

Con Artist: Non-Cosplay Participation at Popular Culture Conventions as an Arts-Based Method of Inquiring Into Resistance and the Undoing of Rules

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Qualitative Inquiry, 2023. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177>

Accepted Manuscript. Not final.

## Introduction

Institutions of Higher Education and Schools of Education in particular aim to be spaces of anti-oppressive and liberatory practices. Yet, members within these institutions at times engage with those of us from historically marginalized groups through “discursive and material practices constructed around problematic assumptions” (Orner, 1992, p. 74). For example, while I am professionally trained as an Applied Linguist and Language Teacher Educator, I am sought out frequently to speak and research on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Often, I am invited to sit on academic committees within this area as though my race and gender identities cement my authority and legitimacy on these topics. The academic freedom to choose and the opportunity to be seen professionally that is more readily available to colleagues who are not as obviously marked by their social identities is not readily available to me. Moreover, after nine years of academic life, and in spite of my initial resistances to being positioned by the restrictive assumptions of others, I find myself voluntarily teaching a course on *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy* and accepting invitations to speak on diversity, equity, and inclusion in K-16 spaces. In taking up these causes, I have come to

discipline my own body, and I am left asking myself if the Borg, the alien antagonists of the *Star Trek* series (echoing Michel Foucault), were right—is resistance futile?

As I have wrestled with this issue of the futility of resistance in places that strive and even imagine themselves to be anti-oppressive and liberatory, I have found myself drawn to other spaces that also struggle to live up to their emancipatory ideals. Comic book conventions, or *Cons*, are such a space. Originally established as a meeting ground for a “sub-culture of comic book and science fiction fans, video gamers, and live-action role players” (Scott, 2013, n.p.), these spaces of fandom and ludic play are perceived as freeform and transgressive. With their origin in the conspiratorial writings of comic books and their openness to costume play (cosplay), cross gender play (crossplay), and even age-bending play (Skentelbery, 2019), *Cons* are the physical embodiment of these original conspiratorial conversations about “present and future worlds” (Barone, 2008, p. 146). In the sessions, hallways, and even bathrooms of the convention halls, attendees engage in “*conspiratorial communion* with others around what is possible, unacceptable, and desirable in their worlds” (Faltis, 2019, p. 323 referencing Barone, 2008; italics in original). While the conspiratorial nature of these meetings should serve to forward “a plot against inadequate present conditions in favor of an emancipatory social arrangement in the future” (Barone, 2000, p. 146), they instead can “perpetuate sexist, homophobic, and racist ways of knowing” (C. Thomas,

2021, pp. 326-327; see also Scott, 2013). As such, contradiction and contrast mark the comic book convention space.

Over the past decade, as I have ventured periodically into convention spaces, I would encounter other Black Folk like myself—some in costume and others not, but all willfully displaying their “inner and undisclosed” fandom (C. Thomas, 2021, p. 324). In doing so, they (we) were pushing back against these contradictions and freely owning our participation in these spaces and in a performative genre ideologically imagined as white and male. As an academic and fan, I was curious to study this phenomenon, to examine the ways in which we—through our presence as marginalized beings—were subverting (Ramirez, 2017) or “undoing a rule” (C. Thomas, 2021, p. 326) around the participation, visibility, and place of marginalized identities within the discourses and material settings of the convention space (Warner, 2015). Positing a notion of *Con-ing*—attending a popular culture convention—as arts-based research practice, I inquire into my attendance at two fan conventions. The first, *Dragon Con* (Atlanta, 2017), is a popular comic book convention. The second, the annual general meeting of the *Jane Austen Society of North America* (Kansas City, 2018), while not a comic book convention is an annual gathering of Austenites where cosplay in Regency dress abound. Through techniques of autoethnography, I write about the creative product produced by attending a Con—a product generated through embodied engagement with the actors and materiality of these

convention spaces through movement. In doing so, I work to expand the notion of *the arts* to include everyday forms of artistic expression and (co)production that masquerade and/or are misrecognized as consumption—acts of attending, being part of, and joining in.

