Cosplay: Re-Dressing American Identity

by

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Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in American Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
"I’m... myself when I cosplay..."

“This is what we do; this is my life. I love it.”
- Tripl3 Vision and DJ Kagamine
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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my thesis advisor Brian Hoffman for supporting me in this project from the beginning. You challenged me to unravel my own thoughts, my work, and this community, and, in the process, inspired me to seek the answers which compose this thesis. Thank you for dedicating so much of your time and effort to my success. Your guidance has brought this daydream into reality.

Without the support of the Olin Fellowship from the Department of English at Wesleyan University, my field research would not have been possible. Thank you for allowing me the chance to have the unique interactions which define this thesis, and thank you to Joel Pfister and Sarah Mahurin for their support and advice in these early stages of my work.

To my wonderful family, thank you for your love, encouragement, assistance, candy, and cat pictures, and especially to Mom for being my on-call reader right up to the final hour.

Thank you Paul for your dedication, perseverance, and not taking ‘I hate everything’ for an answer. You deserve a medal.

My glorious housemates and friends, Cassie, Jocelyn, and Samara, you have made this year full of joy despite the stress we’re all under. Cassie- thank you again for all of your affection and advice. I’m so honored that you’ve always believed in me from the very beginning of our Wesleyan careers.

Thank you to those who read and helped me edit this thesis:
My one true heir, the incomparable Richard
Handsome Ian and Even More Handsome Ian (that’s both of you)

Thank you to my friends on and off campus who, through genuine interest and dialogue, helped me develop this thesis, and to those who fostered the environments which allowed me to do such critical thinking.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to the many cosplayers who agreed to be interviewed this summer and since then. Your willingness to open up to me, as a stranger, was incredibly helpful and personally moving. Thank you as well to those whose photographs I have used throughout this thesis, though all images are mine unless otherwise specified.

Finally, thank you to the Department of American Studies for the continued support and appreciation of learning in all forms.
Cosplay Terminology

Cosplay: to dress as a character from fiction, history, pop culture, or one’s imagination and to somehow embody that character while in costume. Cosplay can also be used as a noun to refer to the physical objects which make up a costume.

Convention (aka Con): a large event which is centered on a nerdy genre or medium such as anime or comics and is open to its fans. This is the primary site of cosplay.

Cosplay Meet-up: an event at which cosplayers come together in costume outside of a convention.

Panel: discussions or workshops at conventions led by cosplay or industry experts.

Crossplay: cosplay when it applies to a person who has chosen a character whose gender identity is not the same as the one they express in their everyday life.

Closet Cosplay: creating a costume out of pieces one already owns or by modifying such items.

Commission: paying another cosplayer to construct a custom costume for you.

Binding: a compression vest, or another item which suppresses a female crossplayer’s feminine figure.

Thrifted Cosplay: a costume made primarily from items bought at second-hand stores such as Goodwill and often modified.

Mash-up Cosplay: a costume which combines two characters, ideas, genres, or aesthetics such as steampunk Ironman or Jedi Disney Princesses.

Steampunk: a popular form of creative anachronism which has inspired fiction and many original characters. In this world, steam-powered inventions are imagined to dominate an alternately futuristic Victorian or Old-West society.

Anime: a series or film produced through Japanese animation

Manga: a Japanese graphic novel

J-Pop, J-Rock: Japanese pop and Japanese rock. These genres are particularly popular with people who watch anime because they are often exposed to these bands through a show’s theme song or credits.

Fandom: the subculture within nerd culture of fans dedicated to a certain series or work.
Conventions at a Glance

These are the conventions at which my interviews with cosplayers were done. These interviews, which I cite in the text, can be further contextualized by understanding a bit more about these conventions.

A-Kon
Genre: Anime
Location: Sheraton Dallas Hotel, Dallas, TX
Attendance: 21,982
Dates: Friday, June 1 through Sunday, June 3
Cost: $50 for 3-day pass
Founded: 1990
Organizer: Project A-Kon; fan-run with sponsorship

Otakon
Genre: East Asian Popular Culture
Location: Baltimore Convention Center, Baltimore, MD
Attendance: 30,785
Dates: Friday, July 27 through Sunday, July 29
Cost: $70 for a membership, aka 3-day pass
Founded: 1994
Organizer: Otakorp, a fan organization

Anime World Expo Chicago
Genre: Anime
Location: Hyatt Regency O’Hare, Rosemont, IL (Chicagoland)
Attendance: ~2,000
Dates: Friday, August 3 through Sunday, August 5
Cost: $40 for 3-day pass
Founded: 2011
Organizer: Anime World Expos, fans and professional management

Wizard World Chicago Comic Con
Genre: Comics and Popular Culture
Location: Donald E. Stevens Convention Center, Rosemont, IL (Chicagoland)
Attendance: ~70,000

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Dates: Thursday, August 9 through Sunday, August 12
Cost: $80 for 4-day pass
Founded: 1972
Organizer: Wizard Entertainment (since 1997)

Star Wars Celebration VI
Genre: Science Fiction (only Star Wars)
Location: Orange County Convention Center, Orlando, FL
Attendance: ~35,000
Dates: Thursday, August 23 through Sunday, August 26
Cost: $135 for 4-day pass
Founded: 1999, 2012 was 6th US Celebration convention
Organizer: Reed Pop Entertainment

Dragon*Con
Genre: Science Fiction and Fantasy, Popular Culture
Location: Hyatt Regency Atlanta, Atlanta Hilton, Sheraton Atlanta, Atlanta Marriott Marquis, and the Westin Peachtree Plaza Hotel in downtown Atlanta
Attendance: 52,000
Dates: Friday, August 31 through Monday, September 3 (Labor Day)
Cost: $105 for a membership, aka 4-day pass
Founded: 1987
Organizer: fans, run by volunteer staff

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The Threads of Rebellion

I push my way through the crowded hall, side-stepping a large group of orange-horned teenagers dressed in polka-dotted pants and black T-shirts, chatting animatedly, and a crowd of men and women, all in their 30’s and 40’s, busy snapping pictures of a figure in silver and red which I soon see is a person in an Ultraman suit. As I hop onto the escalator behind a girl in a Japanese school uniform, I can finally see out over the mezzanine below me. Here, there are even more costumes of all different types and hordes of costumed and non-costumed people taking pictures of these creations and engaging their wearers in conversation. I had heard that Otakon was a must-see convention, but this vibrant dive into fantasy was more than I could have ever expected.

We quickly reach the bottom of the escalator, and I begin my search. I had arranged online to meet a Jack Sparrow cosplayer on the mezzanine at 3pm, but where was she? As I looked around, I got swept up in the sheer curiosity and magnitude of this event. The Baltimore Convention Center brimmed over with costumed fans, or cosplayers, expressing their love for a certain show, book, or genre by embodying a fictional character with their dress and sometimes acting. Cosplay finds its home mainly at fan conventions, like this one, Otakon, where a medium or genre like anime, science fiction, or comic books, is celebrated for multiple days through presentations by speakers, special guests, fan meet-ups, contests, and rows upon rows of artists and vendors, specializing in the theme of the convention.

“Hi, are you Chelsea?” A young girl’s voice pulls me out of my reverie, but I’m confused as to its source. As I look around, my eyes fall upon a figure which I
had assumed to be a man. “Sweeney?” I ask, to which the small Jack Sparrow in front of me grins. We sit down together and she introduces me to her friend, Chloe, who is dressed as Toph from the animated TV series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. They both agree to be interviewed and we begin.

“Is this your first time at Otakon?” I ask them, to which Chloe answers yes and Sweeney says no.

“Why did you start coming?” I ask Sweeney.

“My first con [convention] was New York Comic Con,” she answers, “and after that I was just addicted so I kept looking for cons.”

Since her first con three years ago, Sweeney has made three different costumes, and conventions and cosplay have become a big part of her life. I ask her more about this, and about how cosplay might have changed her over the years. Sweeney immediately addresses the tension I had been feeling all weekend as I tried to look at the convention through the lens of academia. “I think they’ve changed me in a good way,” she says about her costumes. “When I’m cosplaying I become a lot less shy than in real life.” Chloe agrees, and I nod along, realizing that I’d had the same feeling, but I hadn’t had the words to define it yet.
Cosplay and “real life” are more than rhetorically separated for cosplayers, they are distinctly different entities. Though Sweeney might learn to be more outgoing in her everyday life by easily meeting people and making friends within a convention, it will never be the same feeling. This inside v. outside tension defines cosplay and allows conventions to exist in an alternate reality, with different people, places, and social rules.

As the interview wraps up I ask them both “how has cosplay affected your life outside of conventions, if at all?” Sweeney answers quickly. “Right after cons I’m like ‘Oh my god, I want to cosplay all the time!’ like, walk around my city randomly in cosplay, but after a week I’m like ‘ok back to normal, time to go back to sleep.’”

Later that evening, as I ride the light rail back to my hotel, I look around me. The bored faces and impatient sighs as the train thunders along are even duller in comparison to the wonder of the convention. Seeing this, it isn’t too hard to understand what Sweeney meant. After cosplaying, real life is as uniform and spiritless as sleep.

Cosplay is as enthralling as it is important to understand. While most people can see the attraction of playing dress-up many times throughout the year, cosplay is so much more than this. As a niche hobby which boomed into a subculture in the past 15 years and, indeed, a lifestyle, cosplay, and the conventions which foster it, offers much more than a change of clothes. Since the turn of the 21st century, cosplay has steadily gained exposure and popularity due to the rise of the Internet and a growth in
fan conventions. Although costumed convention-goers have become staples of these conventions, and, in turn, their host cities, for at least one weekend a year, there is still much confusion from those outside the cosplay community over what cosplaying means and is.

What is most often misunderstood about this community is just that: through their shared interests and activities, cosplayers have created a strong community which flourishes at conventions as well as on the Internet. This community is diverse and accepts many people, including those who are on the margins of society. In the digital age, it is important to pay attention to communities which embrace people who don’t fit in, especially with the growing trend of cyber-bullying. Cosplay is also a very social community, online and in person. This emphasis on interaction counteracts the sort of isolation that many outsiders in society feel.

In this age of standardized ‘individuality,’ cosplay is a practice which challenges and redefines our boundaries and social norms. From the way we understand each other by our dress to the assumptions we make about sexuality and gender, cosplay destabilizes our concept of identity and challenges us to interpret and interact with people on a different level. Instead of producing identities which are tied to a particular group or movement, cosplay intentionally rejects identity politics and celebrates anti-identity identities. These identities are instead built around the narrative and character design chosen and interpreted by the cosplayer.

At a convention, you can look at a person and know that they’re Princess Peach, but you are also left with the reality that you actually know nothing else about them. Instead of assuming the background or identity of this person, cosplay
challenges us to confront these unknowns if we want to know more, and when it comes to what we can know, it forces observers to see other people as they’d like to be seen: as their chosen character. In this way, cosplay allows people to define their own narratives and identities. A cosplayer’s agency over their identity is multiplied by their ability to swap them out. By experiencing the world as different characters, cosplayers gain an appreciation for the potential fluidity of identity, leading them to question the outside world’s repression of such personal expression.

Ultimately, cosplay is a social critique. Through conventions and the Internet, cosplayers have created an alternative reality in which many of society’s norms of dress, self, and interaction are rejected. Cosplayers strive to redefine the aims and ideals of clothing and physical looks in spite of constant pressures from the outside world and cosplayers’ own social conditioning. This agency defines the community and conventions, and also attracts new cosplayers. Cosplay is an important subculture to examine because this group not only consciously rejects the norms of society, but it also transcends identity politics in the pursuit of a purer understanding of the self and others.

Though cosplay has just recently come into the public eye as a nerdy craft and pastime, 7 fans have been attending conventions in costume ever since the first World Science Fiction Convention in 1939, at which Forest J Ackerman, a science fiction author, fan, and collector, wore a “futuristic costume” modeled off of the futuristic

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7 C2E2, or Chicago Comics and Entertainment Expo, for example, which is only Chicago’s second-largest comic convention was given the front page of the Arts and Entertainment section in last April’s Chicago Tribune the weekend of the convention.
characters which the convention honored. Since then, costuming has become a staple of conventions. Cosplayer and steampunk guru Diana, who now runs Steam Con in Seattle, Washington, explained that when she started attending conventions in 1981, “the biggest revelation… was that there were like-minded people in the world.” She says that, unlike “someone who grew up later than me…I didn’t have access to all these other like-minded geeks,” via the Internet. When she attended her first science fiction conventions, Diana says “I met artists, I met animators who finally had something in common with me and I loved the community.” This community has grown in different ways over the years, and though Diana explains that these same Sci-Fi conventions that she attended in her youth have gradually stagnated, she points to Dragon*Con as an example of a convention which is flourishing. “The fandom has gotten old” she says regarding the decline of cons in the Northwest, however “Dragon*Con doesn’t have that problem because it appeals to a younger audience.” This younger audience has the opportunity to mingle with veteran


Laura and Diana (cosplayers) interview by author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
convention-goers at conventions like Dragon*Con, creating a vibrant mix of cosplay and a variety of other interests.

Even as we have moved into the digital age, this community of convention-goers continues to serve an important purpose by uniting fans in a physical space. Laura, Diana’s younger companion and a San Francisco Bay-area cosplayer, says that, even in the modern day, cons are necessary reminders of the nerd community. She says that, at a convention, “there’s… a feeling of community building and a feeling of solidarity because a lot of us still have to remind ourselves that there are people out there who have our same interests and have our same awkwardness in normal society.” While Laura holds a full-time job in her everyday life and wouldn’t immediately be perceived as necessarily “awkward,” she still feels that she doesn’t exactly fit into the mold presented by society. Indeed, with the pervasiveness of commercialism and other norm-enforcing content on the Internet, as well as a rise in online visibility through social networking sites, society has even more ways of telling us what we should dress like, and act like, and how we should spend our time.

The rise of technology has also enabled nerd culture itself to become a larger and more varied entity. Technological advances like e-readers and the Internet have vastly increased the accessibility of ‘nerdy’ mediums and genres like comic books and manga, which is imported and translated from Japan, as well as Japanese anime (which is also imported and translated, often by fans) and science fiction series such as Star Trek and Dr. Who which have become available online via Netflix. Cultural fads, like super hero movies and TV shows such as The Big Bang Theory, have also brought nerd culture to a broader audience and created more variation in the interests,
reputations, and fanaticism among those who identify as nerds. Because of this differentiation, there are no clearly defined politics to the modern identity or community of nerds, nor is there one specific identity of a nerd. Of these nerd identities, many are represented at conventions, and just one of these is cosplay. Though cosplayers are defined by the anti-identity nature of their identity, the broad definition of nerddom allows the cosplay anti-identity to situate itself within this larger community of nerds.

No matter the connectedness offered by online fan and cosplay communities, Laura says that her alternative interests “can be very isolating, so I think these cons are an important social network.” Diana agrees, sharing that, in her opinion, the new importance of conventions is to allow fans to “meet face to face.” “I think the problem is too many of us are willing to hermit away on our computers and we don’t get face time with people,” Diana complains. “You don’t want to lose that communication ability,” she says, adding that at conventions “time is precious.”

Many fans go to conventions not only to meet other fans, but to express themselves in ways they are not able to outside of a convention. Most con-goers immediately note the openness within a convention regarding gender, sexuality, and even a person’s true opinions. Without the fear of being judged for their choices or preferences, cosplayers say that, when they’re at conventions, they can relax and be themselves.\(^\text{10}\) Though it may seem paradoxical that many cosplayers feel most ‘themselves’ while dressing up as someone else, the freedom to explore different

\(^{10}\) Among others, cosplayers Mokuba and Dakota, at Otakon and Anime World Chicago, respectively, said “I just be myself, that’s it.” And “I can just be myself” about their experiences at conventions.
personalities and worldviews gives many cosplayers what they see as a better grasp on their own selves.

As the Internet continues to connect fans and cosplayers, it is also vital in attracting new attendees at both new and old conventions. Just about every convention has a full website by their sophomore year, where people can access hotel information, buy tickets, and check programming schedules. Most also attempt to spread the word throughout online fan communities using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. New conventions are interested in creating the same atmosphere as more established cons, however, and therefore advertise in person as well at close-by conventions throughout the year in order to hopefully attract cosplayers and con-goers that are already privy to the rules of this alternative community.

Americans have a long history of dressing up. From the Boston Tea Party to San Diego Comic Con, altering one’s physical and material appearance has allowed us to respond to the undesirable social realities of our time. Dress has been used to react to a change or crisis in the larger world, as well as to express things about ourselves that we can’t otherwise communicate. These crises and conflicts, such as fears of a secular multicultural society, masculinist anxieties resulting from the rise of white collar labor, Labor struggles of women in an industrial workplace, and the closing of the frontier, inspired individuals and groups to express themselves through clothing that communicated symbolic significance. Continuing this tradition, cosplay responds to the rise of socially alienating neoliberal policies in America with visually
stunning costumes and fantastical conventions that celebrate imagination, community, and difference. Such groups have historically used their visual difference to demand change from accepted cultural norms or to reject society’s reality and create another. Displaying discontent or presenting an alternative in such an openly visual manner has proven to be a powerful response.

At the turn of the 20th century, life was rapidly changing for most Americans, but more specifically, the public’s understanding of “manhood” was changing, and in very concerning ways. At factories, men were steadily being replaced by machines and a stock market crash in 1893 left many more drifting about the country. The power of white masculinity was in danger, so when Eugen Sandow came to America with his strongman act in that same year, 1893, he was an instant success. As businesses closed and unemployment rose, American men of all social strata felt a lack of control over their lives and inferior to the tools of modernity.

In John F. Kasson’s *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man*, Sandow, the “Perfect Man,” is described as “an icon of the hypermasculine who… literally embodied characteristics that many men and women believed were threatened by modern life.” Yet more important to audiences than what exactly he could do was what he looked like doing it. Sandow utilized costumes and poses which hearkened back to times of overwhelming masculinity and power. In “a loincloth and Roman sandals,” Sandow struck “classical poses,” transporting audiences to an imagined Greco-Roman past. In photographs, he donned “a leotard and medals” to portray a great athlete and a one-shouldered leopard-skin ensemble, showing his dominance.

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12 Ibid., 29.
13 Ibid., 64.
over beasts (as well as machines.) Through his costumes and his body Sandow spoke to the American people. In stark opposition to the man made weak by his financial losses or physical inferiority to industry, Eugen Sandow’s display of his body, the most muscle-bound form audiences had ever known, and his performances of feats of strength confirmed the agency and potential of white males in this changing world.

Instead of being seen as a freak or an anomaly, Sandow was an inspiration and an ideal to be replicated by Americans as they moved into the 20th century14. In this fantasy that Sandow’s act produced, men would, through changing themselves to be similar to Sandow, regain dominance over industry and rediscover their own masculinity. In this way, Sandow’s act also reflected a theme of body building and Western society: a “longing for male metamorphosis” in light of “the modern age.”15

A similar fantasy is produced by cosplay. Through bodily adornment, by costume, instead of modification, by weights, cosplayers transform themselves into their chosen identity. Like Sandow and his audiences, cosplayers reject their powerless position within the outside world and instead endeavor to change themselves in order to change their position in this world. However, unlike Sandow’s body building, cosplay represents a temporary change, and this alternative self which is created through costume and performance is not one to be shared with the larger world. Cosplay, instead, rejects the hierarchies of the outside world and forms its own interior reality. While this does not affect a cosplayer’s place or power in the real world, the separation of cosplay from everyday life allows cosplayers even more

14 This image was not formed through coincidence- Sandow was very conscious of his place as a spectacle, and though he often performed with vaudeville acts, in which the performers were basically powerless curiosities, he “carefully distanced himself from circus performers and human oddities” and instead strategically positioned himself as an actor, athlete, “and even [a] work… of art.” (Ibid., 63.)
15 Ibid., 60.
creative power over their identity within the cosplay world. Instead of succeeding through culturally prescribed ideals of manliness, cosplayers are free to determine their own route to power and success. Indeed, the empowerment felt through cosplay is specifically non-gendered, unlike Sandow’s explicitly masculine performance. The trade-off here is the confinement of these accolades to the cosplay world.

As Sandow displayed through costume and sheer strength the potential of white males in the new world of modernity, Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist, offered an ideal of human power and cunning. Houdini rose to popularity at the end of 19th century as well, and while stripped down instead of dressed up, he adorned himself with accessories of every kind, from straight jackets to specialized handcuffs. By pitting his (almost always naked) body against these modern contraptions, Houdini offered his own reassurance to the American people that masculinity had not died. Kasson suggests that Houdini’s acts served as metaphors for the triumph of the male body over machines at a time of huge industrial growth and, consequently, a crisis of modernity.

Indeed, the aspect of Houdini’s feats which made him so spectacular to late 19th century audiences was his continuous triumph over mechanisms of industry. No handcuffs could hold him, no iron or glass case contained him, and no locks outwitted the Great Houdini. It was this rhetoric, the “grandiose masculine role,” of the magician which enticed crowds and made them gather round to see through Houdini just what the human body could overcome, as they had seen through Sandow what the human body could achieve.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid., 87.
Houdini’s appeal confirmed the power of the individual when the modern working man was being weakened and devalued by the developing post-industrial society. This systemic deprivation of individual agency made Houdini particularly attractive in the early 1900’s, but this crisis has endured throughout the century. The same feeling of a lacking meaningful identity, which is enforced by the norms and fads of consumer capitalism, has inspired many people to react through cosplay. This ability to define one’s self in spite of the rules and expectations of the post-industrial world is exactly what Houdini did through his performances.

At the turn of the same century, Ernest Thompson Seton focused on how this crisis of modernity was affecting the future of America, that is to say its children. In Playing Indian, Philip J. Deloria writes that Seton was concerned with “the frontier’s demise” which, as he and others saw it, threatened “the character development of immigrants and the next generation of American children,” for how was the nation to flourish without leaders with “fortitude… shaped authentically by America’s powerful natural environment?” With these motivations, Seton created the Woodcraft Indians in 1901. This “youth development organization” used tropes of American Indianness to impart the values of order, hard work, and strong national identity.

Seton, and those who came to his campouts and joined his organization, used dressing up to separate themselves from the impersonal, mechanized outside world. By creating an alternative community, Seton was able to teach boys the values that he

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18 Ibid., 107.
felt were lost with the destruction of the frontier and a move towards urbanization and industrial life. Like its rival organization, Dan Beard’s Sons of Daniel Boone, in which boys “imitated the pioneer experience,” Seton’s Indians “attached great importance to playacting and costuming.” Like cosplayers, the boys understood their characters through lived experiences, allowing them to translate the values and perspectives they gained in costume to their later lives. Seton and Beard both believed that through experiencing nature as Americans (native or not) would have years ago, boys would avoid becoming “cogs in industrial machines” like the previous generation.

Eventually, the Sons of Daniel Boone became the Boy Scouts. Almost all troops completely abandoned Seton’s Native American-influenced methods and beliefs. In the 1930’s and 40’s, the few Indian-centric troops were told to “scale back their emphasis on Indian lore” and return to the Boy Scout ways, which most ultimately did. As such, the Boy Scouts lost their critical roots and became fully integrated into everyday society. Today, Seton’s fear of standardized masses has become a reality, despite the American rhetoric of individualism. Like Seton’s Woodcraft Indians, cosplay offers an alternative identity and world, creating a fantasy escape from the creativity-stifling outside world and leaving it up to cosplayers to decide which unique aesthetic they will aspire to recreate through dress and play.

Half a century later, the same fear of losing our distinctly American identity plagued the nation. In the 1950’s and throughout the Cold War, anxiety surrounding

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19 Ibid., 97.
20 Ibid. 98.
21 Ibid., 99.
22 Ibid., 136.
the state of the contemporary American inspired some Americans to return to Seton’s answer to waning challenges and morals in the modern era: the American Indians. This time around, it was adults who participated enthusiastically in the costumes and cultures of Native Americans. These hobbyists, as they were called, cultivated relationships with living Indians as well as recreating “detailed craftwork and the performance of Indian dance and song.”23 Deloria calls this accurate recreation “more direct Indian play” and claims that “in the Cold War United States,” these activities “addressed… anxieties focused on a perceived lack of personal identity.”24 For many hobbyists, this crisis of national and personal identity was resolved through the perceived authenticity of Native American culture. Through clubs, larger gatherings, and even periodicals, hobbyists participated in the overwhelming culture of materialism which defined the post-war era while still bucking their fear of “shallow conformism”25 which many anti-modernists declared to be rampant in the United States.

