
Black Femme Rising

Cosplay and Playing Mas as New Narratives of Transgression

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CATHY THOMAS

The author argues that Black female figures disrupt the normative constructions of genre and gender in narrative-based costumed pretend play and turns body spectatorship into new narratives of speculation. For Black women at play, she asserts, cosplay (i.e., comic book and pop culture costume play) and masquerade (i.e., as during Caribbean Carnival) are rhetorical and performative cognates. She suggests that Black women at play highlight the paradoxical dilemma of their visibility and invisibility so that, in public (whether virtual or actual), their presence becomes a phenomenological experience and political expression of their capacity as world builders. She finds that, because the category of “Black women” in this research includes people who use an array of binary, nonbinary, and contested gender categories, Black femme praxis addresses the complex relations of the real and fictive worlds their play inhabits. To demonstrate the overlap between cosplay and playing mas (masquerade), she includes excerpts from interviews with science-fiction writer Nalo Hopkinson, cultural theorist Emily Zobel Marshall, and content from various Black female cosplayers on social media. **Key words:** belonging; Black femme; cosplay; dissemblance; playing mas (masquerade); social media; world building

Introduction

OUR STORY BEGINS in a closet. A purposeful ascent out of its darkness to assemble the best approximation of that picture in our hand or that picture we know by heart. It is our self-portrait. Makeup or mud, smear or spray, wire or thread, feather or fur, blue eyes or blue scales, hooves or heels, boy or girl or maybe not. The scene is set in Brooklyn, Leeds, or Trinidad, designing our Blue Devil mas (Caribbean Carnival masquerade) outfit for Carnival or the multiverse version of ourselves, the version that spans every possible hypothetical universe,

playing itself out for a comic book convention in New York, Denver, or San Diego with our sculpting the turquoise *Homo mermanus* façade on top of our Black skin to play Marvel's Atlantean warrior woman Andromeda as inked by David Marquez for *Avengers's* "The Battle for the Right to Be Called...Earth's Mightiest" (January 2019). Both, a stealth retrieval of an "identity, which does not come when called, nor form out of ash and dust when ordered to do so" (Browne 2018, 49).

This article provides a deep reading of cosplay (comic book and pop culture costume play) as a performance analog to playing mas. In spite of providing space for self-invention and play, both the Carnival scene (Trinidad Carnival and its diasporic offshoots) and the comic book convention hall become complex sites where paradoxically various social norms are enforced and upheld by expectations. Specifically, I look at Black women and female-identified nonbinary individuals who play mas (masquerade) and cosplay and explicitly, via social media and interviews, identify as Black and as of Afrodiasporic descent. This article considers Black trans women, Black womyn or womxn, and other Black individuals identifying under an array of terms who contest gender-normed categories, experiences, and expectations. For this group of people, I will use the broad term "Black women" and later "Black femme" after introducing it as a generative configuration with social, political, and identification sway.

The presence of Black women players has been both fraught with and enriched by community attention, which suggests that Blackness coupled with gender engages narrative-based costume play in new and productively disruptive ways. More importantly, this engagement draws attention to the widely assumed role of play in these two spheres—transgression. In other words, cosplay and Carnival masquerade are meant to be counterculture or subculture creations yet tend toward the hegemonic, at least given the discrepant rules that make up the art of pretending. In addition, this article also seeks to skew the hegemony of narrative-based costume play by shifting the emphasis to the increasing visibility of Black women at play on social media, allowing us to speculate about some of the ways in which race and gender, ironically, contribute to keeping these physical spaces transgressive and, therefore, liberating. I offer a framework for looking at the Black female cosplayer and mas maker as a Black femme praxis that accounts for the nonbinary identity of the actual, fictive, and affective configuration of players. Next, I provide a brief history of Caribbean Carnival and how many elements connect to cosplay. I conduct a deep reading of La Diabliesse, the Deviless, a character derived from Caribbean folklore and reimag-

ined by Trinidadian Carnival performer Tracy Sankar, who creates a specifically Black hybridity—a mixed-race, ambiguous species with gender possibilities. Sankar’s work provides us with an occasion to imagine how, by embodying the discontinuities of feminine expectations, Black women’s alternative staging of narrative-based costume play—of world building, if you will—initiates its own social meaning and sex-positive narrativizing “in relation to the absent presence of the material metaphor of the black female as matrix-figure” (Jackson 2020, 13). To this end, Black women at play are not empty vessels absorbing details or making aberrant the overdetermined storylines and characters in which they are noticeably absent or perfunctorily included as “representations of sacrificial blackness” as is Riley, a black female character in Naughty’s Dog’s *The Last of Us* video game (Russworm 2017, 112–14). This is followed by a discussion of the distinct experiences of Black women in Carnival and cosplay. I interview writer-scholar-players Nalo Hopkinson and Emily Zobel Marshall to situate racial and gender logic that dominates cosplay and Carnival, respectively. Then, my attention turns to the Black female cosplayers who use social media as a safe space for their practice. Their anecdotes remind us that niche canons such as comic books, video games, and oral tradition performed in popular culture are meant to be provisional, iterable, and contingent on the impetus of play.

In my opening scenario, I juxtapose the iconic Blue Devil to Andromeda, a blue-skinned Marvel character. The Blue Devil is an evolution of the traditional nineteenth-century Trinidadian Carnival devil character played by freed slaves, who would blacken their skin with molasses to portray the tortured souls of the original enslaved black Africans who toiled on the sugar estates (Hill 1972). Today, the Blue Devil is one of many devils performed with wire tails, wings, and even pitchforks to try to scare onlookers. Andromeda is a merfolk character whose storyline includes escaping Atlantis’s toxic masculinity by taking surface forms, one of which was in the body of a mixed-race Jamaican woman, Geneieve Cross. She also duels and defeats her father, the Atlantean ruler. Makeup artist Suba Mohan (@suba_mohan on Twitter) creates a flawless execution of Andromeda’s mixed race, mixed species iteration (figure 1). Notably, in Mohan’s depiction of Andromeda, the makeup effect pays tribute to her alias’s Afro-Jamaican heritage. Both black skin and blue skin are highlighted. Her look is featured in Afropunk.com for the Halloween 2018 feature “Black Cosplayers Slay Halloween.” Although Suba does not identify as Black on her social media profile, Afropunk.com, like other digital platforms, emerges as an inclusive third space, a safer space, for showcasing play for Black folk and other people of color.



Figure 1. Half-Atlantean. Image from Twitter, @suba_mohan

I connect Andromeda and the Blue Devil not only because they are visibly blue but because the consequence of their physical appearance makes their play—and, thusly, in this case their Caribbean-rooted narratives—more visible. In this way, Blackness at play can be seen as a form of critical fabulation in which the performance draws on and draws out the blanks left by the historical record and thus the canon (Hartman 2008). “By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story” and “throwing into crisis ‘what happened when’” the Black costumed players’ fabulations contest what has been laid out as fact, history, and event by imagining themselves as world builders who can narrate their presence and present (11). The blue devil player and this version of Andromeda are provisional projects who emerge from ludic impulses renarrating themselves with each Carnival, convention, and social media post. They are rhetorical and performative cognates.

