

Afrofutures of Cosplay: Deviance and DiY in Black Fantastic Performance

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Imagine other dimensions and navigate them here.

— ZiggZaggΣrZ the Bastard, *The Bastard's Manifesto (Issue 01)* (2018)

What might shape the force—political or otherwise—of black cosplay? And how might we read black cosplay, as fandom performance of comix personae, superheroes, and other fantastical forms of the (black) imaginary, as a dimension of black performance that shapes the futures of blackness? What is meant by, and what happens to, or upon, blackness when its force—and how to articulate black force is precisely that which cosplay plays with—shifts between representation and allegory, performance and identity? How might cosplay be thought as furthering, yet pushing the boundaries of the black radical tradition, “that blurring of the clear lines that demarcate[s] black spaces” that, argues Richard Iton (2010), is “one of the legacies of the civil rights movement (p.21)?

I situate these questions concerning black cosplay through interviews with black cosplayers at conventions and events, namely Emerald City ComicCon in 2016 and the inaugural edition of the Black Speculative Arts Movement Canada in Toronto, and I pose them by way of artistic collaboration with Los Angeles-based cosplayer, activist, and artist ZiggZaggΣrZ the Bastard. It is to these interviews and this collaborative, artistic praxis that I will turn below as sites in which these questions take shape. These questions seek to address a shifting field in which blackness, the imaginary, and popular culture mix. This field of Do-it-Yourself, fandom performance affords a rich experience of how contemporary blackness is seen, felt, heard, navigated in what we might call the popular imaginary—the realms of science fiction and fantasy, speculative fiction and futurism—while, at the same time, providing insight into how this collective imaginary is contested, deconstructed, and remixed by the performances of blackness in cosplay and fandom.



Figure 1. ZiggZaggΣrZ, Raging AfroSamurai Cycloptic Cyborg #1, Afrofuturist Occupation at Pomona College (2019). Photo: tobias c. van Veen.

Cosplaying-while-black stages the performative entrance of blackness into an already unstable space cleaved by the irruption of fantasy—and thus of the double entry of what Iton calls the “black fantastic,” both fantasy and blackness, black fantasticalness, fantastical blacknesses, into unstable space neither entirely public nor private, in which the fantasy and science fiction convention and its fandom stages performative costume play. Black cosplay is highly visible in a fantasy space already hypervisible. Black cosplayers are photographed, filmed, represented online and hashtagged in social media—#blackcosplay—as a celebrant performativity of fantastical blackness that exceeds fantasy and blackness, at least a certain blackness as reduced to social death. From the questions above, this is my thesis here—a thesis entirely nonexperiential, a thesis quasi-ethnographic, gleaned from participant interviews, observations, and discussions with black cosplayers, including ZiggZaggΣrZ the Bastard. This thesis is self-reflectively staged from my positionality as a white participant-observer and artist, in which discussions and replies are viewed as necessarily delimited, in which my whiteness reflects upon (or against) the barriers black cosplayers experience, and

yet, an opportunity to deconstruct and transform—while still recognising—such barriers. I am interested in cosplay because I want to read cosplay together with Afrofuturism, and emphasise the role of cosplay in its development, a point also made by Womack (see Womack, 2013). This work here is a preliminary step in doing so. The surreal, fantastical, science fictional, often alien costuming, onstage and off, of “Afrofuturist” performers such as George Clinton (and Parliament/Funkadelic), Grace Jones, Janelle Monáe, Lee “Scratch” Perry, Jonzun Crew, Afrika Bambaataa, Lady Vendredi, FKA Twigs, Missy Elliot and others can be read as part of a continuum of black performance embracing science fictional themes, of which cosplay represents the moment in which the barrier of audience/performer is undone, in which fandom takes up a performative repurposing, remixing, acceptance or contestation of narratives and imaginaries. Such performances are perhaps “Afrofuturist”—and rather using this term as explanatory of such black fantastical and science fictional themes, I here want to maintain it in question. Perhaps a better term is what Anderson and Jones (2015) call “Astro-Blackness” as the “emergence of a black identity framework within emerging global technocultural assemblages,” particularly, as Rollins notes, in which there are “multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities with the universe” for blacknesses (including that of the multiverse) (p.vii). I am interested in the moment where Afrofuturist performativity exceeds allegory, where deconstructive transformation of racialized identity shifts into affirmative becoming, in that moment wherein a singularity of future black topias becomes enacted. At the same time this somewhat exorbitant gesture is tempered by a critical lens of black performance theory that, even in its critical suspicion of an affirmation, opens onto Afrofuturism—and thus here I propose a reading that grafts Afrofuturism into black performance theory, that delimits the pessimism of social death to bear witness to how blackness exceeds its confines through participant cosplay.

