FLOATING WORLDS:
COSPLAY PHOTOSHOOTS AND CREATION OF IMAGINARY COSMOPOLITAN PLACES

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ABSTRACT

Photo shoots are a popular activity among cosplayers in Australian communities of practice. Working collaboratively with photographers and other practitioners, cosplayers create staged images of their costumed character posing at especially selected locations. At first glance this peripheral leisure practice centred on 'dressing up' seems an unlikely context for the production of enduring cosmopolitan worldviews. However, a deeper analysis of these playful practices reveals that cosplay photography can create cosmopolitan connections between places and practitioners. Using images created by cosplayers and the author during fieldwork among Australian communities of practice, this article will explore how the conditions of 'mimetic excess' (Taussig 1993) can create cosmopolitan aesthetic communities. Through the skilled labour of cosplayers, visions of deterritorialised, cosmopolitan floating worlds are produced in local, physical spaces; universities become European castles and parks are transformed into Edo-period Japan.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, mimesis, photography, place

Mimetic excess provides access to understanding the unbearable truths of make-believe as a foundation of an all-too-seriously serious reality, manipulated but also manipulatable, (Taussig 1993, 255).

INTRODUCTION

An imperious, golden-haired queen stares down at the viewer from the top of a marble staircase. Her Master of Coin, a moustachioed man in a brocaded coat is dwarfed by an ornate iron door. A rival king wearing a crown of golden thorns surveys his kingdom from the battlements. An earnest fan of HBO's

Figure 1. Jane as Queen Cersei

Figure 2. Daniel as
Petyr 'Littlefinger' Baelish

Figure 3. James as Renly Baratheon

popular fantasy drama *Game of Thrones* may identify these images as depictions of central characters Queen Cersei Lannister, Petyr 'Littlefinger' Baelish and King Renly Baratheon, posing against the dramatic background of one of the series many castles and fortresses, the Red Keep, Harrenhal or Storm's End. However, the location in the photograph is not a castle of European-inspired fantasy. This is Parliament House, the centre of the State Government of South Australia. Built over sixty-five years from 1874 to 1939, this large marble and granite building is itself an antipodean imagining of Greek Revival style, complete with Corinthian columns. A stone lion cut from a coat of arms at Westminster, a gift from the English Parliament, is placed towards the front of the building. Standing far from the centre of the British Empire, the building is a strange assemblage of European symbolism and local materials.

These images were produced in a forty-minute impromptu photo shoot. Along with my four companions I was attending AVCon, a popular culture convention, held in the heart of the city of Adelaide, South Australia. Like many of the event's attendees we were dressed in costume, each of us a different character from the *Game of Thrones* series. Leaving the convention centre in search of lunch, we passed the steps of Parliament House. One of the party suggested that the building would make an appropriate backdrop for a costumed performance. As the owner of the most sophisticated camera I was designated

Figure 4. The steps of Parliament House

photographer. We carefully set up each shot, posing and arranging costume elements. We quickly accumulated over fifty images.

Parliament House is the centre of state government and authority but also of political protest. Marches in favour or against various causes regularly end at the building's marble steps. Slogans are shouted via megaphone up the stairs to the great doors hiding behind the Corinthian pillars. At the time of the *Game of Thrones* photoshoot, Vietnam War veterans were camped at the foot of the stairs, sleeping in shifts to protest the closure of the state's Repatriation Hospital. With sleeping bags, tables, chairs and signs they protested there for 161 days until there was parliamentary concern about potential damage to the appearance of the House. From two streets away, we could hear the sounds of chanting, clapping and the boom and crash of a brass band as fans of the local Australian Rules Football team, the Adelaide Crows, completed a procession to the Adelaide Oval. They were marching in memory of the team's incumbent coach Phil Walsh, whose tragic death shocked the city. On the streets, amid the elves, princesses and Italian plumbers streaming from the Adelaide Convention Centre were mourning Crows fans decked in the team's colours of red, yellow and navy blue. All of this, the stories, sounds and symbols, the alternative local performances, were cut out of the frame of the photo shoot images. The resulting digital photographs are anachronisms, representations of imaginary places uncannily created in the heart of urban Adelaide.