Costume play is not merely cosmetic or decorative. Costumes are phenomenological; they are another surface that more easily articulates what we have failed, or have not made an effort, to grasp. They draw their power from individuals’ imaginations, their affective orientations toward shared experiences from group participation, and their pleasure in the successful execution of “the extended self” (Rahman, Wing-sun, and Cheung 2012; Browne 2018). However,

“patriarchy cannot hide or help itself. Nor can racism” (Browne 2018, 137). Thus, for Black women and Black identified gender nonbinary people, costume play is a surface art that also draws from an interior that is not so much concealing itself as it is taking its sweet time to publicly play out truths from our inner and undisclosed lives. In this context, “surface art,” or what the surface articulates, has two meanings. The first concerns the literal and topical adornment of makeup and textile. The second points to a culture of dissemblance, concealing an interior life, that undergirds at the very least an irresolvable internal contradiction between the perception of Black women’s politico-cultural openness and their desire to protect privacy and a subjectivity that has been historically and socially maligned by white liberal norms supported by heteropatriarchy. Darlene Clark Hine (1989), in her article “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” uses Harriet Jacob’s (1861) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to illustrate the complicated relationship between Black women and society at large when it comes to narrativizing the violence done to them. “Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle” (Hine 915).

Consider the dynamics of dissemblance in one of the works in “Heads of the Colored People: Four Fancy Sketches, Two Chalk Outlines, and no Apology” from Nafissa Thompson-Spires’s (2017) *Heads of Colored People: Stories* in which cosplayer and artist Paris arrives by bus to the scene of a “large crowd of flashing lights, police cars, and costumed and uncostumed bystanders” outside the Los Angeles Comic-Love convention (15). Her boyfriend Riley, who is dressed as the anime character Tamaki Suoh, and another black man selling self-published comic books get into an altercation we do not witness. They are summarily shot and killed: “Years later, she would regret not drawing the offending officer that day. Since then, she has sketched his face over and over, penciling his name and image in her notebook as a sort of plea, saying it aloud, wishing that she, like Eucliwood, could pronounce the names of those she wanted to die and make it so” (15).

It takes a third character, a Black man named Kevan, to reimagine Paris’s “story of fragments” in an homage comic he will create “to draw new conclusions” (Thompson-Spires 2017, 16–17). It is a comic wherein the gunned-down comic book artist can make “bad things unhappen” with a stroke of a brush. By proxy, Kevan’s daughter Penny, who sits next to him as he draws the comic of the two Black men gunned down at Comic-Love, manifests a new version of

this super power by asserting it will also be her power, “but I’m just gonna think and make it happen or unahappen” (Thompson-Spires 16–17).

These narrative and performative examples eschew overdetermined tragedy that happens in the lives of Black folks and, thus, beauty is born out of experience. As photographer, poet, and Caribbean scholar Kevin Adonis Browne (2018) reminds us, “If we are, in fact, beautiful and dangerous (and we are), we should know that it is a hard-worn beauty, a danger tempered with grievance and blood, rebellion and failure” (107). Specifically, I recognize how new versions of the self-manifest creative disruptions to uninvited ideologies from which Black women (female identified people) inherit and, subsequently, many divest. In this article, I assert that cosplaying and playing mas are rhetorical and performative cognates with similar material investments and emotional outcomes for female bodies that carry self-affirmed Blackness.

Cosplay and Playing Mas, a Black Femme Approach

Cosplay and playing mas are two spaces where I have used an ethnographic approach, as participant, observer, and interviewer, to better understand how Blackness and gender shape subcultures of costume play. These spaces, in this sense, become incidental, but they should not be confused with the inconsequential. Space is political. Therefore, to build the parallels between mas and cosplaying and to examine how they work for and are worked by Black female bodies, I draw inspiration from Browne’s emancipatory project of mas as a praxis and rhetorical method. Mas is the process of doing and undoing social mores; the Carnival is the opportunity in which to do and undo it. He embeds with mas makers as a mas maker to disrupt imaginatively the colonizing effect of both his photographic gaze and his position as a scholar documenting his subjects.

Browne’s central argument is that mas is not a metaphor. It is the enfolded materiality of a recomposed identity for which “issues of race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship do not simply occur in the abstract” (Browne 2018, 30). Therefore, to not come when called insists on there being no easy embrace of preset categories or identities. The hallmark of Afro-Caribbean Carnival tradition and its catalog of characters performed in traditional mas is an embodied rejection to the dehumanization of African and, in some cases, Asian and indigenous people. Trinidad’s Carnival is an ontological coup staged against the gatekeepers of Western humanism and its colonial inventions. It is a balancing of



Figure 2. Author as Gwendolyn with fellow cosplayers Poison Ivy and Catwoman.
Photo from Cathy Thomas

life. Therefore, to play mas is to be exposed to new erotic and ludic subjectivities. In turn, to examine Black women cosplayers who participate in convention hall costuming or via social media personae invite us to explore the undoing of rule, with the hall or hashtag as the opportunity (actual or virtual) to undo it. The rule here is an abstraction of humanism and colonial inventions in the form of pop cultural canons. For example, undoing a rule could be a curvy Black woman playing Poison Ivy, a petite Black woman playing Michelle Pfeiffer's Cat Woman, and me, playing one of the few black-skinned characters in Image Comic's *Saga* because I know the convention hall will be full of its other character (see figure 2).

Because comic books can be adapted to television and film, these images often move beyond the page or screen and therefore contribute to a form of production intrinsic and instrumental to re-creating social reality. For the hall and the Carnival parade, this means perpetuating sexist, homophobic, and racist

ways of knowing. To disrupt this complex space of high-heeled Anglo European heroes and anime princesses, the Black female figure in costume is paradoxically visible because she is invisible. She has been absented from or pigeonholed as “x” in visual culture and narratives.

Browne’s concept of masquerade making and playing mas a praxis and as a rhetorical appeal valorizes the costumer and costume as a much more complex articulation of identities that may have race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship concerns. Mas “is not a metaphor, . . . it is, instead a metonym—a part, a fragment that represents and can compose the whole of a thing” (2018, 30). As such, the Black female form at play can be seen as a fragment of a larger strategy designed to expose our own culture’s hegemonic ways as far as the traditions carried on in convention halls and Carnival parades contribute to reproducing social reality. In *Witch’s Flight*, Kara Keeling (2007) makes the same move away from symbolism in her discussion of the Black femme image in cinema. *Witch’s Flight* draws our attention to the moment in twentieth-century American history when the invention and circulation of its moving images coincides with the “problem of the color line,” as defined by civil rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Enter now the influence and staying power of the visual and narrative archetypes. Keeling (2007) proposes that self-valorization and “conditions of possibility for the cinematic appearance of the black lesbian butch-femme sexuality” emerge out of 1970s blaxploitation films and later in movies like *Set It Off* (1996) and *Eve’s Bayou* (1997) because we are seeing lives that were never meant to be seen. Keeling (2007), Browne (2018), and Jackson (2020) pose vital questions with regard to visibility and invisibility, refusal, survival, belonging, and building worlds outside the confines of the dominant visual culture.

Thinking through these frames, I conceptualize a Black femme praxis at play when Black women—those who refuse to live by rules that actively suppress their expression with violence, correction, and erasure—cosplay and play mas. Culturally, the Black femme is a queer identity wherein Black feminist roots and radical potentials give Blackness, chosen sexual identity, and gendered performance—a refiguring of heteronormative femininity—a simultaneously hypervisible and invisible embodiment. The Black femme identity is a simultaneously eroticized body recognizable for its indexable femininity and a failed eroticism that is stealth as a creative work around aiming toward liberating otherwise beingness. Black femme identity might be better understood, in Kara Keeling’s statement, as offering “immaterial labor to produce alternative social networks . . . a reminder that the set of what appears is never perfectly closed

and that something different might appear therein at any-instant-whatever” (Keeling 2007, 143). In other words, the combination of race, gender, and sexuality in Keeling’s formulation of the Black femme creates anxiety because she can mimic hegemonic values given by how her body is visually read. Looking closely at play, it becomes apparent that Black women in cosplay and playing mas also reproduce hegemonic sociality as a referent, but she is not recognized as doing so. Rather, a Black femme praxis insists on mediating feedback between her material livingness in the present and imagining alternative realities in certain spaces.

