CONVENTION COSPLAY: SUBVERSIVE POTENTIAL IN ANIME FANDOM

by

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Abstract

Conventions featuring *anime* (Japanese animation), *manga* (Japanese comic books), video games, and related merchandise have accumulated fandoms (fan communities) through the provision of a supportive environment that facilitates consumption of imported products. Anime conventions in the U.S. and Canada attract consumers from across North America. Attendees frequently utilize cultural and symbolic capital to express their enthusiasm as fans. Some fans create elaborate handmade costumes and perform as their favorite characters during the convention. This activity is commonly called *cosplay* (or "costume play"). Cosplayers borrow directly from Japanese popular culture media texts and aim to make the best possible realization of the characters.

Drawing on Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1996), theorists of fandom have examined the consumption of popular texts, such as television, magazines, or books, with regards to dominant cultural standards, or taste. Some fan theorists profess that fan subcultures challenge the institutionalized cultural hierarchy. Fans invest time and money in the consumption of devalued products, namely popular culture. Consumption of popular texts and the fan activities associated with them are denigrated by dominant culture. This thesis draws upon Bourdieu's concept of taste to examine how conceptualizations of "good" and "bad" taste relate to gender and physical attributes, such as body size and skin color.

Cosplay is a social activity where fans temporarily assume and perform a fictional identity. However, interviews with cosplayers indicate that a cosplayer's decision making is informed by dominant social standards of beauty, based on physical appearance, body size, and to some degree, ethnicity. Conventions provide relatively safe places for the transgression of normative concepts of gender and sexuality. Cosplay provides an opportunity for gender 'play' and self-invention through the performance of alternative personas. Cosplayers are stigmatized by dominant society for their inordinate interest and consumption of a devalued commodity. The activity involves skill, time, and devotion that mainstream society prescribes for a career or in some way contributing to the economic system. Fan activities, including cosplay, and online fan communities contribute to an alternative discourse about desire, sexuality, and gender that challenges dominant, patriarchal social norms.

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Dedication

To my interviewees and anime fans.

I. Introduction

Japanese popular culture consumers are a subculture within North America that has been overlooked by anthropology; in Micaela di Leonardo's terms they are "hidden in plain sight". In *Exotics At Home*, di Leonardo writes that her ethnography is: "simultaneously about other key American phenomena also hiding in plain sight, populations and processes that are either little represented in scholarship and popular culture or most represented in their least typical forms" (1998:10). Di Leonardo questions anthropology's preoccupation with debates on Otherness, while critiquing anthropology for its "…recent absence in a key arena—the dynamics of race, ethnicity, and gender in modern American life" (1998:79). My research among Japanese popular culture fans addresses how gender, and to some extent ethnicity and race, is performed in the highly commodified context of conventions, providing insight into a growing phenomenon in contemporary North American cultural practice.

The consumption of Japanese popular culture items has expanded in recent years, particularly in Asia where youth are looking to Japan for the newest trends and the West is no longer fashionable (Iwabuchi 2002). Japanese and Asian media industries are actively promoting Japanese popular culture to the East and Southeast Asian markets (Iwabuchi 2002). Furthermore, Japanese popular culture has gained favor in many Western countries. Yet the profitability and popularity of Japanese popular culture in the West is a new and still understudied phenomenon (Allison 2000, 2003; Misaka 2004).

The origins of the popularity of Japanese popular culture items in North America, such as *anime* (Japanese animation) and *manga* (Japanese graphic novels), are attributed to fans who made fan translations of imported anime on video cassettes in the 1970s (Leonard 2005). These fans initially piggybacked on science fiction conventions until anime-exclusive conventions sprang up in the 1990s. Leonard asserts "…that early anime companies had to rely on the

existing fanbase and had to grow that fanbase if they were to turn a profit. That fanbase relied on the circulation of fansubs" (Leonard 2005:294).[1] Both conventions and fans have significantly contributed to the success of Japanese popular culture in the West.[2]

Japanese popular culture conventions have sprung up in major cities in the U.S. and Canada, catering to the current interest in Japanese products. At present, anime conventions are held in five provinces in Canada and approximately 30 states in the U.S. (Animecons.com 2008). Each year, the non-profit group, Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation (SPJA), organizes Anime Expo, the largest anime convention in the United States. The convention offers entertainment, contests, celebrity guests, and booths with products to purchase. The first Anime Expo convention had an attendance of 1,750 in 1992. In 2007, over 41,671 guests attended (Anime Expo 2008). The increase in convention attendees reflects the growth of North American consumers interested in Japanese popular culture products.

North American conventions featuring anime, manga, and related merchandise have accumulated fandoms (fan communities) through the provision of a supportive environment that facilitates consumption of imported products, attracting consumers from across North America. According to Peterson, "...fan activity in the United States is a very different kind of social activity, a site for creating and playing with distinctive modes of action" (2003:154). Fans from the U.S. construct a subculture creating 'markers of difference' by their participation in fan activities and interest, distinguishing them from the mainstream culture (Peterson 2003:134). Drawing on Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1996), theorists of fandom have examined the consumption of popular texts, such as television, magazines, or books, with regards to dominant cultural standards, or taste. For Brown, fan subcultures

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[1] Fansubs are translations and subtitling generated by fans.

[2] Information about various anime, manga, and other Japanese popular culture products are readily available online.

"challenge what the bourgeois have institutionalized as natural and universal standards of 'good taste'" (1997:18). Fan interest and enthusiasm in popular texts automatically associates them with 'bad taste', and their disregard for the aesthetic preferences of larger society presents a threat to cultural hierarchies (Brown 1997: 18; Jenkins 1992). Consumption of popular texts and the fan activities associated with them are denigrated by dominant culture. Moreover, fans are erroneously deemed uncritical consumers or "cultural dopes", who are unaware of the exploitative nature of the popular culture industry (Grossberg 1992:51). However, I would argue that although Japanese popular culture fans are indeed consumers, they have the capacity to discuss popular texts critically, and manipulate them beyond what the producers originally intended.

This thesis builds upon previous fan theory in order to examine a highly visible fan activity, *cosplay* (or "costume play"), that borrows directly from Japanese popular culture texts. Cosplayers craft homemade costumes based on favorite characters from manga, anime, or video games.[3] For cosplayers, whoever dresses 'best'— whether through creating an elaborate costume, selecting a popular character, or portraying the character well— impresses the most. Costumes are associated with cultural and symbolic capital. Clothing is "unavoidably implicated in a complex and elaborate system of symbolic exchange and power relations in which clothing, alongside a myriad of other modes of cultural capital goods…are the currency" (Keenan 2001:33). Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of taste, I investigate the conceptualizations of "good" and "bad" cosplay and how they relate to physical attributes, such as body size.

Furthermore, cosplayers in costume, just like individuals in everyday dress, are exposed to the "…social gaze while expressing something of—and only in part—who we are in our own eyes" (Keenan 2001:35). The character that cosplayers select can reflect an aspect of their

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[3] Cosplay consists predominantly of fan-created, handcrafted costumes, but due to the growing demand, cosplay stores have cropped up both on and offline to provide costumes and accessories.

identity. For example, a female cosplayer may choose to emphasize her attractiveness by dressing as a cute, flirty, or even erotic character. Clothes allow us to temporarily play with identity and self-image (Suthrell 2004:17). The particular personage selected can have implications for the cosplayer's personal identity and what he or she desires to communicate to others. Cosplay involves a high level of performance and cosplayers attempt to present their favorite anime characters or a fictional identity through dress, acts, and gestures. This thesis demonstrates some of the motivations for fans to participate in cosplay, the most crucial being the performance of an alternative persona.

Conventions provide a relatively safe environment for cosplayers to perform a different role. The activity is a spectacle that requires an audience for interpretation, and taps into the theoretical discussion of the performance of gender identity. Gender, according to Butler (1990), is performative because it has no original referent or origin. Gender identity is a process and a continual practice that produces an illusion of being 'natural'. Cosplayers reproduce and perform popular culture representations of Japanese gender norms. Performing an overtly feminine character, for example, may exaggerate aspects of a cosplayer's personality or fulfill curiosities about an alternate persona. Conversely, some cosplayers subvert dominant gender norms by cross-dressing and assuming an oppositely gendered persona. Using ethnographic methods, I investigate how cosplay in North America shapes fan identity while potentially subverting normative concepts of ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

After discussion of my ethnographic methods and theory related to fandom studies, I present how conventions are integrally tied to cosplay as performance. Through an interdisciplinary approach with a feminist theoretical lens, I investigate the social implications of 'good' and 'bad' cosplay, as indicated by my interviewees, and how cosplayers' decisions are informed by both mainstream and subcultural concepts of taste. Additionally, I will expand upon how conventions provide safe social spaces for temporary transgression of normative concepts of

gender and sexuality. Finally, I will discuss the stigmatization of cosplay and how conventions

and fandom become a space for the construction of identity and creative expression.

II. Fieldwork Sites

The majority of cosplay occurs at anime conventions, which offer ideal social spaces

because they provide an affirming audience. As part of my research, I attended four conventions

on the West Coast of North America in the summer of 2008: Sakura-con in Seattle, Washington

(March 28-30); Comic- Con International in San Diego, California (July 24-27); Anime

Evolution in Vancouver, British Columbia (August 22-24); and Kumoricon in Portland, Oregon

(August 30-September 1). These annual conventions attract fans from across North America

(United States, Canada, and Mexico) as well as other countries outside of the continent. Fans

register months in advance to secure their badges. Prices vary depending on the size of the

convention and the amount of days fan plans to attend[4]. Most fans travel far from home and

must arrange accommodations, which can be difficult to find as the event draws closer.

Accommodating the thousands and even hundreds of thousands of fans can translate to big

revenue for local hotels, restaurants, bars, and public transit. San Diego has hosted Comic-Con

International for nearly 40 years. The enthusiastic ways in which they welcome fans with

"Comic-Con specials" and superhero cosplay nights at bars, where servers dress up in order to

participate in the convention spirit, are evidence of how this annual event has become another

important source of revenue for local businesses.

Of the four conventions, Comic-Con International is not explicitly an anime convention.

