Costuming as Inquiry: An Exploration of Women in Gender-Bending Cosplay Through Practice & Material Culture

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of gender-bending cosplay (GBC) through its material culture using costuming (the acts of making and wearing artifacts and the artifacts themselves) to examine the motivations/interests/expectations of women who participate. GBC embraces the shifting, or bending, of the identified gender and/or biological sex of a fictional character to match the gender identity and/or biological sex of the player. This study concentrates on self-identified women adapting male characters to female versions of the same characters. The principal approach of the research design is Practice as Research (PaR) from an Art-Based Research (ABR) paradigm. Research methods include costuming, performance, ethnography, narrative inquiry, interviewing, participant observation, and discourse analysis. The worlds of text and image are melded in the amphibious, mixed-methods design and presentations of this study. GBC involves creating and using material culture, the artifacts of a culture/community. It becomes a creative outlet for many who may not otherwise be making art. When material culture can be worn, an interactive embodied performance can be experienced between the maker and the player, the player and the artifacts, the player and the audience, the player and fellow players, the player and cultural texts. This performance simultaneously emphasizes and

challenges gender binaries, gender roles, and expectations. It is a performance of culture. The communities of play collaborate to interpret and reinterpret the performance and the material culture. They tell and share stories that uncover insights into the phenomenon, society, and culture.

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I am grateful for my interview participants and their willingness to share their experiences with me.

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Publications

Hur, H., Ravisankar, R., Smith-Shank, D., & Turk, R. B. (2016). The nest as metaphor: Reflections on mentoring, growth, and material culture. *Visual Inquiry, 5,* 3, 393-405.

Fields of Study

Major Field: Arts Administration, Education and Policy

Specializations: Art Education and Analysis of Material Culture

Table of Contents

List of Figures

GUIDE

This document is a narrative collage of a performative inquiry. It requires experimentation and play to produce. Images dialogue with text disrupting the limitations of language. Font changes indicate shifts of voice from researcher to participant to author. Text boxes highlight insights and interview participants' quotes. Journal and workshop entries incorporate life and field experiences that make the text more relatable. I ask questions within the text that move the inquiry forward and establish a research agenda. The following is a guide to the various elements that make up this document.

Entries from my dissertation journal are presented in the Pristina font to have a more personal feel as they are a record of my thoughts, musings, and wrestling with theory, processes, data, and findings during the inquiry.

Adaptation Course Workshop text is shown in the Ink Free font as these entries are working documents separate from my dissertation journal.

SIDE NOTE: For Side Note text I use the Bradley Hand ITC font. This is where "side bar" type of information can be found. It is used to elaborate points and interject insights aside from the text.

> Quotes from interview participants are displayed using the Calibri font in blue within a text box. Its function is similar to that of a speech bubble. They are not my words, but the words of the participants.
>
> Participant's chosen moniker

What is the purpose of using italics in the body of the text? I apply italics to emphasize questions that arise within the inquiry and reporting processes and descriptions of figures. This interaction of text elements and images performatively presents the data and shapes the inquiry engaging the reader in the research journey.

I conducted this research in the mid-western United States, specifically Columbus and Lancaster, Ohio and Lexington, Kentucky. The interview participants are self-identified women, over eighteen-years of age, with experience in gender-bending cosplay, residing across the continental United States. A timeline of my research activities and definitions of key terms follow.

Timeline of Research Activities

The sequence of my qualitative research process included the consistent steps of practice, documentation, and reflection.

May 2017	Candidacy Exam Begins
August 2017	Candidacy Exam Passed, Design Phase Begins, Documentation & Reflection Begins
November 2017	IRB Approval
December 2017	Interview Participant Recruitment Begins
January 2018	Interviews Begin, Design and Construction of Cosplay
February 2018	Construction of Cosplay
March 2018	Completion of Costume, Cosplay at Lexington Toy & Comic Convention
April 2018	Analysis Begins
June 2018	Interviews Conclude
November 2018	Research Activities Conclude

Key Terms

The key terms are defined here for clarity and explored more fully within the main body of this dissertation. Written in my own words, the definitions offer an understanding of my position entering this research.

Cosplay – A combination of the words costume and role-play, cosplay is the act of wearing a costume that represents a fictional character or character type often at a fan-centric event, such as a convention (or con) or festival. A cosplay can also refer to the actual costume that is made or worn for the purpose of cosplaying. The costume is usually made by the cosplayer.

Costuming – Costuming is the act of designing, making, and wearing material artifacts and the artifacts themselves.

Crossplay - A combination of the words cross-dressing and cosplay, cross (-dressing) + (cos) play, crossplay is an impersonation of a fictional character of a different sex/gender where a player disguises his or her own sexed/gendered features and physicality to appear as the character being played.

Gender – Gender is the culturally constructed identity of a person usually described in relation to a multi-dimensional spectrum including man/masculine, woman/feminine, and variations around, between, and through them.

Gender-Bending Cosplay (GBC) - GBC is the shifting or bending of the visually presented gender of a fictional character toward the gender identity of the player. Other terms include gender-swapped cosplay, Rule 63 cosplay.

Sex - Sex is a statement of a person's visual anatomical characteristics, male or female, usually assigned at birth. In terms of biology, sex is actually more complex and has greater variation than just male and female.

Section 1: FORWARD

Costuming has always been a part of my life from playing dress-up at a young age to my career as a costume designer and artisan. My fascination began early. As a child, I was instantly engaged anytime a task involved drawing, costumes, or crafts. If a class presentation could include a focus on clothing in some way, I figured out how to do it. I dressed in a "chiton" to present the history of the first Olympics. My mother and I made (faux) fur clothing and boots to costume one of my dolls for a project about the Inuit people complete with a full-color cardboard backdrop. I studied dance but was more adept at evaluating the choice and appropriateness of the costumes than pointe. I enjoyed math and art classes equally but did not realize how those interests could be merged. During my undergraduate education, I explored anthropology, fine art, and mathematics, ultimately majoring in theatre design and technology. Theatre combined everything I excelled at and enjoyed which is the research of historical periods, societies, and costume, the practical application of mathematics in construction, and the imagination and creation of art.

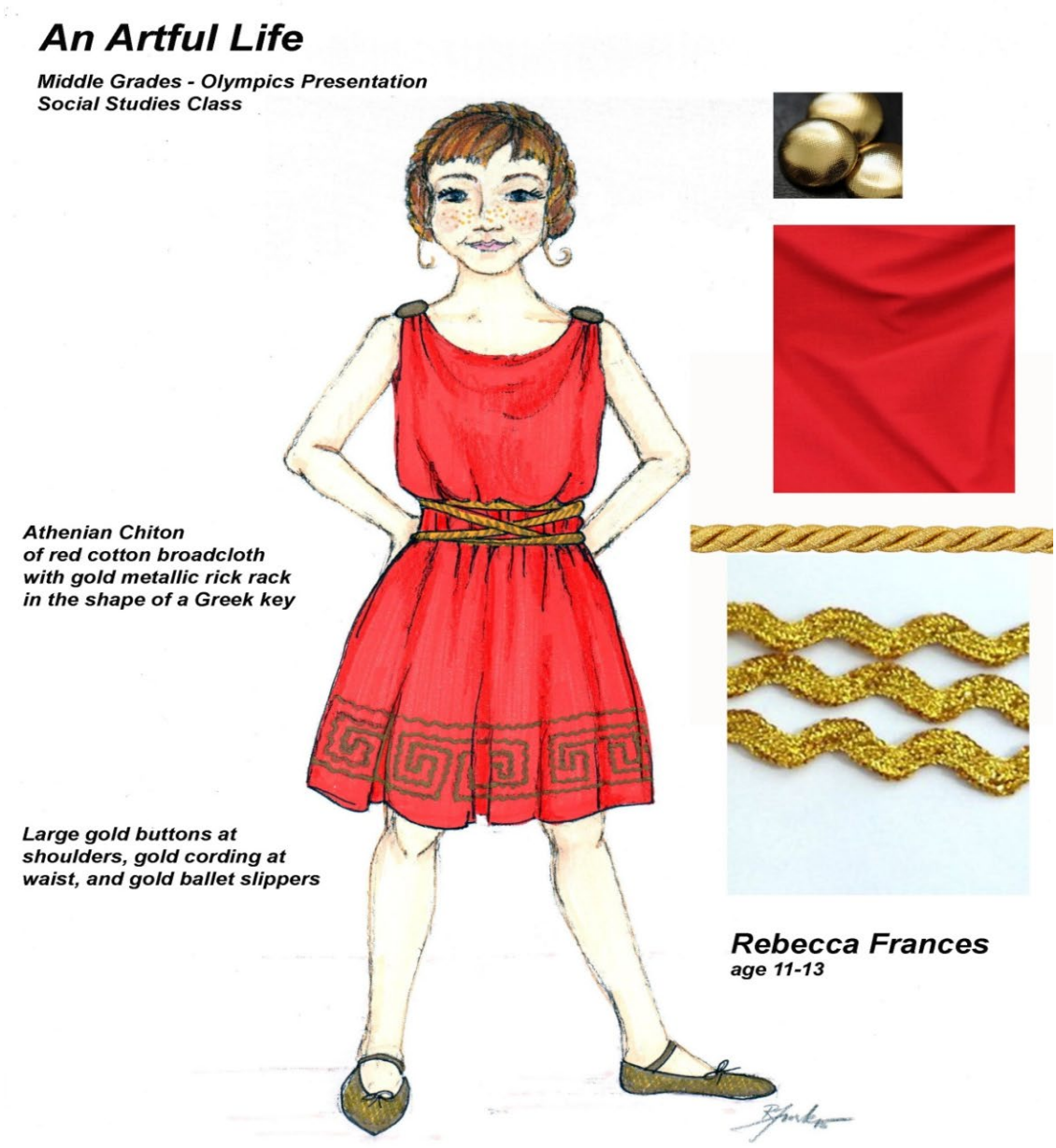

Figure 1: Art Autobiography – pre-teen, 2015

After a few years in the field, I felt drawn to expand my focus beyond the practice of theatre and discover more ways to integrate different disciplines into my skill sets and

interests. While working in Northern Illinois University's Department of Theatre and Dance, I began taking graduate-level courses in art education taught by Dr. Debbie Smith-Shank. At Northern Illinois University, I encountered art education as a field where all my interests come together; where theatrical costume design is my art form and interdisciplinary research is welcomed and encouraged. I spent the next ten years designing and directing the production of costumes for theater and dance across the country, getting married, dressing in costume myself at faerie and renaissance festivals, and starting a family. While working at The Ohio State University, I knew I was truly ready to pursue graduate studies. Serendipitously, Dr. Smith-Shank was also working at The Ohio State University; I took this to be a sign and began my graduate work in art education the following year.

I undertook the research for my dissertation with a curiosity. I suppose most journeys begin that way. How do I combine my background in costume design and my research interests in trans-disciplinary educational practices, material culture, performance, and practice as research in a meaningful and interesting way? For me this project is one answer to that overwhelming question.

One year into my doctoral program, my advisor recommended that I not stress about my dissertation topic. I was enrolled in an intensive, one-week course centered around art-making and meaning-making during the summer session. Her advice was to relax, make art, and at the end of the course, I would know what my topic was. I must say that I did not feel relaxed at all when I entered the classroom because I was a bit too concerned with how I would know my topic by the end of the week. But gradually, by the

end of the first day, those worries melted away. I focused on the art, the work, the interactions, the play.

I did not have a topic at the end of the week, but I had ideas; some new and some old with new insights or perspectives. I entered my graduate program with an interest in the costuming assumed by patrons of imagination-centric festival sub-cultures, such as anime, faerie, and steampunk gatherings, especially as it relates to identity, creativity, and community. My master's work did not focus on costuming, but on craftivism, craft education, and material culture. I tapped into my background as a professional costume designer and instructor, but costumes were set aside as a research interest. The activities of the summer course set off a chain reaction of epiphanies for me and the direction of this research.

A few weeks after the end of the course, I traveled to Gen Con, the second largest gaming convention in the world, with my family. Driving long distances as a passenger is a great time for brainstorming. I bounced several topic ideas off my husband as we moved west along I-70 from Columbus to Indianapolis. As a fellow artist and writer, he always asks questions that force me to be clearer about my thoughts or spark another possible line of inquiry. With options swirling through my head and a renewed interest in the inclusion of costuming in my research, I was excited to be going to a convention that would include plenty of examples of cosplay (costume + role-play) among the attendees. In the event program, the organization advertised a Crossplay Contest, "where attendees create and wear a costume featuring a character opposite his/her gender" (p. 116). I was intrigued having seen examples on Pinterest and other social media sites and decided to

attend the contest as an audience member. There were about thirteen participants. During the deliberations of the judges, a sponsor of the event explained the nuanced distinctions between *crossplay* and *gender-bending cosplay* as evidently there was confusion amongst the attendees and the contest participants. More than half the participants did genderbent cosplays rather than crossplays. The term crossplay is a combination of the words cross-dressing and cosplay, cross (-dressing) + (cos) play. Crossplay is an impersonation of a character of a different sex/gender where a player disguises his or her own sexed/gendered features and physicality to appear as the character being played. Gender-bending cosplay (GBC) is more of an interpretation of a character of a different sex/gender and adapting the sexed/gendered features of a character to fit those of the player usually with a heightened emphasis on the visual sex/gender markers of the player. Both women and men participate in the phenomena of crossplay and GBC. This was it. Sitting in that room, I knew that (somehow) I could combine my professional background in costuming with my other research interests.

The following semester I took a theatre course where I was introduced to the theory of adaptation, this theory provides a conceptual basis for my study. According to Linda Hutcheon (2013), adaptation is a dual process consisting of the interpretation of a source text(s) and the creation of something new, something that is one's own. The act of adaptation involves appropriation, or salvaging, and filtration with a creative reinterpretation of the source as a goal. Fidelity within adaptation can be subjective and is not necessarily the point. Any adaptation will be marked with traces of previous related source texts. GBC is an example of adaptation. Because I was encouraged to push this

line of thinking further by my professor and had demonstrated an interest in Practice as Research, I was introduced to the monographs of Robin Nelson and Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt. In Barrett and Bolt's Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry I found an inspiring chapter by Kim Vincs, a dance researcher and practitioner. Vincs asks an honest and straight-forward question, "If dance practice is treated as a primary source of knowledge, rather than simply an object of study, what kinds of knowledge might that practice produce?" (2007, p. 102). My professional and educational background is in the design and construction of theatrical costuming and arts education. With costuming as my practice within the studio and within the classroom, I ask if the practice of costuming is treated as a primary source of knowledge, rather than simply an object of study, what kinds of knowledge might that practice produce?

Throughout my life, I employed costuming and sewing as media of inquiry in some way or another. The examples from my childhood that I describe above were not as structured or as deep as this research project, but they pointed to an embodied way of knowing, of understanding, of exploring a lived experience that can cross generational and cultural boundaries. My master's project included group and individual interviews, or conversations, whilst stitching sock monkeys for charity. Much of my teaching and mentoring happens across a cutting table while engaged in the making of costumes. Sometimes costuming is the entry point to a seemingly unrelated topic such as mathematics or chemistry. Other times it can be a practice of seeing a situation differently, perhaps more acutely and personally than possible with words alone.

Costuming is collaborative. It is a dialogue between the maker and the materials, the maker and the user, and the user and the audience.

Cosplay exemplifies the collaborative nature of costuming as it inhabits a specifically participatory culture. Participating in cosplay involves creating and using material culture, the physical constructions (the objects) of the culture/community. Matter matters. It can be an expression of identity, affinity, escape/immersion/play, ingenuity, and/or craftsmanship. Cosplayers seem to make the costume (the object and the work) take focus. The making process engages us differently. I am curious how players learn, share, and develop art/craft skills that are necessary for the making of their costumes. *What are the continuums and intersections of meanings at play within GBC? How and why are choices made within the process of adaptation?*

Cosplay occupies a space between and around performance art and theatre and the spectator/observer and fandom and the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) ethos. It is a creative endeavor that has the capability to speak to communities of play and practice - artists, performers, participants, and viewers on multiple levels. There is an entanglement, like elaborate frizzy cobwebs, among these ideas, communities, and material culture. A singular linear path or interpretation is not appropriate. There are multiple entry points, potential lines of flight, and points of view, those of the makers, the users, history, culture (however one chooses to define it), and context(s). Making and using objects becomes a way of knowing something more fully.

In my quest for a dissertation topic, I have uncovered an ongoing research agenda with more questions than answers and rabbit holes of possibilities. My intent for this

project is to dig deeper into a few of those possibilities as they relate to the creation of material culture by a group of people known as cosplayers.

Because this study utilizes costuming as a key method of inquiry, I am going to use the process of costume making as an analogy to present this project. Rather than the traditional five-chapter dissertation, this doctoral study will be presented in stages of costume making. The conceptual framework is described as the underpinnings, the foundation garments, the understructure, the base, the beginning shape. This includes me, my shape, my positionality. The methodologies function as the materials, the fabrics, the threads, the fibers. These can be knit, woven, crocheted, felted, and spun. The fabric choice makes a significant difference in a costume design, construction methods, and final product; just as, methodologies make significant differences in the design, methods, and results of research studies. As may seem obvious, research methods are related to the construction methods of a costume, how the research is done, how the costume is made. The data shapes the research; it's the seams and the pieces that make up the costume. Analysis is the interpretation of the data. It is a deep reading of the data, of the artifact. It is the costume in performance, onstage, available for interpretation by many from different perspectives. *Does the costume tell the story? Is the costume a narrative collage?*

This study explores/examines the phenomenon of GBC through its material culture using costuming as a means to study what motivates women participating in GBC. The principal approach of this research design is Practice as Research (PaR) from an Arts-Based Research (ABR) paradigm.

Is "cosplay" playing with costume? Is it playing in costume or costuming? Is it costuming that is played in, with, and through? The idea is that one role-plays a fictional character or character type in costume, yet the costume (the material culture) is foregrounded. Both the act and the action of cosplay involve interpretation, adaptation, and play with costume materials and embodied performance. These elements are combined, playing with and acting on each other, to make meaning. The web of theory and practice becomes more tangled as the exploration proceeds.

According to The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English (2015), Nobuyuki Takahashi, a Japanese film director, is credited with the coining of the term "cosplay" when he first used the word in Japanese magazines in 1983. Cosplay is the expression of an affinity with a fictional character or character type. There is a long history of fans expressing their fandom through ranges of costume role-playing from quite subtle to the extremely overt from the iconic and often spoofed Star Trek fans of the 1970s at Star Trek conventions to the increasingly mainstream San Diego ComiCon of today to Underoos and Halloween costumes.

GBC is the shifting or bending of the visually presented gender of a character to match the gender identity of the player. For example, a player who self-identifies as female would embody a male character as female. So, Loki from The Marvel Universe who is male would be played as obviously female. Alternatively, a player who self-identifies as male gender-bending the character Wonder Woman would be Wonder Man, a visually male version of a female character.

I acknowledge that the term "GBC" is problematic as it employs the terms "gender" and "sex" interchangeably. Gender, such as masculine (man) and feminine (woman), is a social construction that exists on a continuum of identity. One's physical sex, male and female, is a statement of visual anatomy assigned at birth. The visual markers are idealized, but not necessarily exaggerated, attributes and roles of a gender-defined/constructed by a culture/society. These visual markers can be read/viewed within cultural texts, such as, film and television, comics, advertising, fashion marketing and production, our bodies, performance, social and spatial landscapes, matter and materials. The notion of gender is contextual. It shifts based on time and place/space. Gender-bending within cosplay entails the apparent, visual gendered sex of the character being swapped with that of the player, disrupting social and cultural expectations.

SIDE NOTE: Biological sex, like gender, is complex and considered to lie on a spectrum (Montanez, 1 September 2017).

From Forbes.com July 10, 2015, by Lauren Orsini:

> The idea of taking a male character and converting him into a female persona, whether through fan fiction, fan art, or cosplay, was not invented by the Internet, but it was certainly popularized there. The concept is even written into the anonymously penned
>
> Rules of the Internet, first distributed on the Web's most popular English-language

imageboard, 4chan.

> "Rule 63," the adage reads. "For every given male character, there is a female version of that character. For every given female character, there is a male version of that character." (Orsini, 2015, para. 4)

While there are no official "rules" of the Internet, many fan communities maintain strong and active online presences that influence and, in turn, are influenced by content posted online. Fans may publish photos or articles using one descriptive keyword or phrase and not another or multiple terms. Rule 63 cosplay, gender-swapped cosplay, and GBC are three different labels for the same phenomenon. All are valid and widely used within fan communities. It is a matter of preference. I prefer the term GBC as it implies a flexibility, a twist, an ambiguity, a temporality. In this research, I am using GBC for consistency, not as a way to elevate one term over another.

GBC is a lived, embodied experience that communicates through the doing of the phenomenon, through play, art-making, gesture, stance, interaction, interpretation, collaboration, and adaptation. Doing constructs and deconstructs our social reality. It territorializes, deterritorializes, and reterritorializes physical and social space. This is also the doing of inquiry.

Using play as a strategy for this inquiry and the process and performance of GBC provides ample opportunity for experimentation with performance constructs derived from theatrical practices. Butler admits, "my theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to

think that the two are invariably related, chiasmically so, and that a reconsideration of the speech act as an instance of power invariably draws attention to both its theatrical and linguistic dimensions" (2007, n.p.).

"[T]heatre is... a place which exhibits what a human body is, what it does, what it is capable of."

"Theatre is a practice in which societies negotiate around what the body is and means."

(Shepherd, 2006, p. 1)

Culture is what we do. We are always already a part of it. This project is a performance of culture. Techniques of ethnographic and participant observer research in the field of performance studies are appropriate for such a study.

