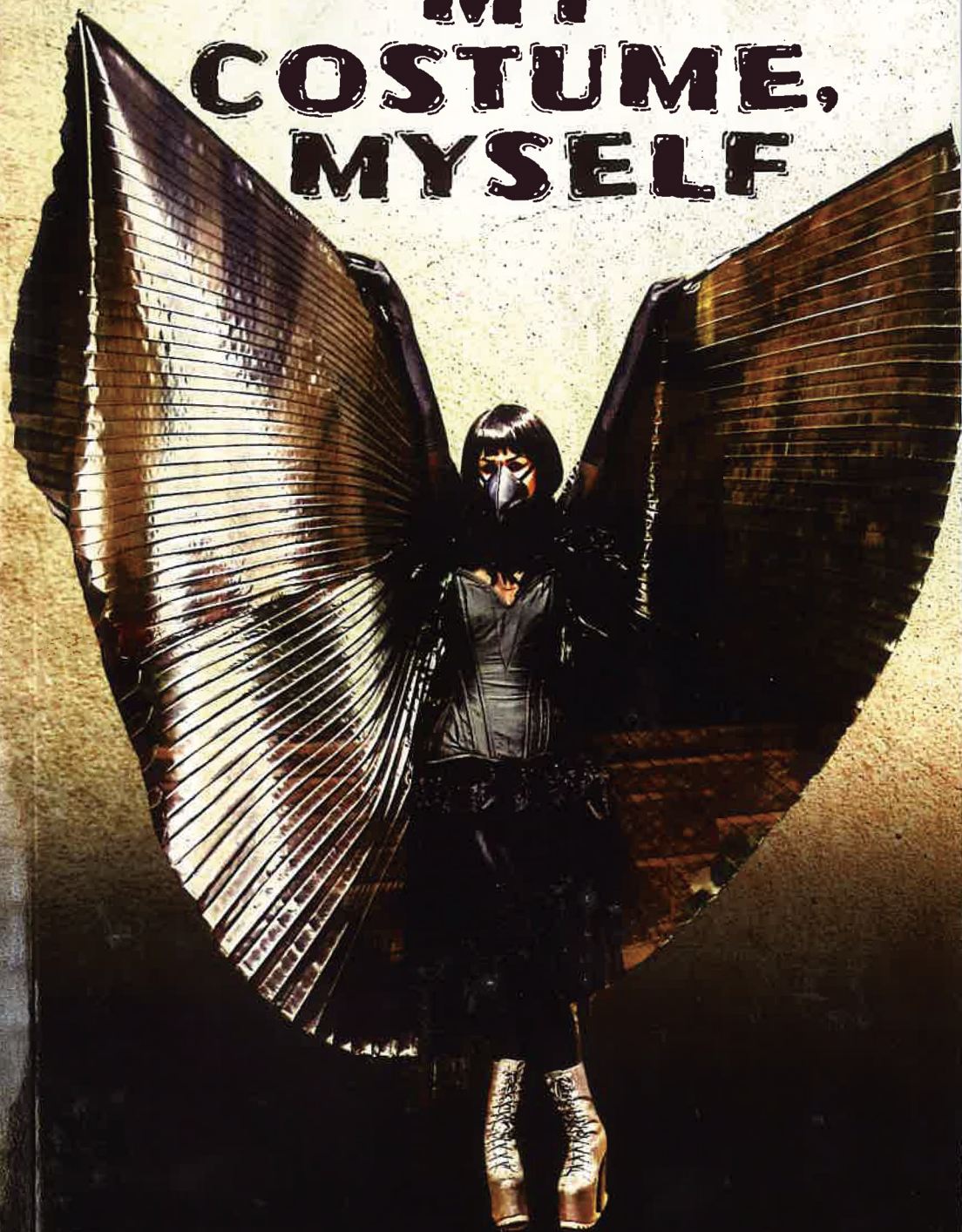


Celebrating Stories of Cosplay and Beyond

# MY COSTUME, MYSELF



THOMAS G. ENDRES, PHD



Cosplay. Celebrity impersonation. Historical reenactment. Drag. Ren Fairs. Through research and stories, come discover the transformational and inclusive world of costumes, and how they can be used to uncover, cultivate, and represent aspects of one's inner self.

Thomas Endres presents a much-needed deeper dive into a phenomenon defined by difference. The case study interviews, and most importantly the photographs documenting the subjects interviewed in their cosplay performance, are presented in a manner that allows a greater depth of articulated voice from individuals than previous works have allowed.

~J. Richard Stevens, author of *Captain America, Masculinity, and Violence: The Evolution of a National Icon*

Endres accessibly and usefully documents the current practice of costuming as communication of multiple identities, providing full body photos and the voices of the creators in the various Costume Conversation sections.