The convention incorporates Japanese popular culture fandom alongside North American comic

book and video game culture, while acknowledging the influence of Japan on popular art forms

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[4] Kumoricon, the smallest of the four conventions charged $35 for an adult to attend the entire weekend. Comic-Con charged the highest registration fee of $75 for an adult four-day pass. Registration fees increase incrementally as the convention date draws near, in order to reward fans who secure their badges early.

in animation, comic books, and video games. As a result of Japanese influence on the video game industry, in particular, cosplay featuring Japanese video game characters is common. The convention also holds one of the largest cosplay contests, the Masquerade, which welcomes all types of fandom. Cosplayers who were not selected for the Masquerade, which accepts only 50 entries, were ubiquitous throughout the convention halls. Photo shoots are most commonly held in pre-determined locations, often outside of the convention center, to provide an opportunity for fans to take photographs of several characters at one time.

As a convention attendee, I was able to observe what my interviewees would call the 'convention experience,' which varied depending on the size and location of the convention. Comic-Con International, held at the massive San Diego Convention Center, was an intensely sensory experience. The expansive center was crowded with fans. With an attendance of 126,000 fans, there were long lines at most events, whether for a popular panel, badge pick-up, or even the restrooms. With such a number of people, the capacity of the convention center was tested and rumors circulated about the possibility that the convention would be moved to another facility. The convention center itself spanned multiple city blocks, which presented mobility and time issues for fans moving between events. The Dealer's Room, where businesses set up shop, was also connected to the Exhibition Hall where large corporations, such as major television networks and toy companies, set up colossal promotional sets. There was a constant roar of the thousands of fans attempting to make their ways through the crowds. In more popular sections, including those where exclusive goods were being sold for a short period of time or promotional 'freebies' were being passed out, fans were shoulder-to-shoulder, preventing easy movement through the crowd. For some, the convention experience can be 'sensory overload'. It presents the novelty of new commodities and people, as well as nonstop, back-to-back events. The convention environment creates a sense that 'time is of the essence', that an attendee may have to find ways to save time, even at the expense of their health (a good night's rest, regular meals,

adequate water, restroom breaks, etc.). Luck, or being 'in the right place at the right time'

factors into the experience. With so many fans attempting to 'do it all', for some, there is the

inevitable frustration and disappointment of being denied access to an at-capacity event after

waiting for hours in line. Comic-Con is rather like Disneyland, where families go for a particular

experience – walking long distances, waiting in lines, looking for opportunities to see celebrities,

and hoping to make 'magical' memories. Planning for maximum fun, as well as coordinating

family members with cellular phones or specific meeting points, is crucial. Guests at both

venues expect to find memorable souvenirs that cannot be found anywhere else. Nonetheless,

both of these experiences can test the stamina and patience of an individual who is there purely

for leisure and entertainment.

In contrast, Kumoricon, held at a hotel in Portland with an attendance of less than 4,500,

provided a drastically different convention experience. The hotel lobbies, conference rooms, and

outdoor spaces were appropriated for the weekend. Due to the relatively large attendance in such

a small space, the halls were crowded, which made travel between events difficult. The

convention staff members, although competent and friendly, were not nearly as efficient at

managing lines as the Comic-Con staff. The tone of the convention was much less hurried, as

fewer events and less prestigious guests were available during the weekend. As a result,

convention guests focused on attending several events, but still allocated time before and after

for socializing in the halls and in other less crowded spaces. Kumoricon's location also allowed

fans to venture beyond the hotel lobbies. The hotel is located near a mall with affordable

restaurants and a public park with well-manicured landscaping for impromptu pictures, cosplay,

group games, and respite from the crowds inside. Cosplay mainly occurred in the public park,

Holladay West Park, where groups posed for fan pictures and chatted with friends. Unlike

Comic-Con where fans were required to travel large distances in order to access the convention

center and affordable meals, Kumoricon offered convenience and a more casual convention environment that emphasized personal interaction with friends and fellow fans.

Anime Evolution, which has been held at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia since 1998, was held at the University of British Columbia in 2008. In order to accommodate all of the events and panels, the convention was broken up across campus. The majority of convention activities were held in the centrally-located Student Union Building; events included the Artist's Alley, the Anime Idol contest, cosplay chess, and other large capacity events. Academic panels, Q&A sessions, and other special interest talks were located in the lecture halls of the Buchanan complex. The Student Recreation Centre hosted the Dealer's Room on the basketball courts. Cosplay at the convention mirrored the organization of the campus, distant and broken up into sections.   Cosplay occurred mostly outside in the foyers of the Student Union Building, on the north and south sides. Additionally, I was inspired by four of my interviewees to attend photo shoots, which were held in various locations on campus. I attended the *Legend of Zelda*[5] shoot where cosplayers incorporated the landscape behind the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre in the Library Garden. The *Guilty Gear*[6] photo shoot, which featured my informants, took place at the base of the stairs at the rear of the Learning Centre. This was chosen by the participants to add a contextually-appropriate ambiance to the shot. Lastly, I attended the CLAMP[7] photo shoot, featuring characters from several CLAMP titles, which was set at the look-out point at the Rose Garden, with the mountains in the background. This spot was particularly scenic and iconic of the UBC campus, but not directly relevant to the

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[5] *Legend of Zelda* is a fantasy-themed adventure video game developed by Nintendo.

[6] *Guilty Gear* is a fighting video game developed by Arc Systems.

[7] CLAMP is the only group of all-female *mangaka* (manga artists), which originally started as a *dojinshi* (amateur fan comic) circle. The team created such popular *shojo* titles, manga written primarily for an adolescent female audience, as *Tokyo Babylon*, *X/1999*, *Cardcaptor Sakura*, and *Chobits*. Their most recent works include *Tsubasa: Reservoir Chronicles* and *xxxHolic*.

CLAMP universe. Overall, the convention tone was much like Kumoricon, as it had similar attendance numbers of around 4,500 guests.

III. Ethnographic Methods

As a part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I interviewed a total of 11 cosplayers from August to November 2008.[8] My chosen strategy for recruitment was to use the 'snowball' method to find other willing interviewees through a few initial informants. However, the actual process involved some referral as well as postings in public anime forums. My intention was to find cosplayers who were (or had in the past) attended the respective anime conventions and perform in-person interviews. However, in some cases, interviews were conducted by telephone out of convenience or logistical necessity. Interview duration varied widely; one interview lasted only 20 minutes and another approximately two and a half hours. Additionally, after each interview, I sent individualized follow-up questions via email in order to offer an additional opportunity for clarification or additional comments.

The majority of my interviewees were contacted through mutual acquaintances. My lengthiest in-person interview was with Angela (26), [9] whom a mutual friend contacted on my behalf. We initially communicated through email, and set up an interview for the day following my attendance at Kumoricon. The interview lasted over two hours at a local bookstore. Angela brought along her husband for the interview, which made my job as an interviewer interesting. I was attempting to record the statements of my informant, but unfortunately, her responses were frequently informed by her non-cosplayer husband's input.

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[8] In-person interviews: Liz, Skylee, Cory, and Nick (August 22); Mirah and Andrew (September 15); and Stacey (November 20). Phone interviews: Deborah (August 12), Rebecca (August 29), and Krista (September 14). Follow-up email corresponances: Liz (August 20), Angela (September 19), Mirah (September 24), Andrew (September 29), and Stacey (December 9).

[9] All of my cosplay interviewees are referred to by their first names, as was their expressed preference.

My largest group of interviewees agreed to an interview after receiving my contact card from an acquaintance. The four-person group of cosplayer roommates from Washington presented the greatest research challenge. As cosplayers are constantly busy at conventions, I was unable to perform a lengthy interview with Liz (20), Skylee (18), Cory (23), and Nick (18) in August 2008. Additionally, rainy weather conditions cut our outdoor interview short. They consented to follow-up questions through email, as they wanted to attend other indoor events. Although Liz was the only cosplayer from the group to respond to my follow-up, the email was a prime opportunity for clarification and additional response to the interview at the interviewee's convenience. Email follow-ups gave me an opportunity to ask questions that I did not have time to ask and allowed the interviewee extra time for consideration. In the case of Liz, I was able to ask her specific questions without input from her friends.

I met Krista (25) at Kumoricon while taking a break in the hotel lobby. Krista seemed to notice a few things about me that set me apart from other convention guests: my sitting on the outskirts with a pen and notepad in hand, my furious note taking, and my solitary state. After striking up a conversation, explaining my project, and discussing convention-relevant topics, we decided to have lunch together at a local restaurant. We spent most of the day together and Krista agreed to do a formal, telephone interview, which we planned to do after the convention ended. Although an in-person interview is most convenient for the researcher, cosplayers are attending for a specific purpose, to take part in the convention. And so, in Krista's case, a telephone interview at a later date was preferable.

My status as a student at the University of British Columbia definitely increased my chances for arranging interviews with local cosplayers. Through my participation in the Japanese language program at the university, I met Mirah (19), and I later encountered her at Sakura-con, where she cosplayed with several friends. At the convention, we ended up talking more about my project and attending the cosplay contest together. It was not until we both

attended Anime Evolution at UBC that Mirah agreed to a formal interview and invited her friend, Andrew (19). Via *Facebook*, an online networking site, we arranged a group interview. Another interviewee, Stacey (22), I met through an anthropology course. During a class discussion, my research topic was mentioned, which inspired Stacey to approach me about her participation in cosplay and crossplay (dressing up as an oppositely gendered character). Through *Facebook*, we shared pictures of our convention experiences and she consented to a formal interview at a campus coffee shop in November 2008.

The final interviewees, Deborah (18) and Rebecca (29), were recruited through the Internet. Deborah, a college freshman from Portland, OR, responded to a post advertising my research in a *Livejournal* (a blogging website) community specifically for Kumoricon guests. Deborah agreed to a telephone interview, as she was not able to meet at the convention. My second interviewee, Rebecca (29), a senior product manager for an online company, had participated in the Comic-Con Masquerade as part of a large group. She posted pictures in a *Livejournal* community for the convention and encouraged community members to leave any feedback at her personal cosplay website. Through her website's message system, I introduced myself and inquired about a potential interview with her. Rebecca agreed to a phone interview as she is currently located in Texas. Telephone interviews, although convenient for these cosplayers, presented particular challenges.