These images are representative of a particular genre known as cosplay shoot photography which features costumed performers posing in physical locations or against digitally manipulated backdrops. The images are created through the collaborative efforts of *cosplayers*, performers who assemble and wear character costumes, and *cosplay photographers*, who capture the performances through still digital photography and video. Cosplay, or costume play, is a globalised craft and performance practice which is centred upon the recreation of pre-existing character designs. Engaging with Taussig's (1993) conceptualisation of mimesis, I will argue that the copying processes involved in this peripheral practice enable cosplayers to imaginatively and materially engage with Other peoples, places and practitioners. Taussig (1993) argues that copies enable individuals to connect with the Other through an effect of sensorial confusion. However, I argue that in the case of cosplay photography it is the visual skill and labour involved in producing the copy that produces the connections between disparate places and practitioners.

COSPLAY PHOTOGRAPHY: MIMESIS AND THE RECREATION OF PERIPHERAL COSMOPOLITANISM

At a fundamental level cosplay practices are structured by an aesthetic commitment to mimesis (Stockburger 2012). Like Stockburger (2012), I argue that Taussig's (1993) conception of mimesis as a process by which individuals can explore aspects of the Other is particularly applicable to cosplay. Cosplay is a labour intensive form of copying through which performers aim to transform their bodies, physical objects and locations into characters, artefacts and settings from pre-existing texts (Gn 2011; Lunning 2011; Stockburger 2012). To ensure that their costumes and photographs accurately mimic source material, cosplayers spend considerable time gathering and studying images of their chosen characters and the worlds in which they inhabit, noting colours, shapes, textures and other details. In this emphasis on mimesis cosplay differs from some other contemporary costuming movements such as Steampunk which emphasise the creation of original or unique characters.

Cosplay can be understood as type of entertainment peripheral to the material world engaging as it does with fantasy–imaginary people and places. Cosplay practice is peripheral from work settings as it is an activity undertaken for leisure, although still requiring significant industriousness and a 'work ethic'. As other studies of cosplay in Japan, China, and the United States have explored, cosplay practice has a complex relationship with globalised popular culture products, brands, and companies (Gn 2011; Stockburger 2012). Cosplay practices could be dismissed as mere copying, the creation of yet more reproductions of mass produced imagery. However, as recent anthropological studies of cross-cultural copying practices have highlighted, activities of copying can be highly creative, requiring practitioners to reinterpret existing images in new contexts, in new media, reinvested with new meanings (Hallam and Ingold 2007). Cosplay practices have been interpreted as a form of resistance to the power of globalised content producers (Gn 2011; Lunning 2011; Stockburger 2012) or alternatively as a productive convergence between the commercial interests of content producers and the creative responses of fans (Norris and Bainbridge 2009).

Cosplay is a transnational practice with localised expressions. Cosplay is now practiced in many countries including the UK, China, France, Italy, Thailand, Brazil, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand. Transnational competitions such as the World Cosplay Summit and EuroCosplay bring together dispersed practitioners in aesthetic contests. Cosplay practice is further dis-

tributed through international cosplay websites and forums such as Cosplay.com and the globalised economic flows of cosplay goods such as wigs, costumes and props. However, the global dispersion of cosplay is driven by local actors and sub-communities as groups of cosplayers assemble at temporary spaces such as conventions, parties, and meet-ups to engage in performance activities and create photography.

From its roots this globalised dress-up practice has always involved imaginings of exotic Others and the re-imagining of the Self as Other. Cosplay costumes and photography are typically inspired by designs from globalised cultural products including Japanese anime, manga and videogames, Korean manhua, Western comics, film, and television. Academics and practitioners argue that the practice developed out of transnational cultural exchanges between Japan and the United States as fan communities on both sides of the Pacific began dressing as Western and Japanese fictional characters (Winge 2006; Lamerichs 2011; Peirson-Smith 2013). A single cosplay costume may be the result of a complex series of cross-cultural borrowings, intertextual referencing and re-imaginings. For example, at a popular culture event in Melbourne, Australia in 2012 the winner of the cosplay competition was dressed in Rococo finery as Marie Antoinette, the historical French queen, as interpreted by the Japanese illustrator Riyoko Ikeda in her manga *The Rose of Versailles* (1972). In cosplay, cultural elements including symbolism, aesthetics and form may be re-mixed and re-framed by numerous creative practitioners.

