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GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND COSPLAY: A CASE STUDY OF MALE-TO-FEMALE CROSSPLAY

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"Let's get one thing straight. I am not gay. I like girls a lot. That's why most of my favorite anime characters are girls. I like them so much that I sometimes dress up like them."

Tenshi, Crossplay.net, quoted on "Why Crossplay?" forum, (May 2012).

"Good crossplay reveals the pure love for an anime character [...] that is at the heart of all cosplay, regardless of the gender of [the] cosplayer or the character being cosplayed. In my perspective, it takes a *real* man to dress like a 10-year-old girl."

Lyn, Cosplay.com, quoted on "Views on Crossplay" thread (Oct. 2011).

"[T]raditional societal perceptions of gender are no fun anyway. I can't fire, earth, water, or air bend so I Gender Bend [*sic*]."

Lialina, veteran crossplayer, *pers.comm.*, (Dec. 2012).

In recent years, cosplay fans gathering at anime conventions and events all over North America have attracted much public attention and media coverage. These fans, who often refer to themselves as *otaku*,¹ wear elaborate costumes and makeup to embody various anime, manga, and related video game characters (Cooper-Chen, 2010; Eng, 2012a). The essence of cosplay, or costume-play, involves affective labor where fans transform themselves into chosen anime characters by constructing and wearing costumes, learning signature character poses or dialogue, and masquerading at conventions and events (Okabe, 2012). Crossplay is a subset of cosplay; crossplayers similarly participate in costume-play, except they dress up in costumes modeled after characters of the opposite gender. This paper addresses male-to-female ("M2F") crossplay where, as the name suggests, male cosplayers costume themselves as female anime characters.

The above quotations from cosplayers discussing crossplaying reveal the multifaceted connotations of crossplay within the cosplay community. These three quotes are not unique; rather, similar statements are littered across forums and threads about crossplay on various websites. Together, they raise a series of interesting questions about cosplay, in general, and M2F crossplay, in particular. For example, why and how do heterosexual men crossplay as female anime characters? How does crossplay affect the cosplay community? Why do cosplayers insist that crossplay is distinct from drag performance, where successful crossplay is collectively perceived as an art form that epitomizes the affinity for anime characters at the heart of cosplay? Furthermore, what is the significance of these gender bending performances and how do they reveal the constructed nature of hegemonic gender norms? Whereas a diverse corpus of scholarship analyzing men masquerading as women or performing femininity through drag exists, male-to-female gender bending as manifested in cosplay performances has not yet received critical attention.

I contend that M2F crossplay exemplifies the performance of gender and sexuality in cosplay that challenges hegemonic norms, providing insight into an increasingly visible

¹In English, *otaku* connotes an obsessive fan of anime, manga, Japanese video games and/or Japanese culture generally. Originally, the Japanese term *otaku* derives from a term for another's house or family, and is used metaphorically as an honorific second-person pronoun. In modern Japanese slang, the term *otaku* is most often equivalent to "geek." However, it can relate to a fan of any particular theme, topic, hobby or any form of entertainment (Asuma, 2009; Eng, 2012a).

phenomenon in contemporary North American popular culture. 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. Yet, despite apparent similarities between crossplay and drag performances, they are fundamentally distinct. Drag Queens in Western culture typically connotes men cross-dressing as an exhibition of self-identity, whereas M2F crossplayers costume as female anime characters to partake in an aesthetic transformation that goes beyond mere self-expression. Thus, this paper aims to provide a preliminary exploration of M2F crossplay through a case study, investigating the motivations behind and process of crossplay performance, its status within the cosplay community, and the implications for broader society in relation to hegemonic gender norms.

Cosplay and Crossplay in North America

The tradition of Renaissance masquerades where participants base costumes and performances on certain historical periods or genres has a long-standing history in Western culture. In North America, the specific practice of fans dressing up as their favorite characters dates back to 1939, when the first World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) was held in New York City (Pollak, 2006). However, the term “cosplay” (*kosupure*) is reported to have been coined in 1984 by Takahashi Nobuyuki, renowned Japanese anime director (Kelts, 2006; Bruno, 2002a). After seeing fans at World Con Los Angeles costumed as science fiction and fantasy characters, Nobuyuki used the neologism to describe the spectacle and encouraged Japanese fans to use costumes in the same way (Bruno, 2002a; Winge, 2006). Consequently, cosplay became prominent in Japan, particularly for anime characters (Hills, 2002; Okabe, 2012). When Western fans adopted the word, it was thus closely linked to its Japanese origins to connote costuming as anime characters (Eng, 2012a; Hills, 2002). Recently, several scholars have argued that Western variants of costuming in science fiction and fantasy fan communities should also be included in the definition of cosplay (Zuberins and Larsen, 2012; Lamerichs, 2011; Lotecki, 2012). Nonetheless, cosplay is still largely received as costuming inspired by Japanese popular culture, specifically fictional characters from anime (animation), manga (graphic novels), and video games (Eng, 2012a; Hills, 2002).

The phenomenon of fandom in contemporary Western society has been identified as one marked by its constant state of evolution and development (Harris, 1998). The growth of costume fandom and cosplay in recent decades clearly reflects this trend. Japanese anime conventions and events began appearing in major cities across North America during the 1990s, catering to the increasing consumption of Japanese popular culture items (Pollak, 2006). Presently, anime conventions are held in approximately 30 states in the United States and five provinces in Canada (Animecons, 2012). The first Anime Expo convention in Los Angeles, California had an attendance of 1,750 in 1992; in 2012, almost 50,000 guests attended (Anime Expo, 2012). These statistics illustrate the rapid growth in the number of people interested in Japanese popular culture products in North America. Anthropological research indicates that cosplay is a defining feature of these conventions, where a significant number of fans costume themselves as various anime characters to attend events (Taylor, 2005; Kelts, 2006; Lotecki, 2012).