Through their costumes and “powwows,” hobbyists created a community of Indian imitators and enthusiasts which was unquestionably distinct from the outside world. Most attended hobbyist events “in full regalia,”26 confirming their place within the community and, to some extent, the living tradition of Native Americans. Much like hobbyists, cosplayers also strive to create a complete and alternative world based around their non-normative identities. Hobbyists, perhaps because their passion is for a culture which exists in the real world, not just fantasy, have succeeded much more

23 Ibid., 128.
24 Ibid., 129.
25 Ibid., 130.
26 Ibid., 129.
than cosplayers in these efforts, and have created wholly separate worlds through their powwows and other community meetings. Cosplayers are still in the process of defining their alternative space and all of its differences from the everyday. This project is further challenged by the constant influx of both spectators and new cosplayers into the cosplay community’s powwows: conventions.

Perhaps the most controversial example of a group which used costume to reject social change is the Ku Klux Klan. Though the Klan is viewed as an extremist and even terrorist group today, at the time of its first revival in 1915 the Klan was seen very differently. In Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928, Leonard J. Moore follows the rise of the Klan’s popularity in Indiana through the 20’s, giving a modern reader a clear picture of who exactly was joining the KKK in this second heyday and why. In this moment in Indiana, a multicultural society was becoming more and more of a reality as non-whites and immigrants began to call the state home. In addition to this perceived crisis, however, citizens were more inspired to come together in response to the decline of their close-knit towns and a move towards elite domination of local government due to economic changes within their communities. As a result, 25% of native-born men throughout the state of Indiana joined the Klan in the 1920’s.

Part of the KKK’s appeal to many Indiana men was its ability to bring together members from “all walks of life” around a single cause, thereby recreating the community feel which many towns were lacking. Moore explains that “the Klan

28 Ibid., 45.
offered membership to all but a small fraction of the community and stood for a wide
range of ideals with which most white Protestants could agree,” unlike “influential
business organizations such as the Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, which admitted only
business leaders and managers.”29 For these members, the uniform of the Klan, the
white robe and hood, signified their unity as a group.

Indeed, the Klan did many of the same things as other organizations. The
KKK met in the same community spaces as other groups, held regular meetings, as
designated by their national handbook, which only ran for about an hour to allow time
for socialization afterwards. Even meeting attendance was “not significantly greater
than that of other community groups.”30 Average members did not wear their robes to
these weekly meetings, or even regularly attend them, however costumes were worn
proudly during larger community events. The Klan made a concerted effort to be a
visible part of community life, and were often the centerpiece of their towns’ 4th of
July parades. Klaverns offered a multitude of spectacles, from the sea of “nearly a
thousand Klansmen” who marched in Kokomo, IN’s 1923 Independence Day parade,
to mass initiations and public meetings, to fireworks displays and even a ‘burning’
cross made of electric lights which flew over one town’s celebration, attached to a
small biplane.31

For these low-level members, the Klan presented an alternative existence in
contrast to their everyday lives. While these average citizens had no real say in “the
major institutions that governed their lives,” the KKK gave them the illusion or

29 Ibid., 95.
30 Ibid., 94.
31 Ibid., 77.
fantasy of power over these ideologies and social realities.\textsuperscript{32} Making a scene by simply wearing their regalia gave many members a feeling of importance and belonging unlike they had ever experienced before.

The same drive to feel power over one’s own life inspires many cosplayers to wear costumes and attend conventions. However, instead of attempting to influence others’ lives (and freedoms) through their dress, cosplay retreats from the larger community and only directly affects those who seek it out. Like the average 1920’s Klansman, cosplayers are often attracted to the promise of community within cosplay, yet they do not attach any political or moral significance to their membership in the cosplay community. Though they might use cosplay to object to what they perceive to be oppressive or corrupt social realities, cosplayers separate their reaction from the public world. Unlike the single prescribed uniform of the Klan, the cosplay community highly values variation of characters and costumes. By fostering these differences within the community, cosplay encourages a multiplicity of viewpoints, unlike the KKK which used their uniform to enforce just one.

This same feeling of dissatisfaction with America’s social realities inspired many other groups throughout history to dress up, however instead of using their alternative dress to respond to social crisis, many groups used costume primarily to express their agency and individuality when they felt their identities being regularly repressed or oppressed by society. Because of the rules of society, groups like women, workers, and drag performers felt they could not express themselves fully, so by breaking these rules openly and visually by dressing up, these groups make a

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 188.
statement about themselves and their opposition to the dominant norms and regulations of the social world.

Working women of the turn of the century were one such group. In *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*, Nan Enstad reveals the roles which dress, consumerism, and femininity played in the women’s labor movement of the early twentieth century. Women were a sizeable and growing part of the work force from the 1870’s onward, however they were treated with little respect or concern by employers and larger society. While conditions were poor for these women, they used clothes, hats, and shoes to reject their position as faceless, genderless lower-class workers. By purchasing garments in the same styles as elite women, though ready-made from cheaper materials and off of push-carts, working girls defined themselves as ladies instead of workers and aligned themselves with these respected upper-class women who expressed themselves through their consumptive power, just as these working women did. These fashion trends may have been dictated by forces outside these women’s control, but a working lady’s choice to spend her very small wages on a new pair of French heels expresses an agency defined by consumption which women had not known in earlier decades.

Though a working woman didn’t have influence over the changing fashions of the upper class, they did have a choice when it came to aesthetic. The modest dress of the middle class as well as the plain, home-made (former) styles of the lower class offered additional fashion options. When they purchased dresses and accessories which imitated those of high society, these working women used them to craft

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34 Ibid., 53.
fantastical narratives of opulence and thereby redefined the objects. Cosplay as well offers a way to change our interactions with the capitalist society we inhabit. As a primarily self-made craft, it rejects normative modes of consumerism. Instead, many cosplayers shop at thrift stores for items which can be repurposed or re-imagined as a part of a different character and narrative. This productive mode of consuming ignores social definitions of the items or of the fashion trends being pushed on the cosplayer because of their age, gender, race, or class, and instead allows cosplayers choose from hundreds of real and fictional aesthetics emulate.

Within the world of factories, working women were often referred to by superiors by numbers or “derogatory names” such as “stupid animal,” etc. When interacting with each other, however, women not only called each other by their proper names, but often re-named themselves in the fashion of “rich”-sounding names from dime novels” which they read and traded amongst themselves.35 Not only did these names and the women’s “elaborate fashion” confirm their worth despite being treated like interchangeable parts of a machine, they evoked the heroic narratives of the dime novels’ main characters: working girls who, through a series of unfortunate and dastardly events which they valiantly rebuke, gain freedom from their ethnic and class identities as well as the paternalistic structures which confine them.36 These novels were wildly popular and working women communally shared in the fantasies created by these tales. Such class-defying fantasies were also carried over to various community events, such as Lower East Side balls, to which working women

35 Ibid., 60.
36 Ibid., 73.
wore elegant gowns in the style of elite women and interacted with each other as such.37

When almost 20,000 of these working women went on strike in 1909 in response to dismally low wages in shirtwaist factories, this insular fantasy world came abruptly into dialogue with the realities of the outside world. Despite the media’s confusion over such seemingly luxury goods being purchased by economically struggling women, strikers did not back down or redefine their self-image to fit that which this world outside of their dime novel fantasy wanted or expected.38 Instead, these women demanded through their clothing and their fashionable hats that they be understood as ladies as well as workers, despite the assumptions of the upper class about the masculinity of work or the scorn of the middle class at prioritizing stylish clothes over more practical things.39 Through dress, these ladies of labor expressed their femininity as a way of empowering themselves in predominantly male world of workers and labor organizers, but they also fashioned identities for themselves as political actors. With these multiple identities, these women were able to position themselves as part of the larger public world as well as creating an interior community within which they could live out the fantasies of their dime novels while rejecting the realities of the outside.

This use of multiple identities could be mistaken for a parallel with the many characters most cosplayers portray, however the permanence and gravity of the working women’s identities disallows such a comparison. Indeed, the cosplay community has not used its internal fantasy world as a model to effect change in the

37 Ibid., 29.
38 Ibid., 84.
39 Ibid., 80.
outside world like the ladies of labor did. Instead of seeking this sort of change through activism, cosplayers treat the convention world as a separate plane of existence despite the many influences of the outside world on the convention.

In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam describes the struggles and representations of another community which doesn’t fit neatly into mainstream ideas of gender or femininity and masculinity. Problematizing these terms from the beginning, Halberstam examines the types and productions of masculinity which a non-male-bodied person can possess and construct. Though there are not many socially-acceptable venues for the display of the non-harmonious gendered identities Halberstam discusses, drag shows are offered as an inclusive space where drag kings can freely “perform masculinity… and make the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of [their] act.”

Though Halberstam explains that “some male impersonators” also cross-dress in “their every day lives… [suggesting] that their relation to masculinity extend[s] far beyond theatricality,” they do not perform masculinity as overtly as they are able to within the parody-endorsing walls of the clubs and bars which host the drag king shows which she writes about.

In the context of drag and in the opinion of Esther Newton, drag “refuses to allow… discontinuities [of gender] to represent dysfunction. In a drag performance, rather, incongruence becomes the site of gender creativity.” This creativity is celebrated at drag king clubs, and though “onstage drag and offstage masculinity” are often blurred within these spaces, the freedom with which both performers and

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41 Ibid., 233.
42 Ibid., 236.
attendees express their female masculinity is unique to the space.\textsuperscript{43} This description of an official performance and competition within a larger event and safe space which fosters the same sort of alternative expression and performance directly parallels costume contests within conventions. Both within the contests and outside of them, cosplay is an outlet for the creativity and identity expression of cosplayers.

Just as entertainers, social reformers, and striking women workers turned to dress to confront crisis and social change, cosplayers have celebrated the world of fantasy as a response to the transformations occurring in late-twentieth century life. Cosplay first became popular at conventions in the 1980’s when America was becoming an increasingly inhospitable place for both non-normative communities and creative, individual personal identities. The emergence of Neoliberal social policies repressed the voices of the public and sought to reshape them “through a state-supported but “privatized” economy, an invigorated and socially responsible civil society, and a moralized family with gendered marriage at its center.”\textsuperscript{44} In response, cosplayers formed an alternative community and, ultimately, reality by creating a separate economy and anti-consumerist hierarchy of self-made goods, redefining the norms of social and community interactions, and troubling the gendered and sexual constructions of this constrictive and increasingly conservative world. This social crisis defines our post-industrial society and motivates many people to reject these norms through cosplay.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 244.

\textsuperscript{44} Lisa Duggan, \textit{The Twilight of Equality?}, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 10.
In order to make such claims about the culture and community of cosplay, a lot of research went into this project. To get a feel for the people, places, and materials of cosplay, I embarked in June 2012 on a convention trail not unlike the summer powwow highways of Indian hobbyists. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, I attended seven conventions in five different cities and states which ranged in subject matter from Japanese pop culture to comic books to all-things Star Wars.

The Charles Street Lobby in the Baltimore Convention Center: one of the main gathering places at Otakon. This lobby (one of four) was the most popular place for cosplayers to hold photo shoots for cosplayers portraying characters from the same series and for cosplayers to see and be seen.

There were cosplayers at all of these conventions, though in different numbers and with different experiences and levels of costume. With the intent of representing a wide range of cosplay experiences, I attempted to attend geographically disperse conventions as well as cons of different ages and sizes. From the 2,000 person, 2-
year-old convention Anime World Chicago, which shared the conference rooms and event halls of a suburban hotel with a microbiology conference and two or three weddings, to the 26th Dragon*Con, which featured panels and events across five hotels in Atlanta and was attended by 52,000 fans and cosplayers, I interviewed cosplayers regarding their experiences at conventions, in their everyday lives, and their plans for the future. With approval from the Institutional Review Board and financial help from the Wesleyan English Department’s Olin Fellowship, I attempted to hear as many voices as possible, and there were many different points of view to be heard.

To get cosplayers’ opinions as they were felt in the moment, I interviewed cosplayers at conventions and almost all were in costume at the time. These lasted as few as ten minutes and, in the case that I was interviewing multiple people at once, up to an hour. In most of these situations, I was also in costume. Because I approached cosplayers as a fellow member of the community as well as a researcher, I believe that my interviews produced an accurate portrait of these cosplayers’ experiences and views because they felt more comfortable sharing their own thoughts on the world of cosplay with someone who was also a part of it. I believe that the more open way in which people communicate at a convention also inspired cosplayers to be more open with their answers.

In addition to in-person interviews at conventions, I performed a small number of much shorter interviews with cosplayers, mostly for follow-up questions, over the Internet. In these interviews, I believe that cosplayers could not be as frank about their thoughts on their in-cosplay experiences and their time at conventions
simply because they were not experiencing those things at that moment, however in these interviews they were granted the barrier of the Internet which gave them some more distance and allowed them to open up perhaps more than they would in person, were they, again, not in costume or at a convention. I believe this ability to say more about one’s self on the Internet than in person in an everyday situation also applies to posts on various cosplay and fan forums which I have also used as a source, primarily to determine the stance of the cosplay community on different issues, but also for specific examples of experiences in costume, etc.

When I wasn’t on the road over the summer, I was keeping up with these forums. Both out of personal interest and as a researcher, I tracked trends in opinion and source materials as they ebbed and flowed throughout the summer months. There was a lot of activity on these message boards, most likely because of the many conventions which take place during the summer, and I definitely feel that, compared with the conventions I was also attending, these forums provide an accurate look into the world of the cosplay community.

Besides the spoken and written words of cosplayers, I have used the published materials of conventions, such as their panel schedules, maps, and websites, as sources throughout this work. These, along with pictures that I took along the way, allow me to analyze the experience of attending a convention more fully. From the crowdedness of an exhibit hall to the rules and guidelines in the program, different conventions create different experiences, expectations, and memories for both cosplayers and other con-goers.
As I have already stated, most of these interviews were conducted in costume. Up until recently, I would have called myself a casual cosplayer. In December 2011, I made the decision to fly to a convention for the first time, so I therefore started to dedicate myself much more to my planning and costumes. Before this, I had attended a few conventions, but I had decided no more than a week before that I would go, giving myself even less time to throw together a costume. Though I’ve always been a fan of cosplay, I wasn’t very involved in it myself. Little did I know, this would all change once I began work on this project. As I said, I believe that the cosplayers I interviewed responded well to me partially because I was visually identifiable as a fellow cosplayer. This choice to wear costumes to all of the conventions I attended was intentional, and I was also hoping to get a feel, first-hand, for the type of response different costumes elicited.

As I became a more involved member of this community online in anticipation of my summer research trip, I saw cosplay as an amateur cosplayer as well as an academic, and these views shaped my expectations of my interviews. I fully expected to hear cosplayers talk about their costumes and convention experiences as ways to escape their lives. As such, I also expected most cosplayers to tell me they stayed in character (as in, to act as if they were the character they were dressed up as,) throughout most of the convention. As you will see in the next chapters, I was wrong on both counts. I learned that instead of running from their problems through cosplay, most cosplayers made it a part of their lives, allowing their interactions with the cosplay community to transform them and how they think. Surprisingly to me, many cosplayers expressed that they felt like they could be
themselves most openly while at conventions and did not understand at all why feeling this way while cosplaying as another person (or character) might be counterintuitive.

I came in with many other assumptions, many of which were somewhat true and many more of which were shattered. This experienced helped me realize that I didn’t yet have the answers I sought. I wasn’t even sure what the right questions were, but I slowly began to figure it out. That figuring out process has continued throughout the writing of this thesis, and even now that I am satisfied with my conclusions, I am left with even more questions, though these are for another day and another project.

These incorrect assumptions also helped me realize that, though they were participating in cosplay, not every cosplayer knew exactly what they were doing or talking about either. Many answers showed that cosplayers simply hadn’t thought about themselves in the terms I was asking about, and though their actions contributed to certain community standards or redefined norms, these were not completely conscious phenomena. This is, realistically, the case with almost any group, however I am confident that my interpretations of these cosplayers’ experiences and the resulting analytical interventions accurately represent the state of cosplay now and the community.

With over 50 cosplayers all over the country interviewed first-hand, I am pleased to say that I believe this study presents a fully inclusive picture of what it’s like to be part of cosplay today.
Cons: The Where and Why of Conventions

To understand cosplay, one must first understand the events and physical spaces which make it possible for cosplay to exist as we know it. The social aspect of cosplay, which defines cosplay in opposition to costuming and makes it more of a subculture than a hobby, is primarily enjoyed at anime, science-fiction, comic, and fantasy conventions, simply referred to by the community as just conventions or cons. Here, costumed and non-costumed fans gather to socialize, shop, and generally immerse themselves in nerd culture. Through a wide variety of exhibitions and events, usually spanning two to four days, attendees engage in a unique and fluctuating combination of the so-called ‘outside world’ and the alternate social rules and realities which make up the ‘con world.’

Conventions are held in hotels (using ballrooms, meeting rooms, lobbies, etc.), universities, and convention centers throughout the country. Any given convention is held once a year and most are on a Saturday and Sunday, though many have expanded to include the Friday and some even add that preceding Thursday to the schedule. Tickets for these conventions range in price from $30 to $150 for a full-weekend pass. The price depends on the size of the convention as well as its duration. The average cosplayer or fan travels between 30 minutes and 3 hours to attend a convention and stays in the convention hotel (or one close to the convention center) with a group of friends who will also be attending the con.

In both cosplay and conventions, participants span all ages and ethnicities, but there are generally more females than males who cosplay and attend conventions. At anime conventions, the target age group seems to be 15-20. Comic conventions cater
to an older audience, attracting most attendees between 25 and 30, but also much older collectors and dealers, between 40 and 50 years old. Finally, sci-fi and fantasy conventions attract the same sort of divide, between an older audience, averaging between 35 and 45, and a younger representation between 12 and 18, some brought by their parents, some on their own. This might be related to the decline in popularity of the fantasy genre or because of the relative cost associated with attending those less-frequent conventions. At most conventions, ethnic minorities are well-represented, as well as within the online cosplay community.

The idea that a convention exists within its own separate world with separate rules and expectations is what attracts many people to this alternative space and experience. The convention is spoken of as a sanctuary or escape from the everyday. Consequently, the two realities are often understood as existing in opposition to one another instead of in tandem, despite the blurred lines between these worlds.

45 Based on author’s observation at conventions and the demographics of interviewees; however, these interviews were conducted with the intent of seeking out a diverse group so they are not directly representative of an average convention make-up.
The basic elements of a convention, be it anime, sci-fi, fantasy, comics, or any mixture of these, are guests, panels, dealers, artists, a masquerade contest, and a dance. Unofficial or unscheduled events and interactions at conventions, such as individual room parties, photo shoots, and fan meet-ups are also integral to the experience and are expected and awaited at conventions.

The official events of a convention are organized by either a larger company such as Reed Pop (Star Wars Celebration, NYCC, etc.) or Wizard Entertainment (Chicago Comic-Con, Comic Con International, etc.), or fan-run organizations, such as the non-profit group Otakorp which runs Otakon. Unofficial events are organized by unaffiliated fans or fan groups and are advertised in person at the convention, through fliers, and over the Internet. In addition to the many convention-specific forums on Cosplay.com, many conventions have their own forums as part of their web page where attendees can put together meet-ups, plan out costume groups, and more.

Conventions of all sizes feature guests from their respective industry, such as voice actors, directors, writers, actors, etc., who often hold panels and sign autographs throughout the convention. Other panels are artisan-run and fan-run. These take the form of workshops, lectures, and discussions which cover a vast range of topics. Panels generally relate to the theme of the convention or a shared interest of its attendees.

While some convention-goers schedule their weekend at the con around these events, some ignore the program guide all-together in favor of simply perusing the dealers’ hall or artist alley. These convention standards, though not always arranged
in a full hall or in the rows of tables from which the ‘alley’ got its name, are in essence a collection of vendors with con-relevant merchandise displayed in a booth which has been assigned to them by the convention. This could be anything from corsets to collectible action figures. A dealers’ room could be a single meeting-room sized space, such as at the first-year convention Anime Midwest, or multiple floors of an open exhibition hall, such as at the 22-year-old convention A-Kon. Unlike walking around a shopping mall, the items sold at conventions are often impossible to find elsewhere and/or cater to the interests of a very niche group. ‘Checking out’ the dealers’ room is often more to find out about new items, shows, and books rather than to buy these items.

The artist alley consists of convention-approved artists at booths much like those in the dealers’ room. This includes both published and non-published artists who sell prints of their work at their booth. Some also offer on-site commissions, such as sketches (and for a higher price, often even full-color drawings or paintings) of their own characters or of the customer or their desired subject. Similar to the dealers’ room, most convention attendees flock through the aisles of artists, observing work as if at an art show, not necessarily or primarily considering making a purchase.

At fan conventions such as these, the focus is far more on social interaction than shopping; however the physical layout of the convention space greatly influences the types of interactions which can and do take place within the con. Though it is a bit of a chicken & egg conundrum, the conventions with large open spaces dedicated to socializing and costume-watching are attended by more cosplayers and enable fans to meet and connect with more people. Conventions such
as Comic-Con which are more like trade shows and lack a large space for social interaction are attended by less cosplayers and exude less of a convention vibe, or the alternative feel of the con world. While convention organizers obviously try to cater to the attendees’ interests, this also speaks to the inherently social aspect of cosplay.

Another aspect of cosplay is performance and accuracy, both of which are featured in a convention’s masquerade. Though most convention attendees spend a large amount of their time at a con observing the costumes of those around them, this is a convention’s codified method of declaring the “best” costumes and performances of the weekend. Many masquerades have two types of entries: walk-ons and skits. Walk-ons are entrants who are judged only on their costume; while skits are performances by cosplayers as the character they’re dressed as. These involve a considerable amount of planning, as larger conventions often require skits to provide pre-recorded sound for their act, including any dialogue which is then lip-synched by the cosplayers onstage. The entrants are then judged in a variety of categories which vary across conventions, but often include age, level of expertise, type or genre of the character, and groups v. individuals.

To win a masquerade is not usually the expectation or intention of entrants, as one can see from the extensive entrant lists. The draw is instead the chance to display one’s costume in a show and for a real audience. This runway-esque display of alternative beauty and ways of choosing clothing is a reversal of the outside world’s standards of imitative fashion and its envied persons. The cosplay world’s runway models literally recreate the outfits of fictional characters, lending an established personality as well as a uniform to the entrants. Through this parody of haute couture,
the convention world critiques the character-less, personality-less fashion followers of the mainstream. A cosplayer in a masquerade will have chosen and made his or her own costume, displaying not only the talent of the entrant, but their agency in defining how others perceive them, both on the runway and throughout the cosplay world.

Finally, every modern fan convention finishes up its Friday and/or Saturday with a dance or rave. Though the entire convention is seen as an opportunity to relax and be one’s self, this enthusiasm and emotion is nowhere more explicitly expressed than at the con dance. Drawing in a younger crowd than the con at large, these dances often start at about 10pm and carry on until the wee hours of the morning. DJs and light shows fill whichever ballroom or lounge which has been converted into a party space for the night. The proliferation of raves at conventions in the last five years has been pointed to by seasoned attendees as a major draw for a younger crowd.

These conventions of conventions are part of what encourage consistent attendance. Many of the convention attendees interviewed said they attended at least one convention yearly, and almost all of the first-timers claimed to have intentions to return to the con they were at as well as others. This general formula for a convention has also created a stunningly consistent ‘con world’ or convention atmosphere which reproduces itself in cons across genres, years, and even states. Many of the small differences left between conventions can be directly tied to the ratio of cosplayers there are at the convention. Naturally, when there are less cosplayers, the ‘con world’ is more diluted. As previously discussed, it is extremely hard to tell if the conventions with fewer cosplayers lack them because they don’t provide the right social
atmosphere or if said atmosphere breeds and attracts more cosplayers, but either way, conventions are their native habitat.

In the minds of most cosplayers, once the con starts, the real world is put on hold. This means that not only will their wardrobe be swapped to con-mode, so will their outlook, understanding of social interactions, and even their personality. This separation is very important to many cosplayers who value their time at conventions based on the difference in attitude shown at cons. This is often attributed to an environment which encourages self-expression and fosters nerd culture.

“It’s a very accepting environment” says Nate, a first-time cosplayer and con-goer who traveled to Star Wars Celebration VI in Orlando via a 15 hour bus ride from Biloxi, Mississippi.46 “It’s a no-judgement zone, so there’s no need to be scared or apprehensive about coming to con.” Nate also agreed that a costume changes a person’s experience at a convention. “Something about being in costume makes me feel a little more confident than I usually do in my regular life” he said through his costume’s dark veil. Throughout the weekend, Nate spent a large amount of time simply standing guard at the entrance to the main hall.