Black femme praxis is unruly, but I do not lean on a queer identity as a placeholder for unruliness or that which is set in a binary war against straight white male preferences assumed to be the default setting of Carnival or cosplay. Rather, a sizeable population of queer folk participate in Carnival and cosplay performances. As the term “femme” is not a straight identity, in this discussion it helps if we are inclusive and imaginative. “Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz 2019, 1). Thus, the Black femme praxis must be queer to sustain speculative ontologies and new narratives of self within the prison house of the here and now. Further, much of cosplay is based on comic book and cartoon characters being (looking) sexually dimorphic. Differences between sexes translates to distinction in gender presentation. In turn, gender presentation begets exaggeration of desirable archetypes, whether that be a Geisha or Godiva fantasy and even, if rarely, Beyoncé.

Whereas mas praxis has citizenship as a consideration of the here-and-now concerns of its practitioners, for Black female cosplayers’ *citizen belonging* comes in the form of the comic book and pop culture community and their defense of the canon. The canon in this instance is the comic book, the cartoon, or the actor portrayal of a creative property. Black women cosplayers often confront insult, misrecognition, and judgments on their costumed looks that are deemed incomplete because, for example, they do not match up to a comic book character’s race or body type, a struggle often voiced by Chaka Cumberbatch on Twitter @princessology and in online interviews. My exploration asks: What is the politicized poetics of the Black female form in aesthetically and canonically policed spaces such as comic book convention halls? How might cosplay politics align with the body and pigment politics of popular Carnival masquerade

(pretty mas with beads and bikinis)? How does the cosplaying Black female form disrupt the constructions of genre and gender normativity, thereby turning body spectatorship into new narratives of speculation? The Black femme praxis is a conceptual frame capturing the race-gender-sex expansiveness of Black female forms, cisgender and nonbinary, as it works toward positive alternative images of their social, sexual, and mental selves. Costume play is an act of publicly playing out a counterrepresentation of a black women's interiority as a dissemblance that, instead, becomes a phenomenological experience and political expression of their capacity as world builders.

History and Social Emotional Impact of Playing Mas

Play is vital to social emotional development in children and adolescents giving them at various stages of biological development new approaches to thinking, expressing emotion, inventing alternative ways of dealing with repetition and novelty, and understanding cause and effect (Malik and Marwaha 2020; Scott and Cogburn 2020). Role play, insofar as research on child education and social emotional competencies goes, teaches students to cooperate and express empathy toward others (Vlaicu 2014). Play, with regards to adults playing mas, has long been considered profoundly linked to socialization, community, and the politics of emancipation. Medievalist and Trinidad Carnival scholar Milla Riggio (2019) in her essay "The Power of Play" observes that "Carnival links personal freedom with the political: 'freeing up' the self, 'freeing up' society" (575). Emancipation, we must remember, is a system of events that ended forced labor and enslavement. The festive play of Carnival has a positive and cathartic psychological impact for its participants.

In *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Culture*, Browne (2018) uses Trinidad's Carnival to discuss Caribbean identity as a function of Trinbagonian history, transnational returnees, and other diasporic sites where versions of this Carnival thrive. Because Carnival has a history that entwines colonial settlers, decimated indigenous populations, and enslaved and freed people and their descendants, what is being salvaged and reimagined by way of costuming and performance are, collectively, traditional elements and modern derivative artifacts of Carnival's evolution. It evolved from once being an event solely enjoyed by the colonial ruling class to being the rare time and space for catharsis for the underclasses and laborers.

In preemancipation Trinidad, prior to the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, Carnival was off limits to slaves and lower-class freed people. Preemancipation Carnival was reported as an elegant affair enjoyed exclusively by the planter elites who would dress in elegant and expensive costumes as Black field laborers and women “mulattas” of the time. Leading up to emancipation, Trinidad switched colonial hands from Dutch, French, and Spanish to British rule. Capitulating to stricter Victorian social ordering, emancipation dissolved demarcations between upper-class Blacks and the newly emancipated in such a way that it created colonial anxiety, and this anxiety, in turn, called for more policing. We see that even middle-class and upper-class Blacks and free colored people, gradually downgraded and barred from participation in the Carnival, become racial collateral damage. Postemancipation, freed Blacks over time created their own Carnival in which they took to the streets to create new narratives that reflect their experiences. Parody, dark and novel, of histories of institutionalized assault, extraction, and rape underpins the performance and play of this Carnival.

The Baby Dolls and the *jamette* are two examples of new reenactments of the social life of women in nineteenth-century Trinidad that persists today. The satirical Baby Dolls portray mothers in bonnets who hold an illegitimate baby doll (mock child) and search the crowd for its father, embarrassing male passersby with paternity accusations until they give her money for milk. This farce belies a history of rape, miscegenation, and the devaluing of Black women’s reproductive agency. The *jamettes* (or *jametes*) got their name from an insult derived from the French word *diametre*, which means people living under the diameter of respectability in society. Art historian Samantha Noel (2010) unpacks the gendered etymology of the word noting that “*jamette*” is feminine and “*jamete*” is masculine, although the blanket term of *jamette* Carnival “clearly feminizes the cultural practices of a certain class of people, and, in turn, is used by society to regulate and scrutinize the sexuality of black women” (63). *Jamette* women were targeted because their hip gyrations, pretend and actual brawling, sexual assertion, and teasing were considered unfeminine. Creole women, in particular, were a double threat because of their ability to simultaneously cross race and cross gender play as they satirized being a white planter (King 1999). But it is important to note they were not trying to impersonate and deceive. They were trying to entertain and provide pleasure to themselves and other revelers. Consequently, the *jamette* mas is theorized by other scholars who compare the *jamette*, for example, to modern-day performers such as Rihanna, citing how her on-stage and social media persona pushes back against the historical shaming of black women’s dancing bodies (Jones 2016, 174–5).

The early Soviet literary critic and Marxist language philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin famously considered Carnival a social institution of therapeutically liberating force, and Browne reconfigures Bakhtinian models by engaging affect theory and Black diasporic queer theory to address ethnocentric variations of street performance. He highlights the difference in formation of contemporary mas culture (pretty mas of beads and bikinis), traditional culture mas (heritage figures), and J'ouvert (or “dutty mas,” as Trininis call it), which—with its revelers covered in mud, oil, and body paint—is connected to predawn celebration on Carnival Monday. The popular performance by bands of people wearing beads, bikinis, and feathers in the eroticized Beads and Bikini mas constitutes part of pretty mas. It is the performance most associated with Carnival parade images. Jamette, Baby Doll, and devils are traditional mas characters, though they may also be performed in the same Carnival parade as pretty mas. Revelers will likely encounter traditional mas players on the fringes of the route or during mas making J'ouvert celebrations. These encompass the various ways participants can express themselves through play. “As we come to understand that everyday life in the neocolonial Caribbean involves the acceptance and indictment of socioeconomic/econosocial disappointments and political failures, we should also understand that Carnival functions not only as an acknowledgment of the indictment, but also the explicit rejection of it” (Browne 2018, 14). This statement can be applied to Black cosplayers and how their performance (and presence) becomes a playful disruption in the comic book convention scene.