The Internet was crucial to the success of my interviews, as it played a role in meeting, communicating, and following up with all of the interviewees. As Landzelius aptly states in her ethnography, *Native on the Net*, the Internet "defeats distance" (2006:7). Japanese popular culture fandom can thrive online, because fans are connected instantly through websites, forums, and communities. Free and affordable webhosting services make online publishing accessible to amateurs aiming to create a fan or even a personal cosplay website to host images. Websites dedicated to cosplay, such as cosplay.com, cater to cosplayers across the world, providing

message boards, personal account profiles, and other methods for social networking. According to Landzelius, who addressed the potential for cyberactivism for indigenous individuals, "….the Internet offers not just a 'tool' but also a social environment for new articulations of identity" (Landzelius 2006:7). Fans rely on the Internet in order to maintain and develop their fan identity, and for access to a cohesive group that exists outside of real-life conventions.

The Internet presents interesting potential for anthropological inquiry in a virtual world. Beyond the relevant inquiry with respect to fan identity, Landzelius emphasizes the need to explore the ramifications of the Internet and indigenous identities: "Far less is known about the uses and experiences of ICTs (information-communication technologies) by groups decentered from dominant institutions and idioms. This is especially true for indigenous peoples, who have been long delegitimized by ruling cultural norms and isolated (economically, politically, geographically) from centers of influence" (Landzelius 2006:1). Anthropological methods will be challenged by the virtual, when investigating cyberspace as a field site: "…the field is here/there, everywhere/nowhere, perpetually open to immediate (re)visitation, and moreover poised to (re)visit us, the fieldworker" (Landzelius 2006:32). *Facebook* and other networking sites are a crucial aspect of communication amongst cosplayers and fans of Japanese popular culture. Email and *Facebook* provided an opportunity to maintain contact with my interviewees after our interviews, and allow easy access to my digital photographs of each convention. The Internet provides an additional field site to take into consideration when performing research with individuals who consider online participation a part of their identity. Although cosplay has a considerable online presence, I am not able to fully address the online component of fandom and cosplay in this thesis.

IV. Fandom Theory

Fans, short for "fanatics", are not just consumers. They are enthusiastic individuals who devote themselves to a given media text beyond mere consumption. The term 'fandom', combines *fan* and the affix *–dom* which alludes to an abstract entity or body of people; it refers to the collective group, community, or subculture of enthusiasts who share interest in a particular text. Celebrities, actors, writers, and other industry professionals can garner a fan following, but the majority of anime fans are concerned with imported Japanese popular culture, such as specific anime, manga, or video games. Mainstream society frequently denounces popular culture fans for their poor taste, targeting their seemingly misguided preference and gusto for inferior texts (Jenkins 1992).

Theorists have examined fans and fan activities utilizing Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of taste, in which society exists as a cultural system that generates a hierarchy of value. According to Brown (1997), a given cultural system allocates value to certain 'tastes' while devaluing others; tastes associated with the upper class are privileged. Dominant tastes are viewed as superior and are naturalized through institutions controlled by the ruling class (Brown 1997:14). Popular culture fans, however, devote an inordinate amount of time and energy to their favorite popular media texts. Therefore, "…fan cultures challenge what the bourgeois have institutionalized as natural and universal standards of 'good taste'" (Brown 1997:18). Quite simply, fans who deviate from 'good taste' are recognized as inferior and even threatening to the cultural system. "Fans and their subject of enthusiasm are necessarily looked down upon by the greater society because their aesthetic preferences amount to a disruption of, and threat to, dominant cultural hierarchies" (Brown 1997: 18).

Henry Jenkins also applies Bourdieu's concept of taste to fans: "Taste distinctions determine not only desirable and undesirable forms of culture but also desirable and undesirable ways of relating to cultural objects, desirable and undesirable strategies of interpretation and

styles of consumption" (Jenkins 1992: 16). Fan activities that are based on media texts but add or alter certain elements for effect, such as cosplay, fanfiction (stories based on a text), fan art, and amateur music videos (AMVs), thus stand as "… an open challenge to the 'naturalness' and desirability of dominant cultural hierarchies, a refusal of authorial authority and of violation of intellectual property" (Jenkins 1992:18). Fans who consume popular culture, not solely anime fans, are not only valuing media texts in 'poor taste', but they are also manipulating them for their own purposes.

A common criticism of fans is their role as 'uncritical consumers', individuals who cannot distinguish between good or poor taste, or comprehend that popular culture texts are intended solely for profit. Frequently, it is assumed that popular culture appeals to the least critical individuals in a given society, and this uncritical audience stands susceptible to manipulation and distraction from 'serious culture' and real-world concerns (Grossberg 1992). As Grossberg writes about dominant culture's opinion of fans, "The various forms of popular culture appeal to the audience's most debased needs and desires, making them even more passive, more ignorant and noncritical than they apparently already are. Fans are simply incapable of recognizing that the culture they enjoy is actually being used to dupe and exploit them" (1992: 51). From my interviews with anime cosplayers, and in various discussions with fellow convention attendees, it is evident that these popular culture consumers are not "cultural dopes". My findings support Grossberg's point that fans are "…often quite aware of their own implication in structures of power and domination, and of the ways in which cultural messages (can) manipulate them" (1992: 53).

Media texts are commodities that by their very nature are not considered to be unique art-objects. "They are thus open to the productive reworking, rewriting, completing and to participation in the way that a completed art-object is not" (Fiske 1992:47). Amongst a given fandom, some individuals "…actively appropriate the texts of specific popular cultures, and give

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them new original significance" (Grossberg 1992: 52). For example, they build costumes to portray their favorite characters and while assuming this fictional persona, perform actions that the character would not normally do. Fans of a television series can expand upon the canon (officially recognized plot) by writing amateur short stories — fanfiction. Others create AMVs (amateur music videos) featuring edited footage from an anime, set to a selected song to produce a particular emotion or implication beyond the canon. As Peterson writes, fans "… appropriate characters and settings, and use these as the bases for their own stories, which allow fans to explore meanings that go beyond, or add to, source texts controlled by producers" (2003: 155). Through altering and building upon media text, a fan can find "…a means of expressing one's sense of self and one's communal relation with others within our complex society. Individual fans and entire fan communities develop intimate attachments to certain forms of mass-produced entertainments that, for whatever reason, satisfy personal needs" (Brown 1997:13).

According to Grossberg (1992), an increasing number of people in advanced capitalist societies undergo a transition from mere consumer to fan. As he writes, within consumer culture "…[W]e seek actively to construct our own identities, partly because there seems to be no other space available…The consumer industries increasingly appeal to the possibilities of investing in popular images, pleasures, fantasies, and desires" (Grossberg 1992: 63). Where individuals previously invested time, energy, and resources in labor, religion, or politics, fandom can occasionally supersede these practices. Fandom also provides a means for constructing identity. "Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass cultural images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media" (Jenkins 1992: 23). American fans, in particular, have constructed a subculture, "…a group which sets itself off from the mainstream by particular markers of difference. The nature of difference is not marked as much by alternative codes of dress, linguistic register, or other forms of public display... " but in a myriad of expressive practices, such as costumes, fan art, and fanzines (fan

magazines) (Peterson 2003: 154). For some, participating in fandom sets them apart from others, a crucial component in their sense of individuality. To be a fan "…is to be interesting and different, not simply a 'normal' cultural consumer" (Jancovich 2002: 308).

In the introduction of De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), he explores the marginality of consumers, more generally, as the non-producers of culture who make up a 'silent majority'. He writes, "Marginality today is no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself" (1984: xvi).

Fan artists, cosplayers, and writers, in particular, attempt to articulate their concerns that go unvoiced by the dominant media. For instance, cosplayers frequently contest mainstream concepts of gender and sexuality, particularly through crossplay, where typically a female cosplayer dresses and acts as a male character. Moreover, fan culture is associated with "…the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly with those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race" (Fiske 1992:30). Thusly, anime conventions provide a supportive environment for individuals who are doubly marginalized by society: first for their disadvantaged socioeconomic position in society, and secondly for their consumption of Japanese popular culture products.

V. Anime Conventions

According to Leonard (2005), fans at conventions virtually started the anime industry in North America. With the introduction of the video cassette recorder (VCR), fans could share untranslated anime, primarily at science fiction conventions (Leonard 2005:282).   A vast underground network of fans was created and generated fan distribution outside of conventions.

"By 1990, fans started to 'fansub', or to translate and subtitle anime videos. Many fans started anime companies, becoming the industry leaders of today" (2005:282). The early anime companies relied on the pre-existing fanbase at science fiction conventions, and eventually anime conventions, in order to foster a growing consumer market that would generate profit. According to Jeffrey Brown, the convention is an important part of comic book fandom, a "point of entry into the social order of comic culture" (Brown 1997: 17). From my interviews with anime fans and cosplayers, the same can be said about anime culture. The convention "…is a place for fans to accumulate and demonstrate their cultural knowledge…It is the market place of fandom's cultural economics" (Brown 1997: 17).

Conventions primarily encourage and celebrate fandom through social interaction. Conventions offer the perfect setting for open and public celebration of fandom by hosting various events related to fan interests in a short amount of time. Panels are a universal feature of anime conventions, and can provide affirmation that others share the fans' love for a particular series or special interests, such as Asian ball-jointed dolls,[10] *Shonen*/*Shojo-ai* (boy-love or girl-love),[11] fanfiction, and improvisational storytelling. Q&A (Question and Answer) panels allow a limited number of fans to ask questions of celebrity guests, which generates interaction between the actors or creators and the public. These guests vary depending on the size of the convention; larger conventions in closer proximity to Hollywood tend to attract more prestigious celebrities and artists. For fans, conventions can provide a rare opportunity to meet fellow fans from distant locales and interact with individuals involved with their favorite series. Attending panels,

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[10] Asian ball-jointed dolls are referred to as ABJDs, BJDs, or "dolfies" after a famous Japanese company. They are customizable dolls with fully articulated joints and features highly influenced by anime aesthetic. They are sold in kits or assembled.

