts" (Shiphitsthefan, Tumblr, 2015).

In the post, shiphitsthefan also emphasizes that "when we use 'genderbent' instead of cis-swapped or sex-swapped, we forget that we have more than two choices" (Shiphitsthefan, Tumblr, 2015). This Tumblr post is another indicator that though gender norms aren't as reinforced at cosplay conventions or in the cosplay community because of its position as a liminal and carnivalesque space, there is still a form of social control in these spaces. As Seregina puts it, "while carnivalesque performance supports undoing gender, it also inadvertently reinforces existing normative structures" (Seregina 2019, 456). Cosplay, even with its variants related to gender, can reinforce the gender binary because cosplayers are generally led to choose cosplays that still fall within the gender binary; while this may be in part due to the lack of nonbinary characters in media, it may also be due to the fact that the concepts of crossplay and genderbending/cis-swapping still prescribe to the male/female gender binary.

## Sean

My final interview in the fall of 2020 took place over Zoom on November 20, 2020 with Sean, a 23-year-old South Korean transgender man who has an enormous following on Instagram. He has been to over 35 conventions and told me that he first started cosplaying when he was twelve and that his first cosplay was Jesse, a member of Team Rocket from the *Pokémon* franchise. However, he also explained that he knew he was transgender before he began to cosplay and that as a South Korean man, he is very aware of the differences of how gender can vary across cultures and across time. An example he provided was how as an anime fan, one gets used to seeing men and women not conforming to gender, such as the fact that many men in anime have little to no body or facial hair. His explanation leaves me with the question of how media across cultures such as Japanese anime may shape audiences' perception of gender and gender identity that can then be performed through means such as cosplay or in everyday life.

When asked more specifically about his experience with cosplay, he described the enormous amount of work that goes into cosplay and how through cosplay “you’re playing a character.” Though Alec had hinted at this idea in his interview, Sean emphasized how important embodying the character he cosplays is to him, even if he doesn’t LARP or roleplay. He continued to say that he doesn’t really have a “type” of character he cosplays and that some characters are like him and some are what he wishes he could be, again tying into the idea of exploration of identity as well as gender. He also said that he generally cosplays male characters, with the exception being Hatsune Miku, a popular vocaloid character. Vocaloid, as he explained to me, is an “all-purpose tool for



making art,” specifically music, and as such, Miku is not tied to gender for him but is instead “meant for personal self-expression.” As he continued to explain vocaloid, he said that he would like to cosplay another vocaloid character, Bizu-kun because he is a fan of the vocaloid artist associated with the character. His love for vocaloid combined with his mindset about Miku being apart for gender also exemplifies both a “declaration of personal identity and membership within [a] community of fans,” a concept scholar Matthew Hale explains in an article about cosplay and something that extends into the cosplay community (Hale 2014, 11).

Sean described his first experience at a cosplay convention as “mind-blowing” and that he sees cons as an escape. He finds it especially fascinating how gender norms do not exist, pointing out that at most conventions bathrooms typically designated for men or women are all gender-neutral and no one is “put off by it,” even those who are cisgender. Overall, he feels safe at most conventions, and even told me that as a tip for those who are questioning their gender, cosplay is a good way to “get away with” presenting as a different gender, especially at a convention. However, like the majority of the other interviewees, he acknowledged that cons are still a public space and that not everyone will be supportive, but that he finds it interesting to not be in a space predominated by heteronormativity.

### **Sylas**

I interviewed Sylas, who lives in Kentucky, over Zoom on January 4, 2023. Sylas is 24 years old, white passing but ethnically Hispanic, and uses “he/they” pronouns. At the time of the interview, Sylas told me that they are a demiboy and that he thinks he is

asexual and aromantic. They have been cosplaying for about 10 years and that they had learned about cosplay and queer culture itself through anime. For Syllas, anime was “life-changing,” and they began to consume as much anime as they could and also joined social media sites such as Tumblr in order to see fandom content and art. They also said that growing, they watched cosplay skits on YouTube before realizing that they could cosplay too. At the time, they were 13 or 14 years old and asked their grandmother to help them create a cosplay for “Shadow Link,” which they wore to their first cosplay convention in Rochester, New York. Since then, he has gotten better with cosplay makeup, acting, and prop creation. They also create cosplay content on Tik Tok, with their most famous being a one when he was cosplaying the character Dabi from *My Hero Academia*.

Syllas says that he mostly cosplays male characters and that one of his favorite characters to cosplay is Wei Wuxian from the Chinese BL (Boy’s Love) novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* (“Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation”) because he finds him relatable and believes him to have “ADHD brain” like Syllas himself. Wei Wuxian is also a canonically bi character who ends up with a man at the end of the series, and overall describes the series as “so gay and so fantasy.” He loves the BL genre specifically as well as the relationships within the novels because he finds them a way to escape the homophobia in the real world.

When I asked Syllas whether his gender identity ties into his cosplays, he explained that when he first started cosplaying, he just loved the characters and mainly wanted to cosplay to show his love for them. He then experienced a shift in high school

as he started to question sexuality and later his gender in college. They began to notice that they had mainly been cosplaying male characters and tend to gravitate toward male characters in general, which is when he started to wonder if these trends might be related to gender. He says that he bought a binder for cosplay and then started to wear it in everyday life, citing cosplay as an exploratory experience for him where he got to play with gender more, and he has been out about being trans for about two years at the time of the interview.

However, Syllas also stresses that being gay is not their only identity, as they are also a cosplayer, neurodivergent, Hispanic, American, and a folklorist. Because of our shared experiences of being neurodivergent, Syllas and I also had a brief conversation about being neurodivergent fans who are very passionate and may have special interests<sup>7</sup> related to and/or hyperfixate<sup>8</sup> on a fandom and/or a character; for instance, Syllas said that if he hyperfixates on a fandom and/or character “super hard,” he’ll “probably cosplay it eventually.” We also talked about the challenges of being neurodivergent in cosplay spaces, particularly cosplay conventions because they can be overstimulating and can lead to autistic burnout afterward. Syllas told me that when they go to conventions, they have to be able to find a quiet room or space if they are feeling overstimulated and that some bigger cons may quiet rooms. Based on our discussion and reflecting upon my own

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<sup>7</sup> Some autistic people have “special interests,” which are things such as a hobby, food, object, etc. that bring them immense and intense joy; compared to hyperfixations, they tend to be “long-term” (Wakeman paras. 2-3).