While Browne does not play favorites in his *High Mas*, his photographic eye favors the Caribbean subjects whose designs deconstruct the persistent hypocrisies of everyday life and the persistent afterlife of violent and revolutionary histories. The devils in Trinidad Carnival play out a reaction to the here and now as an accretion of the dehumanizing conditions of colonialism. The devils are a bookmark for Black resistance but not a symbol of it. Browne writes, “People are not allegories of the hardships they face, nor do they engage purely in symbolic terms with the circumstances that drive them to make *Mas*” (96). He refers here to the devil mas’s inception with the nineteenth-century “Molasses” devils who used sugar byproducts to blacken further their bodies to contrast more against white domination. It is also known as the “begging mas” in which these bodies covered in oil, paint, grease, or molasses beg for money from passersby, who will pay to remain untouched or to be left alone. In the devil mas performance, they might pick up the money tossed to them from a safe distance with their



Figure 3. Erzulie the La Diabliesse portrayed by Tracey Sankar. Photo from Maria Nunes, 2015. <https://www.marianunes.com/>

teeth. They have a dance that, perhaps, mimics being whipped to being tossed in boiling hot molasses. Punishment and societal atonement face off. There may be chains attached to them. There may be horns, tails, and a mouth reddened with dye. The public dance is a recomposition of a human beingness outside of Western knowing.

Among others, Browne focuses on Tracey Sankar’s “Queen of Sorrows” mas in which she plays a character called La Diabliesse, a modified characterization of the trope of the “tragic mulatto” woman (see figure 3).

This character first appears in Lafcadio Hearn’s (1890) *Two Years in the French West Indies*. She is a complex character, a horned woman with hooves whose Black female form is literally staged with white paint as if to cover her mixed-race body in a sheath of white Victorian respectability. She targets happy couples and married men. Browne writes, “La Diabliesse is the extended convenience of the woman’s body in this place, a manmade archetype of Caribbeanness in the shape of a fractured femininity” (138). In a February 2017 interview with *Caribbean Beat Magazine*, Sankar says, “I never choose the mas. The mas choose me. It speaks to you. So you can’t just think that at the end of the day, you put on a costume. It doh work like that. You awakening something” (Various contributors 2017). Cosplay is redolent with other such manmade tropes: DC Comics’s Cat

Woman as a noncustodial child turned thief turned costumed character to elicit the same joy and terror enjoyed by Batman and the Joker. Then, there is Marvel's six-armed sorceress Spiral as a mind-controlled experiment of her kidnapper. In these embodiments—La Diabliesse, Cat Woman, Spiral—fractured femininity is not a weakness; it is a disruption and challenge because the female characters are “being tasked with carrying the burden of toxic manhood” (Browne 2018, 138).

Whereas scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin write about Carnival transgressions in medieval Europe as happening in confined time though not in confined space, Browne recognizes that the material and emotional reality of the season in the Caribbean has no endpoints. On Ash Wednesday, people are already dreaming up and saving up for next year's costume. Browne writes about the extent to which the body is used. Costumes may be heavy, tight, sharp, or absent. The sun, the police, the ouroborian parade route with its nonstop soca music and steel pan drums blasting from speakers on the trucks leading large floats or on the floats themselves, draped with corporate endorsement banners, set hips and waists gyrating as participants and observers wine up (wining is a dance with roots in African dance tradition that was made popular in Caribbean Carnival). The party started ten weeks ago, and you are expected to continue until you cross the stage, rain or shine, for Last Lap, the final portion of the Carnival parade march when final judging may happen. The day begins and ends with adrenaline and sweat. There are accounts of people crying at the end of a Carnival that they began planning, designing, and saving for on Ash Wednesday the year before (Thomas 2018). These plans may include building a costume, setting up a character's storyline, and coordinating moves, gestures, and speech acts with others for its execution. I see cosplay's emotional and material reality in a parallel field.

I have, for example, planned my costumes for cosplay months in advance of a comic book convention. For a three-day convention, I will usually spend one day walking the halls with companions dressed as characters from a single creative property. My “cos band” usually consists of peers who are also presenting critical work on panels dedicated to comics scholarship. In 2019 I chaired and presented on the panel, “Crafts, Covens, and Hunts (re)Producing the Witch.” It served as an opportunity to use fandom to enact an aspect of our research by making visible the relationship between the more disciplinary aspects of our fields with pop culture. The theme of the witch was, in particular, emotionally charged given the flagrant misuse of the phrase “witch hunt” by cis white male politicians, who used such historical events to explain the ways media and fellow politicians critiqued their use of their power. We recognized this cooption of an



Figure 4. Weird Sisters from *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*. Left to right: Natalie Sheppard (Dorcas), Cathy Thomas (Prudence), Jessica Calvanico (Agatha). Photo from Tracy Bealer

identity as an erasure of the history of torture, defamation, and prosecution of a majority female victim populace who were hunted as witches. And yet, within the idea of the witch, we went further to critique film and television's white supremacist and heteronormalizing of these queer and rebellious figures. Our presentations included: "Black Witch Liberation from Screen to Comics," "(de) Colonizing the Coven," and "The Femme Devil, or What Happens When the Devil's Whore Dethrones the Dark Lord" (see figure 4).

Presenting research in costume is simultaneously playful and incisive. Like the Carnival scene, it is a performance of your other self that is not necessarily seen or shared on a regular basis. While our departments did fund our conference travel, the performance of our witchiness throughout the day included posing with others dressed as characters from Netflix's *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* and exceeded the conventional academic conference paper presentation, as it usually does.

At Play in the Parallel Fields of Blackness

Like Browne (2018) in his attempt to embody and embed his investigation of

Trinidad Carnival, I intertwine myself as scholar and subject as a cosplayer and mas maker. In this way, I see a powerful irony in Darlene Hine's (1989) elaboration of Black women's interiority as a dissemblance that uses "a self-imposed invisibility" to "harness" strength and "psychic space" to survive (915). With the help of the costume and costume play, the invisibility is charged with the creative energy of pretending. To reflect on ways in which performance, as escape or expression, operates for other Black women scholars, I offer excerpts from longer interviews I conducted with two scholar-activists. First, poet and professor Emily Zobel Marshall discusses her participation in mas. Next, writer and professor Nalo Hopkinson discusses experiences cosplaying. These conversations move beyond mere observations of performing identity to insights into, as Muñoz (2009) writes in *Cruising Utopia*, "multiple forms of belonging in difference [that] adhere to a belonging collectively" (20). Like Browne, Hopkinson and Marshall demonstrate the insight gained through performing, particularly as it applies to this art form that is so much about embodiment.

Marshall is a cultural theorist whose research, teaching, and creative expression examines constructions of hybrid and liminal identity within the African diaspora with special attention to Caribbean Carnival culture. Marshall explores race and racial politics of humans alongside the orality of the tricksters Brer Rabbit and Anansi. Her first book, *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance* (2012) and her second, *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition, and Brer Rabbit* (2019), focus on the role of the trickster in Caribbean and African American cultures and how trickster tales that originally encode Black life on plantations gets appropriated by white writers for antebellum fantasies.

She knows firsthand the poetics of endurance from playing mas annually at Leeds West Indian Day Carnival. As a scholar, mas player, and trickster she observes, "Participating in Carnival is a transformative experience and one has to be able to let go, to become/ be at one with the 'mas' in order to grasp the significance of this unique cultural phenomena." She represents what Michel Foucault (1977) called "the new historian, the genealogist" who "will know what to make of this masquerade" (160–61). Marshall shares that, "Performance enhances my scholarship in so many ways." She is an advocate of bringing together both her creative and critical practices. In fact, she writes poetry based on her research, "and playing mas every year with my 'Mama Dread's Masqueraders' Carnival troupe brings my creative and academic work to life." For her, Carnival scholarship is immersive "whether that be playing mas or helping to sew costumes at a mas camp" in Leeds. She adds that "there is sometimes a (justified) suspicion

of the academy (the ‘institution’) amongst Carnivalistas.” However, part of her process is being attentive to the hierarchies around the researcher who parachutes in to extract data. She has created a Carnival platform that brings together artists, performers, and scholars into a “much needed dialogue.” It is obvious that the much-needed dialogue Marshall draws attention to is the inclination of academic spheres to approach those considered marginal and their practices as objects of study rather than as knowledge producers. In other words, stereotypes, shopworn curated images, and habituating cultural assumptions fill the space between mas makers due to a foreclosing on who can be and what is considered a worthwhile contributor to knowledge production.