As a form of popular culture fandom, cosplay constitutes a participatory and communal culture that facilitates social interaction (Longhurst *et al.* 2007; Eng, 2012b). People have various reasons for participating in cosplay, but generally, cosplayers share a strong appreciation for

anime characters where they want to dress themselves as specific characters. In her book on *From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West* (2007), Susan Napier writes that cosplay performances demonstrate fans' opened-minded creativity as well as the flexible nature of anime, which lends itself well to "fantastic representations because it is inherently non-referential" (Napier, 2007, p. 160). Unlike "Star Trek," "Harry Potter," or other real-actor dramas that have concrete characters, anime characters are "the perfect sites for imaginative visual fantasy" as they present fans with a plethora of identities to emulate, allowing individuals to exhibit a certain level of personal artistic detail during the cosplay process (Pearson, 2007; Napier, 2007, p. 164).

In this way, the cosplay community exemplifies what media scholar Henry Jenkins defines as "a cultural community, one which shares a common mode of reception, a common set of critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic production, and a set of social norms and expectations" (qtd. in Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995, p. 143). The hybrid aesthetic of cosplay culture allows fans to participate in a "genuinely new and unique culture" that is "[f]reed from material constraints...[and] offer[s] an endless array of possibilities to a world that seems increasingly fettered by the intractable realities of ethnic, religious, and national identifications" (Napier, 2007, p. 210). The notion that anime cosplay are "sites of play...where participants can engage on the most creative of levels" is expanded upon in recent works that highlight the subversive potential of anime fandom (Napier, 2007, 211). These essays draw upon theories of masquerade and gender performance to emphasize that anime fandom provides a space for social transgression, of which cosplay constitutes the most visible, physical embodiment of unconventional identities (Lamerichs, 2011; Taylor, 2005). Generally, however, scholarship on cosplay is still in its nascent stages, subsisting primarily in the form of university theses, and this paper aims to provide an exploratory introduction on a subset of crossplay that has not yet received critical attention.

Despite how studies have consistently highlighted that cosplay – and, by extension, crossplay – is a cultural phenomenon performed primarily by women (Banesh-Liu, 2007; Cooper-Chen, 2010; Okabe, 2012), I suggest that M2F crossplay is significant as an emergent and increasingly popular trend in the growing cosplay community. This is evident not only in the lively discussions about crossplay in online cosplay forums, but also in the fact that panels, events, and costume contests at conventions that focus on crossplay are on the rise. For example, the annual Tokyo in Tulsa convention has held a Crossplay 101 Panel every year since 2010 (TNT, 2012). Additionally, the 2012 Florida Supercon's Crossplay Costume Contest was so successful that organizers had to cap entries at 140 participants, with equal numbers for each gender. The Contest describes crossplay as "a strong part of costume and cosplay culture" and deliberately states that "male cosplayers must enter as female characters and female cosplayers must enter as male characters" (FSC, 2012).

Given that anime cosplay is a relatively new trend overall, it is striking that crossplay has been so quickly integrated as a familiar aspect of contemporary costume fandom that appears to receive widespread support from the larger fan community. The trope of performance has been elaborated across a range of academic disciplines, teaching us that "acting" cannot merely be defined as something distinct from reality, but actually signifies a model of and the process through which real identities are constructed (Silvio, 2010). As such, this paper contends that M2F crossplay, as both a literal and figurative performance, exemplifies the overlapping discourses of gender, sexuality, masquerade, and fan identity in North American popular culture. These crossplay performances should not be overlooked as a vacuously titillating popular culture

mode of entertainment. Instead, parallels can be drawn between crossplay and drag to examine how both aesthetic performances involve similar practices of cross-dressing and imitation of archetypal masculine/feminine images, decentering and defamiliarizing hegemonic norms of gender and sexuality.

However, the reality that drag is marginalized by mainstream society, whereas crossplay practices, particularly M2F crossplay, appears to be endorsed by the community from which it emerges, poses an interesting conundrum. To better understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to explore the logics of crossplay: that is, the process itself as a performance of an alternative gendered persona as well as the motivations behind and impact of crossplay. By investigating the case study of Lialina, a veteran M2F crossplayer, along with ethnographic study of virtual cosplay communities, this paper seeks to expand upon how crossplay exemplifies a temporary transgression of normative concepts of gender and sexuality that is specific to cosplay culture. I contend that M2F crossplay practices epitomize how cosplay conventions and fandom provide a transitional space where boundaries between self and world are encountered, crossed, and reconstructed. In particular, M2F crossplay deploys the visual excess of gender performance not only to challenge hegemonic norms about masculinity and femininity, but also to facilitate the construction of new modes of fan identity and creative expression.

M2F Crossplay 101: Preparation for the Performance

Danny,² who is goes by his cosplay name of Lialina, is a 28-year-old Canadian male cosplayer who has been active in the cosplay community for more than 10 years. He specializes in M2F crossplay, and has created more than 40 costumes modeled after his favorite anime characters. He is widely known in the cosplay community for his crossplay of Chii from Chobits as well as Sailor Venus from Sailor Moon (see Figure 1). Lialina's profiles on Cosplay.com, Deviantart.net, and Crossplay.com showcasemore than 200 photos of various costumes, including a substantial number of professional photo-shoot images. In real life, Danny runs his own restaurant business and has an online store selling cosplay supplies.