Situating cosplay as a celebration of agency in the performative fandom of science fiction and fantasy would seem to replay the (endless) discourses of cultural studies in which “resistance” is located in each variance of consumer activity. Cosplay, however, cannot simply be consumed: it must be performed. And the performance of black cosplay reiterates how it is in the existing state of things that new things (and new ways to do things) must be found. But what happens when the thing itself takes play? When those deemed things—racialized as nonhuman, as but things—play at being something other than either things or non-things?



Figure 2. ZiggZaggΣrZ, Raging AfroSamurai Cycloptic Cyborg #4, Afrofuturist Occupation at Pomona College (2019). Photo: tobias c. van Veen.

Discourses in black studies have sought to conjoin blackness to the thing. Moten (2017) describes “the double edges of thingliness” in Harriet Jacob’s autobiography as a “loophole of retreat,” a “fugitive trajectory” whereby writing black autobiography opens onto “aesthetic criminality” (pp.69-70). I am likewise interested here in cosplay as black performativity of other-selves—a writing-in-general that shifts the autos of autobiography and its loophole of retreat to the transformative alterity of a xenoperformativity (the performance of an alien, an alienation) and its exodus (its ungrounding from roots—via Gilroy’s routes). I am also thinking of what happens in that “conjoining of historicity with bounded subjection and the thing”—as Alexander Weheliye (214) writes of Heidegger—when it “opens a particular aspect encased in the tradition of the oppressed” (p.89). What happens when that particular aspect of the thing, unbounded from its subjection, becomes no longer but a thing? Weheliye notes how for Heidegger the “unleashing of [the thing’s] happening contributes to the conceptualization of modern politics” (p.89). When, in short, some or all are reduced to things, we enter that field of bare life that Agamben (1998) has correlated to the concentration camp. But as Weheliye makes clear in his critique of Agamben, not all things are equal, even in their absolute reduction to thingliness. The plantation in its centuries of duration is not the camp. The supposed universality of the “we” that is reduced to bare life is precisely that which is in question. And the discourse of blackness qua thingness is, perhaps, in its own ways, a limiting one, when thinking that movement of the thing which would exceed the thing, while at the same time, refusing its assimilation into the “unbearable whiteness” of no-thing. Heidegger will likewise need to be ungrounded as the universal grounds of discoursing on (all) Being.

While black cosplay, like all cosplay, suspends boundaries of performer/audience through participatory subcultures, registering among other things shifts in the dynamics of public/private, it

also holds a particular force as that resistance of the thing to remaining as such. A resistance, in part, to being staged as but a thing, but a resistance also to becoming bound to the telos of subjection, and to necessarily becoming but another subject to, and in, whiteness. A playful resistance that I will seek to connect to Moten's (2003) "resistance of the object," and to the contested and unstable belonging of the "black radical tradition" in which, as David Scott (2013) reflects, "if I am black it is because there is an historical tradition in which that identity is constituted partly by a continuous argument over precisely what it means to be black" (p. 3).



Figure 3. ZiggZaggΣrZ, Raging AfroSamurai Cycloptic Cyborg #5, Afrofuturist Occupation at Pomona College (2019). Photo: tobias c. van Veen.

What constitutes the resistance of black cosplay? With Hollywood hero narratives traditionally dominated by white and masculine stereotypes, cosplay affords avenues of what Ytasha Womack (2013) calls "creative empowerment" for those who are already marginalised under conditions of white fragility—whereby the celebration of otherness is otherwise silenced by white majorities phobic of black particularity, black resilience and black (super)power. Cosplaying black superheroes reveals and yet displaces the white mythologies of superiority that condition the genre. And cosplaying white superheroes while black destabilizes universal saviour narratives that reify whiteness. At the level of representation, then, cosplay affords two avenues for black participants: the first in the representation of oft-neglected black characters; the second in the black cosplaying of characters who though default white, can be revisioned, replayed, re-cut as black—thus platforming the agency of black cosplayers to cosplay whomever (or whatever) they so desire, a gesture perhaps more important than it appears, for it upsets the default universality of whiteness as the blank slate of comic book and superhero subjectivity.

Certainly something is at stake in black cosplay, not the least at the level of black representation in the multibillion dollar industry of Hollywood superhero franchises that have become the dominant global narrativization machines of the 21st century. Even though Afrofuturism has

now had its Black Panther moment, with Hollywood seeking to monetize upon the most recent commodification of blackness, cosplay itself remains a phenomenon that, if not immersed in its vast world of conventions, perhaps needs some further introduction. Since the 1980s—with the term “cosplay” coined in Japan in 1984—cosplay conventions have proliferated rapidly. The origins of “costume play” at science fiction and fantasy conventions can be traced to Myrtle R. Douglas, a.k.a. Morojo, and her “futuristiccostumes” created for the 1st World Science Fiction Convention in New York City in 1939 (with Morojo and her then-boyfriend Forrest J Ackerman taking inspiration from the 1936 film, *Things to Come*). Today, the annual San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) has some 130,000 attendees, with many (if not the majority) in cosplay, often interacting with others and enjoying the event “in character.” What is at stake in cosplay suggests, on the one hand, the need for escapism in a world beset by climate eschatology, the rise of right-wing politics of hate, and its unevenly distributed violence, and yet, on the other hand, such an escapism attempts to do or be something more or other than a passive consumer cog—to become, if only for a day, a superhero of some sort—that I will suggest opens onto a performative exodus that exceeds allegory and calls human identity, and its historicity as supposed universal narrative, into question.

