

Cosplaying while Black: The Transgressive Pleasure of Blacktivism

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This brief photo essay documents my accidental activism, a by-product created by participating in a personally pleasurable hobby, cosplay, while existing in the intersections of being Black and female. “Cosplay” is, combining “costume” and “play,” primarily practiced at conventions where fans dress like favorite fictional characters. As cosplay gains mainstream attention, van Veen (2019) notes its increasing recognition “as a celebration of agency in the performative fandom of science fiction and fantasy” (p. 77), as an extended, enthusiastic, embodied engagement with pop cultural texts. Cosplay has not always been very visible in the Black community. As a child, when I discovered my love for superheroes and animé, my mom subsequently deemed it weird, labelled it witchcraft, and even considered it demonic. I was not free—as a young Black woman—to transcend the boundaries of reality, to explore living in an imagined, fantastical world of endless possibilities.

In some ways, this forbidden-ness amplified the overall lack of major characters of color in children’s books, science fiction, fantasy, graphic novels, anime, etc. Academic scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) echoes this sentiment in her work *The Dark Fantastic; Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* noting, “people sincerely believe that characters of color are out of place in the fantastic: issues of race and difference threaten to shake us out of the waking dream that we inhabit while engaged in the fantastic” (Thomas, p. 73). Racism infects fiction and fantasy multiple ways. I was painfully aware of the deficit of prominent Black characters in pop culture forms: movies, cartoons, and comic books.

Given this lack of Black protagonist options, my cosplay consists primarily of dressing as non-Black characters. This often elicits critical commentary questioning my motivations for such cosplay character choices: Why would a person of color play an originally white character? I echo van Veen’s (2019) critique that cosplay only “affords two avenues for black participants:” 1) playing less-well-known or “oft-neglected black characters;” or, 2) “revision[ing], replay[ing], recut[ing],” and, I would add, *re-presenting* “default white” characters, “thus platforming the agency of black cosplayers” to choose any character to play/be (p. 79).



Figure 1. *Three Princesses*

Though seemingly minor, van Veen argues Black cosplayers exercising this freedom of character choice “upsets the default universality of whiteness as the blank slate of ...subjectivity” (p. 79). For Black cosplayers, claiming and exercising this right to play anyone simultaneously asserts, and reinforces, our inherent subjectivity by sheer virtue of performing this subjective act of claiming. As an adult, I take a lot of pride in exercising my choice to cosplay, and I derive a lot a great deal of pleasure from cosplaying as well.

Often, race has a very powerful, and highly inequitable, impact on fiction and fantasy readers from different demographic groups. Thomas (2019) observes:

When readers who are White, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied enter the fantastic dream, they are empowered and afforded a sense of transcendence that can be elusive within the real world...the implicit message that readers, hearers and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villain. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monsters.* (p. 23).



Figure 2. *Harley Quinn*

A major pleasure found within cosplaying, particularly from my perspective as a Black woman, is the chance to defy traditional roles and limitations, to choose identity options society traditionally withholds from us. I use cosplay as my own subversive, celebratory, immensely pleasurable form of Blacktivism, accessing this liminal space of fantasy, pretend, and play to embody and enact a refusal of restrictions based on my (racial) identity. Being Black in spaces that center white voices and white narratives is a form of protest, a disruption of societal norms that dictate that I should not and do not exist. My deliberate embrace of my disruptive existence—as a Black woman who will not be constrained *to* and *by* the available roles/characters of Black women (not) presented in pop culture—is my activism, my *Blacktivism*. My cosplay Blacktivism is a refusal of restrictions, an embrace of imagination and fantasy and dreams—realms of pleasure and forms of entertainment historically denied to Black people in the United States. Comic book characters and superheroes were not originally written by, for, or with much awareness of marginalized people, except stereotypically, when

they served primarily as background characters, victims, or villains. Superhero protagonists mainly functioned as an embodied ideal (and fantasy) of white, cisgender, heterosexual, powerful, masculine males. In contrast, van Veen (2019) argues, Black people cosplaying white characters “destabilizes” this idealized, and normalized, White male savior narrative and image. Like van Veen, Joel Gn (2011) asserts the idea that cosplaying cross-racially enables Black participants to insert our identities into these previously segregated and exclusionary narratives. From this point-of-view, consuming many of these original pop cultural texts, despite their predictable homogeneity and dominant perspectives, is pleasurable, pleasurable enough for cosplayers to engage more deeply. Blacktivism extends beyond cosplaying. The past few years has seen a growing amount of comic book writers and artists of color that are providing a disruption in the form of narratives and stories that showcase the lived experiences of BIPOC people. Writers such as Eve L. Ewing who took over after Brian Michael Bendis as the primary writer for the *Ironheart* run, a story about Riri Williams, a black girl who takes over the Ironman mantle after Tony Stark disappears and eventually comes into her own as the superhero Ironheart. Prolific writer, journalist, and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote select issues on the Hugo nominated run of *Black Panther*, and writers Sana Amanat and G. Willow Wilson created a space for Muslim superhero visibility when they created Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel. These BIPOC writers cause significant disruption to the comic canon by taking traditional white superhero mantles and rewriting and restoring them with youthful BIPOC characters.