> Performance and phenomenology propose that the world is fundamentally mysterious as well as the site of all that we can know. They are modes of thinking and embodied engagement with the world that invite ambiguity instead of identification, and that locate the stakes of grasping that world in our urgent and inconclusive contact with others.
>
> (Bleeker, Sherman, & Nedelkopoulou, 2015, p. 1)

Performance and phenomenology appear to go hand in hand through our embodied experiences and in Practice as Research (PaR). "Phenomenology is performed, not just applied" (Bleeker et al., 2015). The questions I posed in discussing the use of performance constructs as models for examining GBC concern interactions between players and players and between players and audience members. Asking how audience members encounter a GBC fits within Bleeker et al's description of

phenomenology as concerned with "the structures of experience and perception" and speaking "to fundamental concerns of performance-making" (p. 4). Phenomenological analysis "aims also for an interpretation of the phenomenon that discloses, however partially, the lived meaning, significance, and nonneutral value it has for those who engage it" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 160).We just start. "Learning phenomenology is to learn by doing, by example, and by experience" (Merx, 2015, p. 207). The inquiry is in the performance, in the practice, in the doing. "Practice pertains to the meandering, improvisational acts of individuals who must move through the systemized world of collective schemes and images" (Morris, 1995, p. 572). Morris notes that the performative context is the social and political context of the body. Performative inquiry uses the body as a site of knowledge. We use our bodies to think, to experience, to understand.

Write through it.
Talk through it.
Draw through it.
Walk through it.

I record parts of my process and performance in images and text. I use the audio and visual recordings as data to be mined, as sparkers of memory, and as material for artmaking. Experiences recorded are not the same as the embodied

SIDE NOTE: I wrote the notes to the left referring to ways to do research. But during the exam process, I realized the actions are experienced through the body. Is "it" research or body or both? What else could it be? How do we begin?

performance. Storytelling has the capacity to show and tell a fuller picture. It is performative. Traditionally, ethnography involves much note-taking and transcribing. It still does, *but what are the potential embodied processes that can be used in my inquiry?* GBC entails material encounters with play and chance encounter improvisation. Bodies are materials of play. They are not raw but inscribed with meaning through experience.

> *How does one tell a story?* It can be in words, images, and/or objects. I collaborate to tell stories through costumes. The objective of a cosplay can range from creating and portraying a visually accurate likeness of a character's source rendition to themed adaptations of characters, such as Steampunk Princess Leia, to GBCs and everything in between. Fidelity is subjective and not always the goal. Knowing audiences have a frame of reference regarding the source material, whereas unknowing audiences assess and appreciate the current context and the product without a reference to the source. Both groups use intertextuality (and intergraphicality) to read (and to view) and to interpret and respond to the cosplay and player. Each person's (re)interpretation is a story.

Narrative collage is "the shattering of the narrative line" (Denzin, 2003, p. 87). It is nonlinear, which is appropriate for the presentation of nonlinear processes, such as many of those in ABR and PaR. Time and space are fractured and compressed on a page. The text can be almost anything, "a collage, a montage, with photographs, blank spaces, poems, monologues, dialogues, voice-overs, and interior streams of consciousness" (p. 87). These nonlinear forms have the ability to indicate the passage of time,

transformation, and movement through space. Improvisation, experimentation, and play are useful strategies in developing a personal style of narrative collage. Narrative collage is a form of performance writing. As researchers who want our work to have an impact beyond our reach, we must have a text that can be disseminated, evaluated, and used. In this time of proliferated multi-media, performance writing stands out as visual, textual, moving, reflexive, and poly-vocal at once on a page. “It may look distinctive on the page, perhaps set in double or triple column and using unusual spacing between words and lines” ... “It may combine several different types of texts, such as poetry, first-person reflections, quotations from scholarly works” (Denzin, 2003, p. 94). When submitting a report on performance as research, a form of PaR, performance writing can be a rewarding and appropriate technique.

Section 2: UNDERPINNINGS

Each project starts somewhere with something. There needs to be a base, a grounding, a foundation from which to build. And that place, person, thought, or experience is affected by its own histories and context. In this section, I describe the conceptual influences of this research and my position within it.

In costuming we start with a thought or design question. We receive parameters such as the text of a play, the director's concept, the budget, and eventually a performer or set of performers with which to work. Performers have bodies that wear the costumes. Costumes within a theatre context contribute to the storytelling and the defining of characters. On numerous occasions I have been told how much a costume affects the performer's ability to find and feel character and the effective telling of the story. I hear this from performers in fittings when they put the costumes on for the first time and from directors after the first dress rehearsal. Costumes support the production/artwork and the performers. Creating costumes becomes a collaboration among bodies, materials (visual and textual), and experiences. As costumers, we use the underpinnings that are appropriate for the desired silhouette. Underpinnings in costuming include foundation garments - such as corsets, binders, push-ups, Spanx, and shapers to frameworks such as bustles, crinolines, and the like – to emphasize the silhouette and to support the costume. The same can be said of the theoretical underpinnings and foundations of research. The

conceptual frameworks of a study are the foundation garments of the research. They are the basis, the grounding, the starting point. Layers act on, through, and with each other to create the whole experience, the costume, meaning. The costume/research without the framework does not function in the same way. It can be distracting or misleading. The foundation supports the inquiry as a foundation garment supports the costume and the performer. A corset affects the posture, stance, and movement of a performer as the conceptual framework affects the research and the researcher. But a corset, or any foundation garment, needs to be the right fit for the performer and the character. In this way, the performer/researcher affects the foundation.

As the researcher, I affect this research through my body, my positionality, and the methodologies and methods employed. I am a white, cisgender woman. My body has experienced just over forty years of an artful life. I did not present as a girly girl or a tomboy growing up. I was the only girl in my class throughout elementary school that took dance lessons and was torn between being a ballerina or an astronaut. I dressed in khakis, a blue button-down shirt with sleeves rolled, a cream sweater vest, and a coordinating striped necktie to my college scholarship interview. I sported a more casual version day-to-day in high school which included denim or flannel over shirts and desert boots. In college, I typically donned overalls or an A-line jumper and platform heels. I wore a tulle confection of a wedding dress that made me feel like a fairy princess. It was the exact opposite of what I ever envisioned. My weight has fluctuated my whole life, even before giving birth to two children. Embracing my soft mom body has been a challenge at times. Taking taekwondo classes has helped me find my strength and de-

stress over the past couple of years. Dressing the characters within stories is my art and my craft. I know what I should wear to flatter my figure and what I want to wear to tell my story, but I do not make that a priority. It is sort of like the cobbler's children that do not have shoes. I am the costume designer without appropriate clothing beyond the studio and the random opening night. *What do I want* to *know?* That is a big question with no simple answer. I view cosplay as a creative outlet for many who may not otherwise be making art. It is an act of expression, of play, and of community. Cosplay is a venue where artistic talent and effort are on display and democratized for those who may not consider themselves artists. Stakeholders include participants, educators, researchers, and those interested in play, community, popular culture, materiality, and art/meaning-making.

Research Questions:

- Why do women participate in GBC?
- What are their motivations?
- What gaps in desire are being filled by participating in GBC?
- What does/can this mean in the world?

Research Objectives:

- To uncover insights into female GBC including why women participate, their motivations/interests/expectations, and what it gives players that they do not

experience in real life.

- To investigate GBC as a performance and a performative form of communication that can describe and construct or change our social reality and the potential impacts of embodiment, agency, and acculturation when participating in or studying GBC.

- To explore how the phenomenon of cosplay through its material culture can generate new understandings of how and why players engage with a clump of popular culture that are different from analyses that can be gained through ethnography, survey, or visual analyses. When we experience/explore material culture we interrogate five qualities in particular - 1) the shifting nature of material objects, 2) our habits of looking, 3) ideologies associated with the object, 4) codes that condense and carry knowledge, 5) values, beliefs, and expectations. When material culture can be worn, an interactive embodied performance can be experienced between the maker and the player (in cosplay, the maker and player is often the same person), the player and the object/s, the player and the audience, the player and fellow players, the player and cultural texts. These communities of play collaborate to interpret and reinterpret the performance and the material culture.

- To reveal how participating in or examining GBC can be an entry point for discussing social issues related to gender, sex, power, race, class, visual and cultural texts. Using the material culture of GBC as a pedagogical tool can

facilitate different ways of knowing and a consideration for how such literacies are acquired.

- To develop further research questions related to community, identity, and creativity.

The work does not end with this study. This is the beginning of an ongoing research agenda that is meant to be read and used and continued. In the following three sections, I will discuss the specific theoretical underpinnings of this research. The theories of performativity, adaptation, and play inspire me to pursue this line of inquiry and influence how I approach this project from research questions, methodologies, methods, and beyond.

Performativity

Performativity is the capacity of communication to not only describe a social reality, but to actively construct or change it in the process (Austin, 1962; Butler, 2007). Communication can be clothing/costume, gestures, movements, speech, interactions, stories. *What is the role of performativity in gender bending cosplay (GBC)? How can GBC act as a form of communication to describe and construct or change social reality? How may the undertaking and exploring of GBC be impacted by considerations of embodiment, agency, and acculturation? How might models of performance constructs that are not centered around pre-written or prepared texts or scripts be used in an*

examination of GBC? How could techniques of performance ethnography and participant observer research further a study of GBC?

GBC is a conscious, voluntary act, a performance. Whether intentional or not, GBC plays with the sex/gender norms that are established and perpetuated through gender performativity. A tension between corporeal and abstract/imaginative, physical representation and the represented is present. As such, gender-bending simultaneously emphasizes and challenges gender binaries, gender roles, and expectations. "We - as in everyone - have bodies, and not simply one. Each of us has virtual and imagined, and seen and seeing bodies, bodies in action and constrained and displaced and dominant and dominated" (Bleeker, 2015, p. 15). GBC is performative in that it is communicative, collaborative, and interactive. It "speaks" about social realities, possibilities, and constraints.

Embodiment is "the lived body as, at once, both an objective subject and a subjective object: a sentient, sensual, and sensible ensemble of materialized capacities and agency that literally and figurally makes sense of, and to, both ourselves and others" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 2). Body is always already part of the world we perceive/experience. The body is an object of the social and an object of the self. "All artistic action originates in the living flesh. But the flesh is also a material on which societal structures and values are imprinted" (Falk, 2012, p. 12). We are co-constituted through our interactions with the world, of which we are a part. Our lived experiences shape how we interpret and respond to new experiences. Our lived experiences are not separate from our bodies (Shepherd, 2006). Performativity works with/through the lived body.

My inquiry focuses on self-identified women who participate in GBC. The female body cannot be separated from its experience, its participation in GBC. Butler stated, “The body is only known through its gendered appearance” (1988, p. 406). There is no set of universal experiences of being a woman in the world. A body serves as a vantage point for perceiving the world (Conroy, 2010). But Young attempts to clarify what “feminine existence” could mean.

> In accordance with de Beauvoir's understanding, I take "femininity" to designate not a mysterious quality or essence which all women have by virtue of their being biologically female. It is, rather, a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves. Defined as such, it is not necessary that any women be "feminine"--that is, it is not necessary that there be distinctive structures and behavior typical of the situation of women. (1980, p. 140)

For Young, femininity refers to societal expectations, conventions, norms. She is explaining a part of gender performativity. Our experiences are lived through our bodies. And bodily presence is always mediated (Sobchack, 2004).

> An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her,

but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. (Young, 1980, p. 154)

GBC is highly visual, yet multi-sensory. The sounds and textures are particularly potent in the process phase and in the con space. The body, the costume, and the poses embody the presence of the character. They communicate separately and together through interactions with others. GBC, communication on and through a lived body, is co-constituted through those interactions.

SIDE NOTE: "Con space" refers to the areas of a building or buildings where a fan-centric convention is being produced. To lesser degrees it can encompass the rest of the building and its surrounding area as players and attendees pass through them.

> For dedicated cosplayers, cosplay is not just about dressing up but also about transformation and translation. It is a complex process involving the transference of the source character from the page and the imagination onto the body. Cosplayers endeavor to transform the visuality of their body into the visuality of a fictional and usually fantastical other. This cannot be a literal transformation; their material reality ultimately limits and bounds their transformation. (Kirkpatrick, 2015, para. 4.5)

The process of translation, or adaptation, and transformation is an act of creation and interaction that is sensual and open to (re)interpretation by audiences and fellow players across multiple stages or platforms. The material product of the GBC will always already

be a costume and the living body that inhabits it. The body may be that of the maker and possess another layer of experience and potentially a deep attachment to the physical costume. *How can embodying a male character as female affect the player? Embolden, empower, return of the gaze?*

The costume is not simply a decoration for the body. The costume is performative. It "works as a metaphor for the relationship between the body and identity" (Monks, 2010, p. 37). It communicates dedication, labor, pride, affinity, skill, and longing for recognition. Character, gender norms and transgressions, story. Consider the theory of performativity as described by Butler. A cosplay costume is always in a state of becoming. Even when the making of the costume is complete, it will never be the costume worn by a character on screen or the two-dimensional figure on the page of a comic book, just like the player's body will never be two dimensional. The costume and the body work together to *play* a copy of the character. "The actor's body is, after all, a series of practices rather than a finished object. Actors practice their own bodies by wearing and using costume - and their bodies are also worn and used *by* costumes" (Monks, 2010, p. 33). This symbiotic relationship can produce the illusion of the "real" fictional character. Cosplay, like gender performativity, is the embodiment of a copy of a copy. Success depends on how the body of the player and the costume work/play together and how they interact with and are received by the audience.

What about the costume and the body in GBC specifically? How are the relationships same or different? The GBC costume is in a liminal state. It is the

embodiment of a copy of a copy with the additional adaptation of the bending of the character's gender. The GBC costume diverges from the state of becoming.

> Given that the constructedness of bodies becomes most visible when it deviates from the expectations of the dominant ideology from whence the writer comes, it is not surprising that so much of the work on embodiment and the performative constitution of gender should focus on cases of seemingly ambiguous genders, whether these are institutionalized, temporary, or even theatrical states. (Morris, 1995, p. 570)

GBC (player's body and costume) performs the illusion of gender. Monks (2010) provides a theatrical perspective.

> When actors cross over the borders of identity, their act of crossing can question the very concepts of 'truth' and 'nature'. Theatre invokes and invents bodies on the stage and in the audience. Cross-dressing allows us to see the connection between costumed performance, and the concept of 'performativity': the ability of performance not just to imitate, but also to invent and perpetuate further ways of knowing the body. To tamper with the categories of clothing and make-up is to remake bodies and identities. (p. 97)

Imagination is boundless. In theatre, in play, in art-making, we can push past the limits of our everyday realities, or performativities, and experience possibilities and challenge the status quo. And like cosplay in general, success depends on how the body of the player and the costume work/play together and how they interact with and are received by the audience.

Figure 2: Hopkins Gallery

The GBC costume and player are the products of play and imagination. They are also the materials, tools, and participants of play and imagination. *Does the player make the costume, or the costume make the player?* The GBC player is performing the role of a fan through the making and wearing of the costume. One does not work/play without the other. Yet, the costume can function as a cultural text, as material culture on its own to be examined as a part of the phenomenon of GBC. The uninhabited costume can communicate the physical effects of use, construction methods, skill, process, and resources available. So, the player needs the costume, but the costume does not always need the player. It can be viewed and judged without a body inhabiting it. During

the summer of 2018, my cosplay costume was displayed among other costumes for theatrical and adaptive purposes. On the wall beside the costume arranged on a dress form, I presented research and process text and images. Though the body, the maker, the player need to be acknowledged. As Monks (2010) points out, “Costume is that which is perceptually indistinct from the actor’s body, and yet something that can be removed. Costume is a body that can be taken off” (p. 11).

Figure 3: Research Display

Costumes have a material effect on the body, and embodiment is “a radically material condition” (Sobchack, 2004, p. 4). Thinking about embodiment when engaging with GBC seems obvious, but it also feels as though it might spiral out of control and

back on itself. With this in mind, considering embodiment in a practice-led inquiry is a reflexive strategy. The player and the costume

are constituted together and by each other. It is an iterative process. This point is further demonstrated by Monks (2010) in two quotes separated by more than twenty pages of text regarding the instability of costumes and bodies.

"Costume does not remain stable or fully knowable, but rather depends on what we see and how we look at what we see" (p. 6).

"The actor's body is not singular and stable, but rather multiple and continually shifting in its appearance and possibilities" (p. 33).

"The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler, 2007, n.p.). Gender is social, identity is social, discourse is social, existence is social. We are not created in individual vacuums or pods. Our identities are affected by our physicality, our materiality, our surroundings, our cultures. In order to study GBC, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the terms *gender*, *gender performance*, and *gender-bending* as they relate to this inquiry. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is a starting point.

"[G]ender is the variable cultural construction of sex, the myriad and open possibilities of cultural meaning occasioned by a sexed body" (Butler, 2007, p. 152). Entrenched western ideologies and practices perpetuate binarities. Male/Female, Masculine/Feminine, Man/Woman, Patriarchal/Matriarchal. This strains the recognition, acceptance, and understanding of the possibilities of one unified or multiple sexes and/or

genders. There is an uneasiness with ambiguity, with uncertainty. Categorization, norms, and conventions can be comforting and/or limiting to living one's life. Attempting to make a clear delineation between the terms sex and gender, one might refer to sex as the biological and anatomical characteristics of a person and gender as the culturally constructed identity of a person. But the terms anatomy and sex operate within the same social networks as gender. *Can the terms be separated?* "Butler has collapsed the sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender. All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence" (Salih, p. 55). Sex/gender is typically assigned, or declared, at birth and reinforced through our lives as social beings in a social world. This is the performativity of gender. It is a cultural act, a repetitive doing to, with, and through the mind-bodies.

We have a problem with having to use language (a part of the regulatory cultural regime) to describe mind-bodies and their social lives that are not "neatly" categorized within our heteronormative binary system. *Intersexual, one sex, transsexual... Agender, Feminine, Genderqueer, Masculine, Third Gender, Transgender, Two-Spirit…* Butler (2004) asserts the body is not reducible to language. "Language emerges from the body, constituting an emission of sorts. The body is that upon which language falters, and the body carries its own signs, its own signifiers, in ways that remain largely unconscious" (p. 198). The social life of the body is carried out through a complex relationship of verbal and nonverbal acts.

> We say something, and mean something by what we say, but we also do something with our speech, and what we do, how we act upon another with our

> language, is not the same as meaning we consciously convey. It is in this sense that the significations of the body exceed the intentions of the subject. (p. 199)

We do not "do" gender alone. It is co-constituted with others filtered through our individual and collective past experiences. This reminds me of Barthes's 1967 essay *The Death of the Author*. The author, or artist, or social being, is not the sole authority of her/his/their text/art/expression of identity. We are not in control of the (re)interpretations of our words and actions outside of ourselves.

How is gender interpreted (or done to us) by others? What are the signs or codes provided? Our bodies are physically marked by nature and culture. Our sexed bodies possess expected physical characteristics. We may emphasize, hide, or alter these characteristics through dress, adornment, or surgery. But gender is performative, a repetition of norms. It is not a choice, a role one accepts to play, or a costume one decides to wear. It is involuntary. It precedes the subject (Butler, 1993). "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 2007, p. 45).

Butler's theory of performativity might be best articulated in contrast with performance. Performance is a conscious, voluntary *action*. Performativity is an unconscious, continual, compulsory *process*. Both performance and performativity produce effects beyond and outside of the subject. Performance is a show, a spectacle. Performativity is part of cultural discourse, in which discourse is considered the repetition of an event, not solely a speech act. Performativity is the reification of social

relations, ideologies, and norms that precede the constitution of the subject, the "I". "Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power" (Butler, 1993, p. 17).

The repetition of cultural norms, such as sex/gender binaries, is a performative process. Butler challenges the notion of an original or true gender, declaring the illusory origin is as performative as the copy. She also acknowledges the "difficulty of determining where the biological, the psychic, the discursive, the social begin and end" (Butler, 2004, p. 185). Gender is constructed and performatively established. Gender is not absolute or arbitrary. Gender cannot be discovered. Gender is something that is done by, to, and with persons within a framework of normativity "produced in the service of other kinds of regulations" (p. 53). Normativity is a double-edged sword. It can mean the "aims and aspirations that guide us" and/or a coercive "process of normalization" (p. 206). It draws us together through exclusion, resistance, opposition, and shaming taboos. "A performative 'works' to the extent that it *draws on and covers ove*r the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force" (Butler, 1993, p. 19). Norms set codes, procedures, and expectations over time. They set the scene.

The "I", the subject is the effect of the repetitions of norms, of performativity. "Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power," produced within gaps, or pockets, opened in the

process of performativity (Butler, 1993, p. 22). Meaning is made in between, in gaps, in pockets. This is related to Foucault's (1972) decision to "ignore no form of discontinuity, break, threshold, or limit" (p. 31). There is no real, actual, natural, or true gender. There are spaces between what is expected of gender and what is realized, what is "done" as gender; spaces of agency, possibility, and freedom. *If a person* "never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate," *can the gaps ever be closed* (Butler, 1993, p. 22)*? And if so, how and by whom?*

> If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. (Butler, 2007, p. 45)

This notion of an ongoing process that is continually situated in the middle with no beginning or end is similar to the Deleuzian (1987) concept of the rhizome made up of lines, not points, and that resists repetition, categorization, and characterization. This resistance is in a symbiotic relationship with cultural norms allowing for disruption and transformation, agency, and possibility. Construction and deconstruction are the scenes of agency (Salih, 2002).

Expressions precede identity. Expressions make identity. "Performativity, then, is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms" (Butler, 1993, p. 28). These terms have symbolic power. Identity is political (Sahil, 2002). The political is theatrical. "Gender is

an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 2007, p. 190). Though the terms and the process are unstable, there is no promise of subversion; but it is possible.

