

Black Femme Cosplay:
Navigating Identity, Creativity, and Cultural Representation in Fandom Spaces

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Abstract

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Black Femme Cosplay: Navigating Identity, Creativity, and Cultural Representation in Fandom Spaces explores the transformative power of cosplay as a site of identity formation, resistance, and community-building for Black femme-presenting individuals. Through an interdisciplinary framework that draws on Black feminist thought, Afrofuturism, critical media studies, and cultural performance theory, I examine how Black femme cosplayers navigate hypervisibility, racialized exclusion, and gendered stereotypes in fan culture while asserting agency, visibility, and joy through embodied creative expression. Using a hybrid ethnographic methodology, including participant observation at major and regional comic conventions, in-depth interviews with thirty-nine Black femme cosplayers, and digital ethnography, this study uncovers the ways cosplay becomes a liberatory praxis for participants marginalized within both society and fan spaces. I argue that Black femme cosplay is not simply aesthetic mimicry or fandom engagement; it is a deliberate and radical reimagining of self and world, grounded in cultural resistance and speculative possibility. By tracing the history of cosplay and its intersections with racial representation, I contextualize how Black femmes disrupt the normative whiteness of

fandom through racebending, genderbending, and Afrofuturist reinterpretations of canonical characters. Their artistic practices reveal an affective labor that reclaims narratives historically used to stereotype and marginalize Black women. Drawing on the legacy of speculative fiction and the evolving tenets of Afrofuturism, this dissertation positions cosplay as a critical cultural site where Black femme participants project futures in which they are not only visible but central, powerful, and limitless. This work contributes to conversations in communication, media, and cultural studies by affirming the intellectual and creative labor of Black femme cosplayers. It challenges dominant structures in fandom and academia by centering community-based knowledge, multimodal storytelling, and lived experience. This dissertation contends that cosplay, for Black femmes, is not merely play, it is a profound form of freedom work, a visual archive of self-authorship, and a radical assertion of joy in the face of systemic exclusion.

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Preface: Suiting Up: How Cosplay Sparked My Creative and Critical Voice

My journey into cosplay truly began in community college when I attended my first fan convention and discovered the power of escapism. As a Black queer woman, I was drawn to the idea of embodying different characters, stepping into new worlds, and finding a sense of belonging in fandom spaces. Cosplay allowed me to express myself freely, unbound by societal expectations or rigid definitions of identity. Surrounded by people dressed as Jedi, superheroes, and anime characters, I felt both exhilarated and out of place. I hadn't yet gathered the courage to dress up myself, but seeing others in costume sparked something within me. It was the first time I realized that this was not just about the outfits, it was about community, expression, and celebrating the stories that brought us together. My first cosplay was Mystique from *X-Men: The Animated Series* (1992-1997).



Fig. 1: Researcher dressed as Mystique from Marvel's *X-Men: Animated Series*

I was drawn to Mystique from *X-Men* for several reasons, particularly because of her shapeshifting abilities and the concept of race fluidity in her character. Mystique, as a mutant, can transform into anyone, making her a unique figure in discussions of identity, representation, and the flexibility of physical form. For Black cosplayers like me, the character Mystique offers an opportunity to embody a character where race does not define the character's limitations, which is a rarity in mainstream media. Mystique's ability to become anyone challenges the rigid structures of race, gender, and identity. Unlike many fictional characters bound by their racial or ethnic origins, Mystique's shapeshifting makes her a symbol of fluidity and freedom, which resonates deeply with cosplayers who often face gatekeeping or criticism for cosplaying outside of their perceived racial identity. Because she exists outside of traditional racial categories, she allows Black cosplayers to inhabit her character without the external pressures of conforming to a single race-based interpretation. Many Black cosplayers connect with the metaphor of mutation in the *X-Men* universe as a parallel to racial discrimination, where mutants, like marginalized communities, struggle for equal rights and recognition.

I pieced the costume together with items from thrift stores and hours of YouTube makeup and sewing tutorials. When I finally put it on, I was nervous, but stepping into the convention in full costume was exhilarating. People stopped to take pictures of me, complimenting my look and enthusiasm. In that moment, I felt seen, not just as a fan but as someone who belonged. In my time as Mystique, I realized that Mystique's blue skin neutralizes traditional racial categorization, making her a universally accessible character. For Black cosplayers, this removes the expectation of altering their skin tone to "fit" a role, a problematic issue often discussed in cosplay culture. Because she is neither Black nor white nor tied to any specific ethnicity, she exists outside of conventional beauty norms, which opens the door for cosplayers of all

backgrounds to bring their own interpretations to the character. By cosplaying Mystique, I was able to embrace a character who defined her own identity, making her an enduring favorite in the cosplay community.

Cosplay, for me, became a form of self-discovery. Growing up as a Black girl, I often struggled with the societal expectations placed upon me. I was too “nerdy” for some circles and not “authentic” enough for others. Cosplay gave me the freedom to step outside these boxes, to inhabit characters that transcended those limitations. Cosplay, for me, is more than just a hobby, it is an act of self-liberation and storytelling. It is about reclaiming space in fandoms, challenging traditional beauty standards, and showing that anyone can be a hero, a villain, or a legend. Through cosplay, I found escapism, but more importantly, I found myself.

As I delved deeper into cosplay, I began to confront the challenges Black cosplayers often face. Comments like “That character isn’t Black” or “You’re too dark for that costume” were disheartening, but they also fueled my resolve. Through online communities, I found solidarity with other Black cosplayers who shared similar experiences. These online forums became lifelines, connecting me to a vibrant, supportive network of people who understood the unique joys and struggles of navigating these spaces. While online spaces provide a vital source of solidarity and representation, in-person communities for Black cosplayers are just as essential in fostering belonging, cultural pride, and creative collaboration. Attending conventions, cosplay meetups, and Black-centered nerd events allows cosplayers to connect beyond the screen, forming real-life bonds that strengthen their sense of identity in fandom spaces that are often dominated by non-Black voices.

Over time, cosplay also became a way to reclaim representation. If mainstream media didn’t always provide characters who looked like me, I could reinterpret existing ones or create

my own. Black cosplay is more than just dressing up as favorite characters, it is an act of joy, resistance, and self-expression. In a world that often tries to dictate where Black people belong, cosplay allows us to reclaim space in fandoms, celebrate our creativity, and showcase our love for nerd culture without limitations. The joy of Black cosplay is found in the freedom to be anything and anyone, embracing characters from anime, comics, sci-fi, and fantasy with confidence and pride. For many Black cosplayers, the act of cosplaying itself is a joyful rebellion against societal norms that have historically marginalized or excluded Black fans. When a Black cosplayer steps into a convention dressed as Scarlet Witch, Spider-Man, or a character of their own creation, they are making a powerful statement of, “we belong here, we have always belonged here, and we are part of this culture”. That sense of belonging, of seeing and being seen, is deeply affirming and adds to the excitement and passion that cosplay brings.

One of my favorite projects involved reimagining Sailor Moon with Afrocentric elements, incorporating Ankara fabric and natural hairstyles. The overwhelmingly positive response from other cosplayers of all races, especially from those who were other Black femme cosplayers, reminded me that representation isn’t just about seeing yourself in media, it is also about creating spaces where others can see themselves. Cosplay also deepened my connection to my cultural heritage and my queerness. Inspired by characters like Shuri from *Black Panther*, the queer characters Aneka and Ayo of the Dora Milaje also from *Black Panther*, and Afrofuturistic designs, I began to incorporate elements of African art and fashion into my costumes. Seeing an entire lineup of cosplayers dressed as the Dora Milaje or a full group of Black anime characters at a convention sparks pure joy, it is a celebration of identity, artistry, and shared culture. These projects felt especially meaningful, as they allowed me to blend my fandom with my cultural and

personal identity. In doing so, I felt I was not only celebrating the characters I loved but also honoring the richness of my ancestry and myself.

Now, cosplay is an integral part of my life. It has given me lifelong friendships, creative outlets, and the confidence to embrace every part of who I am. When I walk into a convention now, I don't just see a room full of strangers, I see a community that I'm proud to be a part of. Cosplay taught me that belonging isn't about fitting into someone else's idea of who you should be; it's about creating spaces where you can be your authentic self. Reflecting on my journey, I see cosplay as more than just a hobby. *It's a transformative practice that allowed me to reclaim my narrative as a Black girl navigating a world that often tries to limit us.* Through costumes, creativity, and community, I found a way to celebrate my individuality and connect with others. Most importantly, I learned that the stories we love can be a mirror, showing us who we are and who we have the potential to become.

Introduction

As a Black girl growing up, my early fascination with anime, superheroes, and science fiction often felt like a lonely pursuit. In an ethnically diverse community, my love for characters like Toph, Mystique, Chun-Li, Poison Ivy, and Harley Quinn seemed out of place to some of my peers. “You like that nerdy stuff?” they would say with a mix of curiosity and teasing. Yet, these stories were my escape, a world where I could imagine being someone else, somewhere else, and something extraordinary. Little did I know that this fascination would eventually lead me to the transformative world of cosplay. The first time I encountered cosplay was through the internet. I stumbled upon photos of fans dressed as their favorite characters, complete with intricate costumes and striking poses. At first, it felt like something I could only admire from a distance. The people in those photos did not look like me, and I didn’t see many Black people celebrated in these spaces. The unspoken message was clear: cosplay was not “for people like me.” But instead of discouraging me, this realization planted a seed of determination to find my own place in this world.

In this dissertation, I uncover and make parallel the significance of Black cosplay as a form of Black femme affirmation, a means to empower confidence, and a community-building site. To offer some context within the three chapters, I will give a historical account of cosplay and the emergence of social media. I will then discuss diversity and representation in cosplay, how cosplay develops empowerment and confidence within its participants and lastly, how cosplay builds communities for those who are marginalized and breaks the stereotypes of who can cosplay as certain characters. Throughout this dissertation, I assert that cosplay, as a

transformative practice, enables Black women to reclaim their personal narratives in a world often determined to limit individual creativity. By examining how cosplay fosters agency, performance, and community, I illuminate its power to both challenge and reshape the cultural constraints placed on Black women's identities.

As a critical communication scholar, I seek to analyze how Black femmes who cosplay contribute to a more diverse representation in a subculture traditionally dominated by mainstream white cosplay portrayal. In which Black femmes are those whose intersectional identity combines Black, feminine presentation, and/or queer (Story, 2016). Through innovation, cosplay serves as a platform for Black women to express their creativity and build confidence. Many Black women in cosplay challenge preconceived notions regarding stereotypes about Black women, and the roles we are expected to play. Black women who cosplay foster a sense of community within the cosplay and convention world. In the interest of analyzing current Black representations in cosplay, there must also be an examination of past representations of fictional Black characters that led to the increase of Black cosplayers who depict Black and non-Black characters.

Artistic renditions of cosplay are linked to a genre of science fiction coined as Afrofuturism (Kirkpatrick 2019). Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic and artistic movement that explores the intersection of fiction, representation, and creativity, allowing Black women who cosplay to assert agency over their narrative and image. I apply theories of Afrofuturism as a theoretical frame in my reading of Black women cosplayers to offer a nuanced perspective and analysis that goes beyond the surface of cosplay. Afrofuturism refers to a flourishing contemporary movement of African American, African, and Black diasporic writers, artists, musicians, and theorists. According to Sinha (2023), "Afrofuturism is a body of creative work

and academic thought that imagines greater justice and a freer expression of black subjectivity in the future or in alternative times, places, or realities. It includes literature, visual art, photography, film, multimedia art, performance art, music, and theory” (para. 1). Afrofuturism also offers speculation about a world wherein Black people are normative and not seen as “other” within works of fiction and reality. By examining the development of Afrofuturism, I illustrate its influence on the creative practices of Black cosplayers and its role in fostering a deeper sense of cultural belonging. These findings build on my previous research into the historical and contemporary exploitation of negative stereotypes about Black women, particularly within the framework of *misogynoir*, the uniquely racialized and gendered forms of prejudice directed at Black women (Bailey, 2010). By tracing the evolution of controlling images such as the Jezebel, the Sapphire, and the Mammy, my previous work examines how these harmful archetypes have been continually reproduced and weaponized across various forms of media and public discourse. This historical pattern not only reinforces structural inequalities but also shapes the cultural narratives that constrain how Black women’s identities, labor, and bodies are understood and valued within society. Utilizing these patterns, my current research will interconnect the need for Black audiences/participants to be seen positively within fictional genres and visibly seen on the convention floor. This need for visibility will begin to investigate the relationship between power and agency for participants in the cosplay world.

This dissertation first explores how cosplay was created by the fans of science fiction, Japanese anime, graphic novels, films, and various forms of media. As an avid cosplayer and academic, my goal is to meld these two aspects of my life to dive into the various reason that many cosplayers have sought out fictional characters to portray as an avenue to find joy, representation, acceptance, and a community of likeminded people. Within cosplay, I am what

Jenkins (2006) calls an ‘aca-fan’, someone who analyzes and pushes the merging “roles of fan and academic, who is explicit about the sources of their knowledge and passion that drives their research” (p. 4). While there is a history of cosplay that dates to the 1980s as a portmanteau of the words ‘costume play’ that was attributed to the rise of Japanese manga and convention attendees dressing as their favorite anime character, these cosplayers were and remain, majorly non-Black. Black cosplayers are newer to the cosplay scene and an ever-growing addition to the world of cosplay and the conventions that celebrate fictional worlds and characters.

Afrofuturism

“Afrofuturism allows black people to see themselves in the future, whether through literature, film, art, or fashion. It’s about reclaiming identity, re-imagining possibilities, and challenging the idea that Blackness is incompatible with science fiction and fantasy.”

– (Womack, 2013)

Afrofuturism, as a theoretical framework, provides Black cosplay with a liberatory lens through which Black identity, creativity, and speculative futures can be explored and reimagined. The exclusion of people of color from science fiction has been noted from the 1950s onwards. Bould (2007) argues that science fiction has a “color-blind future that was concocted by whites and excluded people of color as full subjects; and because of the particularities of US history, the most obvious omission was that significant proportion of the population descended from the survivors of the West-African genocide” and slavery (p. 178). This led to the creation of Afrofuturism, where Mark Dery, during an interview in 1993, coined the term “Afrofuturism” to describe the intersections of African American themes with technological culture. Dery (1993) argues that speculative fiction addressing African American themes and concerns within the

context of twentieth-century technoculture can be described as "Afrofuturism." More broadly, he defines Afrofuturism as African American cultural expression that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.

To clarify, Black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism are interrelated yet distinct literary and cultural frameworks that center Black experiences, histories, and futures through imaginative storytelling. Black speculative fiction encompasses a broad range of genres, including science fiction, fantasy, horror, and magical realism, using speculative elements to explore issues relevant to Black communities. Afrofuturism, on the other hand, focuses specifically on envisioning Black futures through the lens of technology, science, and culture, often emphasizing the intersection of Black identity and the future. While the two often overlap, Afrofuturism is a subset of Black speculative fiction, defined by its futuristic orientation and its roots in African diasporic culture.

One key distinction lies in their thematic scope. Black speculative fiction includes works that may delve into historical reimagining's, alternate realities, or purely fantastical settings without necessarily engaging with futuristic elements. For example, Tananarive Due's horror novels or Nalo Hopkinson's Caribbean-inspired fantasy present speculative elements grounded in cultural folklore and historical contexts. Afrofuturism, exemplified by works such as Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Stan Lee's comic book character Black Panther (also a major box office film) specifically envision a future where Black people and African cultural elements thrive in technologically advanced and socially transformative societies. It may seem like an overstatement to claim that these works embody Afrofuturist ideology, especially considering that the original comic book character Black Panther debuted in 1966, and *Kindred* was published in 1979, both predating the formal coining of the term "Afrofuturism" in 1993.

However, both works appear to engage with elements of Afrofuturist thought, albeit in seemingly contrasting ways. *Black Panther* embraces an Afrocentric imagination rooted in African histories, which I contend primarily draws from pre-colonial Yoruba culture (Odukomaiya, 2020). In contrast, Butler revisits and reinterprets the historical experiences of African American slaves in the antebellum South. While *Black Panther* brings to life the cultural ethos and worldviews of Africans in the “motherland,” Butler focuses on the lived experiences of African Americans. These past, present, and futuristic lenses define Afrofuturism’s unique contribution within the broader speculative fiction landscape.

Another significant difference is their approach to cultural representation. Afrofuturism frequently incorporates elements of African art, music, spirituality, and cosmology into futuristic settings, creating a fusion of traditional and modern aesthetics. Although classified as fiction, the genre strives to portray African/Black worldviews with authenticity. To achieve this, creators delve into historical narratives and experiences of Africans and Black people. It positions African diasporic culture as central to humanity’s future, countering colonial narratives that historically marginalized these contributions. Black speculative fiction, while also deeply rooted in cultural representation, may focus on broader or alternative contexts. It often draws on folklore, mythology, and historical themes without necessarily projecting them into a futuristic framework. Instead, it weaves these cultural elements into narratives that explore the supernatural, the mystical, or the uncanny, offering imaginative reflections on identity, resistance, survival, and cultural memory. This allows Black speculative fiction to blur the boundaries between the past, present, and imagined worlds, creating space for reinterpreting history, interrogating present realities, and envisioning transformative possibilities (Yaszek, 2006).

Despite their distinctions, both Black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism serve as powerful tools for exploring identity, resilience, and liberation. They challenge dominant narratives in speculative literature, where Black voices have been historically underrepresented. Through their imaginative narratives, these genres confront systemic oppression, interrogate power structures, and celebrate the creativity and agency of Black communities. Both genres also encourage a reclamation of history and cultural heritage, offering a space to envision not only what has been lost but also what might yet be possible. The relationship between Black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism is one of overlap and synergy. Black speculative fiction provides a broad umbrella under which Afrofuturism thrives as a focused, forward-looking expression of Black creativity. Together, they push the boundaries of speculative literature and cultural discourse, creating vibrant, multifaceted narratives that reflect the complexities of Black experiences across time and space. By doing so, they inspire both critical reflection and imaginative possibilities for the future of storytelling.

Rooted in the intersection of Black history, culture, technology, and science fiction, Afrofuturism allows Black cosplayers to move beyond traditional representations of race in media and embrace alternative realities where Blackness is central, powerful, and limitless (Dery, 1994; Nelson, 2002). This theory challenges Eurocentric narratives by envisioning Black people in futuristic, fantastical, and technologically advanced societies, creating a direct counter to the historical marginalization of Black bodies in speculative fiction and popular media (Eshun, 2003). This expansion of cosplay and Afrofuturism, “spans both underground and mainstream pop culture. With a twofold aim to entertain and enlighten, Afrofuturists strive to break down racial, ethnic, and all social limitations to empower and free individuals to be themselves” (Womack, 2013, p. 215). This expansion and need to be visible within society are what Black

cosplayers strive for. Afrofuturism as referenced by Womack (2013) is a way to “encourage experimentation, reimagine identities, and activate liberation” (p. 9). As a form of liberation and a newly imagined historical past, Afrofuturisms combine historical fiction, science fiction and fantasy as a path to decolonize the mind and pave the way to a brighter future through a Black cultural lens, that has re-envisioned the past and predicts a more welcoming future, absent of the dystopian stereotypes and views of race.

One of the most significant contributions of Afrofuturism to Black cosplay is the reimagining of canonical characters through an Afrocentric lens. Cosplayers inspired by Afrofuturist aesthetics often incorporate African-inspired textiles, hairstyles, and futuristic embellishments into their costumes, transforming mainstream characters into distinctly Black interpretations that reflect both history and innovation (Womack, 2013). This not only serves as an act of creative reclamation but also challenges the notion that Blackness is absent or incompatible with sci-fi, fantasy, and speculative storytelling. Yaszek (2010) argues that “Afrofuturist artists fight these dystopic futures in two related ways. First, they use the vocabulary of science fiction to demonstrate how black alienation – what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double-consciousness” – is exacerbated rather than alleviated by those visions of tomorrow that are disseminated by the futures industry (p. 48). This double consciousness is a concept articulation of the duality faced by African Americans, offers a powerful framework for understanding the work of Afrofuturist authors. Double consciousness refers to the internal conflict of viewing oneself through the lens of one’s own culture while simultaneously grappling with the dominant culture’s perceptions.