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46 Nate (cosplayer) interview with author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.
exhibition hall, surveying the crowd, waiting for pictures to be taken of him and for conversations to arise. He was not disappointed.

Once new cosplayers begin, they soon realize just how different and engaging the cosplay scene can be. In addition to cosplay, some of this allure is due to a shift in a person’s attitude and expectations when they enter a convention compared to their expectations of the outside world. One experienced cosplayer, DJ Kagamine described his introduction to “cosplay and conventions” as finding “this awesome new world I’ve never seen before,” into which he dove head-first.47 “That was ACen 2009, ACen 2010 I started cosplaying.” Kagamine, like other cosplayers, also feels uninspired by his “third shift,” minimum wage job “packaging products for the medical industry” and his everyday suburban surroundings. At ACen 2009, Kagamine made completely new friends and now “all I hang out with are cosplay friends.” Because of his positive experiences at conventions, including the con he attended “three years ago” at which he “met [his] best friends,” Kagamine’s outlook and expectations for a conventions are much more positive than in everyday life. Though he has only been in the hobby for three years now, in 2012 he attended “a con a month,” created numerous costumes (he now has 25 in total), and even began to DJ at convention dances. “This is what we do, this is my life” Kagamine professes happily. “I love it.”

Again, there are clear ties between this ‘con world’ and the practice of cosplay in these spaces and established rules of the community which dominate within a convention. Cosplay acts as a visual demarcation of the alternative space of a

47 DJ Kagamine (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
convention, making it easily distinguishable and mentally distinct from the ‘outside world’. It also immediately confirms the membership of costumed persons into the cosplay community by nature of their dress, granting cosplayers a feeling of unquestioned acceptance. This acceptance is especially important because of the marginalized status of cosplayers in larger society, as nerds. Alternatively, cosplayers enjoy a privileged status within conventions. Cosplayers are given the most attention by convention attendees, but they are also given special treatment in certain other capacities, such as advanced, free, or discounted entrance to con events and after-parties, attention from reporters and con staff looking for pictures and interviews, and special offers or modeling requests from vendors looking to promote their merchandise.

With all of these perks of wearing a costume to a convention, it would seem logical for all attendees to cosplay. The fact that they don’t speaks to the social, temporal, and monetary cost of acquiring a costume as well as the power that the outside world’s social norms have both in and around conventions. In chapter 4 I will address the cost and creation of costumes further. Here, I will focus on the tensions between the ‘real world’ and convention social realities. While the un-costumed convention-goer carries this stigma and vestige of the outside world with him wherever he goes within the con, he also has the ability to blend in with a crowd once he has left the convention center. Different conventions display and challenge these anxieties in different ways, as well as displaying the cosplay community’s larger reaction to them.
Dragon*Con, which takes place each Labor Day weekend in Atlanta, Georgia, is a vivid example of a convention which spills over into its host city, but also maintains extreme insularity. Dragon*Con takes place across five different hotels within three blocks of each other, with guests, panels, concerts, and hoards of cosplayers in each of these locations. This convention is the largest multi-genre fan convention in the US, necessitating the use of ballrooms, conference rooms, and lobbies of these multiple sites. Because the convention is based in hotels (and also very popular,) almost all of the rooms in the convention hotels are filled for the weekend with convention attendees. Unlike other hotel conventions which also host non-attendees, this transforms the hotels into a completely encapsulated piece of the convention. It is possible to wake up in the morning, eat all of your meals, attend panels, scope out cosplayers, and finish up the day with a concert, all without stepping into the outside world. This is also made possible by the multiple sky bridges which connect the neighboring hotels. Though two of the five convention hotels are unconnected, the other three can be reached without walking outside, further encapsulating the convention.

While this near-complete world which Dragon*Con creates seems to offer a convention experience devoid of interference from the outside world, it also reveals the different attitudes among convention-goers regarding points of mixture between the two realities. Having a room in one of the official convention hotels is regarded as essential to the Dragon*Con experience, though this also makes it one of the more expensive conventions to attend. This is also because of the indulgent, pseudo-resort-like culture which surrounds this convention in particular. The price and specific con
culture have evolved with and around an older audience with the average attendee at about 30 years old.

Though not all attendees treat the convention as an escape from their everyday life, it is clear that many attend conventions explicitly to separate themselves from that world. A convention-goer older than 25 is almost-always more enmeshed in the real world than their younger counterparts, so this intensified desire for separation is understandable, and also more monetarily feasible since these attendees are usually self-sufficient by that point in their lives. This unwillingness to confront the public is readily displayed within Dragon*Con. On Saturday, one of the busiest if not the busiest day of the convention, the pedestrian sky bridges which linked the hotels were at a standstill in terms of foot traffic across. It was not only the late summer heat that these attendees were avoiding. Even though it took about an hour to progress from one hotel to the next when it would have taken five minutes to walk outside, the line was part of the convention. As con goers queued up to purchase an overpriced slice of pizza from a cart within the hotel instead of venturing outside the convention to find meals without a line, they showed the value they placed on staying inside the convention over saving time and/or money. This reflects both the safety and general pleasantness felt within the convention world and a convention-goer’s desire to maintain the immersive experience.

On the other hand, a main attraction of Dragon*Con is the annual parade which is organized by the convention and exclusively features cosplayers. These costumed attendees march down the streets of Atlanta for all to see on the Saturday morning of the convention weekend, seemingly challenging the boundaries between
the convention and the outside world. Although this public display of cosplayers and their rejection of norms could be interpreted as a critique of these mainstream standards of dress and behavior, neither the parade’s participants nor its viewers seem to feel this way. Though the parade’s spectators are mainly outsiders to the con, cosplayer Maika, who has walked in the parade two years in a row, says it is “definitely part of the convention.”

While the people who line the parade routes are sometimes other convention-goers, but often families with “kids who didn’t have tickets to the convention,” the codification of parade participation, through formal registration which is required by the convention, as well as the massive size of the parade maintains the community feel of the con. Furthermore, through their advanced registration, cosplayers are assigned a position within the parade which corresponds to their costume. Organizers arrange the parade participants into sections by costume, so cosplayers are almost always surrounded by other characters from the same work or series, creating even more of a unified group.

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49 Maika Nagata (cosplayer) interview with author, April 9, 2013.
The parade follows “a mile-long”\textsuperscript{50} route around the multiple convention hotels, and through downtown Atlanta. During the parade, “there are a lot of stops” for photo-ops and even small performances, like choreographed sword fights or musical acts.\textsuperscript{51} Maika, who cosplayed as an assassin from the video game \textit{Assassin’s Creed} said he likes “interacting with the crowd a lot, especially [while cosplaying from] \textit{Assassin’s Creed}, so I would ‘blend in’ because that’s what my character would do, or at another stop I would throw change on the ground because that’s a distraction [technique the character uses] in the game.” Maika also explained that the parade was his father’s favorite part of the convention because “you’re like a celebrity,” and crowds would “cheer out” “yell out to their favorite characters.” Despite this interaction, the clear delineation formed between the crowd and the participants ensured that the parade still reinforced the idea that costumes belong to the world of the convention, and that the people lining the parade route are outsiders trying to get a glimpse of this reality.

Possibly inspired by Dragon*Con, Dallas’s anime convention A-Kon had its first convention parade in 2012. Unlike Dragon*Con’s parade, which occurs on the morning of the most popular day of the convention, A-Kon’s costumed walk through the city’s center took place on Thursday evening, a day before the convention even began. Through this parade, organizers and attendees did what Dragon*Con doesn’t need to do, thanks to the convention’s visibility through multiple sites, and proclaimed to the city of Atlanta that despite their singular location and the generally invisible presence of the convention, since all of the events occurred within a single

\textsuperscript{50}Maika Nagata (cosplayer) interview with author, April 9, 2013.
building, the fans and cosplayers were proud to be participating in such a gathering and were not hiding from the public. Whether or not they intended to challenge mainstream standards of attire and comportment through this display is questionable, however A-Kon’s parade was only for the benefit of the cosplayers rather than the non-costumed onlookers. At the convention’s closing ceremony, organizers asked the assembled crowd if they felt that the parade had been a success and if they were interested in doing it again the next year. The resounding cheers in response to this suggestion confirmed that, as much as they enjoyed the oasis of the convention, attendees also wished to assert their nerdiness to the city of Dallas.

Perhaps it is related to the lack of a dedicated convention hotel, but the largely-commuter convention Chicago Comic Con, aka Wizard World, has no such message to relay to the larger world. This is probably tied up in the fact that Wizard World is thoroughly saturated by the outside world. Despite its origins as a comic convention, Wizard World has expanded its exhibitor and guest lists to include in its target audience fans of popular sci-fi and fantasy TV shows, action, fantasy and horror movies, professional wrestling, steampunk and renaissance fairs, and even Legos, collectible card games, and role playing games. Though other conventions, such as Dragon*Con cover just as many genres, the attendees are much more involved in the nerd community, often in multiple ways such as through cosplay, compared to those at Wizard World. Approximately 90% of Wizard World attendees come to the convention without a costume. These few cosplayers are usually people who go to multiple conventions throughout the year and attend Wizard World in the
same costumes they wear other places, however their experience at this convention is very different. This margin leaves those who do attend in costume in a unique position. One of the main attractions of Wizard World is getting autographs and pictures of celebrities. This same mentality is applied to cosplayers, turning them into minor celebrities with lines of interested spectators waiting their turn to snap a picture, but through this fame they are transformed into another attraction for the majority of convention goers: no different from the official convention guests who sit at their booths selling photographs and a moment of personalized interaction for a set price. Though some cosplayers attend Wizard World knowing this will happen and attempting to make cosplay more popular there, others enjoy the attention and cosplay for that experience. This economy of spectacles within the convention confirms the cosplayer’s role at Wizard World as an inhabitant of the convention world, yet confines the cosplayer’s existence and critique to the convention world by virtue of their novelty.

This contradiction exemplifies the ultimate bind of cosplayers at conventions. Even at conventions without a culture of chasing celebrity photo ops, cosplayers are pursued by fans, etc. for pictures and conversations. As discussed above, there is a possibility of temporary celebrity status which comes with dressing up for a con, and even people in less popular costumes are still treated differently than non-costumed people at conventions. This power which comes with an audience is countered by the vulnerability of being on display for the same audience. Though outsiders or non-costumed attendees are by no means the only people who take pictures of cosplayers at conventions, this whole group of admirers has the power to elevate a cosplayer’s
status through the attention they garner. This same mix of outsiders and cosplayers has the power to condemn costumes as well by their disinterest. While the desire for attention is understandable for a person who has worked for a considerable amount of time on a costume which disallows them from fitting in comfortably with the outside world, this trade off is amplified for those in ‘better’ costumes, as the worth of a costume is often judged by the general con audience not only on accuracy, but on conspicuousness. Though un-costumed observers may be simply tourists among costumed locals within the world of the convention, they have the unrivaled ability to return to the outside world unnoticed. While for super heroes, great power comes with great responsibility; with great convention power comes limited abilities outside the convention.

By making themselves noticeable, cosplayers have no choice but to accept all viewers. As a subject of others’ gaze, they are vulnerable to the judgments and comments of the convention attendees as well as outsiders. The inconspicuousness which most of us take for granted is forfeited by cosplayers, including a lack of stares on public transportation and the ability to walk through a city without challenge or comment. In its place, they hope to enjoy the camaraderie of their fellow cosplayers and perhaps those advantages detailed above, but no cosplayer makes a costume without acknowledging that it will put them in opposition to the mainstream regarding methods of self-expression, hierarchies of popularity, and ways of meeting new people.
Despite the limited and geographically prohibitive occasions for its physical manifestation, aka conventions, the cosplay community maintains its alternative values through the use of internet forums and fan sites. This is not to say that the cosplay community is not a growing and constantly changing thing. Because cosplay incorporates so many mediums and genres, new developments in all of those areas, from the release of a new video game to a change in a craft store’s inventory, influence the cosplay world in visible ways, both at conventions and online. The fact that many cosplayers attend more than one convention per year also lends stability to this community. The presence of experienced cosplayers at cons is also important because of the way that cosplay has been growing in recent years. With more and more first-time cosplayers showing up at every con, the fight to maintain a stable community with an established set of understood norms has presented itself as a site of internal conflict which the online cosplay community is integral in resolving.

The general tenets of the cosplay world are sensible enough that many new cosplayers infer them on their own, such as the connection between accuracy and the attention or deference a cosplayer will receive from others. This is also represented through the comments on photos posted online, both on cosplay-specific websites like Cosplay.com or more general social media sites like Facebook and Tumblr. Cosplay-specific sites also regularly designate costumes as “Showcase Costumes” or a moderator’s “Pick,” denoting that these cosplays are particularly well-made.\footnote{“Latest Showcase Costumes,” Cosplay.com, last modified November 20, 2012, http://www.cosplay.com/costumes/showcase/.
“Acy’s Pic,” American Cosplay Paradise, last modified March 2013, http://www.acparadise.com/acp/.} This teaches new cosplayers that more complicated costumes and costumes from more popular series often elevate a person in the hierarchy of cosplay.
Other community standards are harder to understand for new cosplayers. For these topics which are more subjective or controversial, the internet is the most important site of dialogue. Is it alright to cosplay as a black character if you’re not African American? Is cotton a suitable proxy for suede? What’s the standard for cosplaying barefoot characters at a convention which requires footwear? Should I use a wig or my real hair for this cosplay? Though these questions and issues are often addressed by panels and individuals at conventions, they are discussed by the cosplay community online in more in-depth and less self-conscious or socially inhibited ways, giving a new cosplayer a much better sense of the beliefs and meanings of cosplay. The online community is also a central hub for advice and support in costume construction and issues of conflicting worlds, as in dealing with ‘real life,’ such as family drama over cosplay or responses to a costume or to cosplay in general from other cosplay outsiders.

Another collective understanding within the cosplay community is the privileged place of beginners as an exception to the rules. Beginners can wear objectively bad cosplays because of the shared ‘everyone starts somewhere’ mentality. But where this line between beginners and poor cosplayers is drawn is ambiguous. Is one a beginner until they succeed in making a good costume? Or is there a set number of costumes which advances a person to the so-called intermediate level? Should someone who starts off doing found-item cosplay (putting costumes together from pre-made pieces of clothing instead of making or commissioning the pieces specifically for the costume) still be considered a cosplayer after their third Goodwill costume? Different factions within the community have different opinions
on these important issues, which speak to a cosplayer’s level of dedication and the economics and politics of cosplay. The Internet allows cosplayers to discuss these issues without the heightened stakes which an in-person conversation on the same would include, aka another person’s place within the physical con.

Whether they are in costume on the way to a convention, or cosplaying for a meet-up, or even just for fun, many cosplayers engage in costumed experiences outside of conventions. While the separation a convention has from the ‘real’ world enables cosplayers to express themselves through costume, the borders of this alternative world are also defined by costume. In this way, the feel of a con can be replicated in some ways simply by donning cosplay even in the outside world. This is especially true for costumed groups. This experience is undoubtedly different from that of the convention, as cosplayers can no longer expect to enjoy their place as an elite or specially privileged group. Instead, the everyday societal norms of dressing and social interaction are directly challenged by this super-visible fringe group. When cosplayers outside of a convention act in the free and open manner befitting of a con they are making a conscious decision to reject the social rules of the majority. There is much more at stake in an event like this than at a convention. The everyday identity of these cosplayers is a risk of being permanently affected or tarnished by these behaviors, yet many engage in them anyway, like Eva from Wizard World Chicago, who says she often goes to costumed meet ups to see the friends she has made at conventions because they constitute most of her friend group.53

53 Eva (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 9, 2012.
One might ask ‘why?’ What would inspire a person to blur these two ideally incompatible realms. Simply put, cosplay itself is a response to the state of the larger world, so cosplaying in the outside world is, for some, the next logical step from cosplaying in the confined world of a convention. For others, it is antithetical to cosplay. At a con, cosplayers can easily trade their real world identity for a privileged place in the world of the convention. When cosplaying outside of a con, cosplayers have to assert or create a place for themselves as a part of society. This makes cosplayers more vulnerable, but also serves as a way to incorporate the mentality of a convention into everyday life. Eva, whose friends and her “used to go in cosplay to museums” says that, “as far as walking around, I just like to be recognized.” By dressing as a popular character from Dr. Who, as Eva chose to do, she instantly provided her viewers with her (character’s) identity and personality. Instead of being judged by her real-world looks, mannerisms, and clothing choices, Eva took the risk of being rejected by society and assumed the character of someone else.

The point of cosplaying outside of cons for many is to declare that cosplay can occupy any space, and that conventions are simply one stage for costumed expression. The neighborhood comic store or the beach or a coffee shop downtown...
could just as easily be places for cosplay as well. Corey, a new cosplayer, decided with a friend that they would wear their first cosplays to the mall after they left Wizard World to “showcase them.” When I asked what they were expecting to happen, Corey simply replied “whatever comes of it, it’ll be fun.” Taking cosplay out of its element is also a way for new cosplayers to learn the limits of cosplay and explore the differences between the cosplay community, conventions, and the outside world.

Another attraction of cosplaying outside of a convention is the confirmation of the strength of the community bonds which are tested when taken out of a convention. Unity within the bubble of the convention is all but expected, but the same feeling of community and solidarity, when it is invoked in the outside world, is much harder to achieve, yet more rewarding. This sentiment, and the desire to confront the everyday with the abnormality of cosplay has inspired many cosplayers to hold and attend costumed meet-ups throughout the year. These gatherings are independent of conventions and are usually organized over the internet. The urge to cosplay out in the real world has even led to the establishment of open-air conventions. Soy Con, which is held yearly in July, calls itself a “Cosplay Gathering” despite the use of ‘con’ in its name. This event is held in a beachfront park in Chicagoland, without a convention center or a hotel or any semblance of separation from the wide world. This sort of experiment threatens to deprive cosplayers an essential part of a cosplay experience, which is the alternative environment of the convention. Soy Con, at least, has paid off, however, and the cosplayers at the meet-

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54 Corey (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 9, 2012.
up have successfully created a small piece of convention reality which rubs up against, yet does not crumble due to the reality of the outside world.

What is not in danger of being lost through a convention-less convention like this, however, is the unique mode of interaction which cosplayers enjoy. Indeed, meeting fellow cosplayers is one of the main points of this sort of convention which has no programming or special guests. As one of the defining parts of a convention, the value placed on in-person interaction is also one of the most transferable aspects of the convention world. Holding an open-air convention or even just a meet-up broadens the potential influence of conventions and their norms and implores cosplayers to extend this signature convention sociability to their everyday lives.

This extreme example of a convention shows that when you reduce them to their bare bones, conventions are a venue for expressing creative and alternative interests and identities as well as coming together physically for social interaction. The next chapters deal with the expression of gender, sexuality, and nerdiness through cosplay and conventions. Here, I’d like to dwell a little longer on the unique social aspect of conventions and the cosplay community.

Many fans of ‘nerdy’ genres and series like anime or Star Trek form communities online in order to connect and share their interests. Cosplay is distinct from these groups and their forms of alternative expression, be it fan fiction or art or online role playing, because cosplay revolves around a physical craft and personal interactions. Though many fans may feel extremely connected to other members of the fandom who they’ve only met online, cosplay takes these relationships to the next level. While other fan activities and communities enable their participants to avoid
personal interaction, cosplay necessitates real-life experiences. Although the world of the convention is not the same as the real world, the valuable social skills and friends which are gained through conventions were still gained through lived experiences and are therefore carried over into a cosplayer’s everyday life. This is an especially important experience for self-identified nerds who often find themselves the subject of ridicule and on the margins of society. Real, lived cosplay interactions confirm the power of the community and the personal worth of cosplayers.

Cosplay is a way to bring fantasy and fiction to life, and conventions enable cosplayers to interact with this world which could not exist outside of it. Though making or acquiring a costume is a necessary part of cosplay, using this costume to connect with other people with shared social ideals and interests, as well as to redefine themselves through their chosen characters is the real goal of cosplay. The physical space of the convention provides the world and an audience which is necessary for cosplayers to interact and be understood in these new ways.
The Parable of Cosplay Jesus:
Gender and Sexuality in the Cosplay World

It was June 2, 2012, a Saturday afternoon. A-Kon, North America’s longest running national anime convention, was taking place in the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Dallas, Texas for the 23rd consecutive year. Over 20,000 people were in attendance, though few strayed from the exhibition hall. It was pushing 100 degrees in Dallas that day; however starting at about 3 pm, cosplayers in all sorts of costumes began spilling out from the air-conditioned haven of the hotel and toward a small fountain across the street. Even more were congregated on the Sheraton’s glass-walled sky bridge above, trying to get a look at the events unraveling below. At the epicenter of this gathering crowd, at the edge of the fountain, stood a middle-aged man with a megaphone, shouting loud and clear into the crowd of cosplayers.

“You’re all going to Hell!”

As a cosplayer, this sort of scene is something you eventually get used to. Almost everyone has a story about a disapproving parent or a misinformed friend who has warned them about the depraved nature of cosplay and their imagined versions of conventions, which feature “sex everywhere and people are in bad clothing,” as one cosplayer’s mother put it.56 Comments like “The freaks are in town again” are not an unusual refrain to hear whilst on the way to a convention57, but how much does cosplay actually deserve this reputation?

Cosplayers don’t think that what they do is average or even normal, yet it is more than an abnormality in dress which has spurred this level of demonization. The

56 Fischer (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
cosplay and convention community have gained a reputation as transgressive and sexually deviant primarily because the community regularly breaks the norms of gender and sexual expression. Indeed, there is even a word, crossplay, used within the cosplay community to denote a cosplay which is worn by someone who does not identify as the same gender as the character they have chosen. The ways in which these norms are disregarded and the effects of such performances on cosplayers, both in and out of conventions, are important to examine. Furthermore, the norms of everyday life which pervade the cosplay world and affect a cosplayer’s understanding of authentic representations reveals the tenuous dynamic between conventions and the outside world.

Similarly important to understand is the disconnect between critics of cosplay who portray it as an all-out orgy and cosplayers and convention organizers themselves who push for cosplay to be viewed as family-friendly. When a large group of people is suddenly seen packing into a convention center wearing odd clothing and interacting with each other in odd ways, this is hard to understand. Most observers just leave it as that: a nerdy niche phenomenon, which isn’t too bad for a cursory glance. However, when observers make uninformed assumptions about the morality and motivations of such actions, they assign incorrect and harmful labels to conventions; some of which have unfortunately stuck.

Unlike a cosplayer walking around in a full suit of armor or with green hair and antennae, there are much closer parallels in pop culture to a man in a Sailor Moon dress or a woman in body paint and a bikini. The mind of the average observer immediately jumps to drag and strip clubs, and judgments are made from these
assumptions which inform an outsider’s understanding of cosplay events and cosplayers as a whole. Though crossplay definitely has some similarities with drag, and the revealing costumes of cosplayers and dancers might sometimes look the same, there are important differences between these performances.

Though character design often plays a role in a cosplayer’s character choice, the fact that a cosplay is a representation of a pre-existing fictional character separates such acts of dressing up from those of a drag or erotic performer. Any cosplay performance is therefore mediated through this fantasy. Additionally, because the character is fully-formed before the cosplayer’s involvement with it and exists independently of the cosplayer, it does not define them as a drag or erotic performer’s persona defines their relationship with their craft or their audience. These sorts of performers completely assume and are wholly defined by their persona while in costume, while cosplayers are an amalgam of themselves and their characters. Through this mediated relationship with their character, the transgressive nature of cross-dressing and sexualized representations of the body is diminished. Through this relationship, cosplayers also inevitably redefine their chosen characters. As we will see in the next chapter, the reinterpretation of characters through cosplay can range from very minimal differences to major changes to the character’s look and personality.

This range applies especially to males who choose to crossplay. Male crossplayers undoubtedly elicit a different response than female cosplayers, which speaks to the influence of the outside world on convention-goers and even other

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58 Halberstam explains that, despite the style of drag a person engages in, they have a persona, a character name, and often a gimmick or specific aesthetic which defines them within the community. Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 250.
cosplayers when they are confronted with this sort of performative dissonance. In contrast with the outside world, crossplay does not necessarily express a cosplayer’s sexual identity, whether it is created and performed genuinely or not. Although some males choose to crossplay seriously, without parody in mind, others choose characters for comedic effect, most often choosing to parody a ‘sexy’ female character. Though these costumes are light-hearted interpretations of the characters, not malicious representations, the fact that male cosplayers engage in crossplay both seriously and humorously complicates the community standard for the appropriate interpretation and response to such a costume.