Lialina has a following of fanboys and fangirls who follow his crossplay posts on cosplay websites such as Cosplay.com and Crossplay.net. By all means, his cosplay accounts do not reveal that he is male, and Danny takes painstaking efforts to ensure that Lialina stays in character on all of these cosplay and social media sites. In his own words:

I make sure that pictures of myself as a man are not shown online together with my cosplay identity. I want Lialina to project the character of a female cosplayer. Although many of my fans are precisely my fans because they know that Iam a male and I crossplay, within the cosplay community I think it is important to stay in character...[and] Lialinais meant to be female...If I see any photos of myself [posted by fans] that show me out of character, I always ask them to take it down.

The internet plays a significant role in the cultivation of many fan communities, particularly for fans of Japanese popular culture (Azuma, 2009). As Landzelius notes in her ethnography, *Native on the Net* (2006), the internet “defeats distance” so that fans can connect instantly through

² Interviewee is referenced using only his first name, as was requested during an interview.

websites, forums, and communities (p. 7). These accessible webhosting services allow fans to create cosplay websites that host images and publish information about cosplaying, particularly costume making manuals. Websites dedicated to cosplay are especially important for fans who wish to learn more about how to improve their cosplaying skills or successfully crossplay. Fans also rely on the internet to develop and maintain their fan identity, where the internet “offers not just a ‘tool’ but also a social environment for new articulations of identity” (Eng, 2012b; Landzelius, 2006, p. 7). Although cosplayers have an online presence that is linked to how fans perform crossplay and construct their fan identity, the virtual component of fandom and cosplay is beyond the purview of this paper. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Danny’s construction of Lialina extends the notion of crossplay to his entire cosplay identity, so that the character of a female gendered Lialina is part of his fan identity. Within the cosplay community, Danny crossplays as Lialina, but it is Lialina that cosplays various anime characters.



Figure 1: Crossplay of Sailor Venus from Sailor Moon
Source: Deviantart.net

When asked to describe crossplay, Lialina answered that:

F]or me, the usefulness of ‘crossplay’ as a subject refers to the practicality of it: does the costume include binding? Tucking? Body silhouette reshaping? Hiding a beard with makeup? Faking a beard with makeup? Learning to swish your hips like a girl? Practicing to lower your voice to sound manlier? Then it's crossplaying, regardless of the ‘nominal’ gender of the character or the cosplayer.

Evidently, the general process of cosplaying and specific practice of crossplaying is intimately connected to the actual costuming method. Costumes are essential to cosplay, but go beyond simply putting on clothing and makeup to look like a particular character, where an essential component of successful cosplay includes the personal enactment of that character (i.e.: acting like the character would, practicing signature poses and dialogue, mimicking voices and temperaments, etc.). All of these aspects are accentuated during the crossplay process. From my discussion with Lialina and research on cosplay websites, the crossplay performance expands upon four general components of cosplay:

- 1) Clothing
- 2) Makeup
- 3) Character
- 4) Photos

Unsurprisingly, clothing and the actual costume itself is vital for crossplay. Although cosplayers have the option of purchasing or making their own costumes, most fans concur that the process of making their own costumes shapes their cosplay experiences (Benesh-Liu, 2007; Bruno, 2002b; Lotecki, 2012). In fact, most cosplay websites, such as Cosplay.com, are designed with the assumption that players make their outfits themselves, where almost all of the forums allow players to discuss various aspects of costume making. Makeup and clothing are closely related, in that both contribute to a visual transformation of the fan into a specific fictional character’s simulacrum. The process takes a lot of effort, money, and emotional investment: once a cosplayer decides to make a particular costume, they have to collect multiple images of that character in the same clothing design from different angles. They then have to purchase fabric, cut, sew, make patterns, and so forth (Wang, 2010). Cosplayers share information online about how to make costumes and apply makeup, including tips on choosing the right fabrics, buying wigs, accessories, or certain cosmetics. This appeal of costume making as a participatory and communal aspect of anime fandom is what Japanese-American writer Roland Kelts terms “the seductions of the do-it-yourself (DIY) factor” (2006, p. 147). In his view, fans of anime and manga are inspired by the “DIY attractions” of anime expos where they are able to “display their anime affection publicly” by making and wearing their own costumes, engaging in a process that allows them to determine “how the meanings [of a given character] might apply to their own lives” (Kelts, 2006, p. 151-152).

With the value placed on making costumes and mimicking the aesthetic of fictional characters, the fact that M2F crossplayers always have to make their own costumes and pay immaculate attention to details places them in a special position within the cosplay community, where successful crossplay is highly respected. M2F crossplayers have to exert extra effort when costuming themselves, masking their male physiques by enhancing feminine characteristics to create a female body silhouette. Makeup and costumes are essential to this process of gender transformation. As Lialina explains:

Male-to-female crossplayers have to compensate for being biologically male by focusing on being extra-feminine when cosplaying female characters. We have to focus on the little details to decrease differences between male and female physiques. It is not simply...putting on a girl's costume. I always have to make my own costumes...I can't buy them even if I wanted to – every costume has to be customized very specifically and tailored to my body's measurements so that I can work on certain things to make me appear more feminine. A lot of thought goes into planning every costume... Basically, I think it is important to choose costumes that are very feminine with lots of lace, ribbons, and frills. Since I have pretty broad shoulders, I need to create a harmonious volume between my waistline and shoulders to make them appear...smaller, [and] big frilly skirts help...I always cover my Adams apple by wearing something around my neck...I also tend to cover my legs, at least with stockings, because men's knees and ankles are stouter than women's...Wigs are also very important. Long hair is a symbol of femininity, so I think it is much easier for men to successfully crossplay characters with long hair...In general, M2F crossplayers need to try and emphasize every stereotype of femininity as possible so that...others are more likely to think that we are actually women.