Afrofuturist authors embrace and reimagine this duality, using it as a creative tool to critique systemic oppression and envision transformative futures. By intertwining African

diasporic traditions with speculative narratives, these writers explore the tensions of living in a world shaped by colonization and racism, while also imagining liberatory possibilities that transcend these limitations. Second, they disrupt, challenge, and otherwise transform those futures with fantastic stories that “move seamlessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones – and thus between blackness as a dystopic relic of the past and as a harbinger of a new and more promising alien future” (Yaszek, 2010, p. 48). The term double-consciousness that was coined by Du Bois in 1897, can be utilized in the ways that Afrofuturism is determined to create a better sense of the historical self for Black people. This is accomplished in the ways that Afrofuturism seeks to take back control of the Black narrative that has been iterated within fictional stories.

This dynamic perspective manifests in Afrofuturism through the juxtaposition of tradition and innovation. Afrofuturist authors often blend African cultural practices, mythologies, and aesthetics with futuristic technologies and speculative storytelling. For example, Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* incorporates the protagonist’s spiritual philosophy, “Earthseed,” as a means of navigating a dystopian future shaped by systemic collapse. This blending of ancient wisdom and futuristic vision reflects the dual consciousness of valuing one’s heritage while navigating a world dominated by Eurocentric modernity. Afrofuturist authors use this duality to question whose knowledge systems are privileged in the shaping of the future.

Afrofuturist literature also employs a layered perspective to explore the complexities of belonging. In many works, characters grapple with being “othered” in their societies while simultaneously asserting their humanity and agency. N.K. Jemisin’s the *Broken Earth* trilogy explores the alienation of marginalized groups, using speculative settings to highlight real-world inequities. These fictional narratives delve into the tension between being seen as an outsider and

claiming a rightful place in a reimagined society. This tension is often resolved through radical acts of self-definition and community building, offering pathways toward liberation and self-actualization. Moreover, this multifaceted perspective allows Afrofuturist authors to critique and deconstruct dominant cultural narratives while simultaneously constructing new ones. Works like Samuel R. Delany's *Nova* or the film *Sorry to Bother You*, challenge the Eurocentric visions of the future prevalent in mainstream science fiction by centering Black characters and cultural frameworks. This multifaceted strategy of dismantling existing paradigms while imagining and constructing alternative futures highlights the transformative potential of Afrofuturist thought. Afrofuturist writers use their positionality to illuminate the gaps and biases in traditional speculative fiction, offering visions of the future that are inclusive, imaginative, and deeply rooted in Black cultural heritage.

This layered literary perspective equips Afrofuturist authors with the tools to envision and craft new futures. However, according to Lavender and Yaszek (2020) there seems to be estrangement from a commonly accepted norm and the imagined positive alternative future. It seems that, "Afrofuturism is predicated on a double estrangement because it estranges us both from our commonsense assumptions about the world and about the norms of much [fiction], which is often unquestionably white, male, and imperialist and its base and direction" (Lavender and Yaszek, 2020, p. 90). This may later prove there will always be an internal battle for the Black self and the Black creator in imagination and representation. Afrofuturist authors draw on a dual perspective that allows them to critically engage with and transform the conventions of speculative fiction. This nuanced outlook enables them to explore both African and African American experiences, blending cultural memory with imagined futures to challenge dominant narratives. It empowers them to critique systemic injustices while crafting new realities that

honor Black histories and envision Black futures. By embracing the duality of their identities and experiences, these authors challenge readers to rethink assumptions about power, identity, and progress. Through the dynamic interplay of tradition and innovation, alienation and belonging, critique and creation, Afrofuturist literature harnesses the transformative potential of double consciousness to illuminate paths toward a more equitable and imaginative future, with little to no limits.

These small limitations/hinderances have a way of setting creative minds on a temporary lull, as there is a fear that the creativity being offered to society will not be accepted. Retta (2022) argues, “White people have controlled the individual and collective memories of Black Americans for centuries. When slaves were first brought to the American continent, their names were changed, their languages suppressed, their marriages undocumented, their graves unmarked” (para. 7). This is a historical truth and the sanitized and harmless ways that these facts are given to the masses, is the Afrofuturist’s artistic iteration. As Lavender and Yaszek (2020) posit, “such voyaging, imagining and seeking, can be put to work to reinforce the invalidate imbedded inequalities as if they were essential or even divine” (p. 91). Afrofuturism seeks to take the historic Black experience and travel through fictional passageways, so that Black bodies cannot freely traveled in the past.

Cosplay as an Afrofuturist Practice

“Cosplay is not about being perfect, it’s about enjoying yourself and expressing your love for a character or a fandom.”

– Adam Savage

Positioning cosplay as an analytical framework illuminates its role as a site for self-liberation, storytelling, and the free exploration of identity through embodied performance and creative play. Cosplay, short for costume play, is a cultural phenomenon that allows fans of popular media to bring their favorite characters to life. It is an intersection of artistic expression, creativity, identity exploration, and fandom, where participants express their passion and celebrate shared narratives through costuming and performance. It transcends geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers, inviting participants to immerse themselves in their favorite fandoms. Over the years, cosplay has grown from niche fan activity to mainstream cultural expression, with conventions like San Diego Comic-Con, Dragon Con, Emerald City Con, and Anime Expo serving as global stages. Comic book conventions have been a part of American popular culture for over four decades and have grown steadily ever since

Freedom of movement and travel serves as a central theme within cosplay, providing cosplayers with a flexible, imaginative space where they can traverse cultural, racial, and gendered boundaries to explore fluid identities and craft personal narratives through embodied performances. This creative mobility not only enables self-expression and identity experimentation but also challenges dominant norms around who can occupy certain characters, ultimately positioning cosplay as a site where identity, race, and representation are continually negotiated. The characters that a cosplayer chooses are never stagnant and are frequently fluid. There is a sense of uninhibited freedom among the cosplayers where the individual can don different masks to “construct, transform, or reshape their temporary roles or identities over the course of self-formation and transformation” (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 320). Cosplay is a term that represents the combining of the words *costume* and *play*, to describe the activity of dressing up in costume as a character and embodying that character's mannerisms and speech, to express

enthusiasm and fandom. According to Kroski (2015) the term cosplay, was first coined by writer Nobuyuki Takahashi in “the June issue of *MyAnime* to describe the costumed attendees at the Convention in Tokyo” (p. 1). Cosplay attendees are regularly on display at comic book and anime conventions around the world. There is not one singular genre of cosplay within each convention.

Cosplayers find their inspiration from a number of different outlets including “science fiction, the comic books, Japanese animation, television, film, video games, and even from works of literature” (Kroski, 2015, p. 1). Cosplay in a “modern subculturist context is often used to describe the activities of dressing and acting as characters from *manga* (Japanese comics), *anime* (cartoon animation), *tokusatsu* (special-effect movies or television shows), video games, science fiction/sci-fi, and music groups” (Rahman et al., 2012, p. 318). More recently, cosplay has expanded to include any type of dressing up outside of the scope of published portrayals, to include original characters that the cosplayer has created, mascots, public figures and more. There are no limits to where cosplay cannot extend itself.

Furthermore, Afrofuturism provides Black cosplayers with a framework for self-expression that extends beyond traditional character replication. Rather than adhering strictly to existing fictional characters, many Black cosplayers create original Afrofuturist designs, merging cultural heritage with futuristic elements to present entirely new narratives. This mirrors the way Afrofuturist literature, music, and visual arts function as vehicles for self-definition, world-building, and cultural resistance (Anderson & Jones, 2016). Cosplay within this framework becomes a performative form of Afrofuturism, allowing cosplayers to step into a speculative future where Black people are not only present but thriving in advanced and supernatural

realities. Along with inspiration, cosplayers also find a sense of confidence and community while attending the conventions.

Also, Afrofuturism in Black cosplay is a form of resistance against racialized gatekeeping in fandom spaces. The cosplay community has historically been influenced by Eurocentric beauty standards and racial biases that challenge the legitimacy of Black cosplayers portraying non-Black characters (Jackson, 2020). Afrofuturism disrupts these exclusionary practices by asserting that Blackness is inherently futuristic, dynamic, and capable of occupying any imaginative space. The popularity of films such as *Black Panther* (2018) has further amplified this movement, providing Black cosplayers with aesthetic and ideological inspiration rooted in Afrocentric futurism and speculative technology (Nama, 2011). One cosplayer and scholar Krumholz (2017) stated that cosplay, “unites people through their shared love and appreciation, [while] introverted restraints fade when it comes to cosplay” (p. 3). Cosplay enables those participants to imitate personas and transformation into another version of themselves, cultivating joy and a sense of belonging. In general, cosplay enthusiasts attempt to produce a fantasy and bring their favorite character to real life as a way to “replicate and perfect an ideal theatrical” or alternate self (Chen 2007). This cultivation of joy is a way that cosplayers can pause the issues and problems occurring in society and through this type of escapism, foster their own happiness in a place that is their own personal utopia. Grossberg (1996) states that, “affect is closely tied to what we often describe as the feeling of life...different affective relations inflect meanings and pleasures in very different ways” (p. 56-7). I argue that this theatrical self is a positive way to express various emotions and characteristics, that leave the cosplayer euphoric and anxiously awaiting until the next convention.

Black Cosplay

"We're helping people see us as heroes...Black cosplayers are changing cosplay because we are now opening up a conversation about inclusion."

—Lewis, Los Angeles

The presence of Black cosplayers, particularly Black women cosplayers have garnered the attention of convention communities. This would suggest that the presence of Blackness engages in a way that alters the hegemony of cosplay by shifting the emphasis of cosplay narrative that constantly highlights the white body and white representation (Thomas, 2021). Black cosplay can be described as rhetorical and performative as there is a sense of persuasion in the act of conveying the importance and visual presence of Black bodies who interpret and create version of their beloved characters. Black women cosplayers experience a unique intersectionality that adds layers to their cosplay experience. Exploring characters through the lens of race and gender allows for a more nuanced and multifaceted expression of identity.

Black women cosplaying as non-Black characters may face racial stereotyping and biases due to societal preconceived notions about how certain characters should look. One scholar argues that there is a desire for character accuracy that is reinforced through unfair cosplay competitions wherein those who are Black are considered inaccurate (Zhao, 2023). This bias can manifest in comments, judgments towards these Black cosplayers, or even questioning the authenticity of the portrayal due to the tone of skin. Black women who cosplay non-Black characters contribute to breaking down racial barriers in cosplay. Black representations challenge stereotypes and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse portrayal of characters, providing evidence of the universality of certain roles. Black women in cosplay bring a unique and

important perspective to the subculture. Their contributions challenge traditional portrayals and expand the narratives within cosplay.

Black women also play a crucial role in community building within the cosplay world by fostering connections, collaboration, support, and representation for individuals who may have previously felt marginalized or underrepresented. Despite these challenges faced by Black women in this regard, the representations provided challenge stereotypes, a more inclusive portrayal is encouraged, and supportive communities exist where appreciation is given in cosplay, regardless of their race. Comic books, works of fiction, and manga that are “adapted to television and film...[allow] representations to move beyond screen and therefore contribute to a form of production intrinsic and instrumental to re-creating a social reality” (Thomas, 2021, p. 326). The cultural and social significance of Black participation in cosplay emphasizes that it is not just about creativity but also about visibility, resistance, and redefinition of who gets to exist in fandom spaces. Black cosplayers, through their artistry, are actively reshaping the narratives around inclusion, representation, and identity in geek culture. It is to be understood that “Black cosplayers, the act of cosplay is more than just dressing up—it is an assertion of presence in spaces that have historically excluded them. By embodying characters, whether canonically Black or not, they challenge the idea that fandom and fantasy worlds are reserved for whiteness” (Goldman, 2017). Without the presence of Black cosplayers, particularly Black women cosplayers on the convention floor and online, the practices of exclusion could further perpetuate harmful stereotypes and stoke the fires of inequality and racial bias. Respectful and culturally aware approaches are crucial in creating an inclusive environment within the cosplay community.

Comic, anime, and popular culture fans have become increasingly interested in diversity and the malleable reincarnations of their beloved characters. This has allowed Black cosplayers to expand their representations of themselves, their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability in comics (Goodrum et al., p. 45). These forms of diversity in cosplay allows the exploration of identity to be intersected and expanded beyond the canon fictional characters, allowing a transformation that is unique to each Black cosplayer. This can be partly due to the “Rules of the Internet”, where in mid-2007 a “list of Internet rules added the popular Rule 63: for every fictional character, there exists an opposite gender counterpart” to an ever-growing misogynistic rule list for search results on the Internet (Goodrum et al., p. 144). As of now, there is no Internet rule regarding the usage or change of ethnicity for fictional characters. Yet there is often an outspoken acknowledgement towards those who chose to participate in cosplay of another ethnicity. To be precise, those who are Black and choose to cosplay as non-Black characters are often met with racism, confusion, and misunderstanding of their portrayed character. This is due to the range of characters within comics, video games, anime, movies, and television series.

Colorism in Cosplay

“I’ve been cosplaying for about 5 years now and while most of my costumes I’ve received a lot of positive feedback and praise, there have been times throughout the years in which people have made openly racist remarks to me whenever I cosplay a character who is not dark skinned. My photos ended up on a very hateful website that bashed what they called “awful looking” cosplayers and those who cosplay outside of their race.”

-SweetMagic Cosplay

A recurring theme that emerged from interviews was the belief that the visual appearance of both the cosplayer and the character being portrayed is the most significant factor in determining cosplay accuracy and addressing racial considerations. Participants were primarily concerned with physical attributes such as skin color, height, and weight. Despite claims that cosplay is centered on costumes or performance, most participants expressed hesitation in cosplaying certain characters due to physical traits (mainly the participants of darker skin tone) that were difficult or impossible to alter.

You see the overwhelming majority of characters are of a lighter complexion. Cosplayers with darker skin are made to feel inadequate about their appearance when it comes to their character choices. The practice of labeling Black cosplayers as the “Black” or “Blacker” version of a character, rather than simply recognizing them as embodying the character itself, reinforces a racial hierarchy that positions whiteness as the default and norm. This framing not only erases the creative labor and interpretive work of the cosplayer but also reduces their identity to a racial qualifier, positioning their Blackness as an aberration or deviation from the “authentic” representation of the character. Furthermore, the use of racial slurs combined with character names, whether online or at conventions, exemplifies the way racism becomes embedded in cosplay culture, where Black participants are subjected to both overt hostility and microaggressions that simultaneously question their legitimacy and exclude them from full participation in fan communities. The act of advising Black cosplayers to alter their skin tone to better align with a character’s appearance or limiting character suggestions to only those who share their race, reflects a deeply ingrained racist ideology that ties the validity of cosplay to proximity to whiteness or to strict racial essentialism. By imposing racial boundaries on character portrayal, such practices reinforce larger societal narratives that devalue Black self-

expression while perpetuating the false belief that certain identities are inherently more legitimate than others within fan culture. Fundamentally, these practices expose the ways in which systemic racism pervades even seemingly playful, imaginative spaces, rendering cosplay both a site of creative freedom and a contested terrain for racial politics and exclusion. This is especially evident in online interactions between cosplayers and the community. A cosplayer named KiKi, dressed as Alastor from *Hazbin Hotel*, reflects on the dynamics of TikTok's platform and its underlying algorithms, emphasizing how these systems disproportionately favor white cosplayers and light-skinned Black cosplayers. KiKi notes that these groups are often granted greater leniency when it comes to the perceived accuracy of their portrayals, while darker-skinned cosplayers frequently face heightened scrutiny and exclusion. She explains, "A lot of it comes down to being pretty and skinny. You can get away with anything, even if it's mediocre, because as long as you're pretty, skinny, and light-skinned or white, it generally performs better both online and in person."

As a society, when the topic of cosplay is discussed, there are many who would envision cisgendered, white, male presenting individuals within the convention halls and posted throughout social media. This visibility of mainly white male cosplayers is an all-too-common occurrence when it comes to cosplay. Cosplay is a visual medium, and the physical appearance of a Black woman's body is often scrutinized in cosplay due to the visual appearance of race (Zhao, 2023). Black women who cosplay white characters has been studied as a form of 'Blactivism' and is seen as an act of resistance to the mainstream whiteness that most associate with cosplay (Thomas, 2021). This public reception of Black women cosplayers (myself included), is often greeted with the emphatic salutation of the label "Black" followed by the character being cosplayed. For instance, if a Black woman cosplayer has chosen to portray

Rainbow Brite (see Fig. 1) from Hallmark Cards and Mattel Incorporated, they would often be greeted throughout the convention as “Black Rainbow Brite” as opposed to being simply called Rainbow Brite (see Fig. 2). In this case, the researcher herself serves as a primary example, drawing from personal experiences as a cosplayer navigating both convention spaces and online platforms. Being repeatedly referred to as the “Black version” of non-Black characters has become a normalized, yet deeply racialized practice in these environments. This recurring labeling highlights how, even within spaces designed for imaginative play and creative expression, race remains a primary lens through which cosplayers of color are viewed and evaluated. The persistent inability or unwillingness to simply recognize the cosplayer as the character, without racial qualifiers, underscores the pervasiveness of racial essentialism within cosplay culture. It raises the critical question: why is it so difficult to see the cosplayer as the character, rather than as a racialized deviation from an assumed white standard? This phenomenon reveals how racial bias operates even in ostensibly escapist, fantastical spaces, demonstrating that the imaginary is never truly divorced from the social and political realities of race.

Cosplay enthusiasts attempt to produce a fantasy and bring their favorite character to real life (Chen 2007). By being seen as Black before being seen as their cosplay character, Black women who cosplay are constantly reminded of their hypervisibility in a space that is meant to be welcoming and uniting people who share an appreciation for the characters that have impacted those of all backgrounds and skin tones. There seems to be a whispered and sometimes shouted scrutiny towards Black women who cosplay as characters that are not Black. As if the visibility of a Black woman in cosplay on the convention floor was a breaching of the “wonderful white world of cosplay” (Matthews, 2016, n.p.). This interruption to the atmosphere

of the convention floor is a reminder of the many fictions, comic books, and films that constantly leave an absence of Black women characters. Thus, negating that characters should represent more than just the white gaze.



Fig. 2 (left): The researcher dressed as Rainbow Brite from the animated *Rainbow Brite*

Fig. 3 (right): The animated character *Rainbow Brite* television series. TM 1996 Hallmark.

Fan Based Engagement

"Cosplay is more than just wearing a costume. It's a celebration of identity, creativity, and culture. Black cosplayers are redefining representation, proving that fandom belongs to everyone, and inspiring new generations to see themselves in the characters they love."

-ChameleonsCosplay

Fan-based engagement in cosplay represents a dynamic and evolving form of participatory culture that has grown into a vibrant global phenomenon. For participants, cosplay is more than a hobby, it is a way to celebrate their fandoms, express their creativity, and connect with others who share their passion. This creative space has also seen an increase in diversity, with a notable rise in the participation and visibility of Black cosplayers. Fan-based engagement in cosplay has become a vibrant and inclusive space for creative expression, with Black women increasingly emerging as prominent contributors to the community. For Black women, cosplay serves as a powerful medium to challenge societal norms, redefine representation, and celebrate individuality in fandom spaces. This rise in engagement reflects broader cultural shifts toward diversity and inclusion within geek culture.

Historically, Black women in cosplay have faced unique challenges, including racism, colorism, and stereotypical perceptions of beauty that often marginalized their participation. In traditional fandom spaces, Black women cosplayers have been criticized for cosplaying characters who do not share their racial background or for not conforming to narrow standards of femininity. However, through perseverance and creativity, Black women have disrupted these narratives, asserting their right to embody any character they admire. Their engagement in cosplay is not merely an act of fandom but also a form of resistance against societal limitations.

