ABSTRACT

ZHAO MICHELLE Z. “My Sister and I Lost a Contest…Because We Were Black”: How Cosplayers Practice Respect, Visualize Race, and Enforce Accuracy in Cosplay. (Under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Taylor).

Cosplay is an embodied fan practice wherein participants costume themselves as characters from a media franchise. The ways that cosplayers conceptualize and mediate their practical representation of self as a racialized subject, as well as how they interpret others as racialized subjects, have not been as closely studied as other aspects of cosplay. In this thesis, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork and observations, as well as my own experiences as a cosplayer, to illuminate the complexities of how race is, and is not, enacted and discussed by cosplayers. In particular, I show how cosplayers' understandings of race in relation to cosplay is deeply intertwined with a key tension cosplayers feel and discuss: between notions of cosplay as a liberating escape from one's identity on one hand, and concerns over the accuracy with which one's cosplay matches the source material on the other.

To begin, I give a brief history of cosplay and a general overview of the literature that exists on race in cosplay. Then, I outline my participant observation and interview methodology and provide a brief contextualization of my own reflexive place as a researcher-self. I then state my findings from my interviews and observations. Due to the profoundly intertwining nature of my results, the findings are grouped according to the following larger themes: free cosplay vs reality, matching the self and the character, and primacy of the visual in cosplay. Finally, I present a discussion of the larger implications of this study and conclude with suggestions for future directions on this topic.

“My Sister and I Lost a Contest…Because We Were Black”: How Cosplayers Practice Respect, Visualize Race, and Enforce Accuracy in Cosplay

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Communication

Raleigh, North Carolina
2023

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BIOGRAPHY

Michelle Zhao (who prefers to go by Michelle Yu) obtained her Master's of Science in Communications from North Carolina State University in May of 2023. She grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina for most of her life before heading to the Triangle Area for the last two years of her high school career and remaining there for both her undergraduate and graduate studies.

Her interest in communication and critical cultural studies began when she took a Media Theory class at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill during her sophomore year. Her experiences in communication studies in her undergraduate education led her to pivot from a biology focus to a communication focus, and she is happier for it. She has presented her research on the intersection between fan culture and colonialism at the National Communication Association conference as one of two selected Top Student Papers. Additionally, Michelle is dedicated to becoming an educator for future scholars and emphasizes the importance of a well-rounded, critical-centered education for all students. As an instructor for the public speaking classes in the department, she takes care to maintain an open and student-focused approach to teaching. Michelle hopes to earn a Ph.D. in the future and continue her path towards becoming an educator.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincerest thanks to everyone who contributed to making this thesis happen. I extend my deepest appreciation to my mother and my sister, who provided moral support when it was needed and boosted my confidence during hard times, as well as to my professors and committee members for encouraging me to pursue my passions and cheering me on as I handled this project. I also thank my participants for generously donating their time and their insights, without which this project would not have been possible. I want to acknowledge my two dogs, Lacie and Lincoln, whose primary contributions were cuddles and unconditional affection but who nevertheless were integral to the completion of this thesis. Finally, all my love to my dear friends in Team Friend (and the guy who slept on my couch), who provided invaluable mental and emotional support when I needed it most, who allowed me to use them as a sounding board, and who made my oral defense a joy to present. I could not ask for more wonderful people in my life.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The meditative act of laying out fabric samples in an arc around me marks the beginning of a cosplay project for me. An image of Zelda is on my computer screen as a reference while I pick out the right fabrics to make her costume: a subtly patterned white charmeuse and scuba knit for the quilted shirt, a dark brown faux suede for the wide belt, and a warm gold satin for accents. I prefer homemade cosplays because they can be more sturdily constructed with beautiful fabrics in order to truly capture the essence of the character. I sort through the velvets, dupioni, and brocades, dissatisfied with the particular shades of blue provided. A coarser cotton sample is the correct color, but the material is plain and might clash with the red crushed satin I have already chosen for the lining. I have to think for a moment, weighing the pros and cons of color accuracy against concept fidelity in the costume. Perhaps, if I intended to enter this cosplay into a competition, I would dye my own fabric to the correct shade. But this cosplay is just for me, with my limited time and financial resources, so I choose the cotton sample for its color accuracy and begin planning how to sew the cosplay.

In the simplest terms, *cosplay* refers to the fan practice of costuming as a character or character concept from an existing media franchise, usually practiced within dedicated cosplay or fan conventions. As Lunning (2022) states, the goal of cosplay is "for an individual fan subject to embody and identify with an adored character whose persona is real for the fan, actor, and/or creator of the cosplay costume" (34). Cosplayers do not always act as the character they are embodying as one would in a play, though some will perform as the character for varying lengths of time. The embodiment of the character is one that is shared with a group, often fellow fans of a franchise or participants at a fan event, all of whom understand that the character is meant to be as real as the person embodying them.

Cosplay is therefore a visual and embodied practice with the goal of appearing as a character. Despite attempts to minimize the self, embodiment of a character is unavoidably influenced by the body of the cosplayer. This creates tension within cosplay as people attempt to look as much like an unrealistic image as possible because very few physical bodies actually look like animated ones. Differing physical features become points of dissonance for a cosplayer, and this awareness of one's own inability to be subsumed into a character due to the body constrains cosplayer decisions and interactions.

The visuality of race is one that plagues cosplayers in the United States in particular. Race as it is currently understood in America is experienced as visual even as it has national and genealogical histories. The belief is that race can be discursively determined through features like the size of one's nose, the shape of one's eyes and, in particular, the shade of one's skin, and that this determination is intelligible and incontrovertible (Raengo, 2013). Because cosplay is such a visual medium, the physical appearance of one's body is highly scrutinized in cosplay, and this almost inevitably includes the visual appearance of race. The ways that cosplayers conceptualize and mediate their practical representation of self as a racialized subject, as well as how they interpret others as racialized subjects, become fruitful grounds to explore when taken in conjunction with the complex historical ideological structures that underlie what we consider 'race.' In this thesis, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork and observations, as well as my own experiences as a cosplayer, to illuminate the complexities of how race is, and is not, enacted and discussed by cosplayers. In particular, I show how cosplayers' understandings of race in relation to cosplay is deeply intertwined with a key tension cosplayers feel and discuss: between notions of cosplay as a liberating escape from one's identity on one hand, and concerns over the accuracy with which one's cosplay matches the source material on the other.

To begin, I give a brief history of cosplay and a general overview of the literature that exists on race in cosplay. Then, I outline my participant observation and interview methodology and provide a brief contextualization of my own reflexive place as a researcher-self. I then state my findings from my interviews and observations. Due to the profoundly intertwining nature of my results, the findings are grouped according to the following larger themes: free cosplay vs reality, matching the self and the character, and primacy of the visual in cosplay. Finally, I present a discussion of the larger implications of this study and conclude with suggestions for future directions on this topic.

CHAPTER 2: Background

In the United States, cosplay was originally known as *masquerade*, the same term used to refer to elaborate, costumed Carnival pageants in 15th century Europe (Winge, 2006). The first recorded masquerade costume is widely regarded to have occurred at the World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles (WorldCon) in 1939, when Forrest J. Ackerman and Myrtle R. Douglas wore "futuristicostumes" based on the 1936 science-fiction film *Things to Come* (The International Costumers' Guild, 2016). Masquerade contests would be incorporated into subsequent WorldCons, sparking the tradition of costuming as characters from media franchises at fan events throughout the United States.

The term "cosplay" was coined in 1983 by Takahashi Nobuyuki after he saw participants at WorldCon in their masquerade costumes as a portmanteau of *costume* and *play* (Lunning, 2022). The practice of cosplay had existed in Japan since the 1970s, well before Takahashi first wrote the term in the magazine *My Anime*, though it was known as *kasou* (仮想) at the time. The act of costuming as certain characters from media was practiced simultaneously at various fan events in Japan and the United States, but it was Takahashi's portmanteau for this costuming that eventually caught on. Over the next forty years, cosplay would grow into a global phenomenon. The world's largest cosplay competition, World Cosplay Summit, states that they receive over 200,000 attendees during the course of the three-day event ("World Cosplay Summit 2022", 2022). Of course, not all of these attendees are competition cosplayers, as only the winners of regional World Cosplay events are invited to the final judging onstage. Many attend the event as casual cosplayers to enjoy pageantry and to immerse themselves in a fan-centered environment. Cosplay is usually performed at conventions (cons), in groups or alone, with costumes varying in complexity and from variable sources. Some of the largest cons within the United States like

Sakura-Con, DragonCon, ComiCon, and Anime Matsuri also attract tens of thousands of fans each year, with ComiCon alone reporting upwards of 130,000 attendees in 2019 ("Breaking Down Comic-Con", 2019).

In this paper, *competition cosplay* refers to cosplay that is produced for the purpose of presentation in a formal competition setting, where the cosplayer and their costume are judged by an officiator, often for an award. *Casual cosplay* is much more loosely defined and, for the purposes of this study, refers to cosplay that is produced without the intention to enter a competition or other formal judged contest. The term "casual" in this paper refers entirely to the intention to compete in this case, as even casual cosplayers will devote extensive resources to create detailed, elaborate costumes on par with what might be seen in competition cosplay.

There is considerable overlap between competition and casual cosplayers, and cosplayers often embody both categories at the same time. For example, casual cosplayers may choose to enter a competition at an event, even if that was not their original intention when creating their cosplay. Conversely, competition cosplayers may create casual cosplays that they do not intend to enter into competitions, sometimes creating casual and competition cosplays for the same event. The fluidity with which cosplayers can shift within designations can make distinctions about the "cosplay community" difficult to theorize, as cosplayers smoothly negotiate the assumptions which underlie different situations and different levels of competition or casual cosplay environments.