At the technical level, M2F crossplayers also need to shave body hair, wear corsets to enhance their waistline, put on breast prostheses or deploy other cosmetic methods to enhance cleavage, and “tuck” (Ohanesian, 2012; Kevin, 2011).³ Makeup is also vital for the transformation, where serious M2F crossplayers will go as far as to shape their eyebrows, hide facial hair with concealer, and put on false eyelashes (Kevin, 2011). Interestingly, many M2F crossplayers will refer to women's make-up forums and drag tutorials to learn more about how to alter their bodies and portray feminine characteristics.

The concept of “emphasiz[ing] every stereotype of femininity as possible so that...others are more likely to think that [they] are actually women” is also evident in the crossplayer's self-conscious adoption of gender-specific behavior when impersonating character traits for conventions or photo-taking. A complete crossplay costume includes enacting the gendered movement and mannerisms of opposite-sex characters. While cosplayers all try to mimic the signature poses of specific characters, M2F crossplayers also have to learn a new set of movements and gestures that pertain to performing a feminine character. For example, men have

³Tucking refers to the practice of hiding the male genitalia so that they are not visible through tight clothing.

to learn to adopt a feminine demeanor when moving about or sitting down and practice speaking in a feminized voice that fits their crossplay character. As Lialina describes:

I knew that to successfully crossplay, I had to act more feminine. Especially since most female anime characters are pretty cutesy. So, I learned how to walk and move in feminine ways by watching YouTube videos and reading articles....I also started taking voice feminizing lessons....Practicing moving my hips and wrists like a woman was probably the hardest part for me to get a hang of...It was really difficult to stay in character when I first started crossplaying, and so I used to only do photo shoots where I didn't have to move around or speak. After a while I got more and more used to it...I think that movement is perhaps the most important skill to learn for successful crossplaying, more important than voice...I remember reading somewhere that the first thing anyone wants to know about a stranger is their sex...For crossplay, I believe this is very important, which is why I always try to put on as many visual and behavioral cues of femininity so that when people first look at me, they see what they would expect for a woman and overlook the clues that give away the fact that I am a man.

The overall process of crossplay thus educes elements of drag performance, where character impersonation is described in terms of mimicking a platonic ideal of femininity. Here, Judith Butler's concept of gender performance offers a useful framework to examine how drag and cosplay come together in the subgenre of crossplay to address identity politics in fandom.

In her book on *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler posits that feminine masquerade as performance opens up possibilities of agency foreclosed by positions that presuppose fixed and foundational gender identities. According to Butler, gender can be understood as a cultural performance whereby "the gendered body is [revealed as] performative, suggest[ing] that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (1990, p. 136). In other words, gender is a socially constructed concept that is not based on biological sex, but mere reiterative acts. She references drag and cross-dressing to illustrate the idea of gender parody as an exhibition of sex-role stereotyping:

"The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed...As much as drag creates a unified picture of 'woman'...it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (1990, p. 137).

Drag Queen and M2F crossplay performances are both based on gender, which involves the mimesis of an archetypal woman (Lamerichs, 2011; Lotecki, 2012). In Butler's view, drag is a parody of femininity that destabilizes the rigid boundaries of gender identity, but also reinscribes

heteronormativity: the categories that define heterosexuality, man, and woman as normative concepts (Butler, 1993). This parallelism between drag and crossplay illustrate how gender performance exposes the socially constructed nature of femininity and masculinity yet reconfirms heteronormativity.

Scholars have argued that cross-dressing performances symbolizes a mode of border crossing that connotes culture crises as it disturbs the male/female binary opposition to problematize our notion of a stable, unified, and grounded gender identity (Garber, 1992). To some extent, drag and crossplay both exhibit cross-dressing to portray gender confusion and connote the allure of women and a feminine physique, where the cultural effect of cross-dressing destabilizes hegemonic male/female and gay/straight binaries of gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, I posit that crossplay presents an added dimension pertaining to fan identity and artistic expression that theories of gender performance and cross-dressing in Western culture does not consider. This is revealed when one considers that the motivations of crossplayers vary greatly from drag performers. On the one hand, Drag Queens tend to perform femininity as an expression of self-identity, where cross-dressing typically signifies the emergence of gay inclinations. On the other hand, M2F crossplayers mimic feminine behaviors as a style of artistic self-expression representative of their aspirations as a fan, and their performances may not have integrated issues of gender or sexuality intentionally.

Motivations Driving M2F Crossplay within the Cosplay Community

Cosplayers have various reasons for attempting crossplay; crossplay can be an occasional practice, enacted because fans identify with a specific character of the opposite gender, it can be motivated by the appeal of certain character tropes, such as cute girls, or it may even be solely driven by the sartorial challenge of making certain outfits. From my research, motivations driving M2F crossplay can be broadly grouped into two categories: 1) the cosplayer's desire to express his fan dedication and skills, and 2) the thrill of an enhanced "carnavalesque" experience by transgressing the gender binary.