This question ultimately returns us to the central inquiry: Where are all the Black cosplayers?

The answer is both straightforward and telling, Black cosplayers are present and active throughout fan communities, yet they are often rendered invisible unless their presence is weaponized as a spectacle. They become hypervisible only in moments of racial hostility, such as when racial slurs are directed at them, or when they are tokenized as rare anomalies within the cosplay world, treated more like mythical beings than integral members of the community. There is no justifiable reason for a cosplayer's skill, creativity, and craftsmanship to be ignored or undervalued solely because of their skin tone (Doll, 2017). Similarly, Black cosplayers should not have to rely on moments of racist backlash to garner attention or recognition within the broader cosplay landscape. This ongoing pattern highlights how systemic racism shapes visibility within fan spaces, determining not only who is seen, but also under what circumstances their presence is acknowledged.

Black cosplayers are increasingly prominent in the cosplay community for several reasons, including the democratizing power of social media platforms, the rising representation of Black characters in mainstream media, and the proactive efforts of Black cosplayers to carve out their own spaces in the fandom world. Social media has played a pivotal role in amplifying the voices and visibility of Black women in cosplay. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have become powerful tools for showcasing their artistry, connecting with like-minded individuals, and challenging discriminatory practices within the cosplay community. Hashtags such as #28DaysOfBlackCosplay and #BlackGirlMagic have created a sense of solidarity, providing a platform for Black women cosplayers to celebrate their contributions while fostering a supportive network. These movements emphasize the importance of inclusivity and inspire the next generation of cosplayers to join the community. These movements not only uplift

individuals but also educate the wider community about the importance of diversity in cosplay. For many Black cosplayers, cosplay is an opportunity to rewrite cultural narratives and challenge societal expectations. Through their artistry, they defy stereotypes that have historically marginalized Black creatives, asserting their right to exist and thrive in spaces that have often excluded them. By embodying characters of all backgrounds, Black cosplayers expand the definition of fandom representation, proving that anyone can bring their favorite characters to life regardless of race or ethnicity.

Representation in media has also been a significant factor in empowering Black women to engage in cosplay. The increasing visibility of Black women characters in popular culture, such as Nakia, Shuri, and Okoye from *Black Panther*, Monica Rambeau from *WandaVision*, and Dominique “Domino” Thorne from *Ironheart*, has given Black women cosplayers characters that reflect their identities and experiences. These portrayals not only validate their participation but also encourage creative reinterpretations of characters who may not originally share their racial background. Through these reinterpretations, Black women cosplayers expand the boundaries of representation in both media and fandom spaces.

Moreover, Black cosplayers are actively reclaiming and reinterpreting traditional depictions of characters. Many engage in “racebending,” the practice of adapting a character’s ethnicity while maintaining their essence (Coto et al., 2022). This not only personalizes their cosplay but also challenges the narrow confines of mainstream representation. For instance, a Black femme cosplayer portraying a historically white character like Sailor Moon or Harley Quinn demonstrates the universality of these figures and opens new possibilities for interpretation. Black femme cosplayers seek to reclaim and celebrate their heritage, incorporating elements of African and Afro-diasporic aesthetics into their interpretations. This

blending of traditional and modern influences highlights the richness of Black cultural identities and broadens the creative scope of cosplay. For instance, some cosplayers reimagine characters with African-inspired designs, fabrics, or hairstyles, creating a fusion of fandom and cultural pride. These reinterpretations celebrate the intersectionality of being both Black and a fan, making cosplay a deeply personal and meaningful act.

Wherever there is marginalization and oppression, there is resistance. Cosplay serves as a site of race and gender reproduction, subversion and resistance. For instance, Samantha Close (2016) found that cosplayers perform alternative masculinities that subvert hegemonic masculinity. Racebending allows fans of color to resist whitewashed, normative, and racially homogenous media representations, carving a space for themselves within a mostly White space (Gilliland 2016). According to Owens (2017) racebending refers to the practice, commonly seen in comic books and other media, of reimagining an existing character as a member of a different racial or ethnic group. This practice is often mistakenly equated with whitewashing, but I argue that the two are fundamentally different, both in intent and impact. They stem from entirely separate historical contexts. Whitewashing actively erases the already limited presence of non-white characters, further marginalizing communities of color. In contrast, transforming originally white characters into African American, Asian/Asian American, or Latinx characters provides audiences of color with opportunities to see themselves reflected in popular comic narratives. However, this form of representation does not significantly disrupt the overarching dominance of whiteness in the comic book industry. The reception to racebending is not always received with a positive outlook, Ortiz (2012) discussed how many cosplayers observe “on certain forums and websites, rude immature comments made about others because of their skin color. If there is a Hispanic in the same cosplay, no one questions it!” (para 8). The growing popularity of

racebending and genderbending has given cosplay greater subversive potential for transgressing normative identities. As media scholar Henry Jenkins (1992) has stated, “fan culture stands as an open challenge to the ‘naturalness’ and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies” (p. 18).

Conventions and events have become crucial spaces for Black women to engage with cosplay and connect with others who share their passion. Events like Blerdcon (Black Nerd Convention) and Afro ComicCon celebrate diversity within geek culture, offering Black femme cosplayers platforms to showcase their talents, such as panels that prioritize diversity and engage in discussions about representation, workshops to assist cosplayers with the creation of innovative ideas, and the opportunity to participate in competitions. These spaces foster community and provide opportunities for Black women to feel seen, valued, empowered, and foster a sense of belonging within the broader fandom. Both conventions have similar goals to, “educate, highlight, and celebrate Blerd culture and create a marketplace of ideas where sharing that culture can take place with proper context, attribution, and positivity in an inclusive environment... [and to] establish a platform to showcase and empower artists who have historically been denied access to equal opportunity” (Joyner, 2024). These conventions intertwine the themes and goals of larger popular culture conventions with the addition to added insight as to how Black culture and its enthusiasts can come together to create communities. Black femme cosplayers also use their platforms along in addition to popular culture conventions to advocate for greater inclusivity within the broader cosplay community. By sharing their experiences, they challenge industry gatekeeping and educate others about the importance of diversity. Through their work, they inspire other cosplayers to embrace their uniqueness and affirm the value of representation in creative spaces. Their visibility and advocacy contribute to a more equitable and welcoming environment for all fans, regardless of race or gender.

In *Black Femme Rising: Cosplay and Playing Mas as New Narratives of Transgression*, Thomas (2021) explores how Black femmes use cosplay and Caribbean carnival traditions (such as “playing mas”) as a means of resistance, cultural reclamation, and subversion of dominant racialized and gendered narratives. Her work focuses on how these performative spaces challenge hegemonic standards of beauty, sexuality, and representation, emphasizing transgression and reimagining of Black femme identity in ways that defy colonial and patriarchal frameworks. Thomas (2021) frames cosplay and masquerade as political acts, embodied performances that carve out visibility for Black femmes in spaces where they are often rendered invisible or hyper-visible through stereotypes. While my research overlaps with existing scholarship on cosplay and its significance for Black women, I approach the topic from a different angle. Rather than centering on themes of transgression or political disruption, I focus on cosplay as a platform for self-expression, creativity, and personal empowerment. My work emphasizes how cosplay allows Black women to celebrate their identities, explore aesthetic possibilities, and cultivate self-confidence—particularly within fandom spaces where they have historically been marginalized or excluded. This perspective is more personal and affirming, grounded in the psychological and social benefits of cosplay, rather than framing it solely as a form of cultural resistance.

It is important to explore this topic because it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature on Black femme representation within fan and performance cultures. While scholars such as Thomas (2021) have critically examined the political dimensions of Black femme performance and its role in acts of resistance, there remains a need to center the everyday, lived experiences of Black women who engage in cosplay as a form of joyful self-expression and empowerment. My research intervenes by shifting the focus from resistance as the central

framework to an exploration of how joy, pleasure, and community are cultivated within and through the act of cosplay. Although Thomas engages with Black femme cosplay, my work contributes to the field by reorienting the conversation toward the affective and healing possibilities of creative expression. Through a humanistic approach, I emphasize that for many of the participants in this study, cosplay is not primarily a political statement, but a practice rooted in self-love, belonging, and affirmation. Within fandom and popular culture—spaces that have historically marginalized and underrepresented Black women—I argue that cosplay functions as a transformative site for identity formation, interpersonal connection, and the celebration of Black femme creativity. Rather than resistance as the end goal, my research highlights how the cultivation of joy and the building of community serve as powerful and intentional acts in their own right.

The rise of Black femme in cosplay has had a transformative impact on the cosplay community, shifting perceptions about who belongs in fandom spaces. Their presence challenges entrenched biases while enriching the culture with diverse perspectives and creative interpretations. By breaking down barriers and redefining representation, Black femme cosplayers have expanded the possibilities for engagement, ensuring that cosplay is a space where everyone can express their fandom authentically. Black femme cosplay reflects a broader cultural movement toward celebrating diversity and embracing individuality. As all Black cosplayers gain visibility, they challenge entrenched norms and expand the possibilities for fandom engagement. Our contributions highlight the importance of diversity and inclusion in fandom spaces and demonstrate the power of creativity as a means of self-expression and resistance. Not only in fictional narratives but also in the communities that celebrate them. The increasing presence of Black cosplayers in fan-based engagement is a testament to the

transformative power of creativity and representation. By asserting their place in a historically exclusive subculture, Black cosplayers are reshaping the cosplay world into a more inclusive and inspiring space. Their stories and creations reflect the broader cultural shift toward recognizing and valuing diversity in all forms of artistic expression. And as such, Black femmes continue to thrive in cosplay, as they redefine the boundaries of representation, proving that fandom is for everyone and that all voices deserve to be celebrated.

Methods

"I actually always feel offended, but I just pretend it doesn't affect me. I don't want my skin tone to be an issue, so I act like it's not. But it is. Because it's how society is and thinking that we do not care or talk about skin tone in the cosplay community is naive. I get why people don't see this as an offense, because you need to live it to understand."

-Cissy

A large portion of my one-on-one interviews took place at San Diego Comic-Con, which is known to be one of the world's largest popular culture conventions, with its attendance surpassing 130,000 people each year since 2010 (MacDonald, 2019). Today, in addition to many small comic book conventions across the U.S., there are over sixty comic book conventions held annually that host tens of thousands of fans. Comic book conventions can now be considered "the major focal point of modern fan culture" (Brown, 1997, p.17). However, as cosplay communities have expanded, they have also mirrored societal inequities, revealing gaps in diversity and inclusion. This fan culture houses comic book enthusiasts, collectors, voice actors, artists and cosplay, to name a few of the fandoms. This research grew from time spent immersed in the vibrant worlds of two large and three smaller comic book conventions in Washington and California. Through attending these events, observing the creative energy of the spaces, and

engaging directly with the people within them, I was able to connect with thirty-nine Black femme cosplayers. Our conversations were in-depth and semi-structured, allowing space for their stories, experiences, and reflections to unfold naturally. Occasionally, a male-identifying partner would sit alongside them, offering their own insights and personal observations about how the cosplayer was received by others, adding further texture to these shared narratives. The conventions were attended to acquire ethnographic data, participate in panel discussions, and gain access to initial participants. I accessed additional participants through snowball sampling from the initial group of participants met at conventions. Images and cosplayer names featured in this study were used with explicit permission from the participants. In certain cases, participant names have been changed to protect their privacy.

All conventions took place in large convention centers or state fairgrounds that could house tens of thousands of attendees. I reviewed each convention's layouts and event schedules beforehand and ensured efficient observation of those attending certain panels and themed days that attracted large and diverse crowds. This preparation ensured that I could be intentional about where I positioned myself and which events I prioritized for observation. Each convention's main exhibit hall was the prime location and the central hub of activity. The conventions are open to fans for approximately twelve hours each day, offering continuous opportunities to witness the dynamic interactions between cosplayers, attendees, vendors, and guests. Beyond the main exhibit hall, I also sought out additional spaces where cosplayers gathered, particularly at off-site and after-hours events that extended the conventions' social life well into the evening. These events, which ranged from informal gatherings to highly curated experiences, became crucial spaces for meeting potential interviewees. Some were late-night panels designed specifically for adult attendees (18+), while others took the form of off-site parties, exclusive

meetups, special guest panels, or themed costume contests. Unlike the more publicly promoted daytime programming, these after-hours events were often advertised exclusively on social media platforms, fostering a sense of insider community and invitation-only access. By attending these off-site events, I was able to observe how cosplayers navigated these less formal, but equally important fandom spaces, where self-expression and community-building often flourished in ways not always visible within the structured confines of the convention halls. I attended the masquerade contests at both Emerald City Comic Convention and San Diego Comic Convention, each lasting ninety minutes.

Over each convention, I dedicated about twenty hours to direct observation and preliminary notetaking, both on the convention floors and from elevated vantage points such as upper mezzanine areas. This time included the hours spent waiting in line prior to the official opening of the convention halls, crucial moments when attendees gathered in anticipation, often showcasing their cosplays in informal settings outside the structured programming. By actively walking the floors, weaving through crowds, and pausing to observe interactions from above, I was able to document not only the movement and flow of cosplayers and attendees, but also the spatial dynamics of how Black femme cosplayers navigated these spaces. Observing from multiple perspectives allowed me to capture both micro-level interactions, such as conversations, photo opportunities, and gestures exchanged between cosplayers and fans, in addition to the larger social patterns that emerged within the broader convention ecosystem. These preliminary observations served as an essential foundation, informing the direction of subsequent interviews and helping to identify key locations where Black femme cosplayers gathered, performed, and built community. In between observing and taking field notes at the conventions, cosplayers were approached regarding participation in the study. Attending the conventions offered me an

opportunity to gather extensive observational data in addition to meeting and building rapport with interview participants, both inside and outside of the convention halls.

My initial forays into convention research were shaped by a desire to be present in the same spaces my interviewees inhabited, not just as a passive observer but as someone actively participating in the rhythms of the event. I attended panels, wandered the exhibit halls, and stood in the long lines where cosplayers, fans, and photographers congregated. These lines, often seen as tedious necessities of convention life, quickly revealed themselves to be fertile ground for connection and observation. Conversations sparked organically, cosplayers bonded over shared frustrations and excitement, and crucially, these informal moments highlighted how Black femme cosplayers experienced these spaces in ways distinct from their peers. Their creativity, resilience, and joy stood out, but so did the microaggressions, the assumptions about their expertise, and the ways their costumes were policed more heavily than others. It became clear that any meaningful exploration of Black femme cosplay required capturing not only formal interviews but also the spontaneous interactions and spatial negotiations that happened in real time. A surprising number of my interviewees 19 out of 38 were students - undergraduates and graduate students studying everything from English to Pre-law to Chemistry.

This awareness led me to develop a hybrid method that blended in-depth, semi-structured interviews with extended periods of observation, both on the convention floor and from elevated areas like mezzanines. From these vantage points, I could observe not just individual moments, but patterns of how Black femme cosplayers moved through space, when and where they paused to pose for photos, and how other attendees reacted to their presence. Observing from above allowed me to map their visibility within the broader ecosystem of the convention, while walking the floor placed me directly in the flow of interaction, able to witness up-close how race, gender,

and fandom intersected in fleeting but telling exchanges. Online spaces also became an integral part of my process, not only as places to recruit interviewees, but as extensions of the conversations happening at the conventions themselves. Many of the cosplayers I spoke with were deeply embedded in online cosplay communities, where they curated digital identities that both complemented and complicated their in-person experiences. After-hours events and exclusive meetups, often only discoverable through social media, further underscored how essential these digital networks were to understanding Black femme cosplay as a cultural practice. The cosplayers themselves were not simply navigating two separate worlds, physical conventions and online platforms, but actively weaving the two together to claim space, build community, and resist erasure.

The process of developing my approach to interviewing Black femme cosplayers did not emerge in isolation. It was born from my own lived experiences navigating fandom spaces and from years of witnessing the ways Black femmes carved out space for themselves within cosplay communities, both online and in person. My early fascination with conventions was rooted in the creative energy they offered: vibrant displays of imagination, fans transforming into their favorite characters, and the undeniable sense of community that forms, however briefly, during these events. Yet, even in these celebratory environments, it was impossible to ignore the ways Black femme cosplayers were often rendered hypervisible, either through unwanted attention or exclusion, while simultaneously being overlooked in larger conversations about fandom culture. This disconnect between visibility and representation became the foundation for my methodological approach, one that prioritized both presence and voice. In conducting this research, I found myself increasingly relying on the concept of “patchwork ethnography”, a multimodal and adaptive methodological approach that extends beyond traditional fieldwork

practices. This method not only allowed me to occupy the role of researcher but also enabled me to build meaningful relationships with my interview participants, facilitating deeper trust and richer dialogue throughout the research process. As Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020) describe, patchwork ethnography embraces the fragmented, flexible, and often discontinuous nature of contemporary fieldwork, especially in contexts shaped by time, access, and resource constraints. This flexible framework allowed me to blend formal interviews, participant observation, and casual, in-the-moment conversations, creating an approach that was both methodologically sound and culturally responsive to the unique positionality I held as both researcher and fellow cosplayer.

Fundamentally, this layered, multimodal approach was shaped by the very thesis driving my research: that the presence and representation of Black femme cosplayers is not incidental, but central to understanding contemporary fandom culture. Black femmes, through their cosplay, challenge the racial and gendered boundaries of popular media, insisting on their right to embody beloved characters and to be celebrated within these creative spaces. By combining observation, interviews, and digital ethnography, my methodology reflects the very hybridity and adaptability that Black femme cosplayers themselves embody, by moving fluidly between physical and virtual spaces, creating, resisting, and redefining fandom on their own terms.

The following two chapters expand on the central themes that emerged from my research: the cultivation of joy and the building of community among Black femme cosplayers. While existing scholarships often frame Black performance within resistance-based paradigms, the participants in this study illustrate that resistance, while present, is not always the focal point. Instead, what emerges is a vibrant emphasis on joy—expressed through acts of self-styling, character (re)interpretation, and embodied confidence—as well as a deep commitment to

community, nurtured through shared creativity, mutual support, and solidarity. These themes structure the organization of the next two chapters.

Chapter Two, *Bold, Black, and Cosplayed: Confidence and the Rise of the Blerd*, explores how participants construct and perform confidence through cosplay, navigating identity and visibility with a sense of purpose, pride, and playfulness. This chapter highlights the significance of joy as a generative force that allows Black femmes to reclaim space and redefine representations of Blackness in fandom. Chapter Three, *Community Building and Breaking Stereotypes*, shifts focus to the collective dimensions of Black femme cosplay. It examines how participants challenge exclusionary norms and build networks of care, resource-sharing, and cultural affirmation through both online and in-person spaces. Together, these chapters underscore the importance of joy and community as vital, often overlooked frameworks for understanding the transformative power of cosplay. The dissertation concludes with *Toward Future Frontiers in Black Cosplay Studies*, a chapter that considers the implications of this research for expanding the field and sustaining inclusive, imaginative possibilities for Black femme creatives.

Chapter 2: Bold, Black, and Cosplayed: Confidence and the Rise of the Blerd

“The biggest reason I love cosplay is that it offers an escape from reality. As someone who hasn’t always felt strong and has often felt alone, cosplay and attending conventions introduced me to a whole new world filled with supportive and accepting people I never knew were out there.”