### **To Con as Artistic Production**

While attendance at Cons is rightfully associated with performance, spectatorship, and consumerism, this focus tends to overlook the artistic co-production of fandom and ludic play reflected through attendee movement across the convention space. As an attendee, one walks, skips, saunters across the convention halls in anticipation, wonder, excitement, and discovery. One gestures—rolling heads and eyes, laughing, smiling, and even chin pointing—at the sight of things and people in a wave of emotional and judgmental response. Finally, one sits, stands, and stands in line while improvising what productive actions to take next. These expressive and embodied movements produce the Con over hours and across consecutive days in systematic (regularly scheduled programs and events), ritualistic (depending on the design of the convention space), and patterned (depending on the length of the sessions) ways. It is this systematic, ritualistic, and patterned movement that renders Con attendees artists in their own right—*Con Artists*. As we move across convention spaces, “our bodies produce constant data that speak to us” (Snowber, 2018, p. 255), expressing to ourselves and others

what is aesthetically, intellectually, and imaginatively important, valued, and desired in the convention space.

To document this artistic production created through movement, I turn the lens of ethnography upon myself as an active member of fandom, a peripheral member of Cons, and a novice attendee at Dragon Con and JASNA. Through the personal, evocative, and self-reflexive aspects of autoethnographic research (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Chang, 2008; Ellis 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Ellis et al., 2011; Winkler, 2018), I relate how social and cultural ways of doing and knowing recreate problematic assumptions across space, place, and time. Moreover, they result in the disciplining of bodies as much as they afford the potential for resistance and engagement. In this autobiographical form of research, I draw upon artifacts collected during my attendance at these two Cons—video and photos from my Con experiences, notes and emails I texted to myself and others, Facebook conversations about and following the convention, and convention badges and receipts. These materials were used to recall, not only movement through the convention spaces and hotels, but also sensations, observations, interactions, and conversations—overheard and initiated, conspiratorial and just plain ordinary—with informants and fellow attendees over meals as well as before, during and/or after the convention sessions.

Next, I engage with and interpret the data drawn from each Con as its own unique episode (e.g. Saarnivaara, 2003) through four analytical

themes—suspending, bodying forth, sensuous encountering, and being informed (Seeley, 2006; Seeley & Reason, 2008). These themes represent a presentational way of knowing (Heron, 1992; Seeley, 2006) that suits the movement and creative production associated with attending Cons. For example, the first theme, *suspending*, involves “turning off the intellect” (Seeley, 2006, p. 32) and “allowing the next responsive impulse to emerge—from the whole body and not as a premeditated idea had in advance of taking action” (Seeley & Reason, 2008, p. 35). The second theme, *bodying forth*, relinquishes possibilities to “imaginative impulses to express themselves through the media of our bodies without our intellects throwing a spanner in the works and crushing those responses with misplaced rationality or premature editing and critique” (Seeley & Reason, 2008, p. 31). The third theme, *sensuous encountering*, involves “engaging the whole body” (Seeley, 2006, p. 32) in “sensuous, erotic, curious, playful and emotional engagement with experience” (Seeley & Reason, 2008, p. 34). The fourth theme, *being in-formed*, invites us to consider the ways in which suspending, bodying forth, and sensuously encountering during some creative (co)production has begun or is transforming our ways of knowing. Together, these themes allow me bring to life the artistic (co-) production that is attending a Con while also revealing how “cultural logics enable and constrain” (Pelias, 2004, p. 11) the discourses and practices of convention spaces in ways that recreate problematic assumptions and discipline the body, even while affording the possibility of resistance.

## **Dragon Con**

*Suspending.* In Fall of 2016, a picture surfaced on my Facebook feed of my nephew dressed as painter Bob Ross. He and my sister were attending the Dragon Con parade, the annual parade of cosplayers that is a key feature of the Dragon Con convention. Unlike attending the convention, which costs upwards of \$140 per person for a four-day pass, the parade is free and open to the public. For years, I felt an impulse to be part of this space where people openly expressed their love for and engagement in fandom, yet my own limiting beliefs about the appropriateness of my age and race in this space kept me from venturing forth. Over time, these beliefs made less sense. Because of Dragon Con's location in Atlanta, African Americans of all ages are fairly well-represented at both the convention and the pre-convention parade and as cosplayers. Setting aside my problematic assumptions and self-imposed constraints, I gave in to the impulse and imagined for a moment being a part of this space and I made a note to register for the next Dragon Con in 2017.

*Bodying Forth.* Dragon Con exists across multiple hotels and blocks of the city's downtown area. Traffic signals are meaningless against the throngs of attendees undoing and even subverting the canonical rules around traffic crossing to co-create new rules of horizontal movement and order. Subverting the traffic rules as an Atlanta native felt like a re-conquest of the city. As I walked across the convention hotels, I found

myself traveling through parts of the city I had not dared or bothered to walk through before—the touristy parts left over from the 1996 Olympic Games, the decades old touristy restaurants, the ever-present unhoused and the financially needy. As I walked, sometimes with purpose, sometimes aimlessly, I engaged with, gazed upon, frowned at—in judgment and amusement—and inwardly reflected upon the space, place, and beings of the Con attendees, onlookers, and passersby.