[11] *Shonen-ai* (boy love) and *shojo-ai* (girl love) describes the romantic, homosexual love between beautiful youths. These themes are frequently found in dojinshi (amateur) manga or in fanfiction, which may or may not be supported by the text's canon, or officially recognized plot.

particularly with famous guests, inevitably involves waiting in queue for hours (even 'camping' overnight). While waiting, most people keep tabs on the friends, family, and partners with whom they are attending the convention, typically by cell phone. Also, this downtime provides ample opportunities to strike up conversation with others. Cosplay, as a conspicuous marker of fandom, makes for easy conversations between fans. Conventions further facilitate the social aspect of fandom by hosting official meet-ups for various online communities, such as MMORPGs[12] and corresponding convention forums. Conventions can offer a safe, public environment for a casual, IRL (in real life) meeting with a fellow fan from online. Conventions even promote more 'adult' interaction by offering speed dating, Anime Dating games, Adult Fanfic bedtime stories, and room parties for mature attendees.[13]

The convention provides not only the chance to encounter fellow attendees with shared tastes, but encourages consumption and helps sustain Japanese popular culture industries. Dealers' Rooms feature a range of items from the popular or widespread to even slightly obscure anime, manga, video games, or even J-Pop (Japanese pop music) provided primarily by local comic book and import shops. Fans are frequently able to purchase items that might otherwise be difficult to obtain through import websites, either due to shipping costs from Asia, payment logistics, or language barriers. Although the Dealer's Room does not tout bargains or particularly low prices, the appeal for fans is the chance to find a unique item featuring a favorite character or special Japanese import goods. Local and online import stores rent space at the convention locale to set up booths. At Comic-Con, large companies, such as Mattel, ABC, Sony and others, display jumbo-sized, elaborate booths, and these exist beside booths representing independently owned shops. Products frequently sought after by female fans include 'plushies,'

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[12] MMORPG is an abbreviation for "massively multiplayer online role playing game". These games are computer-based role-playing games where a large number of players participate in a virtual world. Examples include World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy Online, and Everquest.

[13] Conventions offer events for mature (18+) audiences that may include overt sexual content, such as screenings of pornographic anime (*hentai*) or readings of more sexually explicit fanfiction. Dating games and parties often provide single fans opportunities to find romantic connections.

which are stuffed and typically the *chibi*[14] versions of popular characters, as well as other Japanese *kawaii* ('cute culture') items, such as key chains, school supplies, backpacks, and cell phone accessories. Male attendees frequently choose apparel, such as licensed t-shirts, hats, and messenger bags, as well as figurines and action figures. Figures are of varying quality and theme, including figurines requiring assembly and even erotic female models for adult fans. Other items offered include costume pieces for casual cosplay, animal stocking hats, cat ears, collectible toys, coin banks, stickers, and art posters.

Consumption of 'Japaneseness' is a prominent feature in the Dealer's Room. Import shops and Asian grocery stores offer booths filled with popular Japanese drinks, candy, chocolates, and snacks[15] alongside shelves of DVDs, manga, fashion and lifestyle magazines, art books, *yukata* (summer kimono), *geta* (wooden sandals), *tabi* (split-toed socks associated in the West with ninja), paper fans, and decorative weapons (*katana* swords, *nunchaku*). Conventions also acknowledge the Japanese origin of anime by providing events that feature more traditional or authentic Japanese culture, such as origami, Aikido (traditional martial art), tea ceremonies, karaoke, *kabuki* (Japanese theater), ParaPara (a popular dance craze, comparable to the Macarena), Japanese baseball, *go* (board game) tutorials, and Japanese beer and sake tastings. Panels are also offered for fans interested in interacting with 'real life' Asians through info sessions about teaching abroad in Japan and even about the experience of being Asian in America. Kumoricon in Portland offered the "Asia in America" panel in their programming guide: "Meet the Asian guests of Kumoricon as they'll take on anything and everything you

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[14] *Chibi* in Japanese refers to a diminutive size, or the smaller, junior version of a character. The Super Deformed or SD is a type of caricature that exaggerates a character's body proportions to render them more childlike.

[15] Snacks and drinks found at the convention seem to cater to North American tastes or offer Japanese products popular due to their presence in anime or manga. Booths provided, for example, fruit gummies, Pocky (chocolate-dipped biscuit sticks), and canned coffee. Pocky in particular can be found at Western supermarket chains in the "Asian" or "International" food aisle.

might wonder about growing up as an Asian in America. Asian Stereotypes? How to date an Asian? You can find out the answers to the questions you've always been too afraid to ask in this free form panel hosted by The Slants" (Kumoricon Guide 2008: 19).

Conventions also provide a space for displaying creativity, especially through sponsored contests and Artist's Galleries. Nearly all conventions have an established cosplay and amateur music video (AMV) contest where fans can enter their work. Fan artists and AMV creators can submit their works to the convention for non-competitive display in Artist's Galleries and AMV viewing rooms. Additionally, events also incorporate fans' storytelling, improvisational, and acting skills through various games and Live Action Role Playing (LARP) sessions. The most conspicuous and common medium is through cosplay. Most cosplayers do not enter the cosplay contests due to the additional effort with coordinating skits, the entry process, and necessity for planning in advance. A high proportion of cosplay is displayed in the convention halls and in coordinated photo shoots.

Conventions also provide an opportunity for fans to explore and start an artistic career. Conventions frequently host 'How to' panels on a wide range of topics, including artistic techniques (character design, animation cel artwork, drawing), business models (writing a pitch, creating your own low-budget animation studio), skill development (storytelling, computer programs, website building) and even art law (licensing, trademarks). 'How to' panels instruct attendees on a variety of useful topics and generate interest in the industry. Fans can improve their computer program knowledge, get tips on voice acting, and receive advice on writing plots. These sessions are intended to inspire and generate discussion about techniques. Depending on the moderator and guests, the 'how to' can be a hands-on panel with practical information.

Conventions provide an opportunity for aspiring artists to network and to size up their career potential. Professional guests from various industries attend conventions to not only promote their work, but also to inform fans about how they achieved their position, and to offer

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hope to individuals aspiring to a similar job. Attending these tutorial and Q&A panels can provide inspiration for fans to use their creative abilities or other skills to support their industries of interest. Individuals have an opportunity to research the job market and the skills necessary for their ideal position. With the advent of the Internet, more and more artists have an opportunity to share their artwork through free websites and even hosted webspace, which may increase their likelihood of finding employment in the art industry. Although the opportunities for individuals looking to get into the art industry is frequently positively portrayed, particularly at Comic-Con, the reality for most artists is that they are still waiting for their 'big break' or seeking opportunities to engage their creative abilities. Participants resort to a wide range of means to promote themselves. For instance, I encountered a group of young female art students who had created a comic book and tried to make contacts by giving out their books and contact information. Conventions provide prime social networking opportunities for fans, including cosplayers seeking out other individuals with a common interest.

VI. Cosplay

Cosplayers express their fandom through costuming and performing characters from Japanese popular culture texts at anime conventions.[16] Cosplay does not explicitly exclude anyone based on age, size, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. According to my interviewees, anyone can cosplay. However, at the four conventions I attended, cosplayers were most frequently young, Caucasian women between the ages of 18 and 30. Young men of the same age also participated, but in relatively smaller numbers. Cosplay participants reflected the broader convention demographics, as the majority of convention attendees were in this age category. Those older than 30 or so were less visible, but some older convention attendees sported

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[16] Cosplay occasionally includes Western characters, particularly with video game fandom, as the two industries do not seem to be expressly differentiated in my observations.

costumes or dressed up in fandom-related fashion.[17] Cosplayers were more likely to attend the convention with another friend or a group of friends in costume, sometimes coordinating costumes. For instance, a group of four young, college-aged women that I met at Comic-Con planned coordinated costumes for each of the five days at the convention. Other fans coordinate costumes with their friends or partners to represent their relationships. Fans would dress up as male characters from a favorite series that they envisioned would have a non-canonic romantic relationship in order to suggestively pose and elicit affirmation from other fans. Older, frequently heterosexual couples, dressed as paired characters that also reflected their possible intimacy, such as Shrek and Fiona from the *Shrek* films, or Joker and Harlequin from *Batman*. In the case of one couple that dressed as Ryu and Chun Li from the *Street Fighter* series, their costume choice seemed to highlight their interracial union, particularly the wife's Asian ethnicity and attractive figure. Overall, cosplayers at the conventions I attended on the West Coast reflected larger population demographics of the respective American states or Canadian province. Cosplayers were predominantly Caucasian, with Asian ethnicities as the next largest group. At Anime Evolution in Vancouver, British Columbia, in particular, the number of Asian cosplayers seemed to correlate with the local demographics. Black and Hispanic cosplayers were uncommon at all four conventions. English was the main spoken language at each convention while most of the anime was shown in Japanese with English subtitles.

In spite of the limitations and potential social consequences that inform a fan's costume choice, cosplayers love their hobby. Several interviewees did not discover cosplay until they had attended a convention for the first time, and witnessed other fans dressed up as their favorite characters. Often, they are supported or influenced by friends to dress up specifically for the

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[17] Convention attendees also wore alternative fashion, such as fantasy (fairy wings, pirate inspired attire), Gothic (black clothing, corsets), and steampunk clothing. Steampunk fashion is informed by a subgenre of fantasy and science fiction that envisions an era of steam power and Victorian technology.

convention. For most, cosplaying is a vital part of the convention experience. For Rebecca, cosplay is essential for "expressing her fandom", and she wants to wear the costumes of particular characters because they are elaborate. Skylee finds cosplay enjoyable, an easy "way to make friends." From a technical standpoint, cosplay is an opportunity to engage in interests or skills that would otherwise not be a significant part of the cosplayer's daily life, such as sewing, wig making, acting, or dressing up in elaborate costumes. Cosplayers revel in the challenge of making a costume by hand, or with some found objects. Liz loves the prop-making aspect. She has no professional experience, but loves crafting and experimenting with materials and techniques. Both Deborah and Stacey create their own wigs. For Andrew, he enjoyed "getting all the pieces of the costume" at various second-hand stores. Angela, who has a background in costuming and has created special orders for a local costume shop, enjoys the creation process quite a bit more than the performance aspect. She spends a great deal of time getting every detail of the costume accurate, even down to the fabric texture. Angela enjoys having her picture taken, but feels the performance is the icing on the 'cosplay cake'. For all my interviewees, there's a certain level of pride for them to successfully create and perform as their favorite characters. This publicly displays their fandom, commitment, skills, and enthusiasm.

