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# MODES OF CARTOON CORPOREAL PERFORMANCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by

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May 2019

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any success I have had the opportunity to experience in my academic career I owe to those who have lent their support and guidance over the years. I owe my thanks to family and other loved ones, past and present, who have encouraged my progress and decision to pursue a career in higher education, and who have entertained more than a few instances during which I simply needed to vent about some of the struggles that come with such a choice. I need, in particular, to acknowledge and thank my father, Cameron Langner, and my mother, Verlene Young Kirby, as well as loved ones Abraham Vega, Jonathan Paiz, and Kevin Ngov.

To my doctoral advisor and dissertation chair, Patricia A. Suchy, thank you for your tireless efforts towards my success, for pushing me and critically challenging my scholarly and creative practice, for your invaluable insights and depth of knowledge, and for encouraging me to pursue my interests unapologetically. To my departmental committee member, David Terry, thank you for your ongoing strategic insights into my studies and into the world of academia. To my Film and Media Arts committee member, Jason Buch, thank you for sharing my love of all things geeky, and for bringing your unique wealth of knowledge to this process.

I need also to extend my sincere thanks to David Olsen, for the years of mentorship and camaraderie; to Tracy Stephenson Shaffer, for always modeling the utmost passion and reverence for Performance Studies; to Kristina Ruiz-Mesa, for constantly supporting my passion for education; to Naomi Bennet, for the years of collaboration; to Montana Jean Smith, for the incredible friendship; and to Ethan Hunter, for grounding me in times of stress and frustration. To my other colleagues, mentors, students, and loved ones, including Rico Self, Chris Vincent, chris collins, Lexus Jordan, Holland Smith, Julie Matos, Loretta Pecchioni, Taylor Dawson, Gabi Vigueira, Kalli Champagne, Jasmine Nguyen, and so many others: Thank you.

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation project works to introduce and interrogate a phenomenon I am calling *cartoon corporeality*. The phenomenon refers to the varied ways in which cartoons “escape” their usual two-dimensionality through performance, appearing to manifest in physical environments in ways that should be understood as culturally impactful. Cartoon corporeality encompasses different modes of performance wherein the explicit visual presence of a cartoon subject informs an immediately observable physical impact through the body of the performer. I interrogate the phenomenon by focusing on four select modes of cartoon corporeal performance: videogame play, cosplay, theatrical adaptation, and the active weaving of cartoons with physical liveness. For each mode, I select a specific site of interrogation that exemplifies and informs the insights gained throughout the different parts of this phenomenological study: the mobile game *Pokémon Go*, the annual Japanese animation convention Anime Expo, comedian James Corden’s crosswalk adaptation of Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*, and my own 2018 performance production *Cue Cartoon*. This study was conducted through close readings of existing scholarly texts and media reports into each mode of performance and each site of interrogation, through open-ended qualitative interviews, and through direct critical observational analyses which sometimes included my own on-site experimentation with the modes of performance under investigation. The aim of this dissertation is to argue that cartoons’ apparent escape beyond the screen allows individuals more effectively to access the fluidity, vibrance, and overall expressiveness cartoons offer in order to discover more expansive possibilities for self-expression and self-affirmation.

## CHAPTER 1. CARTOON CORPOREALITY: AN INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2009 I dressed up as a purple cartoon rat (Rattata from *Pokémon*, to be specific) so that I could walk around a Japanese animation convention in hundred-degree dry weather, posing and performing as the rat while having my picture taken. In the spring of 2015 I performed as the *Batman* villain The Scarecrow in a live-action theatrical parody of the infamous 1972 animated television special “The Dynamic Scooby Doo Affair” (more colloquially known as “Scooby Doo Meets Batman and Robin”). In the fall of 2018, as I sit writing this opening paragraph in my corner of a small shared graduate student office, I am surrounded by poster prints, stickers, fan-art renditions, and keychain charms of some of my favorite animated series and videogame franchises. Admittedly, these experiences are not particularly profound, but they do represent how I have come to appreciate and embrace the presence of cartoons whenever they appear to “escape the screen” and become, in some way, physically present.

This dissertation explores the ways in which cartoons “come to life” in such physically present ways through a phenomenon I am calling *cartoon corporeality*. Cartoon corporeality can be understood as a phenomenon encompassing modes of performance wherein the explicit visual presence of a cartoon subject informs some kind of immediately observable physical impact. To be visually present means that one can look at the physical environment and clearly see the cartoon figure occupying that environment in some fashion, as if the figure were no longer bound to the screen. To be physically impactful means that the figure’s presence informs some kind of change either to the bodies engaged in performance, or to the cultural environments that surround those bodies.<sup>1</sup> Cartoon corporeal performances should also reflect the dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> While the concept of cartoon corporeality emphasizes the physical potential of cartoons, I retain the requisite of visual presence because cartoon animation is an inherently visual form. To argue that cartoons are corporealized through performance is specifically to argue that their presence becomes both visual and physical.

qualities of movement characteristic of cartoons generally, as well as those qualities of movement that are unique to each cartoon and cartoon character individually. Additionally, performances of cartoon corporeality embody and represent cartoons either by referencing specific cartoon entities (such as animated films or specific cartoon characters) or by utilizing cartoons as a medium through which to develop and execute the performance.

Accordingly, performances that access exclusively the content and qualities of other source texts and media would not constitute cartoon corporeal performance, even if those texts and media share certain formative features with cartoons. For example, cartoons are particularly fantastical in nature in that they appear to transcend the laws of physics by warping, magnifying, and selectively minimizing representations of reality. Cartoons, however, do not retain a monopoly on fantasticality: cinematic and literary works like *Harry Potter* employ feats of magic, live-action superhero and science-fiction films depict extraterrestrials and characters with supernatural powers, and fantasy role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* allow players to create mythical characters and stories that can similarly defy our understandings of reality. Yet, performing physically through any these texts, genres, or media does not require that one access the distinct aesthetics and qualities of motion characteristic of cartoons, let alone any specific cartoon referents. Throughout the dissertation I use the terms *cartoon corporeality* and *cartoon corporeal performance* interchangeably. My research leads to a series of insights into how performances of cartoon corporeality can be understood as culturally significant. I am subsequently concerned with how the myriad phenomena through which the “umbrella” phenomenon of cartoon corporeality performs, as well as with the productive power of cartoon corporeality to be influenced by and to materially shape the cultures within which it is performed.

We can understand *animation* as a visual form composed through a succession of drawn images that are played sequentially to communicate the impression of movement. For the purposes of this project, I approach the concept of *cartoon* animation by borrowing from Bay-Wei Chang and David Ungar, who posit three important characteristics of the medium: its theatricality, its use of illusion as an engaging force, and its inherently graphic nature (52-53). I amend Chang and Ungar's framing by adding the qualification that for something to be recognized as cartoon animation, the influence of the artist or the animator must be clear in the presentation of the subject. A cartoon is something drawn, digitally generated, or constructed through other materials external to the artist such as clay or moveable dolls, and always with the intent of appearing to be somehow distinct from naturalistic presentation. Throughout the dissertation I usually use the terms "cartoon" and "cartoon animation" interchangeably, but when relevant I also make specific references to cartoons that are *not* animated, such as comics and graphic novels. Because this project is so heavily concerned with the roles that live human subjects play through different modes of cartoon corporeality, I also use the term *body* to refer to individuals' basic human forms, with or without the augmentation of prosthetics.<sup>2</sup> As such, I discuss throughout how each mode of cartoon corporeality utilizes or complements the expressive capabilities of the body, often in ways that social bodies are conditioned to find unfamiliar or uncomfortable.

When discussing the ways in which cartoons become corporeal, as in physically *present*, I refer to Pavel Zahorik and Rick Jenison who conclude that a core requisite for presence is a recognizable impact on the subject's immediate environment (87). In this sense, the physical presence of a cartoon can be something as immediately tangible as a grown adult showing off her

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<sup>2</sup> As I discuss later in the dissertation, prosthetics of different kinds are often used as key elements of cartoon corporeal performance.



purple rat Pokémon cosplay (cosplay being the practice of performing in costume as characters from various media), or something more indirectly impactful such as a person playing a videogame on her phone, using the touchscreen to control the animation of the characters within the game, simply because she enjoys doing so. To refer to performances of cartoon corporeality, then, is to acknowledge not only cartoons' appearances in physical spaces, but also to consider the tangible effects of those appearances as well. Additionally, I am recognizing *performance*, as Mary Frances HopKins describes, as “always a kind of repetition,” and driven by “the intention of the performer, and possibly of [the] observers” (231). In turn, when I talk about exploring and experimenting with performances of cartoon corporeality, I am specifically addressing cartoon corporeal performances as motivated physical repetitions, or physical extensions, of the two-dimensional cartoons that precede them.

Possibilities for how cartoons might physically “come to life” in culture can include anything from explicit reenactments of cartoon figures such as through the performances of many theme park performers (e.g. when an employee performs as Homer Simpson from the well-known animated comedy series *The Simpsons* while wearing a large, bulky, proportionally accurate, and highly cartoonish costume at Universal Studios theme parks), to more nuanced or niche performances such as when people post short videos to social media that use augmented reality filters to layer animated features of a cartoon character over their own physical features (Facebook, for example, has a function that allows users to digitally don key features of the character Bob from the cartoon *Bob's Burgers*, including his dark hair, bushy mustache, and plain white apron). In order to examine cartoon corporeality systematically, as it encompasses multiple modal possibilities, I have selected four distinct modes of performance that demonstrate both its range and the interconnectedness between its various manifestations. I have divided the

study into the following possibilities for cartoon corporeal performance: videogame play (or gaming, gameplay, etc.), cosplay, theatrical adaptation, and the active weaving of cartoons with physical liveness (i.e. deliberately “meshing” cartoons with immediately live performance, rather than simply adapting cartoons for the stage).

I have also selected a specific site of interrogation for each mode of the phenomenon. These include the mobile game *Pokémon Go* as an example of cartoon corporeality through gaming; the annual convention Anime Expo as an example of cartoon corporeality through cosplay; a live parody production from comedian James Corden of the animated feature film *Beauty and the Beast* as an example of cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation; and my own original, experimental multimedia performance, *Cue Cartoon*, as an example of cartoon corporeality through active weaving. I selected *Pokémon Go* specifically in response to its remarkable popularity after its release in mid-2016, and because of the strong base of regular users it has retained since. I selected Anime Expo because of its status as one of the largest Japanese animation conventions in the world, and subsequently its status as an event featuring thousands of cosplay performances in the span of just a few days each year. I selected Corden’s adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* in part because I am able to access footage of the performance online for continual reference, in part because of the source text’s ongoing popularity, and in part because this particular production takes several liberties with the source text that other staged adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast* do not, meaning that Corden’s version allows for a richer analysis of the ways in which performances of cartoon corporeality lend themselves to transformation. Lastly, I selected *Cue Cartoon* because, as an experimental project, my work guiding the performance helped produce my initial interest in, and recognition

of, cartoon corporeality as a phenomenon. Each mode of cartoon corporeality, and its selected site of analysis, is explained in greater detail in sections that follow.

### **Cultural and Disciplinary Significance**

The videogame industry, or more broadly, the industry of interactive entertainment, generated more than 100 billion dollars of revenue in 2017, and as far back as 2013 there were more than 1.2 billion recorded active gamers globally (“Games Industry”; Soper). While numbers of people who actively participate in cosplay have not been formally counted, annual attendance at anime and comic conventions around the world — at which cosplay is always a key attraction — numbers in the millions (Overmind). Additionally, an informal survey of the cosplay community by the website “Cosplay Calamity” shows that more than a quarter of active cosplayers spend anywhere between two hundred and four hundred dollars to build a single costume; and some cosplayers can dedicate hundreds of hours of labor to a single character’s ensemble (YsabelGo). Theatrical adaptations of cartoons have a long history, and with the adaptation of mainstream animated feature films onto the Broadway stage, shows like *The Lion King* musical have attracted tens of millions of individual attendees in recent decades (Fierberg). Even with relatively high production costs, as of 2018 the cartoon animation market by itself exceeds a quarter-trillion dollars worldwide, and sales of comic books and graphic novels have generated more than a billion dollars every year since 2015 (“Size of the Animation Market”; Griep and Miller).

While dollar amounts and attendance numbers certainly do not always translate into the cultural significance or overall importance of any given activity or phenomenon, they do, in this case, reflect cartoon animation’s overall popularity within various facets of culture. My own interest in the phenomenon of cartoon corporeality originates with a decades-long affinity for

cartoons and animation, an affinity that has often translated into spending significant sums of money on the rare occasions I can afford to do so, and into immeasurable numbers of hours spent watching, playing, discussing, and creating animated works across modes. As someone who engages regularly with several of the communities and modes of performance I discuss throughout this dissertation, I make little effort to hide my “geekiness,” both in my daily life, and in my scholarly and creative practices. In fact, as I further emphasize later in this chapter when discussing my methods of investigation, my affinity for cartoons, for the modes of performance to which I give primary focus, and for the majority of the cartoon texts I discuss has served as one of my primary motivations for developing this study.

Within the purview of performance studies, as well as other adjacent disciplines, cartoon animation has been addressed, too rarely I would argue, but in some significant ways. Media theorist Lev Manovich interrogates the relationship between animation and cinema. Cinema, Manovich notes, shifted away from a process of “creating a convincing illusion of dynamic reality” (2) and towards a “regime of visual realism” in the twentieth century (12). That is, live-action film, evolving from various mechanical technologies that produced impressions of movement (discussed at more length later in this chapter), once allowed for moving imagery that was not photorealistic. Manovich observes how the growing concern for visual realism in cinema translated into a concern for defining “itself as a recording medium” (2), and consequently “cut all references to its origins in artifice” (3). In contrast to the photorealism of twentieth-century cinema, “Animation foregrounds its artificial character, openly admitting that its images are mere representations. Its visual language is more aligned to the graphic than to the photographic” (Manovic 3). Manovich contends that digital media production, which allows for extensive flexibility in the editing process (such as through the adding of special effects),

reconciles the shared histories of cinema and animation — or rather, returns cinema to its animated roots — embracing a blend of the stylized and the visually realistic, rather than rejecting it. Performances of cartoon corporeality similarly embrace such a blend, allowing for the stylized imagery of cartoon animation to take on a palpable three-dimensional form, minimizing animation’s perceived distance from visual realism.

Animation as a form needs also to be assessed according to its unique properties and capabilities separate from cinematic conventions. Paul Ward observes, “One of the key theoretical and practical considerations for anyone trying to offer an outline of animation — as a mode of practice, a pedagogy, a knowledge area — is its multi-sitedness” (230). Ward points to the varied uses of animation that occur throughout contemporary culture, but also addresses the myriad ways in which animation can be understood, applied, and generated. Ward contends that animation is recognized as being situated in the broader fields of film and media studies, but is often misunderstood as only taking shape in response to the influences of those fields, and not vice versa. That is, as Ward states, “Animation’s overlapping relationship with film and other media has meant that the theoretical paradigms applied to these other areas are often applied to animation, without first fully thinking through how animation’s theory and practice might inform *them*” (235). While Ward, similar to Manovich, suggests that animation and other media should be understood “as existing in a dialectical relationship” (237), my project seeks to emphasize a similar relationship between animation and performance. In particular, I aim to articulate an understanding of animation as a form of expression that creates multiple possibilities for performance by recognizing the form’s corporeal potential as another example of its “multi-sitedness,” and as possible only through acts of performance.

Birgitta Hosea explores the essential *performativity* of cartoon characters as “being constituted in the act of perception” (19). Performativity can be understood as the power of discourse that cites and repeats culturally acceptable performances of identity to produce and reproduce those same performances (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 2). Hosea asserts that the action of being animated produces for viewers the impression that animated characters are conscious beings. For Hosea, because we project such a perception of sentience onto cartoon characters, we allow them a similar agency that we might allow one another. Animated figures can be recognized as social actors whose behaviors are constructed and expressed in response to ever-evolving cultural codes that constitute an understanding of normative and therefore acceptable behaviors, but they also have the potential to undermine such codes. Judith Butler states that “it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible” (“Gender Trouble” 198; emphasis removed). Accordingly, if we recognize animated figures as social subjects, we potentially can respond to their behaviors similarly to how they, themselves, respond to the cultural codes that precede them. If an animated figure fractures one of those codes — performs in some way outside of normative expectations<sup>3</sup> — those engaging with the animated subject may perceive that such a fracture is possible, and may choose or attempt to repeat that fracture in the material world. This dissertation similarly explores the potential of cartoons to disrupt normative expressions, but specifically through their myriad corporeal manifestations.

My own recent scholarship has elaborated on how complete works of animation (as opposed to specific characters) also perform their own cultural identities. My video essay, “Performing Out of Line: Queer(ing) Animation Through Media Performativity,” recognizes the

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the male character Tommy from the 1991 cartoon *Rugrats* was crossdressed and entered into a beauty competition for “baby girl[s]” in the episode “Beauty Contest.”

performance of identity through cartoons as embodied, in that the “concepts, cultures, and behaviors” that precede them are also contained within them; as fluid, always changing and always capable of change; as socially-leveraged, shifting with the ebb and flow of culture; and as potentially subversive, capable of the same kinds of cultural fractures indicated by Hosea and Butler. The video essay examines sociohistorical influences on cartoon animation, particularly focusing on how animated series and films have abrasively characterized Queer identities over the decades, and on how the visually expressive qualities of more recent cartoons help to undermine and mend some of those very same abrasions. This dissertation, while not explicitly invested in the dynamic between cartoons and Queer identity, offers a more expansive understanding of cartoon animation as not only capable of a corporeal presence, but also capable of cultural influence. To recognize that cartoon animation performs identity is also to accept that such performance occurs in a variety of ways, whether on or beyond the screen.