The biggest challenge for a convention is to create an environment in which the social realities of the outside world are redefined; however this ideal is threatened by costumes which make use of these real-world expectations for their effect. Different levels of skill, sincerity, and resources often leave attendees, whether they are part of the cosplay community or not, wondering which crossplays are sincere and which are parodies. Though both kinds of crossplay coexist
at a convention, these parodies of real-world gender cause convention-goers to struggle to immerse themselves in the non-heteronormative environment of the con. Though crossplay has the potential to defy expectations and problematize assumptions about gender expression and sexuality, it is currently limited by the persistent influence of outside-world in cosplayers and non-costumed convention-goers alike.

When it comes to females in crossplay, however, these assumed connections to sexuality are virtually nonexistent within the cosplay community and the real world. Many more women choose to crossplay than men, in part because of the lack of stigma attached to it. Perhaps it is because women have been wearing pants for half a century, or because women are generally perceived as less sexually threatening. No matter the reason, female crossplay is rarely questioned or criticized. Additionally, females who crossplay rarely, if ever, do so in jest.

The popularity of crossplay among female cosplayers is also related to the costume and character design of female characters in the genres of sci-fi, fantasy, anime, and comics. Though this is subjective, it is a commonly held opinion that female costumes are often not as interesting or thoughtfully-designed as male costumes. One crossplayer, Nichole, says that her choice to crossplay is due to a lack of “sensible” costumes for women within her chosen source material. “I don’t wanna wear something revealing and sexy that might fall off at cons,” she complained at Dragon*Con. “and I don’t want to sew an entire wedding dress,” she adds, implying with some hyperbole that these are the only types of costumes that

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59 Nichole (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
female characters wear in the genres she’s interested in cosplaying (comics and sci-fi). Beyond the shortcomings of costumes, some cosplayers feel that female characters are not as well-developed as male characters and therefore choose to crossplay because of their preference for a character with depth over a one-dimensional, though female, character. This sort of decision is part of a larger debate within the cosplay and nerd communities surrounding sexism in the narratives of comics, video games, fantasy and sci-fi novels, and other similar works. Regardless of their reasons, a female cosplayer’s choice to crossplay is hardly as controversial as their male counterparts.

In response to the large, and expanding, number of crossplayers at conventions, many offer panels and workshops on crossplay. Crossplaying presents different challenges to cosplayers, from binding and padding to achieve a masculine or feminine silhouette and impression, down to the more subtle touches of fake beard coloring and how to “pick things up or wave hello” like a man or a woman. All of these issues are given large amounts of attention, both in person through panels at conventions, and online through forums and tutorials. These panels and forums are both filled with current crossplayers looking to improve their costumes and pass along their knowledge as well as cosplayers who have not yet crossplayed and are curious or perhaps interested in trying it. By talking about crossplay online in public forums and in person at conventions, the subject is made commonplace instead of taboo, as it is in the outside world. While these online forums are generally framed around construction and makeup techniques (the crossplay sub-forum on

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Cosplay.com is sorted under ‘Cosplay Construction’), issues of sexuality and convention audiences’ reactions and expectations are brought up as well. On the Internet, cosplayers are often more comfortable discussing their own insecurities in regards to their transgression of gender norms, both in cosplay and in everyday life. Cosplayers and especially fellow crossplayers form a support network online and further utilize liberating convention rhetoric ideals of expression.

The most common concern of those crossplaying or considering crossplay is often put as “can I pull it off?” Non-crossplayers, when asked their opinions on crossplay, time after time responded “if you can pull it off… go for it!” Pulling it off, as we will see in the next chapter, means very different things to different people; however this rhetoric of pulling a costume off, despite its similarity to “passing,” should not be interpreted in the same way. Instead of advising cosplayers as to their chances of being mistaken for the gender of their character, crossplayers look for and receive other community members’ opinions on whether or not the character is recognizable and how closely the costume resembles the original character. With these answers in mind, cosplayers make changes to their costumes, makeup, binding, etc. or even make choices as to who to cosplay. As we’ll see in the next chapter, this rhetoric of pulling a character off is used the same way for any cosplay.

61 “If they can pull it off, then why not?” Mokuba (cosplayer) interview by author at Otakon, July 26, 2012. “I don’t think I would be able to pull it [crossplay] off very well because of my body type, I don’t think it’s suited to looking like a man, but I do think that if you can pull it off, more power to you.” Lauren (cosplayer) interview by author at Celebration VI, August 25, 2012. “If you can pull off a character well doing it as the opposite gender, then by all means, I say go for it.” Britney (cosplayer) interview by author at Otakon, July 29, 2012; “[You should choose]…something that you… in some cases pull off well. I would not make a good Batman. Just not built for it, but I do make a good serving wench…” Angie (cosplayer) interview by author at Wizard World, August 10 2012.

62 “…because I cannot pull off some skinny tiny teeny little character.” Pulling off a character refers to all different aspects, including gender, weight, race, personality, etc. Heather (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, August 30, 2012.
These responses show that there are many things an outsider to cosplay does not know or understand, but they also beg an important question: since the outside world’s relation to crossplay is similar in so many ways to its relation with other forms of cosplay, online and in person, is crossplay any more transgressive? Though gender norms within a convention are not transgressed by a male-identifying cosplayer portraying a female-identifying character, this still represents a larger challenge which is presented to the outside world’s understanding of what it means to be male or female. More transgressive than any one act of crossplay is the part that it plays in the construction of a community which does not acknowledge the same restrictions on gender as the outside world. The struggle which faces cosplayers is that of solidifying the norms and boundaries of the cosplay world.

Crossplay also participates in the larger transgression of fixed identity which defines cosplay. One might also wonder if crossplay is queer; however the explicit performance of gender within a convention confirms that this potentially queer identity does not reflect a cosplayer’s sexual orientation. This separation between a character and the cosplayer is further deepened by the temporary nature of this performance. The ephemeral nature of cosplay does temper its transgression; however the experiences that cosplayers live through their characters are permanent. The alternative perspectives which cosplayers gain on gender and the possibility of multiple malleable identities influences cosplayers in and out of their costumes and in and out of conventions. Through these experiences, cosplayers gain new perspectives on and understandings of the norms and constructions of the outside world.
Like gender, the cosplay community continuously attempts to redefine norms of sexuality for the world of cosplay and conventions. Though conventions are idealized as a space in which female sexuality, specifically, can be expressed in non-normative ways, many cosplayers object to these expressions for a number of different reasons. While many in the community find this sexual freedom to be empowering, others consider it to be a form of objectification and a reaffirmation of the ideals of the outside world.

Those who feel positively about conventions as a place for the display of female sexuality draw attention to the fact that the types of female sexuality expressed at conventions differ from the outside world’s sexual ideal. Conventions serve as a stage for alternative modes of sexuality to be shared and celebrated. Unlike the outside world which represses expressions of sexuality by non-ideally-bodied females, the cosplay community strives to create a space devoid of this pressure to cover up. Without the consumerist and heterosexist undercurrents of the outside world, women in cosplay redefine what is sexy in terms of confidence and authenticity.

This alternative appreciation of female sexuality also invites women with bodies which society tells to them to cover up to instead reveal and display them proudly. Cosplayer Jenn from Chicago says that it’s this “body acceptance” which has encouraged her to keep cosplaying.63 “As you can see, I am a plus-sized woman,” she explained, “and it’s kind of liberating to…show off your curves.” Jenn was initially uneasy about wearing the costumes she has made because she was afraid

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63 Jenn (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World, August 12, 2012.
that her body size would define her in the eyes of strangers. “I don’t want to be judged as ‘Hey look, there’s a fat Poison Ivy,’ I want to be judged just as ‘Hey, there’s Poison Ivy’” she says, “and so far that’s all that I’ve gotten,” confirming that there are different ways of understanding clothing and bodies within a convention. “I feel comfortable in this,” says Jenn.

Other cosplayers confront their body insecurities through more daring cosplays, such as the fan favorite, Princess Leia from Star Wars in her metal bikini. Though this costume is an outfit which was forced upon the character in the film in order to deny Leia power and literally reduce her to a sexual object, women who cosplay as the Princess in the metal bikini make a statement that a strong female character is not defined by her pants or lack thereof. This narrative of rebellion allows cosplayers to claim the same agency through their representation of Leia. Females in sci-fi, and nerd culture in general, can be sexual without sacrificing their agency, just as Leia proved when she strangled her captor, Jabba the Hutt, with her own chain.

On a fan forum dedicated to metal bikini costumers, or Slave Leias, user FaeSolo introduced herself by sharing her personal experience wearing such a
revealing costume. At first, I was nervous about wearing the outfit because I thought I was too fat for it,” she explained, “but after wearing it for the entire weekend [at a convention]…I fell in love.” FaeSolo goes on to note that she felt accepted by the convention community and the sub-community of Slave Leia cosplayers, “and I didn’t feel fat!”

Erin and Heather, cosplayers at Dragon*Con, empathize with cosplayers with body insecurities and encourage them to use conventions to their advantage. Heather points out the attention that cosplayers in more revealing costumes generally receive. “If you want that attention, if that’s what you need, go for it,” she says. Erin agrees, stating that if a costume calls for a revealing look “and you have the body, you’re comfortable doing it, go for it,” to which Heather replies “if you don’t have the body for it and you still do it, good for you.” At this, Erin quickly revises her statement, saying “I’m sorry, if you have a body you’re comfortable enough doing it with,” then you should go ahead and wear a revealing costume. This conversation reveals, however, that cosplayers are still conditioned by the outside world to reserve ‘sexy’ costumes for those with “the body” for them. While Erin and Heather know that conventions are a space where this culturally-defined acceptable body is not a necessity for acceptance or for showing off one’s body, they still don’t instinctually think this way. They both ultimately agree that a cosplayer’s personal comfort is the most important thing in determining whether or not a costume is appropriate for them, however this socially-understood “body” with which sexy cosplay is a viable option

65 Heather (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
66 Erin (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
is evoked multiple times by Heather and Erin. The fact that neither feels the need to explain what this “body” looks like speaks volumes.

This sort of attachment to commercial forms of sexual expression which influences how cosplayers think about their bodies and the bodies of others is the main reason why those who oppose displays of female sexuality at conventions feel this way. Despite the best efforts of the cosplay community, conventions are not yet at a point at which they are independent of outside influence, especially in the realm of sexuality. Erin and Heather’s trepidation to cosplay a “sexy character” because, as Erin puts it, “I just don’t have the body for a sexy version,” shows that, while some cosplayers choose sexually expressive costumes and characters regardless of size, others pass on these characters because of their size. Past a “sexy version” of a character, many cosplayers find fault with any reproduction of a character whose design represents unattainable goals of physical perfection and, in turn, reproduces the same ideals of beauty and accepted sexual expression.

Despite this outside influence, cosplays of characters who are considered to be (problematically) perfect women are not all worn by physically similar cosplayers. This diversity in cosplayers and their body types is sometimes criticized by cosplayers as “indecent,” a word which means “unattractive” just as much as it means “not suitable for public viewership.” This rhetoric of indecency inserts the outside world standards of sexuality into a convention and declares certain representations inappropriate for their non-conformity to these ideals. While some cosplayers speak of indecency in terms of actually showing inappropriate body parts or amounts of
skin, most use the term to self-censor their costume choices and to judge the costumes of others with the illusion of objectivity.

Despite the body issues with which many cosplayers struggle, the idea of putting one’s self on display in a sexualized costume is understood by some cosplayers and critics as willingly making one’s self a sexual object, devoid of agency. Similarly, being made a spectacle is seen as inherently disrespectful by some people. This scenario, however, treats cosplayers as passive actors. On the contrary, when a cosplayer constructs or seeks out a costume to wear to a convention, they exercise their agency over their own identity, both by constructing their own narrative as a cosplayer through their relationship with that character and by determining how they will be perceived by onlookers at a convention.

A cosplayer can never completely control the reactions others will have to their costumes, however, leaving cosplayers, especially those in sexually charged costumes, open to unwanted comments and advances.

Allie, a relatively new cosplayer from Chicago, attended Wizard World in what she calls “a female version” of Superboy from DC Comics. Allie said that she chose “femme Super Boy” because she was “really disappointed with all female costumes” and felt like “male characters have better...

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Allie (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World, August 11, 2012.
costumes.” Instead of sticking to this male costume, however, Allie created her own version of Superboy, keeping his signature leather jacket, but substituting red sparkling spandex shorts for his red tights and a low cut women’s T-shirt for his form-fitting Superman-esque (and fully-concealing) top. Allie calls her outfit “a slightly more promiscuous costume” and says it “has changed things for me, in sort of a negative way.” Despite the conscious choice that Allie made to alter Superboy’s costume in the ways that she did, she was unhappy with the reactions she received. “I’m just trying to pick up some comic books and people are like ‘oh, it’s so good that you, as a lady, can dress up and be at this con’” she recalled, implying that these comments meant something more, “and I’m like ‘shut up! I don’t need your input, like, I don’t care what you have to say.’” These sorts of interactions define the risks a cosplayer takes when dressing in a sexy manner at a convention, as the separation from the outside world, as we have seen, is exceedingly imperfect.

One must question, however, if this outside influence is coming only from Allie’s audience. When a cosplayer chooses to create an original version of a costume, they assume creative control; so Allie, who acknowledges that she created a “promiscuous costume”, chose her own aesthetic to a large degree. While it takes an outsider’s eyes to see it, Allie’s costume is not far from that of a Hooters waitress’ uniform. Just as her viewers respond to this costume with an outsider’s surprise and interest because of their limited exposure to women in sexualized superhero costumes, especially at a convention like Wizard World which attracts much less of a cosplay crowd, Allie’s own standards of “sexy” have made her a part of the visual lexicon of the outside world.
Though it is hard to tell why Allie chose to go this direction with her costume, many other cosplayers make use of the same aesthetic when feminizing, or explicitly sexualizing, other costumes. It seems clear that for a person like Allie, whose first convention was just four months before Wizard World, the only image of “sexy” or “feminine” she could conceptualize was that of the socially rewarded sexualized female of advertisements and popular culture.

Perhaps this is the reason why Fischer, a veteran cosplayer and crossplayer, chooses almost exclusively male costumes. “I want someone to say ‘that’s an awesome costume’ and mean like me as a person and not ‘oh you have a great pair of tits.’” Because respect as a costumer is important to Fischer, she avoids sexual cosplays which, she feels, negate her ability to be seen as a costumer.

Still, there are cosplayers who choose to express themselves as a sexual female character one day of a convention and then change into a masculine male character for the next day. It is this fluidity of gender and sexual boundaries which makes cosplay transgressive. While cosplayers are socially understood and influenced by their characters, they ultimately define what the characters mean to them. Through these types of performances, it is clear that any singular cosplay is not about the identity or sexuality which is being expressed, but about what the narrative of that character means to the individual cosplayer. By performing a character and a narrative rather than a particular identity or sexual preference, cosplay rejects the rigid conceptions of gender, sexuality, and the body of everyday society.

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68 Fischer (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
Back in Dallas, the crowd of convention-goers continued to grow, voices were raised, yet the man with the megaphone repeated his damnation over and over. “You’re going to Hell. You’re sinners.” From the enclosed walkway above, cosplayers answered back from afar. “We usually don’t fit in, but this is our weekend,” they said, and “this is our haven.” Then, like Moses at the Red Sea, the crowd parted. Jesus himself had arrived, and he calmly began his sermon on the other side of the fountain. Quickly, the masses abandoned their megaphoned false prophet and gathered around the holy one Himself instead.

Of course, this was only a cosplayer in a sheet and a homemade crown of thorns, but at a convention, you are what you choose to be. Though ignoring him didn’t change the protesting critic’s mind or force him to alter his ways, these cosplayers said more with their silence than they could with words. By choosing to abandon the voice of the outside world, cosplayers actively constructed the alternate reality that is cosplay. Though cosplayers must struggle to overcome the influence of the outside world, the conscious choice they make to do so contributes to the goals of the cosplay community and the alternative world of the convention. By reimagining
parts of identity through cosplay, like society’s expectations of gender and sexual expression, cosplayers gain valuable perspective on these issues and change the way they think about themselves and the world.

The average cosplayer’s unwillingness to engage in the outside-world of sexual politics and gender expression does not render their choice to crossplay or wear a revealing costume an escape from the serious issues which are intertwined with these acts. It instead indicates that, like the cosplayers who refused to participate in the hateful rhetoric of a person on the street, when cosplayers turn from the judgment of the outside world to the warmth of an accepting community it is not escapism, it is recognition that the outside world is flawed. Cosplayers utilize their anti-identity identities to reject the constructed boundaries of the outside world and deny power to the limitations, expectations, and regulations enforced by the mainstream. No, cosplay is not actively involved in taking a stand against these sorts of things, but it does foster a space and a community of people who recognize this rhetoric of intolerance, and not just the radical one offered by a street preacher, but the normalized intolerance of modern social expectations, and thereby can limit its influence and neutralize its power. Though the cosplay community as a whole is still struggling to fully embrace alternative modes of gender and sexual expression over the culturally taught norms of the outside world, the establishment of conventions as a stage for different expressions is the first step towards the creation of an accepting community within cosplay and conventions.
Character Selection from Alice to Zorro:

The Construction of Authenticity

Cosplay is based on recreating and embodying a character, so accuracy is naturally one of a cosplayer’s main concerns. Because it is impossible for any cosplay to be 100% accurate, the real aim of cosplay is to provide a realistic and authentic representation of the character. The reaches of authenticity, however, are an oft-contested subject. There are, of course, many qualities which make up any character a cosplayer might choose to be, from their looks to their walk to the details of what they say. It up to the cosplayer to determine which of these characteristics they will attempt to include in their costume and performance. Through these choices, a cosplayer shows which traits are more or less important to them. These priorities are evident as far back in the cosplay process the very first step: choosing a character. Once the cosplay has been realized, a cosplayer’s unique costuming priorities as well as their different skill sets, body types, etc. guarantee that each cosplay, even of the same character, will be different. While these differences are accepted and even celebrated within the cosplay community, they also beg an important question: what is an authentic representation?

To answer what is such an oft-disputed question within the cosplay community, I turn again to the first step of cosplay and examine the process of character selection. The prerogatives that guide a cosplayer through this process determine how far they go to achieve accuracy and show how different cosplayers define the limits of authenticity in their own cosplays as well as others’. There is no universal community standard or set of rules for authenticity within cosplay, so it is,
by nature, a subjective concept. The contrasting beliefs within the cosplay community regarding different facets of characters and the importance or unimportance of their accuracy in cosplay give cosplayers the agency to determine their own definition of an authentic representation.

While the physical accuracy of a costume is partially determined by the time and effort a cosplayer puts into it, there are also economic and social factors to consider. However, the multitude of materials and techniques used for cosplay at its many different levels means that very few characters are simply too expensive to cosplay as on a small budget. Instead, personal standards of accuracy and concern for one’s reputation within the cosplay community keep some cosplayers from attempting more challenging projects. This sort of decision, because of the strong influence of the community’s hierarchy of construction methods, says more about a cosplayer’s social aims and connection to the cosplay community than their personal opinions on the limits of authenticity.

Ultimately, a cosplayer is free to decide on a character from the entire scope of existent fiction, history, pop culture, and their own imagination. With such a broad range of sources to work from, cosplayers generally start from one of three major points: the personality of the character, the physical appearance of the character, and their affinity for the series or work itself. Most consider each of these when choosing a character, but weigh them differently. Almost every cosplayer I interviewed mentioned at least two of these categories as something which guided their decisions; however, their ultimate choice of one aspect of authenticity over another defines their personal conception of the authentic within cosplay.
Here, I follow four cosplayers, quite alike in many ways, yet different in many others, through their decision-making processes when choosing a new cosplay. These voices, along with others, reveal the implications and motivations of different choices and define, individually and collectively, what is authentic.

Meet Elsie. Though this is not her real name, this cosplayer introduced herself as such and asked to be called Elsie for the entirety of the convention Anime World Chicago because this was the name of the character she was cosplaying.\footnote{Elsie (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 3, 2012.} This character is a cheerful demon from a Japanese Manga, on a quest to recapture escaped evil spirits. Elsie, 20, is a Mexican-American college student living in Chicago. This cosplay is the second costume she has constructed, with the help of her Japanese Media Club at school, and she has worn it to multiple conventions. At Anime World she was working as a volunteer staff member, though she stayed in costume and in character even as she worked. Elsie agreed to an interview while monitoring the door of a video room at Anime World.

Across the country, cosplayers Fischer and Nichole, who have cosplayed for 7 and 5 years respectively, relaxed outside of the Dealer’s Hall at Dragon*Con 2012 in Atlanta. They were both cosplaying characters from a work of fan-made art featuring two Pokémon characters: anthropomorphized versions of Mew and Mewtwo. Fischer is a 24-year-old Milwaukee native who is currently in college as well as working part-time.\footnote{Fischer (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.} Nichole, a 20-year-old from Northwest Georgia, is also in college and works a
part-time job at her university.\textsuperscript{71} The two met online through “a mutual friend” and “bonded over comics and… cosplay.”\textsuperscript{72} Though Dragon\textsuperscript{*}Con is almost local for Nichole, Fischer had to travel by plane to arrive in Atlanta, making it the farthest she has traveled in order to attend a convention. Fischer has been to Chicago, Coralville, Iowa, and Minneapolis for the same reason, and adds “I haven’t made it to the West Coast yet but I plan to.” Both Nichole and Fischer create multiple costumes per year and are active in different fandoms and with the cosplay community online.

Back in Chicago, cosplayer Tripl3 Vision, or Kyle, has been cosplaying for just as long as Nichole and Fischer, but his character selection process is extremely different. Called a “costume MacGyver”\textsuperscript{73} by his friends, 21-year-old Kyle, who is originally from the Philippines, but has resided in Chicagoland for the past six years, is known for the costumes he puts together at short notice from a variety of recycled pieces and thrift store finds.\textsuperscript{74} However, he occasionally puts together intricate costumes or pieces as well, such as the DeadMau5 helmet he wore during our interview at Anime World Chicago. This costume piece was an original design, featuring EL lights and flashing LED lights and a large two-tone foam faux zipper across the mouth. Kyle was joking around with a large group of cosplay friends in the main lobby of Anime World when he and his friend, DJ Kagamine, volunteered to be interviewed.

\textsuperscript{71} Nichole (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon\textsuperscript{*}Con, September 1, 2012.
\textsuperscript{72} Fischer, email message to author, March 4, 2013.
\textsuperscript{73} DJ Kagamine (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
\textsuperscript{74} Kyle (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
1 Elsie poses in costume, complete with jar of escaped spirits; 2 Elsie, in her Volunteer Staff T-shirt, works her shift; Kyle in his deadmau5 helmet; 4 Kyle as ‘Con Security’ without the deadmau5 helmet; 5-8 Fischer and Nichole, dressed as human versions of the Pokémon characters Mewtwo and Mew, discuss their experiences at conventions.
A character’s personality is one of the first things that comes to mind when a person thinks about their favorite characters from games, movies, and books. While some cosplayers consider an accurate imitation of their character’s personality to be an important quality of the cosplay, others completely disregard it. These disparate styles stem from a disagreement over the importance of role-playing, or acting in character, while in costume. Staying in character is done in many ways, from speaking like the character through accents, tone, or lines that they have said or would say, to matching a character’s temperament in interactions as well as facial expressions, to even matching the way that a character moves and sits or stands. While some cosplayers believe that this has no bearing on the authenticity of a costume, for others, recreating the way a character acts is just as important as recreating how they look.

Staying in character is one of the first things Elsie considers when it comes to cosplay. For her, “deciding on a character takes a lot of time… because I don’t know if I’ll be able to pull off a character well- if I’ll be out of character.”75 Being able to stay in character is based on the personality of the character for Elsie, so even though she says she “can’t be her [character] all the time… I reflect the energy of her.” This characteristic energy is an important part of any cosplay for Elsie, so she dedicates herself to replicating it even when the attitude and mood she is expressing is different from her own.