It may surprise the casual observer of contemporary Caribbean Carnival to know that many of the performing groups use play to recenter social and political problems. For example, in 2008 the HB Mama Troupe were stopped from entering the Carnival park with their “Free Dem—Close Guantanamo” placards. They were deemed too political for the Carnival authorities at the Leeds West Indian Day Carnival. And this is perhaps why traditional mas and dutty mas thrive in the margins. “Dutty mas” is the official start of Carnival (Jouvert or daybreak) on Carnival Monday where participants may be smeared in oil, mud, and paint. A reflection on what motivates Carnival’s political and social importance connects Marshall to the figure of the trickster, not merely to its symbolic will to survive through planning and deceit, but to the manifestation of motives that the trickster conceals as a way to overcome the system. She had the opportunity to play mas with the “last remaining Midnight Robbers in Trinidad.” The Midnight Robber is a stock character from traditional mas with roots that predate slavery, evolving from the West African griot. Evolved as Trinidad Carnival’s Midnight Robbers, these characters wear a broad-brimmed hats with fringe and are known for their robber speech that mocks masters, derides former slave owners, and brags of deeds done. The back story of the Midnight Robber tells how, despite being born an abomination (likely in some inhospitable place), the Robber brags he is the greatest among greats and uses his eloquence to persuade onlookers to give him money. Traditionally, this is a character played by males, but Marshall found herself with an invitation to join a group of Robbers. However, Marshall recalls, in our interview, that she “was given a cape and a whistle and a sombrero hat last minute. I wasn’t expecting to play with the Robbers, only to interview them—but this costume made me move, talk, and think differently.” She adds that “the Midnight Robbers were welcoming once I had performed a day on the street with them. This was a kind of test, I think—I’m not sure they thought I



Figure 5. Emily Zobel Marshall as Midnight Robber. Photo from E. Zobel Marshall

was cut out for the job initially!” (Interview with author December 26, 2020).

Belonging in is not by any means a seamless dynamic, but Marshall’s example gestures to findings in the context of early childhood development and theories about pretense or pretend play. Pretense functions to change individuals’ perspectives in role taking and advances their “cooperative behavior, friendliness, positive emotional expressions.” Simply put, it advances one’s psychological domain (Weinberger and Starkey 1994). Further, “the content of the pretense may be enriched by having a larger number of participants.” Marshall (2017) wrote about her experiences on the road with the band in Trinidad on her university blog: “The Midnight Robber is part highwayman, part cowboy and part agent of death and destruction Words are what he uses to hold passers-by to ransom” (n.p.). Pay out or else be regaled by the Robber’s colorful fast-tempo stories of vengeance against his oppressors. The fierce Robber talk is as much part of the costume as his broad-brimmed hat. “My tongue is the blast of a gun!” is one of the threats Emily recalls from a reveler. The degree to which mas players feel and see themselves connected with others is married to the degree to which they can transform into character. She adds that “I felt strong in my Midnight Robber costume . . . what I did feel was that as an (Anansi!) Midnight Robber, I wasn’t going to get too much unwanted attention from men—I would

be seen to be a figure of dread and power” (Interview, December 26, 2020). Marshall connects the trickster figure of Anansi the spider god to the boisterous performance of the Midnight Robber. While physical attributes such as props and costume may not coincide with attributes of Anansi, mimetic attributes such as crowd interaction and verbal expression do. Acts of disruption such as baiting and play threatening the crowd is a common attribute in mas characters including the devil, Baby Dolls, and jamette. A pretense of transgression belies a narrative based on past transgressions in Caribbean history.

In Carnival, some of the most provocative and memorable female characters are those who play out tropes of survival and noncommittal seduction, such as Sankar Charleau’s La Diabliesse mentioned previously. Specifically, when it comes to representations of pure evil or goodness incarnate in the traditional mas characters who women commonly play, some ambivalence is attached to them as they parody plantation life. The Baby Dolls approach people with wild accusations interceding for the health and welfare of their abandoned and hungry child. The Dame Lorraine parodies the French planter-class women who were, perhaps, physically unfit but always overly dressed for the stress of the tropical climate. The jamette are brash and loud both to mark and to counterpoint their lives being overdetermined by class, race, and gender violence. In *Carnival is Woman*, Samantha Noel (2009) points out that portrayals of folkloric characters like the soucouyant add a women-centered significance to J’ouvert (or Jouvay), the pre-Carnival celebration. The soucouyant is a childless, unmarried woman living outside society who, after making a pact with the devil, can slip out of her skin and take the shape of fire so she can travel through small spaces into her victim’s home to suck their life-blood. J’ouvert celebrations have their actual and symbolic roots in the use of fire to burn cane at the end of the growing season to mark a break from work or to sabotage the work entirely by creating a stoppage. Given this, the soucouyant’s fire reminds us of the dehumanizing effects of plantation regimes and of the possibilities of resistance once she sheds her dehumanized human body.

These traditional mas players, with their shape-shifting and transgressions, usually perform during J’ouvert in the predawn hours, relegated to a space and time when the majority of people are asleep. To come out for J’ouvert is to willfully transgress the “normal” setting of time and place for Carnival. Similarly, Black women who cosplay often complain of alienation from the scene. As such, they create their own asynchronous time spaces that transgress normal settings. For example, there is the #28daysofblackcosplay challenge created by AfroCa-

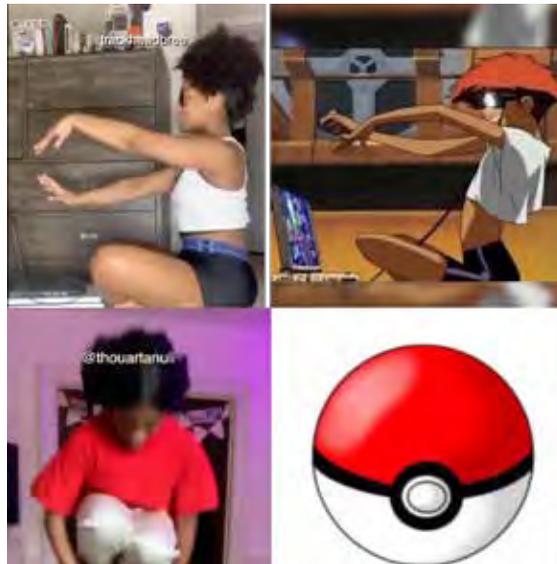


Figure 6. Anime gestural portrayals in #28daysofblackcosplay. Image from Twitter, @princessology



Figure 7. Black trans and nonbinary cosplayers in #28daysofblackcosplay. Image from Twitter, @yakfrost



Figure 8: #closetcosplay. Image from Twitter, @ThouArtAnuli

ribean cosplayer Chaka Cumberbatch-Tinsley in 2015, then again in 2016 as #29daysofblackcosplay on Twitter (see figures 6, 7, and 8).