Cosplay competitions differ from sewing or costuming competitions in that cosplays usually reference a character that already exists. Considerations about the cosplay intrinsically use this character's appearance as textual evidence to measure the cosplay against. Competitions like the World Cosplay Summit often include judging criteria for the "level of precision in the

costumes," referring to how closely the costume matches the original character ("Representative Rules", 2022). This is judged separately from craftsmanship of the clothing and/or props which indicates that matching the character is considered an important element of cosplay by authority figures within the hobby. The extent to which a cosplayer matches a character or resembles a character in terms of appearance is referred to as *accuracy.*

The drive for accuracy in cosplay has led to debates over what is or is not acceptable for someone to do in the pursuit of total accuracy. *Racefacing* is a term used by members of the cosplay community which refers to the act of changing one's physical features through makeup or other tools to appear as another race or ethnicity (Nichols, 2018). This term encompasses practices such as darkening one's skin to appear Black or taping one's eyes back to appear Asian. Oftentimes, racefacing in cosplay is not meant as an act of racial bigotry, but is instead an attempt to be totally accurate to the character the person is cosplaying as. The complicated racial dynamics that underlie interactions within the United States makes this drive for total accuracy harmful or outright insulting to people of color, causing certain racefacing practices to be banned from competitions or subject to public criticism, though there is rarely agreement as to where the boundaries of racefacing lie. Ultimately, the ways in which cosplayers understand how race and ethnicity operate in cosplay reveal insights on the complex relationships that structure the playful nature of cosplay within a larger social framework. This raises important questions about that sociocultural structures that undergird its meritocratic visual nature.

Literature Review

Until quite recently, fan studies have remained curiously silent on the topic of race in fandom. Fan studies have historically centered on White, female fans and Anglophone media, focusing on media franchises like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Harry Potter* when examining

fan practices such as fanfiction and cosplay (Pande, 2018a). Issues of sexuality and gender have remained the focus of fan studies since its inception. However, this focus on sexuality and gender appears to largely ignore issues like race, nationality, ability, and age (Wanzo, 2015; Pande, 2018a). The field has also been heavily criticized for characterizing fan engagement as empowering without recognizing the inherent privilege of the archetypal "fangirl," who is usually a White, cisgendered woman (Pande, 2018a, 2018b; Stanfill, 2020). Furthermore, with rare exceptions, scholarly work has not yet delved into topics related to non-Anglophone media and the Anglophonic fandoms that enjoy them. Transnational fandoms are an increasingly relevant part of popular culture in America, yet transnational media are not represented accordingly in scholarship. This is troubling, especially given the international popularity of media such as Japanese anime and Korean pop music.

Moreover, cosplay has rather uncritically been studied as an empowering practice for fans of color. Black cosplay of White characters has been studied as a form of 'Blacktivism' and resistance to mainstream Whiteness and White femininity (Hines, 2020; Thomas, 2021). This cross-racial cosplay, when a cosplayer dresses as a character whose perceived race does not align with their own, is portrayed as a liberating moment that challenges the invisibility of the Black body in the media (Thomas, 2021). Some research on cosplay has also touched on issues of race and ethnicity in examining questions of authenticity that non-White fans are faced with. For example, El Jurdi et al. (2021) found that hijab-wearing cosplayers frequently were forced to negotiate between authentic character depictions and their own religious identity, and these cosplayers often faced criticisms about authenticity and religion in spite of their efforts. In Ramirez's (2017) interviews with cosplayers in Florida, participants expressed a need to portray

characters "accurately," something which women and people of color found more challenging to accomplish due to the high saturation of light-skinned male characters in popular media.

Participants on online cosplay forums such as Reddit's r/cosplay and cosplay.com[1], as well as general question forums like Quora, are divided over issues of race and cultural background with regards to cosplay. Briefly, r/cosplay is one of the largest forum sites for cosplayers, particularly in the United States, and is viewable by non-registered users of the forum. R/cosplay participants are of varying levels of interest and experience in cosplay. Cosplay.com, conversely, caters to more experienced cosplayers, fans, and photographers; users are required to submit a photo post related to cosplay that is reviewed by administrators before they are able to participate in forums. Quora is a general question forum and caters to a wide range of individuals who may or may not be interested in cosplay; this site serves as a platform for registered users to ask a variety of questions about almost any topic and to answer questions from other users. All of these sites are owned by individuals or companies based in the United States and consequently cater primarily to users in the United States. These sites often have a multitude of questions that are some variation on the following:

> *Is cosplaying a darker-skinned character as a white girl inappropriate?*
>
> (peutetrevierge, 2017)
>
> *Is it wrong for me (a white person) to cosplay a character from Encanto*?
>
> (WaxThrowa, 2021)

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[1] Current as of May 16, 2022, cosplay.com's forums are archived and read-only as the site administrators replaced it with another forum service.

what are your opinions on non-Asian people cosplaying as Asian characters?

(cosplaythrowaway_, 2013)

This question, "is it racism/cultural appropriation for me to cosplay as X character if I am White," is repeated ad nauseum. White individuals cosplaying as characters of different skin tones and races are variably accepted and disapproved of depending on, it seems, who is being asked and who they wish to cosplay as. This ambiguity is consistent across platforms among both casual and experienced cosplayers and fans of cosplay.

These questions of cross-racial cosplay by White fans are further complicated by animated or cartoon media which contain characters that are not always explicitly raced in the same way that live-action characters may be (Lu, 2009; Agnoli, 2020). Characters who are drawn with "ambiguous" facial features–facial features that are not explicitly marked Other–are often defaulted to Whiteness in America, even if they are explicitly presented as non-White within their original narrative (Lu, 2009). For example, Japanese anime will have characters with blue eyes and blonde hair, as artists often use colors as shorthand for personality traits, but these characters are still understood to be Japanese. In addition, the art style of anime with its large heads and enormous eyes was pioneered by Osamu Tezuka, creator of Astro Boy, who was in turn heavily influenced by Walt Disney's cartoons (Schodt, 2007). The similarities between Disney animation and anime and the historical connection between them further blurs the line between Otherness and Whiteness in these animated characters; like cosplay itself, anime and its aesthetics has bounded back and forth between America and Japan.

Furthermore, when cosplaying characters of international franchises, there are colonialist histories of Europe and North America that complicate the act of cosplaying the Oriental Other. Cross-racial cosplay and appropriateness weigh on the minds of even casual cosplayers as issues

of racism remain prevalent in popular discourse. Two concepts, racial minstrelsy and whitewashing, are particularly salient in the question of cross-racial cosplay. Racial minstrelsy has its roots in the minstrel shows that were performed in America after the Civil War (Johnson, 2012). White actors, their faces covered in burnt cork, used blackface minstrelsy to turn a profit by demeaning Black Americans, portraying them as stupid and sub-human (Johnson, 2012). Yellowface has an equally long history in America, with yellowface minstrelsy appearing amidst fears of the Yellow Peril in the late 19th century (Lee, 2019). Asian people, especially the Chinese, were played by White actors with darkened skin and taped eyelids to create an "Oriental" look (Lee, 2019). These yellowface caricatures were buck-toothed and conniving, but ultimately impotent against the White man. Minstrelsy emphasized the differences the Other displayed and sought to capitalize on its inferiority to Whiteness. These blackface and yellowface minstrel caricatures both came about during a time of White uncertainty in America and served to assuage both White fears of and fascination with the Other by elevating Whiteness to a place of superiority, while enforcing stereotypes of Blackness and Asianness that endure into the modern era (Lhamon, 2012).[2] Public backlash against such racial minstrelsy in recent times has diminished the popularity of the practice and drawn attention to its deeply traumatic racial past but has not completely curtailed it.

Conversely, Whitewashing refers to the erasure of people of color from their original narratives, particularly in reference to White actors replacing actors of color to turn a character of

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[2] Many White fears centered around economic and social displacement as Black and Asian Americans entered the workforce. Blackface and yellowface served to assuage these fears by reassuring White audiences of the inherent inferiority of the Other that would prevent such displacement. This "inherent inferiority" was then codified legally and socially by White Americans as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy to ensure White economic dominance.

color into a White character (Nishime, 2017). For example, White actress Scarlett Johansson was cast as the Japanese character Major Motoko Kusanagi in a live-action American adaptation of the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell* (Berman, 2017). The act of whitewashing differs from racial minstrelsy in that it serves to erase difference rather than highlight it. Whitewashing is used to subtly vanish people of color from visual narratives and is often justified as being done to avoid insulting portrayals of non-White culture or as a function of choosing the 'best' actor. In the former, rather than attempting to improve on stereotypical depictions of people of color, they are removed entirely; in the latter, White people are presented as being even more adept at playing people of color than *actual* people of color (Nishime, 2017). This practice is condemned for depriving non-White actors of roles for the sake of White actors, but crucially, the erasure of difference implies a post-racial present that is ignorant of the privilege afforded to White individuals, who are able to 'play' with race but never have to leave their position of privilege.[3] While minstrelsy overtly created and enforced White dominance, this post-racial colorblindness make dominant Whiteness ahistorical.

Transnational and cross-racial cosplay within the United States is seated at this uncomfortable junction between historical displays of White supremacy and White privilege. Cosplay is often characterized as a "slippery" performance of identity, simultaneously a physical embodiment of *character* and *self* in an inconsistent, multilayered, and transformative expression of narrative identification (Lamerichs, 2011; Rahman et al., 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2015 & 2019;

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[3] Similar criticisms have been leveled at able-bodied actors portraying characters with disabilities or cis actors portraying trans characters. Difference is rendered aesthetic rather than a trait that fundamentally influences how one moves through the world.

Hill, 2017; Masi de Casanova, 2021). This ‘slipperiness’ evokes parallels to criticisms of cultural appropriation, in which White individuals are able to take on aspects of marginalized identities to benefit themselves without losing their White privilege (hooks, 1992). Willingly or not, American fans exist within this multilayered cultural context when they engage in the practice of cosplaying. How these racial issues are navigated by cosplayers, however, remains largely uninterrogated. This study seeks to add to the literature by bringing intersectional and postcolonial perspectives into our understandings of cosplay (and fan studies more generally) in order to shed light on how cosplayers themselves conceptualize and racialize the characters they choose to emulate juxtaposed with their own racial identity.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

Fan studies historically has had a textual bias, focusing on the analysis of texts rather than embodied, material expressions of fandoms (Lamerichs, 2018). Due in part to the material nature of cosplay, which involves the creation and wearing of costumes at public events, not much scholarship has been devoted to the practices, motivations, and rituals that surround cosplay as creation and performance. Ethnographic methods are well-adapted to the study of a given community's embodied practices and provide a useful counterpoint to the reliance on textual criticism within fan studies.

Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with cosplayers recruited at two different North Carolina conventions, as well as through participant observation notes taken at the conventions. I was dressed in a costume while conducting observations and approaching participants for interviews. This allowed me to build rapport with other cosplayers and establish that I had knowledge of the practice of cosplaying and intimate association with the issues that are of importance to cosplayers in general. In addition, the act of attending in cosplay was beneficial for the purpose of generating embodied, autoethnographic notes to situate my activities as a part of the larger practice of cosplay that I am researching. A familiarity with the conventions of cosplay and associated jargon smoothed interactions between myself and the participants and greatly benefited the study.

I utilized two separate cosplays: for the first convention, Researcher Princess Zelda (see Fig. 1) as she appears in the video game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*; for the second, a member of Diamond Clan (see Fig. 3) accompanied by owl-like Pokemon from the video game *Pokemon Legends: Arceus*. Both costumes were handmade. Both characters are from the Japanese video game developer Nintendo. Zelda is a blonde-haired, green-eyed woman of the

fantasy “Hylian” race, who are humanoid with the exception of pointed, elfin ears (see Fig. 2). The kingdom of Hyrule is partially based on medieval Europe, as reflected in its architecture, weapons, and knights (Iwata, 2011). Conversely, the Diamond Clan outfit does not have a set phenotype and takes on the appearance of the customized player character (see Fig. 4). However, the land of Hisui is heavily inspired by Hokkaido prior to the Meiji Restoration, as seen in the clothing (including “kimonos” for the player) and Japanese-style architecture throughout the game (“Pokemon Legends Arceus’ Japanese influence”, 2022).

Fig. 1 (left): I am dressed as Researcher Zelda from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.* The entire outfit was sewn over the course of two weeks. Photo owned by Michelle Yu.
Fig 2 (right): The Researcher Zelda outfit was inspired by Zelda’s appearance in the game and concept art. © 2019 Nintendo.

Fig. 3 (left): My Diamond Clan outfit from *Pokemon Legends: Arceus*, with accompanying Rowlet plushie. Photo owned by Michelle Yu.
Fig. 4 (right): The player character wearing the Diamond Clan outfit. ©2021 Pokémon / Nintendo / Creatures / GAME FREAK. Photo owned by Gamepur.

The first ethnography site was an anime-focused convention, though not an anime-exclusive convention. Events at the convention were centered around Japanese culture and animation, and attendees did not necessarily cosplay or have an interest in cosplay. The anime convention was hosted in a large convention center with a large open area for mingling, and separate rooms reserved for panels and vendors. The convention was open for all attendees from 10 A.M. to 8 P.M., after which point adult-only panels and activities would occur until approximately 2 A.M. the next morning. Examples of events hosted by the anime convention included a butler/maid cafe, franchise-specific photoshoots, panels on anime genres, and anime-

themed trivia. I took ethnographic notes Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of the convention for a total of approximately fourteen hours over the course of the convention. While taking field notes, I would approach cosplayers at the photography area of the convention to discuss their possible participation in the study. Despite the focus on Japanese media, cosplayers at the anime convention were not limited to Japanese media and characters.

The second event was a cosplay-focused convention in which events were centered around cosplay workshops and issues that were of interest to frequent cosplayers. The convention took place in the convention center of a hotel and was smaller in size and scope than the anime convention. Examples of events hosted by the cosplay convention include Makerspace demonstrations, Q & A with notable cosplayers, informational sessions about using certain materials, and how-to workshops on drafting costumes. The convention was open for all attendees from 11 A.M. to 11 P.M. Participant observation took place Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of the cosplay convention for a total of approximately twelve hours over the course of the convention. The cosplay convention featured two panels concerning diversity in cosplay, both of which I attended, lasting approximately one hour each. While taking field notes, I would approach cosplayers in the staging area of the convention to discuss their possible participation in the study.

Upon obtaining appropriate informed consent for the IRB-approved study through signed consent forms, participants were interviewed in-person at the event or were interviewed via Zoom at a later date, depending on the individual's preference. All participants were required to be at least eighteen years old for this study and were present in cosplay at the conventions. In total, 20 participants were interviewed, with two interviews taking place via Zoom after the conventions were over. Interviews ranged from 20 minutes long to 75 minutes long, with the

average length being around 45 minutes long. The cosplayers represented a range of experience with cosplay in terms of years cosplaying, competition participation, and costume creation. Questions focused on how the cosplayers engaged with race and ethnicity when costuming and while seeing other cosplayers in costume, as well as how participants perceived other cosplayers' attitudes towards issues of race and ethnicity. Participants were also asked to share their experiences with cross-racial cosplay and their thoughts on matching/mismatching phenotypes when cosplaying characters. Below (Table 1) is a chart with demographic information from cosplayers, though some participants declined to state their ethnicity:

Table 1: List of participants' pseudonyms, self-identified race/ethnicity, the convention they attended, and the character they cosplayed as and the franchise.

Pseudonym	**Race/ethnicity**	**Event Attended**	**Cosplayed Character, Franchise**
Malina	White/Indigenous American	Cosplay convention	Momo, *Boku no Hero Academia*
Pallas	White	Cosplay convention	Alucard, *Castlevania*
Sam	White	Cosplay convention	Chandelure, *Pokemon*
Diana	African American	Cosplay convention	Aifread, *Aselia*
Vi	White	Anime convention	Zero Two, *Darling in the Franxx*
Alan	Asian (unspecified)	Anime convention	Adam, *RWBY*
Jonah	White	Anime convention	Jiraiya, *Naruto*
Yulia	(Preferred not to say)	Cosplay convention	Yor, *Spy x Family*
Jade	Puerto Rican (self-described)	Anime convention	Connie, *Steven Universe*
Ayla	Middle Eastern/White	Anime convention	Geto, *Jujutsu Kaisen*
Helena	White	Anime convention	Luna, *Sailor Moon*
Thalia	African American	Anime convention	Tanjiro, *Demon Slayer*

Table 1 (continued).

Minsi	White	Anime convention	Spirit Blossom Kindred, *League of Legends*
June	White	Cosplay convention	Jirou, *Boku no Hero Academia*
Nina	White	Anime convention	Ninetails, *Pokemon*
Cori	White	Anime convention	Player Armor, *Monster Hunter*
Nora	African American	Anime convention	Nezuko, *Demon Slayer*
Ava	White	Anime convention	All Might, *Boku no Hero Academia*
Marnie	White	Cosplay convention	Mina, *Boku no Hero Academia*
Markus	White	Anime convention	Inosuke, *Demon Slayer*

Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant in order to protect the confidentiality of the cosplayer. I audio-recorded the interviews and transcribed the data using the application Descript before sending the scripts to participants to allow them the chance to review their statements and make caveats as necessary. After transcriptions were finalized, I analyzed and coded the interviews in order to examine themes and connections.

The reflexive researcher-self

Qualitative research necessitates the use of the researcher-self as an instrument or apparatus to gather, record, and analyze data. The self is produced contextually and looks outward contextually as well. The state of being a subject and being subjective is one that we cannot, and perhaps should not, attempt to transcend. The researcher-self similarly is reflexive and subjective, and these subjectivities necessarily interact with participants' own subjectivities in ways that emphasize (or de-emphasize) relationships between them. These interactions create

possibilities of certain knowledge creation and constrain other possible knowledge formations in an evolving, dynamic mechanism of communication between subjects; thus, it is important to identify the researcher-self as one would any other instrument in research (Taylor, 2018).

My researcher-self is academically enmeshed within traditions of feminist studies and critical cultural studies, and this is the methodological framework through which I approach my work and daily life. Postcolonialism and critical race studies also feature heavily in my work almost by necessity as an Asian American woman, one whose embodied experience is centrally linked to alienation and Orientalism. My identity and how others identify me is not something I have the luxury of divorcing from my methodological framework, particularly when the subject of my research is related to race within the United States.

W.E.B. Dubois' notion of double-consciousness states that African Americans view themselves through two lenses due to the discrimination and subjugation Black individuals face in American society. This is a self-conscious understanding of self as an embodied Black individual and as an individual viewed through the lens of White society: "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Dubois, 1994, p. 9). This principle has since been further expanded by Black feminist scholars to include a third consciousness of gender, a consciousness of oneself as a woman within a patriarchal world (Welang, 2018). Similarly, I drew upon this self-consciousness as I interviewed participants and took field notes. Indeed, this self-consciousness is omnipresent and one that I felt keenly as a single researcher, alone amidst a crowd.

The increased awareness of myself and all the ways that I could possibly be perceived manifested in a strong anxiety about the possible answers that my participants gave. There is

always a belief that some microaggression (or macroaggression) will occur, and I was always tensed to prepare for such a moment to ensure that I remained amiable during the interview. When participants spoke about certain aspects of Japanese culture that I knew to be incorrect, there was a strange mixture of pride, because I clearly passed as "American" enough to be trusted with their thoughts, and discomfort, because I was unsure how welcome an attempt to correct them would be received. Further, because my research focused on race in particular, and because I myself am an individual that is obviously marked as an Other, I was concerned that my participants might try to censor themselves or give answers they deemed agreeable rather than honest. I let myself remain agreeable and docile in an attempt to make my participants comfortable and further encourage them to share their thoughts. It was only later that I wondered how much of my passivity was expected and performed according to those expectations, and how reactions might have differed if I did not affect this harmlessness.

Furthermore, the awareness of my intersectional existence as an Asian American woman manifested in my interviewing choices. Walking alone in a large convention, occasionally being leered at by strangers, was an extremely uncomfortable experience. Two months prior was the solemn first anniversary of the Atlanta spa shootings, an incident in which eight people were killed, six of whom were Asian women (Shivaram, 2022). Though most media outlets were hesitant to label the killings as a hate crime–the focus was primarily on the shooter's misogyny and 'sex addiction' rather than xenophobia–the intersection of the Asian femme as a target for violence was impossible for me to ignore.

Being without the safety of my usual crowd of cosplay friends meant that trying to conduct interviews became a dance between finding a quiet space and not finding *too* secluded of a space. Because all participants except two preferred to have the interview on-site, I often

placed us in a corner within an open area to give some semblance of privacy without being concealed from view. The audio was often full of background noise as a result. Occasionally, a passerby would interrupt the interview to ask myself or my participant for a photograph, as we were both in cosplay and therefore interpreted to be available for public consumption. I worried that the open-air nature of the interview might make participants feel uncomfortable telling me their true thoughts. Though I doubted that anything untoward would happen in the middle of a convention center, I was too aware of the current atmosphere of hostility towards Asian Americans due to the COVID-19 pandemic to forgo all precautions.