Elsie is extremely dedicated to the accuracy of her attitude and presentation when in cosplay. To her, when she doesn’t “say things she [her character] says,” she

75 Elsie (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 3, 2012.
is out of character. While many other cosplayers would not define this so severely, another cosplayer, Sweeney, 18, from Northern New Jersey, might tend to agree. Sweeney, who cosplays as the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series’ Jack Sparrow, said at Otakon that she had “yet to memorize all of his lines,” but “for Jack Sparrow you should be more in the personality more than reading off lines. You shouldn’t be stuck to just the movies... [however] if people are interacting with me with strictly movie lines, I can read them right back to them.” Sweeney admits that she is quite intense with her accuracy, both in her costume and her knowledge of her source material, but she attribute this to the fact that she can’t be as accurate as she’d like in other areas, like her physical similarity to the characters she chooses.

Because she was disappointed with her ability to capture the personality of her last character, Elsie intentionally chose her new character to be someone she “related more with.” She describes this character as “very bubbly, [and] ...a little klutzy, but she’s very helpful and she just wants everyone to be happy,” which is also “definitely something that I try to do.” Allie, a cosplayer at Chicago Comic Con, says she chose her character, Superboy, because of their similar personalities, but she doesn’t think they’re completely analogous. Instead, she sees him as a single facet of herself, calling him “an outlet of me.” 20-year-old Sunny, who also cosplayed at Chicago Comic Con, also sees her chosen character, Catwoman, as a reflection, if not an exaggeration, of her different sides. Yet 18-year-old Haley who is from Otakon’s

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76 Sweeney (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
77 Allie (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.
78 Sunny (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.
host-city, Baltimore, sees her own personality in her character much like Elsie does, adding that she “can relate to her [character] easily.”\textsuperscript{79}

While at Otakon, Haley even went as far as playing her character outside of the convention center. “Me and a group went to a restaurant last night,” she said, “and we agreed that we would stay in character at the restaurant.”\textsuperscript{80} Though Haley did say that she felt comfortable as her character and saw connections between herself and Feferi, the aqueous troll from the fantasy webcomic \textit{Homestuck} whom she was cosplaying, this performance did something cosplay rarely does. By existing and interacting in the outside world as someone who is admittedly not herself, Haley questions the limits of authenticity and social legibility in this larger reality as well. As she confidently presents herself to society as an other-worldly, highly-excitable, grey-skinned and orange-horned troll instead of an average white female human, Haley draws attention to the performative “words, acts, gestures, and desire[s]” by which, Judith Butler writes, we also define our everyday identities.\textsuperscript{81}

A performance like this is not a usual part of cosplay; however some cosplayers don’t even feel the need to stay in character within the con. Erin, a 24-

\textsuperscript{79} Haley (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
\textsuperscript{80} Haley (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
\textsuperscript{81} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 173.
year-old Masters student from the Atlanta area, cosplayed as a minor character named Becky from the fantastical TV drama *Supernatural* (2005-present) for Dragon*Con 2012, but said she didn’t want to subject other con-goers to the personality of her character. “I’m not gonna wander around like Becky, she’s obnoxious!” Erin explained.82 “I love her, but she can be a bitch!” Though she didn’t act as her character except to interact with other characters from the same show and while posing for pictures, Becky’s personality still played a role in Erin’s character choice.

Like Erin, many cosplayers only get into character for photos. In this situation, which usually begins with the cosplayer being addressed by their character’s name and then asked for a picture, a cosplayer acts out their character’s personality through the poses they strike for the camera and the way they interact with their photographer, other fans, and other characters they might be posing with. Cosplayers who restrict their acting to only these scenarios show through this choice that they don’t consider the way a character walks, talks, and acts to define an authentic representation of that character through cosplay. These cosplayers are generally more focused on the physical aspects of a costume like wearing the right shoes or constructing accurate props. This order of priorities leads many of these cosplayers to simply disregard the personality of a character when choosing whom to cosplay.

If a cosplayer does consider personality in their character selection, it can be both limiting and empowering. Though some cosplayers only consider characters whose personality traits and behaviors are similar to their own, others use their...
costumed experiences to explore traits and behaviors which are different from their own. Some even go as far as to choose characters for their personality’s defiance of social norms, such as tricksters or troublemaking characters. Though confining one’s costume choices to characters which somehow resemble one’s self, either physically or psychologically, may seem antithetical to cosplay’s challenge to the fixed identities cosplayers inhabit in real life, it is possible for cosplayers to be content with how they have defined themselves in the outside world and therefore want to maintain these characteristics through their cosplays. It is also entirely possible for the non-universal standards of authenticity within cosplay to be understood by some cosplayers, especially relatively-new cosplayers like Elsie and Haley, as strict expectations of accuracy in every realm of one’s representation. For this reason, a cosplayer might choose to cosplay a character which is similar to them in some ways, like their personality, in order to ensure the positive reception of their cosplays. This sort of misinterpretation of the cosplay community is especially unfortunate because this keeps cosplayers within their comfort zones instead of encouraging them to use cosplay to push their boundaries and explore new possibilities in the realm of identity and defiance of social norms.

Many do just this, and use cosplay to challenge themselves and move past their own everyday behaviors and personality traits. Limited only by what they believe they can authentically represent, these cosplayers perhaps think of their character’s personalities even more when they are in costume than those who are cosplaying characters who are more similar to their everyday selves. Britney, 24 from Virginia, said at Otakon that she wants to portray her characters well and will go with
some characters who are “a lot like myself,” however she also enjoys cosplaying “a mix of characters because they’re really, really fun.” This diversity is fun for Britney because of the challenge as well as the creative opportunity it offers her. Like Britney, many cosplayers recognize the potential for personality experimentation as a valuable outlet, especially within the realm of the convention where social norms and expectations are relaxed.

Fischer is one of these cosplayers. “I have to choose someone who’s kind of cocky, or really kind of boisterous, or kind of evil” or else “the really stern types; I do the really stoic characters.” When asked why, she replied “I guess that’s how people first see me when they meet me at cons… I don’t know why!” But instead of fighting this misconception, Fischer plays with it as an alternate personality, cosplaying characters such as Beetlejuice’s Betelgeuse and enjoying the opportunity to get into character. “I can just do whatever the hell I want and people are like ‘Oh, it’s great! Whatever, it’s Betelgeuse!’ …So I live it up, because when I’m me it’s like ‘you can’t do that!’ and I’m like ‘Oh yeah, I’m not my character. I should behave.’” In the convention, however, there is no pressure to ‘behave,’ and therefore more cosplayers choose to disobey social norms with their character choices. Erin seeks out “goofy characters” to take advantage of the fact that “you’re allowed to do more in costume,” while

Nate from Star Wars Celebration VI is attracted to dark characters despite his cheery disposition, adding that “if you’re going to take on a different persona,

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83 Britney (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 29, 2012.
84 Fischer (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
85 Erin (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
He says that if he were to play a character whose personality was more similar to his “it wouldn’t be much fun” he supposes. “It’d be like any normal day, I guess,” which is far from his ideal convention day.

The physical appearance of a character is a central consideration for some cosplayers, including the cosplayer’s similarities to the character’s gender, body proportions, race, and more. It is important to remember that, despite the relative removal of conventions from the outside world, cosplayers are often still guided by their expectations for the reception of both their representation of a character and their own body, as they present it to the convention and the world. Some cosplayers are able to disregard these pressures and body insecurities, while others choose characters to fit their own physical characteristics, whether for accuracy or to allay critics. Still others consider changing their own bodies to more closely match a character or changing the character’s costume to better suit their own body type. Each small detail of a character’s physical appearance, from their eye color to their waist size, impacts a cosplayer’s decision; however the most influential aspects of a character’s appearance, when it comes to selecting a character, are gender, body type, and race. A cosplayer’s choices, opinions, and compromises regarding these aspects of a character best show their interpretation of authentic representation.

The obvious place to start these decisions may seem to be with gender. Though it may seem like a restrictive characteristic to a non-cosplayer, the gender of a character is actually a much smaller concern within the costumed world. Cosplayers

86 Nate (cosplayer) interview with author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.
often play across the spectrum of gender, but this does not mean they’ve no concern for the authenticity of their characters. There are many different strategies and techniques by which cosplayers attempt to create an authentic representation of a character whose gender identity does not match their own, as well as many different variations of intensity.

Fischer and Nichole, who both crossplay regularly, choose characters who they think they can accurately imitate, yet they put in a lot of work to reach this point of physical similarity. They both agree that for a female to cosplay a male character, they should “at least put in the effort to bind and do makeup to look like a guy.”87 Here, binding refers to wearing a compression vest or otherwise minimizing one’s chest. “I look really good once I’m binded in my cosplay,” Fischer explains, “and you just, you just gotta push through the pain.”88 “Guy” makeup could be anything from a stippled-on beard to heavier eyebrows and an accentuated jaw. Though this is time-intensive and sometimes even painful, the accuracy is worth it to these two. Achieving this level of accuracy means that one has defied the limits prescribed by gender, both biologically and as it is socially taught and defined.

Other cosplayers choose to do the exact opposite and create alternate versions of the character, instead of themselves, to cosplay. 22-year-old Chicagoan Eva cosplays almost exclusively from the TV series Dr. Who.89 Though she used to cosplay the Doctor’s female companions, she has since begun cosplaying the lead male character, the Doctor himself. However she does it “without having to wear a binder or a wig.” Instead, Eva does what she calls “gender shift or gender swap”

87 Nichole (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
88 Fischer (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
89 Eva (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 9, 2012.
cosplay. Eva was inspired by other female cosplayers whom she heard say things like “I really like the character…, why can’t they be a woman?” So, instead of changing her own body to be similar to that of the character she wanted to cosplay, she “reimagine[d] that costume as if the characters were a different gender than they usually are.” This sort of cosplay is sometimes called a femme or gender bent version of a character, and while there is no exact source for the costume to work from, the authenticity of this sort of costume is determined by the cosplayer’s attention to detail and efforts to incorporate parts of the original character into their new design.

Gender shift cosplay expands the narrative of a character by imagining a person of a different gender doing the same things and having the same relationship with their setting and the other characters as the original does. Femme play especially makes a powerful statement about the potential for a different type of female character in genres like science fiction and comic books by suggesting that a woman could just as easily fill the role of a male character. Because people define authenticity for themselves, this sort of redefinition of a character is possible and allows cosplayers to transgress the traditional boundaries of gender in different and creative ways.
The same options are available to cosplayers when it comes to the body type of a character. Some cosplayers choose based on what they look similar to, while others disregard these more permanent impediments. Changing one’s self for a cosplay is also a possibility; however there is only so much a person can change about themselves in the realm of body size. This sort of more-permanent change has also prompted backlash from the community and individual cosplayers. Yet the body is a part of any costume, and can therefore be thought of as one more variable which can be worked with, ignored, or manipulated in order to achieve a cosplayer’s desired goals of authenticity.

Fischer and Nichole, though they are very willing to bind or use makeup to account for gender differences in a cosplay, pay close attention to the parts of themselves which they cannot change or obscure. Nichole, for example, feels limited by her diminutive height and her round face and mentions that “there are… some really masculine cosplays that I’d love to do, but no way, I’m not nearly tall enough.” Instead, she sticks to “effeminate guys and girls,” because “Obviously I can’t cosplay a super tall character or a large character. It’s gonna look really dumb.”

For Nichole, making the cosplay look good or authentic means having the same proportions as the character. Nick, 20 from Chicago, agrees that part of looking good in a costume is sharing the body type of your character. “I mean know it sounds like a cheapskate thing,” he explained at Anime World Chicago, “but it’s just because I

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90 Nichole (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
don’t wanna be… [cosplaying] some big guy and be like a skinny little guy.” Nick brings up an important point: sometimes a physical attribute defines a character, or even just a specific cosplayer, and therefore any representation which does not reflect this trait, such as the character’s height, or weight, is deemed inauthentic. Kasev, 23 from Chicago, throws out an example: “Punisher, you have to have that build.”

Though it is possible for a cosplayer to reject the dominant constructions of masculinity which define these characters, like many cosplayers do with gender and sexuality, by cosplaying these sorts of characters without having the height or muscles which define them, the socially ingrained pursuit of a body type like this discourages male cosplayers from enacting such a critique.

Though these two cosplayers seem convinced that it takes a large muscle-bound male to play certain characters, Sweeney, the Jack Sparrow cosplayer from Otakon, thinks and does the opposite. Though she is a short Asian 18-year-old girl, Sweeney cosplays almost exclusively as “tall Caucasian males.” Though she doesn’t let the difference stop her, she does acknowledge the challenges and says the physical dissimilarity has affected her costumes. “I try to make my costumes as screen accurate as possible to compensate for the fact that I look nothing like the original character. So I’m hoping if I get everything really accurate that it kinda just distracts people from the fact that I don’t look like Johnny Depp.” Even though she puts extra work into her outfits to make up for her difference in looks, Sweeney asserts that “it shouldn’t matter what you look like, if you like a character, just go for it.”

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91 Nick (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
92 Sweeney (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
Sweeney has changed herself for a costume, however. Despite their other physical differences, she regularly dyes her own hair for her Sweeney Todd cosplay (her most-frequently worn costume and her cosplay namesake) because she hasn’t “found any wigs that are good looking, so I do my own hair.” Kyle, who also crossplays frequently, agrees that physical appearance shouldn’t matter since cosplay is for fun, and while he loves to cosplay and says “it defines me,” it is also true that “I define it.” Kyle often goes through minor changes to cosplay as characters he really looks nothing like. As a tan, broad-shouldered Filipino male, Kyle has played characters such as Yuna from the popular video game Final Fantasy (a pale, attractive young girl) and Link from the classic console game The Legend of Zelda (a blond young boy.) Though he can’t change his build, Kyle says “I try my best to overcome any obstacles to a costume. If the character has a beard, I’ll draw a beard on myself... if the character’s a girl, I have no objections to... wearing a bra and... shaving everything.”

Sweeney has also dieted for her costumes, saying that she recently felt “heavier than I should have been, so a couple weeks before Otakon I was like ok, so I’m gonna go on walks, I’m gonna cut down on what I eat, I’m gonna try to eat better so I can look better as Jack Sparrow.” These sorts of healthy

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93 Kyle (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
94 Sweeney (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
changes are beneficial to the cosplayer as well as the authenticity of the cosplay, but most who did diet for a costume said that they wouldn’t have otherwise. Linda, for example, said she is going on a diet for next year’s Otakon so she can be “Ichigo from *Tokyo Mew Mew* [a young-adult manga about teen girls who gain super powers].”

“It does help my self-image too,” she added. Kasev also plans on dieting for his next convention, as well as working out more “so I can be Spiderman next year.”

A revealing costume such as a spandex body suit inspires many cosplayers to work out more than usual, like Phillip who “was Green Lantern last year and... was trying to work out a lot more to actually fill out my costume.”

Nichole also dieted to feel good about her body in a spandex suit, claiming that her desire to be “Kid Loki from Marvel [comics series]” was “the reason I started dieting.” In these cases, a cosplayer’s idea of looking good in the costume is defined by both authenticity and mainstream standards of attractiveness.

Changing one’s body for a costume which will be worn perhaps three to ten days out of a year might seem drastic, however when one considers the ways in which modern bodies have become defined by these changes and their summation, or our body project as Joan Jacobs Brumberg calls it in her book, *The Body Project*, dieting for a costume makes a lot more sense. In her book, which is a study of American girls and their understandings of their own bodies throughout US history, Brumberg points out our modern “faith in the power of personal image.”

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95 Linda (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 26, 2012.
96 Kasev (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.
97 Phillip (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.
98 Nichole (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
ourselves to ourselves and those who view us by our choices in dress and the stylization of our bodies, so it only follows that cosplay would do the same.

Though many cosplayers feel that the limiting social standards of the outside world have no place in cosplay, they are hard to get away from, as they are regularly written into a cosplayer’s source materials. By only casting and drawing people with lean and muscular bodies, comic books and television, among other often-cosplayed sources, not only define for cosplayers and their genres the ideal physical form, they also limit creative interpretation of these characters by their narrowly-defined view of attractiveness and bodies which are suitable to be displayed. This creates a limited and fixed path to authenticity which confronts the same themes of eroticism and socially-defined masculinity which were latent in performances of body builder Eugen Sandow.\footnote{John F. Kasson, \textit{Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man}, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 29.} Performances like Sandow’s and the cosplayers who choose to change themselves physically for their costumes often perpetuate these standards, whether they want to or not.

For example, super heroes are generally only portrayed in one physical style. This makes it much more challenging to separate their physical characteristics from their character, thereby tying muscles and thinness closely to the authenticity of the character for many readers and cosplayers. This single physical form therefore makes it more challenging to imagine any superhero with a body unlike Superman’s or Catwoman’s, so many people are discouraged from even considering cosplaying these characters without changing themselves to achieve this physical look. This continued idealization of thin white bodies as well as sexualization of female bodies
is a weakness of the comic book industry which many cosplayers consciously reject by disregarding a character’s body type through their cosplay, however this is still a minority opinion, or at least response. What continues to dominate is the limiting definition of authenticity which mirrors the outside world’s norms of femininity, masculinity, and attractiveness.

Britney, for example, routinely loses “a couple pounds” before she will wear her more “revealing costumes.” She says, as if defining a general rule of cosplay, “you don’t wanna be a little too pudgy, and like ‘ooh, you shouldn’t wear that,’” however the source of this criticism, presumably at the convention, is undefined, showing that Britney’s expectations represent the majority opinion, both inside and outside a convention. Elsie echoes this rhetoric, stating that if she were to do a revealing such as “Yoko from Gurren Lagann,” who wears a bikini top and short shorts, “I obviously would work out a little bit for it.” Why this is obvious, however, is left up to interpretation.

This pressure on bodies to conform to these mainstream ideals is extremely troubling to many cosplayers who value the accepting and alternative ideals of the cosplay community. To many members of the cosplay community, a definition of authenticity which limits a cosplayer’s freedom to express themselves through cosplaying is contradictory to the larger aims of cosplay. As previously mentioned, some of the cosplayers who disagree with this formation of authenticity use their own character choices to reject it. By outwardly refusing to change themselves for cosplay,

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101 Britney (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 29, 2012.
102 Elsie (cosplayer) interview with author at Anime World Chicago, August 3, 2012.
these cosplayers question the socially-defined ideal body and to proclaim that a cosplayer’s body type should not be connected to a cosplay’s authenticity.

When Jenn, the 22-year-old Poison Ivy cosplayer from Chicago, was asked about changing her body for a cosplay she responded “no, I would never do that, no. I am the size that I am and happy about it.”

Another Chicago cosplayer, 20-year-old Amanda, agrees with Jenn. Amanda explicitly connects the idea of changing herself for cosplay to changing her body to match “what society portrays a figure as.” Amanda also points out that “as a woman,” she feels she has “worked so hard to become comfortable with [her] body,” so the idea of changing herself to fit an image created by someone else, especially a man, to please a predominantly masculine audience, disturbs her. This critique brings up an important question about cosplay: can feminist or alternative costumes be made from non-feminist or mainstream sources? Many cosplayers would argue that you can, because a cosplay is a representation of your own interpretation of a work or character, and it is possible to make changes to this narrative through how a costume is made and worn. This subversive and liberating act is only possible, however, if one’s understanding of authenticity allows for creative interpretation.

Though opinions within the cosplay community regarding a cosplayer’s body type and its importance in the authenticity of a cosplay are contentious and varied, opinions on race in regards to authenticity are quite the opposite. It is almost unanimously agreed upon that race should not prohibit a person of color from

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103 Jenn (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 12, 2012.
104 Amanda (cosplayer) interview with author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 10, 2012.
choosing to cosplay white characters. Indeed, from Sweeney, who disregards almost every physical difference between her and her characters, to Fischer and Nicole, who decide on their characters primarily based on their physical similarities, everyone I interviewed insisted that race was the one feature which escapes concerns of authenticity. “That would really limit the scope,” adds Nichole, whose personal scope is already quite narrowed due to her high personal standards of accuracy.105 There are very few anime characters of color, and not very many people of color in science fiction, fantasy, or comics either, so no one within the cosplay community makes a fuss when a non-white cosplayer chooses a white character. Though there might be some negative reactions from outsiders, this exception to standards of physical authenticity is almost universal.

Renee, a graphic artist and cosplayer from New Jersey, brings up the converse situation, however, over which opinions are not nearly as unified. Renee recalled an experience she had at Otakon when she witnessed cosplayers of the animated TV show *Legend of Korra*, which was inspired by Chinese martial arts and features all Asian or Native American-looking characters, being told they were “too white to be cosplaying Korra.”106 “It shouldn’t matter, as long as what you’re pulling off is still recognizable” argues Renee. This statement ignores the politics of such an act, however.

Like any imitative or theatrical craft, cosplay is haunted by America’s racist past on stage. Though it hasn’t been practiced to any large degree since the 1940’s, blackface is still a present concern and boundary for cosplayers. Blackface minstrelsy

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105 Nichole (cosplayer) interview with author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.
106 Renee (cosplayer) interview with author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
was, as Eric Lott describes it, “commodification of an already enslaved, non-citizen people.”

Cosplay is essentially based upon the appropriation of narratives, however the fictional nature of these characters whose lives are being imitated and interpreted by cosplayers makes this a victimless crime. Still, the use of blackface would suggest an imitation of struggles which are not fictional and this past and present reality of racial subjugation and the politics surrounding such an act are what guarantee that this is just as anomalous in cosplay as it is in the outside world.

Blackface is unquestionably stigmatized, and rightly so, however there are grey areas when it comes to just that: grey skin, blue skin, green skin. Hues which are not found in nature regularly populate the pages of comic books and Japanese mangas, however these lingering connections to a racist past give many cosplayers pause. There has been a general consensus within the community that obviously-unreal body paints like bright blue and red are fictional enough that they run no risk of seeming politically incorrect.

Characters like the trolls of *Homestuck*, however, which have grey skin

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107 Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American*
and black lips, are often given a second glance.

Though painting one’s self grey is undeniably different from historical uses of blackface, even its slight similarity to minstrelsy is enough to give some con-goers a moment of unease. This reaction also begs the question why. If grey-face is not an appropriation of any existing persons or culture, why could it be questionable? The answer is just as uncomfortable. Since blackface is so overwhelmingly understood today as wrong, it seems likely that, in most cases, modern avoidance of blackface is not actually out of respect for the African-American experience and racial identity, but an attempt to be politically correct. Though it is, indeed, a good thing that such disrespectful performances are altogether rejected, it has caused many people to lose sight of the reasons for this rejection.

The real ambiguity of morals occurs when a white cosplayer chooses a non-white character and doesn’t make any attempt to imitate the race of the character. While this is not visually related to blackface, is there still an inherent appropriation of a non-white past in this sort of representation? Can this be so if the character is fictional, or does interpretation outweigh intent? Most cosplayers avoid this uncomfortable question by simply staying away from non-white characters, however it presents a unique conundrum. Should a fictional character’s background prohibit those who have not experienced it from claiming embodying their narrative? This sort of consideration could actually be made about many facets of a character, from their sexual orientation to gender expression, to religion to socio-economic group, to race. The fact that race is the only aspect of a character which regularly

receives this type of special consideration reveals how our culture values experiences of difference.

Britney, who cosplays a large variety of characters, and often does multiple even just in one day at a convention, says that she’s “personally… not a fan of cosplaying black people… [because] I feel like it’s a character that should be portrayed by a black person because that’s what they are in the anime, so I feel like I shouldn’t do that. Because it’s their costume, you know, they don’t have many black anime characters so it’s like, you know, leave that for them, you have so many other things. Now do I have a problem with a black Mario walking in here? I have no problem with that at all. Not at all.” Britney speaks what is unspoken by many cosplayers, which is the feeling that characters of color should be reserved for cosplayers of color. Though more than one cosplayer portraying the same character is not at all unheard of, there is sometimes a feeling of competition when cosplayers have doubled up. Additionally, Britney’s thought process here accounts for the choices of cosplayers of color who aim to be physically similar to their characters, including considerations of race, and therefore don’t have as many characters to choose from as a white cosplayer would. Her comments also show, however, that when cosplayers cross racial lines with their character selection, it rarely goes unnoticed, even if it is accepted.

Phillip, from northern Illinois, who identifies as African American, explains that he only cosplays as “black or African American characters” because of the difference between acceptance and authenticity. “I don’t like being ‘oh, black Superman’” he says, so he chooses characters with which he can avoid these sorts of
labels. These undesired qualifiers are often added to cosplays which play with race, gender, and even size, and though they may not be malicious, reactions like these are hard to disregard. Though the cosplay community is, as a whole, accepting, it is not colorblind. While the pursuit of authenticity can be transgressive, like in the case of Sweeney who disregards her gender and race in order to cosplay the characters she likes, it can also be limiting and can reinforce racial barriers of the outside world.