-Alexis “Lexie.Day,” San Diego Comic Con International, 2024

Alexis is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Chemistry at Xavier University, balancing rigorous lab work, teaching responsibilities, and academic publishing expectations. Growing up, she was drawn to popular culture, specifically science fiction and fantasy, and the vibrant artistry of cosplay. In describing her transition into cosplay, Alexis often notes how it allowed her to connect with a supportive community of Black fans who were equally passionate about self-expression, social justice, and geek culture. Over time, her involvement in cosplay enriched her academic pursuits. Despite her growing confidence, Alexis once struggled under the weight of imposter syndrome, which can adversely influence Black graduate student’s sense of belonging or recognition of their achievements, despite their success. (Graham and McClain, 2019; Clance and Imes, 1978)¹. Imposter syndrome is a powerful force familiar to many graduate students, but especially acute for Black women in what the National Science Board (NSB) shows is a predominantly white STEM field, with 49% of those in the field being white men (NSB, 2019). By the time she sat down for her interview about her experiences, Alexis described the process as “healing.” Talking about how her love of fandom and academic ambitions intersected helped her process years of self-doubt. She reflected on the subtle microaggressions, comments

questioning her ‘seriousness’ as a scholar or the raised eyebrows when she mentioned she was a cosplayer. Now as she poses proudly in her Sailor Moon cosplay, she felt validated and empowered as both a doctoral candidate and a creative force within the Blerd cosplay community. Through cosplay, Alexis silenced her imposter syndrome by embracing the very parts of herself she once feared made her an outsider and transformed those qualities into the foundation of her success.



Fig. 4 Alexis “Lexie.Day” as Sailor Moon ®

The primary aim of this chapter is to discover how cosplay serves as a platform for Black women to express their creativity and build confidence. The empowering nature of embodying

characters from various genres, allows Black women to step into roles that may differ significantly from societal expectations and preconceived notions regarding beauty. Cosplay invokes a draw into different narrative ecologies or what can otherwise be described as an immersion into other worlds. While interviewing many cosplayers at conventions, I heard the theme of empowerment and confidence highlighted throughout each conversation. Many cosplayers were academics and self-identified Black nerds that spoke to the ways that conventions and online communities assisted them in expressing parts of themselves that are ordinarily kept hidden. Vanta who is a self-described “Black, outspoken, nerdy girl from Brooklyn” who is now a social media content creator and international cosplay judge, describes her cosplay experience as an act of character personification, meaning that embodying the character allows her to step into their world confidently. Reminiscing her past, Vanta recalls her “college roommate suggested that we go together, and I was apprehensive because at that time, many Black cosplayers were criticized for their skin tone. After attending that first comic convention, I realized that I finally found people like me, nerds like me” (Vanta, 2023). When the topic of being labeled came up, Vanta was quick to point out:

“In the 1990s/2000s, the connotation of being a nerd, went hand in hand with getting bullied. I had the audacity to hang out in the Barnes and Nobles manga section after school, and sneak comic books in class. Back then, being a nerd made you an outcast; a weirdo, and being a black nerd made it even harder. My school was predominately white, so a loud, silly, black girl, talking about Dragon Ball Z and Justice League, made everyone uncomfortable. I laugh when I think about it now, because I was authentically me; being bullied never stopped me” (Vanta, 2023).

The term “nerd” has historically carried a pejorative connotation, suggesting social awkwardness or a lack of conventional hobbies and interests. However, within cosplay communities, being labeled a “nerd” is frequently regarded not as a stigma but as a badge of honor. Many cosplayers proudly embrace this identity, viewing it as a celebration of their passion for anime, comics, video games, and other facets of popular culture.

Similarly, AlyssaB, an undergraduate student that describes herself as a “francophone and cosplayer” refers to her cosplay experience as “a chance to be confident as someone else,” while Jazmen, a fourth-year fashion student, describes it as “bringing the characters to life, but as a Black character.” This process of embodiment within cosplay not only transforms the participant’s outward appearance but also shifts their sense of self, displacing and reorienting them into a new state of becoming (Gn, 2011; van Veen, 2018a). Exploring the significance of embracing and normalizing the label “Blerd,” I discuss the popularization of the term, while highlighting its impact strength and self-assurance, and the broader representation of Black nerd culture in various spaces. The discussions with interviewed Black femme cosplayers address the mental health benefits each participant associates with cosplaying and the joyful expressions of how cosplay has changed their outlook on life.

Through semi-structured interviews, I delved into the ways that cosplay allows Black women creates the ability to embody characters from various genres and to step into roles that differ from their daily lives. I surveyed the internal and external effects of donning costumes, creating alter egos, and adopting the mannerisms of the characters that each participant has chosen. To cosplay such characters, these Black women tap into their own superpower by exploring their own fictional identities. Thus, cosplay and the labels that come with it, are

empowering experiences that promote self-expression, increase self-esteem, and create a sense of belonging within the cosplay and convention community.

Revenge of the Blerds

“I’m a proud Blerd, and nothing’s more exciting than rocking a cosplay that reps both my fandom and myself!”

-SaraM

Spotting a cluster of Black *Pokémon* cosplayers gathered in the corner of the convention hall, one dressed as Pikachu, another as Ash, and a third in the distinct orange-and-yellow ensemble of Misty, I approached them, eager to learn more about their fandom experiences. Among them was SaraM, sporting her iconic red suspenders and short orange wig, talking animatedly with her friends. Amid laughter and the occasional Pokémon catchphrase, SaraM cheerfully agreed to chat about her identity as a Black nerd, or “Blerd,” and the changing perceptions of nerd culture. Taking a seat on a low stage platform near the bustling crowd, SaraM leaned in conspiratorially and recounted how she remembered everyone in “the mid-2000s popping the lenses out of 3D movie glasses or buying fake frames just to look nerdy. People even wore fake mustache tattoos on their fingers...it was a whole trend!” She laughed at the memory, noting how “there was a time when being a nerd was a bad thing. But then someone realized we outnumber the ‘normal people,’ and suddenly, nerd culture exploded.” As a proud Black fan of anime, video games, and comics, SaraM embraced her Blerd identity: “We put our own spin on things, or I guess spice, and that’s how we became Blerds. The cooler version of nerds!” She broke into a grin at her own remark. For SaraM, representing *Pokémon* in full Misty cosplay was not just about fandom; it was a way to celebrate the joyful merge of Black culture, creativity, and nerdy interests, a blend that continues to evolve and gain visibility in the ever-expanding landscape of geek culture.

Black characters and Black cosplayers are rarely the central to the imaginary worlds that fill the pages of comic books and popular culture conventions. According to Thompson-Hernandez (2018) the goal of Black cosplayers is to “disrupt the popular ideas of what cosplay can and should look like and to help create a more racially tolerant environment through cosplay” (p. 1). This disruption is a form of empowerment by the participants focusing on the positivity they receive through social media groups like “Cosplay of Color” and “The Extraordinary Journey of a Black Nerd” where the Black cosplayer is celebrated and being labeled a “Blerd” is one that is one that instills confidence within the cosplayer.

The Blerd is a modern slang term to describe a Black nerd. Blerd is simply shorthand for black nerd (Black + nerd = Blerd). Blerd describes Black individuals or groups that enjoy things nerdy and geek regardless of gender, skin tone, sexuality, etc. According to Dickson (2024), “one of the earliest uses of the word “Blerd” appeared on Usenet in a 2003 discussion of the rock band named *They Might Be Giants*. A user jokingly used Blerd to describe a Black person who likes music that is labeled as a form of alternative rock band that leans towards a form of avant-garde geek rock” (p. 19). The Dictionary website (2019) asserts that the word nerd has been around since the 1950’s having an associated archetype of a socially awkward white male, who enjoyed things like comic books, action figures. The idea of a black nerd, that nerdy things could be enjoyed by Black people, that nerdiness was not just the domain of whiteness...was rare in popular culture. Again, this a reminder of how bodies of color, especially Black bodies have often been underrepresented or ignored within popular culture. Blerds were not traditionally shown in the media or within cosplay groups online or in person. Not only that, but when the intersection of Black and nerd culture intertwines, there is a distinctly different way that the topic

is described by those who are Blerds. Simply put, those who are Blerds add their own bit of flavor to the mix when discussing and portraying all things nerdy.

Rell (2022) posits that the term became popular in 2006 when Donald Faison who portrayed the character Turk in the comedy sitcom *Scrubs* stated he was a Blerd in the episode ‘My Best Friend’s Baby’s Baby and My Baby’s Baby’ (*Scrubs*, Season 6, Episode 2). From that point, it has become a popular term among the Black nerd community. Subsequent to the inception of the term Blerd, many notable figures have identified themselves as a Blerd or are recognized as one, include rapper Megan Thee Stallion (Norfleet, 2024), CEO Jamie Broadnax (Johnson, 2018), and actress Amandla Stenberg (Anderson, 2024). Each of these figures range from entertainers, scientists, authors, and more. To be a Blerd is empowering the individual to be confident that although they are seen within society and their personal social circles as different and a bit nerdy, it is no less than a proudly worn badge of honor. Being proud of being a Blerd is important because it affirms identity, challenges stereotypes, and fosters a sense of belonging in spaces where Black voices have often been marginalized.

Embracing the Blerd identity allows Black individuals to reclaim and celebrate their interests without feeling the need to conform to societal expectations that often box them into limiting stereotypes. Pride in being a Blerd also empowers individuals to challenge gatekeeping in geek spaces, where Black fans have historically faced exclusion or questioned legitimacy. By visibly and unapologetically participating in nerd culture, Blerds pave the way for greater inclusion and inspire the next generation to embrace their passions freely. Additionally, the Blerd community fosters a sense of solidarity and cultural expression, blending geek culture with Black experiences. It creates a space where individuals can celebrate their dual identity without erasure, finding camaraderie with others who share similar struggles and victories. Being a proud Blerd

means embracing one's intelligence, creativity, and love for all things geek while breaking down barriers in industries that lack diversity. It is a declaration that Black people belong in all spaces, including those dedicated to fantasy, science, and imagination. Ultimately, it's about visibility, empowerment, and the right to exist authentically in every aspect of one's interests.

Historical Disguises and Modern Black Cosplay

"They weren't pretending for fun...they were doing it because it was the only way to keep themselves and their families safe." *-Samaria*

At a roundtable discussion, the topic of the historical roots of Black cosplay was introduced during EagleCon at California State University, Los Angeles. Samaria, an undergraduate History student, offered her perspective. She pointed out that, long before the modern pastime of dressing as favorite characters, Black individuals were often forced to "cosplay" for survival. Drawing from her own family stories and readings on American history, Samaria explained how Black people in the United States sometimes had to alter their appearance or behavior, whether by dressing differently, adopting particular speech patterns, or even straightening their hair, in order to avoid persecution. This insight reframes Black cosplay not simply as a 21st-century fandom activity but as an extension of a centuries-long struggle where identity performance served as a protective measure. Chatting with Samaria, I realized the distinction between survival-driven disguises of the past and the creative expression of the present highlights the resilience of Black communities. Today, when Black cosplayers freely choose to portray a favorite comic book hero or anime character, they are participating in an act of empowerment rather than necessity, yet their efforts echo the historical need to navigate hostile environments. For Samaria, acknowledging that lineage of forced "role-play" lends a

deeper significance to the modern cosplay experience, connecting artistic expression to a legacy of perseverance and adaptability.

In the 19th century, Black women like Harriet Tubman and Ellen Craft used strategic disguises as bold survival tactics. Through clothing and performance, they temporarily assumed alternate identities to escape bondage or aid others, turning the act of dressing up into a form of resistance. Two striking examples illustrate how identity performance and self-transformation were employed in this era. Ellen Craft (1826–1891) was a light-skinned enslaved woman who orchestrated a daring escape by posing as a disabled white male planter, with her husband, William, accompanying her as an enslaved valet (Craft, W. et al., 1999). She cut her hair, donned men's clothing, placed her arm in a sling, and bandaged part of her face to obscure her features, successfully “passing” as a white gentleman while traveling by train and steamboat to freedom (McCaskill, B., 2015). This elaborate disguise inverted the typical power dynamic, an enslaved individual adopting the role of “master” and capitalized on 19th-century social assumptions, enabling the Crafts to journey openly and reach the North (Craft, W. et al., 1999). Historians have noted that Ellen's performance was so convincing it remained undetected despite multiple close calls (McCaskill, B., 2015). Scholars have since interpreted her escape as a performance rather than a mere flight, characterizing it as a “complex set of layered performances” or “fugitive transvestism” to highlight the ways her cross-dressing and role-play challenged both legal and racial hierarchies of the period (Jell, Y., 2018). Ultimately, Ellen Craft's adept use of clothing and racial passing functioned as a revolutionary strategy for seizing her freedom.

Harriet Tubman (1822–1913) was a famed Underground Railroad “conductor” who guided dozens of enslaved individuals to freedom (Walters, K. 2019). Renowned for her mastery of disguise and subterfuge, she frequently returned to slaveholding regions under altered

appearances to avoid capture (Whitlock, C., 2019). At times, Tubman dressed as a man; on other occasions, she posed as an elderly woman or an impoverished free Black woman (Larson, K., 2022.). These various guises allowed her to move without arousing suspicion. For example, she once donned a bonnet and carried live chickens to seem like she was on a mundane errand; when a former enslaver approached, she tugged the chickens' legs, causing a commotion that concealed her face and enabled her to pass unnoticed (Walters, K., 2019). On another occasion, upon recognizing someone on a train who might identify her, Tubman pretended to read a newspaper, fully aware that her illiteracy would deter him from suspecting her (Walters, K., 2019.). Such quick-thinking performances allowed her to “hide in plain sight.” Contemporary sources confirm that Tubman “relied on disguises” regularly, wearing male attire, aged clothing, or middle-class dress—as part of her rescue missions (Larson, K., 2022). By shifting her outward identity, Tubman both eluded slavecatchers and seized power over how she was perceived. In doing so, she embodied resistance itself, using costume changes and adopted personas as critical tools to secure freedom for herself and others.

The resonance of historical disguise narratives in contemporary Black cosplay is evident in themes of agency, self-definition, and resistance to norms. Black cosplayers stand on the shoulders of women like Harriet Tubman and Ellen Craft, whether directly or metaphorically. The courage and ingenuity of those earlier figures offer a roadmap for turning constraints into opportunities. Although a cosplayer is not fleeing slavery, she may resist other pressures, such as the assumption that heroes should not look like her or the lack of representation within her favorite story. The tales of Tubman and Craft thus provide empowering models for confronting these obstacles: by becoming what is necessary, by using creativity and performance to secure one's rightful space. Modern Black cosplayers often embody this spirit by exercising agency

over their self-image within fandom contexts, refusing to let fictional racial boundaries limit their participation. As van Veen and Hines (2019) point out, reimagining “default white” characters as Black asserts Black cosplayers’ subjectivity and their right to inhabit any role. This recalls Ellen Craft’s bold re-presentation of herself as a white male, a declaration of her right to move freely. Moreover, these historical legacies fuel emotional pride. At Black cosplay meet-ups and panels, it is common to hear references to Black history, honoring those who paved the way for present freedoms. In many respects, the motto “cosplay is for everyone” championed by Black cosplayers parallels the ethos of the Civil Rights Movement, extending the fight for equitable access into imaginative arenas. Knowledge of pioneers like Tubman imbues cosplay with purpose, reframing a simple costume as a statement that Black people have consistently found ways to exist authentically, even when disguised.

The performative resilience exemplified by historical Black women is mirrored in the confidence and solidarity of contemporary Black cosplayers. According to Thomas (2021), Black women at play, whether in cosplay or carnival, embody the paradox of being highly visible yet historically rendered invisible, transforming their presence into a powerful political and creative force. This insight firmly connects past with present: Harriet Tubman was both famous and hidden, moving unseen as she helped others to freedom, while today’s Black cosplayers, conspicuously dressed yet often overlooked by mainstream coverage, grapple with a similar tension. Through social media campaigns and celebratory cosplay events, they ensure visibility and normalize Black participation in geek culture, an act of agency rooted in a long tradition of Black performance as resistance. The supportive network that has grown around Black cosplay functions much like an Underground Railroad of shared resources and communal

uplift, affirming that Black people have long been reshaping themselves and their narratives, with cosplay now serving as another domain where they can thrive.

Black Cosplay Expression

“You may think that people aren’t watching, or you may think you are just doing a silly hobby.

But no, if you take merit in it, if you’re true to yourself and express it, a lot of people are going to appreciate your cosplay”

-Cheri

It was a Friday afternoon at San Diego Comic-Con, and the energy in the convention hall buzzed with excitement and color. As I navigated the crowded floor, I spotted a Black femme cosplayer leaning casually against a wall, dressed as Superman. Her suit was bold and vibrant, complete with a flowing red cape that contrasted beautifully with her natural curls. She was mid-text when I approached, but she greeted me warmly, and we began to talk. Like many of the interviews I conducted, our conversation began with the usual questions, “what drew her to cosplay, how long she had been participating, and which characters inspired her most”. But it quickly became clear that Cheri, as she introduced herself, had something more to share. She spoke passionately about the ways Black cosplayers express themselves, emphasizing the importance of reimagining popular characters through a culturally reflective lens. “I watch all the comic book characters come to life,” she said, “and my first thought is, okay, how can I make them look like me? How can I make this character have locs or an afro?” Her words revealed a powerful sense of ownership and creativity, an intentional reshaping of mainstream characters to reflect the diversity that is often missing from the source material. Our discussion remained centered on how Black cosplayers navigate and redefine visual representation by embedding aspects of their identities into each portrayal. As our interview came to a close, Cheri left me

with words that perfectly encapsulated the spirit of Black cosplay: "People who are hesitant to cosplay...do it anyway!" Her message echoed a central theme in my research: that cosplay, for Black participants, is not merely a hobby but a radical act of joy, transformation, and unapologetic self-expression. Cheri's reflections served as a reminder that for many Black cosplayers, embodying these characters is more than play, it's a powerful declaration of presence, imagination, and the right to be seen on their own terms.

"Do it scared... just feel it, love it, and enjoy being yourself as someone else," Cheri urged, her voice filled with conviction and joy. Her words spoke not only of personal empowerment but also of the transformative potential of cosplay as a cultural practice. In this way, Cheri embodies what Rafael Roncaglio (1991) describes as the alternative "that which has the power to stir things up and create [a positive] change" (p. 207). When Roncaglio (1991) refers to *the alternative*, he is pointing to practices, expressions, or ways of being that challenge the dominant norms or status quo. Rather than simply existing alongside mainstream culture, *the alternative* actively disrupts it by offering new possibilities, perspectives, and narratives that inspire transformation. Cosplay can be classified as an alternative mode of expressing confidence and power through the formation of a fictional alter-ego. Cosplay disrupts the routines of everyday life by incorporating the structural frameworks of fictional worlds to temporarily reshape reality, wherein the cosplayer may develop more inner strength and self-assurance. Cosplay allows its participants to utilize the power of the imagination, and the creation of alternative systems of being and belonging, it can be conceptualized as a tool that possesses the capability to resignify and represent blackness by encouraging cosplayers to take control of self-visualization. Cosplay can encourage the participants to create new narratives that allow the

introduction of power and confidence that is not expressed in everyday reality for racialized popular culture enthusiasts.

People often adopt different masks to create, modify, or redefine their temporary roles and identities throughout their journey of self-discovery and personal growth, this is also what cosplay has allowed its users to attain. This insight into the cosplay subculture, along with discussion on embodying a text, fluid identity formation, and psychological transformation, strongly aligns with Eshun's (1998) theories on multi-egos. Each convention ignites the urge for cosplayers to embody a different and powerful persona. The names and characters that cosplayers embody function as multi/alter-egos for the cosplayers themselves. This process enables them to access or transcend their everyday identities, allowing full immersion into different narratives that they can modify and perform as they choose.