<sup>8</sup> Hyperfixations are similar to special interests in that they are things that can give someone immense joy, but they tend to be short-term and extremely intense. Hyperfixations are commonly associated with ADHD, but anyone can experience hyperfixations” (Wakeman para. 2)

experiences as a neurodivergent cosplayer, intersections of cosplay, fandom, and disability could be another very valuable thread for future research about cosplay.

### **Dom**

I interviewed Dom on January 12, 2023. Dom lives in Florida and identifies as a white, bisexual, cis man. He has cosplayed for a total of 10 years, and he told me he actually first heard about cosplay when playing the Gameboy game *Pokemon: Red and Blue*. In the game, one of the Pokemon trainers asks the player if they know what cosplay is, and they eventually tell the player that “cosplay stands for costume-play.” Dom continued to say that he had always put together elaborate Halloween cosplayers and also was in a friend group with other cosplayers, which eventually led him to cosplay himself. His first cosplay was Robert Baratheon from *Game of Thrones*, which he put together when he went to a Halloween store and put various costume pieces together for a party at Indiana University. He said that he had so much fun that he decided to *look up other Game of Thrones cosplay events and eventually became one of the founders of the Game of Thrones convention Ice and Fire Con*. Dom told me that it was “profound” to see the same group of friends four times a year and that he considers Ice and Fire con his “home con.”

Outside of *Game of Thrones* cosplays, one of his favorite characters to cosplay is Harley Quinn from D.C. Comics, and it is the cosplay he is most known for. Dom says cosplaying Harley involves doing a female performance where he goes into a “girl mode” and “flips the Harley switch” such as walking like Harley or doing the Harley voice.<sup>9</sup> For

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<sup>9</sup> Dom, Interview with Author, January 12, 2023.

Dom, cosplaying Harley is a type of deep gender play but not who he really is. He adds, though, that as a bisexual cis man, the four places where he feels most like himself are gay bars, weddings, cosplay parties, and cosplay conventions.

### **Amanda**

The last interview I've conducted for this thesis was with a cosplayer named Amanda on February 15, 2023, who lives in Florida. Amanda is a 27-year-old, white, genderfluid individual who uses any pronouns and identifies as both asexual and panromantic. Amanda explained that they realized that they weren't cisgender when they were a kid; they described themselves as "one of the guys" because many of their friends were boys. In high school and undergrad, they told me that they had begun to try to wear more boy clothes and realized that they were asexual their junior year of college once they had a term for it. Later, they identified as genderfluid once they had a term for that as well.

Amanda said that they began watching anime around 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade and that they wanted to try to cosplay by middle school. Her dad took her and her friend to her first cosplay convention in Orlando, Florida. When they went to college, they continued to stay involved with cosplay and helped run their university's cosplay convention on campus. Within cosplay spaces, Amanda has not only cosplayed but has also helped run panels and events, has a cosplay Instagram, and has been involved in cosplay communities. For Amanda, cosplaying is more of an afterthought compared to the thought of going to the convention itself. They enjoy seeing all of the fandom art, merch, and other events, calling conventions a cool "nerd haven of a place."

Though cosplay did not play much of a role in Amanda's exploration of gender identity, he said that he enjoys cosplaying with others, including couple's cosplay or group cosplay. Amanda told me that they have cosplayed with their significant other or another close friend as two characters who are either in a relationship or who they "ship" together, meaning that they are characters she wants to see end up in a romantic relationship (Iovine 2019, paras. 3-4). They also added that they mainly cosplay male characters and gay ships, something that I found particularly interesting as a method cosplayers may or may not use to express their sexuality.

### **Survey Participant Responses**

The survey respondents offered their insights into why people cosplay, including love/attachment to a character, a shared identity with a character, and a love for a character's design. Some cosplayers also use cosplay to explore gender identity, supporting my argument that cosplay can be used not just to explore, but to confirm and/or affirm an LGBTQIA+ cosplayer's gender identity. Some of the LGBTQIA+ cosplayers who took the survey expressed a desire to cosplay a character out of gender envy, or wanting to look like or have the characteristics of the gendered character they are cosplaying (LGBTQ Nation, 2022, para. 3). Others indicated that there are particular characters they cosplay frequently because they feel gender euphoria when they cosplay as that character. Some participants said that they enjoy crossplay and genderbend cosplay, and some said that they have incorporated pride into their cosplay.

Most of the participants have participated in conventions and online communities as well, and they have said that they feel like gender norms are generally not as enforced

in these spaces as they are in day-to-day life, and that they are safe and supportive environments overall. However, their responses also indicated that there are still problems in the community, one being fear of sexual harassment, especially when cosplaying female characters, which seems to be a reason why some people cosplay male characters. While some cosplay male characters for male expression, the fear of sexual harassment seems to be a motivation to cosplay male characters for trans male, nonbinary, genderqueer, and female cosplayers alike. These issues will be further discussed in chapter four.

## **DISCUSSION**

These interviews and the survey results were extremely eye-opening, and I learned so much from each of them and their views and interpretations of cosplay and what it means to them. Connecting back to the scholarly sources, the consensus I found from my ethnographic fieldwork is that cosplay is a form of expression, whether or not it is tied to gender exploration, and that cosplay can also be used to find community. There is an affective aspect to cosplay, which Lamerichs addresses in a chapter in *Embodied Characters: the Affective Process of Cosplay*. She describes what she calls an “affective process,” which is “a range of emotional experiences that can lead to investments in the world through which we constitute our identity” which we as individuals always experience and construct (Lamerichs 2018, 208). Similar to Butler’s theory of performativity and undoing gender, some of the cosplayers I interviewed have used the performative nature of cosplay in order to better understand themselves and, for some, their gender identity.