As Stockburger (2012) points out, this borrowing and reinterpretation could be interpreted as a form of exploitative cultural appropriation. There have been tendencies in cosmopolitanism literature to draw a line between authentic (reflective, politically and or ethically motivated) cosmopolitanism and banal cosmopolitanism (unreflective, rooted in globalised capitalism) (for further discussion on this debate see Molz 2011, 33; Woodward and Skrbis 2012, 130). At first glance cosplay may seem to fall into the category of banal cosmopolitanism. Certainly, cosplay practices may seem to lack the explicitly political cosmopolitanism identified in the works of modern artists participating in a transnational art world (see for example Papastegiadis 2012). However, following Stockburger (2012), I argue that cosplay copying practices can be considered as an expression of cosmopolitanism, as the endlessly reflecting mirror worlds of cosplay seem to resemble Taussig's (1993, 246) concept of 'mimetic excess'.

Writing in the early 1990s, Taussig proposed that under the conditions of mimetic excess there is a breakdown of apparently stable localised identities, a

blurring of the divide between Self and Other and the potential production of new subjectivities. In 2016, this condition of mimetic excess seems to be realised in cosplay shoot photography where playful mirror worlds of imaginary places are created and recreated in physical and digital spaces. As cosplayers create their photographs of 'Westeros', 'Versailles' or 'feudal Japan' they destabilise cultural identities, treating them as costumes that can be taken on and off for entertainment. Cosplayers may dress up as Shinto priestesses, Buddhist monks, British butlers or Italian clergy, playing with symbolism from major religions or historical events. Recent cross-cultural studies of cosplay have suggested that these dressing up activities enable cosplayers to explore Other identities, cultural, sexual or gendered, in a temporary and safe context where participants understand that these identity transformations are performative and temporary (Gunnels 2009; Lunning 2011; Truong 2013).

In cosplay photography local places are also 'dressed up'. Using photographic techniques such as framing and digital editing, cosplayers remove localising features and emphasise the exotic as they transform local sites into recreations of fantasy worlds from popular culture. To describe the fantasy places (re)created in cosplay shoot photography I have playfully borrowed the term 'floating worlds' –*ukiyo*. For the Edo elite of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Japan, the floating world was a term used to describe the entertainment places and a mindset of pleasure and escapism; worlds of fantasy and liminality; places of play distinct from places of work.   Play is also what cosplayers do – play with texts, objects, performances of genders and sexualities, and, in this case, spaces. Cosplay's playful treatment of place and identity seems to be very superficial and temporary engagement with Other peoples and places. However, drawing on Taussig's (1993, 255) idea that make-believe can provide a foundation of reality, this exploration of cosplay photography will reveal how processes of re-creation can produce deeper, more enduring cosmopolitan worldviews.

METHODS

Throughout my ethnographic fieldwork within Australian cosplay communities from 2010–2015 I was immersed in cosplay photography as a consumer, subject and photographer. Through my participation in cosplay photography I was able to observe how the labour and skill involved in re-producing worlds from manga, film, videogames and television connected practitioners to each other and a broader field of cosplay practice. In creating images of floating worlds cosplayers may play with Other identities and imagery but in producing and redistributing these photographic works they participate in a

cosmopolitan cosplay nexus, forming social relationships with dispersed prac-
titioners, sharing skills and aesthetics that criss-cross geographic boundaries.

I was involved in the production of cosplay photography throughout the eth-
nographic fieldwork conducted for my doctoral research project from 2010–12,
and in the fieldwork undertaken in subsequent 'return visits' to Australian
cosplay communities from 2012–15. This ethnographic fieldwork included
in-depth semi-structured interviews with fifteen key participants including
cosplayers, event organisers and photographers. However, the core method
was participant-observation with cosplayers in backstage and onstage set-
tings. I collaborated on costume projects with other cosplayers, created my
own costumes, shopped with cosplayers, learnt the basics of cosplay photo-
graphic methods, visited online spaces and exchanged information and images,
attended over twenty popular culture convention events and performed in
formal competitions with other practitioners. Immersive participation enabled
me to experience cosplayers' dynamic and hyper-mediated way of being in the
world. Through these experiences I was able to more fully understand how
the uncanny floating worlds of cosplay shoot photography play an important
role in the creation and recreation of cosmopolitan worldviews and cosplay
communities.