For a few of my interviewees, cosplay also entails a degree of role-playing or being 'in character' and the subsequent attention as a result. Mirah enjoys cosplay because she can be a character she admires for a day, as well as the attention she gets for dressing up. According to her, "You get phone numbers." Krista, similarly, sees cosplay as "a little pretend world" that reminds her of playing dress-up. She also reported that her maid outfit at Kumoricon earned her compliments from fans, and even the admiration of a male stranger on the street. Considering the time, money and effort devoted to cosplay, compliments are well-earned. Moreover, Stacey feels more confident in costume, which makes her feel as if she can act differently. When she is playing another character, such as Sora from *Kingdom Hearts*, she feels more secure to interact

and enjoy the convention. As Stacey put it, cosplay is like "Halloween at anytime of the year". Cosplay can provide a safe place to temporarily set aside inhibitions under an assumed identity.

My interviews with cosplayers indicated that their favorite fan activity is kept alive by anime conventions. Although cosplay happens in private circles of friends, and in cosplay and anime clubs, the practice thrives because of conventions which provide an ideal venue and related consumer goods. However, Krista informed me that she enjoys dressing up, with friends or by herself, in various costumes for photo shoots outside of the convention times. She described how she and a close female friend dressed up in formal Japanese kimono for pictures at a local Japanese garden in her hometown. Krista was unique amongst my interviewees, as all the other cosplayers rarely cosplayed outside of the convention setting. It does, however, sometimes happen: Stacey and her friends have dressed up in their costumes for impromptu, late-night cups of hot chocolate at White Spot (Canadian restaurant chain). Jokingly, Stacey mentions her late-night, public cosplay as "terrorizing the mundanes". Moreover, cosplayers, like Rebecca, forge lasting relationships with club members, as she did with her *Sailor Moon* cosplay group that frequently cosplayed together in college. For some cosplayers, the act of dressing up is not reserved solely for public display, but for most, cosplay is most frequently done in public with friends.

Despite some cosplayers' casual public displays, cosplay is first and foremost a social activity that has developed alongside anime conventions. For practical reasons (mobility, adjusting costumes, checking makeup) and because fans do not frequently attend conventions alone, it is generally not performed by a sole individual. Conventions provide a space for people to display costume-making skills to a receptive audience, thus affirming fandom, and even gaining prestige through official contests.

While public performance is central to cosplay, many of my interviewees spend extensive time and energy on creating costumes. The topic of costume selection generated conflicting

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discussion amongst my cosplayer interviewees. Most cosplayers choose a costume from a favorite series. In addition to devoting a significant amount time and energy to planning and making the costume, the cosplayer must have enthusiasm for the character. For some, their decisions are informed by practical concerns. Krista, who purchases all of her costumes and accessories, chooses outfits that she likes, such as a kimono or French maid's uniform, but still takes cost into consideration. Stacey chooses a character she likes, but emphasizes that a costume should be simple to make without help and something she knows she'll be comfortable in. Other cosplayers strategically pick characters to highlight their skills and downplay other elements about their costume. Deborah describes her participation as "ghetto cosplay", because she doesn't have a lot of skills, money, or time to invest. Deborah picks characters based on their hair, which emphasizes her ability as a wigmaker. Her recent costume was a female character from *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, which featured an elaborate hairstyle with a much simpler costume. This emphasized her talent and interest without overburdening her with the clothing details.

Often a group of cosplayers may depend on the skill of a member or a related individual for help with constructing costumes. In an interview with four cosplayer friends and roommates at Anime Evolution, I asked Liz, Skylee, Nick, and Cory how they decide on their costumes for conventions. Liz admitted that she has the most sewing skills and was frequently relied on for her knowledge to create Cory's costume. She cosplays a character from a video game that she is currently playing, but considers the time, money, and the level of skill necessary to make the costume. Cory prioritizes characters that he is fond of and that "you don't normally see" at conventions, and completes his costumes with help from Liz. Skylee takes into consideration the challenge of the creation process, but also the theme of her group of friends and how her costume will fit in. The remaining group member, Nick, also considers the group, but ultimately chooses a character that he admires for their "bad ass-ery". In group cosplaying, several factors influence

decision-making about what costumes are chosen, and in order to complete several costumes, frequently an individual with stronger construction skills is relied on for a good finished result.

For other cosplayers, the selection process is clearly more about expressing fandom than technical costume design. Rebecca picks a costume that she likes, but more recently, has come to rely on others for creating the costume. At the 2008 Comic-Con Masquerade, she performed a skit with a large cosplay group but did not contribute to any of the construction as she was performing as a last-minute request. In the past, Rebecca has chosen to cosplay characters that she relates to — strong females — such as Mulan from Disney's animated film, Chun Li from *Street Fighter*, Shiranui Mai from *King of Fighters*, and Tifa from *Final Fantasy*. She also favors characters with impressive costumes, such as Padme from *Star Wars: Episode II*. Mirah prioritizes a character that she likes and that she thinks she can "pull off". Her friend, Andrew, was willingly persuaded to dress up as the Joker from *The Dark Knight* and said that he loved the movie. Andrew emphasized, "Don't assume that a cosplay is only a costume!" Cosplay, ultimately, is about expressing one's affection for one's series or a particular character.

As cosplay is based on fan enthusiasm, a convention will see several cosplayers dressed as the same character from popular series. At all the conventions I attended, the anime series *DeathNote* and *Naruto* had by far the most cosplayers. There were also many fans dressed in Japanese school uniforms, which may or may not be associated with a particular series. Without asking the cosplayer, I could not determine whether or not they were dressed as a generic "schoolgirl" or "high schooler". Other costumes were prevalent due to recent film and video game releases, including games for the most popular consoles. With long-running series, it is difficult to distinguish if a cosplayer is specifically inspired due to an upcoming, recent, or past release.

Some popular cosplay characters may potentially be selected because the character's costume is much simpler than others. For male cosplayers, cosplay could merely involve

purchasing a *gi* (and dyeing it the specific color, if necessary) and amassing the few appropriate accessories in order to create several characters from the series, *Street Fighter*. Although it is indeed a popular video game series, the characters present an inexpensive and comfortable costume option. Cosplay, ultimately, is about fandom and without specifically inquiring about a cosplayer's motivation for selecting that particular costume, I cannot be sure that costume difficulty level was the primary factor.

Although cosplay is inspired by a fan's enthusiasm, cosplayers have a clear concept of both 'good' and 'bad' cosplay. For nearly all of my informants, the costume quality, accuracy, and detail are important. For Angela, a self-proclaimed detail-oriented cosplayer, striving for perfection is her goal when creating her costume. She researches the character, and finds official character art created for the series. She chooses quality fabrics, and makes great efforts in order to get every element right. Similarly, Liz emphasized attention to detail: "I think details can really make or break a costume, or could really add to one, especially with simpler costumes". Stacey, another cosplayer who prioritized costume details, claimed in jest that cosplayers had "better get it down to the last button". She appreciates the effort individuals put into costumes for the sake of accuracy and attention to detail and recognizes when cosplayers use quality materials. Rebecca also insisted that accuracy is crucial for crossplay, and particularly with males who dress as female characters. She was absolutely impressed by a male crossplayer who went to great lengths, including body hair removal and wearing hosiery, in order to portray Lulu from *Final Fantasy*. Rebecca was unable to recognize the cosplayer's sex as male until she conversed with him at the convention.[18] For her, that was an amazing costume. Mirah concisely voiced her opinion about cosplay accuracy: "If you're not going to cosplay as close as you can – don't cosplay". Accuracy, being true to the character, is paramount for good cosplay.

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[18] Crossplay is a type of cosplay where a cosplayer dresses and acts as a character of the opposite gender. This will be addressed in more detail below.

Accuracy is not only in the details of the costume, but also in the physical attributes of the cosplayer. Krista articulated that cosplay involves becoming the "best possible version of the character", which entails physically resembling the character and being a 'realization' of a fictional entity. Cosplayers aim to make the most precise, most 'real' costume. The epitome is making a realization of a fictional character. Cosplayers are attempting to realize fictional characters with unrealistic proportions, the realization of the entity is not always successful. Anime characters are created in an idealized aesthetic that is not based on reality; achieving accuracy is difficult without having similar proportions. Some female cosplayers find it necessary to temporarily alter their bodies through hosiery, shape wear, padded bras, and hair removal. Cosplayers strive to become these characters, even acting 'in character' while in costume, and strive to experience the world through the character's eyes. When I asked cosplayers about how much room exists for innovation, most replied that there is some flexibility with aspects as long as they fit within what is deemed "acceptable," or something that the character would possibly choose. Although the range of 'acceptable' innovation is subjective and vague at best, utilizing canon or official art remains ideal. However, innovation can be artfully used if a cosplayer cannot accurately realize a character or 'pull it off', as most of my interviewees would say. Stacey innovated on a character's costume from *Air Gear*, a shonen manga, which featured a plunging neckline created by only partially zipped coveralls. In order to be comfortable and tastefully perform, Stacey decided to zip the coveralls much higher, sacrificing absolute accuracy for taste. Although cosplayers' decisions are informed by normative notions of tastefulness, the primary motivation for performing this activity is pleasure.

Taste is a subjective concept that dominates discourse about good or bad cosplay. All my interviewees insisted that cosplay can be enjoyed by anyone. Liz wrote to me in a follow up email: "[I]t's important to know that cosplay is for everyone. All walks of life have managed to become a part of this hobby. A cashier at a grocery store, a desk clerk at a hotel, a construction

worker, a security guard, a teacher, a frat boy; any of these people could be wandering around at a convention in costume a few times a year." Cosplay, by nature, does not explicitly exclude fans from diverse backgrounds. Individuals of all genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes participate in the hobby. However, taste dictates to varying extent the available characters for a given cosplayer based on their outward appearance. For Mirah and Andrew, good taste is intertwined with costume and body accuracy. Mirah insisted: "You must suit the character". Andrew advised that cosplayers should wear something that is in their "league" and that flatters the person's body type. Rebecca also emphasized that a costume should be flattering, taking construction into consideration with the cosplayer's figure. My discussions with cosplayers about bad costumes yielded a complex discourse that involved two senses of aesthetic style, that of fan subculture and of the dominant culture. Although cosplayers were dressing up in costumes that were conceived by mainstream culture to be in 'poor taste' and therefore in tension with dominant cultural norms, some aspects of cosplay aesthetics are still determined by mainstream notions of acceptable dress.