Though the interview participants and survey participants are only some of the many voices within the cosplay community, the majority expressed this affective process by explaining how cosplay has helped them express themselves and express a love for a character or fandom, which falls in line with Tompkins' study and Gn's argument. However, for those who are or had previously questioned their gender identity, this expression goes beyond character and fandom, which did not support Tompkins or Gn's findings. Instead, they supported Lamerichs' idea of cosplayers expressing the fluidity of gender, but to a different, more personal depth. Morgan, Jayden, Alec, Sean, and Syllas had all used cosplay to explore their gender identities, either helping to solidify their gender identities (Alec, Sean, and Syllas) or as a method for exploring multiple possible gender identities that may or may not be solidified at this moment in time for them (Morgan and Jayden), which supports Lamerichs' idea of cosplay being used to explore gender.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While cosplay is an affective practice that allows for self-expression of individuals, whether or not it is tied to gender depends on how cosplayers utilize cosplay as a tool for exploring gender identities. On one hand, cosplayers who identify as cisgender and have never questioned their gender may primarily be motivated to cosplay in order to better understand themselves, because they enjoy the creative aspect of cosplay, or to show appreciation for a character or fandom. On the other hand, cosplayers I interviewed who had previously questioned, are questioning, or have identified as transgender attributed a part of how they began to further explore their



identities to cosplay, along with the opportunity to be creative and convey their love for fandom. Cosplay as an act and as a community has played a tremendous role in helping the cosplayers I interviewed explore, shape, and solidify their identities, questioning or not.

My findings do not completely line up with most of the scholarship that I found on the subject of cosplay and why cosplayers may crossplay or genderbend characters, and I believe that this may be due to the fact that the sources I found do not specifically focus on LGBTQIA+ individuals and their experiences. Therefore, I believe that more general research needs to be done about the relationship between cosplay, gender, and sexuality. Aside from gender, I found the fact that all of the interviewees described cosplay conventions as relatively safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ folk significant and worthy of more research.

My ethnographic fieldwork also provided other important topics pertaining to cosplay that deserve further research. For instance, more research needs to be done about the intersectionality of cosplay, gender, sexuality, and race, especially considering Jayden's point of the gatekeeping that can occur in the cosplay community, especially around race. Racism still exists in the cosplay community, which is disconcerting considering the general acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities and queerness within the community. Jayden also mentioned the fact that some cosplayers oversexualize cosplays, which may be another topic of interest as well. The term "genderbend" and other terminology within the cosplay community and overall fandom community should be examined in order to understand the different perspectives, as Alec brought up in his

interview. Lucille raised another important concern of researching the experiences of plus-sized cosplayers and the issue of premade cosplays potentially being inaccessible to them because of the sizing of cosplay. All of these issues will be further discussed in chapter four.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### WOMEN IN COSPLAY

As previously mentioned, in recent years in the United States, there has been a shift in how geek culture has been perceived by the general public. Though geek culture is often assumed to be a “male-oriented” subculture, many women and gender-nonconforming folks cosplay and are active at cosplay conventions and other fandom spaces at large. In fact, Andrew Liptak, the author of the 2022 book *Cosplay: A History*, states that there are more professional women cosplayers than men cosplayers and designates cosplay as a “woman-dominated pastime,” a testament to the fact that men are not the only ones who enjoy certain genres and aspects of geek culture (Seregina 2019, 458; Liptak 2022, 107).

While more scholars such as Liptak are beginning to pay attention to cosplay within the realm of academia, there are still many gaps within the study of cosplay that need to be filled or explored even further, and women who cosplay is one of them. When it comes to research about women who cosplay and the intersectional identities that may influence their cosplay experiences, such gaps include how women cosplayers use cosplay, why and how they engage with the cosplay community and other spaces, and how they are perceived by other cosplayers and the general public. Therefore, my goal for this chapter is to be able to provide some insights into such questions and more about women cosplayers themselves. Just like cosplays of any other gender identity, many women who cosplay do so because they find joy in it; however, academic research and

my own qualitative research has shown that women can also use cosplay to explore and express their identities in a variety of ways. The cosplay space allows women to explore and ‘play’ with gender through the act of cosplaying and embodying a character whose canonical gender identity may be different than their own. Women may also use cosplay as a source of empowerment and a way to express their pride for being a woman and for other intersectional identities they may have, just as Melissa said in her interview. However, there are some issues women face in the cosplay community, including sexism, racism, and fatphobia that highlight issues of gatekeeping in the community and a need for more diverse representation of women in media of all genres.

#### **COSPLAY AND GENDERED ASPECTS OF GEEK CULTURE**

Within the world of cosplay, many media genres are present, but comics and sci-fi are considered two of the genres that fans have interacted with over the years that have led to a shift in how fans interact with the media and within the fandom (Liptak 2022, 40-41). Since the 1960s, both of these genres tend to be gendered through stereotypes that white males are the main consumers of these types of media rather than those of other marginalized identities such as women and People of Color (Liptak 2022, 41; Kashtan 2021). From just general observation, it is clear that these genres also tend to feature white, male characters in more prominent roles in their respective canon and storylines as well. Anime is another genre that cosplayers frequently cosplay from, and while there are quite a few male characters, the majority of these characters are not white but have lighter skin tones (Granja n.d., para. 2; Liptak 2022, 99-100). In an online article called “Black People in Anime and Why Representation Matters,” Shani Deason writes that

“growing up I can admit I did not see many anime characters that looked like me,” and when she did see Black anime characters, they were often drawn from racist representations and caricatures such as the “mammy figure” (Deason 2019, para. 4); Liptak 2022, 99-100). Despite the fact that there has been progress in diversifying characters within the media and breaking away from harmful caricatures, there is still a major lack of representation of Women of Color and plus-size women: for instance, female characters who are featured in sci-fi, comics, and anime are usually portrayed as having model-like or athletic appearances and wearing tight-fitting and, sometimes revealing, outfits or costumes that would be considered “sexy” to most individuals (Liptak 2022, 109-110). These characters are often sexualized by both other characters and audiences, and issues of sexualization and objectification translate into the realm of cosplay because many women are subject to the male gaze and are accused of cosplaying mainly for male attention by men themselves (Liptak 2022, 106). While many of these issues are discussed later in the paper, it is important to understand that such assumptions deny women agency and ownership of their fan identities and reasons for cosplay, most of which do not involve a desire to appeal to men at all.