However, my presentation as a research student and a fellow cosplayer enabled a sense of authority regarding cosplay and anime. For example, when speaking to a participant, Vi, about the art style of anime, she was willing to take my explanation that Disney's large-eyed style heavily influenced modern anime as the truth without further questions. I was also permitted to speak casually with participants about media franchises that they were enthusiastic about, sharing details and comparing opinions in a way that made clear my commitment to fannish practices as a whole. Competition cosplayers like Nina were also impressed that my costumes were handmade and readily gave details about competition environments, encouraging me to take part in them in the future, and spoke with me in technical terms about craftsmanship aspects of their costumes and my own. My presence as a cosplayer, and one who took the time, effort, and money to 'go all-out' with my costume, assured participants that this was more than a simple research topic for me. Despite my status as an Other, I presented as someone immersed in the cosplay culture–whatever that entailed for the participant.

CHAPTER 4: Themes

Free cosplay vs reality

I am still a mile away from the convention center when I first spot a group of cosplayers as I stop at a traffic light. I recognize one young woman in a green Hatsune Miku wig but am not familiar with the other characters. As I get closer to the center, I see more and more people, some in costume and some not, with convention badges around their necks. By the time I actually reach the parking deck, I am waiting for crowds of people to cross the street in order to queue up for entry into the convention center. I make a stop at a nearby Starbucks and do my best not to be self-conscious when passing businesspeople do a double-take at my Diamond Clan cosplay. They probably are not looking at me, but I think I can feel their stares anyway.

After showing my COVID vaccine card and receiving my badge, I am finally out of the hot sun and can enjoy the relative coolness of the building. The door swings shut behind me, quite literally closing out the rest of the world. As I find a place to set my things down, a woman in a Nurse Joy cosplay hands me a badge ribbon with the word "Pokerus" on it, a reference to the fictional stat disease in the Pokemon series. "It's for the Pokemon cosplayers," she tells me. She moves on to a man with a net full of Pokemon plushies slung over his shoulder. He is standing with a woman in a Sailor Venus costume and two teenagers in costumes I cannot recognize. The mixture of franchises is odd but not out of place in the bustling convention center.

The broadly decentralized nature of cosplay was a common theme among participants. Cosplay was framed as an activity where people should have the freedom to cosplay whatever character concept they choose or, as Ayla describes it, "anyone can cosplay anything." The consensus among most participants was that cosplay is meant for enjoyment and fun rather than a strict adherence to some notion of cosplaying 'correctly.' Participants were generous with what

they believed cosplay should or could entail, often invoking the importance of enjoyment and comfort before anything else. This seemed to be at least partially contradictory to Winge's (2018) assertion that cosplay meritocracy was based on the craft of the costume, at least to a superficial extent. For example, Pallas indicates that comfort and happiness are the most important aspects of cosplay:

> Because I have had so many times where someone's outfit looks great, like it's super clean. Their makeup's great, but they look like they're miserable. And I don't, you can't connect with that person. You can't be like, happy for them because they just look so upset.

Similarly, Jade emphasizes the importance of "fun" over other considerations when cosplaying:

> I wanna say is, if you love that character and you want to be that character, then be them, have fun. Cosplaying is supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be a safe place where there's nerds, just like you, like just put your own twist on it.

Cosplay is framed by participants as an activity which permits an escape between the everyday self and the cosplayed self. However, this separation seems possible only because cosplay and cosplay events are described as being entirely separate from the 'real world,' or a "safe place where there's nerds, just like you," as Jade put it. According to Minsi, cosplay is "a world of make-believe, you're allowed to do what you want and dress up." Minsi implies that the act of cosplay and the events that one attends while cosplaying are framed as belonging in a separate sphere, a world of "make-believe" that is disconnected from a world of not-make-believe. This separation allows freedom for a cosplayer to 'do what they want' without

constraints they might ordinarily face. Another cosplayer, June, explicitly describes the act of cosplay as a "break from reality, you can put on a different persona so you can just pause being yourself and just be whoever."

This separation of reality and cosplay is important for participants to maintain democracy within the hobby. Being able to "pause" one performance of self and take on another is permitted because considerations about the 'real' world are able to be ignored. Whatever role one takes on in the 'real' world, whether they are a student or a salaried professional, it is placed on hold as they become a character when they cosplay. For some, this performance is even more real than the persona they inhabit in the 'real' world. According to Nora, cosplay "is a way to escape the real world troubles and just be yourself. Cause you're in like, a place where everybody else is cosplaying, who's gonna judge you?" Markus echoes this sentiment, adding that cosplay was "a way to express yourself, where you're free."

Crossing a parking lot to reach a convention, I heard a child tell his mother, "Look, it's Princess Zelda!" He wanted to take a photograph together, and I obliged with a smile. When he asked where Link was, I told him that I was waiting for Link to finish with a quest. It wasn't until later that I realized I had adopted a soft, feminine tone that was much different from my regular speaking voice.

A similar exchange had happened at a previous convention, though this one was less enjoyable. In my Zelda cosplay, I was stopped for photos by a man who called out to me as 'Zelda' despite my nametag. And yet, I turned to respond when I heard his call. He spoke to me, always referring to me as Zelda, and asked me various questions about my activities in the Legend of Zelda *games and my feelings towards Link as if I were actually Zelda. In the moment*

when I was dressed as a character I understood that, for all intents and purposes, I existed as that character to others and performed accordingly.

Respect, accuracy, and racefacing

Because cosplay is described as so freeing, the unofficial boundaries that participants prescribe become even more important to analyze. Despite this ideal of "anyone can cosplay anything," participants established the caveat that the cosplay had to be done respectfully. Interestingly, this idea of respect was extended beyond the familiar respect for real-world groups which may find some kinds of cosplay disrespectful, and now also takes fidelity to the character being cosplayed as another form of respect. For example, Cori explains that he often avoids cosplaying petite male characters due to his larger build, stating, "It's, I don't look, I don't look right. And for me, I'd hate to insult a character or franchise, like that sort of thing." The cosplayer 'not looking right' in their cosplay is taken to be disrespectful to the character or even 'insulting' to the franchise that the character hails from. Character matching and accuracy are then taken to be a form of respect when cosplaying. Another cosplayer, Alan, has similar reservations about doing the character justice:

> I think respecting the character is important. Just because it feels wrong if, it feels wrong as a cosplayer to do a cosplay badly. Just because it's, if I do a bad job of it, it's not that I'm concerned about how I look, but rather the image of the character…what I was saying earlier about like how you want to do it justice and you want to get it close to what it, what the character is. So if it's too far away from what you are, it makes it difficult to do it.

Alan's concern is focused on how his own cosplay might diminish the character in the eyes of the public, almost as if the character itself was a real person who could take offense at their own

image being tarnished. He notes that this issue of visual accuracy is compounded by the physical body of the cosplayer. Those who are "too far away" from what the character looks like have more difficulty achieving accuracy and subsequently have more difficulty doing the character justice.

This desire for accuracy creates a tension within cosplay, particularly regarding how accuracy is pursued by cosplayers. Though what was deemed respectful varied slightly among participants, most agreed that cosplay techniques which alluded to historical racial caricature were unacceptable, even if it is meant to be character-accurate. Two examples which participants frequently referred to were the practices of darkening one's skin (equated to blackface) or using tape to pull one's eyes back (equated to yellowface), both of which were considered racefacing. Ayla refers to racefacing as racist, "especially with the history of blackface and the history of like, hate towards the Asian community." Though she acknowledges that cosplayers may have only used these practices to be accurate, she replies, "I'm not gonna change my race to be accurate though."

Participants provided several examples of racial caricature in cosplay that occurred in pursuit of accuracy, all of which were unacceptable to the participants. Helena mentions an incident in 2019 where a French cosplayer chose to costume themselves as Pyke from *League of Legends* by wearing a prosthetic suit that had been heavily darkened with paints (see Fig. 5 below). The Pyke cosplayer insisted she "respected his skin color because I wanted to be as accurate as possible because I really do love that character…just the way he is, I don't want to change anything" (Minelle, 2019). The act of literally wearing another's skin is framed as a matter of respect, because accurately representing the character is meant to honor the character. Helena recognizes that this is unacceptable but attributes the cosplayer's ignorance to be a

product of her non-American upbringing, as the cosplayer “just didn't really realize it, ‘cause they weren't surrounded by those issues where they lived.”

Fig. 5: The Pyke cosplayer who was accused of blackface posted a side-by-side comparison of their cosplay (left) and their uncostumed self (right) on their Instagram. Photo owned by Alice Livanart [Livanart Cosplay].

Diana is less lenient when speaking about a German cosplayer at TwitchCon 2022 who was accused of blackface. The cosplayer had been dressed as a character from the *Borderlands* game series and was competing for a $15,000 grand prize, but had put on darker makeup to mimic the character more closely. Diana describes it as follows:

> Yeah, they showed up in blackface, so they didn't win anything on a big prize or anything, but they were flown out. So that means they had that costume, and at one point in time–and TwitchCon does have a rule against offensive cosplays, but either wasn't enforced, it was missed or something went wrong. So yeah, unfortunately this person decided to present themselves to the world that they were super racist.

Another example, given by Ayla, was an incident over a group of *Hellsing* cosplayers at a convention. *Hellsing* is an anime series that depicts a supernatural hunter organization in a fight against a Nazi vampire group. Ayla describes the scene at the convention as follows:

> A bunch of people came to [this convention] dressed in full Nazi regalia, with the armbands and everything, and did like the Hitler salute during a photoshoot and got mad when people called the cops and egged them. And I was like, homie, you dressed up as a Nazi and literally did the Hitler salute?

The break between cosplay Nazis and real-world Nazis was indistinguishable at the event, causing others to react against the *Hellsing* cosplayers. These acts of blackface and yellowface and the positive portrayal of hate groups was seen as unacceptable, even if it was done for the sake of accuracy or for roleplay, because participants recognized the historically racist complexities that surround such displays. Practicing these acts in cosplay was labeled as so

egregious by participants that it fell outside of even considerations of character accuracy: it was better to be inaccurate than racist, or even that race should not be considered a criteria of accuracy. As Ava puts it, “because people are trying to be so character accurate, they forget the world a lot of the time.”