Is gender subversion conscious? Is it a choice? Is it a performance rather than part of the performative process? Can subversion be unconscious? Is gender subversion an undermining, destruction, a deconstruction, and/or a deterritorialization? Butler (2007) states the performance of gender subversion cannot be seen/read as an indication of one's sexuality or sexual practices.

> Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact. Thus, no correlation can be drawn, for instance, between drag or transgender and sexual practice, and the distribution of hetero-, bi-, and homo-inclinations cannot be predictably mapped onto the travels of gender bending or changing. (2007, n.p.)

Mainstream American fashions of the early 1990s tended to be gender flexible, or unisex (toward the typically masculine), such as Calvin Klein, the Gap, and grunge aesthetics. Research writing of the time was predominantly stiff, compartmentalized, and inaccessible to a general population. Both fashion trends and research have shifted over time. A fairly recent issue of Vogue (August 2017) featured more gender fluid fashion that includes elements once considered to be too feminine for menswear. Research writing is more accessible, relatable, open, and therefore, more efficacious. In some

aspects of our cultural practices, we seem to be accepting and even embracing what Butler called "unknowingness" (2004). It can be advantageous to leave yourself and your research and your writing open to unknown or ambiguous possibilities, to leave questions unanswered. I find inspiration in the work of Yinka Shonibare, MBE. He discussed his art education and Barthes in a 2005 interview with Anthony Downey.

SIDE NOTE: The comments about fashion can find one falling, falling, falling down a rabbit hole of questions and more questions. These issues are on the periphery of, or tangential to, my inquiry. Critical inquiry could address the commodification of fashion and the normalization of subversion, the assimilation of the feminine body within unisex and menswear styles for women, the shaming or feminization of men who dress well. The language to describe these phenomena is problematic. It falls short.

> The main preoccupation within my art education was the construction of signs as outlined in Roland Barthes's Mythologies. So, the idea of the theatrical for me is actually about art as the construction of a fiction, art as the biggest lie. What I want to suggest is that there is no such thing as a natural signifier, that the signifier is always constructed—in other words, that what you represent things with is a form of mythology. Representation itself comes into question. I think that theater enables you to really emphasize that fiction. (Downey, 2005, para. 4)

In theatre, in art, in life, we co-construct our realities. Nothing is "natural." Even performativity is a construction of reality. Unlike gender performativity, gender-bending is a performance. It is a conscious, voluntary act. Whether intentional or not, it plays with the sex/gender norms that are established and perpetuated through gender performativity. As such, gender-bending simultaneously emphasizes and challenges gender binaries, gender roles, and expectations. GBC and similar phenomena do just that.

In this research, I planned to concentrate on self-identified women adapting male characters to visibly female versions of the same characters. I acknowledge that the definition of GBC is problematic as it uses sex and gender interchangeably. This demonstrates the performativity of gender and how we are limited by our language. Similar, but different cosplay practices include crossplay and Sailor Bubba. Crossplay is a term used to mean GBC on occasion, but entails a combination of cross-dressing, costume, and role-play, hence the term crossplay. Describing male to female, or M2F, crossplay Leng (2013) states, "When men crossplay as women, they are not merely donning femininity, but hyper-femininity, revealing the socially constructed nature of gender roles yet concomitantly reinforcing them" (p. 90). Even in female to male (F2M) crossplay, the goal seems to be complete visual transformation of one's outwardly visual gender to that of the character. All visual markers of the player's gender are masked, bound, tucked, and concealed to create the appearance of the character without revealing the physically gendered appearance of the player. Crossplay has been compared and related to drag performances. Though the costuming techniques are similar, and they are both performances of *signs* of gender, further study would need to be conducted in order

to clearly distinguish or relate the two phenomena beyond surface impressions. The Sailor Bubba concept is a grown, visibly (heteronormative) masculine male dressed in an apparent "girly-girl's" costume without bending the gender of the character (Literally Media Ltd., 2015, n.p.). I would not characterize this as GBC. The resultant appearance is that of a man in a woman's costume. This comes across to many as ridiculous, out-of-place. But a woman could wear a "man's costume" and perhaps blend in. Sailor Bubba brings this contradiction of effect and acceptance to the surface. *Is he a super fan? Is he mocking fans? Is he knowingly engaging in parody or social commentary?* This stands in contrast from GBC and crossplay as neither the visual sex/gender identity of the character nor the player is adapted or disguised. It is a curious phenomenon. *Is this gender-fluid cosplay?*

Adaptation

"Fans expect to be able to play with and adapt content and arguably, in the digital era, being a fan is demonstrated by the extent to which one adapts and generates adapted/adaptive content" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 186).

According to Hutcheon (2013), adaptation is a dual process consisting of the interpretation of a source text(s) and the creation of something new, something that is one's own. The act of adaptation involves appropriation, or salvaging, and filtration with a creative reinterpretation of the source is a goal. Fidelity within adaptation can be subjective and is not necessarily the point. Any adaptation will be marked with traces of previous related source texts. This is a kind of palimpsestic intertextuality, or a shaping of

a text's meaning by/though the reworking of another text. Cosplay, or (re)interpretation of a character, is a collaborative act between player, audience, and source(s). Cosplay involves an ephemeral performance that requires a considerable amount of material culture, objects, or costumes and props that necessitate investments of thought, time, and money from the individual player. Video, photos, and social media can document the performance, but it is essentially a live, interactive art form. When observing players from a material culture perspective, it is, at first, all about appearances. The initial, surface impression matters. Knowing audiences have a frame of reference regarding the source material, whereas unknowing audiences assess and appreciate the current context and the product without a reference to the source. The objective of a cosplay can range from creating and portraying a visually accurate likeness of a character's source rendition to themed adaptations of characters, such as Steampunk Princess Leia, to GBC and everything in between.

To adapt is to fit, be it parameters, bodies, and/or circumstances. Play strategies often set rules of the game.

Play

Cosplay has "play" in its name. Play cannot be ignored.

> "It is a way of being in the world" (Sicart, 2014, p. 3).

GBC is performative. It is a lived, embodied experience that communicates through the doing of the phenomenon, through play, art-making, gesture, stance, interaction, interpretation, collaboration, and adaptation. This "doing" constructs and deconstructs

our social reality. It territorializes, deterritorializes, and reterritorializes physical and social space. This is also the doing of inquiry. These repetitions, these motions form grooves within a culture that territorialize concepts of gender. They adjust over time and/or become ruts. Instances of disruption and transformative possibility, of hope, deterritorialize the norm and open, or rupture, creating lines of flight.

Gender performances, including GBC, can support regulatory cultural norms through bodily practices. But GBC is play, play in costume, play with roles, play through cultural texts. Butler (2004) expresses that even *gender* can be play. It can also be fantasy.

> Fantasy structures relationality, and it comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself. Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification - depending on their interactions - and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future. (p. 217)

Play and fantasy are integral to human existence. They reveal possibilities and question constraints of normative cultural practices. Perhaps play is a discursive strategy of subversion and of survival within performativity.

Cosplay can be viewed as a form of social or critical play. Critical play, specifically, is a non-linear process of thinking critically through a medium. It allows participants to understand, assess, and modify the rules of a game or activity. This combination of critique, practice, and ambiguity has the potential to reveal

possibilities of meaning and meaning-making. Cosplay is critical play and a collaborative adaptation. It involves a reinterpretation of a cultural text and the creation of something new that is worn, performed, and shared while retaining traces of the source, or inspiration, text. This something new involves the multi-sensory mediation of material culture through various platforms or stages. The creation should not be considered independent of the process and vice versa.

SIDE NOTE: According to Flanagan (2009), "Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces" (p. 6). Games and other forms of play can be designed as social activism. Even cosplay has the potential to bring about social awareness and change.

Each one of us experiences the world through filters formed by our own past experiences. I feel it is worth repeating Rollings (2015) here. "Interpretations yield reinterpretations, the stuff of research, and this matters a great deal" (December 3, para. 8). Much can be gained from each of these interpretations; but it seems that the materiality of cosplay is not developed as the center of these inquiries, but rather employed as the embellishment.

It is a creative endeavor that has the potential to speak to communities of play and practice - artists, performers, participants, and viewers on multiple levels. There is an entanglement among these ideas, communities, and material culture.

Understanding how and why a material choice was made can illuminate the motivations, desires, skills, and dedication of the player. Participants of cosplay and particularly cosplay contests cannot untangle the creation of material culture from the interactions with material culture from the performance, or physical and material interpretations, of cosplay.

> Entrants must perform a short skit to entertain – and in true Bahktinian fashion, usually horrifically embarrassing – while the judges evaluate their costume based on aspects of proficiency, accuracy to the character, or originality. Awards are then presented for best workmanship, and best presentation – that is, the best recreation and the best inhabitation. (Frey, 2008, p. 7)

Not all cosplay contests require a skit. But when role-playing the character is central to the judging criteria, the physical embodiment, presentation, performance, theatricality, and inhibition score points with the judges and the audience.

There are multiple entry points and points of view, those of the makers, the users, history, culture (however one chooses to define it), and context(s). Making and using objects become ways of knowing something more fully. Objects possess power and agency defining us as makers and users as much as we define them. The life cycles of things are dynamic though they objectify our past presence. Our understanding of objects can shift as they "circulate through people's activities and can contextually produce new types of activities, objects, and events" (Tilley, 2007, p. 61). Lamerichs (2013) emphasizes that a cosplay costume can have an afterlife through

repeated wearing, display, nostalgia, gifting or selling, and re-creation extending the life cycles, values, and agency of the objects.

Popular culture invites participation and play. I think there are multiple continuums of how one displays their fandom. It is not linear, yet rhizomatic. It can encompass cosplay, encyclopedic knowledge, consumption and/or production of visual and material culture, and many things around and in between. The various communities of play are entangled within their fandom(s) and their expressions of fandom and their consumption of the clump(s) of popular culture in question. When a clump is embraced by fans it can become the inspiration for communities of play surrounding the fandom. This site or clump becomes deterritorialized as fans play with and within it creating lines of flight that cross, overlap, and entangle. Fans reterritorialize clumps of popular culture by creating communities of play that surround an activity of expression such as cosplay, fan fiction, fan art, consumption of merchandise, and attendance at conventions for example. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994) lines of territoriality are significant and make intention/meaning. It is this play with popular culture through fan production that makes and expresses meanings beyond those of the source materials or contexts.

Section 3: FIBERS

"My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 235).

Costumes are worn on the body, but quickly become part of it, in some ways inseparable from it and the considerations of character, performance, and performativity. My body and my positionality are the base of this inquiry along with the theoretical underpinnings as the frameworks, or foundation garments, that shape the body, that shape my perspective, my approach. Costuming and fashion can be so personal in fit, comfort, design, and expression. This blurs the lines of where the body, the person, ends, and the costume begins. The body, the foundations, and the fabrics inform and influence each other in the creation and interpretation of a costume. This project involves three intertwined research methodologies, Practice as Research (PaR), Arts-Based Research (ABR), and Material Culture. Perhaps it is all of these at once, or maybe more of one than the others at any given moment. The three methodologies overlap and twist together like the spun fibers of the threads that are layered, felted, knitted, crocheted, fused, and/or woven to create the textiles from which we make costumes. In this chapter, I describe each methodology and their related methods and how they function as a fabric of this inquiry.

Practice as Research (PaR)... or Performative Research

We are social beings. Our practices, our processes construct our cultures, our realities. PaR is an amphibious approach that melds the worlds of text and image, participation and observation, creating and studying/knowing. PaR

> involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect to the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry. (Nelson, 2013, p. 8-9)

Though Nelson focused on the practice of the arts, practice can be teaching, nursing, counseling, or any other "engaged action or activity organized around a shared practical understanding" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 239). Procedures from a researcher's field of study and/or *practice* are employed as key methods of inquiry to generate or uncover knowledge and understanding within, through, and about the discipline and transdisciplinary fields. A central idea is the practical nature of both the research processes and the anticipated outcomes. As mentioned in the introduction, both are meant to be used. Costuming, my practice, is used as a research practice/process, and the outcomes are meant to be used by teachers, students, researchers, and anyone interested in issues of mean-making, identity, gender, and popular culture. I wonder what will happen if I think of costuming at the level of the stitch and what that could mean.

PaR methods include any and all methods, techniques, and practices related to an artist/researcher's artform or discipline.

> Since the researcher's relationship to the object of study (material or mental) is of central concern in practice-based methodologies, they are in accord with Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity. As a result of this reflexive process, methodologies in artistic research are necessarily emergent and subject to repeated adjustment, rather than remaining fixed throughout the process of enquiry. (Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p. 6)

Simply put, reflexivity is critical self-reflection, remembering your stance and its influence. An artist/researcher reflects on how her presence in the research setting affects the phenomenon being studied. These reflections become data for analysis and part of the research report. In this study, I will use costuming as what Nelson (2013) terms the "key method of inquiry" (p. 8). Costuming is my practice within the studio and within the classroom. Aspects of costuming combine character analysis, historical/contextual research, sketching, rendering, sourcing and purchasing materials, collaborative interactions, reflection, adjustment, pattern-making, stitching, fitting, accessorizing, and finishing. Costuming is an interpretation, or adaptation, of a character, idea, feeling, and so forth. Other PaR methods can incorporate performance, object analysis, discourse analysis, peer review, reflective writing or process journal, ethnography, dialogic interchange, artistic audit, interviews, observation, and visual content analysis. This list is by no means exhaustive.

"[PaR] arises only where an insightful practice is submitted as a substantial part of the evidence of a research inquiry" (Nelson, 2013, p. 9). Yet, there is some debate on practice-*based* versus practice-*led* research (Sullivan, 2010). Terms of qualitative research, after all, are not static. Practice-based research requires an artifact, or product, of practice to illuminate the research; while practice-led research uses the process of creating to decode practices (Candy, 2006). Another distinction made between practice-based and practice-led inquiries focuses on whether the methods search inwards or outwards from the practitioner-researcher. "Practice-based research is an 'infolding' process of critical reflective and creative action that involves 'looking inside' for possibilities within one's practice and is highly adaptable as a research methodology or a teaching philosophy (Sullivan, 2009)" (Sullivan & Gu, 2017, p. 55). Practice-led research is considered "an 'unfolding' process that combines the investigative manner of the practitioner, the imaginative space of the studio, and the innovative challenges" of an artist/researcher's practice to uncover networks that drive and influence the discipline and cultural practices (p. 56). Finally, practice-based researchers often start with a problem or questions to be investigated, whereas practice-led researchers view the process as more emergent and "construct experiential starting points from which practice follows" (Haseman, 2006, p. 100). Performative research (sometimes used interchangeably with PaR) is yet another possible term to characterize or categorize this inquiry. "At the 'performance turn' it is now widely recognized that we 'do' knowledge, we don't just think it" (Nelson, 2013, p. 66). And by applying knowledge, we 'do' understanding. Performative

research is experiential and multi-method led by practice and expresses outcomes in the material forms of practice (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Haseman, 2006). It places equal emphasis on the performative and the material aspects of practice. For this inquiry, I am using the term PaR as an umbrella term, as the strategies employed under each label are entwined and inform each other.

Arts-Based Research (ABR)

The arts provide us with different ways of knowing, of researching what it is to be human. ABR honors many differences in interpretation alongside improvisational creative activity or play.

> Rolling (2015, December 1), an arts educator and scholar, defined the arts-based research paradigm as "a way of knowing self in relationship with lived experience and lived relationships than can easily encompass or hybridize with other ways of knowing or interpretations of the human condition" (para. 3). Inquiry is always already an aspect of artmaking. We often create to understand a culture, a relationship, an object. That is ABR. It plays with ideas, connects them in innovative ways, generates new understandings, and makes and communicates meaning. It has the potential to make research more accessible (read *relatable*), and therefore, more efficacious.

An arts-based research paradigm privileges "differences in interpretation" (Rolling, 2015, December 1, para. 3). This coincides with the Deleuzian concept

of art as encounter, a cycle of interpreting and disrupting. I imagine a fuzzy Slinky® with seemingly random spokes, or tangents, that may begin new Slinkies that may have spokes that begin new Slinkies and/or may run into another spoke or Slinky®.

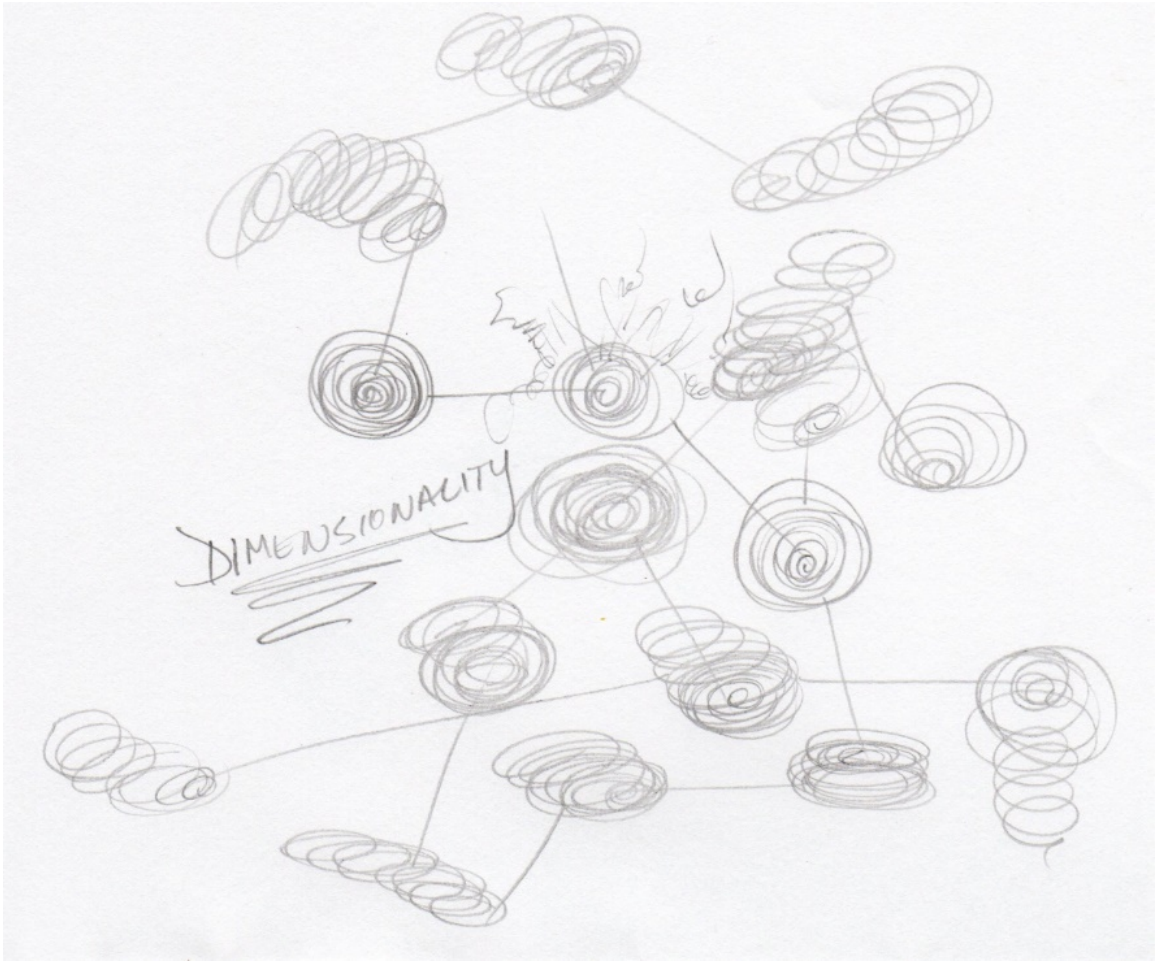

Figure 4: Conceptual sketch of a dimensional rhizome or fuzzy Slinky®

This may seem a bit more chaotic than typical descriptions of rhizomes. I am working through the idea of cycles, spirals, reflexivity, twists and turns (the unexpected), spinning interpretants, and dimensionality in experience and

research. An encounter is something that makes us think, bringing “a variety of elements and forces into relation with one another” (Parr, 2010, p. 40). Is not all art then an encounter, including costuming? Each one of us experiences the world through filters formed by our own past experiences. An audience can view an adapted performance, or cosplay, as knowing or unknowing regarding the source text(s) (Hutcheon, 2013). One viewer may be a big fan of the character being cosplayed, another may only have a peripheral experience with the character, and another still may have never heard of or seen the character. Each response is valid as his/her interpretation of the performance/encounter. This should allow for a greater range of what is accepted as cosplay across communities.