### **WHY WOMEN COSPLAY**

Women cosplay for themselves for a variety of different reasons, and these reasons are not just exclusive to women. In the article “Playing with Identity: Gender, Performance, and Feminine Agency in Cosplay,” Elizabeth Gackstetter Nichols writes that,

Female cosplayers often express identification with the personality and back story of a character, an aesthetic appreciation for the visual appearance of the character, and also an identification or feeling of resonance with the character in the physicality of their canonical gender (Nichols 2019, 277).

Nichols' insights also correlate with other academic research and some of the responses I have received from both the survey results and interviews I have previously collected; in other words, some of my fieldwork participants' reasons for cosplaying correspond to the reasons Nichols lists, further supporting the fact that cosplay, for some, is more than just a costume.

### **Identification with the Personality and Backstory of a Character**

Women may cosplay a particular character for affective reasons such as out of a love of the character or the fandom itself. Some women and other cosplayers become emotionally attached to certain characters because they make them happy, sometimes referred to as a “comfort character” (“Comfort Character”). Women cosplayers may also cosplay a character because they find commonalities with the character, whether it be that they have similar personalities or they share an identity with them (e.g., racial identity, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, etc.). Sometimes, as Nichols mentioned, the identities of these characters are considered canon because the identity is confirmed in the media or by the creator (e.g., a character confirmed to be gay); however, sometimes characters are not confirmed to have a particular identity but are “headcanoned” to have that identity, a term that refers to a theory some fans may have about a character's identity that others in the fandom agree with and accept (“Headcanon—Urban

Dictionary”). Such sentiments display the value of not just canon identity but also how fans can take on ownership of particular characters in order through their imagination, both to find identity with a character, but also to make up for a lack of representation in the media.

### **Aesthetic Appreciation for the Visual Appearance of the Character**

Women may also cosplay certain characters because they feel like they already can look like the character or they believe they can “pull off” the look. This is true for many women as well as trans and gender-nonconforming cosplayers. In a study about cosplay and crossplay, Jessica Ethel Tompkins found that some cosplayers crossplay because “their bodies did not strongly signify their self-identified gender” (Tompkins 2019, 7.9). For instance, one female cosplayer said that she cosplays the male character Zuko from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, saying that:

My body structure typically lends itself better to cosplaying as taller, thinner male characters from animated series than it does female animated characters (who are often quite a bit more buxom). I prefer cosplaying characters with similar body types; I think it helps make a more convincing costume and helps me feel more “in character” (Tompkins 2019, 7.9).

Other times, someone may cosplay a character because they love their design, even if they do not necessarily love the character itself. Some women enjoy the creativity that comes with cosplay when it comes to designing the cosplay, whether it be the process of making the cosplay by hand or buying cosplay and accessories such as jewelry and wigs to create the cosplay and aesthetic of the character; in fact, one of the cosplayers

who participated in my survey said that they consider cosplay an art form because they take a lot of time to plan how their cosplay will look.

### **COSPLAY AND IDENTITY**

Some cosplayers may use crossplay as a form of gender play, allowing them to explore gender, gender identity, and to even “[challenge] existing gender norms” (Tompkins 2019, 1.2).

As hinted at previously, some other reasons women may cosplay go further than a love for a character or their design. Rather, they may cosplay characters as a way to explore and/or express pride in their own identities. There are numerous examples of how this type of exploration and expression is found in cosplay, but the two examples that will be discussed more specifically are gender exploration and Muslim identity, the latter of which has not received much attention in academic but deserves more research.

Some women may cosplay in order to play with gender and gender identity. Cosplay can help cosplayers explore their gender identity, and for some, this exploration can lead to a confirmation or realization of a trans and/or gender-nonconforming identity (Liptak 103). Cosplay avenues such as crossplay and genderbending allow for such gender play and gender exploration. Crossplay, for example, refers to when an individual cosplays a character of a different gender identity than one’s own (Winge 2006, 71). It is generally split into two subsections<sup>10</sup>: (1) male-to-female (MTF), referring to when a

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<sup>10</sup> As far as current research indicates, these are the two most widely-discussed subsets of crossplay, though of course there are cosplayers and characters who do not fit within the gender binary. General definitions of both MTF and FTM crossplay only focus on the two binary genders, which is why I have decided to put asterisks behind the word “gender-nonconforming” in both of these definitions. I acknowledge that such an addition plays into the notion of the gender binary, and my hope is that there will eventually be more terms to describe crossplay that will be



male or gender-nonconforming\* individual cosplays a character who is canonically female, and (2) female-to-male (FTM), which refers to when a woman or gender-nonconforming\* individual cosplays a character who is canonically male (Nichols 2019, 277). FTM crossplayers may use methods to create a more masculine appearance such as wearing a chest binder, cutting their hair or wearing a wig, or using makeup techniques such as contouring to change the appearance of one's face and facial features (Nichols 2019, 277). For some trans and genderqueer cosplayers that participated in my survey, crossplaying has helped them feel more confident and may give them a sense of gender euphoria depending on the character they're cosplaying as.