Expression and positivity are a few of the key factors as to why Black femme cosplayers continue to participate in conventions and online forums. Within Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers* text, he describes how there have been criticisms of how the perceived dominant culture characterizes cosplayers and popular culture fans, often negatively. Among the many instances where mainstream culture defines the characteristics of fans and fandom culture, particularly within the *Star Trek* franchise Jenkins (1992) highlights a *Saturday Night Live* skit that openly mocked *Star Trek* enthusiasts, portraying them as individuals who have "no life" (Jenkins, 1992, p. 19). He discusses how, as a fandom-specific cultural minority within a dominant culture that often ridicules them, fans frequently seek ways to articulate and validate their experiences to outsiders, emphasizing that they do, in fact, lead fulfilling lives like anyone else. Jenkins references a *Star Trek* fan's response to the SNL skit, in which they assert, "I do live in the real world, with all of its tensions and stress. That is the reason why I am a Trekker. A

hobby is necessary for mental health...” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 21). Notably, the fan further explains that Star Trek prevents burnout, offers relaxation, maintains perspective, and, most importantly, provides enjoyment for her and others.

This same mental escapism is what fuels the cosplayers to continue doing what they enjoy, while combining their interests and creativity. Physically the cosplayer has granted themselves the ability to convey someone besides themselves, emotionally the cosplayer allows the alter ego to manifest through the actions of their character and mentally the cosplayer is able to make decisions based on what the perceived character would say or do. I would like to note that often mental and emotional wellness are often thought of as one in the same. However, according to the West Coast Ketamine Center (2023) emotional health is about navigating life's challenges with resilience and maintaining a positive, constructive approach to both successes and setbacks. While mental health encompasses an individual's psychological well-being, shaping their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. Dr. Langford (2016) stated in an interview that, “wearing a costume could give people the opportunity to explore the personality traits of their hero or someone they admired or reveal hidden parts of their own personalities” (Fernbach, 2016, n.p.). These concealed aspects are yet another way that cosplay participants seek to enhance their psychological well-being, while also participating in a subgenre that instills confidence in one's ability to exude power and tenacity.

Langford (2016) much like other cosplayers posits that wearing a mask whether it be a physical mask or a metaphorical mask allows the participant the freedom to do anything without fear, and that the daily fears of belonging and acceptance still exists in our society, influences how people, especially outsiders, perceive cosplay. Many participants such as Hawie (2024) agree that cosplay is a rewarding hobby that “builds your confidence...and teaches you about the

importance of diversity in popular culture”. While meeting cosplayers at conventions and through my research, many expressed that when they are with other cosplayers online or at conventions, they find it easier to express parts of themselves they ordinarily keep hidden. “Cosplay feels like a safe space for me, it’s like a protective shield where I can express attractiveness, sexuality, and femininity,” explained Chelsey (2024), a cosplayer from Brazil now living in California. “The real me is still in there somewhere, but I feel protected. When people see a cosplay photo and then see the real me, they often don’t even realize it’s the same person. I look so different in cosplay that even I sometimes don’t recognize myself.” This temporary unrecognition of the self can as be argued to represent an identity and constitute elements of a cosplayer's personal story, with cosplay as the means to explore and embody an incarnation of a second self. This formation of a second self allows Black femme cosplayers the freedom and agency where “gender norms are fluid and relaxed, allowing for experimentation, acceptance” and most importantly empowerment and confidence (Nichols, 2019, p. 271). This second self allows Black femme cosplayers the freedom and agency to step outside the limitations often imposed by societal norms around race, gender, and beauty. Within cosplay, identity becomes fluid, playful, and transformative. As Nichols (2019) notes, it is a space where “gender norms are fluid and relaxed, allowing for experimentation, acceptance,” and most importantly, empowerment and confidence (p. 271). For Black femme cosplayers, this space becomes especially meaningful, as it offers an opportunity to explore parts of themselves that are often marginalized or overlooked in mainstream media and daily life. The act of embodying a character, whether heroic, fantastical, or deeply personal, creates a kind of dual identity, one that both challenges dominant narratives and affirms their right to take up space. The second self is not a mask to hide behind but a version of the self that is aspirational, liberated, and fully

expressed. Through this process, Black femme cosplayers reclaim authorship over their own image, voice, and power.

Cosplay for some participants, became a sort of self-identity armor and allowed cosplayer to either “not be themselves” as suggested by Winge (2006) who argues that a cosplayed character provides a protective environment for the cosplayer to be more confident and engaged in social interactions. Interestingly, several participants noted that they often selected characters based on their perceived strength or intimidating presence. Among Black femme cosplayers, the notion of stepping into a persona that exudes confidence, power, and sheer badass energy resonates deeply. At Washington State Summer Con, I met Janet, a Black cosplayer whose quiet confidence immediately stood out. She wore a sleek, hand-crafted costume inspired by the warrior character Izoge, from *The Woman King*. As we talked, it became clear that for Janet, cosplay was more than a creative outlet, it was a reflective, personal practice. “When I choose a character,” she said, “it’s not just because I like how they look, it’s because there’s something in them, I want to bring out in myself.” For Janet, donning a costume isn’t simply about aesthetics or accuracy; it’s a deliberate act of self-alignment, a way of embodying strength, courage, or confidence she’s cultivating in her own life. Her approach to cosplay reveals how the practice can become a transformative tool that blends aspiration with artistry and allows the cosplayer to step into a version of themselves they are actively becoming.

Whether she’s representing an armored warrior from a fantasy realm or a daring anti-hero from a comic series, the transformative experience of cosplay amplifies her sense of self-assurance. In Janet’s words, each cosplay projects a powerful image that she carries beyond the con floor into everyday spaces. Meanwhile, At BlerdCon 2025, I had the pleasure of meeting Vanta, a seasoned cosplayer and international cosplay judge whose presence was impossible to

miss. She stood proudly in a custom-made angler fish costume, black, glittering, and strangely elegant, complete with a glowing lure above her head, and matching shoes. Her look was as bold as it was whimsical. Vanta offers a slightly different spin on empowerment by pointing out that you can “take something as simple as a freakin’ fish and make it badass!” Drawing on her love of sea creatures and aquatic themes, Vanta modifies basic concepts into visually striking cosplays that challenge assumptions about what’s considered cool or formidable. For her, the creative liberty to redefine and remix characters, whether humanoid mermaids or anthropomorphic sea creatures, is at the heart of cosplay’s allure. By blending ingenuity with a fiercely unapologetic attitude, Black femme cosplayers like Janet and Vanta not only display their artistic skill but also push the boundaries of representation, illustrating how any concept, when filtered through their unique perspective, can be transformed into a compelling expression of identity and power.



Fig. 5 Vanta as an Angler Fish

To demonstrate how cosplay allows Black femme participants the opportunity to explore and express their interior self, there should also be an acknowledgement of the first and third self. Valéry's concept of the 'three body problem' offers a valuable framework for understanding the intricate relationship between body, identity, and appearance (1990). In his essay *Some Simple Reflections on the Body*, he argues that we do not possess just one body, but three. Our first body is our intangible self, the mental image we hold of who we are. The second body is the external form we showcase to the world, shaping and decorating it according to personal preferences or societal expectations. The third body consists of the internal structures and systems that sustain our physical existence. Cosplayers are engaged in the manipulation of their outer appearance allowing them to display their own varied experience of identity through costuming without being limited to any one look or the assumption of being judged by others (unless they are participating in a contest). Those who have studied cosplay in both digital and physical spaces argue that visual communication functions as a powerful tool for shaping perception, influences the participants and viewers behavior, and enhances comprehension across diverse audiences.

Visual communication in the context of Black femme cosplay, confidence, and positive self-esteem refers to the ways in which visual aesthetics, embodiment, and performativity shape self-perception and external representation. Through cosplay, Black femmes utilize costume, makeup, pose, and digital imagery to assert agency over their identities, challenging dominant narratives about beauty, femininity, and Blackness. Cosplay operates as a form of visual storytelling that allows Black femmes to reimagine themselves in roles often excluded from mainstream media, reinforcing self-worth and empowerment (Ramirez, 2017). By curating their appearances in ways that align with their self-concept, they engage in a performative act of self-

affirmation, where the visual becomes a tool for constructing confidence. Visual communication in Black femme cosplay challenges Eurocentric beauty standards by celebrating diverse expressions of Black femininity. This type of empowerment allows the cosplayer to experiment with intentional styling of wigs, makeup, and costumes to serve not only as an artistic practice but also as a means of self-definition, resisting societal erasure and affirming multifaceted identities. The act of seeing oneself represented in a powerful, fantastical, or desired form reinforces self-esteem, as cosplay blurs the boundaries between imagination and reality, allowing participants to embody aspirational versions of themselves.

Transmissions of Creativity



Fig. 6 Researcher and Laura as Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales, ECCC 2024

"I chose to cosplay as Spider-Man's Miles Morales because, for the first time, I felt truly represented, seeing a Black dad and a Latina mom on screen felt like seeing my own family. Cosplaying him allowed me to engage in a more masculine character and gave me the space to explore my own masculinity."

-Laura

Laura, a doctoral student at the University of Washington specializing in Peacemaking and Conflict Communication, and I embarked on a collaborative cosplay project centered on our own interpretations of Spider-Man's Miles Morales. In the weeks leading up to Emerald City Comic Con (ECCC) 2024, we exchanged ideas over phone calls and texts, sharing sketches and images that reflected how we each might embody a character originally portrayed as a 17-year-old Afro-Latino teenager. As scholars and fans, we approached this process not only as a creative endeavor, but as an opportunity to explore how our intersectional identities—racial, cultural, gendered—could be expressed differently through the lens of the same character. Our final designs were not identical replicas, but personalized reinterpretations that highlighted how cosplay can be both communal and individualized. Meeting up at the convention, adorned in our respective Miles Morales variants, we embodied the dynamic interplay between media representation and personal narrative. Drawing on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding framework (2019), we approached Miles not simply as a fixed media text but as a dynamic cultural symbol whose meanings could be negotiated and rearticulated through our performance. Rather than receiving the character's meaning in a fixed or dominant-hegemonic way, our cosplay enacted a negotiated and oppositional reading that allowed for re-signification. In embodying Miles, we did not merely replicate the intended meaning encoded by media producers; instead, we re-encoded it with our own experiences, aesthetics, and cultural identities. Cosplay thus became a

site of self-expression, identity work, and collective meaning-making, a dialogic process that reconfigures representation through embodiment.

Scholars such as Gn (2011) critique reductive frameworks that treat cosplay as symptomatic of excessive fandom or deviant gender expression, particularly when cosplay is examined through binary gender models or pathologizing lenses. These interpretations fail to account for the complexity and agency of fan performances. Following Hall (2019), rather than viewing cosplay as mere mimicry or escapist fantasy, it can be better understood as a form of cultural labor wherein fans decode media texts and produce alternative or resistant meanings. As Lilley (2022) suggests in her exploration of visual diagnosis in pathology, meaning often emerges through acts of careful interpretation and visual analysis. Similarly, cosplay operates as a form of embodied semiotics, a visual discourse in which fans engage in cultural texts not passively but through performative reimagining's that challenge dominant meanings around race, gender, and identity.

At the core of cosplay lies the *physical imitation* of media figures, characters from anime, comics, video games, and film, yet this imitation is far from superficial. It involves a deliberate and layered engagement with source material, which allows participants to engage with and critique dominant narratives while also projecting aspects of their own identities onto these characters. In doing so, the cosplayer emancipates the character from the constraints of its original narrative and infuses it with new meaning that reflects personal, social, or political dimensions. McCormick (2007) highlights this emancipatory potential, stating that cosplay provides participants with avenues to express “alternative identities, scenarios, and experiences” (p. 4). This practice becomes a creative intervention, an act of re-authorship that expands the character’s story arc beyond its canonical boundaries. This process of physical imitation can be

understood through three interrelated components: direct replication, gender-bending (commonly referred to as Rule 63), and personal interpretation. First, the act of replication involves meticulous attention to a character's appearance and mannerisms. This includes costume design, props, makeup, and even the embodiment of specific gestures or speech patterns. It is through this process that cosplayers demonstrate both technical skill and a deep appreciation for the character. However, this replication is rarely exact or static; rather, it serves as a foundation for more expansive interpretations.

The second component, *Rule 63*, derives from internet fan culture and posits that “for every given male character, there is a female version of that character. For every given female character, there is a male version of that character” (McGunnigle, 2018, p. 144). Rule 63 challenges rigid gender binaries and opens space for gender-fluid and nonconforming representations. Within cosplay, this often manifests in crossplay (cosplaying a character of a different gender) or reimagining the gendered attributes of a character to better reflect the cosplayer's identity or artistic vision. By doing so, cosplayers disrupt normative gender expectations and offer alternative readings of familiar characters, creating space for visibility, inclusion, and subversion.

The third component, *personal interpretation*, involves infusing a character with individual creativity, cultural specificity, or narrative extension. This might include adapting a costume to reflect the cosplayer's cultural heritage, integrating contemporary fashion elements, or imagining the character in an alternate universe or storyline. These reinterpretations reflect the cosplayer's agency in not only participating in fandom culture but reshaping it. Personal interpretation is where cosplay becomes most reflexive, where the boundary between the

character and the cosplayer begins to blur, and the performance becomes a mirror of the cosplayer's own identity, aspirations, or lived experiences.

Together, these three components form a multifaceted framework for understanding cosplay not as a symptom of media obsession or fan pathology, but as a sophisticated practice of visual discourse. Cosplay, in this light, is an expressive medium through which individuals communicate identity, critique cultural narratives, and participate in collaborative world-building. It is simultaneously a creative act, a social performance, and a deeply personal exploration, grounded in visual storytelling and imaginative transformation. Rather than dismissing it as a pathological symptom, scholars and observers alike must recognize cosplay as a legitimate and meaningful cultural practice that reveals the dynamism of fan engagement and the richness of identity formation in contemporary media landscapes.

Physical Imitation

According to Koehler (2022), costuming breaks away from the monotony of everyday life, offering an entry point into the boundless realm of imagination and creative expression. Through this physical imitation, individuals step beyond the constraints of their daily identities, immersing themselves in new personas that allow for exploration, play, and self-discovery. This transformative process fosters a heightened sense of self-awareness, as participants actively engage in the construction and redefinition of their identities. By embodying different characters, personas, or archetypes, individuals gain insight into aspects of themselves that may otherwise remain unexplored. In this way, cosplay becomes more than just an aesthetic practice; it is an intentional act of transformation, an avenue for self-reflection, and a bridge between reality and the infinite possibilities of the imagination. This concept was vividly embodied in my encounter

with a cosplayer at Emerald City Comic Con, who portrayed Michonne from *The Walking Dead* with striking precision and poise. Her katana, dreadlocks, and determined expression captured not just the visual elements of the character, but the essence of Michonne's quiet strength, resilience, and emotional complexity. When I asked her why she chose Michonne, she explained that the character represented survival, not just in a post-apocalyptic world, but as a Black woman navigating the challenges of daily life. "Michonne isn't just a strong woman with a sword," she said, "she's a symbol of what it means to carry trauma, to protect your people, and still find moments of softness."

This choice to embody Michonne was not merely performative, it was deeply personal. The cosplayer spoke of how putting on the costume helped her tap into her own inner strength, particularly during a time when she was facing significant emotional hardship. In this context, the costume functioned as armor, both literal and symbolic, allowing her to access a part of herself she felt had been buried under the pressures of work, family expectations, and racialized gender norms. Her cosplay, then, became a ritual of empowerment, an intentional act of stepping into a persona that both reflected and amplified her own capacity for endurance and grace. This experience reflects the broader cultural and psychological implications of cosplay as a site of self-transformation. The process of costuming not only enables the projection of alternative identities but also facilitates introspection and healing. As the cosplayer suggested, "When I'm Michonne, I feel like I can breathe a little deeper, stand a little taller. She reminds me of who I really am underneath everything else." Here, the boundary between fiction and reality becomes blurred, and cosplay functions as a medium through which participants not only express admiration for a character but actively engage in identity work. For Black women, these dynamics carry additional layers of meaning. Given the lack of expansive representation in

popular media, the opportunity to embody a strong, complex Black female character is a radical and affirming act. It offers a counter-narrative to the restrictive stereotypes often projected onto Black femininity and allows for the reimagining of Black womanhood as powerful, multidimensional, and emotionally rich. In this sense, cosplay becomes a site of cultural reclamation and self-affirmation, where fantasy is not a means of escape, but a tool for re-authoring one's reality.

"Rule 63"

The practice of subverting and exchanging traditional gender norms has been a prevalent and widely embraced phenomenon within fan cultures, manifesting prominently in both fan art and fan fiction. Within fan art communities, this creative reinterpretation often takes the form of altering a character's gender, a concept commonly referred to as "Rule 63." This term originates from the internet collective known as Anonymous and its widely circulated "Rules of the Internet," a list that blends humor with informal guidelines aimed at fostering online engagement and interaction. Rule 63 states that "For every given male character, there is a female version of that character; conversely, for every given female character, there is a male version of that character" (Skentelbery, p 2, 2024). This principle has given rise to an extensive body of transformative works in fandom spaces, where artists and writers explore alternative gender identities for beloved characters, challenging traditional representations and expanding the interpretive possibilities of fictional narratives. The application of Rule 63 not only allows for creative experimentation but also serves as a means for fans to engage critically with gender dynamics in media, reinforcing the role of fandom as a space for both entertainment and discourse.

Within fan fiction communities, the term "gender swap" refers to the creative process of reimagining an existing character with alternative gendered traits, often challenging conventional gender roles and expectations. This transformation allows writers to explore new dimensions of characterization, relationships, and identity by presenting familiar figures in a different gendered context. Scholar Judith May Fathallah (2017), building on the work of Busse (2005), emphasizes that fan fiction, including slash fiction, which focuses on erotic or romantic relationships—serves as a medium through which writers "explore and connect through sexualities outside of the heteronormative binary" (Fathallah 2017, 30).

Both Rule 63 in fan art and "gender swap" in fan fiction highlight a fluid and often playful approach to the traditionally rigid constructs of gender, illustrating how fandom spaces encourage experimentation and alternative narratives. These creative reinterpretations do more than simply change a character's outward appearance or pronouns; they frequently engage with deeper questions of identity, power dynamics, and societal norms, offering fresh perspectives on familiar stories. Beyond art and fiction, cosplay also functions as an avenue for fans to actively participate in character adaptation and transformation. Much like fan artists and writers, cosplayers often embody characters outside of their assigned genders, further reinforcing fandom's role as a space where gender can be deconstructed, subverted, and reimagined. Through these creative practices, fan communities continue to challenge and expand mainstream understandings of gender representation in media, fostering a dynamic and inclusive environment for artistic and narrative exploration.

Although Rule 63 suggests that gender-swapping is primarily an online phenomenon, the practice of reimagining characters with different genders has become an integral part of public performances such as cosplay. For Black femme cosplayers, gender-bending offers a powerful

means of self-expression, allowing them to challenge rigid gender norms while also addressing the racialized and exclusionary standards often present in mainstream fandoms. By embodying characters that may not traditionally reflect their identities, Black femme cosplayers assert agency over representation, reshaping narratives to better align with their lived experiences. Through re-gendering, they not only expand the possibilities of character interpretation but also create space for broader conversations about diversity, inclusion, and the fluidity of identity within geek and cosplay cultures.

Cosplay is an expansive and diverse practice that encompasses a wide range of subcategories, each allowing cosplayers to creatively reinterpret and embody fictional characters in unique ways. Within this broad umbrella term, different types of cosplay have emerged, reflecting the ways in which fans engage with identity, representation, and performance. One notable form is race-bending, which involves cosplaying a character whose racial or ethnic identity differs from that of the cosplayer. This practice can be a means of cultural appreciation, representation, or reimagining a character in a new context. Another variation is age-bending, a term introduced by Skentelbery (2019) to describe the widespread phenomenon of cosplayers portraying characters who are significantly older or younger than themselves, further demonstrating how age, like other identity markers, can be fluidly reinterpreted in fandom spaces. Among the many approaches to cosplay, two specific forms explicitly engage with gender roles and expectations: gender-bending and crossplay cosplay (known as Rule 63). Gender-bending refers to the process of reimagining a character with an alternative gender presentation. This can involve taking a canonically female character and envisioning them as male, transforming a male character into a female version, or assigning gendered traits to a character who is otherwise portrayed as genderless. Aadahl (2018) defines gender-bending as

“taking a character who is canonically female and reimagining them as male, vice versa, or giving a genderless character gendered characteristics” (para 3).