Teri Silvio also discusses a relationship between animation and performance, but argues that within the field of performance studies, the “binding of the concept of performance to the idea of embodied mimesis has also tended to obscure animation as a kind of action worthy of study in its own right,” going on to state, “The concept of performance . . . tends to hide the ontological difference between animated characters and the people who create, use, and interact with them” (423). In other words, Silvio recognizes animation as *like* a performance by the animators that help produce it, or as an extension of the animators’ performances. Rather than approaching the study of animation as merely analogous to the study of performance, my study understands animation as a form of expression already present across several modes of performance, and further recognizes performance as a lens through which animation can be more richly analyzed and understood. Yet, Silvio also expresses that both animation and performance

can be understood as “forms of play [that] exist in the space where ‘me’ and ‘not me’ merge” (426), a notion similar to Wallace Bacon’s contention that performance through oral interpretation joins performer and text to create something altogether new, “joyful, [and] transcendent” (“One Last Time” 356-357). I consider the notion of such a merger to be invaluable to an exploratory study into how animated texts leave the two-dimensionality of television, phone, tablet, and film screens to manifest physically through the experimental performances of human agents.

Animation, in its richly varied forms and processes of production, is consumed at ever-higher rates and in myriad ways across culture, often for the purposes of entertainment, and often seen as an “escape” from the perceived mundanity of reality. Cartoons provide impressions of entire animated storyworlds<sup>4</sup> into which consumers or viewers can project impressions of themselves, or out of which they can see themselves differently. Further, Chang and Ungar note, “Cartoon animation does not merely mimic reality. Like all dramatic mediums, it takes liberties with what is strictly realistic in order to more effectively convey its message” (48). The liberties that cartoons take sometimes magnify what we consider to be realistic appearance and movement, while at other times those liberties reduce the complex aesthetic details of the material world to a radical simplicity. Cartoons penetrate the very cultures that they magnify, warp, and reduce, and from which they originate. Yet they seem to be, with little critical notice, escaping the screens on which we first encounter them, and in such a multitude of forms that to ignore their escape is to disregard the nuanced and powerful ways in which they might be culturally productive, and in which their capacity to magnify, warp, and reduce might carry over into our material lives.

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<sup>4</sup> A *storyworld* is simply the world or the “universe” of possibilities in which any given narrative takes place.



## Modes and Sites of Interrogation

The modes I have chosen to investigate — gaming, cosplay, theatrical adaptation, and active weaving — certainly fall short of encapsulating all modal possibilities of cartoon corporeality. However, while each mode has qualities that distinguish it from the others, each also speaks cohesively to the next. The subcultures of gaming and cosplay regularly overlap with one another, sharing many of the same members from what I like to call the “league of nerd culture.”<sup>5</sup> Cosplay shares many of the same demands as theatrical staging, even beyond the craft of costuming. For example, characteristic of cosplay is a consistent concern for not only looking like the characters, but performing like them as well. A theatrically staged adaptation and a performance that actively weaves cartoons with physical liveness both concern artistically calculated, publicly staged interpretations of cartoons. Interrogating cartoon corporeality across these forms allows me to identify a range of important insights into the phenomenon, which together contribute to a synthesized understanding of cartoon corporeality’s overall cultural significance.

Each mode also constitutes myriad possibilities of engagement. For instance, there are many different styles of gameplay, from arcade to console gaming, to motion-sensor gaming, to touchscreen gaming, to augmented reality, and beyond. Cosplay styles can be recognized as exacting, whereby cosplayers replicate the appearance of characters as closely as possible; or as casual, whereby cosplayers simply allude to certain characters, basically “achieving the look” with less rigor; and a great deal in between. Some theatrical adaptations of cartoons occur on a grand scale in terms of budget, spectacle, and attention to the craft conventions of theatre; others

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<sup>5</sup> As the dissertation progresses, I continually (and interchangeably) refer to *nerd* or *geek* culture, and locate myself within that culture. The culture can be understood, for the purposes of this project, as learned and shared behaviors centered around individuals’ strong fixations on various facets and forms of animation, particularly those with strong fan bases such as videogaming, Japanese animation, and even Disney film animation (I do not consider myself part of the latter).

are more “makeshift” in these respects, working with tight budgets and creating spectacle much more through heightened characterizations than through elaborate scenic and costume designs.

This dissertation aims at introducing the nomenclature of cartoon corporeality, and also at advocating for the potential of the concept’s significance beyond this project. Accordingly, my goal is to locate critical connections between (corporealized) cartoons, performance, and culture, rather than to exhaustively interrogate every potentially significant manifestation of the phenomenon. As explained above, for something to be understood as a performance of cartoon corporeality, the cartoon subject must be visually clear, meaning that when witnessing the performance one should be able to identify the subject within one’s environment, and in such a way that the subject appears no longer to be contained within a screen. The performance must also be physically impactful in some way, eliciting change in or through the performers’ bodies. These requisites for cartoon corporeal performance can be recognized in the modes I have selected to interrogate, but certainly have the potential to be seen elsewhere.

As also mentioned earlier, theme park performers dressing and acting as readily identifiable cartoon characters are clear examples of cartoon corporeal performance — Daisy Duck and Pluto from *Mickey Mouse* cartoons at Disneyland, Snoopy from *Peanuts* at Knott’s Berry Farm, Scooby-Doo from the *Scooby-Doo* cartoon franchise at Universal Studios, and so on. Videos can be found online of people dressed as Spider-Man (“Take on Me”) and as characters from *Pokémon* (“Team Rocket Flash Mob”) engaging in flash mob behaviors by dancing in the middle of a videogame store and acting out a Pokémon battle scene in the park, respectively; these are clear examples of cartoon corporeality as well. Some modes of performance might be understood as cartoon corporeal “adjacent,” in that they corporealize certain qualities shared with animation — such bright colors and fluid movements — but without

the same clear reference to specific cartoons or their characters, or without a clear physical impact that results from the presence of a cartoon. A laser light show, for example, wherein sharp beams of light produce vivid and fluid images on walls, ceilings, or fog, can feel much like a cartoon come to life, as can various merchandise products based on certain cartoons, like a *Pokémon* lunchbox.

None of the above instances, however, could together be comprehensively analyzed in a single project. Even as stand-alone subjects, the possibilities for assessing their significance are far-reaching and worthy of attention in their own rights. Further, the subjects chosen — gaming, cosplay, theatrical adaptation, and active weaving — also have significant potential beyond the scope of this dissertation. The insights I gain and the key themes I uncover draw from investigations into each site, but also from analyses of the selected modes more broadly. Producing an understanding of each mode of cartoon corporeality in relation to a select site gives me the opportunity to ground my overall analysis, locating specific examples within each mode of performance, and inversely applying the unique insights that each site offers to the general analysis as well. The following subsections briefly introduce the sites I have selected, before more thorough descriptions and analyses are provided in subsequent chapters.

### **Cartoon Corporeality through Gaming and *Pokémon Go***

*Pokémon Go* (2016) is one iteration of the larger, and inarguably iconic *Pokémon* franchise, which launched in 1996 and comprises a long-running animated television series, multiple films and comic book series, a trading card game, and widely popular handheld adventure-based videogames. *Pokémon*, as both a narrative and an aesthetic, envisions a world in which humans live among near-mythic creatures, which are aptly called Pokémon. People form partnerships with Pokémon, battling other “Pokémon trainers” and going off on adventures

together. Through augmented reality, players of *Pokémon Go* are able to look through the screens of their smartphones to see 3D-animated Pokémon digitally layered over players' immediate vicinities, as though players and Pokémon were occupying the same physical environments. Players are prompted by the game to explore their physical environments in order to “capture” and compete with Pokémon through battles, and to interact with one another in doing so. Consequently, *Pokémon Go* materially surpasses the mere aesthetic of Pokémon “appearing in the real world,” and as such, is an ideal example of cartoon corporeality within the phenomenon of gaming. My targeted analysis of *Pokémon Go*, then, is concerned primarily with the experiences and practices of its participants who directly engage with and encounter the game's myriad material motivations. I provide in the following chapter more detailed descriptions of *Pokémon* and *Pokémon Go*, including a brief overview of the ways in which the franchise is largely profit-driven, and as such, demonstrates how modes of cartoon corporeality can fail to always prioritize the human agents who perform through them.

### **Cartoon Corporeality through Cosplay and Anime Expo**

Cosplay, while practiced across multiple kinds of fandom, is most strongly associated with fans of Japanese animation — anime (Winge). The largest and most notable anime convention in North America, Anime Expo, began in 1992 with 1,750 attendees, and now sees an annual attendance rate exceeding 100,000 (Delahanty), roughly triple the number of attendees from when I first participated in the convention in 2005. During the five-day event, the halls of the Los Angeles Convention Center in Downtown Los Angeles are filled from the early mornings to late evenings with cosplay performers, saturating all other elements of the convention with living embodiments of animated figures. Other conventions could well serve as workable sites for assessing performances of cartoon corporeality through cosplay, but few could

be as rich in accessible possibilities as Anime Expo. My analysis of Anime Expo focuses primarily on the recent 2018 convention, but addresses previous years as well, working to examine experiential differences between the cosplay performers in attendance and other attendees who engage with cosplay in various ways. In the third chapter, as I discuss multiple experiences related to Anime Expo and cosplay, I note ways in which cosplay as a mode of cartoon corporeality offers performers a great deal of individual expressive agency, but also struggles to resist many of the socially sanctioned behavioral codes that otherwise tend to restrict such forms of expression.

### **Cartoon Corporeality through Theatrical Adaptation and Corden's *Beauty and the Beast***

From the *Disney on Ice* (1981) series, to Broadway musicals like *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2011), to less commercialized and more community-generated productions like *The Pokémusical* (2013), theatrically staged adaptations of iconic cartoon franchises and figures mark a public, physically active embrace of their reach beyond television and film screens. Comedian James Corden's "Crosswalk the Musical" series, which recurs on his late-night talk show, *The Late Late Show*, has featured two theatrical adaptations of cartoons: Disney's *The Lion King* and Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. Both productions (pre-Corden) have Broadway pedigrees, yet Corden's iterations take place at the crosswalk of an active street intersection. Corden and cast dress in full costume and stand at the corner of the intersection waiting for the "walk" sign to illuminate so they can run onto the crosswalk and perform as much of a musical number from the show as possible, in front of stopped traffic, before the lights change and the cars begin to drive through again. Either production would have made an apt site for examining cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation, so I selected Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* partially out of simple preference for its humor and quality, but also because its source text more

consistently includes moments of fantastical expression that are characteristic of cartoon animation more broadly. While this adaptation has well passed its intentionally limited live “run” in 2017, it was designed for a recurring online presence more than anything, and the official YouTube video of the production has now exceeded eleven million views. Further, while theatricality is not necessitated by the immediately responsive nature of live theatre, I nevertheless had to navigate my analysis of this site through the limitations of the filmed version of the performance. In the fourth chapter I elaborate on these limitations as I further discuss my reasoning for selecting Corden’s *Beauty and the Beast* as a site of interrogation.

### **Cartoon Corporeality through Active Weaving and *Cue Cartoon***

What distinguishes an active weaving of cartoon animation with physical liveness from a staged adaptation of a cartoon, first, is that the active weaving is a deliberate attempt to synchronously engage the cartoon and the physical for the very sake of doing so; second, that an active weaving is *not* an adapted, “staged version” of a cartoon. *Cue Cartoon* premiered in early 2018 in the HopKins Black Box theatre at Louisiana State University, and was composed through a series of strategically choreographed interactions between cartoons, and live, human performers. These interactions were performed through projections of cartoons onto live bodies; through sequences during which performers would weave in and out of and manipulate other projection surfaces such as scrims, liquids, and each other; and through projected animated versions of the performers dancing alongside the immediately live performers themselves. *Cue Cartoon* follows a precedent of active weaving established by performance groups like the Live Action Cartoonists, whose work involves the live creation/drawing of cartoons onto large canvases as live bodies and video projections overlay and appear to interact with those cartoons; and Steve Yockey’s stage play, *Cartoon*, which, rather than adapting any specific animated texts,

creates an entirely new storyworld of cartoon-inspired characters and narratives. My critical self-reflexive analysis of active weaving is concerned with both a process of performance creation in which cartoon animation is central, as well as with the direct insights of other artists who worked on such productions. I reflect in the final chapter on some of the key benefits and challenges that come with designing and producing live performance that actively weaves cartoons and physical bodies, one such challenge being the largely (culturally) niche nature of such work.

### **A Brief History of Animation's Corporeality**

Cartoon animation is primarily recognizable through key elements of its aesthetic: stark colors and tones comprising fluid figures and environments; sharply contrasting outlines and depictions of shadows that define form and implicate depth; and an overall vivid malleability that at once merges the conventions of visual art with those of film, while achieving what neither could alone. Beyond its distinct aesthetics, animation's most emblematic quality is the conveyance of motion. These different features have been utilized together for thousands of years. Preserved examples of ancient art that convey the impression of motion can be seen from Bronze Age pottery depicting movement sequences, all the way back to ancient cave drawings ("History of Animation"). Zach Zorich describes caves discovered across Europe where depictions of animals have been drawn in side-by-side or superimposed sequences, indicating motion. In the Lascaux cave in France, the quality of movement becomes even more apparent when images are cast over with the flickering light of fire, a practice indicated by the discovery of "more than 100 small stone lamps . . . throughout its chambers" (Zorich par. 4). Though animation is far too open a concept to definitively pinpoint its roots, threaded throughout history is a clear and consistent reinterpretation of its inherent physicality. That is, as we trace

animation's history by following cultural trails marked simultaneously by the prevalence of vivid malleability and a conveyance of motion, we can locate continually an integral presence of physical liveness.

### **Shadows of the Past**

Shadow puppet theatre can be seen globally and across cultural histories. Chinese shadow puppetry (*pí yǐng*, believed to originate during the Han Dynasty between roughly 200 BCE and 200 AD) has been used to perform “shamanic rituals” (Chen 29). Javanese shadow puppet theatre (Wayang, circa 900 AD) used leather and wooden puppets to perform tales of morality (Keeler). Shadow theatre in medieval Egypt (circa 1200 AD) was used as comedic, farcical entertainment (Subin and Omar). Through shadow puppetry, stories are carved into rich silhouettes, dynamic in size and shape, and sharpened by the ambience of light on canvas; these formative aesthetic features must be understood as similar to those of cartoon animation. Shadow puppetry aligns with what Hosea calls “a sense of artifice about” animated characters, and with Lawrence Kramer’s observation that animation “defies the laws of embodiment” (13; 164). David Currell observes, “[Shadow puppets] can assume any shape or size, transform into other characters and dissolve away before your eyes. In some ways they offer many of the possibilities available to cartoon film makers” (“Transformations” par. 1). Shadow puppetry, a visual artform reliant on live physical bodies, closely aligns with the formative features of cartoon animation, and thus similarly reflects cartoon animation’s inherent corporeality.

### **Machinations Moving the Form Forward**

Cartoons’ most recent (and more concretely linked) antecedents derive from experimental technologies capable of producing the impression of moving images in ways rather similar to the contemporary animated cartoon. The magic lantern (invented circa 1603) was an early



projection device that would cast light through sheets of glass painted with different images, thereby projecting those images onto a surface. Some of the sheets of glass were designed to move with the help of an operator, and thus constituted literal moving pictures (“History of Animation”). Later technological predecessors include the phénakistoscope, the functionally similar zoetrope, and the similar but somewhat more complex praxinoscope, respectively created around 1831, 1834, and 1877. Each required the placement of sequenced images onto a rounded spindle device, which when spun and looked through produced the impression of moving figures and environments (“History of Animation”). Each of these early technologies relied on the physical presence of some kind of operator in order to produce that conveyance of motion indicative of cartoon animation.

### **The Artist and the Animated**

The advent of filmic technologies offered traditional cartoonists — such as those who drew political cartoons — a new means for giving life to their craft. J. Stuart Blackton’s 1900 short, *The Enchanted Drawing*, features footage of Blackton sketching a caricatured face along with various props onto a canvas; the face and props are animated through stop-motion filming. Blackton interacts with the animation in multiple ways, such as when he draws and materializes a glass of wine to offer to the animated face. Blackton’s 1906 follow-up, *Humorous Phases of Funny Faces*, is essentially a longer version of *The Enchanted Drawing*. Similarly, Émile Cohl’s 1908 *Fantasmagorie* — an animated French short featuring a clown’s rowdy behaviors — is bookended by interactions between Cohl’s own physical hands and the clown character. In Winsor McCay’s *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914), McCay draws Gertie, a dinosaur, and places a bet with his friends that she can move at his command. Interestingly, McCay originally performed live with the animation of Gertie, and intertitles were later used to “fill in” for McCay’s

communication with Gertie when he was not physically present. All these examples demonstrate how cartoon animation, at this liminal stage between mechanically-repetitive and standalone medium, consistently involved a concern for, and engagement with, the physical. Animated cartoons' early concern for physicality reflects Tom Gunning's assessment that early cinema was much more invested in "establishing contact with the audience" (19). For Gunning, the early cinema focused on capturing "spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle" (20), qualities that are reminiscent of, and directly linked to, animation and cartoon corporeal performance.

### **A Screen for Both**

When discussing overlaps of live-action physicality with cartoon animation, most people are likely to reference the use of cartoon animation in live-action film. One of the earliest examples of animation and live-action film being used together is Walt Disney's *Alice Comedies* (1923-1927), a series of shorts featuring the live character Alice with the animated cat Julius. Well-known feature-length examples include *Anchors Aweigh* (1945),<sup>6</sup> *Mary Poppins* (1964), and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). The practice remains healthy in contemporary cinema, in films from the 1990s and early 2000s like *Space Jam* (1996) and *Osmosis Jones* (2001), and more recent films like *The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water* (2015) and *Middle School: The Worst Years of My Life* (2016). Animation has a history of lending to live-action cinema its vibrance and fluidity, and in doing so demonstrates an artistic and cultural appetite for experiencing representations of liveness that either allow the physical and the animated to co-exist, or possibly even to dissolve the distinctions between the two. That is, cartoon corporeality through a game like *Pokémon Go* digitally imposes animated images of Pokémon creatures over

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<sup>6</sup> *Anchors Aweigh* features an iconic scene between actor Gene Kelly (playing the character Joseph Brady) and the cartoon mouse Jerry Mouse (known for the *Tom and Jerry* cartoon). In the scene both characters together perform an intricately interactive song-and-dance number.

physical environments, thus allowing the animated and the physical to exist together and in relation to one another. Conversely, cartoon corporeality through a practice like cosplay performance gives individuals an opportunity to transform their appearances and behaviors to mirror those of animated figures, and the distinction between the performer and the animated figure thus becomes muddled. With advancements in technologies for visual communication, we have seemingly begun more rapidly to progress towards a near total collapse of the animated into the physical; at the very least, towards a conflation of the two made more relevant by the ongoing multimodal escape of cartoon animation from the screen.