*Sensuous Encountering.* On the second day of the conference, I found myself on the top floor of one of the conference hotels. The floor was an open space in which, if you look down over the banisters, you saw see three floors of human beings riding escalators going in two different directions and flanked by conference rooms. The sight was poetic. I took out my cellphone and began to record. As I looked through the video, I was able to relive the experience of this sight—the dizzying array of escalators and the people moving up, down and around in this open space. Yet, it was the sound of this movement that touched my soul—the movement of the escalators, as well as the talking, chatting, and laughter of their cargo. There was the sound of someone close to me with a tambourine, a scream out to friends, and the roar of a distant crowd. In revisiting this video, what I recalled most vividly is observing a twenty-ish Black guy in everyday clothes laughing with friends as they ride up the escalator, and I am moved once again by his expression of #BlackBoyJoy in this space.



*Being In-formed.* As I reflect upon how and what is created at this Dragon Con, I think back to my role in this artistic production. As a Trekkie and Harry Potter Scholar (M. Thomas, 2018a, 2018b; Thomas et al., 2018), I allowed my academic mind and popculture fandom guide me equally toward a few academic sessions and celebrity panels. It was within the sessions that the recursivity of problematic discourses and material practices were raised, discussed, interrogated, and even entrench themselves—the fat shaming, the racial and gender policing in cosplay, the absence of differently abled heroes, and notably the controversy surrounding J. K. Rowling. In sitting through these conversations, overhearing conspiratorial conversations before and after the sessions, I began to engage with, see, and move through the space differently. I noticed the absences, and I wondered out loud, where were the *black* faeries?

### **Jane Austen Society of North America**

*Suspending.* Again it began with Facebook. The same year I attended Dragon Con, I stumbled across a Facebook page entitled, *Black Girl in a Big Dress* (BGBD). BGBD was an internet TV series that consisted of three-to-five-minute vignettes depicting *Lady Katherine Avington*, an “awkward African American Anglophile” attempting to “navigate 21st century dating with 19th century ideals” (Walden, 2017-2019, n.p.). This YouTube show attempted to interrogate the phenomenon of being a Black American woman engaging in cosplay in a space

racialized as not only Anglo but also British. A bit of an Anglophile myself, I shared BGBD with my Facebook friends only to discover that one of my friends, who like myself is an African American woman of a certain age, was not only an Anglophile, but also a long-term member of the *Jane Austen Society of North America* (JASNA). In fact, she and her two sisters—henceforth, the sisters—regularly attended the JASNA annual meetings and they were planning to attend the next meeting which would be held an hour away from me in Kansas City, Missouri. I jumped at the chance to attend JASNA where, for the first time, I would attend a Con, not only with others, but accompanied by other Black women.

*Bodying Forth.* Driving in from Lawrence, Kansas, I arrived late to the conference hotel, midway through the opening plenary address. I saw the sisters—all three were wearing Regency period dresses—and they beckoned me over to sit with them. During the break that followed the opening plenary, the sisters and I talked and they took me back in time to reminisce about the event that drew them to the annual JASNA meetings, the 2012 meeting held in New York where Cornel West was a speaker. Spurred on by a bit of the organization's history, I left the break in search of a few sessions to attend. Moving back in time again, I sat in on a session that attempted to contextualize the significance of references to candles in Austen's work with the material, sensual, and visual aspects of the time. I was captivated by the topic—the costliness of these animal fat candles, the smell of them, and even the ways in which employers tried to

keep employees from stealing candles by dyeing them specific colors. Following the session, I was transported back to the present through the experience of walking the meeting floor. Examining the booths set up outside the session rooms, I ran into one of the sisters, my friend. She suggested I visit her room to examine the outfit she would be wearing to the Regency ball. As I walked through the halls of The Westin hotel towards the bank of elevators, I took note of my surroundings for the first time. As I walked towards the slightly aging bank of elevators to look at my friend's Regency period dress, I was acutely aware of our being African Americans in a part of Kansas City and engaged in an act of anglophile co-production that in the not so distance past would not have welcomed us.