~Pravina Shukla, author of *Costume: Performing Identities through Dress*

Tom vividly illustrates how cosplay can transform lives. In a world where polarized ideologies and judgmental thinking about difference have become normalized, these important stories need to be told. Thank you, Tom, for telling them so well.

~Deanna D. Sellnow, author of *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture: Considering Mediated Texts*

Cosplayer Thomas G. Endres (bottom right) is a professor at the University of Northern Colorado, where he teaches courses on unpacking popular culture. He is the author of *Sturgis Stories: Celebrating the People of the World's Largest Motorcycle Rally* (also published by Kirk House). Tom and his wife Maki live in Greeley, CO.

Foreword by "Founding Father of Cosplay" Nobuyuki Takahashi (bottom left), who first used the word *cosplay* in a 1983 manga magazine titled *My Anime* (pictured).



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## FOREWORD

### The Breakthrough of Cosplay Culture

by Nobuyuki Takahashi

**T**his year marks 40 years since our team created the name of an otaku culture activity called “*kosupure*: COSPLAY.”

This word, with unfamiliar spelling, was used as the title of an article in a series that began in the June 1983 issue of the Japanese animation magazine *My Anime*. Since the preceding year, we had been thinking about what to call the activities of the youth subculture.

In the United States, fans dressing up as characters from movies, dramas, anime, and manga existed since the 1970s at science fiction conventions (e.g., Worldcon) and Trekkies fan conventions. The existence of costumes of Disney Studio characters can even be confirmed from the 1940s.

However, there was no name for that action.

At the SF convention, it was called costuming and dressing up. The attraction for the visitors was a show called “Masquerade” where they competed in costumes and stage performances. This tradition continues today at many anime and manga conventions around the world.

We looked up theater terms in the English dictionary and found the phrase “Costume Play.” I learned that it was a historical drama performed in classic theater, such as Shakespeare, in the costumes of the era, and that was sometimes ridiculed as “an unsophisticated play where the costumes are emphasized much more than the actors’ performances.”

We dared to create the word “COSPLAY” by combining short words based on this “Costume Play.”



do not have a lot to choose from. In the last chapter, we saw that white female Kellsie was willing to be Batman even though the character is male. In the same vein, a black cosplayer should be equally allowed to dress as Batman even though the character is white (see “Litt Knight” interpretation in Image 3.1). Loving Batman is the only criterion you need.



**Image 3.1** From l to r: Don Hudson II (*Litt Knight*), Tanya Layman (*Catwoman ala 1960s Eartha Kitt*), Orlando (*Batman*)

Of course, it's never as easy as just saying loving the character is enough. “For people of color to traverse racial boundaries by cosplaying is as white characters is to traverse literature and media that seeks to make us invisible,” declares Kirkpatrick (2019, [1.2]). Again, we are talking about a long history of exclusionary practices. Characters like Batman and Superman could easily have been heroes of color, but how would

that have been received when they first hit the comic book stores in the 1930s? Fortunately, things are better now, but we have yet to obtain a critical mass of characters of color. They still remain the exception.

Famed cosplayer Yaya Han, a Chinese woman who has struggled to find characters that match her skin tone, and received scorn from others for her choices, is aware of the challenge. “However, any racist remarks I have received are nothing compared to the vitriol that black cosplayers have to face on a daily basis” (p. 147). She states that a main reason people cosplay is to “be whoever we want while still feeling content in our own skin. Black cosplayers do not have that luxury” (p. 147). She argues that, as with many activities and organizations, black people are underrepresented. “The invisibility of black cosplayers mirrors the experience of black people in the real world” (p. 147).

For those cosplayers of color who adopt light-skinned characters, Kirkpatrick offers insightful praise. Even if they have no intent on making a social statement – “they just want to cosplay a beloved character” – their decision “becomes revisionist as they create an original version of the character” [6.1]. Despite getting pushback from narrow-minded fans, he concludes, they are an inspiration to *blerds* (black nerds). “In the brave display of their transgressive superhero bodies, they materialize a better today and hint at an alternative tomorrow” [3.6].

While it should be perfectly acceptable for a cosplayer of color to embody whatever character they want, white cosplayers need to consider impacts due to long-standing systemic inequities. Liptak (2022) concedes that “performing arts has a long and unfortunate history when it comes to race.” Early minstrel shows, for example, utilized white performers in black makeup to play racist caricatures of African Americans. While that practice is now a thing of the past, he argues, “every year brings up some viral moment where a college student or overzealous costumer decides to color their face in a similar fashion” (p. 99). Understandably, Liptak’s view is that, even if the person is trying to present an accurate portrayal, the social impact and history of the practice outweighs their good intention.