Reserved characters in personal and public opinion

Another limit that was shared by some participants is the idea of reserved characters in cosplay. These characters are essentially seen as solely belonging to, or “reserved” for, certain marginalized identities to cosplay, though decisions about which characters are protected and which are not are unclear. A cosplayer outside of the marginalized identity would not be able to respectfully cosplay a reserved character, even if they do not engage in practices of racial caricature. Generally, reserved characters were often described as being an impactful representation of a marginalized identity or a traditional cultural representation of an ethnic group. For example, Vi speaks about her admiration and love for Princess Tiana from Disney’s *Princess and the Frog* but did not think she should cosplay her. Tiana was Disney’s first Black princess, and Vi feels uncomfortable cosplaying the character as a White woman:

> As a White person, like there are so many characters that I would love to cosplay, but I feel like that space is so much better for a person of color to do, and I just don't, my voice is not needed to add to that character. So many like Disney ones come to mind because I love Disney, I love Princess Tiana. Do we need a white version of Princess Tiana? No, absolutely not. This is an excellent opportunity for any person of color to cosplay that character, to do a fantastic job, and I will appreciate them.

In this case, Princess Tiana would be a character that Vi believes should be reserved for Black cosplayers, and she found cosplaying this character as a White woman uncomfortable due to implications about her own Whiteness overtaking the character, essentially enacting whitewashing. Sam gave a similar story, explaining that they have a love of Storm from the *X-Men* comics but are wary of potential backlash against them for cosplaying a Black character while they themselves are White. They told me: "If you're wanting to cosplay as a character that isn't the same ethnicity as you, you wanna be respectful of that. So it almost seems like you can't really touch that with a 10 foot pole." Sam also mentions Black Panther and understands the sense of protectiveness that Black cosplayers may have regarding his race, because he is "intrinsically written to be of African descent and represent that community, even though the costume is a wonderful costume and a great character."

Part of the belief that characters should be reserved appears to stem from a recognition that minority groups generally lack representation in media. At a panel about race and cosplay, one host relayed a story about a Colombian woman who believed that characters from Disney's *Encanto* should be reserved for Colombian cosplayers, as they very rarely are represented respectfully in media. June more broadly reserves characters of color for cosplayers of color to emulate for a similar reason, stating that "I think there is a social stigma…because you have such a small pool of these minority characters, let minority cosplayers play minority characters, but then anybody can cosplay out of the larger pool." Vi states quite bluntly:

> White people have done, they've done enough, they have enough characters. Just let people of color have something that is theirs and that is something that, that they can celebrate and we can celebrate with them and not overshadow them.

June also does not cosplay characters from minority groups because “I wouldn't have a way to be as accurate as I want while also being respectful of the culture that character comes from. So I just leave that to people who can do it better.” This indicates that reserved characters are then partially reserved out of respect and partially reserved due to the cosplayer’s belief that they would not be able to adequately ‘pull off’ the character in the first place. Malina, who identifies as White and Native American, echoes this sentiment. She states that she has always wanted to cosplay as Claudine Wolf from the *Monster High* toy franchise, but “I feel a Black person can do it better and they'll do it better. And so I can just live vicariously through them and watch them do it.” Concerns about accuracy and recognizability are thus combined (or perhaps justified) with fears of social stigma and a desire to be politically sensitive to historically subaltern identity groups.

This reservation of characters was not only limited to identity groups, but included discussions of cultural appropriation. Thalia speaks about traditional Japanese clothing in *Demon Slayer* and her discomfort with trying to wear that traditional clothing for a cosplay: “I wouldn't cosplay as them cuz like that's not my tradition. I feel like I would be like, physically dressing up as someone's tradition, in a way. So it's just I would avoid that as well.” Malina agrees, stating that she shies away from “characters who have their traditional…regalia…but I don't, I feel like I couldn't do that justice and I wouldn't wanna be disrespectful in wearing that.” Pallas cautiously shares these reservations about traditional dress, though they add that one should seek permission from the cultural group about any appropriation of their real-world costume. Pallas would research the cultural aspect of their cosplay, noting what people in the cultural group would say:

> If it’s like a cultural piece that they say is for this specific thing, or ‘we would rather not have people outside of our culture wearing it,’ I would never touch

> those. But I will, for the people who are part of those cultures, I will absolutely support it, give 'em all the likes in the world… I'm not going to, I will not do it myself.

The concept of reserved characters had mixed reviews among participants. While some, like those indicated above, believed that some characters should only be cosplayed by the marginalized identity that they represent, others are more hesitant to make such distinctions. Diana used Black Panther as an example, saying that she as a Black woman feels unoffended when White cosplayers made T'Challa's costume because she believes it is wonderful to "find commonality or heroship or inspiration from characters that don't look like you, like people of color and other marginalized identities who had to do with White able-bodied men for like years." However, she also acknowledges and accepts that "there's some Black cosplayers or cosplayers of color, they're like, Don't even touch it. Don't touch. This is ours. No touchy." Diana attributes this protectionist urge to a fear that White cosplayers will use cosplay as an excuse for racial caricature or will overshadow people of color who cosplay as T'Challa. For Black Panther in particular, she states:

> When Black Panther first came out, since it was such a big movie to so many Black people, if I were in a White person's shoes and I was gonna do it [the cosplay], I would wait a little while before I decided to put myself in that costume just so I could make sure the proper audience was getting the attention and recognition that they deserve.

Others criticized this concept of reservation entirely, believing that it was too subjective to be feasible. The ideal that "anyone can cosplay anything" should be one which is absolute, and reserving characters for certain groups leaves other groups unable to cosplay their favorite

characters. Nina and Ava, both White women, call this protectionism “messy,” in part because the subaltern group is perceived as having more freedom to cosplay characters than the hegemon group because they are not subject to the same social stigma:

> **Ava:** Especially on the thing like you see a White guy doing Black Panther like you said, or people like…get so mad, but I'm like, at the same time, I'm like, they're not blackfacing. They're not taking anything truly from your culture. They're just doing a character.
> **Nina:** If you have like, a Black Captain America? Less people are gonna comment then the other way around.

Although cosplay is portrayed as a ‘break from reality’ or world of make-believe, there are clear indications that the hobby itself is nevertheless situated within the ‘real world.’ This rejection of certain cosplay practices indicates that cosplay may not be the clean world of make-believe that cosplayers so desire and, in fact, is very much undergirded with considerations of the ‘real world’ in which it resides. This sense of character reservation is heavily tied to a sociocultural historical understanding of issues like racial caricature and a current social stigma against performing a subaltern identity as a member of the hegemonic group. The contentiousness with which cosplayers themselves describe what is and is not permitted via character reservations is indicative of a greater underlying social tension between those who want to uphold the purity of the “anyone can cosplay anything” ideal and those who are intimately aware of the potential for acceptance to be used by bad-faith actors to re-enact racist caricatures.

Matching the self and the character concept

A persistent theme that appeared throughout participant interviews was the importance of matching with the character that the participants were cosplaying as, both mentally and physically. This concept of matching is related to accuracy, though it is distinct in that cosplayers will sometimes do 'twists' on characters, and these changes are not seen as inaccurate or incorrect cosplay methods. For example, genderbend cosplays, which refer to cosplays in which the gender of the original character is changed, are widely practiced at cosplay events. Another popular twist is the alternate universe cosplay which reimagines the character in another setting, such as how the character would look in steampunk England, how the character would look during the Regency era, etc. Matching therefore refers to the ability for the cosplayer's physical body to be subsumed into the character concept that they are cosplaying as a component of accuracy. This matching can be physical, mental, or emotional but, importantly, contributes to the individual's own embodiment of the character.

Matching the self and personality

When choosing my cosplays, I realized that both of the characters I was cosplaying as were from video game franchises and were not characters with particularly distinct personalities. I had joked previously with my advisor that I chose Zelda because she was a "girl with imposter syndrome," and I personally could empathize with her struggles. Zelda spends most of the game as a captive of the villain, so the only hint of her personality is given through cutscenes. The Diamond Clan member, on the other hand, is a complete blank slate. They are not so much a character as a character concept, and as such I 'played' less with the performance of the character. Was it significant that I chose to cosplay these two characters with minimal characterization in their media?

Cosplay is described as a form of self-expression by several participants, and the act of cosplay is a means of embodying a character whose traits were seen within or desired by the cosplayer themselves. Lamerichs (2011) neatly describes this as the simultaneous actualization of story narrative and self through cosplay in which a person's articulation of their own identity is essential to the construction of identity. Participants stated their decision to cosplay certain characters was because they felt that they resonated with the character on an emotional and mental level, and that cosplay was an expression of that mental resonance. For example, Thalia implies that the act of cosplay is one where she can show her love for a character who was similar to herself through physically appearing as them via cosplay. She explains how her own cosplay, Tanjiro from *Demon Slayer*, was selected:

> Cause I really like Tanjiro as a character, which is why I cosplay for him…the characters that I cosplay…I relate to them, like I journal about the characters I cosplay, and so like I journal about how he's very similar to me and stuff like that.

Similarly, Pallas also describes choosing characters to cosplay because they "vibe with this character." They particularly enjoy cosplaying "sad pretty boys" and "himbos," a portmanteau of *him* and *bimbo* that is used colloquially to refer to a physically large, kind, but naive man. According to Pallas:

> And then I have recently gotten on a kick of doing loud himbos, loud himbos you have as an example Inosuke or like Itto from Genshin, those very loud, very in your face. For me, as a trans person, this is the childhood that I didn't get to have. So now I'm going to have it right now.

Pallas's reason for being drawn to these characters and cosplaying them was because their personalities and mannerisms were ones that Pallas wants to emulate outside of cosplay as well. In addition, their description of the characters as who they desired to be, but were never permitted to be, is one that situates cosplay as a practice which uniquely enables the revelation of self that is otherwise suppressed or oppressed. Another participant, Sam, elaborates that this is sometimes an unconscious process. According to Sam, "I've at least found that in some of my own cosplays, cuz like a lot of the cosplays I tend to do are more crossplays or some kind of expression of a certain part of my personality, even though I don't really realize it."