The final method by which cosplayers generally decide upon a character is starting at the source. Instead of looking for characters with dark hair or a grumpy disposition, some choose to focus in on a fictional world and work from there. While some cosplayers choose a universe based simply on what’s popular at the time and make a costume with only this popularity in mind, most are influenced by a number of different factors, ranging from the aesthetics of the universe to their appreciation of a story line to their attraction to a certain character or characters. Although it is usually taken for granted, most cosplayers consider it crucial to know their source well. The best cosplayers are usually big fans of the series they choose characters from, and their understanding of the universe comes out in the details of the costume and their in-character interactions, making the cosplay that much more authentic.

Kyle uses series as his primary selection tool when deciding on a new cosplay. For his most recent costume, he says “I decided that hey, I’m a huge fan of the Avatar series, so I might as well, you know, cosplay as one of the characters” from the spin-off show, Legend of Kora. After mentioning this, though, Kyle’s friend, DJ Kagamine, immediately started describing the level of Kyle’s fandom, telling him to
re-enact his reaction to the series finale. It is obvious that Kyle was genuinely inspired by his love of this show and the entire Avatar canon to create a costume within the Avatar world.

Britney doesn’t necessarily choose her cosplays by their series, but she does strongly believe that a cosplay should “understand the character so… [they] can portray them in the best way… [they] can.” “If I am going to cosplay a character I make sure I have done my research” she says. Eva agrees, and shares that her personal standard for cosplaying a character is “usually having read or watched all of the material that they’re in, or a good deal of it.” Noel, also a student from Chicago, agrees and says that he personally needs to watch at least half of a series “to feel like I understood that character enough.”

Even cosplayers who create original characters are often highly-inspired by pre-formed universes and often follow the rules or conventions of these worlds. Daniel, who was inspired by his love for the Star Wars universe to make an Old Republic era Jedi Knight costume abided by the images and descriptions of these characters even though he was creating his own character. “This is all hand-made,” Daniel says about his costume, “an Old Republic Jedi… is all brown-based, you can’t have any other colors,” he adds, referencing the Rebel Legion costuming guidelines.
However, these requirements for membership are based on published Star Wars materials and require a very high level of accuracy. Another Star Wars costumer, Nate, was also inspired by the Old Republic era, and was intrigued by the possibility of a Sith Miraluka, but before he decided to make this character, he checked the archives of Wookieepedia, the Wikipedia of Star Wars, to see if there had ever been one of these sorts of characters in the expanded Star Wars universe. When he found that there were, it was “something I had my mind set on.” When an original character is formed in any universe, it is this respect for the existing canon which makes the cosplay an authentic representation of a part of that universe.

Nate was also attracted to the character of a Miraluka in the Star Wars online game for its story. Many other cosplayers choose their cosplays because of a personal connection they feel with the character. More than liking a character’s design or personality, having a connection with them at this level is often described by cosplayers as a very special experience.

Amanda loves the series from which she’s cosplaying, but also feels a personal affinity to the character she has chosen. “I love Futurama,” she says, “it’s one of my favorite cartoon shows... and I love Leela, she’s a strong female character, but she has her flaws.” These flaws, such as her inability “to find love” are what make her relatable as a character and why Amanda chose to dye her hair purple and wear one eye for a day at the convention. Sunny, dressed as Catwoman, said that her own experiences of growing up without privilege and being “on her own at an early age” mirror those of Selina Kyle, or Catwoman, and inspired her to choose this character to cosplay.
Becoming personally and emotionally invested in a character has also guided Chicago cosplayer Kyle through choosing characters. Once Kyle had decided on the *Legend of Korra* series for his next cosplay, he remembers that a “particular character, Mako, a fire bender… kind of spoke out to me.” At first, Kyle liked him because he seemed like “a nice character, a cool character,” but later in the series he was further interested by Mako’s character development. Finally, by the end of the series, Kyle’s companion DJ Kagamine reminds him that “you made it seem like ‘Oh my God, this is me!” Kyle doesn’t deny it.

Linda from Otakon agrees that a character’s development is important to her decision. Linda’s cosplay of Japanese film legend Hayao Miyazaki’s *The Secret World of Arrietty* was inspired by Arrietty’s character arc, from timid to brave and independent, which reminds Linda of changes she says she has seen “in myself” throughout her career as a graphic designer and her in her social life. Tyler as well, who is a former member of the US Air Force, cosplays an Imperial TIE pilot because he can relate to the story of this background actor who, while he doesn’t get named, is an “ordinary” person, doing what [he] was trained to do” and “using [his] mundane skills to defeat the…rebellion.”

A cosplayer who chooses to be a character whom they admire and can relate to will understand the motivations and story of this character like only a fan can. Though it is not readily apparent to viewers, a cosplayer’s personal feeling of authenticity in their costume is multiplied by an in-depth understanding of the character and the world which they inhabit.
Like most things within the cosplay community, definitions of authenticity are
determined by cosplayers themselves, however various pressures from the cosplay
community, the real world, and a cosplayer’s own life experiences make these oft-
questioned and commonly-fluid formations of authenticity less of a conscious
definition and more of a personal understanding. The pursuit of an authentic cosplay
is shared throughout the community, however authenticity is ultimately subjective.
This can be both limiting and empowering, however a cosplayer is often
paradoxically stuck within their own definition of an authentic representation.
Though these definitions have the power to redefine social norms, the agency to
consciously and personally create such a definition is obscured by dominant
community standards and repeated social constructions which have been mistaken for
truths. Though Elsie, Fischer, Nichole and Kyle are shaped by the world around them,
through cosplay they add their own voices to this dialogue on authenticity.
Workshops to Thrift Shops: The Material Culture of Cosplay

Cosplay: a noun and a verb, both signifying something which is alternative or removed from society at large. The act of cosplaying, or to cosplay, is to don an alternative identity. This identity is not one which exists in the real world as we know it; it is instead a character from fiction, history, or one’s own imagination. Cosplay the noun refers to the physical ensemble used to embody this identity, including clothes, shoes, accessories, makeup, wigs, and props. Similarly, these collections of items do not just appear together in department stores or on the runway. Instead, costumes are handmade, assembled out of different (often second-hand) store-bought pieces, or purchased from specialty retailers.

Just as the act of cosplaying functions as a critique of traditional constructions of identity and social norms, a costume itself, in the way that it is made, provides its own critique of the power of fashion fads and consumerist impulses over individual self-expression. Like conventions strive to separate themselves from the everyday worlds within which they are situated, the cosplay community strives to remove itself from this system by valuing and fostering the creation of costumes and props by cosplayers themselves. This alternative mode of production creates even more of a separation between everyday life, which is lived in everyday clothes bought at an everyday store, and the world of cosplay, which is experienced in specially created or assembled clothes, thereby enabling cosplay’s characteristic rebellions against normative fashion and everyday performativity. Within the community, production is far more valued than consumption, granting new agency to cosplayers who, within the outside world, are constantly encouraged to buy, buy, buy a plethora of new and
different products. In cosplay, personal artistic achievement and ingenuity replace this refrain.

The social hierarchy of the cosplay world reflects such values. There are many different ways to make a cosplay, but they can generally be sorted into four categories: self-made, self-assembled, commissioned, or bought. Though there are other factors which affect the general reception of costumes, such as accuracy, originality, and popularity of the source material, the method of construction of a costume is generally the most important factor in its reception by convention audiences as well as fellow cosplayers in person and online. All of these techniques have a strong online presence, yet the resources dedicated to each as well as their reputations within the community differentiate them.

In an affront to the norms of fashion and the high-end designers who determine the average person’s style without their input or knowledge, the most celebrated method of costume construction within cosplay is to make it all yourself. Most cosplayers never considered creating their own clothing before they began to cosplay; however the internet as well as panel schedules are filled with helpful guides, tips, and tutorials for beginners to experts. As such, cosplayers of all levels of skill and experience come together over the creation process of a costume, and the community is thus formed around this collective production.

Tutorials are generally written by a cosplayer who has created the costume, costume piece, or prop before. Instead of hiding trade secrets, these cosplayers detail their method with clear directions and often with pictures. This sort of help is not only found on forums, either. The personal blogs and websites of many of the most
popular cosplayers feature tutorial sections detailing their methods. This collaborative and encouraging attitude which cosplayers have towards others, even toward others attempting to create the same exact costume, proves that the hierarchy within cosplay is based less on comparing one’s costume to another’s than personal achievement in terms of accuracy, fit, and method of construction.

Websites for cosplayers are archives of this culture of collaboration, both in the form of tutorials and in assisting with more personal challenges and questions. As of April 6, 2013, there were 763 threads and 8,881 posts in the sub-forum “Cosplay Tutorials” on the website Cosplay.com. These threads either offer or request tutorials on specific costume pieces or offer tutorials on how to work with different prop and accessory-making materials, fabrics, and wig types.

The support which is offered to cosplayers by fellow cosplayers reflects the shared process of drafting, sewing, crafting, and assembly that defines a self-made cosplay. Different sub-forums are also filled with cosplayers asking more specific questions of experienced crafters and seamstresses who frequent the site. Many of these users also post links to online sewing resources. The fact that these websites dedicated to sewing and crafting exist, yet cosplayers continue to flock to the cosplay websites for advice, shows the value which is placed on community as part of the cosplay process. Creating a skirt for a costume is not considered a DIY project by a

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cosplayer. It is a step in making the cosplay. The users on forums like Cosplay.com also understand that there are always more parts of a costume to be made.

Perhaps this is why cosplayers love talking about their creation process so much. In interviews, cosplayers who had sewn their entire costumes as well as those who had thrifted and modified pieces to create a costume were more than willing to volunteer their process and experience. At Otakon, 4th year-cosplayer Katelyn talked about how she spent “about 30 hours just to get the beads on [her costume] and to string them right.”\(^{110}\) Dedication to details like these is often unnoticed, but many cosplayers put in the time despite the tangible pay-off. Sweeney, a Jack Sparrow cosplayer also at Otakon detailed her acquisition of various parts of the costume, listing how many places she looked for the perfect pieces.\(^{111}\) “The cheapest part of the costume is the pants; these were 2 dollars at Goodwill. This [her vest] was about $70 on eBay. The wig I made myself because if I hadn’t it’s about $300... So I made each of these dreadlocks and then I ordered coins and then tied them in according to a wig chart. It helps you see where all the coins are placed.”

Here, Sweeney points to another factor which determines the type of cosplay a person will make: cost. Though creating a costume completely on one’s own can save

\(^{110}\) Katelyn (cosplayer, student) interview by author at Otakon, July 27, 2012.

\(^{111}\) Sweeney (cosplayer, student) interview by author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
money, it can also be the most expensive route. In a self-made costume, the cosplayer has many choices which determine the cost and time which must be committed to a costume. Fabric choices, as well as construction choices such as lining and the use of patterns vary the price and intensity of any project. They also impact the reception of the costume, however, and will often heavily impact a cosplayer’s entry into a costume contest or masquerade.

Sweeney said that she used the online forums and tutorials of two different Jack Sparrow costuming groups while making her own costume, but many cosplayers who choose less-popular characters are not so lucky as to have these resources. Instead, these cosplayers use more general tutorials, like videos and instructions for crafting foam armor, styling a wig with bangs, or sewing a floor-length skirt. Because there are more female cosplayers, there are more tutorials for female characters, which might be a factor in the gender divide often seen between female cosplayers, who more often hand-make their costumes, and male cosplayers, who more often modify thrifted clothing to create their cosplays.

The online archive of cosplay tutorials also applies to props. Cosplayers of all genders regularly use these tutorials to create additional pieces of their costumes, however there are, on average, more men who bring large, intricate props to conventions. This could be because of the popularity of male characters with giant swords, etc., or it could be an effect of mainstream gender roles which discourage men from sewing and instead lead them towards building parts of costumes. Because costume construction occurs outside the world of the convention, it is very possible that many cosplayers feel these pressures and choose to focus on either sewing or
crafting because of them, however the strong, alternative culture of gender bending and crossplaying within conventions confirms that these antiquated roles are not supported within the world of cosplay itself.

Making a full costume by hand means more to a cosplayer than just the respect from the community which comes with a hand-made costume. These more advanced skills also have important implications regarding a cosplayer’s agency. Most cosplayers begin costuming with altered store-bought items, though many eventually customize these more and more as they continue to cosplay and ultimately many begin to sew costume pieces and full outfits themselves. This is a gradual process for many. 24-year-old Britney from Virginia, for whom Otakon 2012 was her 7th Otakon, described how she has become more independent with her process as well as more skilled.112 “The last couple years I’ve slowly been learning how to sew for myself to eventually learn how to make my own cosplay without that much help.” Britney “initially had eight [costumes] planned” for Otakon yet “ended up doing five this weekend” because of various setbacks. Britney added that her experiences at conventions have “kind of changed what I want to do with my life… I want to do something where I’m interacting with this because I can’t see myself doing anything

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112 Britney (cosplayer, cashier) interview by author at Otakon, July 29, 2012.
else other than conventions [and] cosplay stuff…” It is clear to see that cosplay is a significant part of Britney’s life, in and out of the convention, not only because of the amount of work she puts in, but because through her quest to create her own costumes, she has transformed herself from a passive consumer into an independent producer capable of defining and creating her own identity.

Despite the complete control which a cosplayer like Britney has over her own costume and its creation, many cosplayers who use pre-fabricated pieces to create their costumes have a very similar feeling of agency, over both their own representation and over the costume pieces they repurpose. Chicago cosplayer Kiki, for instance, said at Anime World Chicago that her first costume was made out of clothing items she found at thrift stores and pre-made props which she modified in simple ways. Kiki, who is in her mid-20’s, had wanted to cosplay “for a long time,” however she thought that a costume needed to be completely homemade and “was afraid of going through the sewing machine.” When her friends told her differently, she decided to try it. Despite her limited role in the costume’s physical production, the creative and constructive energies which Kiki exerted to pull the costume together gave her a feeling of accomplishment and a connection with her character upon visiting her first convention in this outfit. She takes full ownership of her work, an agency which is connected to her ability to “feel more myself, free-spirited” at a convention. “It is your own experience, you know; this is your own hard work, your dedication.” Though an outsider might argue against this standpoint, most

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113 Kiki (cosplayer, student, artist) interview by author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
cosplayers would agree with Kiki that a non-sewn costume is just as liberating as a higher-esteemed home-sewn costume.

Many cosplayers are like Kiki and choose to cosplay with pre-sewn items of clothing because they do not possess the skill to sew a full costume on their own. Other cosplayers choose to use pre-made pieces because of the low cost. Even if a cosplayer strives for accuracy, different people have different amounts of free time and disposable income. There are no start-up costs to buying a shirt at Goodwill and drawing lines on it. One does not need to own a sewing machine to make pants a bit shorter: a pair of scissors and hot-glue gun will do just as well in a pinch. These methods may be thought of by more-experienced cosplayers as quick and dirty, but the costs of fabric and tools are prohibitive for some cosplayers.

It is also true that a cosplayer doesn’t have to spend a lot of money on a costume for it to be well-received and even wildly popular at a convention. A cosplayer who now calls himself Shredder after his wildly popular cosplay of Master Shredder from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, recounted at Dragon*Con how he had, in the past, spent up to “a thousand dollars” for an armored Halo costume, but the most popular he’d done were much cheaper.114 “I look at is I try to do something that a lot of people aren’t doing,” he explained. “The first one [cosplay] I did was a stormtrooper and there are tons of stormtroopers, but I soon realized that there are a lot of other characters that, you go around, and nobody does. Like, Shredder was one of them, and that was a rockstar. Robot Chicken was another one that was a rockstar. And it doesn’t have to be that much… [the] Robot Chicken and Shredder ones… ran

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114 Shredder (cosplayer, salesperson in medical industry) interview by author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
about 20 each.” Instead of spending a lot of money on these costumes, Shredder, who is about 50 years old and from Hawaii, spent time and creativity on making less-frequently-seen costumes out of cleverly refurbished clothes and other items.

The shopping involved in semi-homemade cosplay may make this method seem counteractive to cosplay’s critique of consumer culture. The ways in which purchased items are sought out and used, however, differentiates this sort of consumer activity from a normal shopping trip. When a cosplayer shops for or buys an everyday article of clothing with a costume in mind, this item no longer retains the symbolic meaning of a white collared shirt as it is understood in the outside world. Instead, these alternative intentions with which cosplayers buy costume pieces redefine the object in terms of the character and their world. Furthermore, unlike in other clothes or prop-based communities such as BDSM, everyday items are not avoided for their visual connection to the outside world or their connotations of “real social relations.” When they are used in cosplay, they are interpreted as parts of a whole costume which exists within the cosplay world instead of by their individual origins or as “pervertables.” Once an item of clothing is part of a costume it loses its real-world utility in the eyes of the cosplay world.

Though cosplayers strive to match what they see with what they wear, this is not to say that in recreating there is no creativity. Many times, cosplays are based on animated or drawn sources, meaning there are no real-life clothes to imitate. In these cases it is up to the cosplayer to interpret a real-life version of the character’s outfit. Even when working from a live-action source, a cosplayer almost never finds screen-

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116 Ibid., 123.
accurate costume pieces at a store. Instead, they employ many different methods to create what they see on a screen out of what they have to work with. This process applies to almost any purchase. Items are rarely left unaltered. This understanding with the community has led to some cosplayers even thinking about clothing purchases, especially from thrift stores, as supplies or raw materials.

Joe, an 18-year-old cosplayer from Pittsburg who came to Otakon in 2012 for the second year, is an avid costume creator.\(^{117}\) “I think making the costume is a whole big part of the experience and a big part of the cosplay,” he said. “I mean, you get to express yourself creatively… [and] see what you can do.” Though Joe only works from pre-made pieces, he obviously does not consider this style of costume construction unoriginal or creatively stifling. Instead, Joe offers his perspective on consuming versus producing as he describes his costume creation process. He says “I usually buy everything from thrift stores and then make or edit it myself.” Here, by ‘everything,’ he means all of the textile items he will need for the costume. “I don’t like buying things; I think it kind of ruins a bit of the fun,” Joe continues. A person might ask what exactly Joe means by saying that he buys everything he needs for a costume and then, immediately after, stating that he doesn’t like to buy things for a costume. It is exactly

\(^{117}\) Joe (cosplayer, student) interview by author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.
this contradiction in Joe’s statement which proves that he considers some types of consumerism vastly different from others. This division isn’t based on the place of purchase; it could refer to a purchase at a second-hand shop or any other store. Instead, it is reflective of whether or not the purchased item will be used as a finished product. In the first scenario, Joe is buying the means of production for a costume, whereas in the second he is stating his distaste for buying finished costume parts. Though the second-hand items Joe is buying are not bolts of fabric or unfinished pieces of clothing, he views them as such because of the different uses he has in mind for them.

One step of a found-item or thrift store cosplayer’s creative and constructive process is often based in the online cosplay community. There are countless threads within cosplay forums as well as updates on personal Facebook accounts of cosplayers in which they post pictures of various costume pieces and ask for feedback. What these cosplayers are looking for is an idea of community as well as convention audience response regarding accuracy, fit, and general aesthetics. In many cases, a thrifted costume won’t look picture perfect, but if the pieces match the attendee’s mental image of the character, the costume will receive a positive response.

Cosplayers who engage in this style of costuming sometimes display a different set of priorities. Instead of hand-crafting a costume to be spot-on accurate as most self-appointed master seamstresses attempt to do, some of these cosplayers value their audience’s opinions above their own. This difference in focus could be
rooted in the secondary place of thrifted cosplay within the social hierarchy of a convention and the cosplay community. Even if a costume may not win a craftsmanship contest or elicit respect from experienced cosplayers, it still has the potential to gain fans at a convention. It is true that many partially self-made costumes have stolen the lime light, so to say, of more masterly crafted ensembles because of their popularity with the crowd or the novelty of the idea represented.

In contrast to the creative control that cosplayers who handcraft or semi-handcraft their costumes enjoy, some choose to remove themselves even further from the production process by commissioning a costume instead. To commission a cosplay is to custom-order it from a website or an individual. This costume will be hand-made for the cosplayer, usually by another cosplayer, though sometimes by a professional costume designer or seamstress. Though this process is much less time and work intensive for the cosplayer, it is still very possible to devote a large amount of time and even creativity to the project, and it is almost always necessary to devote a sizeable amount of money. Though these costumes are homemade, because they are not made by the cosplayers themselves, they are less respected within the community than costumes homemade made by the cosplayer. Based on the quality of the costume, commissioned costumes are respected more or less than thrifted and customized costumes. This variability reveals the tension between accuracy and handcrafting. Though the act of personally creating a costume is highly respected within cosplay, the accuracy of a costume which has been made from scratch by
someone else often outweighs the regard of a costume which was self-made and less accurate.

Cosplayers who commission costumes are sometimes less involved with the online cosplay community and convention life in the everyday, however the same networks for reference and support are available for cosplayers looking to commission costumes as those who choose to make them. For example, there are 8,692 posts in Cosplay.com’s sub-forum “Commissioner Review,” which is dedicated solely to reviewing the work done by costume creators who take commissions in order to help other interested cosplayers choose a commissioner for their own costume.118 Once a cosplayer has chosen a costumer to work with, depending on the commissioner, they may have a range of preferences to communicate, such as the level of detail they’re expecting, a price range, or even an original design. Nate, who worked with a professional costume designer online to create his cosplay for Star Wars Celebration VI based his costume ideas on the art of a Star Wars computer game, though he made a lot of changes in order to achieve the original character and look he wanted.119 “I invested a lot of time coming up with the design” Nate said, of his Miralukan ensemble. “We basically wanted to capture the essence of a traditional Miralukan outfit, but also bring Star Wars back to its roots as far as how the Jedi were based off of Samurai, so there’s a little bit of Japanese influence.” As well as working with his designer on the concept, Nate invested a large amount of time sending the costume back and forth to his designer multiple states away so that it could fit him exactly.

119 Nate (cosplayer) interview by author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.
Other costumers’ websites convey the amount of work that can go into modifications like this. Teresa Dietzinger’s personal cosplay and commission website Amethyst’s Closet makes this point very clear in her rules for commissions.\textsuperscript{120} “I WILL TRY MY BEST TO MAKE YOUR PROJECT TO YOUR SPECIFICATIONS” she states. “You are allowed to make no more than THREE (3) successive changes to the project’s design after I have sent you progress pictures. Any more than 3 changes, and I shall have to start charging you an extra fee for my time and effort.” Though this may seem harsh, costume makers are respected in the community like any other artisan, and their time is either proven to be worth paying for or they stop receiving requests for work.

Regarding payment, a commissioned costume will almost always be more expensive than a thrifted and altered costume, and it is most often more expensive than home-sewn. Commissions do run the gamut in terms of prices, however, and it is sometimes possible to give a costume creator a price range to guide their material choices and addition of details. Once a commissioner has begun work on a project, however, there is generally no turning

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Ed_in_a_commissioned_costume_at_Anime_World_Chicago.png}
\caption{Ed in a commissioned costume at Anime World Chicago}
\end{figure}

back. Because of the cost of materials and labor, many costumers do not do refunds after this point. Ed, a long-time cosplayer who only commissions costumes or buys second-hand commissions describes his price range as “anywhere between 40 or 50 dollars on a costume to several hundred.” Though this is just one cosplayer’s spending, Ed’s costumes represent the range of cost and customization which defines commissions.

Though price is often a deciding factor in which creator a cosplayer will choose when they’re in the market for a commission, cosplayers who commission costumes are usually already quite invested in the character they’re looking to cosplay in other ways, such as character research and even emotional attachment. Because of this devotion to the character which leads some cosplayers to order a custom-made costume in the first place, the price is ultimately less of an issue.

An overwhelming love for a specific character is only one reason why a cosplayer might choose to commission a costume instead of creating it themselves or buying it pre-made. In that case, the cosplayer’s own skill level in terms of sewing and crafting is a factor as well. Even if a cosplayer is not extremely attached to a specific character, the desire for a well-crafted costume inspires many cosplayers of lower skill levels to seek out commissioned costumes. Though costumes define cosplay, the personal inability to construct one has not stopped many cosplayers. Nate from Celebration encourages potential cosplayers to reach out for assistance instead of seeing a lack of experience or talent as a prohibitive. “To anybody that might be thinking of doing this, even if you’re not too good at maybe making your own

121 Ed (cosplayer, warehouse manager) interview by author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
costume, there’s lots of costume designers out there that are willing to take on new commissions” he said. Indeed, he is right, and as cosplay keeps growing in popularity, there are more and more cosplayers willing to try their hand at costuming someone else.