As a professional, Cumberbatch-Tinsley worked as the Social Marketing Manager for the Pokémon brand. As @princessology on Twitter, she has a penchant for Japanese pop culture, having grown up in Okinawa where her father was stationed. After cosplaying as Sailor Venus (of the Sailer Moon comic series) at an anime convention in the United States, she was harassed online by people who felt she should not be cosplaying non-Black characters. A key difference here between Marshall's initial feelings of not belonging with the Midnight Robbers and Cumberbatch-Tinsley's experience as Sailor Venus is this: The former fictionalized identity is African rooted, and gender conventions are overlooked because the Robbers were willing to welcome Marshall after they had tested her. She states, "When the band gave me a signed photograph at the end of the day, I felt the rush of the warmth of acceptance and the feeling of having lived through an important Carnival ritual" (Interview, December 26, 2020). For a comic book convention, long-standing costumed groups may exist but the success of a fictional identity is usually measured against the racial, gendered, and body-type visual accuracy from a commercial or canonical narrative. Of note,



Figure 9. Cumberbatch-Tinsley as Sailor Venus. Image from <https://thisisblacklight.com/2018/02/23/representation/>

in addition to cosplay, Cumberbatch-Tinsley also plays mas. On an Instagram story from 2019, when she attended Miami Carnival, she writes, “I don’t want to think or say anything that [is] unrelated to Carnival for the foreseeable future tbh” (see figure 9). Again, racial and gendered diversity of a space contributes to the feeling of belonging.

From my own experience at large comic-book conventions, I am a cross-race, cross-gender, and cross-species cosplayer and mas player. I have dressed, for example, as the white female character Kelly in the British science-fiction show *Misfits*. Those at con who knew it, knew it well. My slicked-back hair and “chav” jewelry are Kelly’s signature adornment. Kelly’s superpower is reading other peoples’ minds. I was pleased when, off the bat, one woman knew who I was. However, in separate encounters, I was surprised at how much energy I expended explaining to others why I was not cosplaying the Black character Alicia whom they believed I even looked like. Alicia’s super power is inadvertently causing people to violently lust after her by simply touching her; so she keeps to herself. Cognitive biases in cosplay reflect societal norms carrying over into imaginative realms. I find the hypervigilance about racial accuracy in many cosplay spaces to be antithetical to its origins. In fact, it was a woman, a science-



Figure 10. Author as Kelly Bailey from *Misfits*. (photo from Cathy Thomas) and an image of the character Kelly Bailey. From <http://fanboy4um.blogspot.com/>

fiction zine publisher named Myrtle R. Douglas, who pioneered cosplay in New York in 1939 using the alias Morojo and dressed in “furistocostume”—pure narrative invention. Perhaps cosplay cognitive bias also reveals whose inventions are tolerated and preserved.

In speaking with Nalo Hopkinson as a fellow cosplayer, I was interested in knowing how she understood the way she was regarded by spectators at large. For example, what kinds of assumptions have people made about who she was trying to be? Similarly, I was interested in knowing if, in the past three to four years, she felt her movement through the space of the convention hall in costume to be something transgressive. In other words, did she feel she breached an unspoken order and ordering that may be defined by such norms as age, ability, morphology, gender, race, and even pigmentocracy (skin tone hierarchy). Hopkinson shares: “Yes. I’m Black, fat, female, and over fifty-five. How could my presence moving through those spaces as though I belonged not be transgressive? Case in point; walking through Comic-con dressed as Nakia (from Marvel’s *Black Panther*) in a tight dress with thigh-high slits, yet having non-Black people misidentify me as Queen Ramonda from the same film. They didn’t make the reverse mistake when I dressed the next day as the older character” (Interview, January 9, 2021).

Hopkinson, the 2021 Damon Knight Science Fiction Writers Grand Master, is its youngest-blackest woman recipient. When Afro Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter (1995) writes, “Human beings are magical. Bios and Logos. Words made flesh, muscle and bone animated by hope and desire, belief materialized in deeds, deeds which crystallize our actualities. . . . And the maps of spring always have to be redrawn again, in undared forms.” Hopkinson’s body of work speaks to undared forms. (Wynter 1995, 35). Her ability to world build, blending cosmologies from African, Caribbean, and Indigenous cultures has inspired new readers to the once bastardized genre with her novels, *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), *Salt Roads* (2003), *Midnight Robber* (2000) and countless short stories that include erotica. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s (2020) analysis of *Brown Girl in the Ring* (set in postapocalyptic Canada) points out the text does not waste time opposing a Western liberal humanist lens of what life looks like for Black people in a dystopic future Toronto. Hopkinson’s speculative world is not concerned with the dehumanization or bestialization attached to Blackness in literature, art, and science. *Brown Girl* is not pointing out suffering from stereotypical representations. Instead, it just gets “on with upending and inventing at the edge of legibility” (4). Additionally, Hopkinson is the cowriter of DC Comics’s *House of Whispers* series, a world built within Neil Gaiman’s Sandman Universe that takes up a Voodoo mythology storyline. Literature, being a singular expression of an identity, offers notes on Black woman sexuality, Black woman vernacular, Black woman sex acts, and Black woman roles within Caribbean cosmology. Because Hopkinson is a fellow cosplayer and a comic book writer, these series of inquiries draw from another valence of her world building. Hopkinson spoke to me about how the performance of cosplay intersected with other performances and masks in her everyday life, about the practice of being recognized or mis-recognized, and of recognizing oneself. She participated in Carnival as a child but not as a performer (mas). She adds, “I would have liked to, but being part of a mas parade is an expensive undertaking.” But, as an adult Hopkinson was able to participate in comic book conventions: “Attending my first science fiction convention at twenty-one years old, in Toronto, Canada, right out of undergrad. It was 1982. I’d been reading SF/F [science fiction and fantasy] most of my life, but this was the first time it occurred to me that a) I might like to take part in cosplay; b) I’d like to do so as a Black character; and c) at the time, there were really only two female ones available to me: Lt. Uhura from *Star Trek*, and Storm from the *X-Men*. (That was an early lesson into racism in SF/F)” (Interview, January 9, 2021).

Hopkinson leafed through an expensive book at her local comic bookstore store and memorized the details about female crew members. She observed “The men wore pants. The women wore short tunics that exposed their haunches garbed in matching panties. (I’d already figured out there was sexism in SF/F, so that only caused me an eyeroll, not an epiphany)” (Interview, January 9, 2021). Using a pattern and cheap red polyester, she made the tunic-cut dress a bit longer as a mini dress. At that time, she wore her hair straightened so she was able to match actress Nichelle Nichols’s portrayal of Uhura for the costume contest. Hopkinson admits, it “wasn’t a visually spectacular costume, which is perhaps why it didn’t place.” However, she “managed to elbow out a space in the genre” as a Black woman without having to go in “whiteface or blueface.” You can see the satisfaction on her face in a photograph from that day. She recalls how “fun” it was to pose in another photo with someone who had built an R2D2 bot (Interview, January 9, 2021). See figure 11.

Returning to *Black Panther* cosplay, I asked Hopkinson about her convention experiences with spectators at large and with people with whom she might consider part of a belonging-in group. These might be friends she knew or travelled with or other cosplayers identified as familiar—in this case, the Marvel Universe. On this point, she noted that “Black people, who culturally



Figure 11. Nalo Hopkinson as Lt. Uhura from *Star Trek* in 1982. Photo from Nalo Hopkinson

don't, IME [in my experience], tie female attractiveness so inexorably to youth and slimness, generally didn't make the same mistake." And they tended to respond positively, "whereas I only remember three non-Black people doing so." She credits the Black con goers for knowing what she was doing but as for a majority of attendees—"and I may have been imagining this—I perceived a certain amount of anxious aversion of eyes on their part." However, anxiety is necessarily tethered to fancy dress whether it stokes or hinders you. You want to execute your design to the best of your ability, and you want that to come across. There is a nuanced vulnerability in costume play for adults. It may be attributed to rationalizing peer critique. For Black women, there is the added challenge of performing in spaces where gender and race creates cognitive biases. Hopkinson affirms that this is not only a problem common to the convention hall. Recalling her experiences playing *Black Panther* characters Ramonda and Nakia, Hopkinson "perceived a certain amount of anxious aversion of eyes" from non-Black people that she has experienced in the "real world." She observes "white colleagues not recognizing me outside of the workplace because they refuse to look directly at me, and when I put myself directly in their line of sight and call them by name, their faces at first display anxiety, aversion, or affront, I presume because they either don't know what business a Black woman has addressing them and they haven't recognized me yet, or they're afraid that some rando angry Black woman is about to confront them loudly." I too have experienced the real-world anxiety, aversion and affront with one stand-out incident involving a chatty researcher following an almost two-hour version of some twice-monthly meetings. After the meeting, he took the elevator down and I took the steps, he did not recognize me minutes later outside our genetics building. Flighty professor? Bad eyes? Or, maybe one just gets used to "I thought that was you, Cathy" after the startle of "Hello Professor—it's me."