'QUIVERING TERRAIN' AND FLOATING WORLDS: MIMESIS, ALTERITY, AND
COSMOPOLITANISM

Poetically, Taussig uses the phrase 'quivering terrain' (1993, 255) to describe
the destabilising effect of mimetic excess. The floating worlds depicted in cos-
play shoot photography are hybrid spaces produced through the endless re-
interpretations of globalised imagery. When and where is eighteenth-century
France, seen through the lens of a twentieth-century Japanese illustrator and
re-interpreted by a twenty-first-century cosplayer under the eucalyptus trees
of Flemington Showgrounds in 2012? Visual anthropologists have highlighted
the ways that photographic imagery can blur or collapse traditional geographic
and temporal boundaries, bringing the past to the present and the exotic to the
local (Bell 2008; Halvaksz 2010; Hirsch 2004; Pink 2011). In the case of cos-
play photography these imaginary Other spaces are reproductions of worlds
from pre-existing visual and narrative texts–Westeros, the remixed European
history of George RR Martin's book series and HBO's *Game of Thrones*, the
sprawling noir metropolis of Batman's Gotham, or the distant planet of Gran
Pulse from the videogame *Final Fantasy XIII*. These textual worlds are also
mirrors, the products of multiple cultural influences, produced and consumed
in globalised contexts. Cosplay photography transports the viewer to an un-

canny world, familiar yet strange, linked to other worlds through visual cues and references.

One of the most important skills used in the creation of successful cosplay photography is the ability to choose a location for the shoot, the ability to *see* Other worlds in local places. Experienced members of Australian cosplay communities promote the choosing of an appropriate shoot as a desirable skill in didactic online photography tutorials, on cosplay websites or offline in cosplay panels at popular culture conventions. Taussig (1993) portrays the mimetic faculty as a magical kind of blurring of the senses. Cosplayers, however, would emphasise the importance of the visual sense, sharpened to focus on details, in the production of their remediations. Cosplayers need to find sites that can visually mimic or evoke anOtherplace or time–medieval Europe or a futuristic planet. Cosplayers and photographers need to assess the visual properties of a potential site (its architecture, natural features, colours and shapes) against a pre-existing 'model' (a film set or a comic book panel). Can this park stand in for a forest? Could a swimming pool depict the ocean?

To create the illusion of anOther place cosplayers must know the symbolically significant visual features of the worlds they are mimicking, the things that represent 'Japan', 'Versailles', 'Westeros' or 'Tatooine'. This knowledge is often created through research of textual and geographic places as cosplayers compile Googled images of temple complexes in Kyoto or the castle sets from *Game of Thrones*. In these research activities cosplayers do not highly discriminate between the 'real' and the 'fictional'. The positioning of the towers of Harry Potter's school Hogwarts can be just as relevant for a cosplayer in one shoot as the layout of formal English gardens in another.

Site choices are usually made in collaboration between cosplayers and photographers and many seek input from the wider cosplay community. Throughout my fieldwork I would often observe cosplayers posting ideas for photo shoot locations on Facebook, and asking for responses from other cosplayers. Cosplayer Julia posted the following message while planning a Harry Potter-themed shoot:

> Some of us were talking earlier today about what the next event should be. Anybod got some suggestions? I'd love to go back to the Mortlock Wing of the State Library, but it's a tricky location for photographers as they are not allowed to use flash photography. (Julia's Facebook communication, author's fieldnotes 2014)

In this way location knowledge is shared as a community asset. Certain places such as particular parks, beaches or buildings are recreated as new places again and again.

In this photo (Figure 5) I am cosplaying as Kusuri-uri, the Medicine seller from the anime *Mononoke* (Toei 2007), posing in the false paradise of the garden of the monstrous Nue. The anime which inspires this photograph employs a surrealist remix of folklore and imagery from Edo-period Japan to tell expressionist horror stories. The animators use key symbolic imagery from the period such as kabuki masks, clothing, Buddhist and Shinto iconography, architecture, and gardens to locate the viewer and to guide the interpretation of the narratives.

Figure 5. The author as Kusuri-uri

In this photo shoot the photographers and I used Adelaide's Himeji Gardens, a place which itself acts as the objectification of civic cosmopolitan ideals, to recreate a surrealist imagining of Edo-period Japan. In many instances the chosen sites for cosplay shoots are also products of globalised exchange and are representative of cosmopolitan hybridity. The Gardens were constructed in Adelaide in 1980s as a gift from Adelaide's sister city Himeji. They are walled, physically separated from the Australian eucalypts and grasses of the parklands that surround it. The gardens are regularly used for Wedding photography, for both local Western and traditional Japanese style weddings.