### **Critical Foundations for Cartoon Corporeality**

Cartoon corporeal performances that make themselves apparent in contemporary culture highlight how cartoon animation not only progresses out of a corporeal history, but leads into one as well. Developing an introductory, but expansive overview of the phenomenon requires a series of approaches strategically working in tandem with one another. Because I am most concerned with how cartoon corporeality operates through a lens of cultural experience, I use a phenomenological approach as my overarching method of investigation. Phenomenology as a method allows for multiple possibilities for discovery about a given subject in that it draws on experiential insights from multiple sources. Accordingly, through my phenomenology of cartoon corporeality I incorporate various other methodological approaches, including open-ended qualitative interviews and critical observational analyses. The literature I review draws on relevant scholarship from performance studies, as well as areas of animation and media studies that align with the needs of this project, in order to craft a theoretical perspective through which discoveries about the qualities of cartoon corporeality can effectively be assessed. Following my review of the theoretical literature, I provide further details about the practice of using

phenomenology as a method of analysis before describing the specific steps of my research process, and then finally offering a preview of the key insights I find throughout this dissertation.

### **Theoretical Framing**

A lens of performance allows an introductory view of cartoon corporeality to be understood as more than merely a subject of superficial observation, unaffected by and unrelated to its observers. In discussing the performance turn (and *toss*, as she likes to put it), HopKins observes how an orientation of performance theory allows us to see “a world constituted by our own perceptions or at least mediated by our conceptions, or some of both” (228). Such a world of radical subjectivity necessitates a deep concern for experience, and in part, a contextualizing of others’ experiences through a recognition of one’s own positionality towards a subject. To critically interrogate performances of cartoon corporeality, then, is to contend that cartoon corporeal performances are both culturally informed, yet are experienced differently from person to person.

Mikhail Bakhtin states that language is always “overpopulated . . . with the intentions of others,” pointing to the ways in which cultural constructs have no single source or single author, but are always imbued with the inflections of those who have enacted them in prior contexts (“Discourse in the Novel” 677). Similarly, cartoon corporeal performances in contemporary culture draw not only from the iconography of the cartoons themselves, but also from the myriad motivations that once informed the cartoons’ creation. Cartoon corporeal performances, though, are not exactly performances *by* the cartoons, but rather are physical enactments of them brought to bear by individuals who are, themselves, unique cultural participants. Consequently, though cartoon corporeal performances have been indirectly “authored” by the cartoons, and by

everything and everyone prior that influenced the cartoons, they also are made distinct by the unique contributions of the performers and of the environments in which they perform.

Patricia A. Suchy elaborates on Gary Saul Morson's notion of sideshadowing, which in literature proposes a simultaneous presence of multiple distinct narratives, as opposed to a "single story told in many unmerged voices" (1). In performance, sideshadowing, as Suchy explains, "allows us to account for image, especially the complexity of the image of the performer's body orchestrating various versions of itself" (8). A cosplayer, for example, may "become" the cartoon character she is performing, but also continues to perform as herself beyond the cosplay. Those who personally know the cosplay performer are apt to see both performances at once by also perceiving the unique qualities and mannerisms of the person with whom they are familiar. One performance — that of the cartoon character — is the intended, artistically calculated public performance. The other performance — that of the individual, sans cosplay — is irremovable from the presentation of the first, but they are not simply intertwined with one another, either. The performer behind or beside the cosplay may also take certain liberties with the performance, creating even greater distinctions between the original cartoon and its corporeal interpretation. Suchy explains, "The author orchestrates the voices, but they speak with their own authority" (8; emphasis removed). A cosplayer performing as the comic book icon Superman, for example, may decide to start breakdancing, something well within reason at most anime and comic conventions. Observers with a cultural knowledge of who Superman is supposed to be will then see both the cultural icon of Superman, as well as the subversive imagery of "Breakdancing Superman."

We can see from these discourses on unity and voices of authorship through performance an initial understanding of how, or at least why, cartoons adventure out of the screen and become

corporeally present. Cartoons are no more stable than any other literary or cultural text, and so that they might sway widely enough so as to penetrate new dimensions should be of little surprise. After all, as the previous section describes, cartoons and their antecedents have consistently changed form. The recurrence of the qualities of cartoon animation across cultural histories demonstrates an ongoing pull towards the unique aesthetics cartoons can offer; it exemplifies a perpetual need for creating and engaging with motion and vibrance, through the body, beyond what is usually allowed of the body.

The repression of the body is usually talked about within the contexts of sociocultural categories such as gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and socioeconomic status. In turn, conversations about how the body responds to repressions tend to limit themselves to those same categories. The cultural presence of cartoon corporeality in contemporary culture, however, signals another kind of response to repressions of the body. José Esteban Muñoz introduces *disidentification*, a practice by which an individual performs subversions of a culture that is uniquely oppressive to the individual — and of which she, herself, has been a part — by using key elements of that same culture within the performance. Muñoz states, “To disidentify is to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (12). Disidentification can be performed very deliberately. Imagine, for example, a Gay man who grew up in a fundamentalist Evangelical church dressing up as Jesus and holding a sign that reads “God LOVES Fags” next to a rally protesting against Queer rights.<sup>7</sup>

Disidentification as a strategy necessitates that one locate herself within the context of a culture and account for that culture’s meanings and labels as they relate to categories of identity.

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<sup>7</sup> Such a sign would contrast many homophobic messages on the signage used and popularized by anti-Queer groups like the Westboro Baptist Church.

Muñoz also states, however, that a “lack of inclusion” is only part of a much larger problem when a culture marginalizes a person based on a category of identity (10). Certainly, performances of subversion are not always explicit, nor do they always directly draw from the qualities of explicitly abrasive cultures in order to achieve subversive ends. Performances of cartoon corporeality exemplify a range of expressivity that largely runs counter to the everyday, but originate, at least in terms of content, with cartoons, rather than with the cultures, themselves. Videogames that beckon players to trek into the nooks and crannies of public spaces lend themselves to enthusiastic interactions between strangers over the mere experience of seeing a cartoon creature on the streets together. Performances of cosplay are most concentrated at fan conventions, but especially in North America the convention centers themselves virtually never contain the cosplayers as they venture out to nearby restaurants and shops dressed and performing as cartoon characters. Theatre is a culturally embraced practice in many parts of the world, but theatre that adapts itself from cartoons is far less typical, and must either work harder to earn cultural credibility (such as how the *The Lion King* musical relies on intense and expensive spectacle) or embrace their non-typical presence by tailoring to niche audiences. An active weaving of cartoons with physical liveness not only facilitates unconventional experimental performance practices, but also consciously and as unconventionally takes cartoons seriously enough so as to make them integral to the performance.

The cultural conditions that mitigate “acceptable” social performances of differently situated identities translate directly into mannerisms, gestures, postures, and all manner of physical expressions that we publicly enact. Even though we can account for the idiosyncrasies of physical expression that make each person’s social performances unique, the body is nevertheless capable of navigating social spaces in ways usually deemed unacceptable. Bakhtin

describes carnival as “a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators,” an ephemeral collapse of those sociocultural categories that script and direct the conditions for acceptable expression (“Carnival and the Carnivalesque” 250). For Bakhtin, the opportunities for radical expressivity that took place within the carnival “had genre-shaping significance” (258). That is, the carnival *carnivalized* literary works, in a sense lending them the agency to become as radically expressive as the carnival itself, at least in their representations and repetitions of expression. If people could experience “unchecked” freedom of expression, or if they could witness others experiencing that freedom, they could account for what they learn their bodies are capable of, and could translate those discoveries into mediated works with greater permanence than the carnival.

Bakhtin contends that as the original carnival pageant dissolved out of practice, the function of carnivalization was retained, in a sense, through the now-carnivalized realm of literature. I would argue that no other genre or form lends itself so well to a contemporary carnivalization than cartoon animation. The very nature of the form is one of fantasticality — a material release of the creatively conceptual. Cartoons bend and warp and shift images of the familiar into sensations of the previously unseen. Precisely because cartoons present us initially with the familiar — characters who look *enough* like real people, environments that have the same basic dimensions as *actual* physical environments, dramatic circumstances that feel at least *somewhat* like our own, etc. — we correspondingly accept all of the unfamiliar features that come with them. Bakhtin similarly states that through carnival a “free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things” (“Carnival and the Carnivalesque” 251). Such familiarity serves as a gateway to, or an anchor for, the unfamiliar. Bakhtin goes on to state, “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with



the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (“Carnival and the Carnavalesque” 251). When we conclude that sacredness, profanity, loft, wisdom, etc., are all constructs only given meaning through unstable cultural values, we see the instability of culture itself; we see the readiness of culture to ebb and flow in new directions, even as it resists the behaviors and attitudes of its most fantastical participants and mediations (carnivals and cartoons, for instance).

James McDaniel points out that “Tragedy privileges extremes, and misery. The comic attitude, in contrast, favors certain ‘making due’ in circumstances not altogether of our own choosing, and regards the fantasm as a coping mechanism that stands in for lost objects” (64). The reach, or the endlessness, of cartoons stands in not only for what we are literally incapable of as bound by the laws of physics, but also for what we merely believe we are incapable of but perhaps desire to reach for nonetheless. Bacon notes, “Texts are elastic; they exist in language, and language changes not only over time but from reader to reader.” (“One Last Time” 356).

While cartoon animation is only one of countless available channels through which we can individually engage with cultural and literary texts, few channels or forms can rival the inherent elasticity of cartoons. Cultural performances, be they deliberately artistic or part of the social everyday, result when performers meet with the texts they are given and in doing so transform themselves and one another. Bacon explains, “What goes on in the matching process is a gradual merging of two bodies into a third body which becomes the performance. At its best, the new presence is a joyful, transcendent body” (“One Last Time” 356-357). Performances of cartoon corporeality emerge from just such a meeting between those who consume cartoons as meaningful texts, and the cartoons themselves in all their fantasmic ambitions.

In order to understand how the fantastical expressions of cartoons translate from culture into the cartoons themselves, and then translate back through culture and into performances of cartoon corporeality, we also have to consider the material conditions which precede and perpetually inform those cultural conditions initiating the process. Karen Barad provides the framing for a “posthumanist performativity,” noting that material circumstances — matter, physical substance, palpable touchable *stuff*, etc. — precede human discourses. Human discourses, then, are merely part of a larger “discourse of matter.” Barad accordingly signals through the concept of “agential realism” — as in a realistic view of agency — how agency is not limited to the social-constructive power of human-specific discourses (“Posthumanist Performativity” 816). Barad asserts, “To restrict power’s productivity to the limited domain of the ‘social,’ . . . or to figure matter as merely an end product rather than an active factor in further materializations, is to cheat matter out of the fullness of its capacity” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 810). In the simplest terms, though they fall short of fully encapsulating agential realism, we can only talk about and affect *things* because *things* are there to begin with, whether or not we have reconstructed them into something “new” to talk about. Barad points out that material realities are most often not accounted for when working to understand the socially-discursive, and so there exists an implicit resistance to, or tension with, the materially-discursive.

This dissertation begins with the basic recognition that cartoons are a kind of social discourse. By examining performances of cartoon corporeality, then, it may seem as though I am primarily concerned with how a socially-discursive medium (cartoon animation) impacts certain physical practices, and not the other way around. Agential realism indicates, however, how cartoon corporeal performances are more than simple physical interpretations of social-discursive constructs. Cartoon animation, after all, originates and is consistently imbued with

physical practices. Even stand-alone cartoons that present no explicit relationship to the physical involve storyboarding, voiceover, and editing processes that rely on physically-live bodies for execution. If cartoon animation is always rooted in the physical, then cartoon corporeal performance is less about the physical translation of a socially-discursive medium, and more about a re-articulating of animation's material-discursive origins.

By some accounts, Barad may go so far as to imply that social discourses are so enmeshed with the physical world that to presume any separability is disingenuous (Braunmühl). While social and physical discourses may not entirely be one and the same, they are still densely entangled. Accordingly, Barad articulates the notion of "intra-action" as the permeability of phenomena to one another. She explains:

The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual "interaction," which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) marks an important shift, reopening and refiguring foundational notions of classical ontology such as causality, agency, space, time, matter, discourse, responsibility, and accountability. ("Nature's Queer Performativity" 125; emphasis removed)

Like Dwight Conquergood's contention that a "boundary is more like a membrane than a wall" ("Interventions and Radical Research" 145), a posthumanist performativity reveals that the boundaries between phenomena, between subjects, and between the physical and the social are quite penetrable. Anime scholar Susan Napier articulates a similar permeability between the physical and the conceptual, stating that with the mass proliferation of media technologies "the division between the world of mutability, dreams, and the unconscious, and the hard-and-fast 'real' is an increasingly ambiguous one" (74). An intra-action of phenomena collapses and synthesizes the oft presumed division between the physical and the conceptual, the material-discursive and the social-discursive. Performances of cartoon corporeality exemplify such collapse and synthesis in action.

A relevant example: The 1998 animated series *Cowboy Bebop* is a highly acclaimed Space Opera<sup>8</sup> anime with narrative and aesthetic influences from both Westerns and films noir in which the show's central characters dress like futuristic Western heroes with stylistic hints of steampunk<sup>9</sup> and Old Hollywood. Yet, *Cowboy Bebop* eclipses its status as a cartoon. Given the show's lasting popularity (Hiramoto), it is no surprise that anime conventions regularly have *Cowboy Bebop* cosplayers in attendance. Cosplay occurs with or without *Cowboy Bebop* cosplay specifically, as the practice precedes its relationship with the cartoon. Further, through an intra-action of phenomena *Cowboy Bebop* can be understood as exceeding its subjugated position as a product of entertainment. *Cowboy Bebop* is always *Cowboy Bebop* the cartoon, but it is also performances of *Cowboy Bebop* cosplay; it is the *Cowboy Bebop* fandom; it is essentially every reverberation beyond itself and into otherwise distinct phenomena.

I would like also to offer a brief, tangential analogy for further clarification: HIV/AIDS is a retroviral disease with specific properties and effects. Yet, HIV/AIDS eclipses its physiology and takes part in the formation of discourses that justify homophobic sentiments, galvanize Queer Rights movements, shape conversations around medical research, global policy, and more. These discursive effects, though, are not merely the results of direct causal relationships with the disease, but rather, they take shape in relation to it, and according to the material *and* cultural contexts that precede the relationship, such as cultural predispositions towards homophobia. HIV/AIDS is thus more than a disease, but is also all of the ways in which the disease is discursively employed and understood beyond its physical status.

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<sup>8</sup> A *Space Opera* is a form of science-fiction involving outer space and intergalactic or interplanetary adventure and drama.

<sup>9</sup> *Steampunk* denotes the aesthetic in various science-fiction and fantasy texts that imagines advanced technologies developed from and inspired by older steam-powered technologies of the nineteenth century.

Such intra-active entanglement signals how cartoon animation has a capacity beyond cultural production, and I agree with Brian Massumi who states, “It is meaningless to interrogate the relation of the human to the nonhuman if the nonhuman is *only* a construct of human culture and inertness” (100; emphasis added). I point to María Lorenzo Hernández, who notes, “The double sense of animated images is a conceptual movement that calls attention to the surface of representation, instead of its actual contents” (36). Certainly, the content and construction of a cartoon denotes its relationship to culture, but the “surface of representation” denotes its form. Moreover, while animation may be developed by social actors, it is also more than a social product, such that many of the material qualities influencing its form — vivid malleability and expressive motion — exist with or without human agents and our cultures.

Phenomena of gaming, cosplay, staging, and weaving represent multiple distinct points on a spectrum of cultural performances, from the socially presentational to the artistically calculated. Where Conquergood notes that through performance “cultures throw off forms of themselves — literally, ‘expressions’ — that are publicly accessible” (“Cultural Struggles” 18), I would follow first by acknowledging that, warped as they are, cartoons reflect sincere cultural customs, conventions, and appetites. I would then point out how the material capacity to produce cartoon animation comes from more than just culture; it also owes much to the physical circumstances and precedents that inform and allow for the production of cartoons in the first place: from the actual materials that are used for drawing and rendering imagery, to the material referents that are drawn or interpreted. I would lastly contend that performances of cartoon corporeality exemplify how this cultural casting, which can have significant and potentially indeterminable range, consists of practices in explicitly *returning* the animated to the physical.

As a conceptual form and a particular array of practices, animation is incredibly diverse, used across media in virtually countless ways, and the possibilities for overlap of its form and function are endless. As Ward explains, “Animation is at one and the same time a rich, multifaceted activity, seemingly existing in many different places at once, and it is an intuitive, magical process” (229-230). Smartphones, tablets, video projectors, and streaming services like Hulu are all contemporary media technologies playing a role in animation production and consumption. These same technologies have crossed a threshold, out of the realm of casual entertainment and into that of near social necessity in many cultures, especially in the West. Further, Raz Greenberg specifies that it is “difficult to separate animation from other forms of media as it becomes more embedded within those forms” (3). Manovich notes of animation’s relationship to contemporary film, “Born from animation, cinema pushed animation to its boundary, only to become one particular case of animation in the end” (5), reinforcing his argument that in the digital age, “cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation” (3). Because animation is so thoroughly embedded in the media and media technologies that saturate contemporary society, animation is as thoroughly embedded socially. Philip Auslander aptly notes, “It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media” (45).

Barad, Bakhtin, and others help to provide the basic theoretical grounds necessary to recognize and articulate a more serious intimacy between the discursive motivations of cartoons and the preeminent corporeality of culture. Performances of cartoon corporeality work at exposing arbitrary tensions between the socially- and the materially-discursive. Performances of cartoon corporeality draw credibility from the technologically mass-mediated presence of animation in contemporary culture. Performances of cartoon corporeality allow the physical and

the conceptual — the material-discursive and the social-discursive — to invade one another, recontextualizing our understanding of performative phenomena as intra-active, rather than as independent entities that merely sustain superficial interactive relationships with one another. I introduce additional theoretical perspectives, as needed, throughout the dissertation in order to help further clarify and structure the arguments I put forward. The theoretical positions discussed in this section help to frame and foundationalize the ensuing discussion of this dissertation around the intersections of cartoons, performance, and the social and material discourses through which both occur.