The main reason cosplayers participate in M2F crossplaying is largely apolitical and purely related to an expression of their fan devotion. Like the quote from Tenshi on Crossplay.net in the introduction, many M2F crossplayers are motivated by their passion for a specific anime character that is of the opposite-gender, and perceive their crossplay performances as an expression of their appreciation for that character. When asked why he crossplays, Lialina articulates personal motivations in alignment with this view:

The question should be why I cosplay, not why I crossplay. The simple answer is I cosplay because it is a fun activity that allows me to express my love for anime. It is a wonderful way to combine my fondness for different characters with my love for dressing up. Crossplay is really not that different from cosplay: they are both fan-oriented art forms that can take many different paths. But...the motivations are the same so it should all be just cosplay. You don't ask a woman why she's cosplaying a female character because of the character's gender. Why should crossplayers be asked that question? All cosplayers simply dress up as the characters they love...Some people don't make a major effort to conceal their

actual gender. Others take painstaking measures to resemble the opposite-gender character as closely as possible...I really don't think there should be a distinction between cosplay and crossplay...but only between good and bad cosplay... Ultimately, crossplay is just a new, and perhaps more challenging way, for cosplayers to identify with and share an appreciation for their favorite characters.

This aspiration to “identify with and share an appreciation for their favorite characters” connotes the concept of *moe* in Japanese popular culture. As Patrick Galbraith, a scholar on otaku culture in Japan explains, “*moe* is a euphoric response to fantasy characters or representations of them” that expresses “a desire for the fantastical, not the physical...[that is] ‘pure’” (2009, p.20). In this understanding, M2F crossplayers appear to experience *moe* as they aspire to embody the “fantastical” fictional characters that they like, rather than actually desiring the “physical” implications of a feminine identity.

Furthermore, the appeal of M2F crossplay for many cosplayers is also directly linked to the notion of dressing up as a process that combines a sense of fan identity and playfulness with the wearing of an outfit. In particular, crossplay performances provide a novel platform for avid fans to exhibit their sartorial and performance skills by transforming themselves into opposite-gender characters. As Lialina elucidates:

Cosplay for me is a hobby which is challenging also because it involves me wearing a costume that I make myself. Crossplay, however, appeals to me even more so because I am not merely wearing a costume and temporarily putting on a slightly different appearance, but am turning my whole body into a canvass, transforming myself into a character that is completely contradictory to my normal self...I used to cosplay regular *Naruto* and *Deathnote* characters, but found them rather unstimulating [*sic*]after a while because people could always still recognize me for who I was under the costume...What's the point of wearing a costume if people still recognize you right away? So, when one of my friends told me she was going to cosplay a character from *Chobits* for an upcoming con, I decided that I could try to cosplay Chii as well! After all, Chii was one of my favorite characters so I didn't see why I shouldn't...

Lialina continues by describing the artistic appeal of crossplaying that derives from the performance of gender-specific attributes:

... I love making female costumes – they're just so much more elaborate and interesting to make than male costumes...I also like that I always have to figure out new things about how to enact not just different characters, but different female personalities. That's always really fun and so rewarding when I manage to pull it off properly...Honestly, I think all cosplay is just a huge art

project...[but] while pretty much everyone can cosplay, only a few people can successfully crossplay...A number of cosplayers I know all have crossplay on their “to-do” list...but have not yet picked up enough skills to cross yet...For me personally, crossplay is a higher-level form of artistic expression...where the gender of the cosplayer doesn’t actually matter. Crossplayers are just busy doing what cosplay is all about: being a successful chameleon, taking on the physical characteristics of a character so well you can’t guess anything about the person behind them, even their gender.

This notion of crossplay as a gendered performance that signifies a “higher-level form of artistic expression” evokes connections to traditional Japanese aesthetics in Kabuki theater. Kabuki is a popular form of Japanese musical drama characterized by elaborate costuming, make-up, stylized dancing, music, and acting (Keene, 1983). What is distinctive about Kabuki is the fact that, since the 1700s when a ban on women appearing in public performances was enforced, both male and female acting roles have been performed by men. This practice of a cross-dressing performance gradually became an art in itself and has remained so until today (Ho, 1996). Kabuki dramas have been characterized as “actor-centered, sensory theatre” that aims to portray beauty through the “selection and cosmetic exaggeration of perceived nongenital physical differences between females and males” (Robertson, 1998, p. 12). Kabuki *onnagata* (female impersonator) roles are highly regarded as a sophisticated art form and “one of the most significant achievements of Kabuki which knows no parallel elsewhere in the world” (Ho, 1996, p. 10). *Onnagata* in the Kabuki theatre learn to exude femininity and become more graceful and elegant than real women by practicing a set of patterns known as *kata*, which refer to “stylized gestures, movements, intonations, and speech patterns that signify gender” (Robertson, 1998, p.55). As such, it is possible to see how cosplayers view gender bending crossplay as an exemplification of fan devotion and artistic expression in alignment with Japanese popular culture fandom, rather than simply an alternate manifestation of drag performance.

Another prominent reason why cosplayers find M2F crossplay compelling is the ability to actively transgress various social norms through gender bending performance. This motivation derives from the idea that crossplay exemplifies the essence of cosplay as a “carnavalesque” masquerade. In Lialina’s own words:

I go to conventions precisely to cosplay. I don’t think I would just show up in jeans and a T-shirt to buy stuff. What is so exciting about attending a convention is the whole “carnavalesque” atmosphere where people are all decked out in different costumes that you don’t see on a daily basis...Like I said earlier, crossplaying for me allows me to transform myself into something completely different and unrecognizable from my regular self...Crossplaying is about testing your costuming skills, challenging yourself to bring an anime character into the real world, and having fun while you do it. By crossplaying in flamboyant costumes, crossing as exotic characters, and performing an excess

of femininity, I feel that I really do set myself apart from the popular standard.

The desire to deviate from the popular standard also ties into the idea of cosplay as hierarchical participatory fandom where the boundaries between fan spaces and artistic creativity are crossed, allowing fans to accrue cultural capital and information (Zubernis and Larsen, 2012). Cosplayers gain cultural capital in the form of anime knowledge and costuming skills that validate their status as a fan, where popular cosplayers are admired and have their own fans.