Cosplay acts to link one's sense of self to another character and express that self in an environment which encourages this linkage. In this way, a cosplayer is able to visually and mentally demonstrate their identification to themselves and others, tacitly accepting the position that the character hails them to. This acts as a way to form identity by encouraging the person to participate in the "suturing" or articulation of the self to which they have been hailed (Hall, 1996). For example, Yulia will sometimes choose a character to cosplay because she admires that character's personality. She explains, "sometimes, I'll be watching a show or playing a game and think, Oh, that character was really cool, that character embodies these qualities that I like and that maybe I want to have or want to at least wear for a bit." As Yulia mentions, this identification with the character can also be an expression of admiration for aspects of the character's personality and a method of identity building by literally becoming another person.

Malina explicitly states that she finds cosplay meaningful because she uses it to not only express, but also to formulate a sense of self by emulating other characters. She explains:

> I have borderline personality disorder, so I can't formulate my own personality, so I like to take on the personality of other people and characters, and it's very easy

> for me to pretend to be a character. And it helps it, it helps me become myself. I take all of these pieces from all of these different characters and I make them 'me.'

Malina echoes Stuart Hall's (1996) introduction in *Questions of Cultural Identity* when she speaks about the "piecing together" of identity. In Hall's work, he describes identity as "never unified…increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (p.4). Malina's statement about how cosplay enables her to turn fragments of personalities into one which she believes is 'her' reveals how the self is constructed through representation and then represented in turn. In the case of cosplay, the 'play' of being a character through costuming demonstrates an investment in this representation that manifests in the literal 'becoming' of the character through the conversion of the physical self. In short, the self as an unknown form becomes distilled through the representation of a character in cosplay and the subsequent response of the others in the cosplay milieu.

Matching the body and self

Looking out at the crowd of people filtering into the convention center, I took note that many cosplayers were wearing store-bought costumes, easily recognizable by the complex patterns printed directly onto polyester fabric. Most of these individuals were small and thin, likely because the store-bought costumes are from Asian cosplay websites and tend to run small compared to American sizes ("How to Convert Asian Size to US Size", 2022).

The phenomenon of "Asian sizing" is mentioned by Pallas, during their interview, in which they say it "always makes me so sad that like things only come in the Asian sizes and I'm

like, I barely fit in the Asian sizes at all." Handmade costumes were less frequent and much more varied in quality, and the cosplayers themselves had a broader range of body types.

Participants often spoke about the importance of resonating with a character physically. As a result, they tended to gravitate towards cosplaying characters that were already physically similar to themselves. If they did choose to cosplay a character they did not match, they would either alter the character concept to better fit themselves or attempt to change their own body to get closer to the character concept. The performance of cosplay then becomes an act of eliminating the perceived dissonance between the character and the cosplayer to fully become the character.

Participants detailed methods they used in order to achieve a similar physical body as the character concept they were cosplaying. Markus, who was cosplaying as Inosuke from *Demon Slayer*, states that he has dealt with the issue of body size related to musculature. "Some people that I've talked to before were saying like, 'oh, I really wanted to do this cosplay, but like I'm not muscular like enough to do that.'" Upon hearing these comments, Markus then "started hitting the gym" to compensate for this perceived inadequacy.

Sam mentions that they used binders to flatten their chest when they cosplay as male characters, stating, "In a lot of cases it depends on the body type of the guy, but usually a chest binder of some sort is involved just to make it look more close to the character." To further push the illusion of masculinity, they sometimes utilize makeup "to take the contours of your face and make it look more masculine." If they do not have a binder, they "did my best to try and hide it. Like with Link [a male video game character] you can do that with his looser fitting tunic." Cori speaks about his concerns about visibly aging and hiding markers of age while cosplaying

youthful characters. As a result, he is "wearing more helmets like now, so I can hide that sort of feature."

Both of these cosplayers explained how they sought to physically change their bodies to resonate with the character more closely. The labor involved with changing the body–working out, pressing down, limiting some body parts and emphasizing others–is presented as a necessity to embody the character fully. If such physical changes cannot be achieved adequately, then the body is hidden away so as to avoid any dissonance that one might feel or elicit from others.

When this matching cannot be achieved through methods like binding one's chest or contouring one's face, steps must then be taken to align the character more closely with the cosplayer. For example, Marnie expresses her dissatisfaction with a Dazai cosplay from the anime *Bungou Stray Dogs*. After assembling the costume, Marnie decided to change the gender of the character concept to be female instead:

> And so I changed it to how I wanted to do it, so it fit me better…So I just did a longer wig and did female makeup, basically, because my face shape is round. More round, I feel like, I don't know. So like a genderbend thing.

Marnie feels that her face shape could not be changed to appear sufficiently masculine, even with makeup. As a consequence, she feels better about changing the gender of the character concept rather than cosplaying the original character and looking "too feminine." Ava feels similarly, stating that her cosplay as a genderbent version of All Might from *Boku no Hero Academia* when asked to describe the costume, explaining:

> I did a genderbend just because I felt like, hey, just wanna make it something unique and fun for me because doing male characters, like with my chest, it's very like, like I don't do that cuz I feel bad about it.

Both of these cosplayers were uncomfortable not "passing" appropriately as the gender of the original character and instead chose to slightly alter the concept to match their own gender performance. Rather than attempting to match the original, male character, they now match a more feminine version of the original character, reducing the dissonance and making it more feasible for them to achieve resonance between self and concept.

Helena describes this altering of the character concept as "making the character meet you," rather than attempting to change oneself to be accurate. "Just like, use what you already naturally have. And then just make... wear that with the character instead of altering yourself in some way that can be presumably misunderstood." Regarding race, Nina mentions adjusting the character design to fit oneself better in the same way. "Not trying to change your race to fit the character, moreso changing the character to fit your race…So you're African, you wanna add like African vibes to the character? Cool."

Primacy of the visual in cosplay/race

Overwhelmingly, a theme that arose from interviews was the belief that the visual appearance of the body, both of the cosplayer and the character that is cosplayed, is the most important aspect when considering the accuracy of a cosplay and any racial issues. The characteristics of one's physical body, including their skin color, height, and weight, were of the greatest concern to most participants. Contrary to assertions that cosplay was costume-focused or play-focused, participants most often spoke about their hesitancy to cosplay a character due to physical characteristics that were difficult or impossible to change.

Managing dissonance: alteration and avoidance

I sat in at a panel for "cosplay outside-the-box," run by a Latina woman in a crocheted Star Wars Twi'lek headpiece. She explains that cosplay outside-the-box refers to cosplays that are related to a media franchise but are original characters or ideas created by the cosplayer themselves. Her examples include a Dalek-inspired dress, a set of Klingons, and a man in a patterned suit that matched the convention lobby's carpet. It is meant to be a more inclusive way to show your admiration for a franchise, allowing for people of different sizes, abilities, and budgets to join in. She states that, with cosplay outside-the-box, no one can accuse you of not matching the character you are cosplaying as. A woman taps on my shoulder and asks if she can take a picture of me in my Diamond Clan costume with my stuffed Rowlet plushies. "Are you supposed to be Mai?" she asks. I shake my head. "Just a generic Diamond Clan member," I say. In truth, I had not taken the time to make any of the accessories and worried I wouldn't be recognizable without them.

Discomfort from a lack of matching was alleviated by participants by simply choosing to cosplay characters that physically resemble the cosplayer more closely, or not cosplaying other characters. Minsi expressed hesitancy to cosplay characters that differed from her in height or weight, stating, "It's just, more or less, I think of it in like proportions of myself to the character," and having different proportions than the character was to be avoided. Similarly, Thalia stated that she could not yet cosplay Itto from *Genshin Impact* because she wanted to be "chest out" and was unable to do so as a woman. Although she was aware of the existence of silicone chest covers meant to emulate a male torso, she still demurred: "But still, it's just I don't know, like he's super muscular and I'm not there yet, so it's just like I can't cosplay him yet, that type of thing."

Another participant, Cori, was also uncomfortable with cosplaying as a dramatically different body shape. “But for me personally, cuz I'm a bigger guy. A load of anime characters are very slender and scrawny. I can't pull that off as well as other people can. So I try to stay the hell away from that line if I can't.” The concept of not adequately resonating with the character, of not appearing as the character does in shape, is distasteful. The inability to “pull off” a character is an inability to look sufficiently like the character and is so undesirable that instead, Cori opts to “stay the hell away.” Nina and Ava echoes Cori’s avoidance of dissonant characters, with Nina stating that, “When I'm looking for the next character to compete with, I make sure it's something that'll suit me. Otherwise, I'm not gonna try.”

Alan candidly states that he may “already rule out a lot of ones that are of different ethnicities before I even I think about what I would want to cosplay” because most of the media he watches will have uniformed characters, and trying to cosplay a specific character would be difficult, and “especially in a case where if there's a character that is similar looking to me, I may already have gravitated towards that one without even thinking about it.” In a sense, the impossibility of envisioning himself as such a radically different individual causes Alan to gravitate more towards characters that already look like him instead.

Despite his own preference for cosplaying as characters that already matched his own appearance, Alan encouraged his friend, Jonah, to cosplay any character he wanted. Jonah, however, had similar reservations about matching the character:

> **Jonah**: When we were first preparing for this event... It's my first convention, so I was going through a list and was like, ‘Oh, I wanna be Natsu, or Asta or Naruto,’ all these skinnier people and I'm like, man, I'm a bigger guy. I dunno. So I was thinking, ‘Oh, what can I pull off? What kind of looks like me?’...And then I was

like, Oh my gosh, Jiraiya, he's kinda like a dad vibe to it. I can go for a dad vibe stuff.

Alan: The thing is that it…remember that I was trying to convince you that it was totally fine for you to just pick Naruto if you wanted to, Like we were talking quite a bit…just saying like 'I've seen, African Americans play Naruto. I've seen like, Asians play Naruto. I've seen all sorts of people just be Naruto. I've seen girls be Naruto. So it was totally fine to be, if you wanted to be Naruto it's like you could.'

Jonah echoed Alan's priorities about matching the character he wanted to cosplay as, but Alan seemed to be more open with the idea of his friend not matching. This was a recurring sentiment. Overall, most participants agreed that cosplay should be inclusive and that people should not be judged negatively because they do not fully match the character they are cosplaying. However, participants expressed a *personal* discomfort in not physically matching the character, hesitant to cosplay a character whose physical traits, such as height, weight, or race, they were unable to emulate. They professed an indifference when other cosplayers did not match but felt that matching was an important aspect of *their own* cosplay.