### **Method(s) and Process**

Conducting a phenomenology of cartoon corporeality involves a basic, but somewhat exhaustive, process of (1) gathering and closely analyzing literary materials on each phenomenon and site that I investigate, including scholarly texts and media reports; (2) conducting in-depth open-ended qualitative interviews with select participants from various communities directly related to each phenomenon and site; and (3) performing critical observational analyses, which sometimes involve my own on-site experimentation (I explain in Chapter Four, for example, how I visited the street corner on which Corden and company performed *Beauty and the Beast*, and then deliberately, embarrassingly, danced and sang through the intersection several times). Phenomenology uncovers insights about given phenomena by locating experiences within them and then critically assessing the significance of those experiences. Helene Starks and Susan Brown Trinidad note, “The truth of the event, as an abstract entity, is subjective and knowable only through embodied perception; we create meaning through the experience of moving through space and time” (1374). A singular phenomenology of one instance or mode of cartoon corporeality is insufficient, as the very claim

for the term and concept is new, and subsequently without a cohesive history of insights. An inductive approach offering significant insights from multiple angles and sources is required for a study like this.

Additionally, animation as a form is so widely varied in its uses and manifestations that performances of cartoon corporeality also inevitably manifest in widely varied ways. In turn, while my phenomenological approach attempts to capture and synthesize an understanding of experiences across a spectrum of cartoon corporeal performances, no single method of investigation could adequately be applied to each mode and site of interrogation, let alone to the entire study. My readings of scholarly texts and media reports are necessary to situate my research and arguments within larger discourses on performance and animation, and also to determine how existing discourses have already indicated cartoon corporeality's prevalence and significance. The interviews I conduct are necessary to ensure that the insights gained and the conclusions reached are informed and developed not only through an analysis of larger discursive trends involving each mode of cartoon corporeality, but also through the particular contributions of individuals who have direct knowledge of, and experience with, each mode. My direct critical observations and experiments also allow me to account for the distinct functions, motivations, processes, and impacts of each manifestation of cartoon corporeality. Accordingly, these observations and experiments were closely tailored to each mode and site of interrogation, as I further detail in subsequent chapters. I should also note here that my direct observations and experiments were heavily informed by my experiences with, and affinities for, the modes, sites, and texts I navigate. That is, the "geekiness" to which I refer above made much of the research process, especially my direct observations and experiments, particularly joyful to engage with.



In this sense, a strong affinity for the subjects and experiences I engage played a role in formulating my methodological strategy.

For Shulamit Reinharz, the phenomenological transformation of embodied experiences into publicly accessible and digestible sets of knowledge should follow a specific process: first, the researcher must find a way of engaging with accounts of others' experiences regarding the phenomenon of interest in order to reconstruct what she "sees or hears into an understanding of" those experiences; the researcher then needs to interpret those reconstructions into essentializing themes or categories that contribute to a narrative of meaning about the phenomenon in question (78). Sarah Ahmed asserts that "phenomenology offers a queer angle," and contends that the "surfaces of bodies are shaped by what is reachable. Indeed, the history of bodies can be rewritten as the history of the reachable" (165; 55). Certainly, performances of cartoon corporeality challenge presumptions of reachability by displaying and accentuating ways in which the body can access expressive behaviors and qualities usually considered unreachable or unpalatable for a social individual. My phenomenology of cartoon corporeality is thus concerned with understanding not only what is "reachable" for the bodies and subjects performing, but with how those bodies "reorient the reachable," so to speak; with how performances of cartoon corporeality offer individual experiences and new possibilities.

Mark Mason explains that when conducting a phenomenological study, the goal is to determine "sample size" based on the point in the research process at which the researcher achieves "saturation." Reaching saturation simply means that the gathered material being analyzed no longer produces anything that is both new and significant to the focus of the research. Mason notes, "The point of saturation is . . . a rather difficult point to identify and of course a rather elastic notion" (par. 60). Unlike social-scientific quantitative research methods,

there are no hard-and-fast rules for the number of participants that should be interviewed, the number of texts or narratives that should be thematically analyzed, or even for the number of sites that should be interrogated. As phenomenologist Lenore Langsdorf states, “Connections other than physical causality may be recognized once researchers notice that they are not themselves causally moved into inquiry, and proceed to trace out the implications of their own activities” (6).

Because I want to obtain some depth from the interrogation into each mode and site of cartoon corporeality, I limit my phenomenology primarily to the four sites of analysis introduced earlier, allowing room to achieve that depth while not overwhelming the project itself. The number of scholarly texts I gathered was largely influenced by how many were actually available on each subject. Academic research into *Pokémon Go*, for example, is still fairly new, whereas academic research into cosplay is widely available. Two primary strategies were used to seek out interviewees: simply walking around and approaching people, asking them to participate; and reaching out through my own communities in gaming, theatre, and academia.

While I “only” interviewed twenty-two participants in total, each participant was asked, on average, more than twenty open-ended questions related to their experiences with cartoon animation, with the various modes of cartoon corporeality selected for the study, and with the specific sites of interrogation most relevant to their experiences. Questions probed participants’ interests in cartoons broadly, and in the various modes of cartoon corporeality more specifically. I asked about significant memories involving cartoons and involving the mode of cartoon corporeal performance most relevant to each participant. I also asked about their preferred means of experiencing the modes with which they were most aligned: “Can you talk about your favorite types of videogames (i.e. action-adventure, role-playing, etc.)?” Other questions

inquired about participants' everyday experiences with cartoons and with the different modes of cartoon corporeal performance — “Can you talk about the ways in which your everyday life involves, or has involved, cosplay?” — and other questions addressed the inverse, seeking insights from participants about non-typical ways they may have experienced or engaged with cartoons or cartoon corporeality in the past.

Questions were open-ended specifically so that I could locate themes and shared insights as they occurred, instead of assuming that interviewees' answers would lead to one or more predetermined outcomes. Participants tended to speak with great enthusiasm and energy about the topics (i.e. they spoke fast and said a *lot*). Consequently, I found that I gathered more than enough material from the interview portion of the research process to contribute significant insight. While the primary purpose of the interviews was to help inform the conclusions reached throughout this process, the interviews by themselves also revealed interesting themes about individuals' experiences with cartoons and with performances of cartoon corporeality. Most significantly, interview participants overwhelmingly discussed their own affinities for cartoons and animation as being rooted deeply in a nostalgia for their experiences watching cartoons in their youth. Most participants elaborated that cartoons either provided them with a sense of expressive freedom, or reflected the greater expressive freedom they felt as children. Several participants also indicated that they engaged with the various modes of cartoon corporeality as adults as a way to viscerally re-access or re-experience that same kind of expressive freedom.

I made sure to interview a wide range of participants, seeking those who engaged performances of cartoon corporeality both casually and professionally. I interviewed individuals who work in the videogame industry and those who personally beta-tested *Pokémon Go* before its public release; I also interviewed those who have a deep passion for videogames but pursue

them separately from their professional lives. I interviewed a “cosplay idol,” someone readily recognizable and renowned in the cosplay community and who professionally makes a living through cosplay; I also interviewed an Anime Expo volunteer, not performing in cosplay, whose job (about which he was very enthusiastic) was to gather statistics about attendees at scheduled cosplay gatherings. I interviewed people who had worked on two different theatrical productions of *Beauty and the Beast* (neither worked on the crosswalk version, unfortunately) in two different capacities; I also interviewed someone who had worked in the cartoon animation industry at the twilight of two-dimensional cel (traditional) animation, and who talked about personally co-advising the performers in an ice-skating theatrical adaptation of the 1990s animated series *Animaniacs*. I interviewed founding members of the Live Action Cartoonists performance group, and I interviewed some of my own performers from *Cue Cartoon*.

All interviewees volunteered at least partial use of their names, or pseudonyms of their choosing. Whenever I reference interview participants, I usually use either their first names or their chosen pseudonyms (with just a few exceptions) in order to differentiate between interviewees’ voices, and other individuals and texts that I reference throughout the dissertation. For the same reason, I also reference all interviewees in the past tense, as opposed to the present as I do for other citations. Questions were structured so that all interviewees were asked essentially the same series of questions, in the same order, with just a few adjustments to account for the specific modes or sites being discussed, or to provide clarification whenever a question was unclear to a participant. All interviewees had complete liberty to answer the questions any way they saw fit, to skip any questions they wanted, to end the interviews at any time, or later to rescind their permission for me to use their names. Whenever transcribing interviewee answers (which were audio recorded in all but one instance), I worked to maintain each person’s

individual patterns of speech, including vocal fillers such as “like” and “uh,” my aim being to honor their voices as they have been lent to the research.

My primary intention with including open-ended qualitative interviews in the research process is to help balance the insights I uncover through the existing scholarship I reference, through my direct critical observations, and through the theoretical lenses provided by Barad, Bakhtin, and others. Observations from interviewees provide me with direct experiential insights other than my own, and they help reinforce the claims made by myself and other scholars. In the chapters that follow, I rely on interviewee contributions as needed to reinforce other claims and observations, but not exhaustively. For instance, statements from different interviewees are sometimes very similar to one another, and so I try to avoid redundancy. Further, because I asked interviewees to answer the questions in any ways they saw fit, some portions of most interviews are unrelated to individuals’ experiences with performances of cartoon corporeality.

### **Preview of Structure and Key Insights**

The dissertation is structured such that each chapter provides useful insights for the next. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two focuses on gaming and *Pokémon Go*; Chapter Three on cosplay and Anime Expo; Chapter Four on theatrical adaptations and Corden’s *Beauty and the Beast*; and Chapter Five concludes with a synthesis of the insights gained throughout the research process, along with a discussion of active weaving of cartoons with physical liveness as a niche, but potentially expanding mode of cartoon corporeality. To preview, the overarching insights gained through my research are as follows: First, performances of, and other engagements with, cartoon corporeality are intensely individualized experiences in that they are clearly motivated by individual desires for fantastical self-expression; yet they are also made meaningful largely through community oriented experiences. Second, performances of cartoon

corporeality shift from casual everyday engagements to physically exhaustive comprehensive commitments that lend themselves to transformational experiences for both the participants and for the surrounding physical and cultural environments in which the performances are situated. Third (and perhaps most importantly), cartoon corporeality is a unique mode of performative inquiry that not only bleeds transformation into surrounding (physical and cultural) environments, but also reveals in those environments the already-fantasmic possibilities they possess.

## CHAPTER 2. GOTTA CATCH ‘EM ALL: CARTOON CORPOREALITY THROUGH GAMING

In most iterations of the *Pokémon* franchise, a young character (usually around ten or eleven years old) is partnered with her or his first Pokémon and tasked by a “Pokémon professor” with adventuring into the world to collect data on as many Pokémon as possible, usually by capturing and training them. In the anime, the comics, and most of the videogames the adventurer focuses also on becoming a “Pokémon master” by training her Pokémon to defeat gym leaders who serve as gatekeepers to various “Pokémon leagues.” Trainers battle gym leaders’ Pokémon with their own, earning badges when victorious. Earning enough badges eventually allows trainers to compete for the title of “Pokémon League Champion.” A parallel plot in the games and anime usually positions the adventurer to defeat a Pokémon crime syndicate of some kind. Each syndicate focuses on using Pokémon towards nefarious ends, from world domination to achieving ultimate beauty at any cost. While *Pokémon Go* simplifies or discards some of these narrative elements, the core elements of adventure and exploration, Pokémon collection, and competition are all retained; exploring new geographic locations is central, collecting more Pokémon nets more rewards (allowing players to level up and evolve<sup>10</sup> their Pokémon into stronger Pokémon, for example), and players not only still battle at gyms but also align themselves with one of a few select teams to battle and take over rival teams’ gyms. As a result, *Pokémon Go* players familiar with the larger franchise are able to experience embodied reflections of the general *Pokémon* narrative (and not just imprints of animated Pokémon on the sidewalks).

The Pokémon property is owned and managed by three corporate entities based in Japan: Nintendo Company, Creatures Incorporated, and Game Freak Incorporated. Nintendo, most

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<sup>10</sup> When a Pokémon evolves from one form to another, they take on a new name, a new form, and new abilities.

often recognized as *Pokémon*'s main proprietor, is a behemoth in the videogame industry with a net worth of 140 billion U.S. dollars as of January 2019 ("The Wealth Record"); *Pokémon Go* alone had generated nearly two billion U.S. dollars in revenue by the summer of 2018 (Tassi). Important to note here is that *Pokémon*'s corporate ties make the cartoon corporeality of *Pokémon Go* at least somewhat economically motivated. Those just-mentioned narrative elements of exploration, collection, and competition create for players an opportunity to experience the Pokémon world within the existing material and cultural apparatuses of the real world, but through players' experiences with these functions, Nintendo and others profit. In fact, performances of cartoon corporeality beyond the scope of *Pokémon Go* as a particular example, and beyond gaming as a particular mode, seem largely to be driven by such concerns for economic gain. Anime Expo is operated by the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Animation, and James Corden's crosswalk adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* is produced by CBS Studios and adapts a property owned by The Walt Disney Company. Though the "economics of cartoon corporeality" are not my focus in this or any other chapter, the fact that my primary sites of analysis are directly connected to and controlled by corporate entities needs to be acknowledged, as much of the popularization of animated texts originates with a concern for economic capital. Additionally, as the vast majority of mainstream cartoon animation is produced by such entities, consequently the vast majority of performances of cartoon corporeality are indirectly sanctioned by those entities as well.

*Pokémon Go* is arguably the *Pokémon* franchise's most readily recognizable contemporary incarnation. Released in the summer of 2016, the mobile game proved itself for a time to be a powerful cultural phenomenon, attracting masses of players from across demographics to trek together to and through business districts, parks, college campuses, and



residential neighborhoods for the chance to “catch” Pokémon. For many players, *Pokémon Go* introduced the potential for augmented reality to stimulate a fundamentally physical experience, rather than a primarily visual one. Mobile augmented reality games preceding *Pokémon Go* often require little more of players than to point their phones’ cameras at specially patterned playing cards that would trigger the game to generate animated imagery within players’ physical environments. Conversely, *Pokémon Go* necessitates that players explore the geography around them, allowing interactions with new Pokémon only if players physically travel to predetermined GPS coordinates seeking these encounters.

Although the cultural craze that marked *Pokémon Go*’s launch certainly faded, many can recall in those first months after the game’s release constantly seeing clusters of people (often complete strangers) in every imaginable form of public space, all with their phones pointed at the same seemingly arbitrary spot of ground between them. These moments were marked by shared excitements and even enthusiastic frustrations at others’ attempts and successes catching the Pokémon they had all found together. One of my interviewees, Andres, told me the story of first playing *Pokémon Go* while stationed in Hawaii and serving in the United States Navy Reserve. He explained that while exploring with his friends, looking for new Pokémon, they saw “men and women all over Pearl Harbor catching Pokémon, and it took the base, like, two days to put up signs [saying], ‘Oh, you can’t play *Pokémon*’ or something, ‘It might cause an accident.’” As someone who openly admitted to being “hooked” on *Pokémon Go*, Andres explained that he also took part in traversing the World War II memorial to find and catch Pokémon, and conveyed how interesting it was for him to see so many others doing the same, to be using the space in that way. The phenomenon of these regular yet seemingly spontaneous gatherings has mostly come and gone with the game’s initial burst of popularity. Nevertheless, *Pokémon Go* retains a healthy

following of players committed to catching, training, and “evolving” new Pokémon as updates continue to roll out from Niantic.<sup>11</sup>

Along with the sustained popularity of a game like *Pokémon Go* that encourages players to freely explore new environments comes a series of accidents caused by those playing. While the title screen of the game instructs players to move about their geography safely (which includes not driving while playing the game), one study estimates that more than seven billion dollars in damage may have been caused by *Pokémon Go* players in the United States, alone (“Death by Pokémon Go?”). Much of this damage is the result of traffic accidents, many of which caused fatalities. The website titled “Pokémon Go Death Tracker” notes seventeen deaths and fifty-six injuries directly related to *Pokémon Go* gameplay, from stabbings and muggings of players who enter unfamiliar areas, to a reporter falling “off [a] motorcycle while playing” the game. In addition to the clear and difficult-to-mitigate safety issues of *Pokémon Go*, the game and its publishers have also been criticized for how they program the maps in the game. Players are encouraged to locate and travel to gyms and “PokéStops” (locations usually designated by existing physical cultural landmarks that when visited earn players more in-game rewards), but the particular locations of such places have been scrutinized. Ashley Colley et al. discuss their 2017 study of the game, noting, “Our results . . . strongly suggest that the geographic distribution of PokéStops substantially advantages areas with large white (non-Hispanic) populations” (1184). All of this is to say that while performances of cartoon corporeality appear to function well as experimental modes of inquiry, lending themselves to discoveries of new environments (as discussed further in this chapter) and new modes of expression (as discussed in the chapters

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<sup>11</sup> In Japan, *Pokémon Go* saw a similar initial burst of popularity and a similar sharp decline in unplanned large gatherings of trainers, but also continues to see a similarly steady player base (Blaster).

that follow) they imperfectly operate within the same cultural networks that usually restrict such inquiry and experimentation.

I continue this chapter by detailing my own first attempts at playing *Pokémon Go*, establishing a frame of reference for the narratives I explore through interviews, as well as for the insights acquired through the various media reports and research projects on the game. I also use the opportunity of formulating a personal narrative as a way of recognizing how my own positions as both an avid gamer, and as the researcher at the helm of the project, might inform one another. By no measure is this dissertation an autoethnographic project, but given my personal history within the aforementioned “league of nerd culture,” failure to locate myself within the conversation on gaming (or within any of the conversations throughout this dissertation, for that matter) would discount the value behind the very motivations that first propelled the research. As Ahmed, Barad, and Kristin Langellier respectively argue, “It matters how we arrive at the places we do” (2); “We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are *of* the world” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 829); and, “All stories emerge as a practical communication activity as we take up and piece together the bits of our [own] experiences” in order to formulate narratives (139). I approach my own playthroughs of *Pokémon Go* primarily as deliberate experiments that allow me a close and tactile observation of the general experience of playing the game. After discussing my own playthrough perspective of *Pokémon Go* gameplay, I elaborate on the ways in which the game encourages players to enter and alter physical environments, and how players, themselves, can change in the process. I specifically address how *Pokémon Go* exemplifies ways that videogame play generally has long progressed towards increased physical engagement/activity, and how gaming as a mode of cartoon corporeality functions to rationalize the fantasmic or fantastical qualities of animation.