In contrast, genderbending is when one "reimagines" a character by changing their gender, and women take a character who is canonically male and change the character's gender so that they are female (Nichols 2019, 278). Genderbending usually involves a different type of process that is more focused on creativity than portraying the character authentically as is the case for other types of cosplay (Nichols 2019, 278). Many women cosplayers who genderbend may redesign a costume and modify a character's appearance in order for the character to appear more feminine (for example, wearing a skirt rather than pants). Oftentimes, these cosplays appear with the abbreviations "fem" or "fem!" before the name of a character in order to designate the cosplay as genderbend.<sup>11</sup> To give an example, if a woman wanted to dress up as Robin

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inclusive of gender-nonconforming identities more specifically. Such current binary notions when it comes to cosplay also emphasize a lack of representation in the media when it comes to trans/nonbinary/gender-nonconforming characters, something that also needs to be addressed and deserves further research.

<sup>11</sup> Though there is not one particular source that defines "fem" or "fem!," both are seen across the cosplay community including social media and other online content.

from D.C. comics, she could cosplay as fem!Robin by wearing a longer wig and/or incorporating a skirt and other accessories that differs from how the character is most frequently depicted in mainstream media.

Through both crossplay and genderbending, women have the opportunity to play with gender by exploring different types of masculinities through gender performativity if they choose to do so. Crossplay, in particular, is often viewed from the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which at its core sees gender identity as a cultural process that is developed through the repetition and imitation of gender norms or a "stylized repetition of acts through time" (Butler 1988, 520). Previous research has found that more women or gender-nonconforming individuals participate crossplay, often described as FTM (female to male) crossplay, and they may do so as a way to explore male identity (Tompkins 2019, 1.2). As Hale writes in "Cosplay: Intertextuality, Public Texts, and the Body Fantastic," crossplay can be a "creative strategy" and opportunity for women to dress as "strong and intelligent male or sometimes genderless characters with which they identify and through which they can express themselves and their fandom" (Hale 2014, 23). Jessica Ethel Tompkins, in their article "Is Gender Just a Costume? An Exploratory Study of Crossplay," adds that "cosplay might involve both performance (i.e., enactment) as well as performativity (i.e., practice doing)" (Tompkins 2019, 1.2). Such performance and/or performativity strategies can include changing and/or mimicking the mannerisms of particular male characters or men more generally. Some women may also explore masculinit(ies) by crossplaying characters through the

opportunity to dress as male characters who have stereotypical masculine traits such as being strong, intelligent, and tough (Hale 2014, 23).

Since women are often expected to exhibit traits that align with dominant gender norms (e.g., to be sweet, polite, and passive), cosplay can allow women the agency and freedom to break away from such norms through these different types of performances and performative actions, even if it is only temporary. This is in part because many women feel more comfortable expressing the sides of them that may be perceived as “more masculine” at cosplay conventions and in other cosplay spaces than they may feel doing so in everyday life. This may be due to the fact that gender norms are often not as enforced within the cosplay space than they are outside of it. In this way, the cosplay convention could be identified as a liminal space similar to how Anthony P. Avery describes raves similarly to the rave scene Avery writes about, the cosplay convention is a place where “people of different classes, sexualities, and races [come] together and form a new community configuration” that is ritually separated from the ordinary world (Avery 2005, 162, 165).

Thus, the cosplay space could be considered liminal or even “carnavalesque.” Seregina writes that “the carnivalesque... is a temporally and spatially limited performance that is apart from “real life,” unbound and free from rules and structures,” including gender norms and expectations (Seregina 2019, 456). Though this quote has already been referenced earlier in the thesis, it is worth restating because of how the carnivalesque allows for the rules of gender to be suspended and gender and identities are more fluid as people cosplay characters who may or may not share their own gender

identity; thus, it can be argued that acts such as crossplay and spaces such as cosplay conventions subvert dominant gender and sexuality norms and assumptions. It is also important to note that in much research about cosplay (e.g., Gittinger 2018, 94; Liptak 2022, 104; Nichols 2019, 272; Tompkins 2019, para. 2.2), the majority of cosplayers state that the cosplay community is generally supportive and accepting of others and their identities, though, as previously mentioned, there are still some issues within the community that will be discussed later in this paper.

Cosplay can allow women to express their pride regarding certain identities, including pride as a woman. In my interview with Melissa, she said that she is a cis woman who only cosplays female characters because it is a way for them to feel empowered as a woman. She had explained that they enjoy cosplaying characters who wear skirts and other articles of clothing that would generally be considered “feminine.” Most of these characters, she added, were characters that she considered to be “badass” women, and the personality of the character was sometimes another source of empowerment for her.

Women may cosplay to express pride for other particular identities they may share as well. One such example of this is hijabi cosplay. In the article “Hijabi Cosplay: Performances of Culture, Religion, and Fandom” by Juli L. Gittinger explains that many hijabi Muslim women style their hijabs so that they match a character’s hair or otherwise incorporate their hijab into their cosplay in lieu of wigs (Gittinger 2018, 87). Gittinger further states that hijabi women often engage in Hijabi cosplay to show not just a love for a particular fandom or character, but to express their Muslim religious identity through

“religious performativity” (Gittinger 2018, 96). These cosplayers, Gittinger notes, may also challenge the notions of what a “fan” and what a “Muslim” is; in this vein, some hijabi cosplayers use cosplay as an avenue to open up conversations about Islam and Muslim identity and to challenge Muslim stereotypes like the “Orientalist image of the Muslim woman” (Gittinger 2018, 87, 93). Hijabi cosplay, for some, allows them to open up further dialogue around Islam and cosplay, which raises questions of where the line might be between advocacy and other types of social justice work and cosplaying for the sake of cosplaying (Gittinger 2018, 99). However, Gittinger also makes a point to highlight the fact that because so many women characters in mainstream media wear tightfitting or “minimalist” clothing, hijabi cosplayers sometimes struggle to include their hijabs in the cosplay or have to modify the character’s design so that it fits within their values of modesty; Therefore, Muslim women (whether they wear hijabs or not) are another example of a marginalized group of women who need more representation in mainstream media (Gittinger 2018, 94). Hijabi cosplayers are not the only group who may engage in advocacy through cosplay. Others, especially those who share marginalized identities, also engage in social justice or combat stereotypes within the cosplay community.