In choosing the gardens as a site for our *Mononoke* shoot we cosplayers also used the borrowed traditional 'Japaneseness' of the Himeji gardens to locate our image in a fantasy version of Japan. The photographers and I spent some time moving throughout the garden trying to find the most evocative locations. The photographs that we actually produced tended to include the most symbolically suggestive items: Japanese trees and plants, torii-style gates, bridges, and the bamboo water features known as s*hishi-odoshi*. Localising features of the garden that did not contribute to our illusion such as signage and tourists were deliberately removed from the composition of the images. Framing techniques play a considerable role in creating floating worlds. Photographers use a range of techniques including *bokeh* (the aesthetic blurring of background content using focus), shooting from unusual angles, or cropping the size of the image to emphasise or downplay elements of the background.

In other instances cosplay photographers attempt to recreate a culturally ambiguous location – a place that could be anywhere or any time. This cultural ambiguity is also copied from cosplay source texts. Globalised science fiction and fantasy properties have been described by some commentators as homogenous and bland, leached of all culturally defining features in order to appeal to a wide audience. Iwabuchi (2002), in reference to Japanese anime, manga and videogames draws on the idea of *mukokuseki*–being without evident nationality or ethnicity, to describe how characters and settings in these texts seem to be free from the 'odour' of specific localities. Iwabuchi (2002) emphasises that these texts seem to hybridise multiple cultural influences so the 'Japaneseness' of the text is obscured. In these texts, Otherness is blurred to the point of obscurity. From this perspective the blurring effects of mimesis do not create the potential for new subjectivities and communities but instead enforce cultural homogenisation.

However, cosplay photographers' recreations of homogenised *mukokuseki* aesthetics involve labour, creative choices, and the ability to recognise sameness
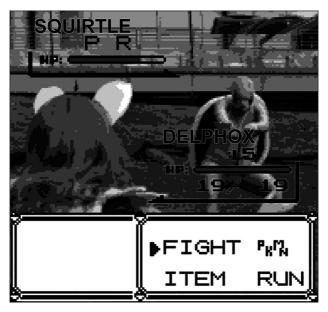
Figure 6. Pokémon Battle

in difference. In this image (Figure 6) cosplayer Daniel and I are recreating a Pokémon Battle from the videogame *Pokémon X and Y*. Here we decided to use the shapes of an abstract sculpture to portray the abstract landscapes of the battle spaces of the games. The sculpture was located on the banks of the River Torrens, not far from a recently redeveloped bridge. Daniel and the photographer discussed the location, commenting that the redevelopment was as bland and as featureless as the towns depicted in the games. While the River Torrens and its surrounds are often portrayed in tourist campaigns as an icon of the city of Adelaide, the participants in this shoot provided an alternative reading of the location. As Daniel pointed out: 'We could be anywhere,' (Author's field note, 26/07/14).

While sites in Adelaide are often used for their apparent cultural ambiguity they are rarely used to portray Adelaide or even Australia. An example of framing can be seen in the two images of James as Renly Baratheon (Figure 7). In the top left hand corner of the first photograph the sculptor's mark from the base of a statue is clearly visible, including the sculptor's address, 'Adelaide'. The second photograph cuts out this information. In Australian contexts cosplayers tend to obscure or erase localising features or identity of a site. This is due to the nature of the source material the cosplayers are recreating. Towering

Figure 7. Framing the image, removing Adelaide

eucalypts are seldom evident in the background of shoot photography produced in Adelaide. Australia rarely features in cosplay source texts: fantasy and science fiction film, television, novels and comics. This is for a variety of reasons such as Australia's position as a cultural consumer of globalised products or, perhaps, a deep insecurity about the role of Australian culture in the

world, the phenomenon of 'cultural cringe'. Urban Australia, where most of the population resides, is virtually never represented in these texts. Like the use of New Zealand as Middle Earth in Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (Werry 2011), Australia's non-urban places and landscapes masquerade as *Star Wars's* Tatooine, *Mad Max's* apocalyptic dystopia, or Pandora's Moon in the video game *Borderlands the Pre-Sequel*. Australian cosplayers are interested in representing Other landscapes rather than local ones. Localising features bring the mundane into the fantastical and ruin the mimetic effect of the photograph.