Though it is not explicitly stated, there seems to be a recognition of the surveillant eye of their peers that prevents participants from fully embodying the "anyone can cosplay anything" ideology that they ascribe to. Their peers are watching and judging, and there is pressure to present oneself (and the character they are cosplaying as) in as favorable a light as possible, and this is achieved through matching. It is implied that matching with the character concept is important to cosplay successfully and, though "others" may be comfortable with dissonance, the

cosplayer personally is not comfortable. The notable aspect is that *all the participants* are personally uncomfortable with the dissonance.

Enforcing visual accuracy in cosplay

On the third day of the anime convention, I decided not to wear my blonde wig for Zelda because of how hot and uncomfortable it was in the summer heat. The decision was one that I agonized over for a while, debating the merits of being comfortable or being accurate. It was with great hesitation that I made the decision to stay cool without the wig, and that trepidation remained until someone stopped me to ask for a photo with 'Zelda.' I noticed that far fewer people stopped me for photos when I was a Diamond Clan member and when I went without my wig, but I was also much cooler now.

Part of the desire to physically match is the belief that cosplays should be recognizable by fans of the media series. Nina spoke about what she considered to be a good cosplay, stating, "The person who looks like each turn, you're like, 'Oh my God, that's that character.' You can instantly recognize them. I feel like that's a good cosplay." As previously mentioned, Nina steers away from cosplaying characters that she believes she could not visually match and be recognizable in the cosplay. As a result, she prefers to cosplay characters of the same build and general skin color as herself. Many other participants expressed this desire to visually match the character. For example, Alan had similar reservations about cosplaying characters that looked too physically different from himself out of concern that it would take away the character's recognizability:

> Because, I think for me it's like when you go out, especially for the kids…I want a kid, if there's a kid who's watched *Darling in the Franxx* before…like you want to look the part so someone can recognize you and be excited about it. And it's just,

> if you want to do it justice and you want to look the part and understand that, hey, how I look in the cosplay does in fact matter to people other than myself, I guess.

The need to be recognizable acts as a form of reinforcement in cosplay as cosplayers seek out characters that they can accurately emulate. As previously noted, this demonstrates the power of a decentralized surveillant judgment which manifests itself through everyone's personal but unified commitment to visual accuracy.

This disciplinary judgment becomes visible when other individuals in-person and in online spaces give negative commentary on cosplayers who are deemed deviant. Minsi notes that she has frequently encountered this gatekeeping from others:

> I've met quite a few people who seem to think that if you can't match up with something or if you don't look a certain way you can't cosplay them, and I don't think that's a very fun way to look at it because it's a world of make-believe, you're allowed to do what you want and dress up.

The disciplining of deviant individuals is particularly apparent (and unevenly applied) with regards to race. Ayla and Thalia separately described a Black cosplayer on TikTok who had been criticized for cosplaying Hinata from *Naruto* with the statement “Hinata ain’t Black,” implying that the cosplayer’s Blackness disqualified her from being able to embody the character. However, White cosplayers do not appear to face the same discipline. Pallas, who is part of a *Genshin Impact* chat group, says that “specifically for the Black cosplayers in our group, they get disrespected by communities and stuff like that, just for being a Black cosplayer.” However, the same communities “won't say that to a White person. Like a lot of the characters aren't White either. So what's your point?”

This is particularly noticeable with online interactions between cosplayers and the community. Pallas speaks about the platform TikTok and its algorithms as a technology that makes apparent how White cosplayers are favored and permitted leeway with accuracy: "a lot of it is that like, be pretty and skinny. And you can get away with anything. Like it can be mediocre, but as long as you're pretty, skinny, and white, it tends to do better online." Marnie is a TikTok cosplayer herself and agrees, mentioning a particular White cosplayer that was known for cosplaying Kaeya from *Genshin Impact,* who is a darker-skinned character. According to Marnie:

> At first I was like, 'Oh, cool, cosplay,' and then someone mentioned that she is the top or they are the top cosplay for when you search 'Kaeya cosplay.' And that just didn't sit right with me. Most of the people at the top of the TikTok search for 'Kaeya cosplay' are White.

In contrast to the popularity of White cosplayers, Nora shares that online Black cosplayers of *Demon Slayer's* Nezuko are sometimes called "N-word Nezuko" to denigrate their cosplay and mark it as distinct from 'normal' Nezuko. Notably, White cosplayers of Nezuko are not subjected to similar treatment–likely because they visually match the character's skin tone.

The desire for accuracy is also reinforced by cosplay competitions which punish cosplayers for what are considered 'cosplay inaccuracies.' Diana related a personal story while hosting a panel at one of the conventions. She explained how she and her sister were previously censured for cosplaying as characters from HBO's *Game of Thrones* as non-White cosplayers. After awards were given out, a judge privately informed them that part of the reason they did not win was because other judges thought they did not match the race of the characters they were cosplaying as. Diana states:

> Shit like this keeps happening. We're like, I don't blame people for being scared in contests. It does. It's happened to me, like my sister and I lost a contest for– literally told to our– one of them was to our faces–that it was because we were Black.

Pallas, who also participates in competitions, spoke about constraints that they placed upon their own cosplays to appease judges. Although they enjoyed adding a bit of their own creativity into costumes, "most of the time I try to keep to the source material cuz once again I compete and so I know judges will look at that, you can only go outside the lines a little bit without them going 'eh'." Competition cosplayers, who are often considered part of the upper echelons of cosplay skill, are therefore encouraged to remain visibly recognizable, which often means matching the character concept (including the character's skin color and body shape) as closely as possible.

The unfortunate effect of this desire for accuracy is that subaltern groups in particular are subtly prevented from fully enjoying the 'anyone can cosplay anything' ideal. The underrepresentation of minority groups in media means that characters they might match are few in number, and cosplaying outside of these characters leaves one vulnerable to accusations of inaccuracy. Yulia expressed that she had little choice in cosplaying someone who was the same race as her:

> But I think overall, cuz I am a person of color, I'm Black and Afro-Latina, that kind of thing, and so I'm not gonna look like most of the characters that I cosplay. And that's just a matter of fact, but just based on what's out there right now.

Malina notes that what little representation of minority groups is present in media is "just bad, subpar at best, horrible at worst." Malina, as a person with a sleep disorder, expressed that her

disability was often played off as a joke, if she was even able to find a character who did share her disability in the first place. As she explained, "'cause I want disabled representation from media, but whenever I look, the only thing that I see is 'ha, funny fall asleep and fall asleep during bedtime.'"

Ayla also expressed that not all representation is appropriate or respectful, and that insisting that minority groups occupy those cosplays is disrespectful:

> A lot of the representation in anime for Black people and people of color are racist. So take, for example, Sister Crone from *Promise Neverland* or Mr. Popo from *Dragon Ball Z*. Mr. Popo is a straight up, like full on minstrel racist character. And then we have characters like Sister Crone who look innocent at first if you don't really know what to look for, but she's also like a racist caricature of a Black person…But the fact that it's, it's slim pickings for anyone who is of a darker skin tone. So to force those characters on people is basically being like, 'Hey, cosplay this racist character, this literal minstrel character, do it like, be uncomfortable.'And it's just not right.

Attempts to reinforce visual accuracy thus serve to not only keep minority cosplayers from partaking in the ludic potential of cosplay, but also typecast such cosplayers into roles that reinscribe demeaning stereotypes onto these groups. The resulting message is disheartening: one must either submit to such demeaning representations or risk censure by a larger community.

Accurate Blackness and 'racelessness' (Whiteness)

The 'racelessness' of characters in cosplay was mentioned by several cosplayers. Many cosplayers choose to cosplay animated characters who may not have stereotypical markers of

race drawn in, i.e. narrow eyes for Asian characters. Physical features of race such as skin color and hair color were the primary method through which participants identified the race of characters that they saw in media. At times, this caused confusion as to how characters were meant to be raced. This confusion was especially prominent with Japanese anime and manga. For example, Nina mentions that, "Japanese manga looks American just because they draw them with big eyes and stuff." Vi agrees, saying that "a lot of characters in anime are inherently Japanese…and they appear White in, in a lot of media. But they're not, they are Japanese people." Despite acknowledging that the characters were likely meant to represent Japanese individuals, the presence of 'big eyes' was enough to make the characters read as White for some individuals. Yulia explicitly states that cosplayers:

> get thrown off by the skin tone, and the hair colors and things like that, right? And it's like they're [the characters] are actually in Japan, speaking Japanese, going to Japanese high school and all these different things.

Because most pale characters are defaulted to Whiteness through their facial features, skin color becomes an important indicator of non-Whiteness. Pallas said that they preferred to cosplay characters who were White, later clarifying that they will also cosplay "Asian characters, but they tend to be on the paler side. I don't go anywhere that is too like non-White since I am White and I don't wanna offend anyone."[4] Nina also stated that she only cosplayed as White characters

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[4] This alignment of Asianness with almost-Whiteness is not uncommon due to the binary rhetoric of race that is dominant in American discourse. As a consequence, White individuals who cosplay as Asian characters are not usually included in criticisms about racefacing or whitewashing in cosplay. However, Asian cosplayers are still subject to critiques on racial accuracy, *even when cosplaying Asian characters*.

to avoid conflict, though she later adds that "my most popular character was genderbent Sasuke," a Japanese character from the anime *Naruto*. Asian characters were considered "White enough" for the purposes of cosplay, seemingly based on the lack of explicitly racialized physical features that American audiences recognize.

Fig. 6: Tsukino Usagi (月野 うさぎ, known as Serena Tsukino in the English dub) from *Sailor Moon*. Note the sailor-style uniform, a popular school uniform in Japan, and the accompanying school uniform bag on the left. ©Naoko Takeuchi/PNP/Kodansha.

The art style of anime and the pale skin of the characters becomes a means of justifying White cosplay as being accurate to the source character concept, and sometimes even being *more* accurate than the source character. For example, at a panel, Diana spoke about a Black cosplayer being criticized for cosplaying Usagi (see Fig. 6 above) from the anime *Sailor Moon*, as Usagi "wasn't Black." As someone who had also cosplayed Usagi previously, I recall that I was told that my cosplay was inadequate because Usagi "was White." As Mishou (2021) rightfully notes, Blackness is the main target of gatekeeping within comics fandoms in particular, and this is in

part justified by the historic Whiteness of the canon. However, as participants in this study demonstrate, anime cosplay is similarly gated against other non-White individuals, even though the media originates from Japan. Markus describes how these considerations of race become important for certain types of cosplayers over others:

> Yeah, I think it's weird that for most anime characters, obviously they're from Asia. And if a White person cosplays them, people don't care. And it's whatever, a person of color or like a different ethnicity, if they try to cosplay, then some people give hate to that.