Within the cosplay community, successful crossplay is thus seen as a means for cosplayers to distinguish themselves in their art and skills as a fan. Lialina, for example, is considered one of the most admired crossplayers who has a substantial following of fans. He recounts that part of his original motivation to crossplay is attributable to the desire to distinguish himself within the cosplay community:

As an anime fan, I had always wanted to find some way to set myself apart...I guess I went into crossplay wanting to make my mark, wanting to move past being a regular cosplayer...I first had the idea after attending several conventions...I felt like plenty of women have absolutely no problem putting in the time and effort to portray a female-to-male character, but very few men are willing to go all out for the male-to-females...That [observation] influenced my original decision to crossplay Chii...My first few crossplay attempts were only on camera, though. I didn't want to attend a convention until I felt more confident in my ability to cross in person. However, I posted photos online and...they circulated within the cosplay community...I will never forget the surprise I felt people when started to recognize me at conventions as the "Chii Crossplayer," even when I might be playing different costumes...

The notion of M2F crossplay as cultural capital that allows cosplayers to move past being a "regular cosplayer" speaks to Zuberins and Larsen's study of how people conceive themselves as fans and renegotiate creative space (2012). They posit that "Big Name Fans" are fans who "seek to set themselves apart in fan communities, earning privilege and status through...having coveted access to objects of fandom" (Zuberins and Larsen, 2012, p. 30). In cosplay, the "objects of fandom" revolve around the ability of fans to costume themselves as facsimiles of anime characters. As such, successful crossplay epitomizes such a process. Lialina's M2F crossplay hence enabled him to enhance and re-define himself as more than a normal fan to become a "Big Name Fan" who is particularly well-known, liked, and lauded. Through M2F crossplay performances, Lialina transgresses the perceived social norms of cosplay fandom, engaging in a newfangled activity that few other fans had pursued, to validate his individual status and creative space within the cosplay community.

Nonetheless, the product of M2F crossplay is inextricably intertwined with a public exhibition of the fluidity of gender, a process that invests crossplay performance with subversive potential. At the fundamental level, M2F crossplaying symbolizes rebellion against mainstream

conceptions of gender and sexuality and allows cosplayers to temporarily indulge in being an alternate persona. As Lialina tellingly remarks:

[T]raditional societal perceptions of gender are no fun anyway. I can't fire, earth, water, or air bend so I Gender Bend [*sic*]. Many people like it...Some don't. Guys, girls, and neither within the [cosplay] community always seem to approve as long as you're doing a good job crafting your costume. There are many reasons why people cosplay...but I think it goes down to the need to be something else for a little while, and the same holds true for crossplay...I am very comfortable with my masculinity. Comfortable enough to admit that I have my feminine side...I believe every man does, and we exhibit it in different ways. For me, my way to indulge in my feminine side is to crossplay my favorite female anime characters...I'm not gay, but I crossplay. I'm not trying to say that I want to become a woman, but just that I appreciate how dressing up and being a female, especially a female anime character, can be fun.

The environment and spaces created for and by cosplay provides cosplayers with a variety of social interactions. Cosplay merges fantasy and reality into “carnavalesque” environments and creative spaces, where individuals have permission to temporarily masquerade as someone or something other than themselves (Bakhtin 1968; Napier, 2001; Richie, 2003). Cosplayers construct malleable identities in these environments where people are “not themselves” but instead impersonate fictional anime characters (Winge, 2006). In particular, the fluidity of gender exhibited through M2F crossplay accentuates how forms of dressing up such as crossplay and drag combine a sense of identity and playfulness with the process of costuming. Crossplayers play with identity formation and understand the meaning and influence of what they are doing in various ways. Furthermore, crossplay gives us a different perspective on gender fluidity and identity formation from drag, where the former is not solely confined to gender or sociopolitical interventions but involve a range of aesthetic practices in relation to fandom.

Transgression in “Crossing” and Exhibition(ist) Space

Although M2F crossplay is gaining popularity within the cosplay community, it should be noted that the practice remains occasional and, to some degree, ludic (Ohanesian, 2011). While serious crossplayers such as Lialina are not uncommon, they are certainly not customary either. Besides, the most common impression that cosplay neophytes have of crossplay is that of a parodic performance, propagated and reinforced by images of Man-Faye and Sailor Bubba figures (see Figures 3 and 4).



Figure 3: “Man-Faye” crossplay of Faye Valentine from Cowboy Bebop
Source: Animation.net



Figure 4: “Sailor Bubba” crossplay of Sailor Moon from Sailor Moon
Source: Animation.net

However, most cosplayers denounce these stereotypes for giving the entire cosplay community a bad image. For example, FoxKaiya's post on Otakupride.com for a thread on crossplaying expresses her view of M2F crossplay:

I think it's awesome when guys do crossplay, except I'd prefer them to do it properly. While Man-Faye is equal parts hilarity and disturbing, it really bothers me when a guy is in a skirt with incredibly hairy legs, and does not even make an effort to try and suit the original character. I don't think it even counts as crossplay – or cosplay, for that matter...It brings stigma to all cosplayers...[and] gives the public the wrong impression about what cosplay is supposed to be [about]...Cosplaying is not about parody and poking fun at anime characters...it's about fans expressing affection for certain characters and for anime through wearing costumes modeled in their likeness. I find poor cosplay behaviors –especially bad crossplay attempts – quite disrespectful to other cosplayers...I wish people would stop pulling stunts like that. I wouldn't do it if I were a male-to-female crossplayer...I don't see why anyone would (FoxKaiya, Otakupride.com, 2012).