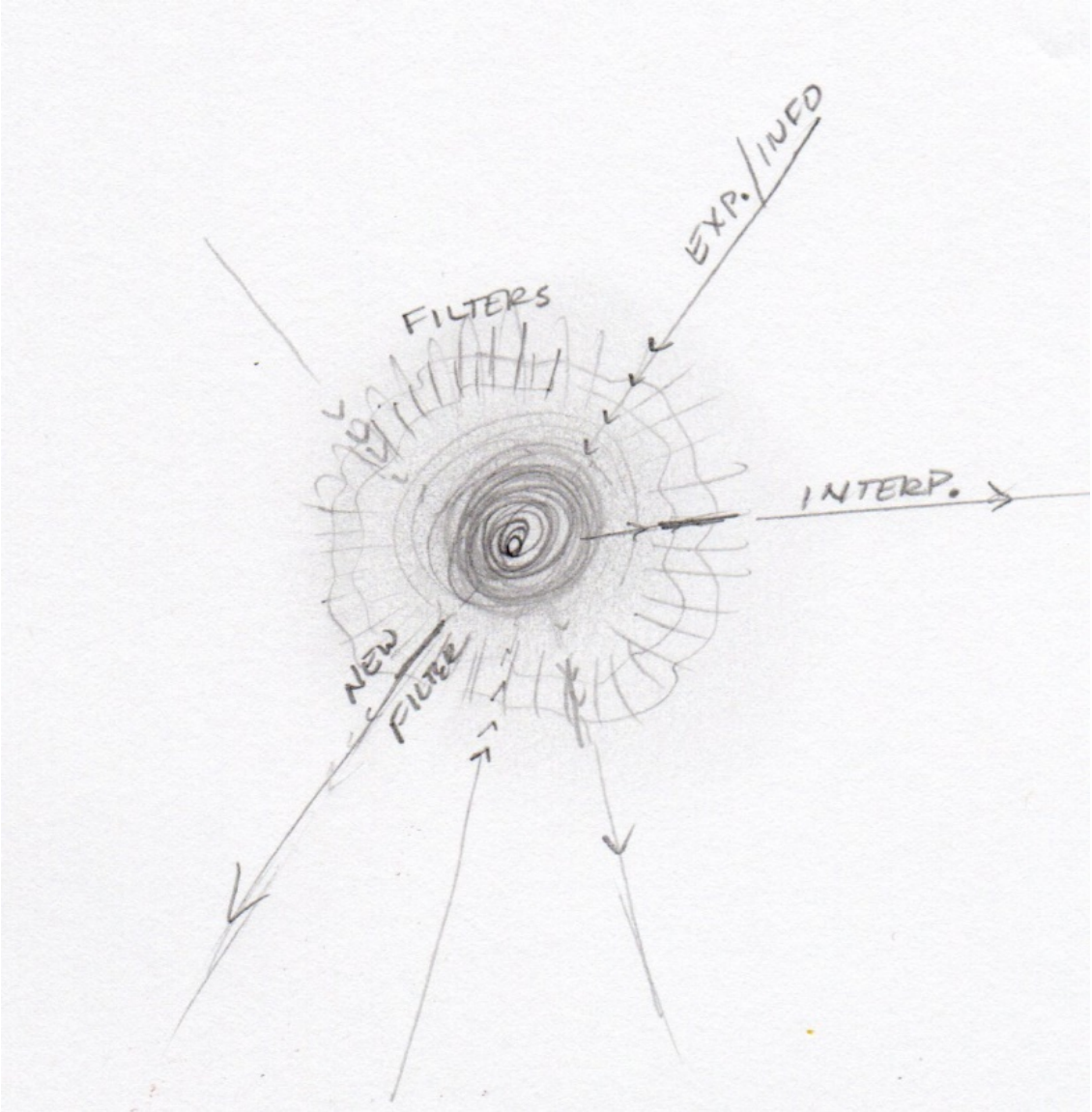

Figure 5: Conceptual sketch of how our filters affect our interpretations of experiences and how our experiences affect our filters of perception

Rolling also describes research as systematic play. Play is a place of experimentation, exploration, uncertainty, and process much like performative research. An arts-based research paradigm also fits within a model of action

research. The basic concept of action research is a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, REPEAT. It is a reflective and interactive art and research practice.

The term ABR encompasses research approaches that use arts practices as "tools to study an issue" and those that involve "an investigation into the arts themselves" (Greenwood, 2012, p. 2-3). It is common, however, to use a combination of the two strategies as they are interrelated, so a clear distinction is unnecessary. Both PaR and ABR methodologies focus on the processes of inquiry. Varying degrees of emphasis are placed upon the resulting artifacts/products. This can be problematic when describing ABR to evaluators unfamiliar with the practice. *So, how do we evaluate ABR?*

> There is no one set of criteria for judging the artistic quality of a work of arts-based research just as there is no one paradigm for the beauty of a work of art – for some, the beauty of a work of art is in the aesthetics of its forms and the mastery of its techniques; for others, it is in the authenticity and expressiveness of voice; and for still others in the incisiveness of its social critique. (Rolling, 2010, p. 105)

The sharing of practices and the generation of understandings become central to the presentation of the research. "Those who view art practice as a form of research argue that artist-practitioners not only collect input from their creative encounters within the worlds they inhabit but also create profound responses to

these experiences" (Sullivan & Gu, 2017, p. 54). In ABR, both the documentation and the art(ifacts) are judged by knowing and unknowing audiences. The skill of the artist is very important to the creation of "profound responses" and the successful presentation of her research.

ABR is inherently transdisciplinary. It inhabits and crosses the spaces between. There is a significance of place. Sites of ABR should be "natural" to the artform, such as a stage or a studio, a place that is meant for artful thinking, but "that is not bounded by walls or removed from the daily grind of life" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 72). The place of my daily life and practice is the studio. I work and teach in a costume studio at a large, Midwestern university's theatre department, and I share a studio at home with my husband, an author and game designer. This place affects what I see, what I wonder, and what makes me think or feel this or that.

> The studio is where our capabilities of thinking, making, and doing merge amid the interactive and messy multidirectional processes that give rise to our actions. These explorations and exploitations help us make sense of who we are, and how we learn to make meaning from where we are. (Sullivan & Gu, 2017, p. 56)

At the core of this is play. In a studio, one has permission (and is expected) to play with ideas and materials. Play as a strategy establishes parameters, or bendable rules, setting the conditions of play to be conducive to creativity. Play

as a theory leaves room for the unexpected, for experimentation. The process is privileged (Miller, 1973).

Methods of ABR start with the artist-researcher's practice. Whatever the artform - use it. For me this includes costuming, written text, textual and visual analysis, rendering, photos and video, and performance. Other artist-researchers may use drama, fiction, poetry, painting, photography, dance, music, or any other artforms as the key method of inquiry. Qualitative research methods that are not artform-specific are also incorporated into the process, such as mapping, reflective writing or process journaling, interviewing, participant and non-participant observation, document analysis, case study, and discourse analysis. ABR and PaR use a mixture of qualitative research methods as appropriate for the inquiry. On the surface, they may appear to be the same. I see ABR as PaR, but PaR is not necessarily ABR. This comparison relates to how a square is a rectangle, but a rectangle is not necessarily a square. ABR is a type of PaR, like a square is a type of a rectangle.

"The limits of my language are not the limits of my world" (Tilley, 2006, p. 162). Tacit/non-verbal knowledge can be acquired and applied through the processes of both PaR and ABR. Immersing in a practice or an art engages us differently. The mind and body are connected. They work, perform, and play together, not in isolation. The mind-body is material to work with, an element of the practice or artform (Conroy, 2010). The mind-body is not *raw* material, however, as it is an object of the social and

of the self. The actions, experiences, and reflections of the mind-body are critical components of both ABR and PaR.

Material Culture

Material Culture as a methodology investigates the entanglements of humans and objects revealing the metaphors, myths, and other meaning systems that things carry. We use these codes to "read" and understand culture. Experience comes first before any understanding.

> Numerous different perspectives have converged on some version of the idea that subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other. In these different approaches it is accepted that human existence and human social life depend on material things. (Hodder, 2012, p. 16)

This statement ties into the theoretical framework and methodologies previously described. As makers, users, and interpreters of objects, we collaborate in the making of meaning and culture. Material culture as a field is the study of things, but that statement belies the complexity and depth possible of such a study. It strives to be inclusive of full human sensoria and does not privilege the visual sense over the others. Material culture is a term that is broad-based in its meaning and application and describes all made and modified forms, objects, and expressions manifested in the past and in our contemporary world. The material world that surrounds us is rarely neutral. Our material environments help forces of chaos that make life random and disorganized and/or help to give purpose and direction to one's life.

"As an object of study, an artwork is an individually and culturally constructed form and thus can be examined as a source of knowledge" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 71). Focusing on material culture provides opportunities to explore in meaningful and immediate ways the complex contemporary world in which we live. It "centres on the idea that materiality is an integral dimension of culture, and that there are dimensions of social existence that cannot be fully understood without it" (Tilley, 2006, p. 1). When we experience/explore material culture we interrogate five qualities in particular: 1) the shifting nature of material objects, 2) (breaking) our habits of looking, 3) ideologies associated with the object, 4) codes that condense and carry knowledge, 5) values, beliefs, and expectations. This interrogation is multisensory, and the questioning and the objects themselves are seldom neutral. **"**Material things express our relationships and our values" (Miller, 2012, p. 107). Things are part of socio-cultural discourse.

"As a form of human expression, an artwork," or any object, "can be considered to be a site where knowledge is created and meanings are made" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 71). There are multiple entry points and points of view, those of the makers, the users, history, culture (however one chooses to define it), and context(s). Making and using objects become ways of knowing something more fully. Objects possess power and agency defining us as makers and users as much as we define them. The life cycles of things are dynamic though they objectify our past presence. Our understanding of objects can shift as they "circulate through people's activities and can contextually produce new types of activities, objects, and events" (Tilley, 2007, p. 61). *What does it mean and to whom? What does it mean in this or that context? How does*

it represent what it means? How and why does it mean what it means? What do you "know"? What do you see?

The study of material culture crosses borders between academic disciplines and fields of study, thus drawing on a wide range of research methodologies and subject matter. Material culture methods consider multiple points of view. Critical reflexivity is built in to material culture studies as one considers her context in relation to an object. Common research methods include object analysis, narrative inquiry/storytelling, observation, interviewing, phenomenology, historical inquiry, and ethnography where the artifacts are a primary source of data.

Materiality is the matter and context of a text. I see this as another layer or a different frame of material culture analysis. Jean Baudrillard's suggestion regarding the materiality of medium involves "medium as a system administered by the code that is interwoven with a technical apparatus (sound, image, etc. or costume) and a corporeal one (gesture, sexuality, etc. or performance)" (Hong, 2003, para. 7). I understand this as the costume (a technical apparatus) and the performance (a corporeal apparatus) intertwining to make meaning. "Material conditions matter, not because they 'support' particular discourses that are the actual generative factors in the formation of bodies but rather because matter comes to matter through the iterative intra- activity of the world in its becoming" (Barad, 2003, p. 823). Matter is more than "things". It is the materialization of relationships (Kleinman, 2012). The materiality and material culture of cosplay do not just support the phenomenon and

explorations thereof, but are central to the creation, performance, and interpretation of cosplay.

This project investigates the phenomenon GBC using a multi-method approach. My focus is the objects created and worn by individual players as they perform in contexts that are decidedly different from the everyday. Cosplay involves an ephemeral performance that requires a considerable amount of material culture (costumes and props) that necessitate investments of thought, motivation, patience, time, and money from the individual player. Video, photos, and media can document the performance, but it is essentially a live, interactive art form. When observing players from a material culture perspective, it is, at first, all about appearances. The initial, surface impression matters. Knowing audiences have a frame of reference regarding the source material, whereas unknowing audiences assess and appreciate the current context and the product without a reference to the source. Both groups use intertextuality (and intergraphicality) to read (and to view) and to interpret and respond to the cosplay and player. The objective of a cosplay can range from creating and portraying a visually accurate likeness of a character's source rendition to themed adaptations of characters to GBCs and everything in between. Fidelity is subjective and not always the goal.

Research on cosplay in the United States is scant, let alone on GBC. Hale (2014) laments this dearth in research; "Con culture has been under researched and under theorized and, by extension, so have the material and corporeal qualities of many fandoms" (p. 6). Hale comes at his inquiry from the perspective of a folklorist and an

anthropologist. Because this is an interdisciplinary topic and terms are not wholly agreed upon, I need to consider other fields related to my inquiry such as folklore, sociology, media studies, and anthropology.

Much of the research currently available on the phenomenon of cosplay does not place material culture or materiality at the center of the study, yet one cannot help but to address it peripherally even if the researcher's main focus is the body/ies, identity/ies, fandom, carnival, camp, escapism, immersion, (sub)culture, expression, gender, embodiment, and/or performance. It is precisely because of these entanglements that I feel exploring the phenomenon of cosplay through its material culture can generate new understandings of what is being enacted through the process/es of GBC and how and why.

Exploring the phenomenon of cosplay through its material culture can generate new understandings of how and why players engage with a clump of popular culture that are different from analyses that can be gained through ethnography, survey, or visual analyses. Cosplay is a collaborative adaptation that involves the production of material culture, the making of costumes, within a community of play/practice. "Numerous different perspectives have converged on some version of the idea that subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other. In these different approaches it is accepted that human existence and human social life depend on material things" (Hodder, 2012, p. 16). An entanglement among ideas, communities, and material culture exist within cosplay. They overlap and entwine. Making material culture, interacting with material culture, and interpreting material culture involve theories and

practices that cannot be separated as they inform, work, and play with each other in this exploration. In the succeeding sections, I discuss three intersections of theory and practice that link materiality and cosplay. Each of these perspectives overlaps and tangles with the others.

Creation of Material Artifacts

Matter matters. It can be an expression of identity, affinity, escape/immersion/play, ingenuity, and/or craftsmanship. "Cosplayers often foreground the costume, not the character, as they model for photographers and chat with other fans (Lamerichs, 2014, p. 123). The making process engages us differently and is an integral part of any cosplay that also involves acting on and with materials and multiple (re)interpretations.

Adaptation is a central strategy. Cosplay will retain key visual elements that are traces of the original character while at the same time place emphasis on design elements that craft the desired theme of an event or group. According to Linda Hutcheon (2013), adaptation is a dual process consisting of the interpretation of a source text(s) and the creation of something new, something that is one's own. The act of adaptation involves appropriation, or salvaging, and filtration with a creative reinterpretation of the source is a goal. Fidelity within adaptation can be subjective and is not necessarily the point. Any adaptation will be marked with traces of previous related source texts. This is a kind of palimpsestic intertextuality, or a shaping of a text's meaning by/though the reworking of another text. "Fans expect to be able to play with and adapt content and arguably, in the digital era, being a fan is demonstrated by

the extent to which one adapts and generates adapted/adaptive content," (Hutcheon, 2013, p.186).

The first stage of production is conducted primarily in a domestic space (Lamerichs, 2014). But it can be far from isolating. If the progress of a cosplay is shared within the community, typically online, one's choices become highly mediated by fellow players, potential spectators, knowing and unknowing audiences. "Contemporary cosplay takes advantage of technologies, relations of production, and frameworks of knowledge that enhance the experience of cosplayers" (Kane, 2015, p. 320). There is a strategy of play and performance in the production process. Interaction with raw materials and works-in-progress occur as soon as the creation of the cosplay begins and can be shared online.

> As I sit behind my sewing machine, I feel the fabric run through my hands. The flower patterns are imprinted on it and feel rougher than I expected. I am working on my dress, inspired by the Hunger Games trilogy. (Lamerichs, 2013, p. 1)

An effective costume defines a character in several ways: time and place, age, gender/sex, socioeconomic status, genre, theme, occupation, and personality. In theater design, we attempt to avoid stereotypes and clichés while still providing crucial information about the character to the audience and aiding the actor in performance of the character. With this in mind, each choice from silhouette to materials to construction methods to the finished look becomes an ongoing dialogue between maker, the raw materials, the objects being made, and cultural texts. The cosplay

design process is multi-layered and can include an analysis of the character, reading texts and/or watching videos of the character within his/her source context, researching the origins and any subsequent versions of the character, choosing a theme, developing a design, and sourcing the materials.

The construction process is the actual making of the costume which can entail pattern- making, dyeing, painting, stitching, fitting, and finishing. "While there is no data to indicate exactly what percentage of cosplayers make their own costumes, there is a large enough foundation of cosplayers that make their own costumes that there are tutorials and guides online detailing how to construct virtually any type of costume" (Kane, 2015, p. 323). Similarly, Lamerichs (2013) states, "The sewing itself is an integral part of the experience and so is the media bubble that flourishes around it" (p. 2). So the object and the creation of the object (by sewing or other means) seem to be at the center of this phenomenon, yet do not seem to be at the center of research studies thus far.

> For dedicated cosplayers, cosplay is not just about dressing up but also about transformation and translation. It is a complex process involving the transference of the source character from the page and the imagination onto the body. Cosplayers endeavor to transform the visuality of their body into the visuality of a fictional and usually fantastical other. This cannot be a literal transformation; their material reality ultimately limits and bounds their transformation. (Kirkpatrick, 2015, para. 4.5)

The process of translation, or adaptation, and transformation is an act of creation and interaction that is multi-sensory and open to (re)interpretation by audiences and fellow players across multiple stages or platforms.

Interaction with Material Culture

> The appeal of cosplay wasn't just in the embodying of my favorite characters. The act itself unearthed something inside me, something that brings me back to cosplay again and again. It gives me a chance to be unafraid of relating to others. The joy of taking pictures with or talking to people mirrors my love for giving smiles to others. It also lets me be transparent with my passions. It's hard to hide your love for something when you spent a paycheck and a week's worth of work recreating a character from it. (Mongan, 2015, para. 10)

When material culture can be worn, an interactive embodied performance can be experienced between the maker and the player (in cosplay, the maker and player, is often the same person as it is a personally motivated hobby), the player and the object/s, the player and the audience, the player and fellow players, the player and cultural texts. These communities of play collaborate to interpret and reinterpret the performance and the material culture.

> Cosplay exemplifies this - fans pull the art so close to themselves that they are literally wearing it. They take up the mantle of a fictional persona, living another's life, and come away from the experience with a new sense of self. (Frey, 2008, p. 5)

A tacit/non-verbal knowledge can be acquired through the process and social play of cosplay. Perhaps it is greater knowledge of one's self, the character type or token, crafting techniques, materials, and/or the community/ies of practice within which one participates. "We talk and think about ourselves through things" (Tilley, 2007, p. 7). But any cosplay requires a personal and physical commitment from the player to create material culture, interact/perform, and display/share his/her interpretation of a cultural text, and then be subject to the interactions and (re)interpretations by and with others.

> Cosplayers spend anywhere between months and years, and thousands of dollars on materials in effort to make a recreation 'just right'. Phasers blink, magical weapons glow, and absurdly gravity-defying hairstyles miraculously stay up. This exhaustive work is undertaken in the complete spirit of seriousness, a real devotion to the craft and an honest, innocent desire to enjoy the art. (Frey, 2008, p. 9)

Different insights/interpretations/multisensory

Material Culture is multisensory. It utilizes differences of perspective, context, and interpretation. Observing and participating in cosplay, or any (fan) production, involves interacting with material culture artifacts. These interactions, or encounters, make us think. They produce interpretations, impressions, that influence future interactions.

As PaR, ABR, and Material Culture are qualitative research methodologies, many of the possible methods of inquiry overlap. PaR and ABR are the most similar

approaches. As I described earlier, ABR is a type of PaR. Costuming is a performative approach that involves making material culture, interacting with material culture, and interpreting material culture. It is the material product of costuming and the phenomenon of cosplay that draws in Material Culture as a research approach. Material Culture research does not require the same level of embodied experience from the researcher as PaR and ABR. PaR and ABR are inherently immersive. One can study material artifacts without making or using them. Yet, objects immerse us in a culture that has edges, boundaries, and codes. Objects are vessels of memory and experience. Though Material Culture may seem on the surface to be the outlier in this inquiry, I argue that it is inextricably entangled with the ideas, practices, and experiences being explored. In the following sections, I articulate the interwoven methods of these methodologies and the design of this study.

Ethnography & Phenomenology

Cosplay inhabits a participatory culture. “Phenomenology explains how experience and cognition result from interactions with the material and social environment, interactions that determine not only how we experience the world, but also what of it we experience” (Bleeker, Sherman, & Nedelkopoulou, 2015, p. 1). It is about lived experiences within a culture. Participating in cosplay involves creating and using material culture, the physical construction (objects) of the culture/society. When material culture can be worn, an interactive embodied performance can be experienced between the maker and the player (in cosplay, the maker and player is often the same

person), the player and the object(s), the player and the audience, the player and fellow players, the player and cultural texts. These communities of play collaborate to interpret and reinterpret the performance and the material culture. They tell and share stories. Narrative inquiry and storytelling and interviewing are methods of ethnography and phenomenology.

Techniques of performance ethnography and participant observer research that could support this inquiry of GBC include narrative collage, performance writing, and performative interview. I'll *walk through* each technique and how they may benefit my inquiry. Processes of performance ethnography are necessarily messy. "Phenomenologies are not born whole and complete; they are rather uncooked and messy at first" (Kozel, 2015, p. 54). But they can be artfully messy. The processes, techniques, and strategies described in this essay require experimentation, improvisation, and play with materials, words, images, and ideas. Phenomenological approaches cultivate reflectivity and attend to "the sensory and affective layers of embodied life" (Kozel, 2015, p. 57). In performance writing, narrative collage, and performative interviewing, the author is encouraged/required to creatively share the messy, nonlinear methods, strategies, tangents, and scrappy notes from the processes of her inquiry. Kozol asserts

> that the interim phases of thinking, devising, and creating are significant parts of the phenomenological process at the same time as they are embedded in a wider philosophical movement. It also emphasizes the breadth of performative

perspectives, not just that of the conventionally defined performer on stage. (Kozel, 2015, p. 55)

GBC is one of those performative perspectives that is not conventionally defined or easily explained, not without opening a can of worms regarding language, bodies, and power. The applications of the terms, constructs, and research techniques that we walked through briefly are useful in revealing the performativity of GBC.

"Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 235). GBC is a performance and a performative form of communication that can describe and construct or change our social reality and the potential impacts of embodiment, agency, and acculturation when participating in or studying GBC.

Narrative Inquiry & Storytelling

Costumes are meant to be worn in performance. By embodying a character at an imagination-centric convention, I will be performing and co-creating a story with other players and spectators. Performances are not neutral. The "writer-as-performer is self-consciously present, morally and politically aware" (Denzin, 2003, p. 14). Performance writing focuses on showing through the telling. It evokes the performance and invokes the reader. "We are all coperformers in our own and others' lives. This is what the performance text does" (Denzin, 2003, p.

56). It enacts the inquiry through descriptive text, images, format, and the reader. It is active. It performs.

In this time of proliferated multi-media, performance writing stands out as visual, textual, moving, reflexive, and poly-vocal at once on a page. “It may look distinctive on the page, perhaps set in double or triple column and using unusual spacing between words and lines” ... “It may combine several different types of texts, such as poetry, first-person reflections, quotations from scholarly works” (Denzin, 2003, p. 94). When submitting a report on performance as research, a form of PaR, performance writing can be a rewarding and appropriate technique. And just like GBC, it requires experimentation and play to produce.

