

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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Vol 7 Issue 2 - Queering Fantastika

<https://www.fantastikajournal.com/volume-7-issue-2>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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COSPLAYERS: GENDER AND IDENTITY (2021) BY A. LUXX MISHOU

Review by Deanna P. Koretsky

Mishou, A. Luxx. *Cosplayers: Gender and Identity*. Routledge, 2021. 81 pp.

A. Luxx Mishou's *Cosplayers: Gender and Identity* (2021) is a love letter to its subject – cosplayers. Though unusually slim for an academic monograph, the volume offers valuable provocations for future research on gender, sexuality, and identity in fandom studies. Over the course of five brief chapters, Mishou raises compelling points about methodological and ethical oversights in cosplay research. And while it does not fill all the gaps to which it calls attention, the text successfully outlines areas of inquiry for other researchers to follow and heed its ethical and timely demand for greater nuance in scholarship on fans, fandoms, and fan practices.

The volume's first chapter introduces the methodological impetus for the study: the tendency of cosplay researchers to theorise the act of cosplay while overlooking the actors, the cosplayers themselves. To rectify this emphasis on the 'what' and 'why' of cosplay over the 'who' (1), Mishou grounds *Cosplayers* in anonymous survey data that "allows for deeper insight into identity building than observational data alone" (9). This qualitative data is presented and interpreted in the ensuing three chapters, the book's analytical core. Mishou's interpretations of the data draws on cultural theory fields including gender studies, fashion studies, queer theory, critical race theory, and disability studies. The fifth chapter brings the project to a close with a series of narrative accounts from survey respondents that recapitulate the book's opening call to listen to cosplayers themselves. Mishou makes a strong case for why observational data alone is insufficient in studies of cosplay, rendering the book's methodology ethically sound and significant. However, as discussed further below, the survey data collected is not always sufficient for the kinds of analyses the study claims to undertake. These shortcomings, coupled with the book's brevity, call into question whether a monograph was the appropriate form for disseminating this research. While the second and third chapters of *Cosplayers* could read as stand-alone essays, the fourth and fifth chapters would have benefitted from further development. Though the monograph begins to investigate this understudied research area, it lacks a depth of analysis in some of the topic's most crucial areas.

Chapter Two advances the volume's most theoretically cohesive and compelling argument. In it, Mishou cogently distinguishes between the practice known as crossplay – wherein cosplayers dress as characters whose gender identities and/or presentations do not match their own – and drag. Resisting extant readings of crossplay as a form of drag performance, Mishou proposes that "the designation of 'crossplay' should be abandoned as an arbitrator of heteronormative binaries that do not adequately describe the nuanced experiences and relationships cosplayers have with

gender" (15). Here, Mishou's insistence on prioritising the voices of cosplayers pays the greatest dividends: citing qualitative data from 143 survey respondents who reflect in varied ways on the implications of their practices, Mishou finds that existing scholarly framings of crossplay as drag assume and impose "identity categories not upheld by the crossplayers themselves" (18). Where drag is an "investigation of gender in its performance and adoption, and relies on binary signs for its successful communication," Mishou demonstrates that cosplay is not primarily interested in gender but rather in the characters being emulated (21). Without denying the manifold ways in which the practice known as crossplay enables transformative experiences around gender identity for some cosplayers, Mishou argues that the critical implications of the practice "may be much simpler: an attraction to aesthetics, or human sympathy for a character" (30). Left unaccounted for in this otherwise persuasive chapter is how a character's gender presentation and/or identity may influence a fan's choice to emulate them in the first instance. While more direct attention to the relationship between characters and cosplayers' gender expressions would have enriched an already engaging discussion, as Mishou notes, the work undertaken here is but an "initial attempt" to grapple with a complex set of questions (29). The chapter offers plenty of valuable insights, even as it leaves space for further considerations around a cosplayer's intrinsic motivations.