## Playthrough Perspective

I first downloaded the *Pokémon Go* app with every intention of playing it right away, of personally capturing the kinds of experiences I was seeking to understand in others.<sup>12</sup> On a surprisingly cool summer day, I installed the app, fully intending to start my journey; and yet exactly one stomach growl later I instead found myself eating lunch, unmotivated to move in ways I knew the game would demand. I understood at the onset that success within the game was measured by the number and variety of Pokémon caught, the levels of one's Pokémon (how “strong” they were), and the kinds of battles won against other players, all of which is only achievable by “gaining steps” in the material world (i.e. by walking a whole lot). When I finally found the motivation to move, I started with the basics of learning how to interact with the app. Beyond what I already knew about the game using my phone's GPS coordinates to track my real-world location, the interface was fairly straightforward. When I opened the app I was prompted to customize a character that could serve as a three-dimensional version of myself, and I was then greeted by the cartoon image of the character Professor Willow. Willow “spoke” through dialogue text boxes at the bottom of the screen; he welcomed me into “the world of Pokémon” and then provided me with my “Pokéballs” — hand-sized red-and-white orbs that open at a hinge to capture the Pokémon in a burst of light that absorbs them into the ball.

After Willow disappeared from my phone's screen, I had a full view of an animated rendering of my character standing atop a map of my actual, real-world surrounding geography. This map of a section of Baton Rouge, Louisiana looked quite similar to those one might see in navigation mode on Google Maps, but in *Pokémon Go* the outlines and geographic renderings were noticeably more colorful and vibrant; they were noticeably more cartoonish. Quite near my

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<sup>12</sup> For as avidly as I have played *Pokémon* games throughout my life, I did not play *Pokémon Go* until starting this dissertation project.

character were 3D-animated figures of three different Pokémon — Bulbasaur, Squirtle, and Charmander.<sup>13</sup> The Bulbasaur, in particular, appeared to be so close to my character on the map that I would not have to physically stand up and walk anywhere to engage with her.<sup>14</sup> Drawing from my limited experience with touchscreen videogames, I took a guess at what to do and tapped the rendering of Bulbasaur on the map. Sure enough, the screen changed — I no longer saw the map, but instead my phone's camera activated and I could see through the screen across to the other side of my office. I happened at that moment to be facing my office mate's desk, and standing on the seat of the desk's chair was Bulbasaur herself, pleasantly looking my way (well, she was smiling). At the bottom of the screen was an animated rendering of one of the Pokéballs I had been given. While I had never played the game before this point, I had seen others play and I knew that if I held my finger on the Pokéball and then twirled it in a circular motion, the Pokéball would sparkle, and somehow doing this would increase my chances of successfully capturing Bulbasaur.

I twirled and flicked my finger upward to throw the Pokéball across the room, rather ineffectively it seemed as I watched it lethargically bounce at the floor between desks, missing Bulbasaur completely. For the second attempt I took care to throw the Pokéball more deliberately in Bulbasaur's direction. This time I saw the Pokéball fly across the office, bounce off Bulbasaur's head, open at its hinge, and with a beam of vivid red light absorb Bulbasaur and then close. The Pokéball landed on the chair Bulbasaur had been standing on, began to shake as though Bulbasaur were trying to get free, and then ceased moving, completing Bulbasaur's capture. Upon my return to the map screen, Willow again greeted me and informed me that I would get to travel the whole world looking for and capturing more Pokémon. Personally

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<sup>13</sup> These are the same three Pokémon players first encounter in the original *Pokémon* games from 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Bulbasaur is a small, four-legged, blue and green dinosaur-like Pokémon with a plant bulb on her back.

disinterested in trekking through the humid and flash-flood-prone summers of Baton Rouge to capture more Pokémon, it took me a while to get into the groove of the game. I found myself waiting for moments of acceptable weather before going out looking for new interactions with the creatures, and sometimes just playing casually, capturing Pokémon as I happened to encounter them while out for coffee or on an errand. I discovered from my research that the pattern I adopted — playing the game by constantly negotiating with what it would physically demand of me in a given moment — was quite the norm. The further impression I got from playing, an impression reinforced across conversations with players much more committed than myself, was that regardless of how much one preferred a casual approach to *Pokémon Go* gameplay, players regularly find the motivation to play with much more deliberation.

Though I play rarely, I also occasionally engaged the game with more deliberate focus. On a Sunday evening in early 2019 I decided to visit the downtown area of Baton Rouge, Louisiana to play the game. I had been downtown multiple times prior, but always to visit specific predetermined locations: a theatre, a bar, the river, a restaurant. I did not usually wander. I parked at a familiar intersection, and the *Pokémon Go* app indicated there was a Koffing nearby. Koffing is a poison-type Pokémon that looks like a misshapen purple orb with a large smiling face, below which is a skull and crossbones symbol. While looking around to determine precisely where Koffing was so that I could capture her, I took note of the surrounding architectural details that had never quite stood out to me before. The surrounding buildings' outer walls were of different shades of brick, and for the first time I realized that several of the storefronts were built out of wood framing. The doors, the window frames, and the sections of wall below the windows of several buildings were all wood, an architectural quality I cannot

recall ever seeing in other metropolitan downtown districts (though maybe I would have if I had played *Pokémon Go* in those other downtown districts).

Looking first at my phone after exiting the car, I tapped the Koffing on the map screen and she appeared in front of me, floating over the sidewalk between the storefronts and where I stood. While I do not play the game often, every time I encounter and try to capture a new Pokémon I catch myself looking up from my screen to glance directly at the actual physical space in front of me. Fully aware that the Pokémon is not actually palpably present, I nevertheless feel compelled to check, because until I glance up I can see her occupying the same environment I am; and every time I check to confirm whether the Pokémon can indeed only been seen in my physical environment if I look through my screen, I experience a brief moment of confusion and dissonance. After experiencing exactly such confusion and dissonance while catching Koffing by looking up from my phone to look for her on the sidewalk, I looked at the in-game map of my area and saw no other Pokémon nearby. I then began walking in a direction with which I was unfamiliar. While walking in this new direction I came upon an opening between two plain-looking brick buildings. Through the opening I could see a parking lot, and behind the parking lot was another, much more visually alluring building. The design of the more alluring building was constituted by large rectangular shapes of dark-tone blues, oranges, yellows, and greens. Though dark in tone, their composition made the building's wall appear quite vibrant.

Looking again at my map, I saw that there were a few PokéStops further down the street, so I continued in the same direction. I made it to the end of the street, and near me appeared a Venonat, a bug- and poison-type Pokémon with long antennae and large red eyes peering out of a round body mostly covered in dark fur. When I tapped Venonat and held up my screen to look

for her, I found her standing in the middle of the street. As I mention above, *Pokémon Go* gameplay has been connected with a number of accidents, so I was especially surprised to find Venonat waiting to be caught in the middle of a road, though I was easily able to stay on the sidewalk while I captured her. After catching Venonat, I walked down a different, one-way street that I had only visited briefly in the past. I stopped outside a restaurant that was closed for the evening, took out a notepad and stood with it against the wall of the restaurant to document my surprise at Venonat's placement. After taking my notes I turned to walk again, and a car suddenly came driving down the wrong way of the one-way street and stopped abruptly in front of me. The driver rolled down his window and aggressively asked me, "You trying to get in there?"<sup>15</sup>

The implicit accusation that I was trying to break into a business while playing *Pokémon Go* (or rather, while I was taking notes about playing *Pokémon Go*) underscored for me that the game not only encourages changes to the ways players move about familiar physical environments and into new ones, but also changes the ways players are perceived by others in those physical environments. Most physical environments where Pokémon can be caught in *Pokémon Go* include not only the structures and natural elements of the area, but the people who occupy the area as well. Following the encounter with the driver, through the remainder of my evening searching for Pokémon in the downtown area of Baton Rouge I discovered (or noticed for the first time) an outdoor performance venue, a library, a large steampunk-style fountain, and a giant stone head on the edge of a grassy field. Through *Pokémon Go* I was discovering new qualities about, and spaces within, an area with which I thought I was already familiar, and doing so through the process of performing the role of Pokémon trainer, or adventurer, in a way that

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<sup>15</sup> After simply stating, "Nope, just taking notes" while holding up my notepad, the driver sped off without saying anything.



treated my real-world environment as if it were also the “world of Pokémon” with which I was intimately familiar.

### **Environmental Interjections**

*Pokémon Go* players travel to new places, walk new paths, and discover previously unknown or unconsidered nuances of neighborhoods with which they may have once thought themselves more familiar. Real-world locations “rich with Pokémon” — along with other specially designated locations within the game — materially, if only briefly, transform as new bodies inhabit them. Parks and public works of art attract new attention as businesses invite more commerce from the patronage of passing-through players. In turn, the environments not only offer players new geographic knowledge, but potentially (and often concretely) instill new experiences connected to the physical and cultural spaces through which they pass, all seemingly in the name of capturing and raising digitally-generated cartoon creatures.

*Pokémon Go* is a “pervasive” or “alternate reality” game (Bogost par. 9); it is designed to augment momentarily conventional conceptions of reality. Such games change both how we literally see the world in front of our eyes, and how we interact with it. A distinct but comparable example is the game *Pac-Manhattan*, which was “a large-scale urban game that utilize[d] the New York City grid to recreate the 1980’s [sic] video game sensation Pac-Man” (“Pac Manhattan” par. 1). Ian Bogost explains, “When they first hit the scene more than a decade ago, pervasive and alternate reality games promised to offer a different way to see and understand the physical, material world” (par. 9). Bogost then argues, “These games wouldn’t replace the world, either as escapist entertainment or as instrumental exercise or social therapy. Instead, they would force the fictional and the real worlds to swap places, and rapidly” (par. 9).

For its part, *Pokémon Go* seems to do more to merge the real and the fictional than to swap them. In playing *Pokémon Go* tangible physical and social interactions occur, but they revolve around the creatures and the storied conventions of what would otherwise be a completely fictional world. Yet, that *once*-fictional world becomes a lived experience for the players performing the role of real-life Pokémon trainers. For Barad, our “discursive practices are not human-based activities but rather specific material (re)configurings of the world through which local determinations of boundaries, properties, and meanings are differentially enacted” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 828). While I agree with Barad that discourse is a matter of formation, setting limitations on everything from social behavior to ideology, I would point to discursive entities like *Pokémon Go* as an example of how the boundaries created through discourse can actually run counter to the kinds of restrictive perspectives Barad often notes, specifically those perspectives that assume absolute separation between the material and social.

No doubt, the environmental interjections spurred from playing *Pokémon Go* occur in two different directions: players interject into the environment itself, and the environment interjects back. That players of *Pokémon Go* should be understood as performers is to recognize that the performance of playing is temporal and transformative; that the act of interjecting into the physical environment changes its physicality, as that of the player changes as well. Yet, as Barad observes, “‘Human bodies’ and ‘human subjects’ do not preexist as such, nor are they mere end products. ‘Humans’ are neither pure cause nor pure effect but [are] part of the world in its open-ended becoming” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 821). Cartoon corporeal performances of gaming through *Pokémon Go* are thus more than simple enactments by the players onto the environment, and vice versa.

The environment precedes the players, and it precedes the game; and yet the environment in most cases has been broken down and rearranged to suit certain desires for cultural organization and appearance: gravel and bitumen transformed into asphalt, climate-worn mountainsides carved into stone blocks and structures, plant life cultivated and transplanted to serve aesthetics and breathability, and so on. Though the material itself precedes the culture that has reconstructed and rearranged it, the complex and ongoing transformations of culture lend themselves to continuing material reconstructions and rearrangements. Further, when *Pokémon Go* motivates players to engage the material world, it relies on a set of animated images of creatures that are both iconic and fantastical. Pokémon are not conceived from thin air, however, but instead are reconceptualized iterations of various real-world creatures and artifacts (the Pokémon Vulpix, for example, is a fox, but with six tails instead of one, and with the ability to breath fire). Accordingly, the merger of performer and environment through *Pokémon Go* gameplay occurs within an apparatus of agential realism — an apparatus of material precedents that interweave to make the performances of public gameplay possible. After all, as Barad points out, “Apparatuses are open-ended practices,” and the relationship between cultural and material referents is therefore one of continual co-participation, more so than a hierarchical command of one over the other (“Posthumanist Performativity” 816).

My wider investigations into experiences of gaming through researching literature and through interviews — as exemplified through *Pokémon Go* — have highlighted two themes about gaming as a performance of cartoon corporeality. First, well before the launch of *Pokémon Go*, videogames have already been on their way to becoming more and more physically demanding, or more physically “encouraging,” so to speak. As described in Chapter One, cartoons and animation have always been imbued with the physical. No doubt that

essential quality of physicality has always been central to gaming as well. With advancements in digital media technologies now paving the way for more possibilities, gaming has begun to evolve rapidly beyond its once primarily isolated performances of cartoon corporeality. The second theme is that one of the core functions of videogames is to rationalize the fantastical by making the fantastical feel more concrete, something achieved through the inherently tactile and emotionally provocative nature of gaming. Cartoons could not be considered as such without some fantastical aesthetic quality; without some clear distinction from our expectations of what reality should look like. Such distinction is part of the allure of cartoons, and when it comes to gaming, the mark of fantasticality grows from aesthetic to synesthetic; it grows to a multi-sensorial experience of sight, mind, and body all at once.

#### **A “step in the right direction” (Already More and More Physical)**

Videogames’ long embrace and incorporation of physical activity can be most clearly seen in some of the more craze-driven iterations of gaming technology over the last two decades or so. Arcade games like *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998) required that players dance atop a giant gamepad to compete with another, or with the game’s computer, to see who could best step in sync with the rhythms of select soundtracks. The Nintendo Wii (2006) gaming console introduced motion-controls to the mainstream gaming public by establishing a platform based entirely on the premise of getting people to play through movement; that is, the game controllers were motion-sensitive, and not just button-sensitive. Microsoft’s Xbox Kinect (2010) would scan players’ bodies so that games could recognize and react to players’ movements; in other words, the players themselves took the place of traditional handheld game controllers. John Downs et al. discuss:

It seems reasonable to expect that these increasingly physical forms of gameplay also lend themselves to a more performative situation: a player jumping, ducking, and

punching certainly seems more engaging and enjoyable to watch than one who is pressing buttons on a controller, and the division between those standing up to play and those sitting back watching becomes more striking. (3437)

Similarly, players of *Pokémon Go*, while not needing to “jump or punch” in order to play the game, make themselves quite apparent in public space, something of which players themselves are well aware (and something that I viscerally discovered after being confronted while simply taking notes about the game). One interviewee, Sean, noted, “I’ve become much more conscious of watching people when I’m out and about . . . Like, you can tell who’s playing even if I’m not.”

Considering the other forms of cartoon corporeality this project focuses on, and considering the other options I had to choose from, gaming and *Pokémon Go* are a unique and somewhat frustrating place to begin. As noted in Chapter One, cartoon corporeality simply refers to the physical presence of a cartoon as informed by its visual presence. Zahorik and Jenison explain of presence, “When actions are made in an environment, the environment reacts, in some fashion, to the action made” (87). Such understandings of cartoon corporeality and presence open up the possibility that all cartoons are, in some way, corporeal, or that they at least lend themselves to corporeality. To simply engage with a cartoon before any explicit “escape” from the screen can alone produce some reaction from within the environment. Kalli, an interviewee who performed in *Cue Cartoon* and who has a long-time love for the series *SpongeBob SquarePants*, talked to me about the “physical barrier of separation” between herself and the cartoons “living” behind her television screen, stating:

But maybe you’re not so separated [from the cartoons] because, you know, we take a lot of these things and are influenced by them and use them. It informs our humor; it informs a lot of who we are as people when we’re growing up because it’s a very formative stage when we watch a lot of cartoons.

Kalli also explained to me how she regularly references particularly eccentric moments from *SpongeBob*, primarily through deliberate physical expressions; she explained how she uses her body to recreate elaborate walks or gestures from the show. Kalli referenced the “walking” track from a season three episode that shows the character of SpongeBob simply walking while smiling for an extended period of time, occasionally performing breaks in his walking pattern to compress his entire body or to elongate his steps while twirling his fingers to the sides. Kalli also described how she “physically references” the “bring it around town” sequence from the second episode of the series, during which SpongeBob relays a complicated series of instructions on how to blow the perfect bubble by spinning, pelvic thrusting, bouncing on the ground, and widely circling the hips while stating, “Bring it around town!”

One could say that to take an initial glimpse into all the ways cartoons can have a physical reach is to look into an endless abyss of potential connections between cartoons and their viewers. The conversation about cartoon corporeality would then become muddled and too easily absorbed into discourses on social constructivism. Certainly, that the fantastical and eccentric nature of cartoons can extend into individuals’ behaviors and worldviews is an important part of this conversation. For the purposes of distinguishing cartoon corporeality from a simple cause-and-effect relationship between cartoons and cultures, however, I have taken the approach of locating the most explicit physical manifestations of cartoons available to me. That is, I have selected examples of cartoon corporeality that perform clearly identifiable interpretations of cartoons, visually speaking, and that also have a clear corporeal presence or impact. With cosplay and with theatrical adaptations of cartoons, the animated figures become explicitly physical; we see the cartoons manifest right in front of us, and they have the ability to directly physically interact with us and with the environment. With games like *Pokémon Go*,

however, while we still see the cartoons come alive in our physical environments as they engage us (and us, them) in multiple ways, we still cannot touch them, and we still rely on our screens to see them. Even the simple fact that we have to take out our phones, open the app, and then aim our cameras in order to see Pokémon “out in the wild” further distances us from the sensation that the Pokémon themselves are palpable.<sup>16</sup>

An interviewee by the pseudonym Raytings, who at the time of his interview worked as the community manager for an online gaming company, stated, “I wish you could actually see them in real life,” talking about a desire to encounter Pokémon without relying on the phone-app-camera process currently necessitated by the game. He wanted instead for *Pokémon Go* to evolve technologically and be incorporated into something like augmented reality eyeglasses, allowing players to encounter the Pokémon much more casually and “naturally.” Raytings did point out, though, that he sees the game in its current state of play as a “step in the right direction.” *Pokémon Go*, and gaming generally, differ from other visually explicit modes of cartoon corporeality that are also *corporeally* explicit. That is, the corporeality of a game like *Pokémon Go* is found in its physical reverberations and motivations, instead of in the cartoons’ obvious physical presence and palpability. Hosea states that though an animated cartoon character “does not have agency or even exist in the ‘real world’, we recognise that it is giving a ‘performance’ by reading the body language of the character through its movements and postures and ascribing causality to them” (18). The presence of the Pokémon is thus deliberately fantasized, much more than it is obvious. *Pokémon Go* remains a visually explicit example of cartoon corporeality because, like with cosplay, we actually see the cartoons become a part of our physical environments. The visuals of *Pokémon Go*, though, are indeed *felt* in the soles of

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<sup>16</sup> Important to note is that *Pokémon Go* gives players the option to switch off the augmented reality function so that the Pokémon’s backgrounds are instead animated renderings, which can even further stress that the Pokémon are not palpably present.

the feet of players who journey through the city blocks, parks, alleys, train stations, and so on; they are felt by the environments themselves at the excitements and tensions of hosting new bodies; and they are felt in the material connections made between players.