Importantly, landscapes only play one part in creating the visual mimetic effect of the cosplay photograph. The appearance and performances of cosplayer subjects play a considerable role in transforming local sites creating the overall effect of the image. The landscape plays the part of backdrop while the cosplayer plays the character. Cosplayer Daniel would often refer to a costume object or performed gesture as an 'anchor', an important symbol or reference that determined the interpretation of the whole image. During photo shoots cosplayers portray their chosen characters through the use of costume, props and makeup but also through their movements and facial expressions. Accurate and affective in-character performances can require a considerable amount of offstage research work on the part of the cosplayer. Research for an in-character performance often involves re-watching, reading, or playing the text, or searching for further references online. This study is done to identify and collect the characters' stances, gestures, gaits, facial expressions or any other bodily presentations that are considered recognisable or representative of the character.

In a successful shoot the cosplayer's performance, the chosen site and the camera should interact in a way that contributes to a unified effect. In the photograph below (Figure 8), created during the *Game of Thrones* shoot, performers, location and framing are assembled to create a narrative effect. In the image the costumed performers are representing the unequal power relationship between the two characters. During the shoot the cosplayers told me that they wanted to create an image that represented the male Littlefinger character as threatening and the female Sansa character as trapped and frightened. Part of this representative work is achieved through the costumes, wigs and makeup worn by the performers which strongly echo those worn by the actors of the television series.

The visual intertextual references of the costumes are supported and amplified through the physical interactions of cosplayer, photographer and space. To get into position the cosplayers had to scramble up on to the ledge, eyes peeled

Figure 8. Sansa and Littlefinger

for any authority figures who might forbid or punish them for climbing on the building. As the photographer I was framing the image with focus and aperture settings and shouting directions to the performers as to how they should position their bodies. Through several minutes of posing, framing and discussion we were able to frame their performances within the pillars of the building, adding to the claustrophobic atmosphere created by the performers.

As with landscape features, subjects that do not add to the mimetic effect of the image are removed through deliberate framing. Due to their public nature cosplay photo shoot locations are often shared with others, including gate-keepers such as staff and security guards. In interviews cosplayers often re-

counted narratives in which they had to explain their activities to bemused park rangers and security guards who were typically concerned that cosplayers might damage property. This is only one of many ways that the use of space is negotiated during cosplay photo shoots. Many cosplayers understand that as costumed performers they might appear 'out of place' in public spaces that were not designed for these kinds of activity. Tensions between cosplay shoot participants and other users of the space may be heightened when cosplayers are performing actions or dress that may be considered risqué or inappropriate according to the framing of the space.

Attending a photography panel at a cosplay event in Perth, I observed a lecture given by two experienced *Yaoi* cosplay photography creators. Yaoi is the term commonly used by Australian fans to refer to a sub-genre of romance Japanese manga targeted towards teenage girls which centres on the homoromantic/ sexual relationships of two or more male protagonists.[2] In their shoot photography the two (women) cosplayers would perform as the male lovers, enacting sexualised poses and situations. The presenters reported that most of their shoots took place outside in public parks. To avoid potentially upsetting other park users with their sexualised play, the cosplayers would assign one of their friends to act as a 'spotter' to warn them when a non-cosplayer would enter their section of the park. In this way the cosplayers edited outsiders from their performances and images, and removed themselves and their performances from the wider context of the park.

During the shoot cosplayers and photographers must constantly negotiate their surroundings and improvise with unexpected elements. Performance theorists have emphasised the improvisatory nature of performance (Cowan 1990; Schieffelin 1998), and this is certainly true of cosplay photo shoots. Shoot performances can be highly improvisatory assemblages as cosplayers and photographers play with found objects in the chosen location. Copying processes are frequently playful. In his discussion of mimetic excess, Taussig (1993) emphasises this aspect using terms such as 'dancing' (129) and 'cartwheeling' (246). Taussig here appears to be emphasising an apparently limitless generative potential of copying.