Of the many overlaps between Hopkinson's and my own experience (at work and in my rapidly gentrifying neighborhood), not being recognized by one's white colleagues stands out. I have jokingly called this phenomena "out-of-context negro" to point out how ethnicity and race, perhaps gender representation as well, conditions people to experience their own life within a set orientation "by means of our origin myths and cosmogonically charted narratives" (McKittrick 2015, 25). Specifically, in Sylvia Wynter's sense and in McKittrick's words, humankind is—and brace yourselves—conditioned to "subjectively experience ourselves as semantically, neurochemically opiate-rewarded, thereby fictively eusocializing, inter-altruistic, kin recognizing member subjects

of the same *symbolic life* kind (here “kind” refers to our *genre-specific* or *pseudo species-specific* human groupings—our class, our tribe, and so forth)” (McKittrick 2015, 25, emphasis in the original). One is opiate rewarded when you recognize kin as members of an in-group who adhere to a narrative that makes sense and creates closure for you. Therefore, the anxiety, aversion, or affront Hopkinson speaks of in her professional settings can also be imagined with a similar dynamic when the out-of-context negro configuration is costumed as if part of “our tribe” of narrative-approved pop cultural icons (25). We need only to read current headlines to see what can be at stake when Blackness, anxiety, and misrecognition align.

Similar to Hopkinson, Marshall observes anxious moments playing in her *Midnight Robber* costume and recalls that although she felt strong in her costume, she “was also feeling vulnerable because [she] was an outsider playing with mostly older men whom [she] didn’t know very well and it was [her] first time in Port of Spain.” She doubted her ability and “had to work through all sorts of emotions on that day.” She says “my shoe broke, so I felt even more exposed. When the band gave me a signed photograph at the end of the day I felt the rush of the warmth of acceptance and the feeling of having lived through an important Carnival ritual.” Eventually, she was accepted as a performer of a figure who emerges from the Caribbean Carnival canon where, by the very nature of the region’s history of colonization and interracial mixing, fictional identities and actual ones have the space to world build. She adds that as a “as a light-skinned mixed heritage woman” it is important for her to “trouble binaries/boundaries between race (monolithic/fixed ideas of Blackness and whiteness)” (Interview December 26, 2020).

Indeed, Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* inspired Marshall to play Robber mas in Trinidad because it challenges “ideas of women as fragile.” She writes, “This is why I love Hopkinson’s protagonist Tan-Tan in her novel *Midnight Robber* so much. She plays the Robber to call for justice and seek out her revenge. It’s a wonderful portrayal of the power of mas.” For Marshall, “the idea of revenge is also strong” giving her the opportunity “to play out some kind of revenge against sexual and racial oppressors on the street in Carnival.” For her next project, Marshall will be looking at the history of Baby Dolls who “speak directly to how black women survive sexual and racial abuse in the Caribbean.” And, the best kind of revenge is success. For example, Chaka Cumberbatch-Tinsley writes that the #28daysofblackcosplay effort “will be a rallying call to arms for a group of people who are consistently subjected to derogatory comments and outright

racism in response to doing little more than proudly displaying their love for this hobby” (Plunkett 2016, n.p.). From the page scroll of this challenge, you will see Cumberbatch-Tinsley’s hashtag project is not exclusive to Black women alone because, as the story goes, Black feminist projects are necessarily world-building projects and the Black femme praxis is staked on the daring of world builders.

“Waz Di Scene Gyal?” Social Media as a Space of Support, in Spite of Itself

In Trinidadian slang, “waz di scene, gyal” means “what’s up, girl!” or more colloquially, “what’s going on.” This is a casual and popular way to address friends, and this address seems apropos for a growing and supportive online community of “friends” and “followers” who want to be “belonging in difference” (Muñoz 2019, 10). The scene, as it were, moves from Carnival to cosplay, from convention halls to Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and vanity websites. Social media, in this sense, becomes the scene where Black cosplayers, especially, can depart from heteronormativity and race, gender, and sex taxonomies.

In convention hall cosplay, it will be a person’s sublimated race, perceived gender, assumed ability, and body type that challenges the immanence trapped



Figure 12. ZiggZaggΣrZ, Raging AfroSamurai Cycloptic Cyborg #1, Afrofuturist Occupation at Pomona College (2019). Photo from tobias c. van Veen



Figure 13. ZiggZaggΣrZ as Niobe. Image from Twitter, @ziggzaggerz

in comic, manga, or pop culture iconography. This is similar to playing mas insofar as pretty mas will be more concerned with the excessive corporeality and even skin tone of those wearing beads and bikinis. With traditional mas, perhaps, there is push back around gender and with performing a traditional mas performance that is dictated by gender. Crossing over to the other side or mashing up many sides, as Marshall has done with her *Midnight Robber* mas and Hopkinson has done with her *Lt. Uhura* cosplay, transgresses hardened canons. For gender, nonbinary players, the narrative generates a whole new scene. Consider the call for transformation in the line “You risk rotting in that shell...” from the poem “Hatch or Rot” by gender nonbinary performance artist and cosplayer ZiggZaggΣrZ the Bastard (see figures 12 and 13).

Breaking the shell can mean freedom, physical and psychic. In *Black on Both Sides*, C. Riley Snorton (2017) writes a modern genealogy of “(black)transness” in narratives and histories of “captivity, fugitivity, and plain old everyday survival” (57). Snorton writes about an escape tactic of enslaved Black people in America of cross-dressing to succeed in their flight to freedom. There is the famous case of the light-skinned Ellen Craft, in cross-gender wardrobe, fleeing with her darker-skinned husband who, in acting as the manservant to her performance as a nearly blind old white man, made their way safely North. Harriet

Tubman also dressed as man and as a freed Black woman to deceive her captors. Snorton writes how this use of costume “play” by Black individuals was both the scene of identity theft and property theft from their former masters. This articulation of (Black)transness maps itself, visually, discursively, and practically to the idea that Black women cosplayers are stealing the identity of a beloved character away from its point of origin. However, it is easy to declare freedom when rarely has there been room for Black women’s own origin myths.