Downs et al. argue that “the increasing role of physicality in videogames should be considered a core part of the sociality of games and gaming technologies” (3474). Additionally, Colley points out, “Humans rarely change their movement patterns” (1185), further suggesting that the collective shift from stationary gameplay to geographically dynamic gaming, largely motivated by *Pokémon Go*, “may be encouraging people to go to new places at a tremendous scale” (1186). I would extend Colley’s point by arguing that the shift towards geographically dynamic gaming is a predictable progression of the form, given its ever-increasing embrace of physical interactivity. Leejiah Dorward explains some of the more nuanced and intriguing reaches of *Pokémon Go*, pointing out that it “exposes users first hand to basic natural history concepts such as species habitat preferences and variations in abundance,” which not only have the potential to expand players’ knowledge about physical environments, but also can help shape the ways players interact with those environments as well (162).

Margaret McCartney notes of her experience playing *Pokémon Go*, “In my local park I’ve received tips from all manner of folk I wouldn’t have talked to otherwise” (1). Andres comparably described his own interactions with others, as the game motivates players to engage one another for valuable intelligence:

I’m not very gutsy at approaching strangers. But with *Pokémon Go* I was like, kind of shy. I’m like, “There’s these geeks that probably known each other and I’m probably the only outsider,” but then I’m like, “No, I gotta do this because I want to catch this Legendary [Pokémon].”

The physical presence of gaming can be seen in its interwoven associations with both physical and social activity, which effectually frame the conditions for rationalizing players’ engagements



with the fantastical qualities of the animated form by aligning the fantastical with the comfortably familiar. Such an alignment with the comfortably familiar seems to direct participants to engage with forms of play often described as lost or forgotten in the shift towards nonstop engagement with digital technologies (at least in the United States) — e.g. running around and exploring instead of sitting in a living room and staring at a screen.

### **Worlds from “out of nowhere” (Rationalizing the Fantastical)**

Barad contends, “Representationalism is so deeply entrenched within Western culture that it . . . seems inescapable, if not downright natural,” and goes on to point out that “the asymmetrical faith in our access to representations over things is a contingent fact of history and not a logical necessity” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 806). Yet, McDaniel points to the subjectivity of representation, stating that it “is a matter of *form*, giving shape and meaning, [and] not objectively representing ‘things’” (50). To encounter the fantastical, whether the experience of that encounter be primarily visual, tactile, aural, or what have you, is to approach that which lacks a historical context for understanding; and that which might be more easily felt in a somatic sense than explained in a linguistic one. Bakhtin expresses that carnival “is not contemplated,” and that “its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalesque life*” (“Carnival and Carnivalesque” 250). Cartoon corporeality is not carnival, per se, but certainly contains carnivalesque qualities, given how it encourages “free and familiar contact among people,” how it is “eccentric” both visually and through movement (“Carnival and Carnivalesque” 251), and how it sometimes allows participants to feel as though they are living a “second life” separate from the mundanity of the everyday. Quite similarly, the act of videogame play can lend itself to powerful experiences

constituted by such open-ended acts of expression that simply become accepted behaviors needing little explanation, no matter how seemingly obscure they may be.

Nick, an interviewee, stated of his love for videogames, “It’s people creating these worlds, and sometimes they’re very hyperrealistic, [and] sometimes they’re just out of nowhere.” Gaming is an opportunity to engage with the animated form in a physically expressive way that goes a step beyond the usually less physically engaged involvement of a viewer attentively watching a cartoon. Through touch or movement, gamers connect with the animated figures and environments on their screens; they form an experiential relationship with the game based on its responses to our physical actions, and any “success” within the game relies on the effectiveness of that relationship. Further, as Kiel M. Gilleade and Alan Dix explain, “In games, the intention is usually to get *through* the controller and the hardware and be in the game, what in virtual reality research is called engagement” (“Using Frustration” 230; emphasis added). All gaming is a kind of engagement with virtual reality, but games like *Pokémon Go* flip the script, so to speak. Conventional gaming works to effectually absorb players into the virtual worlds of the games that have been created and optimized for a two-dimensional experience. Conversely, *Pokémon Go* extracts what is necessary from the screen to still satisfy the fantastical feeling expected of gaming, while helping players to navigate experiences of gameplay within and through all manner of open physical environments.

Conventionally engaging with cartoons (i.e. watching, reading, or creating them), or more specifically, with the animated form, is somewhat like a flirtation with the unordinary. A less conventional engagement — an explicitly physical one — moves beyond flirtation into deliberate *experimentation* with the unordinary. Experimentation through performance lends itself to the creation and reconstruction of ways of being and knowing. Michael LeVan

contends, “Modes of transformation for performance include not just interpretation but adaptation, translation, transposition, interaction, and recombination” (217). Cartoon corporeality cannot merely be looked at as a shift from one way of being to another; from a conventional engagement with environment and culture to a more eccentric or fantastical engagement. Instead, cartoon corporeality should be understood as the *method* for experimentation, as a series of available performative practices that provoke participants’ surroundings and help them to accumulate new knowledge about how cultural spaces and expectations can be navigated more freely. In the same manner that different kinds of iterative speech acts, gestures, and other forms of expressive communication shape what we come to know as acceptable behavior, they also frame how we view and move through the world around us. Andres, who refers to himself as a political activist and who has actively run for a seat on the school board in Compton, California, explained to me how videogames helped him to become “more open-minded and accepting of others.” Andres specifically referenced his experience with the game *World of Warcraft*,<sup>17</sup> and how experiencing the divide between warring factions within the game helped him determine that he could remain close friends with those who oppose his politics.

Cartoon corporeality, as far as gaming is concerned, can “make visible previously unseen — even if preposterous or unlikely — possibilities” (Bogost par. 9). Gaming always engages the body at some level, whether as minutely as pressing a button on a controller or as substantially as walking several kilometers each day to find and collect more digital Pokémon. Playing *Pokémon Go* invites a rather simple shift in performative possibilities for entering and moving through new spaces, or moving through them differently. Many players, for example, pose and take

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<sup>17</sup> *World of Warcraft* is a massive multiplayer online role-playing videogame (MMORPG) that immerses players in a medieval-like world containing various mystical creatures, some of whose forms players can adopt when building their characters for the game.

photos with the Pokémon they discover or catch, but to an onlooker who cannot see the player's phone screen, the player looks as though she is posing with nothing, or perhaps with some out-of-the-ordinary artifact sharing space with the Pokémon. The onlooker may or may not be aware that the person posing is simply playing *Pokémon Go*; either way, the actions of the player engaging with the game in this way change how she is perceived in the immediate environment.

Further, the discovery of new artworks, new communities, new connections to local fixtures or organizations, etc., can increase not only because the game simply asks players to move, but because the game does so by layering over pre-existing physical environments with animated figures from one of the most popular cartoon and videogame franchises in history. *Pokémon Go* is not necessarily unique in its basic functionality, as plenty of health-centered smartphone apps encourage individuals to move and “gain steps” to meet certain fitness goals. *Pokémon Go*, however, encourages people to move with the rather explicit purpose of helping them to feel like they are actually a part of the animated, storied world of Pokémon by making them feel as though their own world — the real world — has retained its realness, so to speak, but has also transformed into such a world of Pokémon. The original video trailer for *Pokémon Go* begins with a prompt to viewers in large bold text, “Imagine Pokémon in the real world,” just before showing footage of people all over the world searching after, capturing, and battling with Pokémon to an overture of uplifting orchestral music. The cinematics of the trailer are a bit more impressive than the actual gameplay of *Pokémon Go*, but appear crafted with the purpose of signalling to potential players that the adventurous world of Pokémon they so loved in the 1990s was about to be given new life, and that they could be a part of that.

To watch someone “battle with Pokémon” (whether in the cartoon, or by watching players of any number of *Pokémon* games battle with each other) often means to watch vibrant

and flashy animated exchanges between the creatures. One can watch the “electric mouse” Pokémon, Pikachu, blast bolts of lightning at the giant, orange, flying, fire-breathing lizard, Charizard; one can watch the ice-bird, Articuno, summon a blizzard to attack the aptly named Psyduck, the psychic duck Pokémon; or one can watch Vanillite and Chandelure, the ice cream cone Pokémon and the chandelier Pokémon, respectively, exchange blows in a bout for victory. Simply put, Pokémon is an aesthetically out of the ordinary phenomenon, and few forms could serve its unordinary ambitions better than cartoon animation.

Cartoons have many attractive qualities. Not only can their usual fluid vibrance effectively capture people’s attention, but they have also an intense malleability. Cartoons can be shaped and visually articulated in countless ways, and thus can spark a sense of adventure or discovery in those who engage them. An interviewee going by the pseudonym Steff Von Schweetz pointed out, “You’re only limited by your own imagination when it comes to cartoons. So, for me, finding myself within a cartoon has helped me grow as a person and I think that’s had long lasting effects.” For his part, Andres noted that when it comes to cartoons there is “something out there” for everyone, but only if they are “open enough” to enjoy what cartoons have to offer. For someone like Nick, who expressed that he sees gaming as “an artform” with wide-ranging practical possibilities, the animated form seems to attract engagement, rather than discourage it. Hosea notes that in a pervasively digital contemporary society, “animation is emerging as a complex set of practices whose boundaries are constantly shifting” (1). Thus, further complicating the relationship between cartoons and culture is that the fantastical quality of cartoons is ever-present, yet not terribly easy to describe with any kind of consistency. That is, the expressive qualities of cartoons can differ significantly from one another, keeping the fantastical nature of the form in a constant state of suspension, out of reach of any unifying

grammatical or “logical” explanation; we simply know that cartoons are exaggerated, illusory, stylistic (Chang and Ungar), and distinct from what we understand the natural world to be.

McDaniel states, “One may be tempted to regard the fantasm as merely a defensive ruse, hallucination, or illusion that blocks access to the Real,” but asserts that “focus on the fantasm . . . would insist that critical concern be exhibited toward the ways in which ‘knowing’ and ‘remembering’ are already ways of making, of crafting both lack and surplus into forms capable of sustaining life” (52; 64). In essence, fantasmic form is less an obscure transformation of an objective reality than it is a shift in perspective that reconsiders what *can* be real by reconfiguring what already feels real. To lend any credibility to cartoons at all is to accept that while they appear unnatural in their representations of both form and movement, they are nevertheless extensions of the cultures in which they are produced. Cartoons look nothing like us, and yet we understand that they are very much intended to. We also understand that they have the potential to distort overly fixed orientations that limit our understandings of the world. We accept those distortions when we engage with the fantasticality of cartoons as a new potential reality, even if only momentarily, and we consequently come to conceive of what that new reality might look or feel like, should it somehow transcend its two-dimensional existence. Ahmed supportively notes, “It is by understanding how we become oriented in moments of disorientation that we might learn what it means to be oriented in the first place” (6).

Videogames are also inherently physiological experiences beyond their basic function of physical interactivity with the players, in that they are also emotionally provocative. Part of what grounds us during moments of disorientation, it seems, are our emotional attachments to the things that disorient us. *Pokémon Go* enjoys the public embrace that it does because of the iconic status the franchise achieved long before the game’s 2016 release. Conventional gaming

is conversely much less public as a usually more isolated and private experience involving one person, or a small group playing together. Cartoons may *feel* obscure — they certainly are, in fact, when compared to the expressively subdued aesthetics of the everyday. Yet, for as outstanding a form as cartoons are, they feel relatively safe so long as they are bound to their screens and two-dimensionality. Performances of gaming are one step removed from that two-dimensionality, as the animation on the screen exists largely in response to the physical actions of the gamer. Gilleade and Dix explain that “as emotional beings we respond both to the general game-playing experience (e.g. enjoying play), and to the more provocative affective elements a videogame offers (e.g. emotionally-packed stories)” (“Affective Videogames” 2). To make those provocative elements acceptable in public space is either to confront the inevitable confusion (or worse) of other cultural co-participants (something regularly induced by performances of cosplay), or to anchor their confusion with meaningful elements of familiarity.

*Pokémon Go* makes use of a deep cultural nostalgia for the *Pokémon* franchise that began cultivating in the 1990s. Elizabeth Whitney Fettrow and Donovan Ross argue, “*Pokémon Go* is more than just a game — it’s a phenomenon” (18), and the same could easily be said of the original *Pokémon* games on the handheld Nintendo Game Boy system, as well as of the (still-running) cartoon when it first premiered in 1997. In fact, the popularity of *Pokémon Go* would not be possible without the initial fad for the franchise. As Bogost asserts, *Pokémon Go* is “a ghastly reminder that when it comes to culture, sequels rule” (par. 15). The consumption of nostalgia gets magnified through full-body engagement with the *Pokémon* property. Raytings described his early experiences with the game as “surreal,” and noted that it even had the power to bring people “out in masses” and momentarily to overwhelm the animosity several felt during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Andres explained how his original desire to play

the game became interrupted with commitments to work, activism, social life, etc. He then explained, however, that as soon as Nintendo announced a new game series<sup>18</sup> for their flagship console, the Nintendo Switch, that would connect with *Pokémon Go*, he re-downloaded the app immediately and again started playing consistently in excited preparation for the new game series.

The original games — which have continually evolved with time into more and more graphically advanced incarnations and newer narratives — allowed players to perform through the game in the role of a Pokémon Trainer. As with *Pokémon Go*, players could travel throughout the world created for the game to catch, train, and battle with Pokémon against computer-generated characters, or against other players. Many very appropriately felt the games as an escape from a less adventurous mundanity of their usual day-to-day childhoods. Now, with *Pokémon Go*, they can perform more fully as themselves while still exploring new possibilities through an engagement with the fantasticality of *Pokémon*. Such an engagement has many differences from the original *Pokémon* games, beyond the fact that *Pokémon Go* takes place in the “real world,” but the core of the aesthetic remains the same, and the core experience becomes intensified.

### **Towards Cosplay**

Conquergood remarks, “The constitutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry” (“Interventions and Radical Research” 151-152). Performances of cartoon corporeality are experiments with cultural realities; cartoon corporeality as such is a mode of inquiry. Certainly, though, cartoon corporeality falls short of being

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<sup>18</sup> *Pokémon: Let’s Go, Pikachu!* and *Pokémon: Let’s Go, Eevee!* were released on 18 November 2018.



“subjugated,” per se, while cartoons themselves fall well within the realm of “differently valued knowledges.” Adding to the already illusory nature of the form an assertion that cartoons are also inherently physical and physicalizing texts can certainly complicate the process of critical inquiry. Cartoons as a form are inherently fantastical, but the form has become such a contemporary norm that it can be easily ignored or overlooked in its conventional two-dimensional state. Cartoon corporeality is engaged, though, because it offers an active physical experience — because it offers something to be more immediately felt — and as the performances themselves become physicalized, cartoons as a form become less easy to look past. That is, cartoon corporeality can be regarded as both the physicalization of cartoons and as an intra-active referential performance directing attention either to specific cartoon figures, or to the distinctive aesthetics of cartoon animation as a whole.

Performances of cartoon corporeality through gaming have always merged the aesthetics of animation with the sensations of movement. Cartoon corporeality through gaming can be located specifically within that merger. The tactile interactions between player and controller become theatrical interactions between player and the animated figures they are controlling, especially when the excitements of in-game success translate to expressions of excitement in the bodies of the players. One of the key attractions of gaming is the opportunity to engage with explicit digital illusion as though it were real, and consequent to games’ use of illusion is a solidifying of the fantasmic as a new normal. Videogames, like all animated cartoons, are highly malleable, not only in their capacity to demonstrate an endless range of motion, but in how their movability/controllability also enhances an endless range of graphic stylization.

Further, we should never be able to call something a cartoon if we cannot locate the “hand” of the cartoonist, and consequently if we cannot determine what distinguishes the cartoon

figure from its original physical referent(s). Through an intra-activity of becoming and being, cartoon corporeality does more than highlight, through physicalized expression, cartoons as a genre or animation as a form; it also highlights the original authoring of the cartoon being represented. That is, the artifice of the animation is always clear, and so viewers or participants are always aware of the origins of that artifice, of what is being stylistically represented. Performances of cartoon corporeality are phenomenologically interwoven reflections of reflections, or as Barad might say, they are “iterative intra-activity” in motion (“Posthumanist Performativity” 828). As cartoons in their conventional form draw for inspiration from the material world, and from the boundless cultural reconstructions of the material world, cartoon corporeality draws from the cartoons themselves. Cartoon corporeality, then, not only translates and transforms the animated form *back* into a physical state, but it also creates a new presence for cartoons that, itself, has continuing, culturally transformative potential. In the following chapter I contend that no other mode of cartoon corporeality demonstrates that transformative potential better than cosplay. Whereas performances of cartoon corporeality through gaming allow individuals an initial sensation of what it can be like to perform through the game, performances of cartoon corporeality through cosplay allow individuals to perform much more explicitly (and even more publicly) *as* the cartoons themselves. Through cosplay the “origins of artifice” become more difficult to identify than they are in gaming, as the physical relationship between performer and animated figure is enacted through the performer’s expressions of the figure, rather than through her interactions with the figure. The two coincide and become more difficult to perceive as separate entities or beings, as the cosplay performer’s body becomes the channel through which the animated subject occupies the physical environment.