Although most of my interviewees were hesitant to criticize fellow cosplayers, the majority had strong opinions about what 'bad cosplay' constituted. Krista, in contrast, stated that there is "no bad cosplay" because it is intended for fun. Still, cosplayers as a group face criticism from individuals in dominant society and even potentially from other fans at conventions. It seems that cosplayers already feel a degree of denigration by other individuals because of their means of expressing their fandom, particularly on the Internet. Online communities can be highly critical about pictures published online, and cosplayers are not immune to such cruelty. Cosplay, particularly when done poorly, with low-quality materials, without construction skill, or even when done by someone who is not considered attractive, can be considered humorous to onlookers in public or online after the convention. According to Stacey, there is an unspoken rule about cosplay that an individual practically releases the rights

to their image by verbally consenting to having his/her photograph taken; cosplayers have no control over the image after the photo has been taken and the fan walks away. Most cosplayers accept that their picture will be posted online, either on personal websites, social networking sites (*Myspace*, *Facebook*), or discussion forums. The potential for defamation of a cosplayer's sense of dignity is quite real.

Convention policies strictly determine where photographs are allowed to be taken, particularly with respect to events or screenings that would present copyright issues. The policy of cosplayer and other con attendees is much less strict. For instance, Kumoricon policy states that, "[T]aking photographs and videos is allowed in most public areas of the convention. However, specific events, panels, or areas may restrict photography. Please respect the wishes of anybody who asks not to be photographed or video recorded" (Kumoricon Guide 2008: 5). In the Comic-Con Events Guide, rules are specifically dictated for the Masquerade, restricting the use of cameras and where the images may ultimately be used. It states: "All photographs and recordings of the show are for personal, non-profit use only and may not be offered for sale or used for commercial purposes…" (Comic-Con Event Guide 2008: 10). Similarly, at Sakura-con, "Photography of all other aspects of the convention is allowed, as long as it does not disrupt events or the flow of traffic, and the subject does not object. Please be considerate and ask first before taking pictures of guests or other Members, or the general public." (Sakura-con Con Guide 2008: 51). Most convention guides publish policies about photography performed by convention staff. Thus the Kumoricon Con Guide indicates: "Consent to Photography- Any photographs or videos of attendees taken by Kumoricon staff in an official capacity may be used or published by Kumoricon without further consent of the attendees being recorded" (5: 2008) Convention organizers write policies in order to protect their own self-interest. They seek to stay out of trouble with copyright laws and also gain access to images for future programs. When registering and paying for convention badges, application forms universally feature legal

agreements to adhere to convention policy. Some forms, in the fine print, also compel attendees through their attendance, to allow convention staff unrestricted use of their images.

As with copyright issues over photography, conventions also seek to control the range of attire attendees might wear. For example, Anime Evolution reserves the right to, "deem a costume unacceptable and request the wearer to make modifications as necessary" (Convention Guide 4: 2008). Anime Evolution describes itself as a family-friendly event and thus, it dictates that "all costumes should abide by common rules of decency. Please be considerate" (Convention guide 4: 2008) As conventions are meant to be a public event for all ages, local, state or provincial laws still apply for cosplayers, but enforcement of their policies vary. During Sakura-con, a cosplayer potentially stepped over the line with her costume. She was dressed as Felicia, a monstrous cat-girl character from the fighting game, *Darkstalkers/Night Warriors*. The official art portrays Felicia as 'clothed' in her cat-fur, with strips of white fur strategically covering her humanoid torso and large breasts, as well as her genitals in a French-cut bikini formation of fur. Her other signature features are oversized paws, long tail, and cat ears that peek out of her large mane of blue hair. This cosplayer did not choose to innovate on the costume by wearing hosiery or support of any kind, but also did not invest time in making the 'fur bikini' portion of her costume. While all the other elements where there – blue wig, fur attached in the accurate places on the torso – she chose ultimately to attach the tail to a pair of white, thin cotton panties. Codes of decency may have been threatened by her choice, but this fan also epitomized what my informants considered 'bad cosplay'. Convention codes reaffirm the state or provincial decency laws, but also add a request for the use of 'common sense' or taste. In order to assure that other convention guests can enjoy a family-friendly environment, some cosplayers have to reign in their creativity and exhibitionism or choose a different costume altogether.

After initial hesitation to criticize fellow cosplayers, most of my informants felt comfortable discussing what generally makes a bad costume. All of my informants emphasized making efforts to convey accuracy. Krista, the most reluctant to offer criticism, indicted that a bad costume is when the cosplayer "doesn't really look like the character", or if the character cannot be recognized by fans. More experienced cosplayers, like Stacey and Mirah, readily provided other examples of cosplay faux pas: poorly styled hair or wigs, unfinished seams, ill-fitting costumes, wearing sneakers instead of the accurate footwear, poorly modified found objects (butchered sweatpants and t-shirts), bad props, wrong fabric, cheap materials, and bad color choices for the cosplayer's complexion. Much like mainstream fashion, there are general rules of thumb that guide decision-making for cosplayers.

An unmistakable aspect of the discourse about bad cosplay pertains to the physical body, whether it is a cosplayer's size or outward appearance. A bad costume does not flatter one's figure, is ill-fitted (too tight or too loose), or transgresses mainstream concepts of appropriate dress. Cosplay, especially for females, can entail rather revealing, unpractical, and racy outfits, as a lot of Japanese popular culture contains sexualized female characters. As anime, manga, and video games tend to have fantastical designs that were never intended to be realized and worn on a real person, costumes can push the envelope with regards to convention policy of 'common decency'. Mirah commented in our interview that cosplay is not intended as "an excuse for women to wear next to nothing". Andrew, in the same joint interview, responded about a female cosplayer he had seen at a convention wearing a skimpy costume, and who was not enjoying her experience. He advised: "If you wouldn't be comfortable wearing it in 'normal' situations, it is probably not too flattering on you." Racy costumes are only sexy when they are executed in the correct way: on an individual with an already attractive body, with the right costume, and with the right attitude. For Andrew, bad cosplay is "when people decide to be someone completely out of their league". Stacey shared an excellent concept during our

interview, the "common sense filter", which most of my interviewees seemed to indirectly allude to. Cosplay still requires common sense in order to generate good results.

A cosplayer's body proportions, and ethnicity, can either contribute to good or bad cosplay. With regards to body size, a slender or petite female cosplayer will automatically produce better cosplay of a similarly proportioned character. Individuals with larger body proportions invariably face the same judgment in cosplay as they do with mainstream clothing, as 'common sense' and accuracy still guide cosplayers in the selection of costumes. Additionally, when discussing how body size and ethnicity potentially limit a fan's costume options, Stacey stated: "I don't think it should. For some people, it does." Ethnicity and body type or size do matter, but to varying degree among my interviewees. Several interviewees discussed how in Japanese popular culture ethnicity is, for the most part, ambiguous. Characters have stylized features that do not distinctly demarcate Japanese ethnicity, even though Japanese is the spoken language. Characters are not limited to realistic physical attributes; some individuals have blue, green, or pink hair, unnatural proportions reminiscent of a Barbie doll, or abnormally large breasts for their frame. Most characters representing a 'normal' Japanese youth in Japanese popular culture series tend to reflect idealized Asian bodies; female characters have petite frames, slender figures and immaculately styled hair, and males have athletic builds, unblemished skin, and perfect grooming. Interviewees recognize the ambiguous ethnicities depicted in anime, manga, and video games, which make skin color less relevant to cosplay. According to Mirah, "You don't have to be Japanese or Asian to cosplay, but it may help with the authenticity". Ethnicity may help with characters that are obviously from Japan, or where series canon clearly states their nationality. On the other hand, black characters in anime are often hyperbolically portrayed with distinct characteristics, such as large lips, dreadlocks, and afros, but their physical traits are not always blatantly associated with a nationality or specific ethnic origins. For black North Americans, 'accuracy' in cosplay is invariably reduced unless

they are portraying a specifically black or dark-skinned character. Ethnicity, according to my

interviewees, does not automatically exclude any fans from participating, but being the correct

ethnicity can contribute to higher quality cosplay.

VII. Cosplay, Identity, and Gender

Cosplay publicly reflects one's identity, as a person and as a fan. According to Lloyd

(1999), gender is a crucial component of identity, and humans understand themselves as

gendered. However, gender is naturalized. "Gender is performative. It does not express what one

is, but something that one does. It is expressed through repetition of acts over time" (Lloyd

1999:196). As we have seen, concepts of gender, size, and ethnicity inform a cosplayer's

selection of costume. Cosplayers also take into account gestures, poses, and facial expressions

of their character in order to perform the role more accurately. Butler writes that "bodily gestures,

movements, and styles constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 1990:139).

Through the temporary appropriation of actions, style, and comportment, cosplayers can perform

oppositely gendered characters to the admiration of fellow fans. Convention cosplayers,

nevertheless, can safely transgress normative concepts of gender in the safe social space of the

convention.

Outside of cosplay, themes of alternative gender and sexuality are common at anime

convention, as *yaoi* persists as a popular theme in fandom, particularly amongst young female

fans. Yaoi is a fictional genre used in several media that features exclusively homosexual male

love. Yaoi texts (manga, fanfiction, drawings, etc.) are created and intended to be consumed by

women. This theme arose in Japan in the mid-1970s and continues to be popular. Initially, the

term was used to refer to the *shonen-ai* themes in *dojinshi*, or amateur manga created by fans, but

the term has broadened in meaning. Yaoi has been popular with Japanese female audiences for

decades, and Fujimoto asserts:

> …not only have girls broadly accepted male homosexual love, but they have actively chosen it as the means for their own self-expression. These *yaoi* narratives overflow with sex to an unprecedented degree. By separating 'sex' from their own bodies and borrowing young men's bodies instead, young women have succeeded in freely manipulating 'sex'. *Shonen-ai* has made it possible for young women to 'play with sex' (Fujimoto 2004:86).

Through the male characters, female fans can safely experience sex without the restrictions associated with 'femaleness', particularly reproduction and passivity. Yaoi fandom, which was present at all four of the conventions I attended, seems to have inspired fans to look beyond mainstream gender dichotomies, and become enthusiastic (even if problematically) about alternative concepts of sexuality. According to Fujimoto, yaoi is criticized by real life male homosexuals, as the characters are "fundamentally the alter egos of young women" (Fujimoto 2004:86). The characters are in male bodies, but with the sensibilities, emotions, and logic of young females, which does not accurately represent the real lived experiences of homosexual men.