Another scene that a Black femme praxis plays out is this failure of origins to ever be relevant to how the Black imagination—coupled with resources (money and time)—narrates its stories. If bookstores, media, and academia can stake a claim to the “Black traditions of” or the “Black voices from” can not costume design also carry the same potential for “Blackening,” for Black embodiment and performance? Is it not also true that the Black female form’s representation within Western imagination carries a Blackening of their femininity (or lack thereof), their masculinity (or how they overreach), their animality (or how they get down), and their thingification (or how they are fungible)? What does it mean when the production of cosplaying gets in the way of the other productions of being a Black person (particularly in this newly, always, masked world in the era of COVID-19), as happened to @ZiggZaggerZ:

#AWKWARD When u get so lost in ur #Blackcosplay u forget it was #quarantine & u frolickin about with no #mask, gloves, or shoes, but have elf ears, a #sword, YOU BLACK, & some patrollers just rolled up eyein you 🙄😭😭😭
It’s for my mental health!
#niobe @strangercomics #cosplay (@ZiggZaggerZ)

ZiggZaggΣrZ’s social media post is a meta commentary on the policing of Black and gendered bodies. In this way, Snorton’s “(Black)transness” is a generative provocation for both cosplay and playing mas because these are still spaces predominantly curated by the inadequate vision of the male gaze. The challenge of Black cosplay and playing mas is that performers have been disciplined by nationalized standards the other 364 days of the year. They inherit a synthesis of selves from which to experiment. The synthesis of social and aesthetic selves is an experience that Tavia N’yongo (2019) writes about in *Afro-fabulatio*s. N’yongo is interested in, “conveying something like the varieties of *afro-fabulative experience*. I write at a time when the powers of the false are needed more than ever, precisely in order to refuse the terms by which present cultural politics are increasingly being reordered to suit the dictates of a bully-

ing and belligerent white nationalism” (44). The “powers of the false” are mas and cosplay. In ZiggZaggΣrZ’s poem “Cosplay,” the urgency of the lines “Let go of yourself/ Become someone/else./ Personalities can end./ There’s powers in/ pretend” (ZiggZaggΣrZ.com n.p.). The lines “become someone” and the sole word “pretend” are not concerned with restaging the voice or the position of the oppressed, the put-upon, or the victim of the mundane. The lines are preoccupied with disrupting the notion of mimesis as the end goal of pretend. Pretending invites a thoroughgoing reappraisal of being. Such subjectivities have, of course, been essential to reclaiming sex-positive, racially nonessentialized, ethnically capacious, species friendly, and nonmimetic bestial humanity. And in the case of Tubman and Craft, costumed subjectivities have meant straight up freedom.

To consider Black femme praxis as rhetorical and performative, therefore, is to consider the extent to which Hopkinson’s notes about sexuality, vernacular, sex acts, and ethno-positive cosmologies and her own embodied practice of cosplay and design upend a culture of dissemblance. Let us not pretend that dissemblance begins and ends when you put on or take off a fantastical costume. Super heroes and Midnight Robbers may be fantastical but, as Sylvia Wynter reminds us of “undared forms,” we need to revise constantly the content and context of the human. So by dissemblance I mean the powerful ideology we encounter every day that functions to shame-fit Black women into a box of heteronormal Victorian femininity that has actually made many of us conspirators against race-gender-sex oppression. This dissemblance is not concealment, it is an entrenchment. If, as Darlene Clark Hine (1989) writes, “dissemblance... shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors,” then Hopkinson’s Black femme praxis on and off the page is a go-between mastery of iconic and ironic exposures. She shows what she will not tell and tells what is at stake. Like Hopkinson, what is at stake for Marshall is a consideration of belonging-in social mores. It is important to acknowledge that the feeling of unease and anxiety at performing can sometimes originate from within a support network. Newcomers to a space dedicated to minoritarian exposures may find themselves going down a mental check list of their own authenticity, as it were. When social mores of a marginalized group reproduce its own brand of hegemony, giving off the slightest whiffs of dominance over others, participant engagement must dig down deep and rely on the confidence and enthusiasm it took to show up in the first place. Self-awareness is not resolved with participation in belonging-in communities of mas players or Black cosplayers. It is resolved by daring.

Conclusion

In our time, I observe a pyramidization of power in America, Europe, and the Global South—the former being a space which, as a generalization, professes loudly to immanent freedoms and historical righteousness. This is not to say atrocities such as the criminalization of ethnic groups like the Uighurs in China or condemnation of sex-positive persons within modern Middle Eastern societies are not acts of immanent righteousness by the state. It is to say, however, that I have witnessed American capitalism and patriotism slip into shades of fascism that does the work of institutionalizing sameness in the name of profits and philosophy. Thus, in this steadfast globalizing world, minoritarian life is mentally and physically taxed by hostilities grounded in the grammar and logic of representation. That is, what is being represented is “not just a random collection of concepts, but concepts organized, arranged and classified into complex relations with one another” (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013, 18). What is being represented and by whom is a question also of who is re/producing it. So, let us take the examples of mas and cosplay as an observation of the opportunity to flip the script, as it were: a new grammar and illogic of fractured femininity, (Black)transness, undared forms, and speculative identities that do not come when called because *belonging in* difference is the power in pretend (to paraphrase ZiggZaggΣrZ’s poem) and the power to insist on something else. It is nothing new to read about the intricate processes of costuming, whether for Carnival or a convention. Representing in surface art the inner details of an “else’s” inner life; becoming a trickster to expose the truth of an “else’s” given truths; wearing someone else’s clothes to show your *belonging in* is something “else.”

While gender and sexuality are crucial to storylines within Carnival and cosplay, a discussion of race, especially in relation to gender and sexuality constitutes an emerging topic. For example, Tobias C. van Veen has conducted interviews of Black cosplayers at Emerald City ComicCon to understand how “gender bending, queering, disabled, and interracial play” affect the “white-abled canon” with a focus on nonbinary cosplayer ZiggZagΣrZ the Bastard, who coins the phrase *cause-play* to describe the “admixture of the political and play” (van Veen 2018, 81). Discussions of minoritarian participation in cosplay has shifted from perfunctory to pernicious based on anecdotes and personal experiences. Similarly, in Carnival, although I have not discussed it in detail here, idealized body types and even skin tone, become its points of contention. Not only is this shift symptomatic of reactionary mainstreaming of once marginalized forms of

play, but points to how we conceive of the role, and thus rules, of costumes in play. Black women at play intrinsically fracture rules by assuming roles.

A Black femme praxis relies on these fractures within the social construct of femininity. And bestiality is a bonus. In *Becoming Human, Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, Zakkiyyah Iman Jackson (2020) writes of moving beyond a critique of prevailing Western thought that yokes Blackness and Black humanity to tropes and identities of “the animal” and also Blackness’s “thingification” in history (1). She writes of the “spectacularization” of “the African female” that imagines Black womanhood to be “a gender apart” (an “other” gender, but also an “other” sex) citing this supposed failure in sexual and racial legibility as a generate space for “imaginative practices of worlding” (1, 8). Tracey Sankar’s La Diabliesse mas is a bestialization of colonial myth worn on a Black woman’s body. #29daysofblackcosplay (as well as the original #28daysofblackcosplay) is the surprise of “thingification” and racial permeability gifted to the reimagining of manga characters. Nalo Hopkinson’s and Emily Zobel Marshall’s embrace of sexual, racial, and body illegibility is a necessary surface art practice for academia’s overreliance on theory. Black femme praxis facilitates an exposure of the interior self—the self that struggles against living legibly—by finding ways to reincorporate and revalorize race-sex-gender positionality. Kevin Adonis Browne (2018) accurately writes how everyday life in the duration of duress “involves the acceptance and indictment of socioeconomic/economical disappointments and political failures” (24). Whereas he speaks about Carnival, I expand this critique to Blackness at play, and I see how playing mas and cosplay are both an “acknowledgment of the indictment, but also the explicit rejection of it” (24). Manifested in playing mas and cosplay, this acknowledgment becomes a phenomenological experience and political expression of Black women’s (cis and nonbinary) capacity for worlding and self-reinvention.

A Black femme praxis is, metaphorically speaking, like a nutrient-rich root tuber pushing out a phylogenetic tree whose leaves, shoots, and eventual branches celebrate its species and discursive hybridity. The lack of imagination on the part of immanence, righteousness, and hegemony upholds boundaries coding white femininity as a byproduct of the human. Boundaries are dug deep and calcified. Black femme praxis is a fractured femininity that maneuvers through this hardened earth, subverting and transgressing historically preserved end points, making its wayward progress, another ascent out of our closet.

Funding from the DiverseScholar mini-grant assisted in the completion of this article.

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