How is experimental research writing evaluated? Denzin (2003) presents suggested criteria from three theorists, Clough, Lincoln, and Richardson, that would be helpful when designing, implementing, and reporting performative inquiry. Denzin shares Clough’s “single two-part criterion” that of cultural criticism and theoretical reflection to address the sensationalization of autoethnography in trauma culture. This can be used as a baseline. Being critical and reflexive should be a part of any qualitative inquiry regardless. Lincoln’s proposed criteria “are based on particular moral standpoints”: positionality of the author, addressing the community of the participants, voices of the community, critical subjectivity of the author throughout the process, and reciprocity among the researchers and the participants (p. 112). Lincoln’s criteria emphasize ethics and empowerment. As agency has emerged as a possible issue in GBC, an emphasis on empowerment is appropriate. Denzin goes on to describe Richardson’s five criteria for

evaluating experimental writing of research include its substantive contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon, its aesthetic merit, the demonstrated reflexivity of the author, its impact on the audience, and its expression of a reality. The inclusion of artistic merit is noteworthy as the skill of the artist is very important to the creation of "profound responses" and the successful presentation of her research. And the impact on the audience is especially important in the process, the performance, and the writing of GBC to ensure a life after the submission of the research report. In ABR and PaR, there are not neat, little boxes to be checked when assembling a report of one's research, and I am not suggesting that there needs to be or that there should be. But it would serve a researcher, her participants, and her audience to be mindful of and apply a blend of the criteria suggested by Clough, Lincoln, and Richardson.

Performative Interviews

"Numerous different perspectives have converged on some version of the idea that subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other. In these different approaches it is accepted that human existence and human social life depend on material things" (Hodder, 2012, p. 16). I aim for my inquiry to be poly-vocal. By listening to the stories of women who have participated in GBC, I hope to add dimensionality and guidance to the inquiry.

Denzin (2003) describes an interview form which he calls "the reflexive, dialogic, or performative interview" (p. 79). Interviewing people and conducting research is a privilege, a critical engagement, a "vehicle for producing performance texts and

performance ethnographies about self and society" not just collecting data (p. 80). If costumes have a material effect on the body, why would not other forms of communication, such as words and language? Denzin seems to agree. He argues that the interview is a way "of bringing the world into play," a way of connecting the teller and the listener (p. 80). *Is the performative interview then a form of play between the teller and the listener?*

Performative interviews take place in unstable systems of discourse. "Gender performances in the interview are shaped performatively, through the acts, gestures, and symbols persons use to bring a gendered self into play" (p. 81). Both the teller and the listener are performing.

What is reality? What is fiction? Is a new world of play being constructed between the teller and the listener? How is power distributed and/or shifting?

This study explores the phenomenon of GBC through its material culture using costuming to study what motivates women to participate in GBC. Interview respondents are experienced cosplayers who self-identify as women and have participated in GBC. Also, respondents are over eighteen-years-old and participated in interviews/dialogues via phone and/or email regarding GBC, costuming, culture, education, and related personal experiences. The interviews followed a guided or topical approach (Marshall & Rossman, 2001). I had conversation prompts or questions, but I hoped the participants would tell their stories, share their experiences. I participated in cosplay as a character type but had yet to cosplay a specific character before this inquiry. This situates me in a

liminal space of not really being an insider, but not quite being an outsider either. The insights of experienced GBC participants (cosplay insiders) provide other perspectives on GBC, guidance for my own cosplay, and possible direction(s) for the inquiry and future research.

I have two main strategies for recruiting respondents. First, I tapped friends of friends and acquaintances. I have several friends who know women active in GBC. Second, I made contacts within the cosplay and fan communities with players who routinely participate in panels, workshops, and discussions. Many appeared eager to talk about their experiences and/or introduce me to others involved in GBC. These were by no means guaranteed. A third recruitment strategy was online posts within cosplay communities. This was not a main strategy as I did not yet have credibility on such sites, and referrals seem more likely to create an atmosphere of trust and reliability for both potential respondents and myself. Cyberbullying and trolling are just as much of an issue for cosplayers as it is for anyone else on social media, perhaps more so because of its significant online presence. I anticipated snowball sampling as a strong probability. Once I make successful contact with one

SIDE NOTE: The problems and realities of online harassment are topics of convention panels. They also come up in general cosplay sessions and in closed groups online. These forums strive to create safe spaces for open dialogue around solutions and safeguards.

respondent, she will most likely know others who might want to participate and feel comfortable recommending the study to them.

I interview respondents up to three times during the entire process: first, at the beginning before I begin constructing my cosplay, but while I am in the research and design phase; second, during the construction phase; and finally, at the performance phase. As mentioned above, the interactive nature of cosplay may lead to unplanned encounters with respondents outside of interviews.

Discourse Analysis

This inquiry seems to be situated somewhere in the middle of aesthetics and techniques and voice and interpretations. The methods described are appropriately interrelated. Discourse analysis looks for structures, patterns, strategies, and processes of meaning and action. GBC is a site full of interactions, performances, and experiences of sense and meaning making to be observed, mined, uncovered, examined, and shared.

> The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity. The performative is thus one domain in which power acts as discourse. Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an "act," singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power. (Butler, 1993, p. 17).

Since gender is performative, a continual act of becoming within a social construct, discourse analysis is appropriate in investigating GBC.

> In Foucault's (1926-1984) work, the term 'discourse' refers more broadly to systems of thought that construct subjects and their worlds. For Foucault, discourses are practices (composed of ideas, ideologies, attitudes, courses of action, terms of reference) that systematically constitute the subjects and objects of which they speak. (Schwandt, 2007, p. 73)

There are no subjects or objects without performativity. *What are the practices, or semiotic events, in GBC in which "power acts as discourse"? Where and how do they work?* Foucault focused on how power is inscribed on the body. GBC, or any body, can be seen as a discursive site, a space for fluid discussion in/through which one can "trace the moments where a binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable" (Butler, 2004, p. 216).

Cosplay, a combination of the practices of costuming and role-playing, has existed for as long as humans have dressed-up and pretended to be someone or something else, something Other. But the cultural capital, the power, of cosplay was practically insignificant until the phenomenon was named by Nobuyuki Takahashi in 1984 (Plunkett, 2014). Over the past thirty years, cosplay has grown in visibility, in popularity, in social acceptability. Power works through people, cannot be created or destroyed, only differentially transferred (Foucault, 1972). Discourse analysis may play a significant role in examining issues of power through GBC, such as representation within cultural texts,

consent, and embodiment. “Cosplay has no inherent political bent; meaning is imposed on Cosplay by those outsiders who judge, who seek to find concerns and issues and something to raise the alarm about” (Frey, 2013, p. 9). I do not seek to judge, but to understand my own and other women’s motivations for participating in GBC.

How are the relations between knowledge and power affected? How do knowledge and power express each other? How do multiple vectors of power (gender, race, sexuality) operate through each other? Who is speaking/acting? Who is not? How do sites of practice affect power relations? What is the position of the subject? Where are the breaking points? How is power inscribe on the body? Where do I begin to find structures, patterns, strategies, and processes of meaning and action?

For this exploration, I consider three issues of power: representation in cultural texts, consent, and embodiment. Like much in our social lives, these issues are interrelated. While thinking about one issue or practice, another will surely come into play.

Representations of women within popular cultural texts are out of balance with representations of men. We are overwhelmingly left out of the stories and out of their creation. We make up just over half of the US population, yet only amount to seven percent of the directors of the 250 top-grossing films in 2016 (Kilday, 2017). This is a dramatic comparison, but not overly so. It emphasizes how women lack power and voice within our cultural production. If we are looking to our cultural texts for ourselves, we find disappointment. The majority of the fictional characters from popular culture are

extremely masculine men. Representation matters. If we see it, we can be it. *What do we see?* Men as heroes. Masculinity respected. Women hypersexualized or ignored.

Women are (consciously or unconsciously) exercising choice and agency when engaging in GBC. With limited representational images provided, they choose to adapt other images. *Is this an act of appropriation or desire or both?* Women participating in GBC assume the story, or position, of a male character while retaining visual markers of her own sex/gender. *How is this a statement regarding our societal norms? How is this a desire to represent characteristics that are seldom associated with women in similar texts or society? How are decisions regarding the visual markers of sex/gender affected by idealized standards of beauty? How is this a desire to challenge and/or display her skills in*

SIDE NOTE: As I was completing my exam, the President of the United States announced that "he plans to reinstate a ban on transgender individuals from serving 'in any capacity' in the US armed forces" (Diamond, 2017, para. 1). I have been wondering how Trans persons feel about GBC? Is it offensive, mocking, refreshing, or liberating? Do they feel left out, included, or neither? I stated the focus of my inquiry is self-identified women who participate in GBC. Who does that excluded? Whom does that include? How is that decided? By the individual, I expect.

costuming and performance? How is GBC about being recognized, about being seen, or maybe, about blending in?

Popular culture is commodified. But there is a problem with consumerism when a group (or groups) of people are devalued as a consequence of another group's superficial/artificial needs or desires (for a thing, an object). While women make up nearly half of the comic book fans, only about a quarter of comic book characters and one tenth of comic creators are female (Schenker, 2014). *What is the power relation here? How is buying power or practices considered or ignored? What norm is being asserted?* Women might participate in GBC even if representation within popular culture was more balanced. As Hutcheon observed, "Fans expect to be able to play with and adapt content and arguably, in the digital era, being a fan is demonstrated by the extent to which one adapts and generates adapted/adaptive content" (2013, p. 186).

GBC can seem to focus on binarities, the opposition of two distinct terms. This is not how I see GBC. GBC as a term can be problematic as it names the concept using contested terms within language. There is no one universal truth as to what gender means to all persons. The language can act to exclude groups of people. The act of GBC can call attention to gender normativity. Each person will perceive it through her/his individual filters of life experiences. *How is GBC liberating? How is it constraining? How do women regard GBC? What about the perceptions of cis-men and Trans persons?*

A Performance of Performativity

The exhibition hall at Gen Con 2015, a gaming convention in Indianapolis, Indiana

The hall is bustling with commerce, lots of fans and gamers, some families. The crowd is about seventy-five percent male. A **VENDOR** and his associate (both about 45-50 years old) are casually, but attentively awaiting customers at their booth of family-friendly games. A **WOMAN** (late thirties) wearing a fan/graphic t-shirt, jeans, and sneakers is browsing a nearby booth and approaches.

VENDOR
(to WOMAN)
Hello!

WOMAN
(*cheerily*)
Hello!

VENDOR
(to associate, gesturing toward WOMAN)
See normal women come here. They're not all booth
babes and cosplayers. (*scoffing*)

WOMAN
(*inquisitively*)
What do you mean by normal?

VENDOR
(mouth agape)
Ugh...

What did we see here? A woman being judged based on her appearance, specifically her attire, by two men. Men who are strangers, who are supposed to be professionals, sales people representing a product marketed toward families. She is outnumbered two to one in the scene and three to one in the overall setting. She is being categorized as normal, not a babe and not a (scoff) cosplayer. *Are cosplayers unwelcome at a fan-centric event? What does it mean to be normal in any context, let alone that of a convention?*

I could ask more questions. But I do not have to, I was there. I am the WOMAN. I was annoyed, maybe a little pissed off, too. *Really?* It was nearly two years ago now, and I have mellowed. I was not harassed or assaulted then, but I have experienced sexual harassment in workplaces and classrooms from peers, strangers, and authority figures. Consent is a big issue for cosplayers. It seems that just the act of wearing a costume is perceived by *some* as an invitation or implied consent to touch, hug, photograph, record, make unwanted or discriminating advances toward, stalk, intimidate, and verbally or sexually harass you. This is wrong. *How do gender norms work through these situations? Could the popularity of GBC among women be related to this issue? How?*

SIDE NOTE: "Booth Babe" is a colloquial term in con culture used to describe people, usually women, who are very physically attractive (based of cultural norms), dressed to emphasize their physical assets, and hired to attract attention to a booth and/or to sell the products within a booth.

Cosplay ≠ Consent. It is not just a statement. It is a movement (Geeks for Consent, n.d.). There has been a strong push for cons and expos to adopt zero-tolerance policies with regard to harassment since 2013. Today it is common to find banners and posters of these policies throughout an event site, on its website, and in its programs. Cosplay involves interactions with material culture and people. Cosplay is supposed to be fun, not fearful. It is common knowledge that many (if not most) female characters in popular culture are hyper-sexualized. This can be challenging for women interested in cosplay. Not all cosplayers (or persons in general) have positive body images. Even if a woman is comfortable in her body, she may not be comfortable in the typical female character's costume. Just like in life, there is no one right way that cosplayers are supposed to feel, be, or look. Cosplay is for everyone (Mayhem, 2014). *Who is interacting with players and how? Who is consuming cosplay and how? How is the dynamic changed if a woman wears the costume of a typical female character or adapts a male character's costume to a similar style as that of a female character? How do cosplayers handle issues of consent? How do issues of consent and body image impact choices of character, style and theme of cosplay? Is there a voyeuristic aspect to cosplay? If so, how does that aspect function within the phenomenon at large? How, when, and where is consent granted or denied?*

I asked before if GBC may be a way of blending in rather than standing out and noted how the numbers of men at cons and expos tend to surpass those of women. Maybe GBC functions as a strategy to go unnoticed for women. Maybe it is a way for women cosplayers to be as authentic as possible with a costume and feel comfortable. Maybe it is

an opportunity for women to exhibit character traits that do not fit within societal norms. Maybe it is a chance to play with materials, cultural texts, and/or other players. Whatever their motivations, GBC is situated in social networks that work for, with, against, and through cultural norms.

To embody a character in cosplay is to render the page or the screen on/in the flesh and out of context. GBC presents a mixture of signs. *How are these signs read and interpreted? And by whom?* The body is a form of discourse, a text, a site of power (Conroy, 2010). No matter how immersive, authentic, or impressive in action and materiality, there is a real person (mind-body and spirit) behind the cosplay, not a fictional character. A person who is situated within social networks with her audience and collaborators. Individual experiences with representation and consent inform and shape one's embodiment of a character. *How are these inscribed on the body? Through costumes/clothing?* Clothing carries both masculine and feminine signs. Barthes (1990) suggests clothing, which is often gendered, is not play, but a sign of play. *How does the (gendered) sign of play relate to performing the sign of gender?*

SIDE NOTE: Visual gender is foregrounded in this inquiry, but it is not elevated above other issues of power related to race, body type, sexuality, ethnicity, or age. An approach with an awareness of intersectionality is key.

A collection has a common signifier, something that holds it together. We group similar items to make sense of them. This is what Foucault suggests, the regrouping of

statements, themes and theories to uncover strategies of power (1972). *What are their interconnections? How are they displayed? How do they persist, appear, and/or disperse? What points are incompatible? What points are equivalent? How do these elements work through each other? How do they play with each other?*

The purpose of discourse analysis and this inquiry overall is understanding and awareness of how the performativity of being/becoming, of living a social existence operates within parts of our culture. I acknowledge Frey's statement about not *imposing* meaning on cosplay, or any other activity, especially from the outside. That is not my intention, but impact moves beyond intent. Reflexivity will be key to being mindful of the impact of my inquiry. I hope to *disclose* meanings that can be made and found within GBC. After all, as a cultural phenomenon GBC is never politically innocent or socially neutral.

Participant Observation

My participation (process and performance) enables me to become a participant observer within the community of play/practice. As someone on the edge of being an insider and an outsider, my observations will be different from someone who is fully inside or outside the phenomenon. I do not see this as better, but unique.

Arts-based research honors multiple differences in interpretation alongside improvisational creative activity or play. Participating in cosplay involves creating and using material culture, the physical construction (objects) of the culture/society. When material culture can be worn, an interactive embodied performance can be experienced between the maker and the player (in cosplay, the maker and player is often the same

person), the player and the object(s), the player and the audience, the player and players, the player and cultural texts. These communities of play collaborate to interpret and reinterpret the performance and the material culture.

My professional and educational background is in the design and construction of theatrical costuming. Costuming is my practice within the studio and within the classroom. As a costume designer, artist, and educator I employ research methods within my current practice to produce costumes for the stage. Like the term cosplay, costuming can be used interchangeably as a noun and as a verb. It refers to the material costume pieces that are worn and the act of designing and constructing costumes. As my practice, costuming is my primary means of investigating GBC. This study involves performance as I participate in one or more conventions as a player in GBC. I have attended conventions and festivals dressed in costumes I made, but I have never cosplayed a specific fictional character. My position within this inquiry is somewhere between insider and outsider. I am not yet part of the cosplay community, but I am a member of costuming and fan communities. My performance enables me to become a participant observer within the community of play/practice. I draw on material culture analysis, discourse analysis, and peer review when examining my data.

Cosplay as an act involves interpretation, adaptation, play with costume materials and embodied performance. These elements are interwoven, playing with and acting on each other, to make meaning. I design and construct a costume intended for GBC documenting the process. This first stage is conducted primarily in a domestic space; in this case, my home studio. I will not be creating in a vacuum as I will be

sharing my process and progress within communities both online and offline. The process, therefore, has the potential to become highly mediated by knowing and unknowing audiences. My approach to this design is similar to mine as a theatrical costume designer. I consider the ways a costume can tell the story of a character, such as his/her time and place, age, gender/sex, socio-economic status, genre, theme, occupation, and personality. Fictional characters within popular culture typically have key or iconic symbols that project his/her identity. These elements need to be present for a cosplay to be effective, particularly when the cosplay is themed (i.e. GBC, Steampunk, etc.). The cosplay design process is multi-layered and can include an analysis of the character, reading texts and/or watching videos of the character within his/her source context, researching the origins and any subsequent versions of the character, choosing a theme, developing a design, and sourcing the materials. Each choice from silhouette to materials to construction methods to the finished look becomes an ongoing dialogue between myself, the materials and objects being made, and cultural texts. The construction, or making, of the costume involves pattern-making, dyeing, painting, stitching, fitting, and finishing. The data produced from this segment of the inquiry will include costume renderings (sketches), character analysis, photographs, videos, journal entries, and the physical costume. This process will lead to the development of interview questions and refined research questions.

The physical, material culture, the costume is meant to be worn. I attend an appropriate, imagination-centric convention as a GBC wearing the costume I make as part of this inquiry. Data gathered through this lived experience of the research is

documented in photographs, videos, and journal entries. This segment is intended to be experiential and interactive. Audience responses to the cosplay are noted as convention attendees are part of the community of fans and therefore peers on some level. As a participant observer, I examine the community of play/practice.

As a cosplayer, I make, and perform in, material culture and observing other's creations. In order to apply material culture analysis, I note my initial or surface impressions of GBCs and take photographs of the players. In-depth, open-ended interviews with a sample group of three to five players, the makers of the material culture of GBC, allow me to read deeper into the phenomenon. Discourse analysis of this data helps to ensure that my findings are polyvocal. Responses to a single artwork, cosplay, or piece of data are multivariate. It is important that the results presented reflect multiple perspectives and experiences. As the research process unfolds, I have my data reviewed by peers within the cosplay, theatre, and arts education communities.

The presentation of this art-based research and its findings take multiple forms. First, the research is embodied as it is conducted through the practice of costuming and GBC. This is recorded via video and still images as the actual performance and its context is live, interactive, and ephemeral. Second, a written text of the process, analysis, and outcomes is required and includes drawings and photographs of the process of costume design and making, costume artifacts, and performance. The written text is not created as a reporting of the research after the fact but will be a document in-progress simultaneously with the research. Finally, an art installation of the material culture of GBC will be displayed in conjunction with a presentation of the research and

a discussion of insights and questions derived from the study for future research. Applying the theories of adaptation, play, and performativity within an arts-based research paradigm allow me to investigate the phenomenon of GBC as a participant-observer using costuming as my media of inquiry. A multi-method approach led by practice as research that includes costuming, performance, material culture analysis, discourse analysis, and peer review generates findings that reflect multiple perspectives and experiences within the communities of play and practice.

Section 4: PIECES

The costume is shaped as the pattern pieces are stitched together. They are developed with the body, the underpinnings, and the materials in mind, in hand, and in conversation. The process of making a costume is a collaborative effort. Multiple parts and people work together. The designer, pattern-maker, stitcher, and wearer/performer/player are different roles within the process that can be filled by one or more people. Each role has a relationship with the materials and the other roles. Each aspect influences and is influenced by the others. The designer renders a costume design based on character analysis, historical and costume research, the text, the director's concept, and the other design elements, such as lighting, media, and scenery. She/He/They also consider the resources available: time, money, skilled labor, and costume stock. The pattern-maker develops a pattern for the costume design rendered using the research of the designer, additional research into the cuts of the periods, the performer's measurements, and the materials selected. They cut the pattern pieces from the materials chosen by the designer. The pattern-maker provides instruction to the stitcher as to how the pattern pieces go together. The stitcher sews the pieces together using any number of methods. The wearer/performer/player meets the other roles in the fitting room to test the fit, style, and functionality of the costume. Using their varied

perspectives within the process, they work together to actualize the character and tell a story in performance through costuming.

As this in an exploration of women in GBC, I sought interview participants who self-identified as women and had experience in GBC. Eight women volunteered to be interviewed. The women are over eighteen-years of age, but mostly mid-twenties to mid-forties in age. They live across the continental United States. My recruitment text posted to two closed Facebook groups did not define the term GBC. When asked, I used the following definition: *GBC is the shifting or bending of the visually presented gender of a character to match the gender identity of the player*. But because the term and related terms are fluid, I asked the participants to define gender-bending for themselves[i].