Also, fans can explore sexuality by 'borrowing' another gender in cosplay. A less common version of cosplay is 'crossplay', where an individual cosplays a character of the opposite sex. In some theoretical respects, crossplay is like drag, which "…is a cultural practice that parodies the belief in an original/primary gender identity…By disclosing that there is no original to imitate, drag denaturalizes, divulging the culturally fabricated nature of gender. It reveals all gender as only ever parody" (Lloyd 1999:198). Crossplay, on the one hand, is parodic and reveals the rigid, culturally-constructed nature of gender, but on the other hand, some crossplayers are performing drag performances for the sake of remaining "true" to the character. Japanese popular culture commonly features male characters with more feminine features and frequently these characters are selected by fans for yaoi fan activities. Therefore, it encourages female cosplayers to portray male characters. Overall, according to my interviewees, it is more common that females crossplay male characters, and relatively few males crossplay as females. According to Stacey: "I think a lot of girls can pull it off, and look good doing it because of

anime's typical appearance of the '*bishounen*'[beautiful, youthful males], and really, I've only

ever seen 'cute' or 'metro' males playing a character and thought, 'wow. They look really

good.'" Stacey explains that most men are too masculine to play the typical Japanese anime

protagonist, a slightly effeminate (according to Western standards) youth. For her, some

characters look "…better played by a woman, or an effeminate male, than a 'manly-man'." As

with cosplay, crossplay is dictated by the same rules of aesthetics and 'good taste'.

The appeal for cosplayers varies, but for Stacey, who has crossplayed Sora from

Kingdom Hearts several times, including at Anime Evolution in 2008, the main motivation is the

costume design:

> I enjoy crossplay because I'm more comfortable in most things that male anime/video game
> characters are dressed in. For the most part, I find females tend to be dressed in fairly skimpy
> outfits, or things that I know I would not be comfortable wearing for an entire day. I think also a
> lot of shows I watch or enjoy hav[e] a male dominated 'cast', and so any character that I like from
> that show is going to be male. If I try to think of something that appeals to me…I guess it comes
> right down to the outfits. Male characters have better looking outfits that don't require you to
> expose yourself.

Overall, she thinks that women are more comfortable with crossplay and engaging in "fan

service" than men. Fan service typically involves suggestive photographs between given

characters that cater to fan desires, frequently for homoerotic pairings. A large portion of

popular anime, manga, and video games have corresponding yaoi fandoms. Yaoi fiction writers,

in particular, have taken advantage of the ambiguity of relationships in anime in order to create

their own pairings, and even re-invent more obvious, canon-sanctioned ones. For female yaoi

fans, the appeal of shonen-ai themes lies in their ability to identify with either the 'top' or the

'bottom' in a relationship, instead of being automatically relegated to the passive role. Crossplay

offers the opportunity for fans to choose to overcome naturalized gender roles.

When crossplayers perform, the actors are portraying an oppositely gendered character.

Crossplayers could choose to portray a homosexual pairing, but the relationship is between the

fictional characters and not the actors themselves. Stacey also suggested that crossplayers who

identify as heterosexual could potentially experiment with their own sexuality through role-playing as an opposite gendered/sexed and homosexual character. Although conventions provide a safe space for crossplayers to transgress normative concepts of gender, my interviewees warned that crossplay does not directly correlate to cross-dressing outside of the convention.

As mentioned above, size is crucial to making a costume "perfect" or creating a genuine simulacrum, for both men and women. However, males and females do not have equivalent character options. Males, overall, have less diverse characters to choose from. Popular male body types in anime tend to fall into three categories: tall with lean build, average height with a normal frame, and tall with bulky, developed muscles. The tall and lean frame is very popular, particularly amongst female yaoi (boy love) fans, as slender frames epitomize the bishonen style. Sephiroth from the *Final Fantasy* series is a commonly cosplayed bishonen. More 'average' build characters are frequently found in *shonen* (boy's comics) or *seinen* manga (for males ages 18-30) that feature a single, normal, Japanese male who, comically, winds up with multiple relationships with females quite suddenly and has troubles coping. Some fans refer to these types of stories as 'harem' manga. A favorite character from a popular anime portrayed at conventions this year is Alex Louis Armstrong (*Full Metal Alchemist*), a muscular yet irrationally emotional source of comic relief in the anime. Armstrong resembles early bodybuilders from the turn of the twentieth century, mostly for his hairstyle (bald except for a single, blonde curl in front) and subdued handlebar moustache. Overall, female interviewees felt that size may not matter as much with male cosplayers, as large men can still wear some of the costumes even if their build is not particularly muscular. However, common sense and good taste dictate that they choose not to cosplay a shirtless, bodybuilder character if they do not actually have the ideal, slender or muscular, body type.

Cosplay for women can involve very complex, impractical, and revealing costumes. Female cosplayers are highly informed by concepts of modesty and mainstream notions of

attractiveness. Most of my female interviewees had a strong sense of propriety, and could discuss examples of other female cosplay that transgressed those notions. However, they admired other women who could 'pull off' more racy outfits. These costumes in particular are highly likely to fail, considering the original characters have unrealistic body proportions and costumes. Without a supermodel body and access to professional level costuming supplies, these costumes are notorious for being underwhelming or bad. Female (and male) cosplayers recognize the limitation of societal standards on their costumes and either select a costume that they feel would be most acceptable to others, or completely ignore these standards altogether (with or without accepting the potential consequences). Some cosplayers acknowledge the potential criticism, spoken and unspoken, and choose a favorite character that works with their bodies. At Comic-Con, I saw several cosplayers who had excellent costumes that worked with their larger body size, including Hsien-ko from *Darkstalkers*, a Chinese *jiangshi* (vampire/zombie) with oversized sleeves that hide various weapons, and a 'ghost buster', potentially Ray Stantz, from *Ghostbusters*. The most strategic use of body size I saw was a cosplayer who dressed as Hugo Reyes from *Lost* complete with a 'Dharma Initiative jar of ranch dressing'. [19]

VIII. Conventions as Spaces for Transgressing Social Norms

Conventions are much like holidays or festivals, as several of my interviewees observed. Firstly, conventions are limited in duration much like other holidays. Conventions occur only once per year, allowing fans an unparalleled opportunity to indulge in consumption of Japanese popular culture. Second, they occur over short periods of time, most commonly for two days but some conventions last up to five days. Moreover, in order to maximize attendance, most

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[19] Jorge Garcia plays Hugo Reyes, whose large size factors in the show's plot, occasionally with regards to his appetite.

conventions are scheduled on weekends and during the summer months. Conventions provide

massive amounts of entertaining events, panels, viewings, parties, and games in one locale, and

fans attempt to maximize their enjoyment. While in line waiting for a panel, it was not

uncommon to hear about the extreme measures that fans take in order to get the most out of their

convention experience. These include: consumption of energy drinks and caffeinated beverages,

long periods without meals, late nights at the hotel watching anime with friends, long waits for

'limited' or 'exclusive' souvenirs, and using credit cards in order to obtain all their desired

purchases. Fans are devoted to having the best time possible at anime conventions.

As mentioned in the previous section, several of my interviewees referred to cosplay as

'dress-up' or equated it with Halloween. Halloween could be considered a tension-management

holiday, which, as Etzioni writes, "…[is] expected to contribute to the reinforcement of shared

beliefs and institutions indirectly by releasing tension that results from conformity to societal

beliefs and the behavioral prescriptions they entail" (2000: 48). While Etzioni provides this

definition, he does not place Halloween in this category himself. I, on the other hand, do feel that

Halloween, conventions, and cosplay can be meaningfully examined with this definition. Other

tension-management holidays in North American society include New Year's Eve, Mardi Gras,

and Oktoberfest.   Etzioni further notes, "During these holidays, mores that are upheld during the

rest of the year are suspended to allow for indulgence…" (2000:48). Halloween and the

previously mentioned holidays have also been considered 'rituals of rebellion' that are

"…culturally permitted and ritually framed spaces where the free expression of countercultural

feelings are tolerated, and protected to some degree by the agents of the official culture…"

(Mueller et al. 2007: 316). These holidays provide a temporary inversion of hierarchies, acting

as a "safety valve" for social tensions. They allow individuals to 'let off steam' from the

everyday routine. One is able to remove oneself from daily roles and access alternative personas.

Costumers are not just "playing" a different role; they can also construct and define these new

roles (Mueller et al. 2007: 317). This liberty to safely engage other personas can inspire individuals to re-envision or change the way that they view aspects of their identity, for instance in regard to sexuality or gender. Cross-dressing, for example, becomes socially acceptable on holidays that involve ritual rebellion (Mueller et al. 2007: 320). Halloween and anime conventions can be a safe way for 'heterosexual' males to explore outside of their socially prescribed gender. Ironically, Halloween provides this secure space for social defiance through its socially normative nature: on Halloween, rebellion is expected.

IX. Authenticity as Materiality

It is also constructive to consider examples analogous to cosplay, such as historical re-enactment groups and 'living history' sites, which can be found in multiple countries, with a considerable number in North America. Historical re-enactors engage in a type of role-playing in an attempt to recreate a specific event or time period. In its precise definition, 'historical re-enactment' suggests re-constructing specific historical events, perhaps battles or celebrated historical incidences or those which depict everyday life in the past (Hunt 2004:388). Much like cosplayers, re-enactors are concerned with costume accuracy and achieving the highest level of authenticity. Re-enactment and cosplay discourse are similar. Hunt describes how the British re-enactors whom he interviewed saw authenticity: "Authenticity is strictly regulated, with often a sturdy correction of those who 'slip up' and do not conform to the required levels. Authenticity, however, is also understood by participants in terms of excitement, exhilaration, and 'experience'…" (2004:391). However, participants also engage in their hobby with varying levels of devotion, some only taking part in commemorating a particular battle, while others may spend a weekend living, working, and eating as they would in their chosen time period.

Motivation for participating in re-enactment is similar to cosplay. According to Hunt's informants, an important reason for them to join their re-enactment group was camaraderie.

Much like cosplayers, re-enactors indulge in their hobby as a means to escape everyday life into a "realistic but imaginary world where interests and fantasies can be indulged in, extended, and acted out" (Hunt 2004:399). Moreover, according to Radtchenko, role-playing in real life is much different than temporarily escaping in a video game. Live role play is much more dynamic, unlike a video game, which has programmed outcomes and limits to the game universe. An actor can feel his/her tangible influence in reality, unlike the virtual reality of video games. (Radtchenko 2006:132). Role-playing can allow the formation of an alternative identity that can potentially influence the everyday life of that individual (Radtchenko 2006:133). As with re-enactors, cosplayers are at the same time celebrating their respective fandom as well as enacting their identity.