In thinking black cosplay, I want to situate it as intersecting if not transforming Richard Iton’s (2010) “black fantastic,” those “minor-key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the vagabond, and those constituencies marked as deviant” (p.16). I have cited Iton’s work before, and it deserves a closer reading. I write “transforming” because here the black fantastic is furthered by way of deviance. Black cosplayers deviate from—and are deviant to—white superhero norms in which, as Frances Gateward and John Jennings (2015) remind us, “the genre of the superhero is very much a white-male-dominated power fantasy” predicated upon the unintelligence and thus unheroic stereotypy—outside of sports arenas—of “Black bodies” (p.5). But in discussing cosplay, which takes up the fandom performance of fantastical, speculative and science fictional characters in general—not all of which are super nor heroic per se—I want to situate it already as a deviant global culture (I hesitate to write, in the internet era, “subculture”), already open to deviating from its superhero stereotypes. Such deviance resonates throughout the history of comics itself, for like science fiction, it has been mostly positioned as a deviant, minor genre to the aesthetic concerns of modern literature. Such deviance is often themeatized, and comics is at its best when its fantastical figures allegorize the struggles of race, gender, and outcast exclusion from the category of the “human.” It should come as no surprise, then, that cosplayers deviate from norms of racial and gendered identity.



Figure 4. ZiggZaggΣrZ, Raging AfroSamurai Cycloptic Cyborg #6, Afrofuturist Occupation at Pomona College (2019). Photo: tobias c. van Veen.

Black performativity of cosplay often criss-crosses the “proper” embodiment of character. The gender-bending of crossplay is likewise a term naming the drag performance and criss-crossing of gender in cosplay. In interviews below, I talk to black cosplayers at Emerald City ComicCon in 2016, discussing “crossplay” through gender-bending, queering, disabled and interracial play that disrupts the white-abled canon of mainstream characters but also opens cosplay in general towards a black radical tradition of black performance. Many black cosplayers also take-up the cosplay of minoritarian and nonwhite characters from minoritarian films, literature and comix (such as Milestone, or underrepresented characters such as Static Shock) to advance and amplify other stories—and stories of the other—by exposing alternative visions of blackness. And some cosplayers—a minority in general—invent their own characters and backstories, enveloping themselves in the creative power of storytelling, infiltrating new narratives into fandom. It is at this level that I want to emphasise what ZiggZaggΣrZ the Bastard coins as cause-play, as the admixture of the political and play, the performance of fantastical and lived science fiction that exceeds the play of identity in the rejection of “Human Identity.”

While white cosplay affords (privileged) deviance from an otherwise unquestioned assumption of full human status, black cosplay deviates from remaining but a thing, in a deviance of the already outcast, insofar as blackness is already subhuman by what Alexander Weheliye calls “racializing assemblages” of antiblackness (or, “inhuman” in Paul Gilroy’s (24) understanding of raciology). Blackness here as nonbiological racialization “designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot” (Weheliye, 214, p.3). Weheliye’s emphasis, after Sylvia Wynter, is upon

the “radical reconstruction and decolonization of what it means to be human” (p.4). However, I want to focus on what he identifies as its “decolonization,” as a deterritorializing, deconstructive, Afrofuturist unhooking from the grounds of the “human” as default ontological and identitarian framework, thereby suspending the teleology of its “radical reconstruction.” Deviant black cosplay calls into question the primacy of the human as the ontological foundation of identity. Deviant cosplay in general also means that the white privilege of cosplay—the privilege to perform any character as white insofar as whiteness is scripted under racializing assemblages as tabula rasa and master subject—encounters and participates in the cosplay of deprivileged characters. I want to suggest that through cosplay, questions of gender, race, ableism and white privilege are thematized beyond allegory and representation in a potentially transformative experience of becoming-other, and doing so, at the limit, calls into question nascent structures of privilege amongst its participants.



Figure 5. ZiggZaggΣrZ, Raging AfroSamurai Cycloptic Cyborg #8, Afrofuturist Occupation at Pomona College (2019). Photo: tobias c. van Veen.

Encounters and Interviews

Black Cosplay at Emerald City ComicCon

Shortlink: <https://soundcloud.com/otherplanes/otherplanes-03>

ZiggZaggΣrZ the Bastard, Performance Poet & Cosplayer

Shortlink: <https://soundcloud.com/otherplanes/otherplanes-04>

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