As this independent commission market emerges to match the demand of a growing community of cosplayers, some worry that the same non-productive consumerist models of the outside world will follow this reproduction of a capitalist institution into the world of cosplay. While commissioning a costume might seem akin to buying one’s way into the community or like an outlet of modern consumerist impulses, this artisan market differs based on the type of products it supplies and how it supplies them. Because a cosplayer has to ask a commissioner to make them a costume before the outfit is made, the cosplayer has to begin the production process with their own choices and inspiration. It is true, however, that the social pressures which exist inside the cosplay world dictate that handmade costumes are more authentic and desirable than others, so commissions can be seen as a cosplayer’s attempt to conform to these norms through consumption. The fact that there is a productive way to do the same, however, and that this is more highly valued shows that alternative modes of consumption still dominate within cosplay.

Just as costumes define cosplay, a specifically hand-sewn costume is part of that definition for some cosplayers. Not all who share this opinion, however, have the time, tools, or skills to make themselves a costume. This is one popular reason for cosplayers to commission their costume. The privileged aesthetics of a hand-sewn

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122 Nate (cosplayer) interview by author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.
costume might also play a role in this choice. Because a commissioned costume is almost impossible to tell apart from a costume which the cosplayer made themselves, a commissioned costume can function as a way of buying status within the convention or cosplay community. Despite the potential for such a ploy, most cosplayers are very open about whether or not they made or commissioned their costume and who they chose to make it. Because commissioning is not looked down upon within the cosplay world, like buying a pre-made costume from a non-cosplay vendor is, these cosplayers rarely feel the need to cover up the origins of their costumes, and some even share this information because of the status attached to the commissioner’s name.

Though commissioned costumes are generally not as impressive to other cosplayers as self-made costumes, they are still highly regarded based on their quality and possibly even creator. For some popular or harder to make costumes, there are specific sellers who have made names for themselves in very niche markets. One of these artists is Jamin Fite, a successful sculptor, castor, and painter of replicas of Princess Leia’s slave bikini (from Star Wars: Episode VI) on his website Leia’s Metal Bikini. Though Jamin mostly sells minimally-customizable costume sets, he also does much more elaborate commissions. As the top name in the metal bikini

A cosplayer in one of Jamin Fite’s bikinis at Star Wars Celebration VI in Orlando.

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business, a bikini by Jamin commands a reasonable amount of respect in the Star Wars cosplaying world. (They are accurate enough to be approved by the Rebel Legion costuming group.) Though it is extremely challenging to create close-to screen accurate metal bikini, those who commission special orders aren’t looking for this perfect accuracy. Instead, these are original concepts. The motivation behind these commissions is often a desire for something different, but also a desire for a specific artisan’s work, as in this case, a personalized bikini made by Jamin.

Cosplayer Liz Fett, 18, from New York, recently ordered a bikini from Jamin which was painted, lined, and styled to be a Boba Fett-themed Leia costume: something that would never appear in canon, but an interesting deviation from the norm and an expression of a fan’s specific enthusiasm for the two characters. “Since the slave bikini is such a popular costume, I wanted to give myself some uniqueness,” she explains. Even though Jamin is the expert, Liz was still the creative mastermind of the project. “I designed the bikini myself, and Jamin took care of the rest!”

Finally, the act of making a costume is just not interesting to some cosplayers. As odd as it may seem, creating a costume is not something every cosplayer likes or even wants to do. Even though they may dislike the process of costume construction, these cosplayers still enjoy being in costume and the experience of being at the convention in costume. For someone like Ed from AWC, cosplaying is about the con. “It’s fun; I’ve got a lot of friends, it’s always amusing seeing what’s come out, seeing new things, meeting new people,” he describes.124 “There’s usually a little bit of drama, [a] little bit of excitement. There’s always something fun to do.” Ed has been

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124 Ed (cosplayer, warehouse manager) interview by author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.
attending conventions and cosplaying for 17 years. In that time, he has made “about ten or twelve” costumes. He has “owned, on the other hand, …about two or three hundred.” While Ed is a special case unto himself, he represents the type of cosplayer who is much more interested in experiencing the con while in the con than attempting to connect with that feeling outside of the convention by working on a costume.

These cosplayers might still be interested in connecting with convention friends outside of the one or two weekends a year they join them at a convention, but they don’t participate in this through construction.

The final way to cosplay is to buy a costume completely premade. This method of cosplay comes the closest to and sometimes includes outright mainstream consumerism. For this reason, some members of the community do not consider this cosplay. This judgment is strongly based on where the costume was purchased and whom it was produced by. The most respected and acceptable purchased costume comes from another cosplayer. This person might be selling an old commission made for them or their own work. Either way, this exchange keeps the business within the community and is still supporting the creator of the one-of-a-kind piece. Buying a costume like this on the cosplay.com marketplace or through individual cosplayers is the most respected way to go about this because it is the most insular. Making the purchase through a forum or a cosplayer’s specific website also allows the seller and the customer to learn more about each other before exchanging goods. The product can often be confirmed as the way it was described through pictures of the seller at conventions or meet-ups wearing the costume and if there is any problem with the
transaction, the larger cosplay community can be involved, either through forum
moderators or fellow cosplayers.

Buying the same handmade, one-of-a-kind costume on eBay or Taobao, China’s eBay, is somewhat less of a ‘cosplay’ thing to do. This exchange does not have the same level of familiarity about it, and cosplayers often post on the forums asking whether or not a particular seller can be trusted. Because of the close involvement of the outside world, the feeling of a community exchange is no longer present.

The inclusive marketplace of a cosplay forum or individual seller is mimicked by some online stores which sell premade costumes produced in factories instead of homes. Though some unfortunately naïve cosplayers may be duped by fake pictures of merchandise or fake reviews, a costume bought from a site like this is easily recognizable at a convention, and not in a good way. Though a customer has spent time and money finding this costume and purchasing it, costumes like these are not respected in the community or at conventions and are sometimes not even considered cosplay by certain community members. These outfits are most similar to a costume you would buy at a Halloween store: a sort of costume that, worn un-altered, is generally not considered cosplay.

In contrast to this general distaste for bought costumes, there are certain parts of a cosplay that cannot be self-produced. These are the wigs, shoes, and makeup which go into a costume. Shoes and makeup, which obviously cannot be handcrafted, nor are they ever expected to be by members of the cosplay community, function in a very similar way to clothes or other items bought to be re-purposed by a cosplayer.
These items are used as part of the costume, not as ways to augment the wearer’s own identity or place in society.

Wigs are another story. Because the wigs which are bought for cosplay are almost always produced explicitly for that purpose, there is no redefinition of the product involved in the purchase. Using colorful costume wigs for cosplay is not the same thing, however, as buying a skirt to wear to work. These sales are from small cosplay companies to cosplayers, so the exchange is kept within community. Despite this insularity, however, wigs have become an interesting exception to the general cosplay ideal of a separation from consumerism. Unlike costumes, the expense of a wig is part of what determines its respectability within cosplay.\textsuperscript{125} Furthermore, even characters with a natural hair color which could be achieved through styling or dying a cosplayer’s real hair is looked down upon by many cosplayers as a cheap and easy route.

This intensity can be understood simply and unfortunately an effect of the consumerist outside world, in which the best and newest wig is always the most desirable; however there is also a different possible reason for some cosplayers to be so seemingly elitist about fake hair. This is the implication of the wig. Though some costumes require a wig for the character to be recognizable, the wig itself symbolizes a goal of perfect accuracy which is an ideal among cosplayers. While it is possible to use your real hair for some cosplays, the choice to use a wig instead shows that the

\textsuperscript{125} "I don’t want to spend money on an expensive wig. Why can't I just get one at Party City?" There is nothing I can do to stop you from buying a crap wig, but keep in mind, you will NEVER be truly satisfied with a wig of such poor quality, and it will make your costume appear cheap (even if you poured hours of your time and effort into it)…” Ghost613, “Common Questions About Wig Styling,” Cosplay.com, last modified March 4, 2008, http://www.cosplay.com/showpost.php?p=2183413&postcount=1.
cosplayer is dedicated to replicating the exact shade, length, and style of the character’s, as well as with the permanence which a wig offers as opposed to hair which will grow, change shade, and lose a style more quickly. I believe that a cosplayer’s choice to use a wig is motivated by this pursuit of accuracy, however a cosplayer’s choice of wigs when it comes to brand, material, etc. is motivated by a mixture of the two factors described above. The relative weights of these reasons depend on the cosplayer personally and their unique relationship with the cosplay community and the outside world.

With all of the effort which goes into these different ways of acquiring a costume, the process of making or finding a cosplay is just as important as a convention in defining a cosplayer and the cosplay community. By engaging in this sort of preparatory work of cosplay, cosplayers are thinking ahead to the convention, their goals for the costume, and to future costumes and possibilities. This cosplay mindset and subjectivity defines a cosplayer and, in turn, brings the community closer together.

Though most cosplayers make their costumes individually and using different methods, there is a shared mindset and worldview which accompanies these
actions. Often discussed on cosplay forums and other social media, such as Facebook and Tumblr, seeing the world through the eyes of a cosplayer is not a single-weekend phenomenon for community members. Instead, the shared experiences and common aims of cosplayers establish the same common ground as meeting someone else in costume at a convention provides. Because of their shared lens of cosplay, community members continue making new cosplay friends and looking for new costume ideas while outside of a convention. This cosplay subjectivity has created a lifestyle out of a hobby.

An investment in the physical culture of cosplay has the ability to augment everyday life. “You look at things in a different way,” says cosplayer Shredder at Dragon*Con.126 “When you’re walking down the toy store aisle, you have little pieces here and there, like if you paint this and put it with this costume, like this piece, if you cut it up a certain way, it would work really well for certain armory and things like that. So it’s just a different kind of thinking that will help you achieve your goals...” This kind of thinking is precisely the alternative mindset which separates cosplay from mass consumer culture. Instead of looking an item and being influenced by its branding or marketing, cosplayers see the ways in which an item can be taken apart or recreated for their own purposes.

Eva, a 22 year-old from Chicago, thinks about cosplay in the same way.127 “It’s kind of constant. I go to Goodwill maybe twice a week and I just scan, and I have a list in my head of ten things I need for upcoming cosplays or to fix a cosplay.

126 Shredder (cosplayer, salesperson in medical industry) interview by author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.
127 Eva (cosplayer, student, dog groomer) interview by author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 9, 2012.
I’m always thinking about it.” Eva has lets the things she finds inspire her to make new cosplays. In regards to the costume she was wearing at the time, during our interview at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, she said “I found the trench coat a few days ago at Goodwill and I sat there and I thought about it and I was like well, I have everything else that I need,” so she assembled the pieces necessary, customized a special agent badge, and wore the completed costume to the con.

Though not everyone in the cosplay community is as consciously invested in it as these two individuals, almost every cosplayer I talked to lit up at the opportunity to discuss their creation process. Even those who bought pieces online detailed their decision-making process regarding who they bought from and the design. These experiences, though they are unique to the cosplayer because of the vast diversity of character and techniques represented within cosplay, affirm the place of cosplayers in the community.

Cosplayers don’t just talk about their accomplishments or their progress when they’re asked, either. Many cosplayers maintain online blogs, journals, and websites which describe their costume making, ideas for new cosplays, and more, but most are centered on costume creation. Others use Facebook to post updates on the construction of their costumes and their ideas for future cons, costumes, and source material. The use of Facebook is especially interesting because of the mixed friend groups, including cosplay friends and non-cosplay friends, that a person will most likely be sharing their cosplay-related content with. Though some people have multiple accounts for their different interests, most of the cosplayers I talked with had just one account and disregarded the lines they blurred by sharing their cosplay
thoughts and progress with friends who were uninvolved with the community. Others choose never to post cosplay pictures or statuses on their Facebook, either because they fear negative reactions from friends or family or because they prefer to keep the two worlds separate.

Within the community, however, the attention to construction methods and materials is omnipresent. At Otakon 2012 alone, there were over 10 panels on cosplay creation and presentation during the three day convention. These panels were clearly based on the assumption that a cosplayer’s goal was to constantly improve their skills and their costumes through more refined methods and more challenging designs. Other panels focused on teaching new skills, such as leather working or character makeup application. These panels are also instrumental in creating and enforcing the hierarchy of construction techniques within cosplay. Panels establish fully self-made costumes as the ultimate goal and highest achievement of any cosplayer. Thus, these cornerstones of conventions teach new cosplayers the rules of the game, for better or for worse.

To be fair, these panels are almost all run by fans themselves, so what is being reproduced is a set of beliefs which already exists within the community, however the negative effects this sort of rhetoric has on altered or thrifted cosplay is often overlooked. Despite the large percentage of cosplayers who make their costumes with some premade items, there are very rarely panels which focus on this method of construction. Besides its intense separation from consumer culture, fully self-sewn costumes also benefit from an age dynamic in which older cosplayers of this

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generation, those in their their late 20’s or 30’s, have, by that point, almost always turned to self-made costumes. Whether or not this is a progression in cosplay or just a trend or change in preferences is debatable, but to a younger cosplayer, it often seems as though part of maturing as a cosplayer is turning to complete self-production.

Entry into masquerade and costume contests is another motivation for cosplayers to personally make their costumes. While different conventions have different rules for these events, 51-60% self-made is generally the standard for entry into the craftsmanship portion of a competition. This rule is reflective of the point of the contest, which is to display your skill as a seamstress as well as a costume creator. Despite the requirements for entry, these contests are still more encouraging of creative expression than they are damnatory of a costumer’s use, or even reappropriation, of consumer goods. By allowing up to 40 or 50% of a costume to be bought and altered, the convention leaderships themselves are showing their open stance towards different styles of cosplay.

Ultimately, there are many different ways to cosplay. The plethora of resources online and at conventions enable cosplayers to engage in the craft any way they’d like, however they also reinforce the dominance of hand-made costumes. Because the costume is a defining part of cosplay, the materials which go into a costume have a large impact on how a cosplayer will be received and treated in the cosplay community. The ideals of separation from the outside world and the inherent critique which this goal presents are reflected in this hierarchy of material culture, by placing completely self-defined costumes, which never had a social meaning in the
outside world, at the very top and those which are sold by non-cosplayer companies and produced en masse at the very bottom. In this way, the artisan culture of cosplay as well as the value placed on self-made cosplay are maintained.
Cosplay: In Living Color

All day I had felt a bit ill. Perhaps it was the anxiety of making a 6am flight hours early after the gut-wrenching despair and panic I’d felt the previous day when I realized that my original flight had left earlier that morning. Or maybe it was the cowboy boot-wearing, chewing tobacco-spitting man who sat, and spat, next to me for six hours on my rescheduled flight to Dallas. It surely didn’t help that, when we finally landed, I was met by a cab driver who insisted that, oh no, I did not want to stay at that inn. I should find another place, despite my non-refundable reservation. And then there was the man who proved the cabbie right as he tried to convince me that, because he had helped me with my luggage, I should buy him alcohol and invite him into my room that evening. When I finally got into a second cab that would take me to the anime convention I had come to Dallas for, it was just an hour and a half before the panel I felt I needed to make in order to salvage what was left of the day, which I had so far wasted in airports. By this point I was more than ill; I was positively woozy.

As the cab rolled up to the convention, I felt a final surge of nerves course through me. I had a job to do here, a people to understand, but how could I possibly do such a thing if the whole world, it seemed, kept conspiring against me at every turn? With this fatalistic resignation weighing heavily upon me, I entered the exhibition hall’s large glass doors, beginning my fieldwork for this project.

Immediately, I could tell that I had been transported to a different place. It was strikingly obvious from the way that people inside the convention were smiling at each other, talking with each other, and strolling around confidently in all manners of
fantastic dress: this was not the same world. As I took my place at the end of the very long registration line, I anxiously checked the time. There was just over an hour left before the panel. As the line inched along, I should have been getting more and more nervous, but instead my anxiety was fading away. This was a safe place, a place where the utterly unapologetic nerdiness pervading the convention hall instantly bonded strangers and invited them to join in.

The line wound its way around the perimeter of the huge open first floor, past dealers’ tables full of dice bags, clip-on tails, sets of art pens, volumes of manga, and more. Cosplayers flowed steadily past as they examined these same tables and were often stopped and asked for photographs. The number and diversity of cosplayers surprised me, as I had been half-expecting there to be just a few costumed attendees, and that those who were brave enough to defy the bigotry which I was sure dominated Texas would be hardened warriors of rebellion. Instead, cosplayers of
every genre and demographic strolled past as I waited in line, smiles lighting up their faces and no hint at all that they were defying any norms.

Still trying to process this, I progressed to the far side of the hall and could tell that I was finally nearing the registration tables. J-Pop (Japanese pop) music blasting from somewhere not too far off got steadily louder as the line inched closer to its head. As we rounded a corner, I could finally see its source. A group of people, between 16 and 30 years old, sat along the perimeter of a make-shift ‘stage’ (duct tape on the ground delineated its borders from the rest of the open space) as many more stood behind them, watching. Inside this ring of spectators, fans performed intricate dances to the energetic Japanese music pumping from the large speakers at the back of the square. As the line wove around this group, different people got up to dance, song after song. These renditions of what were, I eventually figured out, the bands’ original choreography were met with thunderous applause, even when dancers seemed initially nervous or shy. As numbers finished, the dancers were invariably congratulated on their skills and enveloped back into the standing or sitting crowd as the showcase continued. The girl in front of me in line started chattering excitedly to her two companions about the J-Rock band that was to perform at the convention later that night. This was definitely not the Texas I had expected.

When we finally neared the registration tables, the duct tape line along the ground which had been guiding us this whole way became dotted with text. “You’re almost there!” read one of the messages scrawled in silver sharpie across the tape. Other excited notes and signatures of cosplay names peppered the ground, silently adding to the buzz of anticipation which swept across us in our last leg of the journey.
45 minutes after stepping into the convention, I proudly laid my badge around my neck and looked back at the line I had just left. I was now an official part of the convention, but also more than that; I was beginning to understand the convention mindset and everything else that separated this place from the world which was just a set of glass doors away.

As I have imparted throughout this thesis, a convention is a liberating and alternative space because it consciously separates itself from the outside world. Cosplayers are often attracted to conventions and cosplay itself because of their non-confrontational transgression of constraining norms. Within this almost fictional realm of the convention, cosplayers are free to define themselves and their narratives as they will, and they are surrounded by others engaged in the same expressions of agency. However, this is not to say that a convention can solve all of one’s problems or that I never felt out of place or uneasy at a con. Even as they praised the inclusiveness and safety of a convention, most cosplayers never attended a convention without a friend or a group to meet up with. As a novice in the world of cosplay and conventions, I had a lot to learn, and I did, mostly by myself, but my brief meetings with cosplayers taught me more than I could have asked or expected.

I wasn’t completely clueless about cosplay when I started off, but I definitely had a ways to go before I could understand the different themes and motivations within this culture and craft. At the beginning of the summer of 2012, I had only ever been to two conventions, and both were Chicago’s Comic Con. Most importantly, these experiences sparked my interest in cosplay, and as I went to more conventions
my love for it grew. Going to Comic Con also gave me some idea of what to expect at other conventions; however, because this con is more of an expo than a convention, I was still in the dark about a lot of things.

What initially attracted me to cosplay was the idea that other people could enjoy wearing costumes as much as I. As far back as I can remember, I took every opportunity to dress up. My sister and I always wore elaborate Halloween costumes, thanks to our mother and her sewing machine and encouragement of our creative projects. As I got older, I began looking for more and more excuses to dress up. In middle school, every Friday the 13th I convinced my friends to go “goth” with me. For small holidays I would put together entire themed outfits, and during high school I began dressing up, or cosplaying as it became known to me later, for the birthdays of my favorite fictional characters.

The opportunity to reject the dominant norms of dress was empowering to me, and it still is. Now, even having cosplayed within a convention at which the majority of the attendees were also dressed up, I still get a thrill from putting on clothes that aren’t normal. Instead of focusing on ignoring the judging looks and derogatory
comments, I now look forward to receiving compliments on my creations and meeting others who have put in the same effort and share the risks that come along with sacrificing normalcy to express yourself.

This is not to say that the former doesn’t still happen. Conventions, as it has been said time and time again, can never exist within a perfect bubble. They are easily permeable, despite the best efforts of cosplayers to block out the biases of the outside world. While I have rarely felt judged for wearing a costume to a convention, I have been made painfully aware of the friction between sexual and gender norms at a convention versus the outside world. There is a uniquely uncomfortable feeling that comes with being told “only someone who looks like you” is “skinny enough to do that costume.”¹²⁹ No matter what inspired this sort of comment, from the intent to compliment to resentment to plain old sexism, it betrays the mainstream values which are still at work within conventions. Obviously unsettled by these outside influences, as well as the limited agency I now felt in my own costume, I looked to the Internet and other cosplayers for their reaction.

Unfortunately, cosplayers often respond to such comments by hastening too far in the opposite direction. Though the cosplay community as a whole purports to promote bodies of all shapes and sizes, both online and at conventions, I was disheartened to realize that it often makes the same oversight as many online campaigns for body acceptance. Instead of celebrating all body types, these often-popular posts on Facebook and on Tumblr blogs demonize and reject the mainstream image of bodies which are socially recognized as worthy of social acceptance.

sexualization, and pride. To its own detriment, the same rhetoric can be seen in the cosplay community. This misplaced prejudice comes from positioning one’s argument in direct opposition to dominant views instead of creating an independent alternative definition of beauty or a socially acceptable body.

This experience is indicative of one of the major setbacks of the cosplay community. The preoccupation with opposing the outside world and mainstream ideals is keeping the cosplay community from creating its own set of ideals which are truly independent from the outside world. Especially at newer conventions and among younger or newer cosplayers, this rhetoric of inside v. outside or the convention v. the everyday is interpreted as a set of opposites. Ideally, a convention exists without regard to the outside world, so this one-to-one opposition is nonsensical, however this is not yet the case. As conventions gain a more consistent attendee-base, as they have in the past five years, they will hopefully continue to move closer to the establishment of a more complete world within the convention, and ideally one which is not defined in comparison to the everyday.

Throughout this summer I wore many different costumes to conventions. Initially, I attended cons in the same sort of loosely-interpreted, somewhat thrown-together costumes which I had worn to Chicago Comic Con in past years; however, exposure to convention culture quickly inspired me to try something more challenging. I ended up making three costumes which I wore consistently to conventions. Because I wore these same costumes to almost all of the conventions I
attended, this also gave me further insight into the differences between these cons based on my costumes’ reception.

The first of these three cosplays I actually began in December 2011. It was then that I had confirmed my attendance at Star Wars Celebration VI, and I was excited to cosplay a character from, naturally, the Star Wars universe. Summer 2011, my sister and I attended Chicago Comic Con in costumes we made based on interesting clothing we’d found at Goodwill. We ended up creating original characters within the Star Wars mythos and using face paint and Styrofoam horns to make these characters part of an alien race called Zabraks. While researching this species in order to create these original characters, I found an article describing a Zabraki character I hadn’t come across before.130 This character, named Maris Brood, stood out to me because of her character design and her story131, so in December when I was deciding upon a costume to make for Celebration, I thought of this character. Because she lacked the usual facial and body tattoos of a Zabrak, Maris looked more human than others of her species such as the famous character Darth Maul, however her seven

131 Maris Brood was a character in the video game Star Wars: The Force Unleashed. She was in training to be a Jedi when her Master was killed. Brood then turned to the Dark Side, but, after combat with the main character of the game, was left with ambiguous loyalties and an equally ambiguous resolution.
blood red vestigial horns showed a sort of harsh beauty that I found alluring, and just the right amount of challenge for a newer cosplayer like myself.

I started to work on my next costume after returning from Texas at the beginning of June. While at A-Kon, I was inspired by the number and variety of steampunk ensembles at the convention. I had never seen those sorts of dresses and props before in person, and the detail that went into what I saw was amazing. Upon returning from the con, I kept my eyes open for pieces of old jewelry, machines, and clothes which could be modified to use as a costume or prop for a steampunk character of my own. Once I found a dress at a thrift shop which seemed to match the aesthetic I was going for, I began to create the character and the costume around this piece. This dress was casual, yet it had industrial and sort of Victorian-looking details to it. Based on these details and the type of props I wanted to try my hand at (goggles, some simple leather-working) I created a story for this character and let the narrative drive my subsequent creative choices.