> It means interpreting a character in a gender you are most comfortable with or regardless of what the character's given gender is. I tend to make male characters female. I don't tend to make female characters male.
>
> J

> GBC, to me, is taking a character that is not originally written as my own gender (cis female) and blending my own gender identity into the persona and costume.
>
> Detwire

> When one changes the gender of the character they are cosplaying from the original. This could be for any reason and to any gender, not just male and female.
> Putting on a cosplay that happens to be a gender different from what is canon for that character.
>
> Kurama Babe

> For me, it's taking on a masculine outfit as a woman. I don't focus, really, on whether I appear as a man, nor do I try to feminize the costume. My body and gender presentation feminize it. What makes it masculine is it's a male identified character and I'm not feminizing the outfit to solidly define it as "this is a female version" and wear men's clothing as called for by the outfit. So I guess that makes my version of GBC gender fluid? I don't overthink the definitions though. It's about wearing an outfit and persona I like.
>
> Shannon

As a result, some women participated in what I would have defined as crossplay rather than GBC. I understood crossplay to be the shifting or bending of the visually presented and/or identified gender of the player to match the visually presented gender of the character. Some participated in both. Recognizing the problematic and limiting nature of language, I interviewed women who participated in GBC by their own definitions and understandings of the term. In the end, it is all cosplay.

> Gender-bending can mean either taking a cisgender male character and cosplaying a non-canon gender version of that character (i.e. a genderfluid, cisgender female, or non-binary version of the character), or a crossplay in which the cosplayer is cosplaying a character that does not match their gender (i.e. a non-binary person cosplaying a male character, a man cosplaying a female character, a woman cosplaying a male character).
>
> Shiki

Interviews were conducted over the phone or via email depending upon the preference of

the participant. The collection of interviews began in January 2018 and concluded in June 2018.

My inquiry reflects the costuming process. Data are the pattern pieces and the seams. The data collected and experienced include performative interviews, photos, journal entries, sketches, fabric swatches, designing, sewing, and performing. This section focuses on the sharing of the data, the process, the experience. It is nonlinear, tangled, and reflexive. Parts of the process bleed into others.

The journey

I can usually make design choices as they relate to styles, patterns, colors, and the like pretty quickly and feel confident in my decisions when I am working as a costume designer. But in those instances, I do not set the overall parameters. There is a script or movement style, music, a director's concept, and bodies that are not my own and a creative team collaborating on the various elements that go into the production as a whole and more specifically the costumes. On a mundane level, there are budgets of time, materials, and labor. Big picture parameters, the conditions of play, are set before I am really involved. I develop more specific delineations as I conceptualize and render the costume designs, but I am not starting from scratch. I am not starting from scratch with a cosplay either really; once I make the decision

> GBC gives me the ability to express myself a bit more freely than if I stuck to exactly how the character is supposed to be.
>
> Kurama Babe

regarding who or what to cosplay there are countless visual and textual resources. *How is that decision made? What is the motivation to create one cosplay over another?* It involves choices that will be interpreted (perhaps even scrutinized) by others, time, money, skill, creativity, and labor. It can also involve community, identity, artistic expression, and educational opportunities.

Setting parameters can be difficult. Yet some sort of boundaries must be set, or no decisions will be made, nothing will get done. Maybe it is the committing to parameters that is difficult when the possibilities seem limitless. As much as I want to be open to all possibilities, at some point for any project, design, or inquiry, some stuff must stay while others go. Something takes focus.

Setting the Conditions of Play

Parameter 1: GBC

GBC was the easiest boundary to set. Why? It seemed like a fun challenge, something different that I had not done. Any cosplay I created was of a character type like a vampire or a faerie. I did not cosplay specific characters. My body. I am self-conscious. Self-conscious about

> Once I started cosplaying, I spent a few years trying to find ways to do female or gender-neutral costumes that I'd be comfortable in, because I hate a lot of the trappings of female glamour: heels, a lot of makeup, dresses. When I realized crossplay was a whole thing, I decided this was the way to go. I don't do it exclusively, but I do it a lot.
>
> Shannon

my body, my voice. Self-conscious about performing, about taking focus. I do not hate my shape, but I feel like our bodies are under constant attack by social standards, culture, and politics. Cosplaying a male character offered a costume that is usually less revealing than those of many female characters. Artistic license. I think GBC opens more opportunities for creative expression and perhaps less judgement regarding the fidelity of the adaptation to the presumed source text. If I am doing a gender-bent version of a character, then I am obviously not trying to recreate an "accurate" version of the costume from recent films or comics. Cosplay is wearable fan art. I am confident in my abilities to design, sew, teach, and present. But marketing myself has never been my strength. I *have* been onstage without totally embarrassing myself. I enjoy teaching, presenting research, and being interviewed. Those are times when I have already been approved, accepted in some way. It is not putting oneself out there in an unknown situation as an unknown. There is, of course, a first time for everything. Cosplay is for everyone. I believe that. I know that. But it does not keep me from being a bit self-conscious. *Less pressure?* Not really.

From dissertation journal:

Saw Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them today with my daughter. It was set in 1926 NYC. I love the fashion of the period. Before going I was already intrigued by the Goldstein sisters, witch characters, in the film. I could not help by think about which sister I could "reasonably" cosplay. By reasonably I meant representational, accurate, faithful, fidelity. I wondered which I looked like more or could look like. Was I tall enough, thin enough? We're my eyes the right color, could I get contacts to change the color of my eyes? These thoughts were/are

contrary to how I typically think of and explain cosplay. Why should these things matter? If I feel like I want to cosplay a character, I should. But I just did not feel that way sitting there in the theater trying to focus on the magic of the film and not my physical suitability/compatibility to costume play one sister or the other. Maybe I am drawn to genderbending cosplay in part because, one is already not physically suitable or compatible to play the character as originally conceived/presented. It is always already not representational. It is a further adaptation. Are these adaptations judged less harshly than cosplays when genders are not bent? Are mashups another way to "get around" creating cosplays that lack "fidelity"? Fidelity to what? Which version? How is it determined? By whom? I found myself searching Pinterest for movie stills and such that featured the sisters' costumes, especially those of Tina Goldstein. I looked up the height and age of the actress that played her, Katherine Waterson. At 5'7" on a good posture day after yoga, I am four inches shorter than the actress. Why does this give me pause? It bothers me that it does. My eyes are blue, not brown. I am not as thin at the moment. (I grrrr inside at myself). This is not how I want to think about cosplay.

I have always thought that it is about one's individual goal(s)... that there is no one right way to cosplay.

I wonder why I was <u>not</u> drawn to cosplay Newt Scamander, the male lead, given my interest in GBC. Why have I not given that any thought til now? With two strong female characters (three including the President of Macusa), am I automatically inclined to look to them as my options? Maybe that is positive. How refreshing to have multiple female heroes! I need to think about this more.

Parameter 2: Which character?

Captain America, without hesitation.

From dissertation journal:

Why this character?

I want to be him. I want to be like him.

What he represents. The best of us.

I want to be the best I can be, not the best I think I can be, but the actual (unqualified) best.

It's hard. It's scary.

It involves risk and trust and faith.

I do not want to be a man. I want to be a woman. I want to celebrate the spirit of a character that happens to be originally conceived as male. I am drawn to the strength of character and the vulnerability written into the character of Captain America. Wonder Woman also debuted in 1941. *Why gender-bend Captain America when you have her?*

> I don't specifically pick male characters to GBC, just because it's a male character. I just go with what fandom I really like. I did Wreck-It Ralph and I didn't specifically make Wreck-It Ralph female or male. I still wore pretty much exactly what he wore with the ripped pants and stuff. So I didn't turn his clothing into be more female, so that one is more me exhibiting my love for whatever it is I'm dressing as; rather than me trying to be more specific or turning it into something that it is not.
>
> Jessica

> It usually starts with being slapped upside the brain with inspiration/a dire *need* to do a specific character.
>
> Detwire

Well, I happen to love Wonder Woman. Yes, I have even seen Linda Carter play her on television in the 1970s and Gal Gadot in the 2017 film. I had Wonder Woman Underoos as a child and t-shirts as an adult. Maybe it is the idea that we can be anybody when it comes to fandom and fantasy. Maybe it is the idea that we are not limited like we are in reality. Let's be honest, women are limited in so many ways even today in the 21st century. We do not want it to be so, but it is. I understand there are different challenges for all women. Gender-swapped cosplay allows us to channel the power of our favorite characters, to receive recognition (cultural capital) for our successful efforts, and to play. Play is important. Being a mother, an educator, a researcher, and an artist have reinforced that spirit within me.

> Growing up watching movies like Star Wars, Indiana Jones, and cartoons like Thundercats, He-Man, or even Disney movies like Aladdin, Lion King, The Great Mouse Detective, etc., it seemed like the boys always got to do the cool stuff while the women - even if they were portrayed as strong and smart - usually complained, stayed behind, or really weren't important to the overall story. I didn't like that idea because dammit, I wanted to have adventures and power, too. Genderbending gave me a way to express both myself and my love for the character.
>
> Detwire

It would not be difficult to create a Wonder Woman costume for myself. The character is female and so am I. The challenge of design and execution lies in imagining a female Captain America. I am trying not to be tripped up by the politics and history of such a switch. My costume designer instincts lead me to address those issues, but maybe they do not matter in the context of cosplay? *Can a gender-bent cosplay be politically neutral?*

> Back when I started cosplaying I wasn't a fan of a lot of the female characters I came across, because most were magical girls in skimpy outfits, or they were background characters I didn't care about as much. So a lot of my first cosplays were crossplay/GBC. I was also not very confident in my body, so dressing as a guy was easier, because I didn't see myself as a sexy woman.
>
> Snow Cosplays

When the idea for this inquiry struck me, I knew instantly that I wanted to cosplay Captain America. I did not know (or really care about) what version, how I would look, or how I would make the costume. No other characters leapt to mind. I just threw myself into scouring comics, books, online images, and films that included Captain America. I created Pinterest boards for GBC and art, Captain America cosplay, uniforms, and 1940s fashion. I did not begin sketching right away. I was searching for inspiration, so that I could select more parameters.

> GBC shows an extra level of creativity and skill, particularly if the person participating in GBC is adding in original design work.
>
> Shiki

Parameter 3: Time Period

I was intrigued by the idea of a female Captain America character that would still have her origins in the mid-20th century during World War II. *What would Captain America as a female in that time look like? What are the markers of the female gender that would replace the markers of the male gender? How do I switch the costume to genderize it without altering the spirit of the character?* It was important to me to keep the heart and determination of the character.

From Adaptation Course Workshop 1:

With the recent graduation of two females from Ranger School, I think this is an appropriate time to dig into the possibilities and challenges of conceiving of Captain America as a female. Surely many questions will be raised, but that is part of the process.

I'm drawn to certain types of characters and those characters tend to be men. While being feminine, I have a lot of masculine traits. And their characters speak to me. One of my favorites that I've gender-bent is John Constantine from Keanu Reeve's film version. His attitude and his aspects, all of that, really suit me. So I thought, yeah, cool, I'll do that.

J

She is strong of mind, heart, and, eventually, body, not overly sexualized. The uniform is practical. The basic storyline is the same. A physically small young woman wants to do her part in the war. She is given the chance to become a super soldier, because of her perseverance, courage, and

compassion. She takes being a soldier and the responsibility/gift of her increased size and physical strength very seriously even when she finds herself "out of time."

The fashions of the period had a uniform-esque or military-inspired aesthetic. It makes sense. When one thinks about the 1940s, WWII stands out as culturally and politically significant. Besides fashion, actual uniforms from military to factory uses offer inspiration for this GBC.

Parameter 4: Visual Markers of Gender

I was definitely not going into this project thinking I would do anything that could be considered a "sexy, femme" Captain America. I am referring to cosplays that are especially revealing, showing lots of skin, tight to the body, similar in style to the "sexy" Halloween costumes available at mass market retailers. I am not against such cosplays. There are amazing gender-bent cosplays and visual art that fit this category. Mine is not one of them. It would not be within my comfort level at this time. And most importantly, it was not my goal. I wanted my GBC to be more practical and realistic.

From Adaptation Course Workshop 1:

How am I shifting the appearance of this character?

When observing cosplayers from a material culture perspective, it is all about appearances. At least at first, the initial, surface impression matters.

So this is something I have to consider. What will be the first impression of the costume?

What are the markers of gender within the male Captain America image? (first pass)

- Broad shoulders, design emphasizes this
- Muscles visible in even not overly form fitting garment
- Angular features, heavy brow of mask
- Strapping features that would not comfortably fit a typical female body shape

Figure 6: Concept Design 9/17

I must determine what can visually mark the character as female. The body shape matters. The shape and proportions of the shoulders, bust, waist, and hips can go a long way. Softer features overall would help and a different shape to the eyes of the mask. The trick will be to make the female costume as seemingly functional as the male version. It cannot all just be softer. It must be purposeful in fit, construction, and material. I will research some female costumes and clothing that are similar to get an idea of what would be appropriate changes.

> The first character I ever did GBC for was Robin from DC Comics' Young Justice TV series. It began as a cheap Halloween costume idea and eventually evolved into one of my favorite convention cosplays as I put more and more work into improving the cosplay, researching binding methods and makeup ideas in order to make myself pass as more masculine. I wanted to improve my Robin cosplay in order to stop being incorrectly referred to as "the girl Robin," and because I enjoyed children's reactions as they seemed to have a particular affinity for teen superheroes like Robin.
>
> Shiki

From dissertation journal:

Corset w/straps & buckles → stripes work into straps/harness

Flexible boning – spiral steel

Shoulder armor?

Belt

Utility trousers

1940s-esque (I seem to favor that.)

I began pinning corsets, circus costumes for harnesses, women's fashion, and military uniforms of the period to gather visual research from practical, historical sources. I wanted my cosplay to be informed by realistic silhouettes and materials of the period. I wanted my adaptation to make a sort of (fashion) sense.

> I'm a big Star Trek fan, and I wanted to do a version of the original Captain Kirk from Star Trek, but as I was researching and as I was looking what his costumes were like, and I was also trying to make a cosplay for my body, I realized that the straight lines that are on his costumes are not necessarily going to be flattering on my body type, because I am very hourglass. So I looked at the original series female costumes and decided to do a female version of the costume but decorated as Kirk. I do a hairstyle that is similar to his with that sort of wave in the front that he wears, and I style it very 60s. That was my first foray into (dressing as) a character and introducing myself to other people as that character gender-bent to be female. So instead of saying, "Hi! I'm James T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise." I say, "Hi! I'm Jane T. Kirk, Captain of the USS Enterprise." And it would click with people that I am actually supposed to be Captain Kirk.
>
> J

Parameter 5: Iconic Design Elements

From dissertation journal:

- *Palette – red, white, blue (shades & tones vary)*
- *Stars & stripes*
- *Functional*
- *1940s*

To make this gender-bent cosplay recognizable, I could not overlook the visual design elements that signify Captain America. This list was in development and debate until the night before the convention I attended.

From dissertation journal (two months later):

What are the iconic elements of Captain America?

Shield

Star and stripes

Sometimes the A

Red, white, blue

From dissertation journal (night before convention):

Upside down, rimmed bottom of coffee cup in hotel room makes a fine paint palette.

I questioned whether the "A" from Captain America's helmet was necessary until the last minute but was prepared with supplies just in case.

> My most rewarding GBC piece would have to be my partner's Mario dress. It's the same as his normal overalls, but we made it a skirt with a patterned ruffle at the bottom. Compared to a lot of my dresses, it's pretty simple, but it's incredibly popular and I've already had a couple people copy it and order ones of their own, so I know it's a hit. It's a great example of being able to capture the essence of a character even though you've changed the costume.
>
> Snow Cosplays

Pencil to Paper

A big difference in this process from my usually design experiences is not having a finished, colored rendering before beginning to sew and purchase costume pieces. I made a series of pencil sketches to test ideas.

From dissertation journal:

This idea has been in my mind for a long while.

Research of women's work wear of the period was my first inspiration.

Then recently I came across a variant CA cover that had Cap on a farm. I felt like then I had permission of sorts to go in this direction. I never thought I needed permission before, but that was the sense I experienced. Maybe because then my leap wouldn't be as great? More legitimate? Curious.

Top-stitched details? (star)?

In 2011, Marvel Comics commissioned a series of variant covers across their published offerings to celebrate the release of the Captain America film. Each cover

depicted “real world Americans of various vocations and ethnicities in the idiom of Captain America” (Khouri, 2011). One particular cover of the “I am Captain America” line caught my attention in 2017 as I was designing my GBC. Gerald Parel painted a stunning rendition of a Captain America-inspired farmer. It has the qualities of an oil painting, memory, nostalgia, and Americana. He wore blue overalls, a red and white striped shirt, a blue ballcap with the iconic “A,” red gloves, and carried a star adorned kerchief in his right pocket. This cover seemed to mirror, or at least evoke, the ideas I was contemplating in my cosplay. Beyond this cover, I found inspiration, encouragement, and permission in the other covers of this series to go beyond the canon rendition of Captain America.

Figure 7: Concept Design 12/17

From dissertation journal:

It happened again between December 2017 and January 2018. The thought that I could/should do a "screen-accurate" version of Captain America from Captain America: The First Avenge. I spent nearly a week contemplating this. I knew I could purchase coutil (the weave of the Harold Stark uniform) and dye it the "correct" blue. I pinned and analyzed photographs of the costume used in the film. It was not just possible, but doable and not overly complicated. But it was not what I had set out to do. It didn't feel right, but I felt compelled, pushed. Was this performativity? Not making the character too feminine? Not straying from someone else's adaptation? Proving that I could do it? Showing off my skill sets?

I love Doctor Who. I'm also a bigger woman. I don't want to feel hemmed in by doing something that is completely screen accurate. I think it is really cool when other people do it, but I don't have that much patience for attention to detail. So it just came naturally to me as far as doing a gender-bend, because I didn't care if I was exactly like the what character was looking like. So I did a skirt, I had suspenders, I bought a bowtie that looked just like his, and that was the first time I started making clothes for myself as well. So that was a really fun experience for me.

Jessica

You're allowed to add your own details.

Cosplay doesn't have to be exact to capture the love of the character.

Snow Cosplays

Just because you can do something does not mean that you should. *Whose art is this anyway? Who am I doing this for?* It was exciting to think and know that I could do a very "accurate" version. That type of undertaking stretches different muscles, highlights different skills. Part of my interest in GBC comes from a broader interpretation of what cosplay is, not a narrow, fits-into-a-box perspective.

In an effort to not settle and come up with a costume that would be different, amazing, and "wow" the audience, I considered a post-war feminine look a la Christian Dior's New Look. The hat could be the shield and the skirt would be removeable to transform into a more battle-ready look. It would be at once feminine and practical, historical and theatrical. This was an extreme idea that I still think would be awesome to actualize. My time was getting short, and it did not seem quite right in this instance, so I kept sketching, reading, and pinning.

From dissertation journal:

I have too many options, too many ideas.

I need to set more parameters.

I did very quick and rough sketches of my ideas.

I need to flesh some out more and choose a direction.

If I was going into this with another thematic layer, such as steampunk or 18th century, then I could more easily narrow my thoughts down. This is where a concept and a team would come into play in my usual costume design experience. This is like choosing a color for my living room. I can have quick, direct, and reasoned ideas for color regarding a costume that I am designing, building, or supervising for someone else. But if it is for me, I do not trust

my instincts. Is it really for me? Is concern over my opinion or someone else's opinion/judgement holding me back? Why do I care?

Figure 8: Dior Inspiration

Figure 9: Options!

In this research/artmaking process, I considered cosplays that more or less mirror versions of the comic and/or film costume designs of Captain America with a focus on women's fashions of the 1940s. Even within those parameters, the possibilities seemed endless.

Interacting with Materials

In the midst of sketching, I sourced a variety of fabrics and ordered swatches to see and to feel. I was not sure what the final design would be, but I knew the basic color palette and key features. The availability of materials, after all, is a determining factor in the final design.

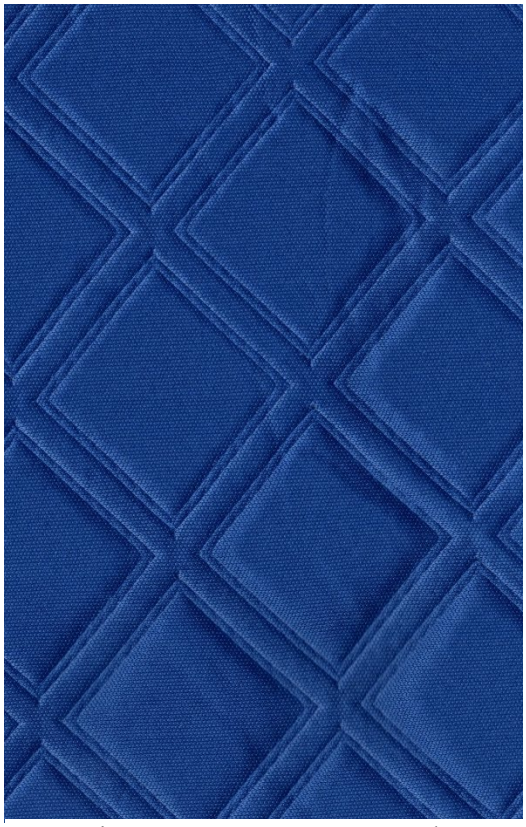

Figure 10: Neoprene Swatch

From dissertation journal:

Is "armor" necessary?

How realistically functional should the costume be or seem?

Should I do more than one? Maybe a simpler take for a local con in order to get me feet wet or go all out for the first time? What does all out mean?

This embossed neoprene fabric mimics a quilted armor or the stamping of metal pieces, yet it is soft and flexible. I was intrigued by the possibilities of the types of wearable forms this fabric could make. It also has a stretch. If I

were to go with a contemporary superhero suit, even with 1940s styling details, this fabric could be ideal.