Mishou's first-hand knowledge of fandom spaces and practices, coupled with the data gathered from survey respondents, informs the next chapter's interrogation of gendered dress and anti-harassment policies in some of the biggest United States popular arts conventions, otherwise known as cons. This chapter attends carefully and caringly to the material and psychosocial demands placed on cosplayers as they seek to fulfil an array of fantasy functions in convention spaces. Mishou shows how dress codes at cons tend to focus on policing feminine bodies on the grounds of 'respectability' and 'family values.' Comparing dress policies to cons' public anti-harassment statements, Mishou argues that the latter is likewise aimed at controlling feminine bodies. On this point, Mishou offers a suggestive reading of anti-harassment policies as thinly veiled efforts to maintain cons as predominantly homosocial, masculine spaces. However, Mishou's intimate knowledge of convention spaces propels the chapter to another conclusion, one grounded in the fact that anti-harassment policies are rarely enforced in practice. As a result, Mishou arrives at the vital point that dress and behaviour policies both ultimately "lay the burden of acceptable social interactions on the cosplayer" and that this burden is experienced unequally among cosplayers of differing subject positions and identities (46). This leads to the fourth chapter's focus on "the subject of diversity" (56).

In the book's most uneven chapter, Mishou rightly observes that current scholarship "recognizes the diversity of a global community [of cosplayers] [...] but does not yet specifically address the elements, nuances, and challenges of that diversity" (55). This chapter largely does the same. Much like the book overall, chapter four is too brief to offer an in-depth argument that fully attends to the intersectional inquiry it promises. The issue here, by the author's own admission, is that the survey data does not yield adequate material for such an analysis: "In the absence of survey participant narratives, I turn to disability theory, critical race theory, gender theory, and published accounts by cosplayers, to demonstrate the gatekeeping American cosplayers continue to face" (58).

The chapter offers limited insights into the inequities faced by Black, fat, and disabled cosplayers, though curiously it does not consider the intersections of these “othered” identities, even as it repeatedly points to the need for intersectionality in scholarship (64). While more scholarship that attends critically to cosplayers’ varied identities and positionalities is certainly necessary, this short volume, with data gathered from surveys that were evidently not designed for such work, is not the place for it. The author would have done better to leave this chapter out or design a new survey to account for the range of experiences ostensibly analysed here more adequately.

Cosplayers concludes by reiterating its stated goal of listening to its titular subjects. The four-page final chapter – which reads more like a coda – concludes the volume by quoting extensively from survey respondents reflecting on the good that cosplay brings to their lives. This is a lovely sentiment, to be sure, and reminds the reader that real people are behind the inquiry. Mishou’s central point that work on cosplayers should take cosplayers’ lived experiences into account is well made. However, this brief concluding chapter does not offer new insights and as a result feels out of step with the genre of the academic monograph. While there is certainly a place for joy in academic writing, the primary goal of such writing is to advance knowledge and Mishou’s concluding chapter falters in this regard. The narrative accounts included here would have been more productively situated in the first chapter, where Mishou introduces the case for listening to cosplayers. A stronger conclusion, then, might have synthesised the four chapters’ findings into a cohesive takeaway for readers. The lack of a cohesive conclusion highlights the fact that while the preceding chapters offer compelling points individually they do not constitute a larger continuous argument. In other words, once again, it is not clear why this work needed to take the form of a monograph – even a short one.

While this short volume may not accomplish all that it promises, it points the way toward important areas for further inquiry. The book’s most successful intervention is the second chapter’s deft disarticulation of “crossplay” from drag. For this reason, *Cosplayers* will be most relevant to advanced postgraduate students and scholars of queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, and fandom studies. Each of the book’s first four chapters also solidly surveys existing scholarship and for this reason it may also prove useful to beginning postgraduate students and advanced undergraduates looking for overviews of recent work on fandom, gender, and sexuality studies. Insofar as it is short, accessible, and takes seriously a community that is often spoken *about* more than it is spoken *with*, *Cosplayers* speaks to cosplayers within and beyond the academy who wish to reflect critically on their own practices.

BIONOTE

Deanna P. Koretsky is an Associate Professor of English at Spelman College, United States. Her first book, *Death Rights: Romantic Suicide, Race, and the Bounds of Liberalism* (2021), shows how cultural representations of suicide inherited from the nineteenth century continue to reinforce antiblackness in the modern world. Her current work focuses on race, gender, and sexuality in vampire narratives and their fandoms.