Closely related but distinct from gender-bending is crossplay, in which cosplayers dress as a character of a different gender without necessarily altering the character’s identity within the fictional narrative. Crossplay often involves the use of makeup, wigs, binding or padding techniques, and other physical modifications to more closely align with the gender presentation of the character being portrayed. Unlike gender-bending, which frequently involves redesigning costumes and aesthetics to reflect an explicitly reinterpreted version of a character, crossplay aims for accuracy within the established gender framework of the source material. Both gender-bending and crossplay, along with other forms of identity-based cosplay, highlight the ways in which fandom communities actively engage with and challenge traditional notions of identity, representation, and performance. Through these practices, cosplayers not only pay homage to beloved characters but also contribute to ongoing conversations about gender fluidity, inclusivity, and the flexibility of identity within fan culture.

Current theory according to McGunnigle (2018) suggests that a cosplayer’s identity entwined with their choice of cosplay and the cosplay identity (Rule 63) is mimetic and performative. For Black femme cosplayers, this bending of the character they have chosen to portray is the individual's way of pushing back against the male gaze that is prevalent in comic books, animated shows, films and within the conventions. At its core, cosplay is both an act of transformation and liberation, allowing individuals to merge fiction with personal identity in creative and meaningful ways as a visual metaphor.

Personal interpretation

A defining aspect of any cosplayed character is the transformation of an ordinary figure into an icon, achieved solely through the power of their outfit. Cosplay provides a unique avenue for fans of popular culture and anime to channel their imaginations, blending personal creativity with the stories that inspire them. It offers enthusiasts the opportunity to step into the roles of their favorite characters, physically embodying the narratives that have left a lasting impact on them. Costumes influence both how characters are perceived by society and how they engage with the communities they serve. One of the most remarkable aspects of this tradition is how it enables fans to transform their admiration for a character into a deeper appreciation of their own personal narratives. Across the interviews conducted, each cosplayer emphasized the importance of personal interpretation in their approach to cosplay. Rather than aiming for exact replication, they viewed their costumes as extensions of their own identities, creatively reimagining characters to reflect their cultural backgrounds, aesthetic preferences, or lived experiences. Whether through hairstyle, costume design, or narrative reinterpretation, each participant used cosplay to make the character their own, infusing familiar icons with new, deeply personal meaning.

It is through the costuming of a chosen character that the cosplayer physically gains control of the chosen narrative. According to Hobbs (2022), this phenomenon is evident throughout contemporary media, particularly on digital platforms like Instagram and at live events such as comic conventions. Through cosplay, individuals craft personalized experiences in diverse ways, shaped by their unique interests, identities, and creative expressions. For the participant, engaging in the creation and performance of cosplay can be seen as a meaningful outlet for self-expression and a dynamic form of artistic exploration. By reinterpreting characters

through their own lens, cosplayers bring them to life in ways that not only honor the original work but also reflect their own imaginative perspectives and lived experiences. While the costume frees the character and cosplayer from the rules of society, it simultaneously establishes new boundaries (Brownie and Graydon 2016). The personal interpretation of a cosplay allows the public to still recognize the character's uniform/costume, while allowing the individual the creative freedom to adjust the cosplay as they see fit. Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga (1938) argues that play involves something beyond mere necessity, it adds meaning to our actions and experiences. He states, "something is 'at play' which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to our action. All play means something" (p. 9). Fans are drawn to fictional stories not only because they entertain, but because they provide an opportunity to engage deeply with characters, using them as a canvas for imaginative exploration. Through this engagement, fans construct playful narratives that blend elements of an imagined past with the possibilities of an unrealized future.

This form of play in relation to cosplay holds profound significance as it allows individuals to explore creativity, express identity, and engage with storytelling in a deeply personal and transformative way. When fans embody or reinterpret a character, they tap into fundamental aspects of the human experience. These stories reveal the essential role of creativity and imagination in shaping identity, the deep importance of relationships, and the transformative power of creativity to influence both personal growth and collective understanding. As Hobbs (2022) asserts, cosplay allows fans to engage with a character's narrative, bring them to life using everyday materials, and cultivate communities of like-minded individuals. In this aspect, cosplay is not merely an escape but a meaningful act that allows individuals to connect with broader themes of existence, self-expression, and the nature of human connection.

In closing, this chapter has explored how Blerd cosplayers and broader Black cosplay expression serve as dynamic forces in fan cultures. Rather than merely replicating established characters, Black cosplayers infuse their creations with unique cultural elements, self-defined aesthetics, and reimagined narratives that expand and enrich the possibilities within geek communities. These acts of creative transmission, from redesigning iconic costumes to giving fresh life to lesser-known characters, underscore the fluid dialogue between fandom, gender identity, and shared artistry. As seen through the voices and experiences highlighted here, cosplay for Black femme fans is far more than hobby or performance; it is a site of personal empowerment, community building, and vital storytelling. In celebrating Black cosplayers' innovations and speaking openly about the barriers they confront; we not only acknowledge their contributions to the fandom at large but also illuminate the transformative power of cosplay to shape more inclusive and intersectional fan spaces.

Ch 3: Community Building and Breaking Stereotypes

“The meetups at Comic Cons feels like an extended family reunion every year. There is this upspoken bias that Black cosplayers are hard to find, but here we are...shattering that myth! We fill the convention floor in every shape, shade, and size...it’s a CELEBRATION of diversity and passion! Most of us found each other on social media in different cosplay groups and started our friendships online. Then someone suggested a group picture to commemorate the con and celebrate Black creativity, and OMG look at us now! We showed up and we showed out! I love us!”

-Jazmin



Fig. 7 Black Geeks of Dragon Con Meetup (2024)

I first encountered Jazmin through the “Black Geeks of Dragon Con” Meta page, a vibrant online community dedicated to celebrating diversity and inclusion at Atlanta’s iconic Dragon Con. When we finally met in person, it was a blazing summer afternoon, but the heat did nothing to

dampen the electric atmosphere. Standing near the convention center's entrance, we watched cosplayers of all shapes, sizes, and fandoms stream by, every outfit a testament to individual creativity and pride. Jazmin, a graduate student at Ole Miss studying Business Administration, lit up as she recounted how she first discovered the group. "There's just something about being here, surrounded by people who look like us, doing what we love," she said, scanning the costumed crowd.

As we chatted, Jazmin revealed that back on campus, many of her colleagues shared her enthusiasm for superheroes and cosplay culture. "The communities you meet at Dragon Con aren't just 'fans', they're people you might have known from school, online gaming groups, your job, or even the local beauty shops," she explained. That interconnectedness, she noted, is part of what makes events like Dragon Con so special. People who have only engaged online finally converge in person, forging deeper bonds over their collective passions. For Jazmin, this weekend represented more than a chance to dress up and admire cosplay, it was an opportunity to gather with a tight knit yet ever-expanding network that cut across professional, social, and cultural spheres. Even amid the sweltering Atlanta sun, the sense of community and mutual support among these Black geeks shone brightly, weaving together the strands of fandom, identity, and friendship in a way that was both celebratory and empowering. Dragon Con is recognized as the world's largest multi-media popular culture convention, focusing on science fiction, fantasy, gaming, comics, literature, art, music, and film (DragonCon.org). Owing to its proximity to Black communities and urban centers, the convention has witnessed a significant increase in the participation of Black femme cosplayers, highlighting the influence of regional demographics on its cultural landscape. Among the conventions I have attended, this one was the most diverse, and my Black identity was fully embraced rather than being perceived as an anomaly.

Black cosplayers have become a vibrant and crucial part of fandom, using cosplay as a form of self-expression and resistance. In spaces that historically lacked diversity, Black fans costuming as their favorite characters help *carve out space* for themselves and others. What began as individual passion has grown into a cultural movement, from online hashtags celebrating Black cosplayers to meetups and conventions devoted to diversity. These efforts not only foster much-needed representation but also challenge exclusionary norms in geek culture. By building supportive communities both digitally and in person, Black cosplayers are bringing visibility and empowerment to fandom spaces that were once dismissive or even hostile toward them. By investigating how these groups have become instrumental in connecting Black women who share an interest in cosplay, we can better understand the ways conventions serve as vital gathering places for community building, cultural expression, and increased visibility within the broader fandom environments. These online and in-person communities account for the additional ways in which cosplay allows Black cosplayers to redefine what it means to be a fan or a participant in geek culture, emphasizing that it is an inclusive space for everyone.

By examining the ways in which conventions serve as vital gathering places for Black women cosplayers, I uncover how convention events provide opportunities to meet like-minded individuals face-to-face and form deeper connections beyond virtual interactions. There are many panels or workshops dedicated to discussing topics related to the cosplay community and spaces to discuss diversity in comics, cosplay, and pop culture. Black femme cosplay is both a personal and collective practice, intertwining aesthetics with identity politics. It fosters confidence by allowing individuals to control their visual narratives, while also contributing to a broader cultural shift toward inclusivity and self-love within the cosplay and geek communities.

The visibility afforded by social media platforms further amplifies this effect, as positive reception from online communities fosters validation and belonging.

This chapter explores how Black femme cosplayers use both online and in-person platforms to affirm identity, build community, and resist exclusionary narratives within fandom culture. Hashtags such as #28DaysOfBlackCosplay and #BlackCosplayerHere function as powerful tools for visibility and solidarity, enabling participants to carve out virtual safe spaces where their creativity and presence are celebrated. These digital networks not only amplify marginalized voices but also serve as gateways to real-world connections, facilitating the growth of supportive communities at conventions, meetups, and cosplay events. Whether online or in person, Black femme cosplayers are reshaping cultural narratives, challenging narrow beauty standards, disrupting racial and gendered stereotypes, and asserting their right to occupy space in imaginative worlds.

The Power of Hashtags in Black Digital Communities

Digital platforms have been a transformative tool for Black cosplayers seeking community, representation, and empowerment. On social media, Black creators have launched hashtag campaigns that not only showcase their work but also strengthen collective identity within fandom spaces. One of the most prominent examples is #28DaysOfBlackCosplay, introduced by Chaka Cumberbatch in 2015 to celebrate Black cosplayers throughout February's Black History Month (Cumberbatch, 2020). As Cumberbatch explains, the core objectives of 28 Days of Black Cosplay have always been “visibility, representation, and celebration,” providing a focused opportunity for Black fans to gain the recognition often lacking in mainstream coverage (Cumberbatch, 2020). She founded the initiative after growing frustrated with a “very one-note” portrayal of cosplay that routinely overlooked the contributions of fans of color

(Cumberbatch, 2020). Emphasizing the abundance of Black cosplayers within the community, Cumberbatch (2020) recalls being “tired of hearing people say that there weren’t very many Black cosplayers, when I knew there were tons of us,” prompting the creation of a hashtag that would make their presence undeniable.

Organizations and conventions have a responsibility to amplify Black voices within the cosplay community. This includes featuring Black cosplayers in panels, exhibitions, and promotional materials. Campaigns like #28DaysOfBlackCosplay have been instrumental in the expansion of Black talent, fostering visibility, and encouraging solidarity within the fandom. Representation matters for future generations of fans. Originally founded by a fellow Black femme cosplayer Chaka Cumberbatch during Black History Month, what began as an effort to spotlight Black cosplayers has evolved into a decade-long initiative that continues to empower and celebrate the community. Many Black cosplayers have recounted similar experiences of being criticized or invalidated for portraying fictional characters, solely because of their race. Such encounters can be especially disheartening in a hobby that is meant to be inclusive and enjoyable for all. In response to this ongoing issue, Cumberbatch took action in 2015. “I was tired,” she stated in an interview with *Crunchyroll*, “So I put a bunch of friends in a group chat and outlined a plan to do something about it” (2025).



Fig. 8 A collage of #28DaysOfBlackCosplay provided by Eric Moran

The campaign, known as **#28DaysOfBlackCosplay**, operates on a straightforward premise: Black cosplayers post their work online and include the hashtag to contribute to the visibility and celebration of Black representation in cosplay. For young Black audiences, seeing cosplayers who look like them portraying iconic characters is empowering. It affirms their place in fandom and inspires them to explore creative pursuits, ensuring that cosplay spaces continue to grow more inclusive over time. Cosplay is a unique space where race, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity intersect. Black cosplayers often navigate multiple layers of marginalization, making their presence and contributions more significant. Recognizing and celebrating this intersectionality enriches the cosplay community and fosters greater understanding among its members.

Tiffany, a graduate student at UC San Diego (UCSD), first stumbled upon #28DaysOfCosplay while taking a quick study break on social media. Intrigued by the vibrant costumes and enthusiastic posts, she clicked through the hashtag to find a thriving online community of Black cosplayers showcasing their workday by day. Although she had been

making costumes in secret, fearful her peers in academia might see it as frivolous, Tiffany felt an immediate sense of belonging and validation from seeing others who looked like her confidently representing their favorite characters. Motivated by their passion and openness, Tiffany decided to join in, posting her own cosplay photos using the hashtag. Within hours, she received encouraging comments and direct messages from fellow cosplayers welcoming her to the community. By the end of the month, she had developed an entire network of online friends, from seasoned cosplayers who gave her tips on wig styling to newcomers who shared her mix of excitement and nerves. This digital camaraderie not only strengthened her resolve to cosplay more often but also gave her a mental break from the pressures of graduate research. After the month-long celebration ended, Tiffany stayed connected with many of the friends she met, trading costume-building advice, providing moral support, and even planning future con meetups for the next convention season.

Since its inception, **#28DaysOfBlackCosplay** has become a viral success, “carving out space for Black cosplayers to be acknowledged and seen,” while shattering the “lone Black geek” narrative by proving that there is a significant, thriving community (Cumberbatch, 2020). Each February, platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook flood with images of Black excellence in cosplay, demonstrating the creativity and craftsmanship that Black fans bring to the table. This wave of posts sends a clear message to the broader fandom: Black cosplayers are here in abundance, which means “there’s no excuse for not including us in the big picture” (Cumberbatch, 2020). This annual surge in visibility, while powerful, also highlights the need for sustained recognition beyond a single month, cosplay created by Black artists and fans deserves to be acknowledged, supported, and celebrated all year long.

The emergence of the hashtag #BlackCosplayerHere, created by cosplayer Belle Boyle in 2018 (known online as “CluelessxBelle”), marks a pivotal moment in the digital advocacy and visibility work being done within the Black cosplay community. Far more than a viral trend, the hashtag functions as a powerful act of reclamation and community building. It provides Black cosplayers with a platform to assert their presence year-round, countering the tendency of mainstream cosplay culture to only uplift Black creators during Black History Month. In doing so, #BlackCosplayerHere becomes both a digital archive and a living testament to the resilience, creativity, and excellence of Black cosplayers (Dahir, 2018). It not only affirms their rightful place within fandom spaces but also directly challenges the pervasive erasure and marginalization they continue to face within those same communities. Boyle’s initiative reflects a critical awareness of how social media can be mobilized for resistance and collective storytelling. The hashtag creates space for celebration, solidarity, and exposure, but also for truth-telling. Many of the posts under #BlackCosplayerHere recount instances of exclusion, bias, and racism that Black cosplayers have encountered, particularly in relation to access to photographers, online harassment, and aesthetic gatekeeping. Boyle noted, "I think the magnitude of participation was proof of our numbers but also how tired we are of being relegated to second-class citizens in a community that prides itself on inclusivity" (Dahir, 2018). These stories range from microaggressions to explicit acts of discrimination, including photographers refusing to capture images of Black cosplayers or justifying their avoidance with racially coded excuses such as "not fitting the aesthetic" or "not knowing how to photograph Black skin" (Lawrence, 2020). Such practices reveal a persistent racial bias in visual culture and highlight the ways in which Black cosplayers are systematically excluded from full participation in the visual economy of cosplay.

The hashtag thus serves a dual function: it operates as a tool of empowerment and as a form of protest. While the cosplay community often espouses the inclusive mantra “cosplay is for everyone,” the lived experiences shared through #BlackCosplayerHere expose the conditional nature of that statement (Lawrence, 2020). For many Black cosplayers, inclusion is aspirational rather than actual, often undermined by racialized standards of beauty and professionalism that dictate who is deemed worthy of recognition. Boyle’s campaign underscores the urgent need for more equitable practices within the community, especially among photographers, event organizers, and media platforms that play a role in shaping who gets seen and celebrated. In this way, #BlackCosplayerHere exemplifies how digital spaces can be leveraged to create visibility, demand accountability, and foster community among marginalized groups. It reinforces the fact that Black cosplayers are not a seasonal trend, but a vital, creative, and enduring presence in fandom. By spotlighting both the triumphs and struggles of Black cosplayers, the hashtag encourages broader conversations about race, representation, and equity, not only within cosplay, but within the broader landscape of popular culture and digital media.



Fig. 9 DanitheHermit as Super Mario's Princess Peach (#BlackFemmeMagic)

The rise of digital platforms has created new avenues for community-building, creativity, and resistance, particularly for Black femme cosplayers navigating traditionally white, cis-male dominated fandom spaces. While social media offers expansive possibilities for self-representation and cultural production, it also reflects and reinforces the systemic inequities embedded in broader media and technological landscapes. For Black cosplayers, particularly those who identify as femme-presenting or disabled, these online communities offer not only visibility but also validation. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Reddit have become critical spaces where Black femme cosplayers actively resist erasure

and marginalization. Hashtags such as *#BlackFemmeMagic* and *#CosplayingWhileBlack* function as both digital archives and tools of visibility. These hashtags and communities allow Black cosplayers to share costume tips, celebrate achievements, discuss experiences of racial bias, and support one another in navigating the often exclusionary norms of the larger cosplay culture. Groups such as *Cosplaying While Black*, for instance, have taken on an active role in community building by raising awareness about racism in cosplay spaces through public education, panels, events, and charity work (Cosplaying While Black, 2020). Similarly, r/BlackCosplayers on Reddit acts as a grassroots forum where cosplayers exchange resources, offer encouragement, and collaborate creatively. These environments act as protective and affirming networks. As Sara Ahmed (2012) theorizes in *On Being Included*, diversity work often means “banging your head against a brick wall” a metaphor that aptly captures the emotional labor Black femme cosplayers perform when claiming space in digital environments not designed with them in mind (pg. 26). Their online presence becomes a form of what Ahmed (2012) describes as “affective activism” a circulation of emotions like frustration, joy, and defiance that push against structural exclusions and demand to be seen. Black femme cosplayers disrupt dominant fandom discourses by naming racism, ableism, and gender bias within spaces that claim to be inclusive but often replicate normative structures of power. By refusing silence or erasure, they embody Ahmed’s (2004) notion of a killjoy figure, one who challenges the smooth surface of community by insisting on truth-telling and justice. This disruption is not destructive; rather, it is generative, creating space for alternative affective economies and reimagined communities.

However, these acts of reclamation take place within platforms governed by corporate interests and algorithmic control. As Safiya Noble (2018) argues in *Algorithms of Oppression*,

platforms like Google and Facebook are not neutral, they are embedded with racial and gendered logics that shape what becomes visible, searchable, and valued. Despite these technological limitations, Black femme cosplayers continue to use these platforms strategically, curating digital counterspaces that resist algorithmic erasure. Their digital labor, often unpaid and emotionally taxing, creates visibility not just for themselves, but for an entire community often sidelined in mainstream cosplay culture. Ruha Benjamin's (2019) concept of "discriminatory design" also helps frame the paradox of digital freedom and constraint. The very infrastructures that host virtual cosplay communities, algorithms, interface designs, moderation policies—are often built in ways that structurally disadvantage Black and marginalized users. Benjamin's work reminds us that inclusion within these systems is not enough; transformation is necessary. In this context, Black femme cosplayers' ability to create supportive networks, share adaptive techniques, and affirm one another's identities is not just a form of self-expression, it is a radical reimagining of how digital spaces can function. For many participants, finding such spaces marks a turning point from feeling isolated at conventions to discovering a vast, interconnected community that shares not only fandom interests but also the social realities of navigating race, gender, and aesthetic exclusion. As Dolo (2020) puts it, the "love and positivity" she encountered in these online communities "far outweighs the negativity," suggesting that the psychological and emotional benefits of communal support are deeply impactful. In addition to offering a refuge from racial bias, these virtual spaces increasingly provide room for cosplayers to express and celebrate their disabilities. In physical convention settings, disabled fans often face significant barriers, from inadequate accessibility to dismissive attitudes from fellow attendees and professionals. Online communities help fill this gap by giving disabled cosplayers space to display their work, share adaptive strategies, and receive validation from others who

understand their challenges. These acts of self-expression directly resist the ableist norms that tend to dominate visual and performative cultures.