### **ISSUES IN THE COSPLAY COMMUNITY**

Like any other community, there are issues within the cosplay community, and some issues that women cosplayers often face are sexism, racism, and fatphobia. As mentioned throughout this paper, one of the most prominent issues in the cosplay community is sexism. Women cosplayers are often subject to the male gaze, which

impacts how they are viewed in the community or fandom they are a part of. Such issues are similar to the issues of the male gaze that bell hooks and Laura Mulvey discuss in the film industry in “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” and “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” respectively. Like in film, the male gaze often prioritizes and places certain women and their bodies as more “appealing” than others, and these bodies are more often than not white women who are thin, curvy, or otherwise fit within a certain beauty standard (Mulvey 1975, 750). The male gaze can also lead to certain female characters being placed in an “exhibitionist role” where they become objectified by male characters and the male audience, and this objectification leads to the objectification of female cosplayers cosplaying those particular characters (Mulvey 1975, 750). The male gaze and assumptions about women cosplayers and other fans often lead to women cosplayers’ motivations for cosplaying and general love of their fandom(s) being questioned along with accusations that they only cosplaying for male attention, which has led to other problems in the community that impact all cosplayers.

The male gaze also contributes to the fact that sexual harassment can be an issue at cosplay conventions, especially for women. Hale writes about how many female cosplayers have shared experiences of receiving unwanted attention and/or harassment at cosplay conventions, especially when cosplaying characters who wear tighter and more revealing outfits that are often considered “sexy” by the majority of individuals (Hale 2014, 22). On the other hand, other women have said that the fear of sexual harassment is a motivator for doing FTM crossplay (Hale 2014, 22-23). This insight was echoed in my survey results, which indicated that while some people crossplay to explore gender

identity, they also crossplay because they have experienced harassment in the past. Hale further notes that some female cosplayers explained that they crossplay because it “[enables] them to take control of or avert episodes of harassment wherein they were subjected to the ‘male gaze’” (Hale 2014, 23). Instances of sexual harassment have led to some backlash against conventions, and in the 2010s the phrase “cosplay is not consent” is prominent in cosplay conventions and other cosplay spaces (Liptak 2022, 112). While there are plenty of issues surrounding the male gaze, some women cosplayers enjoy cosplaying “sexy” characters because they find it empowering; however, cosplaying such characters may also lead to other problematic criticisms and accusations, including the common accusation that they are only cosplaying the character for attention—yet another example of how women cosplayers are denied agency and assumed to not be cosplaying for themselves (Lamerichs 2018, 210).

Issues of the male gaze regarding a woman cosplayer’s appearance also highlight issues when it comes to how many female characters are portrayed in certain media like sci-fi, comics, and anime. In many cases, such characters are created and/or designed by men, which in turn means that men have a significant role in how these characters end up looking—one only has to look at some iconic female superheroes to see that these characters often have model-like bodies and wear what would be considered “sexy” outfits by the majority of audiences (Gittinger 2018, 94; Liptak 2022, 109-110). Lamerichs also bring up an example of when a comic book author, Tony Harris, caused a debate in 2012 when he stated that “female [cos]players only [engage] in the activity for the attention” and that “these sexy media representations [are] a way to turn male fans

on” in a blog post (Lamerichs 2018, 210). This is where the irony comes in: some of the men who are criticizing women who cosplay these “sexy” characters are the ones who designed the character to begin with, and this was the case with Tony Harris (Lamerichs 2018, 210). Liptak also writes about issues surrounding Tony Harris in *Cosplay: A History*. According to Liptak, Harris’s sexist rant against women cosplayers took the form of a Facebook post that stated:

I cant remember if Ive said this before, but Im gonna say it anyway. I don’t give a crap. I appreciate a pretty Gal as much as the next Hetero Male. Sometimes I even go in for some racy type stuff (keeping the comments PG for my Ladies sake) but dammit, dammit, dammit I am so sick and tired of the whole COSPLAY-Chiks. I know a few who are actually pretty cool-and BIG Shocker, love and read Comics. So as in all things, they are the exception to the rule. Heres the statement I wanna make, based on THE RULE: “Hey! Quasi-Pretty-NOT-Hot-Girl, you are more pathetic than the REAL Nerds, who YOU secretly think are REALLY PATHETIC. (Harris)

There are a number of problematic and disturbing issues in this post, and this is not even the entirety of it. One other sentence particularly stands out as well:

THE REASON WHY ALL THAT, sickens us: BECAUSE YOU DONT KNOW SHIT ABOUT COMICS, BEYOND WHATEVER GOOGLE IMAGE SEARCH YOU DID TO GET REF ON THE MOST MAINSTREAM CHARACTER WITH THE MOST REVEALING COSTUME EVER (Tony Harris tweet).



Not only does this sentence from the post stand out because the majority of it is in all caps, but Harris's entire rant is a prime example of the types of sexist assumptions some men make about women who cosplay. Because genres like comics and sci-fi are often associated with "nerds" or "geeks," and because of the assumption that these geeks are white men, there is a questioning of those who are fans who do not fit this stereotype—and this questioning does not just affect women, but other intersections of identity as well.

Another prominent issue in the cosplay community is racism due to these stereotypes of what fans "look like" and the fact that a large majority of characters in mainstream media are either white or have a lighter skin tone. Many BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) who cosplay white or characters who have a lighter skin tone receive racist backlash for cosplaying them because they do not "look" like the character (Liptak 2022, 100; Thomas 2021, 329). In other words, these cosplayers are criticized because they are cosplaying characters who are typically portrayed as white or having lighter skin in canon (Thomas 2021, 329). Black cosplayers sometimes face backlash if they choose to incorporate natural hair into their cosplay (Granja n.d., para. 2). One cosplayer who has faced such racism is Sirleen, a Black model who cosplayed Rin Tohsaka from the anime *Fate/stay night* in 2020. After she posted the picture of herself cosplaying on Twitter, she began to receive racist backlash in the form of "racial slurs, expletives, and insults," and many comments telling her she should not cosplay a non-Black character (Greenspan and Haasch 2020, para. 3).

Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon case: even though there are other cosplayers within the community who are supportive and defend cosplayers who receive such problematic responses to their cosplay, stories like Sirleen's highlight issues of gatekeeping in the cosplay community (especially by those who believe cosplayers should only cosplay characters they "look like") as well as issues of representation and diversity in certain genres such as comics, sci-fi, anime, and more (Liptak 2022, 100). Intersectionality is important for thinking about issues surrounding the male gaze as it relates to BIPOC; some of the points bell hooks raises in "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" apply to cosplay as well. In her piece, hooks writes that Black women are often stereotyped and objectified by the male gaze in multiple ways, including both the white male gaze and the Black male gaze (hooks 1992, 118). hooks argues that both of these gazes contribute to the perpetuation of white supremacy within cinema because male spectatorship often desires white women, and the same can be said in the realm of cosplay as Black female cosplayers like Sirleen receive the criticism they do (hooks 1992, 117). The intersectional experiences of Black women cosplayers need to be acknowledged because there is racism in the cosplay community, and many Women of Color have received racist comments when they cosplay characters who are white and/or have a lighter skin tone.

The problematic belief that a cosplayer must look a certain way to cosplay a character and the lack of diversity in media open up some much-needed discussion about another issue in the cosplay community: fatphobia.

Fatphobia has received little attention in academic research about cosplay and in the cosplay community more broadly. In fact, fat or plus-size cosplayers are subject to gatekeeping because they tend to receive less attention within the cosplay community on social media and in online articles or blogs about cosplay unless they are specifically about plus-size cosplayers.<sup>12</sup> Plus-size cosplayers can also experience gatekeeping because it can be hard to find cosplay that would fit them. During my interview with Lucille, who identifies as a plus-size Black woman, from November 13, 2020, she talked about her frustration about the fact that many of these companies' cosplay sizes run small or they do not even have plus sizes at all. She said that this has forced her to make all of her cosplays because she had no other option, and while she enjoys the creative process of putting the cosplay together, she wishes that there were more options available to her so that she would not always have to make cosplay considering how difficult and time-consuming it can be to put some cosplays together.<sup>13</sup> Her experiences identify certain privileges that cosplayers who are not plus-size have available to them since they may not have to be concerned about whether they will be able to find cosplay or pieces that fit them.

In the online article "Representation of Plus Size Cosplayers" from *The Cosplay Journal*, Robyn Manners discusses issues plus-size cosplayers face in the community and the frustration of being a plus-size cosplayer in a community that often values certain appearances over others. She writes that because "explicit and covert fatphobia follows

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<sup>12</sup> Though I could not find a source that explicitly states this, I've noticed this in my own participant observation when looking at cosplay posts on social media, articles, and other websites.

<sup>13</sup> Lucille, Interview with Author, November 13, 2020.

us everywhere... it stands to reason it seeps into our hobbies” (Manners n.d., para. 6).

Despite the fact cosplay communities often emphasize the idea that cosplay is about fun more than anything else, it is clear that more often than not, unspoken expectations of authenticity lead to problems for many cosplayers, and Manners writes:

It often feels as though our place as visible members of this community exists only if we stay in our place: Cosplaying 100-percent screen/ page accurate renditions of already fat characters. If we deviate from our given script at all, it feels as though our place is revoked by way of "preserving character integrity” (Manners n.d., para. 6).

If one looks at this quote, it becomes apparent that many marginalized identities could be inserted in the place of “fat” and the sentiment still applies, whether it be “woman,” “Muslim,” “Black,” “Hispanic,” along with other identities. The emphasis some people place on “authenticity” when it comes to portraying a character through cosplay is a major reason that these types of issues exist and persist within the cosplay community, not just pointing to issues with the representation of women in the media (who often are white and have similar body types), and these issues also reflect issues in American societies as well.

### **WOMEN COSPLAYERS AND RESISTANCE**

While intersectional issues such as sexism, racism, and fatphobia are still problems in the cosplay community there are some steps being taken to resist discrimination and challenge stereotypes, one of which is called ‘undoing the rule.’ According to Cathy Thomas, undoing the rule is “an abstraction of humanism and

colonial interventions in the form of pop cultural canon” such as a Black woman cosplaying a white character (Thomas 2021, 326). While Thomas is talking about undoing the rule in the context of race, it seems that other intersecting marginalized identities also engage in ‘undoing of’ rule by challenging expectations of how a character is supposed to ‘look.’ Examples of this could be a plus-size cosplayer cosplaying a character who is portrayed as not being plus-size or a tall cosplayer cosplaying a petite character (Thomas 2021, 326). These are just some examples Thomas lists, and all of them could theoretically be applied to multiple marginalized identities in order to highlight idea that character portrayals should not be static and a general need for more diversity in the media. “Undoing of Rule” and other similar acts could be interpreted as a declaration of fan ownership of the characters they love because characters—and in turn, fan identity—is not static nor should it be considered static. Women of all identities deserve the right to cosplay the characters they want to without having to be subject to the male gaze, problematic comments, and unwanted attention.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women cosplay for different reasons, some of which are related to a love for and/or attachment to a character, creativity, identity exploration, show pride as a woman, among others. Through cosplay, many women may express intersectional identities such as gender identity and religious identity. Nevertheless, there are still many issues within the cosplay community, and while sexism, racism, and fatphobia are some, there are some others too that deserve further attention and research. All of these issues tie back to

a need for more diversity in the media, including women and gender-nonconforming individuals, Women of Color, Hijabi women, plus-size women, and more.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

This thesis sheds light on the value of cosplay as a vernacular form of creativity and as a social art form that allows fans (folk) within a fandom (or folk group) who share an informal fan culture to converge and form communities both in cosplay spaces such as the cosplay convention and online spaces. When fans cosplay, they become a character through performance and embodiment that may also include performances of other identities the character may share. Cosplay conventions themselves have frequently been described as both liminal and carnivalesque because they are seen as separate from the outside world for the duration of the space and time when the convention exists. However, that little attention has been paid to cosplay by folklorists despite so many other scholars using folkloric frameworks to study cosplay itself as well as cosplay spaces raises a need for folklorists to also pay attention to cosplay—and how other scholars outside of folklore are using these frameworks.