As Markus notes, the preoccupation with racial accuracy seems to primarily be used against cosplayers of color in service to White cosplayers and serves to erase Asianness from cosplay. White cosplayers are not limited to only "White" characters, as their skin color is deemed similar enough to some pale characters to ignore issues of ethnicity. However, this same flexibility is not afforded to others. Nora gives the following example:

> These certain characters, they literally show that they're from Asia. [But people] literally say like, 'they're White.' And it's no, they're literally Asian. So you see that a lot. And they're like, 'I don't care. Nobody else can cosplay it unless they're White.' It happens so many times.

Nora's experience goes even further, as the characters themselves are denied their Asian background entirely in order to further limit who is permitted to cosplay the characters. She mentions pointing out official texts, like character biographics, and fan wiki pages that label the character as Japanese to no avail. The hegemon group has the benefit of 'racelessness,' and the absence of stereotypical racial markers in animated characters enables White individuals to claim

racelessness for these characters as well. All the while, this absence of race is interpreted to be Whiteness. This sense of race and racelessness also reflects a belief in the visual certainty of race in the presence of distinct racialized features. Participants spoke about "knowing" that a character or cosplayer was not White but did not include many specifications about how this knowledge came about. It is in the confusion regarding Japanese anime characters that reveals Whiteness is conceptualized as racelessness within the United States. The belief that Japanese creators are not portraying their own race reflects a projection of raceless identity from the American hegemon onto the Japanese hegemon. Uncertainty comes about with the cognitive dissonance between markers of Japanese identity on the characters and the participant-described "Whiteness", or the lack of racialized features. Unless a character was essentially a racial caricature or dark-skinned, they were considered White. There is little consideration for the idea that, according to Lu (2008), Japan interprets itself as a hegemon of the East, which is why their characters may be interpreted as Japanese without a need for explicit racial differentiation from White character. There is even less consideration that the international popularity of anime may have influenced this ambiguity[5] as Japan attempts to exert cultural power towards the perceived Other, the West. Instead, the hegemony of Whiteness in America is readily equated to a hegemony of Whiteness globally for the purpose of expanding the metaphorical space that Whiteness can occupy and perpetuating discussions of race in America as between binary Blackness and Whiteness.

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[5] Lu (2008) makes the argument that some anime is purposely made more ambiguous to appeal to a global, primarily Western audience, something that is referred to as "losing its cultural odor." This is not present in all anime, as some still attempt to satiate a nationalistic Japanese sentiment by demonizing the West, something which Lu refers to as "Occidentalizing the Orient."

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

The ideal of 'anyone can cosplay anyone' is one that expresses a desire for a general racial acceptance that is separate from other everyday social contexts. This is used to welcome subaltern participation by emphasizing the equality of all cosplayers and their freedom to cosplay any character. However, this also creates the belief that cosplay can exist apart from a larger social context through the ludic quality of the hobby. When one 'plays,' having fun is an aim which, for many cosplayers, overrides considerations of historical context. And yet, as indicated through interviews with participants, cosplay remains fraught with controversies and issues that are firmly located with broader social and political contexts. The major constraint to this free play was the requirement for cosplayers to remain *respectful* of the character that they cosplayed as. Participants' statements about cosplay and race revealed a complex web of interactions that centered around the sense of respect in the hobby. 'Respectful cosplay' was borne out partially through the avoidance of racial caricature or other socially unacceptable presentation of the subaltern group, i.e. racefacing and acting as a racial stereotype of the character. However, 'respectful cosplay' also involved 'doing the character justice,' i.e. presenting the character in a positive light by/and being accurate to the character's appearance to the best of their ability. This dual definition of respect presents a set of issues and boundaries that are navigated by cosplayers as they dress and perform as a desired character for the public.

On the one hand, some aspects of accuracy will be unreachable to some participants due to the necessity of respectful cosplay as defined by participants. The social push against racefacing in the United States constrains cosplayers in what they can do to achieve visual accuracy. Even if darkening one's skin would be more accurate, the general sociocultural understanding is that any attempts to change one's race via caricature is unacceptable. What is

considered disrespectful varied among participants, but it was agreed that racefacing was generally forbidden. The enactment of racefacing is one that is so socially unacceptable that even cosplayers who were in favor of radical free cosplay balked at the idea of attempting to change one's racial appearance. Racefacing is tied deeply with disrespect in the sociocultural environment of American cosplay such that there was no way to do it appropriately. Some participants went even further to state that they did not agree with White cosplayers who cosplayed as a character of color, even without attempting to change one's racial appearance. This is thought of as being equivalent to 'stealing' an already-limited character of color from cosplayers of color. This constraint is met with some amount of rancor from White cosplayers who desire to participate in the complete democracy of cosplay. Because the subaltern group is making explicit rules about what is and is not permitted, this is interpreted by the hegemonic group as exclusionary because it intrudes upon their implicit privilege to freely cosplay. Additionally, these reservations about race in cosplay did not extend to Asian characters, only characters with visibly darker skin. White cosplayers rarely interrogated whether cosplaying Asian characters could be considered racefacing, instead reasoning that even Asian characters did not "look Asian."

On the other hand, respecting a character was also conflated with accuracy. As Alan and Nina say, the accurate presentation of a character is thought to convey respect for the character. However, the criteria for an accurate cosplay are strongly tied to the visual appearance of a character. Having a different body shape, or hair texture, or skin color was less accurate, and so many participants shared their avoidance of certain characters or their gravitation towards others based on how much they already matched the character. Participants made it clear that this dissonance between the self and the character concept was uncomfortable for them due to the

desire to become the character completely, subsuming the self into the character. Though participants made it clear that they had no objections to others (or the Other) not matching the character concept exactly, their own insistence on visual accuracy is one which perpetuates this idea that one *should* be accurate in every possible way if one wanted to do cosplay 'right' and 'respectfully.' Because the media consumed by cosplayers heavily favors pale-skinned characters, this often means that accuracy is unachievable by non-White participants. Accuracy is used as a pseudo-objective filter which disproportionately affects cosplayers of color due to the highly visual nature of cosplay. On the other hand, Whiteness is so invisible that it can be used to 'play' with race through the relatively 'easier' subsuming of the subject into the character, regardless of the character's actual visual appearance.

The dual definition of respect as expressed by participants is thus: respectful cosplay entails situating the self in relation to a larger societal context, but respectful cosplay also entails aligning the self with the character as closely as possible so as to eliminate all traces of the self in favor of thrusting the character to the forefront. Overall, these two ideals of respect reflect an ongoing tension within cosplay and between cosplayers about the purpose of cosplay and its place within a larger social milieu characterized by (among other things) an increased attention (and in some cases, vehement resistance) to histories of racial and colonial discrimination and exploitation in the United States. The question about what cosplay should be–a space of fun and acceptance, a costume-skills competition, a way to bring a character to life, an expression of self–are questions about how we are meant to situate cosplay as a serious and casual hobby, and how cosplay is located within and beholden to a larger social network. Play is permitted on all sides, but some must navigate hidden rules that others do not need to follow. This prevents them

from experiencing the full ludic enjoyment of the play because the body of the cosplayer cannot be completely erased or hidden.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

As expressed by participants in this study, cosplay is seen as a practice that emphasizes self-fulfillment and freedom through the costuming of the self in order to embody a character. However, my work reveals constraints to this freedom that are broadly applied to how one is permitted to practice cosplay. 'Respect for the character' emerged as an important virtue for cosplayers, and this notion of respect was attributed to both the visually accurate portrayal of the character and respect for the sociocultural context that cosplay events exist within. At times, uncertainty about what was considered respectful led cosplayers to avoid cosplaying as certain characters so as to preserve this notion of respect. Participants also expressed the importance of matching the self to the character, resonating with the character's personality in addition to already looking like the character physically. When this matching was not successful, participants described ways they endeavored to make their bodies match or created new character concepts to match. Ultimately, these attempts to preserve visual accuracy also serve to enforce them, and this complicates assertions that cosplay is truly a free practice, particularly for people of color who have less representation in media. In an unfortunate turn, their diminished presence in media leads to a diminished presence in other hobbies. Finally, the prevalence of White cosplayers that cosplay characters from Japanese media describes notions of the visual primacy of race and the power of white hegemony which facilitates the malleability of Whiteness to advantage White cosplayers. Attempts to categorize cosplay as merely 'play' hides how themes like respect and accuracy are utilized in ways that discourage certain bodies from enjoying cosplay. This tension between cosplay as a practice outside of the everyday world and one which has always been situated in the everyday world is one that the hegemonic group has the privilege to claim ignorance of, but one that subaltern groups remain bound by.

Ultimately, this study provides an entry point into a much larger topic of how cosplayers mediate interactions between themselves and others as racialized subjects. A larger study might include more interviewers in a team-based multi-site ethnography approach or by utilizing a swarm method in which many researchers conduct interviews at a single site (Kilker, 2007). This would serve to generate data from interviewers with different subjectivities, and comparing and combining such qualitative data might yield more nuanced insights than a single researcher could. Furthermore, this study was limited to two conventions in the United States with Anglophonic participants. A future study might consider interviewing cosplayers from conventions outside of the United States or foreign cosplayers who come to American conventions for leisure or competition. Findings from such a multi-site study would further expand insights on cosplay and race from a less US-centric viewpoint and generate new knowledge that reflects cosplay's dynamic, global appeal.

In the future, I recommend that more research be done regarding racefacing and whitewashing in cosplay. Participants expressed particular frustration and concern about what constituted inappropriate cosplay behavior if it was not outright minstrelsy, with contradicting beliefs and more or less extreme notions of what defined racefacing and whitewashing. Patterns between what individuals perceive as inappropriate and points of conflict might provide rich insights on how *racism* is conceptualized and challenged within cosplay and what considerations are made when cosplayers assert that an inappropriate racial act was or was not perpetrated.

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