As many studies of copying and remediation have emphasised, attempts at mimicry can produce new, unexpected combinations of elements (Novak 2010; Hallam and Ingold 2007). A striking example of this occurred during the Final Fantasy Cosplay Day event. Wandering through the park, our cosplaying group happened upon aisles of decorated seating, set out in preparation for one of the many 'real life' weddings to take place there that day. After some consultation

between photographers and cosplayers we decided to 'borrow' the seating, red carpet and pulpit to stage a 'Final Fantasy' wedding with characters from the videogame series re-enacting the roles of guests and actors in a Western wedding. Dressed as a white mage character, I was brought in to play the role of the priest. In one photograph from the shoot I am portrayed joining the hands of the 'bride' and 'groom'. In this particular shoot copied imagery from both Western wedding rituals and a Japanese videogame series were combined to produce something familiar, yet strange.

COSMOPOLITAN WORLD-MAKING AND THE RECREATION OF COSPLAY PRACTICE COMMUNITIES

In creating their floating worlds cosplayers re-imagine familiar local places as exotic Other places. In his discussion of mimesis, Taussig (1993) argued that copies have an intrinsic power that may rival or eclipse that of the original. Cosplay photographs have the capacity to recreate cosplay values and communities. On shoot day performers and photographers undertake considerable imaginative work – defining localising features, improvising with sites and materials – bringing together physical site and fantasy world in the production of a digital image. However, when the images are uploaded and shared on internationally accessible media sites cosplay photographs collapse space and time delineations in more tangible ways. Recent visual and material culture analyses of the sharing of physical photographs and digital imagery have emphasised that these exchanges can play a significant role in the creation and maintenance of social relations (Drazin and Frolich 2007; Van Dijck 2008; Edwards 2012). 'Pixelated images, like spoken words, circulate between individuals and groups to establish and reconfirm bonds' (Van Dijck 2008, 62).

When posted online, cosplay shoot images connect their creator to a 'nexus' (Gell 1998) of globalised aesthetics, in this case the cosmopolitan cosplay community of practice. Uploaders, downloaders, viewers, commenters and taggers all have the opportunity to participate in a 'global field' (Regev 2007) of cosplay where aesthetic conventions are created, discussed and reproduced. Participants have the opportunity to enact a new, cosmopolitan identity – that of cosplayer, a skilled practitioner who can interpret globalised texts and re-invent them for new audiences and compete for recognition amongst other global actors.

To play a meaningful role within this nexus cosplay photographs must be recognised as such by members of the community. The positioning of the image as a cosplay photograph can be partially achieved by uploading it to a cosplay-

specific site such as Cosplay.com or to a cosplay specific-section of a social media platform like a Cosplayer fan page on Facebook. Cosplay images are rendered more recognisable when they conform to audience expectations of the genre. Cosplayers and photographers within Australian communities of practice tend to only share photographs that would be considered aesthetically pleasing according to values of the community. For example, in the photographs used in this article the costumes appear detailed and accurate. Intricate face makeup, handcrafted costumes and delicate painting are on show. The colours and shapes match those of the original character design from the source texts. The image must be in focus, well-lit and the background should serve to enhance the character. Localising artefacts, non-performers or other forms of background 'noise' should be absent from the image.

Uploaded images are also framed as cosplay photography in viewer-poster interactions on social media platforms. Cosplayers in Australia regularly upload photography to sites including Facebook, Flickr and Instagram. Many of these platforms enable other users to interact with uploaded contact. Through the use of functions such as Facebook's 'tag', 'like' and 'comment' functions cosplayers establish tangible links with other members of the community of practice. Interactions with shoot images are typically framed in two ways: viewers and posters either participate in the imagined world created in the imagery or acknowledge the performer or photographer as a practitioner or community member. Interactions framed as 'in world' can include: referring to the performer(s) by character names, describing the content of the imagery from an in-world perspective, referring to other characters, places or narrative events referenced in the image, jokes, and other forms of textual performance. Social relationships can be developed in this extended form of performance. Participants are connected through their shared experience of the imagined world as well as their shared knowledge of the semiotics and narrative of the text. Poster and commentator interactions may also be framed within a discourses pertaining to cosplay as a community of practice. Examples of this kind of interaction include: referring to the cosplayer's skill, asking questions about how the image was created, seeking assistance or feedback on technical aspects of the image, or posted in competition as an example of skilled production. These interactions may create different relationships between participants. Novices ask questions of experts, and co-producers share memories of production processes.