Both Gn (2011) and van Veen (2019) present the concept of *crossplay* as enacted by fans. Gn defines *crossplay* as disrupting a character’s “socially accepted gender” (see also Toffoletti 2007). Gn observes that many cosplayers enjoy modifying and inhabiting revised characters, noting in some cases cosplayers do this as a deliberately subversive and disruptive act. Building on this premise, van Veen (2019) and his Black cosplayer interviewees construct *crossplay* to include “gender-bending” along with “queering, disabled and interracial play that disrupts the white-abled canon of mainstream characters” while it “opens cosplay in general towards a [B]lack radical tradition of black performance” (p. 81). Both Gn and van Veen emphasize the transgressive nature and potential pedagogical liberatory power of such non-normative play. The further consumption of modified, disrupted images can then also be pleasurable for observers as well as the cosplayers themselves.



Figure 3. *Slytherin House*

Personally, I take pleasure in slipping into costume. The pleasure of my Blacktivism is rooted in what Adrienne Maree Brown calls “*pleasure activism*—the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and /or supremacy.” (p. 9). When sliding into a piece of costume, donning a wig, or applying makeup, I am essentially transforming myself, temporarily becoming a different person, playing pretend. As a cosplayer, I see cosplay as an art form that I can use to experiment with different personas, identities, and roles in the process of (re)constructing my *self* (Freedman 2003). Cosplay is my form of disruption as a Black Woman. I outwardly display the identities that I inherently have as a woman of color, my heroism, my creativity, and my fearlessness. Showing up in my costumes allows me the freedom to express myself in ways that would normally be judged by the white gaze in society. In fact, many contemporary artists’ examinations of identity are reminiscent of cosplay. In Nikki S. Lee’s photography series *Projects* (1997–2001), Lee embedded with specific subcultural groups over time, adopting their visual, verbal, and behavioral markers prior to asking other people to take photographs that include her as a member of the group. Cindy Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) series takes a similar approach, with Sherman manipulating Western cinematic vocabulary and tools to create /

embody a range of recognizable fictional characters, yet in ways that suggest disruptive, disturbing narratives. In *The Couple in the Cage: Two Amerindians Visit the West* (1992-1993), Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña satirize colonization's absurd processes while demonstrating its persistence and ongoing impacts. Nick Cave's *soundsuits* qualify specifically as Blacktivist, repurposing cast-off materials into costumes for camouflage and protection. He also frames them as celebratory, including them as living sculptures dancing in parades and public performances. Cave invites community engagement as he dons his soundsuits, his activism and performance invite the audience to question notions of identity, class, race, and gender, to have a line of inquiry into his art that is not judgmental and biased. Cave's blacktivism occurs in the form of art creation comes as a response to his identity as a Black man who has experienced racism and racial profiling. In more recent expression Genevieve Gaignard; a biracial mixed media artist, in her *Fantasia* (2020) used various images to create a collage that explored issues of race, police brutality, and the white gaze as an example of American culture. The placement of the images are meant to create dialogue within the piece and amongst the viewer.

Like these artists, though on a much larger scale, cosplay is an opportunity for exploration, for embodied inquiry into identities. Through cosplay, I become beloved characters in treasured narratives. I immerse myself within the texts themselves as completely as possible. I am not a passive outside voyeur, I am an active inside participant/agent (Rhoades & Daiello, 2016). In the same vein of these artists, cosplay allows for me to have agency and control the narrative of how I show up in the world. Cosplaying is pleasure in ownership, pleasure of making my own rules and defying normalized societal expectations. For me, cosplay has several notable impacts, personally and professionally as a (Black) educator. As a teacher, being a cosplayer helped me provide students with a greater sense of freedom, with permission (and a model) for experimentation and play. Marjorie Manifold (2013) observes that "[a]dolescents and young adults become fans of stories they intuitively or consciously recognize as profoundly relevant to their everyday lives as they are or as they wish them to be" (p. 13). Further, Manifold describes "fanart" production/performance as increasingly "entrenched and pervasive," noting adolescents desire to intensify their engagement with resonant texts and stories, co-constructing responsive, interactive, living texts that demonstrate "how youth are coming to see themselves and interact with others in the 21st century" (p. 18).