A poignant example of this resistance comes from DanitheHermit (Fig. 9), a Black femme-presenting cosplayer and wheelchair user who has gained visibility for refusing to let her disability limit her creative freedom. “Just because I’m in a wheelchair doesn’t mean I’m any less of a cosplayer,” she asserts. “My wheels don’t define my creativity, I do.” Her statement reflects a growing ethos within these digital spaces—one that values authenticity, adaptability, and the refusal to conform to narrow, able-bodied standards of cosplay excellence. The significance of these online environments is supported by recent scholarship. Gray (2020) describes virtual fandoms as “affirming environments for Black users to explore identity and resist dominant cultural narratives” (p. 62). Williams and Calhoun (2021) extend this by conceptualizing such platforms as counterspaces, intentional zones of resistance where marginalized users construct new social meanings, redefine inclusion, and challenge hegemonic structures. These counterspaces do more than provide support; they enable collective identity formation, allowing cosplayers to express not only who they are, but who they are becoming. For Black femme cosplayers with disabilities, these spaces are not just optional, they are essential. They function as incubators for creative expression, psychological safety, and resistance against the double exclusion of racism and ableism. Through the shared language of fandom and the connective power of digital media, these cosplayers are reshaping what it means to be visible, valued, and creatively free in cosplay culture. By making space for intersectional identities to flourish, these virtual networks do not simply reflect the diversity of the cosplay community, they actively create it.

Ultimately, these online platforms transform Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit into arenas of activism, where Black cosplayers rewrite fandom norms and claim the visibility, they have long been denied. While these platforms offer unprecedented reach and community-building potential, they are not without their limitations. Governed by corporate interests, often under the control of figures like Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, these digital spaces have been widely criticized for algorithmic bias, uneven enforcement of community standards, and the silencing of marginalized users through shadow banning or content suppression (Noble, 2018). Despite these systemic barriers, Black femme cosplayers continue to assert their presence through strategic forms of resistance. This practice aligns with Sara Ahmed's (2012) theory of *the feminist killjoy*, where marginalized individuals disrupt dominant narratives by naming and confronting systemic inequities, even at the risk of being labeled disruptive or overly sensitive. Black femme cosplayers take up the role of the digital killjoy by refusing to accept exclusionary standards of beauty and representation in fandom culture. Rather than being passive consumers of content, they become producers of alternative affective economies, what Ahmed (2012) defines as the circulation of emotions within social spaces that shape collective attachments and boundaries. Through joy, creativity, anger, and critique, these cosplayers generate new emotional and political investments in fandom spaces that center Blackness, femininity, queerness, and disability as sites of power and possibility.

Rather than waiting for platforms to become equitable, Black femme cosplayers actively shape the digital landscape to reflect their realities and values. Their digital labor transforms what are often inhospitable terrains into sites of celebration, critique, and radical imagination. These acts of cultural production are not incidental, they are deeply intentional, community-

driven responses to exclusion. They reclaim agency and cultivate networks of affirmation, proving that even within flawed systems, vibrant countercultures can and do thrive.

Black Cosplay in Physical Spaces

Beyond conventions, local cosplay groups and Black nerd organizations serve as gathering places where cosplayers can collaborate, plan group cosplays, and build friendships based on shared experiences. Organizations such as the Black Nerds Expo, Urban Anime Lounge, and HBCU geek clubs provide structured spaces for Black cosplayers to connect, showcase their work, and support one another in an industry that often overlooks them. Additionally, community-led initiatives such as photo shoots featuring all-Black cosplay lineups, cosplay mentorship programs, and panel discussions on diversity in fandom allow Black cosplayers to amplify their voices and take ownership of their narratives. These in-person interactions not only strengthen individual confidence but also contribute to the larger movement of increasing Black visibility in nerd culture. The in-person Black cosplay community is about more than just fandom—it is a place of belonging, creativity, and cultural celebration. It is where we reclaim our space, lift each other up, and continue reshaping the cosplay world into a place where Black joy, artistry, and representation thrive unapologetically. More than a hobby, cosplay in these spaces functions as a site of resistance, empowerment, and affirmation. Black cosplayers have long used performance and costuming to challenge the norms of dominant fan culture, integrating their cultural heritage, lived experiences, and personal narratives into the characters they portray (Harris, 2020). Whether through Afrofuturist reinterpretations, anime mashups, sci-fi worldbuilding, or superhero embodiments, Black cosplayers are actively redefining what it means to be a fan and a creator in these spaces. The Black cosplay community is also deeply gender-diverse, with Black men playing a vital role in building inclusive, affirming, and

collaborative environments. Their contributions range from organizing meetups and hosting panels to mentoring younger cosplayers and advocating for increased representation of Black male characters. Scholars such as Martin (2021) argue that Black male cosplayers disrupt harmful stereotypes by embracing characters that allow for emotional depth, vulnerability, and reimagined masculinity—traits that are often denied to Black men in mainstream media. By engaging in cosplay, Black men not only explore creative self-expression, but also participate in a form of cultural healing, where joy, play, and care are prioritized over performative toughness or hypermasculinity (Jackson, 2019). Their presence affirms that Black masculinity, too, deserves space within the diverse emotional and aesthetic possibilities of cosplay.

These intersections of race, gender, and fandom illustrate how the Black cosplay community contributes to broader conversations about identity, resistance, and cultural production. Black people have always found ways to reclaim space in artistic and communal expressions, and cosplay is no different. We bring our own interpretations, cultural influences, and unique perspectives to the characters we love, enriching fandom culture with layered meanings, aesthetic innovation, and political nuance. As I've participated in these in-person spaces, at conventions, photo shoots, panels, and informal gatherings, I've come to understand that cosplay is not merely about escapism. It is about empowerment, cultural pride, and visibility. It is about rewriting the stories we've been excluded from and stepping into the ones we've always deserved. Through these communities, I have witnessed how the shared celebration of Blackness in all its forms, across gender, sexuality, body type, and ability, creates a space where transformation is not just encouraged but inevitable. The Black cosplay community continues to remind me that our presence is powerful, our creativity is limitless, and our stories deserve to be

told. In these spaces, we are not just participants, we are innovators, icons, and the heroes of our own narratives.

At a recent anime convention, Willimena, an undeclared undergraduate from San Marcos, decided on a whim to attend a panel called “Chocolate Covered Cosplay.” Having only dabbled in casual cosplay before, she was curious to see if these specialized events could really make a difference for her own experiences. Upon entering the room, she instantly felt the welcoming energy, a mix of seasoned Black cosplayers sharing their stories, newcomers asking questions, and allies eager to learn how to foster a more inclusive fandom. For Willimena, the panel was eye-opening. Hearing about the shared challenges of gatekeeping and underrepresentation validated some of her own hesitations around fully embracing cosplay. Yet, what struck her most was how the conversation reached beyond the needs of Black cosplayers themselves. Organizers repeatedly emphasized the potential for cross-community education, explaining that the inclusive environment was also meant to inform, encourage, and even challenge non-Black attendees. Willimena noticed how some audience members, who’d never considered the role of race in fandom, asked earnest questions about handling microaggressions or properly celebrating characters of color. Later, Willimena joined a Black cosplayers’ meetup scheduled right after the panel. While the social aspect helped her connect with people who understood her experiences firsthand, she was surprised to see a few non-Black attendees stop by as well, hoping to learn more. In that moment, she realized how crucial these niche meetups and panels could be in bridging gaps across different parts of the fan community. They were not only safe havens for Black fans but also forums for broader discussions, reshaping how everyone approached cosplay, collaboration, and support. Willimena left the event feeling uplifted and more confident that there was room for her in the cosplay world, and she found comfort in

knowing that every gathering or panel like this one set a precedent for more inclusive, informed fan spaces moving forward.

When a convention invites multiple Black cosplay artists as guests or hosts workshops led by Black voices, it challenges congoers to confront long-held assumptions about who belongs in fandom (Dolo, 2020). Con attendees from all backgrounds witness firsthand the creativity and passion that Black cosplayers bring, an experience far more impactful than encountering the topic only via online discussions. This tangible representation makes it increasingly difficult for individuals to perpetuate stereotypes such as “Black fans aren’t really into anime or comics,” especially when they see a Black woman winning “Best in Show” or leading a standing-room-only panel (Cumberbatch, 2020). Each moment of visibility, whether a group photoshoot on the convention steps or a breakout session on racial equity in cosplay, helps normalize Black participation in geek culture. Stephanie Orme highlights the longstanding issue within comic books and their associated fandoms, noting that female bodies have historically been both underrepresented and hypersexualized, often confined to rigid gender stereotypes (Orme 2016, p. 404). For Black femme cosplayers, this problematic portrayal is compounded by additional layers of racialized gender expectations, exclusion, and the policing of Black femininity within fandom spaces. The representation of women in comic books has long catered to a narrow and often Eurocentric beauty standard, with female characters frequently depicted through the male gaze, exaggerated body proportions, impractically revealing costumes, and roles that prioritize their relationships to male protagonists rather than their own autonomy. For Black women and femmes, the problem extends beyond hypersexualization. These intersecting challenges, *erasure, limited character diversity, and reductive tropes*, will be discussed briefly to highlight how they shape the experiences of Black women and femme-presenting cosplayers within

fandom and cosplay culture, which often strips characters of their emotional depth and complexity. This lack of varied representation means that Black femme cosplayers face unique challenges when navigating fandom spaces, where their presence is sometimes questioned or dismissed due to the prevailing assumption that whiteness is the default for female characters.

For Black women and femme cosplayers, erasure remains one of the most pervasive challenges within the cosplay and broader fandom communities. Despite the increasing visibility of Black creators online, the presence and contributions of Black femmes are frequently overlooked or underacknowledged in mainstream coverage, con photography, and media representation. This systemic exclusion is not accidental but rooted in a long history of racialized gatekeeping that dictates who is deemed "authentic" or worthy of recognition in fan spaces (Scott, 2015). Even when Black cosplayers invest significant time, skill, and passion into their portrayals, they often find their work overlooked in favor of white or racially ambiguous counterparts cosplaying the same characters. This invisibility not only undermines their creative labor but also reinforces a cultural narrative in which Black women must work twice as hard for half the recognition. As Gray (2020) argues, "visibility in digital spaces does not guarantee inclusion; it often highlights the boundaries of who is allowed to belong" (p. 69). Thus, the fight against erasure is not just about being seen, it is about being acknowledged as integral to the community.

Another major challenge faced by Black women and femme cosplayers is the limited diversity of characters that reflect their racial and cultural identities. While the cosplay ethos often encourages creative freedom and "cosplay whoever you want," many Black cosplayers are still scrutinized when portraying characters not originally depicted as Black. This issue is rooted in the lack of diverse source material, comics, anime, games, and films continue to

underrepresent Black women or delegate them to secondary roles (Nama, 2011). As a result, Black femmes often face a double bind: either they are forced to "race-bend" existing characters to see themselves in them, or they are restricted to a narrow pool of canonically Black characters, many of whom are stereotypically written or underdeveloped. This lack of character options signals a larger systemic issue in media production—one where Blackness is rendered peripheral or symbolic rather than central and multidimensional. When Black cosplayers reimagine traditionally white characters through their own lens, it is a radical act of self-insertion into narratives that have historically excluded them. However, this freedom is still often policed by fans and media gatekeepers, revealing the persistent racial biases that govern who is allowed to embody which stories.

The trope of the "Strong Black Woman" continues to haunt the creative and emotional expressions of Black women and femme-presenting cosplayers. While strength can be an empowering attribute, this stereotype often reduces Black women to emotionally impenetrable, self-sacrificing figures who exist solely to support others, often at the expense of their own well-being. Within cosplay, this trope manifests in the expectation that Black femme characters—or Black femmes who portray any character, must exude toughness, resilience, or authority, while being denied the full spectrum of emotional or aesthetic expression afforded to their white counterparts (Collins, 2000; Ashley, 2014). As a result, Black femme cosplayers may feel pressure to perform a kind of curated strength, one that aligns with audience expectations and avoids appearing "too soft," "too sexy," or "too emotional." This constraint not only limits character choices but also stifles the emotional authenticity that cosplay is meant to evoke. The labor of constantly resisting these reductive frameworks becomes exhausting and alienating. According to Thomas (2021), Black femmes in cosplay are "both celebrating and unburdening

themselves from cultural scripts imposed on their identities" (p. 183). Their portrayals often reclaim softness, playfulness, and vulnerability as equally valid expressions of power and creativity.

Over time, these efforts are shifting the norms at conventions, making diversity the expectation rather than the exception. As con organizers witness the enthusiastic turnout at BIPOC-specific events, more of them are incorporating inclusive language into their marketing, creating anti-harassment policies that address racial bias, and proactively inviting a broader array of panelists (BlerDCon, n.d.; Cumberbatch, 2020). In this way, the community-based advocacy of Black cosplayers translates into meaningful changes that ripple throughout fandom. Bit by bit, con culture transforms into a more welcoming environment where underrepresented fans can thrive. Combined with the robust online networks that foster connections year-round, these in-person gatherings demonstrate the multifaceted approach Black cosplayers use to reclaim space, build solidarity, and champion the idea that geek culture belongs to everyone.

Community Building

Black femme cosplayers frequently encounter racialized gatekeeping within fandom communities. Despite the inherently transformative nature of cosplay, where gender, age, and even species can be fluidly reinterpreted, Black cosplayers often face resistance when portraying characters who are canonically white. The scrutiny placed on Black femmes who cosplay non-Black characters highlights a racial double standard, where creative reinterpretation is widely accepted in some forms (such as the aforementioned gender-bending) but met with hostility when it involves race. This pushback reinforces a harmful narrative that excludes Black femmes from full participation in fandom spaces, even though cosplay itself thrives on imaginative

reimagining's of beloved characters. For Black femme cosplayers, reclaiming space in the cosplay community becomes an act of resistance. By embodying characters that challenge both racial and gender expectations, they assert their right to visibility, creativity, and representation within a subculture that has historically marginalized them. Through their presence, they push back against the exclusionary norms of fandom, demonstrating that cosplay is for everyone, regardless of race, gender, or body type. In doing so, they not only expand the possibilities of representation in fandom but also contribute to the broader conversation about inclusivity and equity in geek culture.

Online and in-person cosplay groups have played a significant role in breaking these stereotypes, especially for Black femme cosplayers. These spaces provide visibility, validation, and support, allowing cosplayers to redefine beauty, body standards, and character representation in ways that celebrate diversity rather than exclude it. By fostering inclusive narratives, these communities challenge the notion that cosplay must adhere to strict racial or body-type guidelines, making the art form more accessible to everyone. “Online platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter are everything for Black femme cosplayers who want to reshape the conversation around representation,” says Chelsey, who recently cosplayed as Velma from *Scooby-Doo*. “Being able to share our work on these apps means we can show people that yes, we absolutely belong in these fandom spaces...and that our takes on beloved characters deserve visibility and respect.” Social media provides a space where these cosplayers can showcase their craft, connect with like-minded individuals, and push back against the restrictive expectations of what a cosplayer “should” look like. Hashtags like #BlerdCosplay and #BlackCosplayer amplify their presence, allowing them to receive the recognition and respect often denied to them in mainstream spaces. Additionally, online forums and group discussions create a sense of

belonging, where Black femme cosplayers can share experiences, combat negativity, and affirm that cosplay is for everyone, regardless of race or body shape



Fig. 10 WonderCon Black Cosplayer Meetup 2024 (#BlerdCosplay)

In-person cosplay communities, such as conventions and meetups, also contribute to breaking stereotypes by providing real-world representation of diverse cosplayers. When Black femme cosplayers participate in cosplay competitions, panel discussions, and group photoshoots, they visibly challenge outdated beauty and body norms. Seeing a range of body types and skin tones portraying beloved characters encourages others to embrace their own interpretations of cosplay without feeling pressured to conform to traditional expectations. Moreover, these spaces allow for direct engagement and education, as cosplayers and allies work together to dismantle exclusionary mindsets and promote a more inclusive environment. By existing and thriving in both online and in-person spaces, Black femme “cosplayers actively reshape the cosplay

community's standards," says Lara, dressed as a fierce Dungeons & Dragons character. "We're not waiting for anyone else to give us permission; with every costume we create, we're challenging outdated norms and proving that we belong here just as much as anyone else." Their presence and persistence demonstrate that cosplay is an art form rooted in creativity and passion rather than rigid adherence to Eurocentric ideals. Through advocacy, representation, and collective support, these groups empower individuals to celebrate their identities and redefine what it means to be a cosplayer (Lome, 2016).

Across both online and offline realms, the growing networks around Black cosplay provide crucial support and empowerment. Representation alone can be life-changing: young fans who see Black cosplayers portraying everything from superheroes to princesses can finally imagine themselves in those roles. It sends a validating message that being a nerd is not "un-Black." "The fact [is] being a nerd doesn't make me any less Black" states Dolo, 2020. This is a lesson many have learned through cosplay, as it helps break the myth that Black identity and geek interests are incompatible. Cosplay communities run by and for Black fans reinforce this by celebrating the fusion of Black culture with fandom, whether it's via Afro-centric twists on costumes or photoshoots that welcome all body types and skin tones. This environment empowers individuals to embrace all parts of their identity with pride. When racist trolls or exclusionary practices do rear their head, Black cosplayers now have a safety net. They rally around each other, amplifying one another's voices. For instance, if a Black cosplayer is attacked with slurs on social media, it's common for dozens of others (and allies) to jump in with words of support and to report or drown out the hateful comments.