### **CHAPTER 3. THE “CARTOON CARNIVALESQUE”: CARTOON CORPOREALITY THROUGH COSPLAY**

Cartoon corporeality through cosplay is the embodiment of cultural meaning as much as it is the physicalization of an animated figure. Few sites are as richly populated with observable cosplay performances as the annual Anime Expo convention in Los Angeles, California. As easily the largest anime fan gathering in the United States, and comfortably one of the largest in the world, Anime Expo’s growth in attendance since its early 1990s incarnation nearly rivals that of San Diego Comic-Con, yet predominantly keeps its original focus on the promotion and consumption of Japanese animation (Comic-Con, conversely, now promotes a great deal more than only comic books). Jon Matsumoto notes of the early days of Western anime fandom, “For years serious fans of Japanese animation in the United States were required to possess either a fat wallet or a sleuth-like determination” in order to consume anime (par. 1). The growth of Anime Expo was one of the most important popularizing forces to help carry anime fandom into greater public awareness.

The environment at Anime Expo is saturated with the cosplay of animated figures. Accordingly, to be in attendance is to immerse oneself in that saturation. Even to be an onlooker anywhere near the streets and businesses surrounding the convention center is to peer into a fleeting but bustling and vibrant world so brimming with an embrace of animation-originated performances that the mass embodiment of animated figures inevitably overflows. Animated cosplay overflows into the cafés and crosswalks, into the fine dining establishments and the corner convenience stores alike, and into the residential neighborhoods and preeminent everyday cultural ways of moving through the spaces of Downtown Los Angeles, spaces which themselves are constantly changing yet somehow feel every year unprepared for the seeming strangeness of it all. The transformation of the part of Downtown Los Angeles that surrounds the convention

center during Anime Expo is reminiscent of what Joseph Roach calls the “behavioral vortex of the cityscape,” which he describes as “a kind of spatially induced carnival, a center of cultural self-invention through the restoration of behavior” (28). For Roach, the “cityscape” of places like Downtown Los Angeles is constituted by the architectural and cultural tropes of “the grand boulevard, the marketplace, the theater districts, the square, [and] the burial grounds” through which “everyday practices and attitudes may be legitimated, ‘brought out into the open,’ reinforced, celebrated, or intensified” (28). While the professional and residential occupants of Downtown Los Angeles react often with bewilderment to the overflow of living cartoon characters and their enthusiastic non-cosplaying counterparts, such a place is well-suited to absorb the playfully (socially-divergent) behaviors associated with cosplay.

Even a place like Downtown Los Angeles, known for its incredibly diverse constitution of cultures, reacts with bewilderment (sometimes in the form of a perplexed amusement) at suddenly sharing everyday public space with the likes of Sailor Venus, Rock Lee, and Master Roshi.<sup>19</sup> At virtually any time of day an attendee cannot walk from one end of the actual convention center to another without passing hundreds of cosplayers, many going casually about their business of socializing and shopping and eating, and many others stopping for impromptu photoshoots with fellow attendees enthused by the characters they have chosen to perform. Anime Expo is constituted by the following: a large exposition hall filled with vendors selling anime and anime-adjacent goods such as Japanese comics (manga), props from different series, videogames, and online streaming services with large anime selections; an “artist alley” with independent vendors offering fan-produced artworks and accessories; industry and fan-produced

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<sup>19</sup> Characters from iconic anime *Sailor Moon*, *Naruto*, and *Dragon Ball Z*, respectively.

panels and workshops; screenings and premiers of new anime titles; and various kinds of live staged performance.

Most of these elements are regularly marked by an explicit relationship with cosplay. Significant portions of the exposition hall are dedicated to selling accessories and apparel inspired by certain characters. Many fan panels specifically focus on discussing the ins and outs of cosplay as both a practical craft and a passion, and are often hosted by successful, professional cosplayers. Among the live performance programming is the annual Masquerade, an evening of competitively selected and (usually) tightly-rehearsed performances executed by individuals and groups, almost entirely in cosplay, who both parody and celebrate their favorite anime on stage and in character. Even separate from all of these practices and events throughout the convention, performances of cosplay make their way into quite literally every moment of the Anime Expo experience, as anyone who has regularly attended can attest.

Sebastian Domsch observes, “Cosplay is a truly intercultural phenomenon in which especially American and Japanese cultures interrelate in a complex and intricate way” (128). In order to develop further an understanding of cartoon corporeality through cosplay, I collected and closely analyzed existing academic literature on the phenomenon, along with several media reports discussing Anime Expo, cosplay, and fan convention culture more broadly. Similar to how I performed a close reading of *Pokémon Go* by first playing the game myself, and then recounting the experience in detail, I also attended the most recent Anime Expo in the summer of 2018 to provide a firsthand account. However, unlike my firsthand account of *Pokémon Go*, which was primarily written to provide readers with useful referential details about the game’s functions and aesthetics, my account of Anime Expo 2018 contains more analytic detail. At Anime Expo, I could simply choose a location, sit, watch, write my thoughts, and watch some

more. Conversely, most gaming does not lend itself to the kind of analysis that would allow me to simply watch and observe, but instead requires players' full participation. Interestingly, most interviews I conducted with respect to cosplay-specific experiences of cartoon corporeality also took place at Anime Expo, and as such, many of the participants conducted their interviews while performing in cosplay.

In the section that follows I recount select past Anime Expo/cosplay experiences, in particular the 2005 and 2018 conventions, in order to generate informed critical observations, and in order to build a frame of reference for important details that help clarify additional insights gained through other parts of the research process. In this recounting process I address the visceral culture shock that comes with attending such an event for the first time; I describe the experience of witnessing and taking part in a number of cosplay-centered activities, including how the process of documenting cosplay performances through photography reorients the cosplay experience for performers and spectators alike, and I discuss the development of cosplay performance, including how cosplayers' relationships to the physical materials of cosplay inform their own understandings of movement, space, and continuity of character. I then proceed to assess how performances of cosplay lend themselves to radically welcoming experiences for those involved (both as performers and as spectators). Specifically, I demonstrate how my research has unveiled two key insights about cosplay's function as a mode of cartoon corporeality. First, cosplay, as an embodied extension of the animated form, is a deliberate embrace of cultural difference lending itself to community formations that, themselves, are largely constituted by individual acts of spontaneity. Second, engagement with cosplay is often marked by an affinity for individuals' unique material interpretations of animated texts, and for how those interpretations can encourage the craft's further development.

## **Informed Observations and Nostalgic Tensions**

Matthew Hale argues, “Con culture has been under researched and under theorized and, by extension, so have the material and corporeal qualities of many fandoms” (6). “Con culture” here refers to how events like Anime Expo seem to completely transform the spaces they occupy through the gathering of fans who largely share the same or similar affinities for anime, and who all more or less act and interact with one another according to various behavioral expectations.<sup>20</sup> I want to reiterate that my purpose in this larger phenomenology is not to focus exclusively (or even exhaustively) on my own personal experiences (or on my own catharsis, self-fulfillment, etc.) as they relate to the instances of cartoon corporeality under investigation, especially as to do so would limit a study into the overall importance and breadth of cartoon corporeality as a newly-assessed phenomenon. Detailing firsthand accounts of engaging with cosplay through Anime Expo, however, I am better able to identify and articulate different forms of cosplay, different approaches to cosplay construction (the actual construction of the costumes in tandem with the development of the personae to be performed), and different means of engaging cosplay both as performing participants and as non-cosplaying spectators. The two narrative accounts that follow, of both my first and my most recent Anime Expo experiences, not only provide a foundation for the analysis of cartoon corporeality as a larger phenomenon throughout the rest of the chapter, but also take part in formulating my analysis.

### **Anime Expo 2005**

My first Anime Expo in 2005 left a visceral imprint on me, so much so that the details of my more recent Anime Expo experiences are often even more difficult to recall, with the

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<sup>20</sup> Some such expectations include asking cosplayers’ permissions to take photographs, being prepared to interact with complete strangers who might share an interest in a particular anime, and navigating around other attendees who carry multiple large bags of merchandise purchased at the convention (or sometimes holding other attendees’ merchandise while they are being photographed).

exception of the 2018 convention during which I was pointedly focused on retaining and critically analyzing the event. I can recall the anxiousness with which I first attended the event, having only heard vague descriptions of what one does at Anime Expo: attends screenings, wanders the exposition hall bartering for deals on anime merchandise, participates in cosplay photoshoots, and not much more from what was described to me. I had agreed for a friend to attend each day of the convention performing in a different cosplay so that we could both take part in the same “cosplay gatherings”<sup>21</sup>. I still vividly remember the intense culture shock along with the equally intense and almost overwhelming sense of expressive freedom I experienced when I first arrived. Though the 2005 Anime Expo was not nearly as crowded as it is now, I could see bodies of all ages casually and happily wandering in and out of hotels, in and out of the convention center,<sup>22</sup> and in and out of nearby convenience stores, dressed in full cosplay, and unapologetically so.

Though I was performing in cosplay myself, I did not really know “how.” I watched others repeatedly shift between expressing themselves as their characters — often through the striking of a pose or the shouting of a catchphrase — and simply expressing themselves much more casually, still in costume but out of character, so to speak. I was learning. One of my cosplays that year was of the character Hige from the anime *Wolf’s Rain*.<sup>23</sup> My hair at the time, shaggy and brown, already matched the character, so I only needed to pull together his bright yellow hooded t-shirt and the large metal-plated black collar he hangs around his neck in order for others to know who I was performing. Hige’s personality is often upbeat and carefree; he

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<sup>21</sup> Cosplay gatherings are events at conventions that are usually informally scheduled, during which cosplayers performing as characters all from the same series or film gather for a photoshoot, often using their bodies to create still images that reflect scenes or moments from the anime.

<sup>22</sup> Anime Expo 2005 was held at the Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, California, a smaller venue than the Los Angeles Convention Center where it is now held to accommodate the increase in attendance over the years.

<sup>23</sup> *Wolf’s Rain* is an anime about a pack of wolves who can transform themselves to become human, and who are in search of a secluded “paradise” that only wolves can discover.



also can transform himself into a wolf. By watching others' cosplay performances, I understood that I could perform Hige's upbeat personality, or I could actually start acting like a wolf (which I did when having my photo taken), or I could simply act like myself and enjoy wearing the attire of a fairly popular anime character and the attention that comes with it. Conquergood explains, "Cultural performances are dynamic, ephemeral, volatile, but nonetheless framed, repeated, and recognizable events" ("Cultural Struggles" 20). My performance of Hige, though only lasting the better part of a day, was recognized by those fans who knew him, and they themselves showed joy and excitement whenever I would embody the character beyond appearance and perform him more fully. The other attendees and I were in a cultural environment where performing, recognizing, and displaying appreciation for such performance was acceptable, something that would not only be totally unexpected in my everyday environments, but in fact actively discouraged.

Many anime fans from my generation engaged the genre through a kind of nexus during the early 2000s. We consumed anime at a time when it was becoming more and more accessible in the West, before the advent of online streaming, but during a mass proliferation of DVDs and DVD sharing among fans.<sup>24</sup> Yet this was also a time when anime fandom was still situated well outside of mainstream popular culture, in part the result of decisions from within the entertainment industry to disregard anime "films as insignificant" (Beck 7). As a result, many of us either resigned ourselves to expressing our affinity for anime at the expense of social acceptance — because it simply was, for many us, social taboo — or we reserved such expressions for moments and places that were outside the purview of our everyday social interactions. Anime Expo, I discovered, was one such moment and place, and expressions of an

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<sup>24</sup> Comparatively, today, major streaming services like Hulu and Netflix have huge libraries of anime that rival and outnumber many other popular categories of film and television. Even a cursory count of the options on Hulu, for example, shows more than 450 anime selections, and less than sixty selections in the "Classics" category.

affinity for anime, I learned, could take many forms, most interestingly, I thought, that of cosplay performance. Further, I experienced, as Joel Gn reveals, that “cosplay is a complex yet pleasurable expression that is motivated” (585) by mine and other fans’ affinities for the characters that I once thought could only be consumed on-screen, and whose qualities of appearance and behavior I once thought could only be observed and not embodied.

The cosplay gatherings I attended never took more than thirty minutes, and so how I performed in my cosplay the rest of each day was entirely up to me. I spent the majority of the 2005 convention wandering around on my own and reveling in the sea of other cosplayers, so many of whom unapologetically committed to the performances of their characters. One of my favorite things to witness was whenever two cosplayers each performing different characters from the same series or film encountered one another by chance, and then without prompt would engage each other in a mock interaction of their characters. I, and as I have affirmed throughout this research, many others in attendance, felt momentarily motivated to disregard our own strong introverted tendencies, not just to spectate, but to take part in the spectacle of it all. I took photographs of cosplayers from cartoons that I personally loved, just as I took photographs of cosplayers from shows with which I was entirely unfamiliar but for which I nevertheless found myself too impressed with the quality and creativity of the costumes not to document my encounter with them.

My own cosplay in 2005 came nowhere close to matching such quality; I prioritized hot glue and staples over sewing, and cardboard cutouts over more realistic looking props. Others, however, recognized the characters I was performing, stopped to take photos with me, and shouted my characters’ names when they saw me passing — “It’s Salt!” I was performing as a winged fairy character named Salt from the anime *A Little Snow Fairy Sugar*. Queer and (at the

time) closeted, the prospect of moving through public space dressed as a fairy of any kind terrified me, but proved cathartic and liberating once I encountered others' affirmations of my performance. I allowed my "performing body" to become a "spectacle" through cosplay, as Gn puts it (509), but not a spectacle to be laughed at, to my surprise and relief. Much like sporting events where enthusiasm for a team can become almost wildly encouraged, Anime Expo seemed to be an environment in full and deliberate embrace of these embodied performances of the animated form, in full and deliberate embrace of a kind of cartoon corporeality marked by its apparent ability to saturate cultural and physical spaces completely, momentarily but impactfully transforming them through that saturation. Important to note, however, is that con culture and cosplay communities have not always embraced *all* social differences, as I discuss later in this chapter.

### **Anime Expo 2018**

Megan Peters states of the 2018 convention, "Anime Expo may be over for the year, but its impact is still being felt" (par. 1). Indeed, Anime Expo in 2018 was, in many ways, a very different entity than Anime Expo in 2005. The contrast between approximately 30,000 and 110,000 in attendance would reorient the experience for just about anyone. Simple everyday behaviors like walking and talking and breathing all became more difficult, and the convention's programming had necessarily evolved so that the number and variety of panels and events might cater to and continue to attract the masses now in attendance. That is, there were more activities to choose from than could ever be consumed in all five days of the convention. Yet, at least on the surface, as far as experiences of cosplay are concerned, it seems as though only certain nuances had changed while the overall enthusiasms and behaviors that delight in the practice of cosplay remained a signifying and lasting force of Anime Expo.

After parking my car some distance from the convention, I trekked toward the building complex through a record Southern California heat wave, wanting only to concentrate on the oncoming industrial-grade air-conditioning and not so much on the analytical task at hand. Nevertheless, from several blocks away I already found myself among many of Anime Expo's other attendees, both in and out of cosplay, as they bled out into the city blocks of Downtown Los Angeles. The closer I got, the thicker the outpour of vibrantly dressed attendees became, making unavoidable any impulse to divert my focus elsewhere. That is, while I wanted primarily to focus on my observations, the heat was intense, overwhelming, and difficult to ignore. After picking up my badge, I entered through security and started making my way through the mass of cosplayers, photographers, and swag-bag enthusiasts who occupied the large main entryway. As I began moving through the expansive hall just past the building's entrance, the first significant image to resonate with me was one of dozens of large clusters of photographers, both professional and amateur, gathered around any number of "stand-out" cosplayers. For example, a well-made cosplay of the character Peridot from the cartoon *Steven Universe*, dressed in the character's familiar futuristic all-green ensemble, even had with her a well-designed and -constructed prop stand-in for the character's pet pumpkin creature.

Most interesting to me as I took notice of these several large clusters of cosplay performers and photographers almost completely filling every walkable inch of the entry hall was simply that they were *there* rather than in the large section of the convention center specifically curated to accommodate cosplay photoshoots. At any similar convention, as with Anime Expo, the expectation is that cosplayers may be stopped anywhere, at any time, and asked to pose for a photo. Yet, these clusters filling the entry hall were full-on photoshoots rather than simple impromptu snapshots that usually last no longer than several seconds. Revealed in this

observation of large-sized clustered photoshoots stretching from wall-to-wall at the convention center entrance is that the cosplay experience, broadly speaking, invites impulsive (and enthusiastic) documentation, an act seemingly welcomed and embraced by all persons taking part in the experience — from cosplayers and non-cosplaying attendees alike.

When attendees see cartoon figures brought to life, the impulse to capture their image extends from both a passion for the characters and from a recognition that the characters' corporeal presence is, at best, ephemeral. Virtually anyone who has personally tackled a cosplay performance of their own can attest that not only is the combined process of costume construction and character development tedious, but it usually produces an attire that is either quite fragile, or at least mildly uncomfortable to wear. The ephemerality of cosplay is made all the more interesting when recognizing the level of labor that goes into many cosplay performances. Interviewees described the hours spent designing and building their costumes. One participant, Avi, discussed preparing a costume “three days before the con” as “an abomination of happiness,” reflecting others' sentiments that the practice is tiresome and stressful, but also quite rewarding.

The images and the familiar behaviors of these characters (when they are performed “well enough” to capture behavior, and not just appearance, effectively) produce a very real joy for a lot of people. The impulse to retain an impression of that joy through photography is subsequently quite understandable. Roland Barthes contends, “A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent . . . or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from” (5) the original corporeal source of the image. Perhaps not on the forefront of everyone's minds as they flood their phones and Instagram accounts with photographs and sometimes video footage of these uniquely cartoon corporeal performances is how they are

taking part in the re-mediation of an already re-mediatised incarnation of the cartoons they are documenting. Domsch discusses:

The most fascinating aspect of the practices of “staging icons” is of course that they are not only representational, but also performative: though . . . representational properties like colors, forms, or gestures are adapted from earlier occurrences in other media, all of these are re-mediated through the physical presence of the [cosplay] performer. (134)

Further, performances through cosplay specifically aim at utilizing physical substances — fabrics, foams, polymers, etc. — in addition to the body, as the media through which the cartoon characters are newly channeled and presented.