Figure 4. *Queen of Hearts*

Fandom, storytelling, and re-storying via costumes, through direct and personal interactions, allowed an interconnectedness to develop between my students, me, their life experiences, texts, and bigger ideas. As a high school teacher, every spirit week and holiday provided me with an avenue to dress up. Beforehand, students would flock to my door to ask me for advice on developing their own costumes; on the days themselves, students would flock to my door to see my outfits, to see me.

These interactions inevitably turned into discussions about favorite movies, tv shows, anime, and fandom of all kinds. Manifold (2013) asserts that such “play with popular stories increases the size and diversity of the community that can access knowledge, exchange differing worldviews, debate critical ideas, engage in aesthetic explorations, and improvise upon an original narrative” (p. 15). Using cosplay provided a way to demonstrate my knowledge of and commitment to contemporary and popular stories and characters, and to use myself as an active agent for visually re-storying these previously-exclusionary texts. Cosplay provides me with a unique way to connect to students and help them connect to—and comprehend—other complex texts as well as themselves. Becoming relatable to my students provided opportunities for their interests to

become my interests, for mine to become theirs, for our interests to overlap and merge. It provides opportunities for us to become a true community of learners together.



Figure 5. *Santa's Helper*

The power of creating these relationships, in turn, fueled and reinforced my use of cosplay to enhance my students' learning, using their collective fandom energy to engage them in texts, excite their imaginations, scaffold and frame their critical and creative thinking. Manifold also insists fanart is a strategy for artistic learning, that even when intended to render direct reproductions, copying is not only a strategy for learning artistic technique, but also a mindful exploration of relationships among visual elements, gesture, form, and meaning. Manifold realizes that when students find a compelling subject, their desire to engage, represent, and manipulate it, literally or abstractly, they then often voluntarily "seek knowledge about additional intricacies of proportion, perspective, drawing figures in movement, backgrounds, or aspects of good composition" (p. 16). Desire drives learning.



Figure 6. *Citizen of Wakanda*

My desire for, and pleasure from, immersing myself in the world of cosplay and fandom not only challenges societal norms as a form of resistance, it also serves as a platform for transforming my classroom into a space affirming of my students' identities, desires, and possibilities, open to the pleasures of exploration and imagination. Manifold's (2009) interview findings that cosplayers and fanartists use "excursions into fantasy" texts as a way to escape from, or as a complement to, their ordinary, constrained daily lives (p. 68). For van Veen (2019), such "fandom takes up a performative repurposing, remixing, acceptance, or contestation of narratives and imaginaries" (p. 77).

In "Visual Culture Learning Communities: How and what students come to know in informal art groups," art educators Karpati, Freedman, Castro, Kallio-Tavin, & Heijnen (2013) note that fanartists collaboratively "construct meaning through personal expression, social interactions, and identity development" (p. 105). In their follow-up piece, "Collaboration in visual culture learning communities: towards a synergy of individual and collective creative practice," Karpati, Freedman, Castro, Kallio-Tavin, & Heijnen (2017) conclude that participation in groups like cosplayers allows members

to experience and explore “the flux of identity to illustrate the range of possibilities of the self,” positioning “the self” as something malleable, as potentialities rather than fixed product (p. 169). Cosplay is explicit acknowledgement of and experimentation “with different personas and life roles in the process of constructing the self,” or, as one of their female participants suggested, “it is the developing, and seeing yourself to develop all the time” (Karpati et al, 2017, p. 169; see also Freedman 2003).



Figure 7. *Batwoman*

Being able to explore and extend my identity and positionalities resonates with my experiences. When students and other people of color see me in costume—embracing, revealing, and reveling in my authentic Black nerdy self, defying the unspoken racial rules and invisible barriers—it helps affirm that there is space for difference, and for Black girls specifically, in fandom, in fantasy, in imagining different potential futures, and enjoying the process of envisioning and dreaming. The call for manuscripts for this special edition referenced Adrienne Maree Brown’s (2019) call for using pleasure

activism and “our radical imagination [as] a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality” (p 126). Cosplaying as a Black woman as a form of Blacktivism and as a teacher allows me opportunities to demonstrate not only the pleasure of these fantasy imaginings, but also the subversive power in claiming the right to participate, to insert myself in narratives, to alter them regardless of their original intent. In this way, texts become political and experimental sites, with cosplay providing a framework for playfully disrupting them, changing them, opening them. Cosplay provides a context, method, and tools to use pleasure, joy, strength, and community to disrupt dominant discourses and interrupt persistent inequities, to envision and work toward a better, more inclusive future. One with Black superheroes, too.

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