Distributed cosplay photography also contributes to the endless maze of reflected imagery by inspiring other cosplay photographers to create new works. Drazin and Frohlich (2007) in their study of personal photography empha-

sised the role of photographic imagery in influencing the future behaviour of individuals. The authors argue that photographs can become a model of ideal behaviour or values that an individual or group attempt to recreate in future aspects of their lives (Drazin and Frohlich 2007). Similarly Keen and Woodward (2006), while exploring the dissemination of street-styles in fashion photography, have argued that online sharing of exemplary works can play an important role in the teaching, learning, and contesting of community aesthetics.

Cosplay shoot photography, uploaded and distributed online, become resources and inspiration for other cosplayers in the creation of future costumes, performances, and photographs. In interviews, Australian cosplayers and photographers often referred to a 'research' process that they undertook before beginning a new cosplay project. Images that have been posted online on websites, forums, or social media may be available to other cosplayers during this research phase. Googled cosplay images in turn provide a model or inspiration for the creation of future costumes and performances by other cosplayers across national boundaries. In this way the copying of pre-existing photographic imagery binds practitioners together in an aesthetic nexus.

CONCLUSION: FLOATING WORLDS, COPYING, COSMOPOLITANISM AND THE RECREATION OF A PRACTICE

In the early twenty-first century digital technologies including the internet, search engines, social media platforms and the ubiquitous digital cameras have made copying processes an integral part of everyday globalised life. Concerns that mass produced, reproduced content will erode the uniqueness of local cultures, first expressed at the beginning of the twentieth-century, are echoed in the writings of commentators like Iwabuchi (2002). For Iwabuchi and others, the blurring effect of cultural hybridity erases local cultures and furthers the interest of powerful actors and content producers. However, the case study of cosplay photography provides an alternative view of copying practices where copying activities, conducted by small groups of actors in local sites, enable creative practitioners to engage in a cosmopolitan community of practice which exists in peripheral tension with powerful globally branded cultures.

Taussig, in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), portrays mimicry as playful and uncanny. Mimetic activities have the potential to erode the boundaries between self and other. Copying the aesthetics or works of the Other do not necessarily involve domination, exotification or appropriation. Copying practices can even work to destabilise traditional geographic cultural boundaries and unequal

power relationships between cultures. No one could claim that cosplay photography radically destabilises geographic boundaries but cosplay photography does enable practitioners to see the world a little differently and to contribute to a cosmopolitan aesthetic community.

Throughout my fieldwork among Australian communities I observed how cosplay photography could connect dispersed practitioners. Cosplaying friends and informants would share images on their Facebook pages of wistful Russian cosplayers posing on beaches, dressed as characters from the video game series *Final Fantasy*. Japanese cosplayers would fight monsters in a deep forest in the pages of the *CosMode* magazine sold at my local manga store. Australian cosplayers would showcase their work in printed photo booklets and calendars, sold at popular culture conventions. I would spend Sunday afternoons at cosplay parties in public parks where the creation of floating worlds was accompanied by barbequed sausages. Cosplay shoot imagery, a photographic genre that deliberately recreates pre-existing popular culture texts, also reproduced social relationships and a system of cosplay aesthetics.

For Taussig, it is the sensorial effect of the copy that blurs the distinction between self and other and generates the potential for new relationships and subjectivities. In the production of cosplay photography, however, it is the skilled visual and performance labour required to make and share the imagery that produces cosmopolitan worldviews. Even in the twenty-first century not all copies are mass-produced. Cosplayers and photographers use research, performance and camera techniques to reframe the landscapes around them. Considerable labour is also involved in the editing, uploading, and distributing of these images. Dispersed sites and practitioners are connected through the *making* and *sharing* of cosplay photographs. In the production and consumption of cosplay photography the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' may be redrawn along practice-centric lines as 'cosplayer' and 'non-cosplayer'.

Theorists exploring aesthetic forms of cosmopolitanism may focus on modern art or the appropriation and reinvention of long-established traditional craft forms. Peripheral leisure practices which are for the most part devoid of explicitly political content or activism may be dismissed as shallow, banal or unreflective forms of cosmopolitanism. However, underneath the surface of a transient digital image can exist networks of practitioners, products and sites that criss-cross national boundaries with speed and fluidity.

NOTES

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2　International fandoms do not always use this term to describe this genre. In Japan, where the genre is said to have originated, terms such as 'boys' love' and BL are more commonly used.

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