There does seem to be a premium placed on heavily armored and "screen-accurate" cosplays as though they require the most skill. I argue that fine, quality sewing and stitching skills are just as hard-earned and that the creative skill necessary for a recognizable, yet non-representational cosplay is on par with a realistic adaptation of an "original" design.

> On the intellectual side, the fact that even if it's just clothing I bought off the rack and I just happen to put in a few accessories that turn it into more of a costume or cosplay, that's accepted. I was putting my own troll perceptions of the very minute few that think "well if you didn't hand make your costume then it's not a cosplay." There really aren't a whole lot of people that I've come in contact with that truly believe that. I wish I had known in general the cosplay world and costume world are more accepting of what your version is of a costume. I was very self-conscious when I first started out and I never felt like I was quite good enough, like I was doing the right things. So I really started talking to the people that just have these fantastic costumes and they were like "that's how we started out and that's fine. And even if you stay, if that's your comfort zone, there's nothing wrong with that." I wish I had in a way a mentor or a counselor that told me that that's okay.
>
> Jessica

From dissertation journal:

Adaptation is challenging.

I am way over thinking this.

Thoughts:

Why would the costume be any different than what has been done except made to fit a "woman's" body?

All are already adaptations of the original.

We are three-dimensional. Comic illustrations and printing is two-dimensional.

Even a "faithful" adaptation is still an adaptation.

Differences of interpretation should be celebrated.

When I think about "just" making the costume to fit my body, I get lost in more choices, questions, concerns.

Figure 11: Armor and Harness

Is fidelity then the goal? Do I need/want to make it screen-accurate?

That was never my desire going into this process. But the thought of "just" making the costume to fit my body, makes me think that I am supposed to be very conscious of such details from one specific film or comic adaptation.

That can be its own fun, but since I had not planned on that approach, it makes me a bit anxious and takes the fun away.

I think having clear themes, goals, ideas, parameters (whatever they are) makes choices so much easier.

I do not make myself much clothing, not only because I do not have the time. I can take time and care with costumes/clothing for anyone else. It seems I have a block when it comes to making things myself, so I just do not do it.

Why do I feel I am not worthy of my own time, care, skills?

Why do I care what others will think in this situation and not in others?

Figure 12: "Female" Armor

Is it because this is more personal than professional? Meaning it is for research and education and not as a professional costumer, basically I am not being hired as a costumer.

But aren't I already putting the pressure of my profession upon myself? Or does it never go away?

What were my goals for this GBC?

- *Recognizable*
- *Well-crafted*
- *Confidence*

I never thought I had to make all the pieces for this cosplay. I thought I would make the clothing portions, but not the boots or the shield. It seemed wholly unnecessary and not a good use of time, especially when such pieces were readily available. Sometimes ready-to-wear pieces will help push a costume design forward.

> I have two [favorites]: Cecil from Welcome to Night Vale – I love it, because I found this really amazing silver tie with a swirling pattern, it's a little tentacle-like. And the fan art of him is heavy with tentacle imagery. It's just a beautiful tie, and it makes me feel handsome.
> Badger from Firefly. I hunted down the exact flamingo broach he wears like it was my job, and I wanted a raise.
>
> Shannon

From dissertation journal:

Saw and fell in love with the perfect boots for my Cap cosplay on a fellow taekwondo mom on Saturday. Looked them up online with only my description. Found them. Super proud. But cannot find them in my size as they are from 2014. I am not used to not finding the specific costume piece when I want/need it. I am the finder. This is so frustrating.

Why do I keep looking at shoes as though that is what I will build my design around?

Have I been at this too long?

Inspiration is everywhere.

Dang, I want those boots.

Ugh…

*****

Found the boots in an eBay auction in a 7 wide. So close and so tempting. I feel ridiculous. I have the skills to make a similar pair of boots look like these, but I do not want to do that. Part of why I want these particular boots is because they seem so naturally perfect already. If I were to make or alter something, I would do something more unique or just different.

*****

Bought brown boots today. Not knee high but more like traditional combat boots.

Am I doing this wrong?

I need to go further and solidify more of the design. The boots were on clearance and they seemed so right.

Sometimes as a designer, I find a piece I know is right and that I will use. So I get it. That's how I felt today. I thought I should get them while I can. Maybe this helps me make those other choices and commit. I thought I would have made one firm choice. I have been thinking about this for years.

I was overthinking. I wanted to "do it right." But there is no "right way." I put the pressures of being a professional costume designer and a PhD candidate on this project, on the cosplay. *Play*. I hesitated. I kept myself from moving forward, because I wanted to be sure of my direction. I did not want to waste ideas, opportunities, time, or money. From dissertation journal:

Shared my ideas with a grad student of mine.

Sometimes you/I need validation.

Or just to check that I am not crazy.

I am going with a Rosie the Riveter-esque design. Even within that option there are so many choices, but I feel like I have set a strong parameter.

Actual 1940s women's clothing as inspiration for this adaptation

It does not need to be and will not be real period garments

It is an interpretation of a fictional character

Some key character design elements will be present - shield in some form, stars, stripes, A and wings detailing

Options, options

I decided to cut out a muslin mockup of a commercial pattern for vintage women's overalls. Simplicity 8447. It is a reissuing of a pattern they put out in the 1940s. It is not exactly what I have been sketching, but I thought I might give it a try to see what I like or don't like. If nothing else, I will most likely use the pants as I did not plan to pattern them from scratch anyway.

Figure 13: Into Fabric

Part of why I am leaping to fabric is that, in my experience, I have been thinking about this project for so long and waiting to just do it. I thought getting my hands on fabric and making something would force me to make whatever choices I need to make.

I needed to make something. I needed to progress beyond a sketch, beyond my mind, and into something tangible. While fitting the muslin to myself, I drew in possible details, such as pockets, a different neckline, and the stripes. A mash-up was not the intent, but it will be perceived that way. A mash-up is a mixing of two or more characters, genres, etc. My idea was born out of historical fashion and uniform research. I do not consider my GBC to be a Captain America-Rosie the Riveter cross, but I do not

see a problem, if that is the interpretation of the viewers, audience, observers. An interaction, or experience, with the cosplay is the point.

Construction

From dissertation journal:

Draped new bodice/bib for costume.

Patterned and build second mockup.

Ready for fitting.

Con is in less than one month away.

I have a second fabric option for my shirt. The striped fabric hurts my eyes when I look at it. The second option is a textured chambray that reminds me of quilting and of armor because of its hexagon motif. I am currently leaning towards the second option, at least for my first go. The more I work on this the more I think of other versions. Speaking of... in talking about my project with my students, I mused that it would be fun to design Disney princesses in overalls or overalls to represent a Disney princess. Another group of students

Figure 14: Draping

expressed excitement over my project and getting to see the finished product. It is encouraging to hear this from a younger generation as a times I feel too old for this. Or I wonder if I am or if I seem like I am. I really do not feel too old, but definitely do not want to come across as ridiculous.

Design decisions include hair and makeup, gloves, shield type, shirt fabric finalized, what to make the star and stripes out of for the overall bodice/bib, kerchief fabric and wrap placement.

What color should my hair be?

How much of my hair will show?

Is the kerchief tied at the crown or the nape?

Where are the wings and the "A" placed?

Do I need a wig or a fall?

Buy or build gloves?

Maybe the shield is a button/pin for the collar a la Rosie poster image.

Make sure to have time for test runs and posing rehearsals.

Figure 15: More Draping

Draping is my happy place. Working with the fabric to realize or to discover a vision is deeply satisfying. It is problem-solving, planning, taking and conceding and sharing control. A dialogue between material

and maker. I did not consider this at the time, that perhaps this dialogue should occur sooner in the process for me as a cosplayer.

Figure 16: Chambray

Cosplaying is more personal than the costume design and making I am used to. It seems important to feel and work with the material in the patterning process and in the fitting process as soon as possible.

Matching patterns/prints makes my heart happy. I was stitching a box pleat into the blouse and the woven pattern matches. It's the teeny-tiniest bit off, but not enough to redo. This was more serendipitous than planned. My plan when I cut anything is to not have a pattern/print be way off. So it was more a result of my normal (not the stripes or plaids must match mentality) prepping and cutting for something that looks good. Normal quality control. And the period pattern. And the woven pattern. And the size of the box pleat. It just all worked even more beautifully than I hoped. Then I remembered that no one will see this loveliness as it will be covered by the back of the overalls.

Figure 17: Matching Patterns & Buttons

*****

One week until the convention...

Shirt is complete. Love having dress forms available.

I am not liking how the pattern had the buttonholes placed now that they are complete. I was in a push (hurry) to get it done and just used the pattern guide instead of measuring and placing myself as I would usually do. Any other situation I would trust myself, my experience, etc.

I thought the guide would just be quicker and simpler. Now I think I will adjust the front overlap edge by a quarter inch, meaning I slit the overlap along the fold line, fold the cut edges in by a quarter inch and edge stitch or slip stitch. This is a disappointment. But I am finding the things that are important to me regarding quality and ways to fix them. Just taking a bit

Figure 18: Final Mockup

more time a couple of steps ago would have avoided this. I am worth the time.

I have been giddy with excitement as the costume has been taking shape. Making evil laugh cackles as parts come together, patterns and seams are matched, and new ideas work.

Thoughts and questions...

What is the essence of a character?

Is the essence of Capt. America that he is a soldier that fights Nazis? That was suggested to me last weekend. I do not think that that is his essence. Wouldn't that make him rather two dimensional? No pun intended. What does essence mean?

Figure 19: Final Mockup Fitting

Being on the other side of the dynamic in a fitting is something I very rarely experience. There is no way I would have been able to reach behind myself to fit the mock-up to my body as desired and needed. I am grateful to have had help from a willing and supportive graduate student. We set up making sessions during our lunches throughout the spring semester where we helped each other with personal projects, encouraging and pushing each other to reach our goals.

From dissertation journal:

Does the 1940s feminine work clothes aesthetic, similar to that of Rosie the Riveter, speak to that idea of his essence? Meaning how women fought Nazis in WWII America was to work in factories? So this adaptation is if Captain America was a woman whose essence was that she is a soldier (worker, patriot) who fights Nazis in the "only" way she can? I find that limiting to the potential social commentary of the adaptation, if it is a social commentary at all. If there was a super serum, and a woman took it, would she be doing what women without it were doing already? Was she took weak for factory work? Would a woman that had the same medical profile as Steve Rogers be denied working in the war effort at home? I doubt that but need to check. I think the commentary would be that why couldn't Captain America be a woman in the first place? Whether women were allowed to be soldiers or not, women played important roles within the effort. If a frail man was denied enlisting, why couldn't a healthy female enlist? Is a frail man more capable than a healthy woman? Why couldn't a woman (in any condition) become a super soldier? Especially if the main qualification is about the person's character?

Have fun with it. So many people I know either take it too seriously or are so critical of themselves that they don't have fun. I just want to try and remind people that you can have fun in this hobby. You can enjoy it.

Dawn

GBC's kind of a fun way to give the finger to social norms.

Detwire

Figure 20: Cutting

Figure 21: Red Details – Dyed Gloves &
Pocket Facings

Figure 22: The Stripes

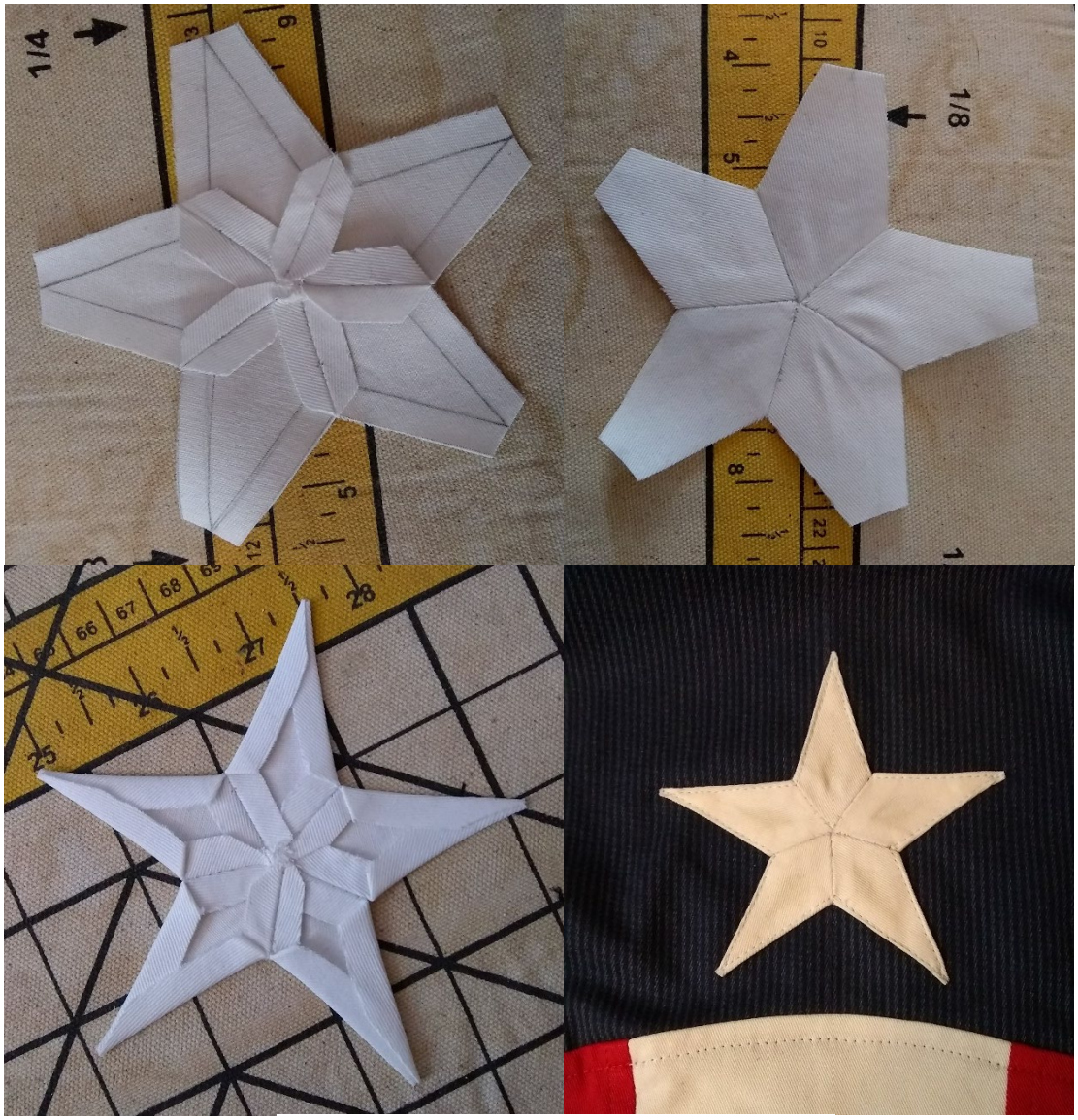

Figure 23: Pieced Five Point Star

Testing /Fitting

From dissertation journal:

Figure 24: Details - Buttons

Fabric fitting done. Woohoo!

Roller coaster of a day with logistics, family, work, people, etc.

People needing things from me with unnecessary urgency.

Pieced a five point star for the bodice applique. Thank you to quilters and Pinterest and the internet.

Been thinking a lot about my intentions and commentary. Basically in my head I am kicking around the fact that for most combat men could be rejected for a variety of medical reasons, while women were not even considered based on their sex/gender.

Also, how often did women attempt to pass for male in WWII and other previous wars, and the like. Does this even matter for this cosplay? Probably not. But it is difficult not to contemplate in a research situation. What is the ultimate goal of a cosplay in general? What is the goal of a GBC, specifically? Are they different?

Finishing a costume piece is so satisfying. Small details like functional buttons that look reminiscent of the period or of a superhero aesthetic add polish and help

complete the look of the character. Could the cosplay be successful without this detail? Yes. But such details do add up to contribute to the story being told for whomever notices them. Sometimes that person is me as the designer, maker, and wearer. I know those elements are there. They mean something to me and affect my performance as a designer, maker, and wearer. I become invested in the success of the costume, of the story, of the cosplay.

From dissertation journal:

Purchasing makeup! Spending money is hard. I made a budget for myself, but I have still put off expenses for as long as possible. I have plenty of stage makeup, but wanted a more refined look for close-up, in-person photos and interactions. I do not think I have worn liquid eyeliner since dance recitals as a kid. And it belonged to my mother. I grew up with pencils and crayons being the norm for makeup. Better at applying it than I expected, so teaching stage makeup and painting renderings has paid off. I have never owned true red lipstick, but now I do. Why do I not wear lip color every day? It makes such a noticeable difference. I will be practicing elements of the look every day now leading up to the con.

Preparing the relatively simple makeup for this cosplay was humbling, maybe because it was a simple and familiar look within our cultural consciousness, a toned-down version of 1940s glamour. I wanted authenticity. I wanted to look like I knew what I was doing. I did not want the makeup to be incongruous with the clothing. It had to work together. I took time during the week leading up to the convention to practice my makeup a few times without stressing too much. While in front of the mirror, I also tried

out power poses. I wanted to get comfortable and more natural; but without the costume, I just felt awkward. It was sort of like what I experience taking taekwondo classes. When I am in uniform on the mat, I do not feel out of place going through traditional forms (movements and poses) that emphasize power, strength, and combat. But outside of that space and outside of the uniform, the same movements feel strange, out of place.

Performing

From dissertation journal:

At hotel, Saturday morning of Convention,

I will be looked at.

People will look at me.

Which is my best side?

(hummed "Be a Man" from Mulan while getting ready – unconsciously)

> I'll watch whatever my character of choice is in. Use their picture as the background on my phone to stay inspired, and I'll pick out music – either their theme song, or music that seems to fit the character. Usually I'll play the music while I'm getting dressed and putting my makeup on.
>
> Detwire

Figure 25: Makeup – Before & After

At Convention Center, 9:45am

Compliment from a vendor – young artist – loved that I made it, loved the pouf of the sleeves, can't sew themselves

> I want people to notice the work rather than my appearance. When cosplaying lady characters, the majority of comments and compliments I get are based on my body rather than my costume or appreciation of my character.
>
> Shiki

Figure 26: Start of Day

Don't be stiff – relax – laugh – smile – tuck in bum – use taekwondo stances

Dip/tilt head to show off "A" on kerchief – maybe wear to back (drawing)

"Awesome!" in passing in restroom

Figure 27: Posing with Star Wars Display

Many compliments from artists/vendors

3 photo requests in 30 minutes walking around

"Did you make the overalls?"

"Nice work." – jewelry artist

3 more photo requests

"That's so clever." – 20-something female

I want them to recognize the time and the effort that it takes, the detail. I want then to notice or even just recognize at all, 'I never thought about a girl being Constantine. And that's cool.' I want to give them an epiphany, 'Oh, that's a thing I could do.'

J

Only one male photographer (professional)

Everyone has been polite and asking before taking my picture.

"You're Captain America and Rosie the Riveter. It's perfect. You're everything." – pair of 20-something women

2 ladies at artist booth – loved it and talked about viewing cosplay being "the fun part" of being a vendor

"I like the concept. Awesome." – a Ghostbuster

Figure 28: Posing with Con Banner

I love when someone can appreciate what I'm putting forth as far as my love of that fandom. I like when they can come up and be like, 'Oh, that's really cool. I love this particular part.' It's the best part. 'Oh, how did you do this?' I like getting questions like that. And I think part of the reason I like gender-bending is because then I don't have those people who are super fans come up and say, 'Well, that character doesn't wear that.' But I'm a female version of that character. You don't know what they would wear. I feel that gender-bending removes that, because as soon as you take it to that level, the person who may have criticized you for something else sees that you are doing something different, and it's like they can appreciate it more that way.

Jessica

Gloves are a challenge when trying to look at art prints

"Love your costume,." - a Sally with top hat

"Awesome costume," - a pair of G.I. Joe Cobra soldiers - their costumes were amazingly realistic.

Smile from a girl scout across the aisle from our booth

Smile from little girl in Captain America dress. It was sparkly with tulle

Attending Cosplay 101 panel

Kids love to see their character come to life. And for the most part, kids don't care that I sound like a girl. Kids don't want to have a bad experience interacting with a character. Even though Kylo Ren is pretty mean, I go full on Disney Princess mode. I get down to their level and give them I big hug. I try to keep my personality. I don't want to *be* Kylo Ren. He's a douche.

Dawn

Figure 29: Posing in the Hallway

I really love people's creativity. I really enjoy seeing other people figure things out, how they do things, how they make things for their GBC. I think it takes a lot of creativity and a lot of effort. For me, it's always nice to be somebody else for while; to put on some characters who have traits that I don't have or whose traits are in me but are not able to be expressed in a manner that is acceptable publicly. So Captain Kirk is very outward and free and fun, and I am those things, but he is free and fun in a masculine way and I like that. I tend to be outgoing, flirty type in a masculine way and that sometimes is interpreted sort of oddly. And so, when I am Captain Kirk, it's suddenly okay. It allows me to be a part of myself that I know I am, but in a way that is easily digestible for other people.

J

I walk differently. I used to do that in faerie costumes. After a bit, I would get comfortable in my "skin" and play. There was a bounce in my step, a glowing, smiling confidence. In Cap, I keep my shoulders back and my back straighter, my chin up. And I smile. I talk to strangers. I say the most genuine "thank you" to compliments. I am thrilled when someone asks or notices I made my costume.

Met a very nice cosplayer in the costume contest check-in line. There was a lot of standing in line and waiting with check-in and pre-judging. Note – can have process and reference photos to show judges, maybe have a description planned. Apparently, my costume looked purchased instead of made. I think that's a compliment. I do know how to finish a garment, so of course I did. It was not a "WOW!" kind of costume but had well executed (precision) construction and details. It was clever. It was fun. It was cute and empowering. The design was thoughtful. It was

socially/culturally relevant. I did not go into this thinking that the cosplay must be socially relevant, but of course I/we are influenced by and influence social/cultural forces.