FoxKaiya's view is echoed by other cosplayers where there is a general consensus that Sailor Bubba and Man-Faye caricatures of anime characters do not reflect “what cosplay is supposed to be [about]” – that is, a fan's aspiration to express his or her appreciation for anime characters through costuming and mimicry.

Another common misperception about crossplay that the cosplay community appears to be especially outspoken against is the idea that crossplayers, especially M2F crossplayers, are typically gay, bisexual, or transsexual. Almost all the cosplay websites I came across have a thread addressing this subject (e.g.: Crossplay.net has a thread titled “Crossplayers are not gay” that provides a forum for members to discuss negotiating these stereotypes). Numerous cosplayers highlight the discrepancy between what crossplay is perceived to be like and what it actually represents:

People who don't know anything about cosplay always place stereotypes...There are plenty of gay men who've never thought of putting on a dress; some...have to be talked into it for pride events, but cross-dressing in real life (i.e.: drag) and cross-dressing for a convention (i.e.: crossplay) are very different... I know plenty of crossplayers, and I know several gay cosplayers, but I hardly ever seen any gay men crossplaying...I think it has something to do with how they don't want their cosplay to come across as drag...The difference is, you have Drag which exaggerates and to some extent parodies women,...and Crossplay, which I would say is more of an impersonation that replicates and honors feminine characters. Unfortunately, the Drag is more outlandish, more “out there” and ends up being the stereotype most people identify with. As the less obvious but more tasteful presentation, Crossplay...is

something people don't know a thing about because you rarely hear about it, see it less often, [and] as a result you have to actually go looking to learn about it (Satsujin, Crossplay.net, 2012).

I never understood why it's okay for girls to play guys, but guys can't really play girls...I strongly believe that drag and crossplay are very different. Although crossplayers do look to drag tutorials, our motivations as performers are very different. Drag Queens are usually expressing their desire to become female. Male crossplayers often simply want to improve their cosplay and artistic skills...I don't know any gay men who want to crossplay as an expression of their self-identity. Most actually cosplay very masculine characters instead. I think that makes sense; the idea that men intentionally want to crossplay to attract fanboys is too twisted...While gay men do crossplay, most of the time the good ones always say they do it as part of their passion for cosplay, not just the desire to cross-dress...However, I know many straight men who crossplay to attract fangirls...I think it has to do something with girls appreciating female beauty, and pretty anime characters, and like men who are so clearly able to understand femininity and imitate that beauty...But ultimately, I think all cosplayers will recognize a good costume. It doesn't matter whether it's regular cosplay or crossplay, what matters is how well the cosplayer is trying to represent his or her selected character (Karisu-sama, Cosplay.com, 2011).

Successful M2F crossplay is when the cosplayer effectively “crosses” to the other gender. This is a process that very much depends on public performance and peer review from other cosplayers, but can bring significant gratification to the crossplayer about his costuming efforts. Crossplay.net is filled with threads that allow people to post pictures of crossplay attempts for feedback from the online community. At conventions, “crossing” is also largely determined by compliments from other cosplayers as well as the number of photography requests. In general, successful M2F crossplaying is held in high regard by the cosplay community. Scholars and journalists have also reported interviewing cosplayers who cite good M2F crossplay as the “best costumes and performances [they] see at conventions,” particularly if the gender of the cosplayer is not initially identifiable (Burkett, 2009, p. 34; Bruno, 2002b; Ohanesian, 2011). For popular crossplayers such as Lialina, the cosplayer may even consider his fanbase as an indication of the success of his performances. As such, Lialina articulates the experience of “crossing” as one that requires emotional investment in relation to performing the opposite gender as well as a process that is representative of a new, and perhaps more ideal, form of cosplaying:

A big part of crossing as female is your mindset...You need to really have it in your mind that you are female, not that you are a guy dressed as a girl. People will often pick up on your insecurity, but if you get it in your mind that you are female things will fall in to place...For cosplaying, dressing well – whether through creating

an elaborate costume, selecting a popular character, or portraying the character well – impresses the most. The heart driving cosplay is that a fan has enough passion for a character to desire to embody that character for a temporary period of time...Crossplayers are held to the highest standards as representative of a pure sort of motivation to really appreciate and desire that character despite...practical constraints such as gender and physical attributes that may not appear suitable. Crossplayers don't let those constraints get in the way of our desire to display our affection for those characters through cosplay, and take it to the next level to really use our creativity in the costuming process...

He also further describes how his performances have earned him numerous admirers and photography requests, legitimizing his status as an accomplished and popular cosplayer:

I was surprised by all the positive attention I received when I did Sailor Venus. Most notorious were the girls' comments about my legs, and secondly comments about the costume construction...I remember one girl telling me she attended the convention precisely because she heard that I was going and wanted to see my costume in person...Sometimes, at conventions, I have people lining up to take photos with me as well...I suppose you could say good crossplayers are highly respected for our costuming ability...I get compliments all the time about how I look prettier as a female character than most women cosplayers do! That always makes me feel better about myself as a cosplayer...

Studies have indicated that anime fandoms are relatively more open about gender and sexuality, particularly with regard to transformation and transgression (Saito, 2007). This is partly due to the nature of anime itself, where scholars have noted that characters tend to be drawn rather androgynously (Hu, 2010). Popular sub-genres often also feature content that explicitly flaunt social norms of gender and sexuality, such as *yaoi* boy-love homosexual storylines and Lolita-like images that fetishize pre-adolescent girls (Saito, 2007). Moreover, anime and manga that revolves around gender bending characters are relatively common (Napier, 2001). The manga series *Ranma 1/2*, for example, tells the story about a boy who transforms into a girl when he touches cold water, and changes back into a boy with hot water. *Touhou Project*, a video game featuring all-female characters, is also one of the most popular sources for M2F crossplay (Cooke, 2008; Ohanesian, 2011).