*Sensuous Encountering.* Later that evening, I returned to the hotel for the night's festivities—the annual Regency Banquet and Ball. I attended the banquet dressed in business slacks, while the sisters and their friends from their local JASNA chapter dressed in their Regency period finest—some rented, some hand-made. Over dinner, the sisters and their friends reminisced about past JASNA meetings, Jane Austen trivia, and regional JASNA events. While not everyone at the table was an Austenite, there was a deep sense of enjoyment in the temporary and imagined travel through space and time to past meetings, favorite books and characters, scenes and places. As the night wore on, the banquet gave room to a dance floor. From my place against the conference room

wall, I lost the sisters amongst the women and a much smaller number of men—almost all of whom were *of a certain age*—dressed in Regency costumes and engaged in the Regency dances. Notable were the attendees engaged in crossplay, mostly female forms dressed in male attire. As I watched from my little corner in the room, I reveled in these acts of resistance to societal expectations about adult behavior through performance, play, audience appreciation, and participation.

*Being In-formed.* When I look upon the artistic production generated at JASNA—the undoing of societal expectations that I observed at the ball—I am called back to a moment when the rules in this space had not been undone. The conference was held in an area of the hotel accessible to the public via a flight of stairs. It was from this place of access that a Black woman, just a little older than myself, stumbled upon our convention space. As she walked up the staircase towards the attendees dressed in their Regency finest, she looked intrigued by the sight. I walked toward her and engaged her in conversation. As we interacted, I realized I was talking to her the way I would have wanted someone to bridge the gap that unfortunately exists across spaces that are racialized in ways that exclude you. I am not sure if this is how she felt, but this is how I imagined she felt—the tug to participate, the desire to be invited, to need to have someone authorize or see you as a possible participant in this space. In essence, the desire to push aside one's own and other's assumptions and the disciplining of the body, and the

emotional labor endured in order to join in on this space of adult play. Unfortunately, her participation in this space hit a paywall—she was told she would have to pay full price for a conference that was already in full swing. Just as comic book and pop culture spaces police and defend their canons and portrayal of characters (C. Thomas, 2021), they also police and defend their paywalls. As I watched this woman walk away, I pondered this request for payment—not about the fairness of the monetary request, but about the unacknowledged cost to a Black woman in a town with a deep history of redlining the attempt to traverse a space racialized as White and European. To move into such spaces—to resist the security of what is known for the unknown—is to give up a bit of your personal power (and engage in an unrecognized and under-appreciated emotional labor) in order to co-produce play in a space not originally designed with you in mind.

## **Conclusion**

The pandemic has slowed my participation in Cons. However, these pandemic years have given me time to reflect on what Cons and Con-ing mean to me. Cons are “complex sites where paradoxically various social norms are enforced and upheld by expectations” (C. Thomas, 2021, p. 321). As a result, we human beings are continually co-creating and reinventing old social structures in new places. Into our spaces of fictive and imagined realities, we bring our misogyny, racism, age-ism, size-shaming, and able-ism, and as a result, what surfaces in convention

spaces is partly the result of self-disciplining and policing “out of fear of stigmati[z]ation” (Orme, 2016, p. 1) and/or trespassing (Nyberg, 1995).

Moreover, each Con produces distinct embodied ways of knowing and, thus, they result in distinctive creative productions. Dragon Con, with its link to popular culture and global fandom, results in a way of knowing that through movement through the convention halls reveals *what* is absent or held at bay, contested, rejected, and/or questioned in this space of fantastical and fictive adult play—the Black faeries, the Black Mermaids, the Black elves. In contradistinction, JASNA almost naturally foregrounds race as participants move across idealized geographic place and historical time. Through this movement, the Con reveals *who* is absent, not because they were not present historically, but because their presence was erased socially, politically, artistically, and economically. The written and unwritten rules of participation can construct spaces that unnecessarily exclude and disinvite, including in spaces that are working hard to diversify their ranks—the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion at the expense of belonging. Thus, as attendees construct and co-construct Cons, it is important to consider how these spaces might be imagined with more mindful attention to what and who are absent and how these missing elements might be invited to belong into the creation process.

Yet, while convention spaces may appear unchanged and resistance may seem futile, the presence and bold audacity of marginalized others to simply exist, walk through, and stumble upon these

spaces is a transgressive and even subversive act that chips away at the unspoken canonical rules that structure Cons. With a simple step, a movement, toward or away from those assumptions, discourses, and stances that attempt to limit our participation in the world, we defy the literal and metaphorical paywalls that limit our visibility and full participation and play in society.

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