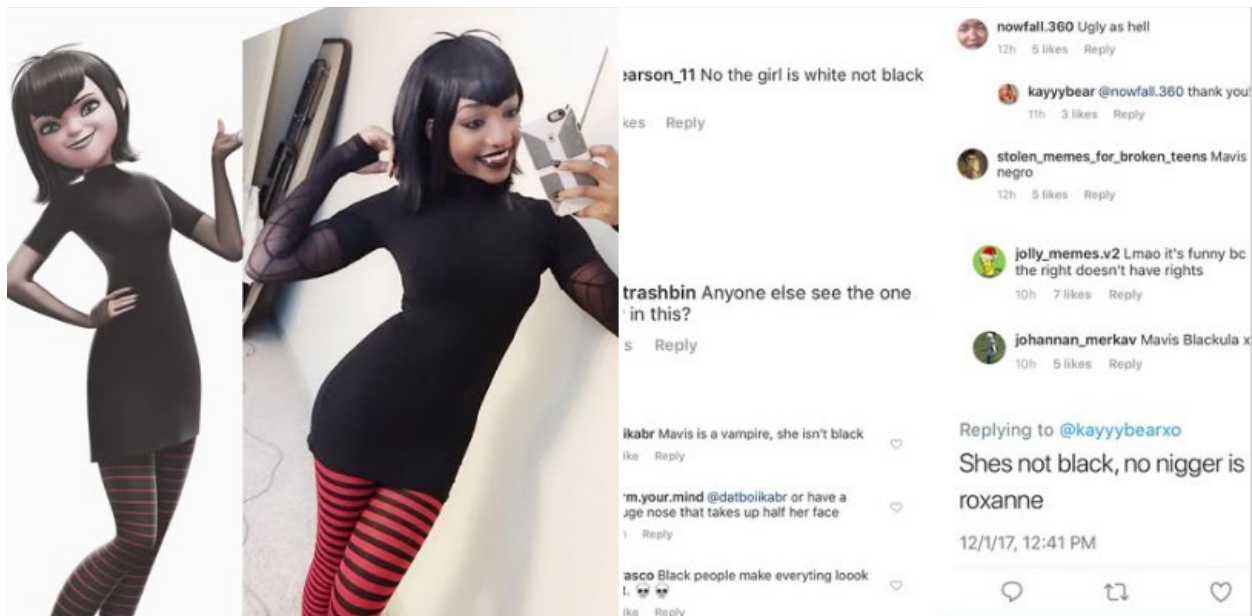


Fig. 11 KayBear as Mavis from *Hotel Transylvania* (#BlackCosplayer)

One notable instance occurred when cosplayer Kay Bear shared a public statement on Facebook addressing the harassment she received online while portraying Mavis from *Hotel Transylvania*. “I’ve been called a ‘n*gger, wrong, ugly’ etc. just because of my skin color,” she wrote. “Cosplay is for everyone. If someone tells you that character is not black, tell them...They’re black now” (KayBear, 2017). The post gained significant traction online, prompting numerous Black female cosplayers worldwide to take a similar stand and publicly share their own experiences with harassment and discrimination (Johnson, 2020). The resilience shown by Black cosplayers in the face of adversity is often bolstered by knowing an entire community has their back. As one research survey noted, “racial slurs are commonplace, but it seems like the same people who throw these slurs are the very people who think it’s okay to do blackface” a hypocrisy that Black cosplayers collectively call out (Woods, 2020). Many Black fans say they’ve “gotten used to” ignorant remarks over time, not to normalize them, but as a testament to their strength in “grin and bear it” while continuing to do what they love. This

emotional armor is often forged through communal support. During an interview, cosplayer Cassidy reflected on the racism she encounters in response to her work, stating, “I know that I did a good cosplay when there are racist remarks...like they can’t fathom that a Black woman can be this amazing at cosplay!” Her statement underscores how, for many Black femme cosplayers, excellence is often met not with celebration but with racial hostility, revealing the deep-rooted biases that continue to shape responses to Black visibility in fandom spaces. Knowing others have endured and thrived makes it easier to persevere. In effect, what used to be isolating incidents of bias can now become rallying points that bring Black cosplayers even closer together.

The empowerment stemming from these communities is changing the fandom landscape. Black cosplayers and their supporters are actively reshaping norms in cosplay toward greater inclusivity. They’ve proven that diversity initiatives are not about exclusion but about opening the doors wider. Indeed, representation has a ripple effect: it can “create empathy outside of the Black community,” helping non-Black fans appreciate why inclusion matters. “Between the Black community and the cosplay support, every hour I spent stressing over my bedazzled Grumpy Bear costume was completely worth it,” says Jennifer. “When I see how we uplift each other, all that hard work feels like an investment in something so much bigger than just my cosplay” (Jennifer, 2024). Every positive interaction be it a compliment on a cosplay, a photographer choosing to spotlight more Black subjects, or a convention adding anti-harassment rules about racist behavior, is a victory that comes from years of advocacy. The efforts of Black femme cosplayers also pave the way for other marginalized groups in cosplay (such as other people of color, LGBTQ+ cosplayers, etc.) to insist on their place in fandom. In that sense, Black cosplay activism is catalytic, pushing the entire cosplay culture toward the ideal it often touts: a creative community where anyone can be anything.

To sum up, the experiences of Black cosplayers demonstrate the power of community in transforming fandom spaces. Through first-person narratives, we see pain from prejudice but also pride and perseverance. Through academic lenses, we understand that these fans are doing important cultural work, performing a kind of resistance by simply enjoying a hobby while Black. As Gray (2020) explains, Black users often construct “affirming environments to explore identity and resist dominant cultural narratives” within digital and fan-based communities (p. 62). This communal dimension is crucial; it reveals how Black cosplayers turn shared experience into collective strength, using both virtual and in-person spaces to challenge exclusion and redefine what participation in fandom looks like. And through popular media and convention reports, we witness a tide turning: online campaigns like *#28DaysOfBlackCosplay* and on-the-ground events like BlerdCon are making fandom more inclusive, one costume at a time. Black cosplayers are no longer content to be sidekicks or curiosities in the fan world; they are organizers, innovators, and heroes in their own right. Their presence offers inspiration for new generations of fans and sends a clear message that fandom is at its best when everyone gets to partake in the fun. Because in the end, it doesn't matter what others think as long as you think highly of yourself! As we move into the concluding chapter, it becomes clear that Black femme cosplay is more than a form of fan expression—it is a political, cultural, and deeply personal practice. The stories, strategies, and creative interventions explored in this research underscore the necessity of inclusive spaces, the urgency of representation, and the transformative power of joy, resistance, and community.

Conclusion: Toward Future Frontiers in Black Cosplay Studies

This dissertation has centered on Black femme cosplayers as active agents in reclaiming identity, crafting community, and rewriting the rules of fandom. Drawing from participant interviews, personal narratives, visual analyses, and theoretical frames such as Afrofuturism, intersectionality, and cultural performance, I have demonstrated that cosplay is not merely an act of play or entertainment, but a profound space of resistance, joy, and self-expression. Black femme cosplayers do not simply participate in fan culture, they transform it. Through costume, creativity, and performance, they destabilize racialized and gendered hierarchies within popular culture and fandom spaces, bringing visibility to identities that have long been marginalized. Central to this work is the assertion that cosplay becomes a liberatory tool, a canvas upon which Black femmes can reimagine themselves not as side characters or tropes, but as heroes, icons, and visionaries. Their presence in both digital and physical spaces carve out vital platforms for communal care, representation, and belonging. Through practices such as racebending, genderbending, and Afrocentric reinterpretation of mainstream characters, Black femme cosplayers not only demand space in fandom, but they also create it on their own terms. This process challenges longstanding norms about who can be seen, who can be heard, and who deserves to be celebrated in geek culture.

In mapping this terrain, I have also explored the broader cultural conditions, racism, misogynoir, and exclusion—that shape the cosplay landscape. Yet within this landscape, Black femme cosplayers persist, innovate, and resist. Whether through viral hashtags like #28DaysOfBlackCosplay, visibility at conventions like BlerdCon, or community-building on platforms like TikTok and Reddit, they affirm their right to be seen not as exceptions but as

essential parts of the culture. These digital and physical networks do more than provide visibility; they offer support, kinship, and critical mass, demonstrating the enduring power of collective identity and action. This project does not conclude the conversation; it invites further exploration. Future research might look into the experiences of disabled Black femme cosplayers, the global reach of Afrofuturist cosplay aesthetics, or the evolving algorithms that shape digital visibility. As both a scholar and a cosplayer, I recognize that my work sits at the intersection of lived experience and academic inquiry. This dual positionality has enriched this dissertation, and it will continue to inform my scholarship, pedagogy, and activism moving forward. This ethnographic work underscores that cosplay is more than performance, it is praxis. It is the embodiment of imagined possibilities, the reconstitution of power through narrative, and the radical act of joy in the face of exclusion. Black femme cosplayers do not simply wear costumes; they rewrite cultural scripts. They remind us that in a world of constant erasure, to be visible, imaginative, and unapologetically oneself is a revolutionary act.

The methodological approach of this dissertation, it is important to reflect on how the strategies and structures I employed were intentionally designed to center the lived experiences, visibility, and agency of Black femme cosplayers. This project unfolded at the intersections of fandom, race, gender, and media, and therefore required a methodological framework as fluid and multifaceted as the participants it sought to represent. The hybrid model I employed, combining immersive ethnographic fieldwork with in-depth, semi-structured interviews and digital observation, allowed me to gather data that was both broad in scope and rich in detail. By attending major conventions like San Diego Comic-Con, Dragon Con, and Emerald City Comic Con, as well as smaller regional gatherings, I was able to access a diversity of participants whose insights reflected the vast range of Black femme engagement in cosplay culture. What

distinguished this approach was not only the breadth of physical spaces observed, but the depth of emotional and cultural labor shared during our conversations. The decision to utilize patchwork ethnography, as articulated by Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020), was essential in accommodating the fragmented, nonlinear, and deeply personal narratives that emerged throughout this research. This methodology allowed me to move fluidly between formal and informal spaces, between staged panels and impromptu hallway conversations, between the convention floor and social media feeds. It mirrored the ways Black femme cosplayers themselves navigate the blurry boundaries between online and offline identities, between performance and everyday embodiment, and between resistance and celebration.

The data collected revealed not just how Black femme cosplayers are received within fan communities, but also how they cultivate joy, creativity, and solidarity in spaces where their presence has historically been marginalized. These insights were only made possible by a research design that prioritized relationship-building, trust, and respect for the knowledge each participant brought into the study. Through this approach, the conventions themselves became more than just sites of observation, they became living, breathing classrooms in which I learned from each interaction, photograph, and conversation. The methodological choices outlined here reflect the core commitments of this dissertation: to value experiential knowledge, to amplify voices that are too often silenced, and to document the ways in which Black femmes are actively reshaping the cultural landscapes of cosplay and fandom. This method, rooted in care, collaboration, and critical cultural inquiry, not only produced empirical findings, but it also honored the communities from which those findings emerged.

The discussion and findings regarding diversity and representation in cosplay reaffirms the critical importance of diversity and representation within cosplay culture by centering the

experiences of Black participants, particularly Black femme cosplayers, at popular culture conventions. Through detailed ethnographic encounters, interviews, and critical reflection, this research exposes how systemic issues such as racialized notions of cosplay "accuracy," financial inequities, and exclusionary gatekeeping continue to marginalize Black cosplayers in spaces that pride themselves on creativity and community. Yet, despite these challenges, Black cosplayers remain vital contributors to the culture of fandom, transforming conventions into sites of cultural affirmation, artistic innovation, and resistance. The significance of Black femme cosplayers lies not only in their visual presence but in the creative, intellectual, and emotional labor they perform to challenge normative structures. Their cosplay is not just a costume, it is a statement of belonging, a celebration of cultural pride, and an intervention in fandom narratives that have historically centered whiteness. By embodying characters from across racial, gendered, and genre boundaries, these participants subvert dominant expectations and disrupt the myth of a monolithic fan identity. They show us that representation is not just about who gets to be seen but who gets to be celebrated and validated in the spaces we share.

Furthermore, Black cosplayers' innovative responses to exclusion, through mutual aid, resource sharing, and digital activism, demonstrate how community-building can thrive even in the face of systemic barriers. Whether it is through social media hashtags, cosplay rental networks, or panels like the Black Panel at SDCC, these fans create platforms for visibility, joy, and solidarity. These efforts not only support the individual cosplayer but help to build a collective reimagining of fandom itself: one where all bodies, identities, and experiences are welcome. The findings and interviews with cosplay participants underscore that cosplay, particularly when undertaken by marginalized communities, functions as more than performance or recreation. It is a deeply political act of identity reclamation and narrative rewriting. Black

femme cosplayers don't just "fit into" fandom—they reshape it. Their presence and power push the boundaries of what is possible in cosplay culture, urging us to move beyond superficial inclusion and toward a deeper understanding of justice, creativity, and representation in fan spaces.

Cosplay, for many Black femme participants, is more than costume, it is an intentional act of becoming. In this dissertation we have seen how the practice of cosplay empowers Blerd cosplayers to explore and amplify aspects of their identities that are often marginalized in broader cultural landscapes. Whether stepping into the powerful boots of a warrior, reimagining beloved characters through a Black lens, or simply donning a costume that feels like a second skin, Black femme cosplayers engage in a performance of self that is as liberating as it is transformative. This practice cultivates confidence, fosters visibility, and provides space for creative experimentation in ways that challenge systemic norms around race, gender, and representation. The narratives and lived experiences highlighted in this chapter illuminate how cosplay functions not only as visual play but as an embodied declaration of cultural presence. From reclaiming and reshaping nerd culture through the proudly embraced identity of the "Blerd," to drawing inspiration from the survival tactics of historical figures like Harriet Tubman and Ellen Craft, Black cosplayers demonstrate that storytelling, when filtered through the lens of costume, community, and character, can be a radical act. These cosplayers are crafting alternative worlds in which they do not merely exist but thrive, not only within fantasy but also in the reality of everyday life.

Importantly, this dissertation underscores how the performative act of cosplay is deeply rooted in self-visualization and mental wellness. The alter egos created and embraced by Black femme cosplayers are not escapes from reality, but reflections of internal strength, joy, and

resistance. By inhabiting these characters, sometimes fierce, sometimes whimsical, always intentional, Black women are rewriting the scripts historically handed to them. They are producing narratives where they are not only included but centered, not only visible but celebrated. In doing so, they are forging spaces of belonging and affirmation within fan cultures that have too long overlooked them. “Bold, Black, and Cosplayed” speaks to the rise of a movement, a generation of Blerd creatives who are carving out their rightful place in fandom with brilliance, confidence, and unapologetic self-love. Their presence disrupts outdated assumptions about who gets to be a fan, a hero, or a protagonist in the stories we cherish. And in doing so, they remind us of all that the truest power lies not just in the costume, but in the freedom to become the most expansive version of oneself.

The layered stories explored throughout this dissertation affirm that for Black femme cosplayers, community is not just a bonus, it is a necessity. Whether in the hallways of bustling convention centers or within curated digital spaces online, these communities are built from intention, shared resilience, and a collective commitment to reimagining fandom spaces that have historically rendered Blackness peripheral or invisible. Cosplay, in this context, becomes far more than a costume. It becomes a means of survival, storytelling, resistance, celebration, and healing. The communities forged in fandom spaces—through hashtags, meetups, mentorships, and panels, disrupt the presumed normativity of whiteness in geek culture and instead offer an expansive vision of what fandom can and should look like: diverse, intersectional, and joyously inclusive. By centering on the voices of Black femme cosplayers, this dissertation has illuminated the critical importance of both digital and physical networks in countering stereotypes, affirming identity, and building sustainable support systems. The emergence of tags like #28DaysOfBlackCosplay and #BlackCosplayerHere showcases how Black creatives harness

social media not just to gain visibility, but to assert agency, foster connection, and challenge systems of erasure. In-person spaces such as BlerdCon and Dragon Con deepen these bonds, offering tactile moments of belonging, joy, and recognition. When a cosplayer sees themselves reflected, whether on a convention stage, a viral Instagram post, or in a group photo where every skin tone, body type, and fandom passion is celebrated, it affirms their right to exist fully and freely within these imagined worlds. Yet, while these stories of empowerment, resistance, and creativity are powerful, they also raise critical questions that point toward future research. The first of these concerns the intersectionality of access. What remains underexamined is how barriers such as economic status, geographic location, or institutional support impact Black cosplayers' ability to participate. Future studies might investigate how class shapes who gets to cosplay, how often, and at what level of visibility. What does it mean to "compete" in cosplay when the costs of wigs, materials, travel, and photography are out of reach for many? How do Black femme cosplayers innovate or remix materials to navigate those limitations, and what does that ingenuity say about the resourcefulness of marginalized creatives?

Another area for exploration is mental health and emotional labor within fandom spaces. While this chapter touched on the mental health benefits of cosplay and community connection, future research could deepen this focus by examining how cosplaying serves as a therapeutic tool in processing racial trauma, gender dysphoria, or isolation. Scholars might also examine the toll of digital labor and constant visibility, how does the pressure to represent, educate, or defend one's right to exist in fandom spaces affect cosplayers emotionally and psychologically? What coping mechanisms or communal care practices have emerged to support well-being? The role of queer and trans identities within Black femme cosplay also warrants more scholarly attention. As this research primarily focused on femme-presenting cosplayers, future work could more

intentionally center the experiences of gender-expansive individuals within Black cosplay communities. How do queer Black cosplayers navigate spaces that are often heteronormative? What forms of queer worldbuilding, resistance, or expression arise when queerness and cosplay intersect? Intersectional analysis that includes sexuality, gender identity, and disability is not just additive, it is essential to understanding the full range of Black cosplay experiences.

Additionally, there is fertile ground for studying the evolving relationship between Black cosplayers and the entertainment industry. As fandom increasingly intersects with corporate media, through influencer partnerships, sponsored content, or professionalized cosplay, what opportunities and tensions emerge for Black cosplayers? Are their contributions being compensated and credited, or are their aesthetics being appropriated for commercial gain? Future research might investigate how Black creators are shaping, and being shaped by, the entertainment economies they help sustain. Another promising avenue is to explore transnational Black cosplay networks. While this study is grounded in the U.S. context, Black cosplayers across the diaspora, from South America to the Europe to Africa to Japan, are also building communities, challenging stereotypes, and generating new cultural expressions. How are these global Black cosplay communities connected? What cultural or linguistic commonalities and distinctions emerge? Comparative studies could examine how issues of colorism, anti-Blackness, and representation manifest across different geopolitical regions.

Moreover, as emerging technologies continue to shape how fandom is experienced, future research should consider how platforms like TikTok, Discord, and even VR cosplay gatherings are changing the landscape. How are Black femme cosplayers using these tools to build new forms of intimacy and presence? How do these digital spaces differ from traditional ones in terms of safety, visibility, and cultural production? Finally, there is the question of

pedagogy and institutional engagement. How can educators, libraries, museums, and cultural institutions support the intellectual and creative labor of Black cosplayers? Could cosplay be integrated into curriculum design as a legitimate form of multimodal storytelling or cultural criticism? How might mentorship programs, grants, or fellowships be used to elevate Black cosplay as a form of scholarship and art? In short, while this chapter highlights the remarkable achievements and resilience of Black femme cosplayers, it also makes clear that the work is far from finished. These communities continue to grow, adapt, and resist, and as they do, they invite scholars, educators, and allies to take seriously the critical interventions being made through wigs, seams, hashtags, and panels. Cosplay is not just fandom; it is freedom work. It is storytelling. It is a protest. It is self-love. And it is an ever-evolving archive of Black creativity and collective power.

As we look ahead, future research must follow the lead of these cosplayers, boldly imaginative, intentionally inclusive, and unapologetically Black. For in these capes and corsets, in these conventions and community chats, lies a vibrant cultural movement with the power not only to transform fandom but to reimagine the very possibilities of representation, joy, and belonging in our everyday world. This dissertation traces the stitches, sequins, sweat, and spirit that shape Black femme cosplay, not merely as a hobby, but as a radical form of self-authorship. These cosplayers do not wait for permission to belong; they create worlds in which they already do. And in doing so, they carve out a space for themselves and for others who have been told they don't fit the mold. Their presence is a masterclass in cultural reclamation, a visual love letter to the power of imagination, and a challenge to institutions, academic, creative, and societal, to keep pace. Future research must go beyond counting heads at conventions or cataloging costumes. It must listen deeply to the lived experiences, dreams, fears, and triumphs

that animate every hand-stitched hem and every social media post proclaiming, “I’m here.” It must explore how these creative expressions ripple across generations, communities, and even pedagogies, influencing how we teach, learn, connect, and care. And it must ask not only *what* cosplay says about identity—but *what kind of future* identity-making these cosplayers are daring us to imagine.

For me, this work has been more than an academic pursuit, it has been a journey of return. Of witnessing. Of recognition. In every interview, every panel, every dazzling image of a Black femme portraying Wonder Woman or Sailor Moon, I saw the magic that happens when we stop asking for space and start *taking* it. When we make joy a strategy. When we turn fandom into a form of freedom. I dedicate this work to the cosplayers who’ve ever felt invisible, and to the ones who, despite it all, showed up in costume anyway. You are not only seen, but you are also celebrated. And the world is catching up to the brilliance you’ve always carried.

Let the record show: Black femme cosplayers are not an exception in fandom; they are the future of it.



Fig. 12 Researcher as Herself

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