Famous living history sites provide a specific, authentic locale where many re-enactors perform daily tasks appropriate to the time period.[20] These sites, as well as historical re-enactment in general, focus heavily on the material culture of the past. As Radtchenko writes, "Reenactors try to make the reality of the past tangible through some physical experience, be it wearing period costumes and armour, fighting with weapons made as close to historical originals as possible, spending time in a 'living history' camp, or mastering handicrafts. In each case the experience of the past is closely connected with making and exploiting of some material artefacts" (2006:130). The material aspect yields tangible authenticity, which is highly critical for role-playing and the realization of the character or time period.

Anime conventions can serve functions similar to the living history site. Re-enactment and living history sites facilitate celebration and even valorization of a particular culture (Hunt 2004: 390). Cosplay could be seen as a fan's investment in their subculture or, sometimes, a

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[20] Examples in the United States include Old Sturbridge Village in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, and Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Virginia. These living history sites feature all the components of their respective villages in the past, including the stables and mercantile stalls, but with wheelchair access, contemporary amenities, educational venues, and gift shops with modern market prices.

celebration of a problematic conceptualization of Japan. Living history sites and conventions both present authentic material objects in appropriated spaces. At anime conventions an uncontested 'authentic Japan' is found in several places. The Dealer's Room features imported snacks, beverages, and products. The panels feature Japanese language sessions and Japanese celebrities. Some con events host 'bring your own' *obento* lunches and tea parties. Attendees can be seen wearing Japanese school uniforms and *yukata*. Cosplayers bring along sushi, decorative fans, and other objects for props in order to incorporate authenticity into their photo shoots.

Cosplay and conventions not only celebrate fandom, but encourage consumption of a potentially problematic and distinctly popular Japan. Conventions present a narrowly defined 'traditional' Japan that does not accurately account for the country's long history of cultural diversity. Anime fans also consume imported Japanese items due their exotic nature. Businesses cater to fans by providing products that are novel but not too unfamiliar, such as chocolate dipped biscuits or fruit gummies. The products available at conventions represent an essentialized Japan that is profoundly popular and not necessarily representative of contemporary Japanese culture.

X. Stigmatization and Subversive Potential

Fans recognize the social stigma associated with their hobbies and interests, and the antiquated stereotypes associated with fandom. Rebecca mentioned in our interview how fans can be considered "weird or nerdy" for their taste in popular culture, in spite of the fact that most fans lead relatively normal lives, with jobs and families. She notes that anime convention-goers are still conceived of as "fat, sweaty white guys rummaging through comics" and "overweight guys who live in their parents' basements". These stereotypes persist in spite of the growing popularity of conventions, particularly Comic-Con, which has strong ties with mainstream

entertainment. Shows, such as ABC's *Lost*, were previewed at the convention in order to gauge

its potential reception. Moreover, anime convention demographics are generally balanced

between male and female attendees, although cosplayers tend to have a higher percentage of

female participants. In some cases, like at Kumoricon, young female fans comprised a

considerable portion of the convention population.

My interviewees, generally, were comfortable talking about their love of cosplay, but

expressed that they were less likely to share their interests with individuals outside of their group

of friends or family members. Andrew said: "I am cautious about giving people the opportunity

to judge me." He shares his interest in cosplay with friends who know about his interest in anime.

He continued, "I don't actively publicize my interest in anime unless I know someone pretty

well." Additionally, Stacey feels that stereotypes about animation persist in mainstream culture,

which adds to the potential for criticism when talking about her hobby. In a follow-up email, she

wrote that frequently other individuals conceptualize anime as for children and immediately

associate Japanese popular culture with *Pokémon*. Although anime consists of multiple genres,

Stacey finds that anime is most frequently seen as 'kiddy-stuff' and a "waste of time." Negative

stereotypes and misconceptions about Japanese popular culture can inspire fans to suppress

sharing their interests outside of close relationships.   Society inherently devalues their

participation in fandom.

It seems mainstream society devalues cosplay because it is not productive work. In this

view, fans devote time and money towards an unproductive hobby, and consume products that

are worthless to dominant culture.   Unsurprisingly, the majority of cosplayers are young adults

who, presumably, have not yet established a career. My interviewees were predominantly

university students with part-time work who received varying levels of acceptance from family

members. Angela's parents conceptualized her cosplay and costume contract jobs as a "cute

little costuming habit", but wanted to her to get a "real job." According to her, they see cosplay

as a "waste of time" and as not being "serious". In a follow-up email, Stacey wrote to me about how she feels dominant culture perceives cosplay: "You're not seeing a return other than the juvenile fulfillment of getting to dress up and act like a dork every now and then." Cosplay, for some, is a wasteful and extravagant leisure pursuit that the North American capitalist does not value, unlike other hobbies, which are associated with prestige or status. Cosplay is subversive because it is exclusive and outside of the capitalist production ideal. Costumes hold no value to the mainstream or economy, in spite of the profitability of Japanese popular culture imports. Without anime conventions each year with massive consumptions and reaffirmation of fandom, anime would potentially lose fans and be relegated to smaller communities on the Internet.

Moreover, fandom is generating art for a specific audience, using skills in a non-professional way. Fan artists, writers, and performers are circumventing more traditional avenues for obtaining a career in the arts, bypassing competitive institutions in mainstream culture. Conventions and online fan communities allow amateurs to gain prestige for their skills at their chosen art (drawing, sewing, acting, etc). Fan art is outside of the system and thus is not explicitly limited by mainstream concepts of aesthetic. Their art is productive and creative but in a specific subculture market that is a part of convention culture. Cosplayers do not see their hobby as a 'waste'. My interviewees all enjoyed different aspects of cosplay: creating costumes, planning a performance, spending time with like-minded individuals, engaging problem-solving skills, and participating in a unique convention experience.

As I have discussed previously, fan activities can be productive spaces for exploring gender and alternative sexuality. Cosplay and other forms of fan art are subversive in that fans enthusiastically invest their money and time in a devalued leisure pursuit, and can gain prestige outside of the prescribed mainstream system. Activities with subversive potential include dojinshi, fanfiction, and fan art. The Internet has contributed considerably to the subversive potential for fandom. "The Internet is already facilitating discourse and textual circulation

among fans in different countries, generating what I perceive to be a global counterpublic that is both subversive and fundamentally queer in nature" (Wood 2006:396). Yaoi dojinshi (amateur stories, comics, etc.), in particular, challenges categories and visually represents shifting identifications and interpretations of gender. Wood sees the World Wide Web as a liberating space of resistance: "It also allows [fans] the freedom of anonymity and the potential to construct or present an online identity resistant to social constraints surrounding age, gender, race, class, and sexuality" (Wood 2006:409). Through online communication and circulation of texts, fans take part in a global counterpublic and generate alternative discourse about sexual identification and desire.

XI. Conclusions

Anime fans challenge institutionalized standards of good taste through their consumption, appropriation, and repurposing of Japanese popular cultures texts. Fans build upon and explore beyond the producer's original meaning. Thus, consumption and fandom become spaces for the construction of identity and creative expression. Anime conventions provide an ideal environment for fans to meet and network with others with similar interests, as well as provide an affirming audience for fan activities. Cosplay is, primarily, a social activity where fans temporarily assume and perform a fictional identity from Japanese popular culture at anime conventions. Costume selection is constantly determined by dominant societal standards of beauty, based on physical appearance, body size, and to some degree, ethnicity. Although my interviewees described cosplay as an activity in which anyone can participate, social rules still apply. Conventions are spaces for play, but concepts of taste still limit the cosplayers' creativity. Ultimately, decision making is influenced by mainstream fashion aesthetics, regarding costume fit or color, as well as a separate notion of taste and what is "cool" from the fan subculture.

Through costuming, as my interviewees explained, cosplayers are able to safely explore an alternative persona. Cosplayers can thus reconsider or redefine aspects of their own identity. Conventions, much like tension-management holidays, allow cosplayers to temporarily transgress normative concepts of gender and sexuality. Through appropriating marks of naturalized gender – bodily gestures, styles, and clothing – cosplayers perform the gender of their character. However, with the influence of social rules about body size, physical attributes, and attractiveness, the potentiality for gender 'play' and self-reinvention seems more limited than my interviewees indicated.

Nonetheless, cosplay can test the rigid conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. Through role-play and performance of alternative personas, individuals can explore different ways of experiencing their existence and potentially influencing the way in which they lead their daily lives. Cosplayers are stigmatized by dominant society for their inordinate interest in and consumption of a devalued commodity. The activity involves skill, time, and devotion that mainstream society prescribes for a career or in some way contributing to the economic system. Cosplay, as well as dojinshi, yaoi fanfiction, and other fan activities, challenges dominant, patriarchal social norms. Online communities, too, have contributed to the alternative discourse about desire, sexuality, and gender.

Cosplayers and other anime fans are "hidden in plain sight", inconspicuously existing in North American culture. Anime convention attendance demonstrates the present popularity and profitability of Japanese popular culture. Cosplay is integrally tied to conventions, which provide safe social spaces and willing audiences for their performances. Although the transgression of normative concepts of gender and sexuality are temporary, the potential for role-play to influence an individual's daily life should not be ignored. Convention cosplay provides opportunities for construction of identity as well as a space for creative expression.

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Appendix

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:	UBC BREB NUMBER:
Millie Creighton	UBC/Arts/Anthropology	H08-00512

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:

Institution	Site
N/A	N/A

Other locations where the research will be conducted:
N/A

CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):

N/A

SPONSORING AGENCIES:

N/A

PROJECT TITLE:
Exploring the Performative in Japanese Popular Culture Fandom

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: June 26, 2009

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:		DATE APPROVED: June 26, 2008	
Document Name		Version	Date
Consent Forms:			
Consent Form		Version One	May 1, 2008
Consent Form		1	June 13, 2008
Consent Form		1	June 13, 2008
Other Documents:			
Sample Questions		Version One	May 1, 2008

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board
and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Ken Craig, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair
Dr. Daniel Salhani, Associate Chair

Dr. Anita Ho, Associate Chair