Because my Maris Brood costume was not finished until August, I started looking around in June for another character to cosplay at my upcoming conventions. This round of character selection was driven by a shortage of time, so I searched for
character with easily-recognizable designs. Because I was looking for a cosplay to make just so that I could be in cosplay at these upcoming events, I went through iconic characters and their defining features. After a few days of research, I settled on the DC Comics villain Poison Ivy. This character is standard fare at any comic con and many multi-genre conventions as well. In order to be recognized as Poison Ivy, all a cosplayer really needs is an all-green outfit and long red hair.

The green dress I used for my ‘formal’ version of Ivy’s costume, which is usually a green leotard, was made by modifying a dress I already owned in the interest of time and also because it worked well for the character. Finding a wig posed a bigger challenge. Despite the many wig-sellers online, I started this costume too close to Otakon, my second convention, to buy a wig from overseas. Anything domestic was simply too expensive for my minimal dedication to this character to warrant. Ultimately, I had to settle for a plastic, non-heat-resistant, $20 curly red wig from a party store. I was initially terrified to wear this cheap wig to a convention. I had read online about how a Halloween wig like this could ruin a costume, and no one should ever buy one, however without spending upwards of $50, I had no other choice.\footnote{\textit{Ghost613, “Common Questions About Wig Styling.” Cosplay.com, last modified March 4, 2008, http://www.cosplay.com/showpost.php?p=2183413&postcount=1.}} Despite this fear of judgment and rejection, I wore this wig to Otakon, Chicago Comic Con, and Dragon*Con.

The reception of my costume at these conventions was almost unanimously positive. At Otakon, not one person criticized my wig, and one person even asked if it was my real hair. This positive response made a huge difference in my opinion of this costume and encouraged me to continue wearing it to conventions. At Chicago
Comic Con, there were a plethora of Ivy cosplayers, and despite my avoidance the open spaces at the convention (in favor of hunting out unoccupied cosplayers to interview) I was stopped consistently and complimented on the costume or asked for a picture. Finally, at Dragon*Con, I abandoned my reservation and attended a convention-wide DC Comics photo shoot. The turn-out was astounding, and as I stood atop the amphitheater steps with other “non-canon” cosplayers, I was proud of the work I’d put into my costume.

Besides these three costumes, I made one more cosplay which I only wore to one convention; however this final costume was the only one I made 100% from scratch. One week before I left for the Star Wars convention, Celebration VI, I was struck by a passing thought. All summer I had been interested in the idea of doing a mash-up costume. These, which I had been seeing all summer, are costumes which take two ideas or two characters and combine them into one original concept. Steampunk versions of comic book or Disney characters, for example, could often be
found at large conventions. Wouldn’t it be funny, I thought, to make a “Rave” Leia instead of Slave Leia, in her metal bikini from episode VI, with elements of the costume replaced by things found in rave culture, like glow sticks and beads. Though I expected the costume to be a little bit challenging, I figured I could finish it in a day or two before heading down to Florida, and that it would be a fun alternative to the classic Leia outfit and a nice break from my main Star Wars costume, Maris Brood, which involved heavy makeup. I did not know what I was getting myself into, both in terms of crafting and convention culture; however I learned a great deal, but not without a great deal of (unnecessary) stress.

As I began making the Leia costume, I got more and more invested in the idea and my standards and expectations for it grew. This throw-away costume which was supposed to take a day ended up taking a whole week, many trips to the craft store, a late night at the sewing machine, and hours of beading and looking at reference pictures to complete. When I was finally done, I couldn’t help but be a little disappointed. Here I was, having devoted all of this time to a silly costume which was intentionally a parody, and therefore inaccurate. Yet after the hours I’d spent getting all the little things right, even if it was through beads and not a plastic mold, I began to desire the accuracy of the real thing.

When it was time for Celebration VI, I was nervous about the way my costume would be received. I was worried that no one would get the pun the costume was built on—rave/slave—and it would end up being interpreted as an odd homemade version of the classic costume. While this anxiety over my blatant inaccuracy was bad enough, my growing desire to become a part of the Princess Leia
costuming community I had uncovered through my research on the costume and the convention made my opinions on my own costume even more troubled. While I was proud of the work I had put into it, pictures of super-accurate costumes which I kept finding online served as constant reminders of my shortcomings.

Through this research, I found that there was an annual Slave Leia photo shoot at the Celebration conventions, however comparing my Model Magic\textsuperscript{133} and spray paint bikini to those of the women in past years’ shoots made me want to hide my costume more than show it off. As a non-traditional Leia, I was also extremely unsure of my place within this sub-community of Leia costumers and whether I’d be welcome at their gatherings. Ultimately, I was convinced by my family and the friend I was in Florida with to at least wear the costume I had spent so much work on to other days of the convention.

My first day at the convention, I walked into the convention as Rave Leia, and immediately had to piece back together a part of the bikini that was breaking off (Model Magic is not a strong crafting material, it turns out). My disappointment and frustration with the outfit resurfaced, yet I was quickly pulled away from my preoccupation by a man with a camera. “Leia, can I get a picture?” he called and I quickly abandoned my repair project and smiled. “See, it looks fine,” repeated my friend as the man walked away. I was stunned that this costume which I had been hesitant to wear, even before the damage it had suffered in transport, had been so easily accepted as a part of the convention.

\textsuperscript{133} A light air-dry clay popular in crafting.
As the day went on, I became more confident in the costume, but I was still shocked when, later that day, I was approached by a person I didn’t recognize, but whose name I did. Jamin Fite, the creator of the commission website and forums dedicated to Leia’s metal bikini costume, introduced himself and invited me to the photo shoot the following day. Amazed to be acknowledged by this master of plastic and resin casting who sold screen-accurate, $300 versions of my costume, I fumbled for words. “Oh my gosh, you’re Jamin!? Thank you so much for posting your reference pictures! I used them so much!” I finally uttered and confirmed that I would be at the shoot. With a gracious nod and a flier for the after party he was co-hosting (Slave Leias get in free) he walked off into the crowded show floor. This sort of interaction, though it may seem insignificant now, is the type of thing which is most important for new cosplayers. It was said in many interviews, but as someone who has experienced this sort of validation from a respected member of the cosplay community, I can confirm that a positive and inclusive attitude regarding cosplay is an invaluable trait for the community to cultivate and maintain.

When I came to constructing my costumes, I used several different methods. For my Poison Ivy costume, I did a half-closet cosplay, using and altering a dress I already owned and buying one new piece, the wig, to complete the look. For my steampunk character, I found many elements of my costume in thrift stores or garage sales, but I also created many things from scratch, like a pair of spats from the extra fabric for my Maris Brood costume and a pair of goggles from scrap leather, jar tops, and paint. This costume allowed me to experiment with different creation techniques
which I had witnessed at different conventions. This costume ultimately totaled about $25-30.

While making my Maris Brood cosplay, I had accuracy as my first priority. With this in mind, I spent a lot more time on the individual pieces, making mock-ups before cutting into my real fabric or prop materials. Though I learned a lot of new techniques by making this costume, I didn’t tie myself to thrifting, hand-crafting, or any other specific mode of costume making in order to complete this. Instead, I focused on making it as accurate as possible, and therefore determined which parts I should make, buy, and alter.

The top and all of the accessories and horns I made from start to finish. My pants I knew I could not plausibly make, so I spent weeks looking through Goodwill stores and the Internet to find a pair which I could buy and alter to fit my specifications. Finally, the tall leather boots which Maris Brood wears were all I had left to find. One night, during spring break of 2012, I was at a store with my family and, as my sister looked through shoes for something she needed, I wandered over to the boot section. Out of curiosity I tried on the one pair in my size and found that they would work perfectly for the costume. To my dismay, they were priced like tall leather boots, despite being marked down for spring. I started to take them off, figuring that I’d have to just keep looking online.

“Are those the ones?” I turned and saw my mom standing over my shoulder. From my initial interest in cosplay to my swan dive into its social and physical culture, my family had been completely supportive of my personal and academic obsession with costumes and cosplay. I had been working on Maris Brood for months
by then, and my mother had quickly realized what accuracy meant to me for this costume. “If those are right and you’ll wear them for other things, don’t pass them up. You won’t find something this perfect again. Let’s get them.” So we did. With the $80 pair of boots, about $125 went into constructing Maris Brood, but I worked on the costume bit by bit from December to August to make sure that everything was just right.

Rave Slave Leia, as I mentioned, was supposed to be a quick and easy costume, but ended up being anything but. This costume challenged me every step of the way, from materials to construction, and even in transport. With such delicate pieces, getting all the way to Florida from Chicago necessitated that I pack extremely carefully and also bring back-ups. The stress from the unexpected challenges of this costume tried my till-then congenial relationship with my family when it came to costumes, but when you realize that your Model Magic won’t set for another six hours and you’re using your own body as a mold, and it’s already midnight, tempers tend to flare. As I said, this is only the first costume I’ve made completely by hand, but after doing so I can empathize.
with cosplayers who say their craft doesn’t make sense to their family or that their parents support it but don’t get it. I realized that when a cosplayer told me this they were just giving me the bare bones of the situation. It is almost impossible for someone who is not involved in cosplay to understand why making a costume to certain specifications or for a specific convention could be as important as it seems and is to a cosplayer. Because costumes are not made within conventions but instead in the outside world, there is always a tension between the surrounding everyday mentalities regarding how much a costume should matter and how much time it should take and the cosplay mentality that a cosplayer brings with them into their costume construction. These divergent priorities are challenging to navigate, especially when they occur between a cosplayer and their family.

As my research at conventions progressed, I continued to keep some distance, both intentionally and unintentionally, from experiencing the convention as just a cosplayer. I saw my primary goal at cons as scoping out informative interviews and panels, so I always had this in mind even when I went to a panel or event just because I was interested in it. Though I am very happy with the sources I ended up with by going about conventions in this way, I have also realized that there’s a different sort of understanding of cosplay which I gained from relaxing more at a convention.

As I mentioned earlier, I went to almost all of these conventions by myself. The last two cons I attended, however, were with one or more friends, primarily to offset the cost of a hotel room since both of these conventions were far from home. These were Star Wars Celebration VI in Orlando and Dragon*Con in Atlanta. At
Celebration, I had a palpably different experience than any of the other conventions I had attended. I believe that a few different factors played into this difference, but one of them was definitely my choice to take some time to just be a fan and a cosplayer.

This wasn’t hard at Celebration. Since I had been planning on going to this convention for almost nine months by the time I got there, I was definitely the most excited to be at this convention. This was also a convention centered around the fandom I most closely identified with compared to the anime and comic book conventions I’d been to throughout the rest of the summer. Though I was even more at home at Dragon*Con with its multi-genre sci-fi and fantasy focus, Celebration was a very new thing for me. Another perk of knowing I was going to Celebration early was the ability to start on my costume early. After working on my Maris Brood cosplay for eight months and researching (and developing a passion for) her character and her world for just as long, I was anxious to unveil my creation.

From the moment I stepped in the door at Celebration I could tell what I had been missing at other conventions. I was so excited about what there was to do and see, I temporarily forgot about taking all of it down. With this liberated mindset, I looked at my fellow cosplayers in a different way. Because I was invested in the fandom, I was interested in these people’s costumes and construction just out of my own curiosity, but, as I met these people, cosplayer to cosplayer, I was also interested in them personally, as potential friends. This impulse to form connections which would last longer than the four days of the convention is an undeniable part of cosplay, but a part I had been missing at the other conventions.
As other fans and cosplayers introduced themselves to me and my friend and started conversations about our costumes, Star Wars, or even just the convention, I could tell that our visual belonging to this convention world had served as an invitation to engage with us more personally. Through cosplay, we not only showed that we were interested in the same series and characters as these strangers, we showed our level of dedication to the stories and our choice to express it in opposition to the norms of society.

Perhaps the height of this feeling of camaraderie came at the Slave Leia photo shoot. Though I knew that this gathering was a tradition at Celebration, I was still a bit uneasy about the thought of so many other people wearing the same costume as me. In other conventions, this sort of doubling-up sometimes happened, but to a much smaller degree, and even though there are regularly group photo shoots at cons based on series, a group of only Slave Leias seemed impossibly specific to me. I was also anxious that such a revealing and culturally iconic costume such as Leia’s bikini would attract a mix crowd, as in non-cosplayers. Some cosplayers who I’d interviewed had mentioned a feeling of competition which they sometimes felt while in cosplay, especially when they saw another person as the same character. As Poison Ivy, I’d felt this small stab of envy upon seeing other more-accurate or more-detailed versions of the character, however I reassured myself with the fact that I’d barely worked at all on that costume, and it therefore shouldn’t look better than anyone else’s. On my Leia bikini, however, I’d just finished a week of labor and agony over difficult materials, travel woes, etc. What I had yet to internalize, however, was the
absence of this ethos of envy and competition from the convention world. As I approached the life-sized model of Jabba the Hutt, I was momentarily terrified.

There in front of me posed almost 50 women in the same outfit I wore. Many were Jamin’s creations, and some were a cheaper rubberized version, but I didn’t see any other home-made bikinis like mine. As I approached the group, there were already masses of onlookers surrounding them, taking picture after picture, and one person with a large video camera, recording an interview with different cosplayers, being conducted in the middle of the group. I didn’t feel right joining this menagerie of Leias, yet as I stood at the outskirts of the group, a couple of cosplayers in the front row spotted me. “Come on in!” one shouted with a smile. “We’ll make room over here,” said another, and multiple Leias started shifting around to give me a spot between them, in front of Jabba.

I quickly jumped into the opening they had made for me, and the women around me introduced themselves quickly between smiling at the cameras which never stopped. Finally, after a man with a very professional looking camera got a group shot for which we all looked up at him (he even brought his own ladder) there was a mass exodus to the second life-sized reproduction of Jabba the Hutt. As the ladies around me filed into a line to head to the next photo location, we continued our introductions. Compliments flew back and forth among the Leias regarding hair, physique, and costumes. We arrived at the next Jabba and performed the same exercise, arranging ourselves in a multi-tiered formation and posing continuously as waves of photographers, professional and amateur, rolled past.
While I had half-expected these cosplayers to be all newbies, desperate for attention or model-tier cosplayers who took themselves too seriously, the women around me were anything but. Though this might have been the first costume some had worn to a convention and all of them were quite gorgeous, none of the Leias were anything but friendly, helpful, and humorous. The male gaze, which the costume seemed to cater to and incur, was acknowledged yet denied power by these Leias through their assertions that they chose to wear the costume for their own reasons. They also made the conscious choice to put themselves on display. My new friends provided constant commentary and chatter throughout the shoot. We joked about the impracticality of the costume and all of the struggles of getting around in a disconnected skirt, and though I was asked by another girl to trade my spot sitting on the huge prop behind us for a standing position in front “because your stomach’s so flat,” the way in which these women talked about their body image said a lot. Instead of jokingly calling themselves fat, the Leias surrounding me talked honestly about
how they were afraid to wear the costume, but how good they felt in it and the fun
they were having showing off their socially imperfect bodies, and especially the fun
they were having talking to other Leias and making friends.

The way that these women used the photo shoot to socialize as well as to
show off their costumes and their bodies confirmed that the power in this outwardly-bizarre exercise truly belonged to the cosplayers. While we were putting ourselves on
display, the shoot was ultimately on our terms, as the cosplayers in the shoot offered
just as much positivity and confidence to their fellow cosplayers as did the scores of
clicking cameras. Indeed, not all of the women who wore the Slave Leia costume at
Celebration VI attended these photo shoots, and many more women likely considered
cosplaying this character and decided against it based on socially-taught body issues
or discomfort with the eroticization of the costume by pop culture, or any other
reason. Though a photo shoot with 50 Leias can be interpreted through the lens of
sexual objectification, it also serves as a liberating model for women in the cosplay
community by celebrating bodies of different sizes. Though there were no objectively
plus-sized women at the photo shoot, the expressions of body positivity which
defined this display are exactly the type affirmation which will hopefully inspire
those women who might wish to cosplay Leia to do so in the future. It is also true
that, as she is one of the most popular characters in the Star Wars series, those who
cosplay Princess Leia in any of her many outfits have created a collective standard of
heightened accuracy and authenticity. This often serves as a source of anxiety for
cosplayers, however many others enjoy the pursuit of perfection, as long as it does
not limit cosplayers by their race or body type.
When this was all over, many Leias continued on to a third location, but others, including myself, broke off from the herd. This star treatment left me reeling, but more than that, I was feeling that I was now part of something bigger. These instant friendships left me a bit confused, yet empowered, and quite curious as to how long these bonds might last. Later that night, at a Celebration after-party, I saw a crowd of Leias whom I recognized from the shoot. “Hey! Beaded Leia!” they shouted, welcoming me to their section of the bar. “Your costume is so cool, did you do that yourself?” one asked. I was amazed to be remembered and even more enthusiastic to have this sort of bond with these former-strangers. As the night wore on, Leias acted as friends, dance partners, and security for one another. At one point, I remembered that I hadn’t seen the friend I’d come with for some time. I suddenly realized that, on my own, as I was, I finally felt completely comfortable in a convention situation. And it was because I wasn’t alone— I had my Leias looking out for me, as I looked out for them. My fellow princesses. My sisters. I remember feeling like I’d suddenly joined a sorority made completely of Leias, and I was safe.

Though I know not every cosplaying experience is like this, the extremes to which it can unite people seem much less extreme when you’ve been in and around this community for a while. The community itself is strengthened by these bonds between its members. Making new friends within cosplay, and thereby building the community, is a completely different experience because of the different rules of social interaction, but also because, I believe, cosplay attracts and creates people who are sensitive to the stories that we all possess and the agency with which we choose to
live our lives. These sorts of people, inside a convention or not, often make good friends.

The second lesson I learned from being more of a cosplayer while at a convention was that cons are also a place to see old friends and reconnect. At Dragon*Con I slept on a floor. This floor was in a two-bed hotel room on the 46th floor of the Atlanta Hilton, a hotly contested spot at a convention where rooms in the official hotels sell out 6-8 months in advance. A recent Wesleyan graduate slept on the floor next to me, and two older alums slept in the beds (and paid for the room). The first night I was in Atlanta, I was met at the train station by another Wesleyan student, my friend Maika, who was at Dragon*Con with his father for the second year in a row. As we walked back through the hotels to my shared room, he pointed out different ballrooms and event halls where different panels and dances would be held in later days. Despite my long flight and train commute, I felt at home in these spaces and among these people, especially so because I had a companion and guide with me.

As soon as I dropped off my suitcases, the two of us hurried back downstairs and Maika introduced me to a group of middle-aged men at the hotel bar. “Chelsea, you’ve met my dad before,” he started, “and this is the rest of the Crazy 88.” At least ten of the group cheered at this introduction. I went around shaking hands, and then asked what exactly he meant by that. One of the men quickly pulled out what appeared to be a business card. “#65” it had printed on it, as well as a cartoon katana and some stylized blood splatters. “We’re the ninjas from the movie Kill Bill,” he explained. “We all have suits and masks and swords, and we run around together. It’s
really fun.” I thanked him for the business card and wondered aloud how long they’d been doing this. “Oh, I see these guys here every year,” Maika’s dad chimed in, adding that this was the only time of the year that many of the group saw each other.

Later that night, Maika, my three roommates, and I went out to dinner to meet some even older alums who were also at Dragon*Con and wanted to see old friends. Throughout this meal, I sat back and enjoyed the memories, food, and laughter which we shared across the table. Of the seven of us at dinner, we had come to the convention from Hawaii, Chicago, New York, D.C. and Heidelberg, Germany. As we enjoyed each other’s company at this meal and throughout the weekend, it was as if no one had ever left the con. How I wish we didn’t have to. As Maika and I fell into our seats on the train back to the airport, I was left with the feeling that it couldn’t be over. I was leaving the convention and finishing my trip, but that couldn’t be the end of it, could it?

Since I’ve returned to Wesleyan I’ve thought a lot about the ways in which cosplay can be woven into everyday life and its possible future. In our intensely visual age, it is hard to ignore such a striking rejection of norms as cosplay; however just as cosplayers choose to react and express themselves in this way, they have chosen to keep their resultant community extremely separate from the outside world. While I appreciate the alternate world which cosplay strives to construct, I am still left wanting more. Cosplay has important critiques of everyday life, so why shouldn’t they be shared openly with the world? I would be interested in the possible effects on society if cosplayers ever demanded a place within the outside world, like the female factory workers of the early 1900’s. These women progressed to this public stance
from privacy of their internal community where fantasies were lived out among
groups of other workers.\textsuperscript{134}

If cosplayers ever made this sort of move, it would definitely risk politicizing
cosplay, ascribing a set of values and causes to a cosplayer’s identity. By maintaining
the relative isolation of conventions, cosplayers are able to preserve their anti-identity
identity. Still, cosplay’s rapid growth will no doubt lead to some changes, whether it
be through social activism or a stronger rejection of the outside world. Either way, I
will be there to help it grow and with the hope that cosplay will continue to grant me
the same favor.

\textsuperscript{134} Nan Enstad, \textit{Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure}, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991),
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Daniel (cosplayer, Rebel Legion Hawai’i Outpost Executive Officer) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 25, 2012.


Diana (cosplayer) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 25, 2012.

Diana (cosplayer, Steampunk convention founder and organizer) interview with the author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.


DJ Kagamine (cosplayer, DJ, IT repair person) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.


Dylan (cosplayer, table top game enthusiast) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.

Eck (cosplayer) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 5, 2012.

Elsie (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 3, 2012.

Erin (cosplayer, Master’s student) interview with the author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.

Eva (cosplayer, dog groomer) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 9, 2012.

Fischer (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.


Haley (cosplayer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.

Hatsune (cosplayer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 27, 2012.


Iñaki (cosplayer, student, martial arts instructor) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.

Isaacs, Deanna. “Clash of the Comic Cons: Wizard World and the new C2E2 battle it out for the hearts and minds of local comics fans.” *Chicago Reader*. Last

Jasmine (cosplayer, student) email message to author, March 20, 2013.

Jenn (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 12, 2012.


Jo (cosplayer) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 12, 2012.

Joe (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.

Jonathan (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Otakon, July 29, 2012.

Julia (cosplayer, nanny, seasonal theater performer) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 25, 2012.

Kasev (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.


Katelyn (cosplayer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 27, 2012.

Kelsey (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Otakon, July 27, 2012.

Kiki (cosplayer, student, artist) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.

Kristen (cosplayer) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.


Laura (cosplayer, nurse) interview with the author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.

Lauren (cosplayer, administrative assistant) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 25, 2012.
Lauren (cosplayer, librarian) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 25, 2012.

Lee (cosplayer) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.

Linda (cosplayer, graphic designer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 26, 2012.

Liz Fett (cosplayer, student) email message to author, February 27, 2013.


Louis (cosplayer, office worker) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 9, 2012.


Megurine (cosplayer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 27, 2012.

Melissa (cosplayer, veterinary assistant) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 10, 2012.


Mokuba aka Tuda (cosplayer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 26, 2012.

Monkey (cosplayer, airport security guard) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.


Moria (cosplayer) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.

Mr. Trite aka Nick (cosplayer) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.

Nagata, Maika (cosplayer, student) interview with the author, April 9, 2013.

Nate (cosplayer) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.
Nathalie (cosplayer) email message to author, March 22, 2013.

Nichole (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Dragon*Con, September 1, 2012.

Nikolai aka Fischer (cosplayer, student) email message to author, March 5, 2013.

Noel (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.


Phillip (cosplayer) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.

Rena (cosplayer, costume and accessory commissioner) email message to author, March 19, 2013.

Renee (cosplayer, graphic artist) interview with the author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.


Rob (cosplayer, Disney Parks guest services representative) interview with the author at Star Wars Celebration VI, August 24, 2012.

Sarah (cosplayer, retail store manager) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 10, 2012.

Shannon (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Otakon, July 27, 2012.

Shredder (cosplayer, medical industry sales person) interview with the author at Dragon*Con, August 31, 2012.


SunMi (cosplayer, graphic designer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 26, 2012.

Sunny (cosplayer, former US Air Force) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.

Sweeney (cosplayer, student, dog groomer) interview with the author at Otakon, July 28, 2012.

Teen Wolf (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 11, 2012.


Tripl3 Vision aka Kyle (cosplayer, student) interview with the author at Anime World Chicago, August 4, 2012.


Unknown. Personal communication to author at Celebration VI. August 25, 2012.


Wuilmar (cosplayer) interview with the author at Wizard World Chicago Comic Con, August 10, 2012.