One of my other main threads of inquiry for this thesis was the intersections of cosplay and gender identity, and even though the majority of literature from the literature review indicated that cosplay is generally not used for gender identity exploration, it seems that there are more nuances to intersections of cosplay and gender play than meets the eye. Cosplayers who are questioning their gender identity and/or sexuality can use cosplay as a means to perform gender and explore identity, and cosplay conventions are a relatively safe space where they can begin such explorations. For those who are

members of the LGBTQIA+ community, cosplay can be seen as an escape from conventional gender norms that permits them to be themselves and feel less pressure of being judged by those who are not part of the community or not allies. Of course, these ideas may not apply to everyone who is an outsider to cosplay, a cosplayer, or an LGBTQIA+ cosplayer, but these are just some speculations about how cosplay might be viewed by various folk groups.

In chapter three, the interviewees' general consensus that conventions do not prescribe to gender norms and are not dominated by heteronormativity (as Sean pointed out) is worth more exploration, along with how cosplay communities and conventions may help individuals learn more about the different gender and sexual identities that exist. Further folkloric research of the carnivalesque quality of the cosplay convention as well as how cosplay conventions and the cosplay community act as a queer space may also be beneficial into better understanding how cosplayers utilize cosplay as an act, as a physical space, and as a virtual space in order to form and solidify their identities.

When considering women in cosplay, there are multiple avenues of further research that need to be considered. One avenue is the further exploration of intersectional identities. As previously mentioned, little to no research has been conducted about plus-size women cosplayers and fatphobia, and there are other intersections that also need to be addressed, including trans women and gender-nonconforming cosplayers, disabled women cosplayers, and cosplayers of various religious identities. It would also be worth researching cosplay and body image in order to understand how women may negotiate the lack of diverse body types in the media.



Another important area that deserves further research is the social act of women in cosplay. Many women who cosplay do so with other cosplayers from the same fandom in order to do a group cosplay where everyone is cosplaying a character from a particular fandom as well as through couple's cosplay with a partner or friend. It would also be important to explore how women interact within cosplay communities and whether they receive support from other cosplayers through such interactions.

Finally, further research is needed on how female cosplayers resist and challenge stereotypes in other ways besides different types of "undoing of rule." Based on my research, it seems that it could be argued that acts such as "undoing of rule" might be a way that women can challenge assumptions of how particular characters should "look" and how cosplay can be a way that marginalized cosplayers can create their own representation beyond what is presented in mainstream media. Where there is a lack of diversity of many different intersectional identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, body type, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.), cosplay can be an act of resistance as cosplayers cosplay characters they headcanon to be of particular identity using their imagination to fill in the gaps of representation where it is needed.

One other aspect of cosplay that was not mentioned in the scholarly articles I found or in my interviews that needs to be further researched is the experiences of nonbinary or otherwise genderqueer cosplayers and their motivations for cosplaying certain characters. In 2020, I was unable to interview a cosplayer who was neither cis nor trans (within the gender binary), so I was very excited to have the chance to talk to both Syllas and Amanda more recently since they are gender-nonconforming cosplayers.

Nevertheless, I still believe that more research needs to be done a pertaining to how nonbinary/genderqueer individuals navigate cosplay, considering the fact that the gender binary is still perpetuated through cosplay, cosplay conventions, and the cosplay community.

Finally, more attention needs to be paid to the voices of neurodivergent cosplayers and/or fans and their experiences within cosplay spaces and cosplay communities. Having the opportunity to talk to Sylas made me realize that some of my experiences of hyperfixating on a particular fandom and/or character, having special interests in particular fandoms and characters that have stuck with me for years, and how much I value these characters and fandoms has made me wonder more about potential shared experiences neurodivergent fans and cosplayers may have. Sylas's points about how convention spaces can feel overstimulating and can cause burnout speak to potential discussions of accessibility and/or accommodations that may (or may not) occur in physical cosplay spaces and cosplay communities—another avenue of cosplay research that deserves more attention. Overall, Cosplayers of Color, plus-size cosplayers, nonbinary or otherwise genderqueer cosplayers, and neurodivergent cosplayers need their voices raised up and their experiences heard.

There are still other branches of research surrounding cosplay that would be worth exploring in the field of folklore. Because the literature I was able to find and ended up using for this thesis primarily looked at cosplay conventions, I was not able to further touch upon social media and other online cosplay communities as much as I would have liked to. Therefore, the study of cosplay would benefit from more research of online

spaces and the study of online fan folklore such as fan art, fanfiction, and cosplay sites. Another aspect of cosplay that deserves further attention is how cosplayers may use cosplay to express sexuality, such as how Amanda sometimes does couples cosplays with someone else where they cosplay characters they “ship” together. This type of cosplay shows how fans may use cosplay as a means to express ownership over certain characters and display their desires of characters they wish would end up in a romantic relationship in the movie, show, anime, manga, or any other kind of work in popular culture.

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Allison Stanich (she/they) received her Bachelor of Arts in English (Creative Writing Concentration) and Music (Vocal Performance Concentration), along with a musical theatre minor, from the University of Mary Washington in 2015. After receiving their Master of Arts in English (Folklore Concentration) and her Women and Gender Studies Graduate Certificate from George Mason University in Spring 2023, they plan to continue studying folklore, popular culture, disability studies, and writing/writing center studies and eventually pursue further education at the PhD level.