The ability to “cross” and portray gender fluidity is a key component of M2F crossplay that demarcates it from regular cosplay, simultaneously exposing the fictive nature of gender yet at the same time reinforcing them. When males successfully crossplay as female characters, they present a caricature of femininity to expose that the notion of distinct male/female gender is socially constructed, where the male body and masculine mentality actually signifies femininity and a female physique. However, the fact that the success of crossplay depends largely on the triumph of “crossing” – the point where a cosplayer is recognized as an amalgamation of both genders in one body – is symptomatic of how male performance of hyper-femininity serves to

reinforce hyper-masculinity. This is evident in various statements that suggest only men comfortable enough with their masculinity are best able to fully embody and perform femininity through M2F crossplay. As Lialina explains:

[E]veryone needs to decide for themselves what they really want to do...Generally, at cons, cosplayers are really supportive of each other. However, stage fright is only natural, especially for crossplayers...There's just such a double standard in gender roles, and the ways people make assumptions of sexual orientation based on what someone else is wearing, that you have to be comfortable in your sexuality (whatever it may be) to be a guy willing to wear a dress or something non-masculine. I mean, if there is distance between the hotel and the con, people are going to look at you funny. There are going to be 'tough-guys' at every con who laugh and jeer and try to make people feel bad. There are parents who are going to duck their kids under their overcoat and lie to them about your existence...You really have to want to do a costume because of how it makes you feel, and how much fun you want to have with it...If a guy is not comfortable with being mistaken for a girl and is too self-conscious about what other people think about his masculinity, then he won't crossplay well...Straight men...really have to be at a stage where[they] are comfortable enough with [themselves] to not care about other people doubting [their] gender or sexual orientation...But trust me, confidence, and that's what most good crossplayers exude, always wins...Only once you stop caring about whether others are doubting your manhood, because you have full confidence in your ability to be masculine in real life, will you be able to fully enjoy dressing up as female and actually feel like more of a man for it. It takes a pretty confident dude to want to crossplay, and most cosplayers recognize that as commendable...

Thus, unlike drag performers, most crossplayers assert their heterosexuality. For cosplayers, the desire to crossplay derives from their aspirations as a fan, rather than an experience of gender confusion. Lialina, for example, is self-assured about his masculinity, but also very confident about his ability to convey femininity. What makes this transformative process even more interesting is the notion that cosplayers engage in crossplaying not necessarily due to a desire to play with gender identity, but as a means to explore their capacity for artistic expression as a fan.

Politics of Gender Performance in M2F Crossplay: Simulacra of Femininity as High Art

The “carnavalesque” exhibition of cosplay merges fantasy and reality in environments where characters and narratives continually evolve. Crossplay, in particular, represents the cosplay community’s resourceful and malleable approach towards the human body: cosplayers’ constant flux of bodily transformations across social and gender boundaries can be interpreted as a new way of thinking about the human body as merely another apparatus to dress up and play

with. In his essay on *Cultural Studies and the Culture of Everyday Life* (1992), John Fiske proposes his theory about “the mundane body as the synecdochal embodiment of the social order, and therefore of the social differences within that order” where “the body and its specific behavior is where the power system stops being abstract and becomes material” (p. 162-3). In Fiske’s view, “social differences can be produced and maintained by the people in their own interests” through “contextualized cultural practices, the theorizations of the cultural politics of the body, and the development of a cultural geography through which to analyze the meanings of place and environment” (1992, p. 165). Along the lines of this analysis, crossplay harbors potential to provide insight into contemporary cultural practices and how people mediate their identities across fiction and reality. This paper posits that the implications of crossplay within cosplay fandom, as well as significance of crossplay to theories about drag performance and masquerade in contemporary North American popular culture, should not be overlooked.

As a cultural practice, cosplay represents a mode of fandom that illustrates how identity is constructed through a process of fictionalizing everyday life and giving it an aesthetic dimension (Pearson, 2007; Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). The act of male-to-female crossplay is particularly compelling as a mimesis of hyper-femininity that evinces Butler’s theory of subversive gender performance, demonstrating how fictional anime characters can shape actual bodies. In addition to displacing the boundary between direct, physical and purely animated contact, M2F crossplay decenters and defamiliarizes gender and sexual norms when male cosplayers embody fictional female anime characters. In cases where a male cosplayer successfully “crosses,” his impersonation demonstrates how “*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler, 1990, p. 6, italics original). Along these lines, the bodily performances of M2F crossplayers articulate sexuality in a way that defies and erodes conventional discourses of sex and gender. Concomitantly, however, the M2F crossplayer reinscribes the gender binary through acts that serve to articulate and construct his fan identity, deploying cosplay performances as a means to aggrandize himself as a hyper-masculine figure and skilled artist within the cosplay community.

In many ways, cosplay performances demonstrate a form of 2.5 dimensional space where the boundary between reality and fiction is transgressed (Saito, 2007). Within this space of potentiality, cosplay epitomizes how cosplayers find pleasure in straddling layers between the fictive and real worlds to explore the virtual potential of sexuality. M2F crossplay thus problematizes how people see themselves as female or male, or how maleness and femaleness are attributed to others, but at the same time, presents itself as a high art form that distills the essence of cosplay fandom. Ultimately, what this paper suggests is that we should think of crossplay as more than an entertainment medium, as more than a mere act of parody. M2F crossplay deserves critical attention as an individual’s artistic expression of performative fan identity with broader meanings for human action in relation to gender and sexuality.

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