Figure 30[ii]: Waiting to Walk the Runway

The energy of the ballroom was tangible. It was supportive, fun, and inspiring. The sound ops paid attention to the cosplays reaching the stage and played character appropriate themes. I was feeling nervous as my turn approached, but once I stepped onto the stairs it all went away. I hope I was not too stiff. When the mc asked who I was portraying, I responded, "Captain America," not femme, female, woman. Just Captain America. I strode to the center of the runway and posed in a battle stance with my head tilted down to show the "A" on my kerchief. Then I walked to the edge and did the Rosie pose. The house erupted. It was awesome and fun. I received many

compliments on my costume as I left the stage and made my way back around the side of the house toward the back. Requests for photos, the gaze of a little girl and girls of all ages. A dad asked to take my photo as his daughter, costumed as Rey, climbed on the seat next to him. My heart melted. I accepted compliments with, "Thank you!" No qualifications, just gratitude. The last cosplayer wore large armor with wings. As he approached the stage everyone cheered. Then he fell, and the house went silent. The energy changed to concern and empathy. Many around the stage went to his aid, but others knew to stay out of the way. As he made his way up to standing, everyone cheered. There never were any laughs. The final judging was not lengthy. The four-judge panel noted how difficult the decisions were. Each class (novice, journeyman, master) would give three awards (1st, 2nd, 3rd). They also awarded best armor and best needlework. Those are the cash prizes. But each judge presented a judge's choice award. These did not involve cash but were special as each judge described why their choice deserved an award, an acknowledgement. (Honestly, I didn't know there were cash prizes until they were presented. That was not my motivation to enter.) The second judge to present her choice was @MonikaLee. It was me, my cosplay, my costume. She mentioned that many would not consider this costume to be a Wow! Costume, but that the sewing and pattern execution were amazing. I can't remember her exact words. That was a wonderful feeling. I was so grateful. My prize was a plastic gold medal on a red, white, and blue striped ¼" grosgrain ribbon. One side says WINNER, the other has a star.

But my real prize was validation, recognition, fun, play – AN EXPERIENCE.

An experience of collaborative play!! Co-creation of an environment of creativity, adaptation, imagination, and support, encouragement – a celebration. When I took my place offstage with the first judge's choice awardee, a

young girl between 6 and 10 in a Fairyland costume wielding a giant axe, she greeted me with "Congratulations. You did a great job." I replied, "Thank you. Your cosplay is amazing." And it was. She worked it. She fully inhabited the costume, the character. The very friendly and talented woman I met at the beginning of the evening while waiting and waiting won first place in her category (journeyman). After a large group photo, we left the ballroom. Luckily, I found Jessica to congratulate her. (Astronema, villain in Power Rangers in Space)

Figure 31: Judge's Choice

Armor is seen as "better" or "harder" – why did I think I needed to do that?

Overhead waiting for contest to begin: "Cosplayers look out for cosplayers."

After walking the runway: Energy is physically felt

So many compliments from women and some men as I went back to the line

I revisited my dissertation journal a month after the convention and found an overlooked entry from December 2017 when I began this inquiry in full force.

What is the story I want to tell?

Anything is possible.

Women/girls can be strong too.

Choices matter.

We can rewrite/re-imagine stories.

We can learn lessons from our past.

We hold ourselves back.

We underestimate each other.

> You can cosplay however you want, whatever you want. You don't have to stick to the ideals of other people.
>
> Kurama Babe

Section 5: PULLING THREADS

GBC exists in the spaces between, in the pockets within a subculture (cosplay) of a culture (fandom). The value of pockets cannot be understated. Meaning is made in the spaces in-between. As cosplay has become more and more mainstream, it appears we have more opportunities to experience and explore those pockets and to share what is inside. In this section, I address questions that came up during my inquiry. I present my interpretations and examinations based on my experiences informed by the responses of interview participants. Different experiences and different responses would yield different interpretations. Different conceptual underpinnings and different methodologies would produce different examinations. There is no one universal experience. Each is personal and varied. The theories of performativity, adaptation, and play guide me. I pull on loose threads to see how they shaped and may shape this and future inquiries. No threads will be neatly tied at end of this project. Some will fray while others may be stitched into yet others. I see these threads crossing multiple categories as this work is intertwined, tangled, and felted together. The delineations that follow are for clarity.

Threads of Performativity

Performativity is a process of reifying cultural norms. *Is performativity what holds us back as we pursue GBC or what urges us forward?* I think it is a bit of both. The communicative, collaborative, and interactive natures of GBC make it performative. GBC brings attention to social realities, possibilities, and constraints. The tension that I experienced in creating my GBC makes sense when viewed with this contradiction in mind. I chose to cosplay a female version of Captain America yet felt compelled to ground that version in historically feminine costume/fashion/uniform. I chose to cosplay a female version of Captain America yet did not want to be "too feminine" that it is considered "sexy" Captain America. I chose to cosplay a female version of Captain America yet worried about the faithfulness of my design to that of the contemporary film version, as if my cosplay must please anyone but myself. My choices are my own, but they are influenced by my socially-conditioned, lived experiences in this world.

> GBC frees me from accusations of cosplaying "sexy" versions of characters. And drastically cuts back on the number of non-consensual touches and catcalls I'm subjected to. I don't get accused of a character just because they are "hot" or "popular." Pretty much every possible insult or harassment related to the Fake Geek Girl stereotype is avoided.
>
> Shiki

> [GBC's] liberating creatively, letting me come up with an amazing array of costumes and not being limited by my own gender/sex.
>
> Snow Cosplay

My main motivations to do a GBC were desires to celebrate the ideals of a character I admired, to feel emotionally and physically safe in that expression, and to feel free to create something new. As a stated earlier, I do not hate my body, but I would not feel comfortable in a traditional Wonder Woman costume. Surely, I could have chosen to adapt her costume to be more comfortable for me. But I was not drawn to Wonder Woman in the same way I was drawn to Captain America. I found the character of Captain America more appealing to portray. And somehow, the adapting of Captain America's costume for a woman seemed more acceptable than changing Wonder Woman's costume for a woman; as though because she and I are both women, I should just wear the costume that is expected. A woman as Captain America is already different from the norm, so of course, the expected costume would need to be adapted.

> I'm a tall girl, and fairly curvy. I tend to design my costumes with garments that flatter my curves; I'm not much of a stickler for screen accuracy. I do try to stay true to the character, though, rather than building an outright "sexy" version. I don't have anything against it, I just know where my own comfort zone is.
>
> Detwire

> I feel more comfortable with GBC. This is partly because the actual outfits themselves are looser, more comfortable, and less revealing. It's also partly because I draw less of the unwanted attention that feminine characters unfortunately attract.
>
> Shiki

Body image and issues of consent affected my choice, even if just

by a bit. I am not alone in this as I learned from interview respondents. Feeling comfortable and confident and having fun were important to me as I designed and created my cosplay. Gender-bending filled those needs. Adapting the costume of a traditionally masculine male character to fit my visibly female body provided me with a sense of armor against sexual harassment and unwanted attention. This was an impression, real or imagined, that led me to relax and have fun, to play. I wish this was not so. Anyone should be able to wear anything and feel, and be, safe.

> It's a chance to be somebody that you are not. A chance to put on a part of yourself openly that you don't show everybody. I can see why other people can find it liberating to finally feel and look how they want to feel and look without the social pressures of being in a binary system like we are.
>
> J

I did not have a specific social agenda planned as part of my GBC, but I wondered how GBC might be liberating or constraining. I believe GBC is not meant to perpetuate binarity though it may have that effect on some. GBC allows us to show it, see it, and call it out. This is how GBC is performative. It speaks about and displays our social realities and possibilities. If GBC is an illusion or performance of gender, and a

> I feel more confident, and I think confidence is a very masculine quality. There are so many reminders in society that women should make themselves small and be nice. Crossplay gives me permission to take up space.
>
> Shannon

person "never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate" (Butler, 1993, p. 22), perhaps GBC can help us become more comfortable with unfilled gaps and ambiguity, ourselves, and each other.

While I did feel more confident and empowered as Captain America, I am curious as to the social cost. *How was my GBC received and (re)interpreted? What did the audience see and experience? Did it (I) offend anyone?*

> I do [find GBC liberating]. I'm taking the male versions – who have all the fun – and putting myself into their shoes, while staying true to myself. It's an empowering feeling. It snubs social limits, and I'm all about that.
>
> Detwire

I can only interpret the reactions that I noticed and the opinions shared with me as I interacted with con attendees and fellow cosplayers. My experience was overwhelmingly positive. This is what I would hope for all cosplayers. But as cosplay is a performance, there is an audience that brings their own individual and collective lived, social experiences to the (re)interpretation of the cosplay. Knowing this, I asked interview participants how GBC may by a form of activism. Responses varied, though awareness of

> I'm a fat woman, but for the most part I don't let that stop me from dressing as a male character. It will stop me from dressing as some female characters. Masculinity is a powerful thing, and I find that really complicated; but I also like how it makes me feel.
>
> Shannon

the potential social and political interpretations of GBC was present among interview participants.

> It can help to raise awareness of non-traditional or non-binary presentations and expressions of gender and can help to inspire interest, familiarity, and acceptance among those who may not participate, but do recognize GBC. It can also help those who may be questioning their own comfort zone and gender expression and become more comfortable with themselves.
>
> Shiki

> For me personally, it's a queer statement, and I think that's always activism.
>
> Shannon

> I'm unsure how to answer this. I've actually had trans folks upset at GBC, saying it's transphobic.
>
> Kurama Babe

> I think that we, as a cosplay, community, tend to be in some ways very inclusive and open and welcoming. Then in some ways there are still problems that need to be addressed and by crossplaying or gender-bending your costume you are in some ways challenging those people and their preconceived notions of gender. And so I think that on a base level, them being able to see it and experience it is only going to help them realize that this is part of their community and they need to be inclusive too.
>
> J

From the processes of interviewing and participation, I realized that many women found a creative power and sense

of freedom from societal expectations through GBC. But social activism was not the main focus of their GBC. As for myself, I felt simultaneously allowed and expected to be more creative, unique, and clever with GBC. I wanted to make it my own. Only I had the power to do that, so there was a different kind of pressure that I put on myself.

Threads of Adaptation

Adaptation, like performativity, is a process; a process of interpretation and creation. As such, no adaptation is a pure copy of the source (text). I stated from the beginning that fidelity was not my goal, yet I found myself hung up on the (perceived) expectation of a faithful recreation that saturates (social) media; praise for a cosplay that cannot be easily distinguished from the "original" on screen or does not alter the creator's intent, as though we could really know their intent. Never mind that any cosplay, regardless of theme, GBC or otherwise, is always already an adaptation. The choices of character and theme(s) assist in setting the parameters of play, the field in which one will work to devise and make a GBC. This field does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by our own life experiences and our own contemporary contexts. These influences act as filters through which we view and interpret new experiences and

> I get anywhere from "*Hey cool! What's that made out of*?" to "*(insert character here) isn't a girl. Do you even know the name of the character you are cosplaying?"*
>
> Detwire

knowledge. At the same time, new experiences and knowledge can affect the filters through which we view and interpret the next new experiences and knowledge. This emphasizes the instability of realities. I am reminded of two quotes I emphasized earlier. "Costume does not remain stable or fully knowable, but rather depends on what we see and how we look at what we see" (Monks, 2010, p. 6).

That same statement can substitute body, gender, and/or experience for costume and still speak volumes. Perhaps that is why the original quote makes sense in the first place. Realities are not stable or fully knowable. Realities depend on what we see and how we look at what we see. And those realities are the same contexts through which we interpret the experiences and knowledge that shape our realities. It is a cycle. I refuse to think of it as "vicious," just complicated. This spinning suggests the spinning of fibers to create the yarns and threads of textiles. They are thoughts, experiences, knowledge embedded within the materials we use to construct our experiences. The costume is often actualized by multiple people including the designer and the performer. Their collective imaginings and interpretations of research and reality are what we as audience members observe and interpret…

"The actor's body is not singular and stable, but rather multiple and continually shifting in its appearance and possibilities" (Monks, 2010, p. 33).

The actor does not have one body. There is the body of the performer, the body of the costume, and the body of the character at least. The three, or more, merge in a symbiotic relationship/experience/performance on stage. Multiple mind-bodies made that possible. Each contributed to the presentation of the character and story, and still others,

the audience/observers/spectators interpret that presentation. This is collaborative adaptation.

Eventually, I felt free to create my own version of Captain America. Finding the variant covers from 2011 helped me achieve a sense of grounding, and of permission; though I do not believe adaptations require permissions. My GBC was an expression of personal values and hope. At the same time, it was a fitting to/of myself – my mind-body and my sex-gender.

> I usually feel better about myself when I GBC. It's 2018 and there still aren't a whole bunch of strong female characters. GBC lets me fix that, at least in my own head.
> To me, there isn't a difference between Cosplay and GBC.
>
> Detwire

> Not just fun for me, because of the creative outlet, but it's a way for me to feel like I did my own thing. Yes, it's a character that exists. However, I got to put my name on it and my version likely isn't able to be found anywhere else. And if that's not the case? I still enjoyed myself.
>
> Kurama Babe

Threads of Play

The making of any costume involves play among/with/through/between materials, texts and images, fellow artists, and one's own realities/contexts. All contribute to the actualization of the material culture that is then interacted with further by a performer/player and the audience/observers/spectators. This is conducive to fostering an environment that emphasizes fun and community-building and was a motivating factor

for interview participants and myself. The things we wanted the audience to "take away" or "notice" from our GBC demonstrate this idea.

Anyone can cosplay, any character, anytime. I want people to notice the *work* rather than my appearance. When cosplaying lady characters, the majority of the comments and compliments I get are based on my body rather than my costume or appreciation of the character.

Shiki

Fun, encouragement, acceptance. I like people to tap into their inner creative bits and be confident in building and wearing whatever they like.

Detwire

A fellow fan. That's my favorite thing in fandom – Love and common ground.

Shannon

The creativity and our smiles, because we're doing what we love. Also that anyone can look beautiful in their outfits, no matter their size or what they look like.

Snow Cosplay

I want them to notice the time and effort that it takes, the detail. I want people to know that anybody can cosplay. I want people to have fun. I don't want them to be limited, because they feel like, "This is my favorite character, but I can't cosplay him, because I'm not a man," or "I can't cosplay her, because I am not a girl," or "I can't cosplay them, because I am non-gender conforming either (any) way."

J

At the beginning of this inquiry, I asked if the costume tells a story and if the costume is a narrative collage. Yes, but not on its own. There needs to be an audience to interpret and interact with the costume. Viewed or read as a singular artifact, the costume can only tell part of the story of a GBC. Its foundation is missing. Similarly, the mind-body is a narrative collage, yet regarding GBC both the body of the player and the costume are needed to create a narrative collage of GBC. And the viewing context matters as the interactions of the audience varies from type of contact; face-to-face, in passing, on-stage, still or moving image. Multiple bodies in multiple settings co-create multiple stories and multiple meanings. They play off/with/through each other. *If we consider Barthes's (1990) suggestion that clothing is a gendered sign of play and not play itself, what and where is the play? Is it because clothing carries both feminine and masculine signs, and gender is a social construct and perhaps play itself, that clothing is a sign of play?* "An item of clothing is indeed, at every moment of history, this balance of normative forms, all of which are constantly changing" (Barthes, 2013, p. 4). This thought is a snarled knot with threads of play, adaptation, and performativity. It deserves investigation beyond this inquiry.

Section 6: DESIGNS ON THE FUTURE

All inquiries have objectives and future directions. In discussing ABR, I quoted Rollings (2015). “Uniquely, the arts serve as a means to interpret the things that matter the most to us as individuals and local communities” (December 3, para. 6). Many people find meaning and matter in self-expression, fandom, community, and making. In this section, I consider the trajectory and future directions of this research. My hope is that this inquiry and its reporting are useful to other educators and researchers. I feel connections between this research and arts integration, student-centered education, culturally-relevant curriculum, and themes of contemporary art. These connections, like others in this process, are spun together, yet have fibers that expand beyond the thread. In thinking and looking beyond the threads of this inquiry, I focus on a potential research agenda that considers the intersections of play, identity, material, education, community, and collaboration.

Applications

Costuming involves skills, knowledge, and understanding from across disciplines. This makes costuming a prime topic, curricular unit, or individualize option to incorporate into an arts-integrated curriculum. As demonstrated within this inquiry, costuming encompasses design thinking, historical and cultural research, spatial

relationships, drawing, painting, sculpting, mathematics, drafting, anatomy, and collaboration. Other costuming projects within arts classrooms could include dyeing (chemistry), printing, electrical components such as lights, or moving parts (engineering). As an art and craft that is used in the telling and showing of stories and the creation of an embodied character, costuming practice reaches facets of multiple disciplines across curricula. The design process in costuming is the same design thinking that engineers use, which is based in the scientific method. Costuming can help students build connections between academic subjects and foster the understanding of concepts through practical applications.

SIDE NOTE: As I am wrapping up the writing of this dissertation, an online BBC News article lamenting the lack of craft skills and "tactile general knowledge" among surgery students has gone viral (Coughlan, 2018). In my experience, I have found undergraduate students who struggle to thread a needle, tie a knot, or find fractions on a ruler.

Costuming and sewing can be introduced as part of a student-centered approach to education before college. Sewing literacy is a life skill. I have found that many of my college students have interests in fashion, fandom, and/or sustainability regardless of their major course of study. *Why not leverage those interests into deeper student engagement with course material? Why not make education, especially art education,*

relevant to students lives? I am not suggesting that it be a stand-alone class, in most cases. I envision costuming as a thread that stitches disciplines and concepts together.

Costuming is not just about sewing and crafting a costume to wear in performance. It entails character analysis, historical/contextual research, sourcing materials, collaborative interactions, and reflection. Introducing the ideas of character, context, story, and design can begin at any age. Projects can emphasize the research and design processes rather than the production of costumes. Consider an object-based approach to learning with material culture studies. *What is the life cycle and the transvaluation of an artifact, specifically a piece of clothing that a character might wear? What stories does/can it tell? How are the stories and meanings different today than when the artifact, or type of artifact, was first made? How was it made? What were the materials used in its making? What are/were the relationships between the artifact and its maker and its user?* I do have a preference toward incorporating the tactile, collaborative, and embodied experiences of creating a wearable costume but depending upon the learning objectives other aspects of costuming can, and perhaps should, take focus when using it as a site of transdisciplinary educational practices.

Cosplay is wearable fan art. According to Hetrick (2018), "We need to realize that fan art creations, in whatever form, use postmodern skills such as appropriation, juxtaposition, and recontextualization, and ultimately, our students are creators of meaning through transformative works" (p. 62). Considering how our students actively and critically engage with clumps of material and popular culture can facilitate understanding and the co-creation of a student-centered curriculum. "Fan art lends itself

to a great deal of artistic innovation that is intimately tied to issues of empowered learning, utilizing postmodern principles and conceptual artistic strategies, and playing with identity (of the characters and of the fan)" (Hetrick, 2018, p. 62). Cosplayers are fans who routinely seek out places to learn new skills in sewing, crafting, sculpting, painting, and design. YouTube was the go-to site of learning for the women I interviewed. Friends and other cosplayers also contributed to the teaching and learning of new skills. *If fans, some of whom may be our students, are so invested that they spend copious amounts of time acquiring and honing sewing and craft skills, why are we not enthusiastically embracing this phenomenon within our classes?* Instead of drawing their favorite characters, students can make parts of characters' costumes or redesign the costumes for different time periods or contexts.

Explorations of cosplay and costuming can fit within educational units surrounding big ideas (Walker, 2001) and themes of contemporary art (Robertson & McDaniel, 2017), such as identity, the body, place, sustainability, heroes, fantasy, and power. Cosplay and costuming can be gateways to discuss and express commonalities and diversity of the human experience. Character analysis, development, creation, and experimentation can empower students to tell their own stories and advance empathy and understanding towards others and their stories. A unit on sustainability could explore various mending techniques, basic to artistic, and how and why they are used in different contexts related to time, place, and resources. We all know, use, and inhabit clothing. It is this closeness of clothing to the social, cultural, and political human experience, and therefore our bodies, that sparks a need/desire for costume play in various forms. Cosplay

opens a space for discussion, expression, experimentation, play, meaning-making, and art-making.

Directions

This inquiry leads me to focus on a research agenda that considers the intersections of play, identity, material, education, community, and collaboration. In contemplating where to go from here, I am met with many threads of possibility. I return to what spurred this inquiry… a curiosity. I wonder what and where play is within our contemporary lives, in educational settings, and beyond. I am not just looking for signs of play but play itself. *How do we produce the conditions necessary for play to flourish in various contexts? What meanings and insights can play generate in such spaces? I seek to better understand how we construct identity through wearable material (made, found, purchased). How does this affect arts education? How does art education affect how we construct identity through wearable material? How does the creation of and the engagement with material culture build community and foster dialogue and collaboration?* I hope to implement the potential applications of this research discussed above in collaboration with K-16 arts educators in classroom and community settings focusing on practice as research and intergenerational partnerships and to continue using costuming as a key method of inquiry.

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[i] The voices of the interview participants are featured in the text boxes. The boxes contain quotes from personal interviews. They are cited below.

Dawn (personal communication, 3 January 2018)

Detwire (personal communication, 4 June 2018)

J (personal communication, 8 June 2018)

Jessica (personal communication, 28 February 2018)

Jessica (personal communication, 5 January 2018)

Kurama Babe (personal communication, 11 June 2018)

Shannon (personal communication, 9 June 2018)

Shiki (personal communication, 6 June 2018)

Snow Cosplays (personal communication, 9 June 2018)

[ii] Photo Credit: Innovative Cosplay, 2018