The characters performed usually originate for the public on television and film screens, though there are exceptions, such as those cartoons that are adapted from literature and comics. Through performances of cosplay the cartoons escape the screen to become three-dimensional, tactile, and often kinesthetically dynamic in ways their original two-dimensionality disallows. The motivated presence of these performances at gatherings like Anime Expo spurs their mass documentation. The documentation makes its way onto social media accounts and into online cosplay communities, and in doing so returns the figures to a two-dimensional world, accessible on phone and laptop screens, but no longer physically present and palpable. While the corporeality of the originally-two-dimensional cartoons dissipates, the new forms they take in digital space become neither cartoon, nor cartoon corporeal performance, but retain allusions to, and an aura of, both at once. Bacon’s observation that performed interpretations of texts essentially constitute a new presence beyond both text and performer (“One Last Time” 356) is evident in the digital documentation of cartoon corporeal performances through cosplay.

This mass digital documentation is an important facet of cosplay as a mode of cartoon corporeality. Engaging online with the photographic and videographic documentation of cosplay punctuates how cosplayers’ apparel often rivals the vivid color palettes for which contemporary

animation is so well known. The images captured, when looked at with a soft focus, could almost be confused for the original cartoons themselves. In turn, to look at an image of the original cartoon character side-by-side with another image of a cosplayer performing that same character is often to take notice of how impressively well-matched the performers become with the sharp, solid, and bright color schemes of the cartoon. Conversely, engaging with performances of cosplay face-to-face can create a very grounded impression of the cartoons, whereby the notion of casually occupying public space with the vibrance of a cartoon character begins to feel normalized. While still moving through the entry hall, I came upon a cosplayer performing as the character Kaiba from the anime *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. Kaiba wears a large crisp-white metal-studded sleeveless open trench coat with bright red inner lining, and is often seen in the anime wielding his blue and red “duel disk,” a large blade-like accessory attached to the wrist.<sup>25</sup> The cosplay performer matched each of these qualities with near perfection. I remember feeling as though I were looking at Kaiba face-to-face, as when I photographed the cosplayer, the cosplayer looked directly at me, something the two-dimensional version of the character certainly has never done. The photograph is now posted to a social media account where I am able to look back to observe details of the cosplay more closely than I had in-person, and to recall the sensation of feeling like I had personally, though briefly, connected with a corporealized version of a familiar character through the efforts of the performer.

After making my way through the mass of both stationary and hurried bodies in the entry hall, I finally took a seat at one of the few small empty tables along the upstairs cafeteria, looking down onto the photoshoot clusters through which I had just journeyed. I sat amongst the almost overwhelmingly large and constantly moving crowd (seemingly no section of the convention

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<sup>25</sup> The *Yu-Gi-Oh!* anime focuses on characters who battle each other through a card game called “Duel Monsters.” The “blades” of the duel disks function as surfaces on which players can place their cards, so that they can battle one another virtually anywhere, at any time.

center was without overcrowding). For the first time in my fourteen years of attendance, I was there for the pointed purpose of conducting research rather than for my own usual reprieve and geeky indulgence. Admittedly, though, I still had every intention of fully “nerding out” on the plethora of experiences Anime Expo tailors to fans like myself, regardless of my newly self-imposed demands for critical observation. When I refer to myself as a “geek” and when I use terms like “nerding out,” I am acknowledging that my interests in anime and other forms of animation go beyond the scope of this research, and that my fixation on these forms influences *how* I conduct my research. To briefly elaborate, while I had trouble switching on the analytical part of my mind, I knew from the onset that switching *off* the part of my brain that simply wanted to enjoy an unrestricted consumption of the anime all around me would be an unreasonable and unattainable requisite for the study. I opted instead to use my position as a long-time participant-observer — as someone immediately and intimately familiar with the convention, and with the anime subculture through which the convention existed — in order to augment and help frame what would otherwise be a series of less informed observations.

My first active analytical act once perched above the entry hall was to peer down and take in the vibrant cosplay-saturated sea of bodies in full view. When passing cosplayers one by one or in small groups at close range, losing focus on the physical environments around them becomes easy. Standing only a few feet away while admiring their execution or while taking a photo, one’s view of the performers frames them tightly, and, at least at Anime Expo, the edges of that frame are almost always occupied by *other* cosplayers. Looking down at hundreds of cosplayers all at once and subsequently through a much wider frame, however, I became abruptly aware of the physical environment around them. The architecture of the convention center suddenly stood out; the contracted convention staff became much more prevalent in their



uniform, corporate, collared shirts tucked into dark slacks; and even something as mundane as the soft-tone green floor of the building became much more noticeable beneath the feet of the cosplayers and other attendees.

The cosplayers and other attendees did not necessarily disappear within this environment. Rather, the stark visual contrast between the vividness of the cosplay performances in the space below me, and the comparatively subdued, lackluster steel and concrete structures that enveloped them, became apparent (not unlike the ways *Pokémon Go* players' bodies stand out when they stop at seemingly random spots in the middle of public spaces to catch a Pokémon). For as much as the close-range interactions with the cosplayers helped to create a sense of normalcy about their otherwise abnormal presence, the act of seeing living cartoon characters inhabit what feels like everyday public space generated a sense of uneasiness. The cosplay at the convention, for the most part, just looked too good. For as immersed as some of us are in daily instances of animation and cartoon corporeality, we are still not fully prepared to witness those characters brought out of the screen en masse, and so explicitly at that. After spending some time looking down into the crowd, and processing the surprising but mild discomfort that came with noticing the contrast between the performers in dynamic cosplay and the static physical environment around them, I turned my attention to the upstairs attendees in my immediate vicinity.

Almost immediately familiar to me was the unapologetic collective vibrance everyone seemed to exude. Reminiscent of every other year I had attended, people were dancing in the food court, running like “ninjas” through the halls, striking poses on the escalators, and high-fiving complete strangers in passing. Performances of cartoon corporeality seem to bring with them not only a presentational merger of the animated cartoon with the physical world, but a behavioral merger as well. What I mean is that when we engage with cartoon corporeality, we

retain our already-conditioned manners and expressive physical impulses, whether they be cultural, personal, or both. One such example of these expressive physical impulses occurred as I sat quietly, watching the convention move around me. I saw a person in full cosplay performing as the character Toad from the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise aggressively and with some serious skill “Flossing” by the food court. *The Floss* is a difficult-to-coordinate dance move popularized in 2017 by a young guest on the television program *Saturday Night Live*. The move, which involves the simultaneous swinging of the arms and hips in tandem with one another along a specific pattern, could easily be called a cultural phenomenon in 2018.

For as recognizable as the dance move was, there was something casually subversive about watching someone performing The Floss while also performing as an animated videogame character that precedes The Floss by nearly three decades. As I discuss below, many interviewees alluded to ways in which their experiences with cosplay function as extensions of, rather than as fleeting escapes or replacements for, their usual lives outside of cosplay. To witness publicly someone performing as Toad *and* Flossing, or performing as Wonder Woman *and* breakdancing, or performing as a teddy bear version of the *Avengers* villain Thanos *and* singing lyrics to the latest Beyoncé single, all fits firmly within the realm of the expected at Anime Expo. It also underscores the apparently rather stable balance between the expressive vibrance inherent in cartoon animation, the expected elaboration of that vibrance when the animation takes physical form, and the active retention of the self on the part of the performer as she produces and channels an expressive presence made clear through her cosplay.

Leaving the food court area, I began to trudge through the large crowds between various locations where I wanted to situate myself for short periods of time and both observe and enjoy the life of the convention moving around me. I went to the exposition hall where cosplayers and

other attendees were shopping, playing vendor-hosted game show style games to win prizes, and just casually standing around and socializing with one another. While there I encountered a genderbent cosplay duo of the young superhero characters Terra and Beast Boy from the *Teen Titans* cartoon and comic franchise.<sup>26</sup> When I first started attending Anime Expo in 2005, genderbent cosplay was a rarity, and sometimes even seen as distasteful (Tomberry and RandomMan). By 2018 the practice of changing cartoon characters' intended gender roles through cosplay performance was uncontroversial.

I also spent a good deal of time at another large hall where photo sets had been installed to accommodate stylized photoshoots. Each photo set was designed and built to look like many of the environments seen in anime, from a highschool classroom, to a forest of cherry blossom trees, to the inside of a futuristic-looking spaceship, to a post-apocalyptic wasteland. Adjacent to the photo sets was a large space designated for cosplay repair where costume construction supplies are provided to attendees who need to reattach or alter the materials of their cosplay. Also adjacent to the photo sets were tables at which invited cosplay guests with large followings in the cosplay community meet fans and sell professional quality photo prints of themselves dressed and performing as various characters. There were also volunteers in this area tasked solely with supporting the "cosplay experience" (as their bright yellow vests indicated). As I mention above, Anime Expo's emphasis on cosplay could never be contained to a space like the one I was in, no matter how well curated it was to support cosplay-centric activities. For the remainder of my time at the 2018 Anime Expo I wandered through cartoon-themed art installations, walked around another large hall designated for videogame and tabletop game play, and attended a panel on the development of gender identity through cosplay. As I proceed

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<sup>26</sup> Terra is a female teen superhero (sometimes turned supervillain) who can control rocks with her mind, usually seen wearing combinations of black, yellow, and brown; Beast Boy is a male teen superhero with green skin who can shapeshift into animals, usually seen wearing a black and maroon jumpsuit.

throughout the rest of the chapter, when relevant, I continue to reference select experiences from Anime Expo to help further contextualize the insights revealed through other facets of my research into cosplay as a mode of cartoon corporeal performance.

### **(Often and Usually) Radically Welcoming**

One might contend that performances of cosplay are attempts to embody the storied lives of the characters being performed; or more broadly, to enter the world the characters are from; or more broadly still, simply to enter the dynamic world of anime. Jin Kyu Park notes, “Anime, in general, is filled with images and symbols that are related to religious motifs, spirituality, the supernatural, and mythology” (394). Anime even more widely varies in content and theme. As Matsumoto points out, “In Japan, where animation has long been a mainstream form of entertainment, everything from comedies and children’s shows to serious dramas and historical adventures can be found in animated form” (par. 6). A saying among anime fan communities that “there is an anime for almost anything” feels pretty close to the truth. Some anime can feel rather familiar to Western audiences who are accustomed to superhero shenanigans, like the iconic *Dragon Ball Z*, which features superpowered characters who fly, fight, and blast beams of light from their palms. Some anime mirror the glamour and style of Disney princess aesthetics, such as the equally iconic *Sailor Moon*. Then there are anime that are much more niche than many Western audiences are used to, such as *The Devil is a Part Timer!*, an aptly-named cartoon about the Devil working a part-time job at a fast-food restaurant. My point is that anime, as a genre encompassing countless subgenres, offers to its fandom seemingly every conceivable style of, and approach to, reconceptualizing reality. Accordingly, the contention that fans who cosplay aim to actually enter a world of radically endless expressive possibilities makes some sense, but nevertheless falls short of accurately describing the motivations of many cosplayers.

Cosplay is about much more than a desire to enter another world. Specifically, performances of cosplay very much reach into the world of anime and try to grasp and pull its expressive qualities back into the material world. Domsch similarly contends that “cosplayers are not only trying to enter into the [anime] storyworld (by way of identification) but also to bring forth, to embody the storyworld in the actual world” (136). Cosplay thematizes the world around the performer as though it were instead or also the world of the character being performed. Such a “merging” of two worlds through the body of the performer produces a circumstance whereby the rules of one world cannot be reconciled with those of the other, and so the cosplayer becomes a momentary embodiment of tension between the two. As Hale notes of cosplay, “Transformative costumes and performances gain their meaning through juxtaposition” (19), such as the juxtaposition between a bright living cartoon character and the often dark-tone structures of Downtown Los Angeles. Hale also explains, “Language, material forms, and body rhetoric are all extraindividual” (19), and Barad notes how “Identity is a phenomenal matter; it is not an individual affair” (“Nature’s Queer Performativity” 125). That is, a performance of cosplay is more than a performance of one person as a character, but is also a performance of and by the series or film from which the character originates; it is a performance of the fan culture itself; and it is even a performance of the authorial intentions and all other material precedents that once informed the development of the character. In short, cosplay is intra-active, constituted at once by preceding and ongoing interconnected social and material discourses that perpetuate both such discourses as they functionally produce a co-existence of the conceptual anime world alongside the material social world.

The process of transforming those open-ended expressive qualities of anime into immediately physicalized and kinetic performances allows performers to borrow and experiment

with new modes of expression. Put another way, performing *as* the animated character is akin to performing *through* the animated character, in that various anime and the characters wherein serve as vehicles or channels for self-expression. More than simply “trying out” different roles, cosplay performers often learn through the characters they embody simply how to feel *bigger* — how to move through public or social space with an otherwise unfamiliar reverence for one’s own visual and physical presence in the world. Anime Expo, accordingly, feels intensely carnivalesque, awash with individual but interconnected acts of experimental expressivity. Bakhtin states, “Eccentricity is a special category of familiar contact; it permits — in concretely sensuous form — the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves” (“Carnival and the Carnavalesque” 251; emphasis removed). As interviewee Steff Von Schweetz observed, “I think it gives people a chance to explore themselves a bit more, and de-stress, and just be the person that they want to be.”

Above, I describe how my early experiences with Anime Expo and cosplay felt, in many ways, unnerving in the face of such seemingly radical possibilities for self-expression. These possibilities also necessarily reflect a powerful attitude from cosplay and cosplay-adjacent communities that actively welcomes and encourages such self-expressive performances. That is, cosplay as a craft communicates to performers that they can better “be themselves” through the craft, and performers in turn extend that same message to those around them. The message is extended by inviting others into the community and into spaces like Anime Expo, and by both supporting and applauding those who choose to enter, as well as those who just happen to pass by. Allison, an interviewee, acknowledged that she has been particularly surprised at how “revealing” some cosplay performers’ costumes are of their own bodies, but pointed out how she has learned from her experiences at Anime Expo how to respect others’ expressive choices.

Steff Von Schweetz commented further on her motivations for attending Anime Expo as an invited “cosplay senpai” (an individual identified as an important and supportive leader in the cosplay community), stating, “It’s a really good feeling to just be able to talk to someone about something you truly enjoy, no holds barred.” Avi additionally explained:

I have a lot of social anxiety. Actually, I have really bad anxiety. So being around so many people is really extreme, but because so many people have so many similar likes, it makes it more comforting to be in the con with that.

Every individual I talked with regarding Anime Expo and cosplay similarly indicated that the convention was both a reprieve from more constricting expectations for self-expression in their everyday lives, and a kind of ritualistic outlet for discovery and experimentation.

### **“That Dude’s a *Tetris* Block!” (Embrace of Deliberate Difference)**

While Anime Expo began in the early 1990s, its predecessors in the form of smaller or similarly themed organizations (like the Cartoon/Fantasy Organization), and in the forms of sometimes more loosely organized fan clubs and gatherings, appear always to have been motivated by a concern for community building. In fact, such gatherings and organizations originally manifested because of an explicit desire to reach and connect with like-minded fans who could stimulate discourse around the genre and who motivated its continued consumption in the marketplace of entertainment. Andrew McKevitt notes that “early U.S. anime fandom’s most conspicuous characteristic was its emphasis on activism within the community” (905). McKevitt further explains, “The more often fans discussed U.S. popular culture, the better they were able to articulate anime’s expression of cultural difference” (915). Through events like Anime Expo, these cultural differences gather in a collective embrace of “odd” or “weird” expressive

behaviors, not unlike events such as Burning Man<sup>27</sup> or Renaissance festivals,<sup>28</sup> but with a theme of anime and a bent towards performances that are cartoon corporeal.

Many interviewees extended McKevitt's observation that anime fandom is, to some degree, driven by a shared desire actively to embrace such cultural difference. Jordan, for example, noted, "I didn't realize how big a community it was, so coming to Anime Expo and seeing, like, several hundred, [several] thousand people, like, all in cosplay and stuff is overwhelming," reinforcing that cosplay can be an energizing force when community is discovered. Steff Von Schweetz comparatively stated, "I love interacting with the community here in person and just talking shop, talking about a series, anything. It's just a wholesome feeling being completely submersed into the community in person," going on to note that, as a result of her experiences, "The weird is now typical for me."

Anime fandom as a culture forms much of the foundation for cosplay as a practice. Certainly, without anime's popularity people *could* cosplay as characters from anime, but the formation of the fandom, and its evolution into a global phenomenon eventually made into a mainstream form of entertainment, together make cosplay both credible and accessible to a wider cultural public, including those outside the fandom. As more people find themselves emotionally attached to the characters, narratives, and storyworlds of anime, they often move from casual consumption of the genre into embodied consumption. Domsch states, "It is the *continuation* of this experience, of this emotional attachment, that is certainly part of the motivation for cosplay," identifying motivation as "the desire to make tangible, to give a bodily, three-dimensional presence to a storyworld and its existents beyond its original source text or

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<sup>27</sup> Burning Man is yearly gathering in the Nevada desert that actively promotes freedom of expression along with experimental artistic practices.

<sup>28</sup> Renaissance festivals are events that emulate the aesthetics and culture of the European Renaissance, often with a focus on the proliferation of artistic freedom.



image” (130). Gn also notes “that the art of cosplay radically complicates the paradigm of the fan as an active producer or manipulator of the canonical text” (583). In other words, cosplay is a performative replication that gives the anime genre’s canon richer meaning and greater cultural impact.

Cosplay also signals both an admiration for the canon as a whole, and a willingness physically to engage cultural spaces not usually defined by any kind of association with anime. Gn continues, “For the cosplayer, it is not only the modification of the text that is liberating (or, in other instances, subversive), but also the consumption of the image that becomes a pleasurable, embodied experience” (584). Much of that pleasure originates in the act of effortfully engaging the anime, accordingly transforming a usually more passive experience into a visceral one; pleasure also originates with the supportive reception of the community who come face to face with cosplayers’ efforts made more meaningful in the act of public performance. Hale explains:

Dressing as a specific character or concept and bringing [them,] him, her, or it to life . . . is not only shaped by the text to which the costume and performance relates, it is also affected by the reactions of other con-goers. (11)

Jordan, who conducted her interview while cosplaying as the *Samurai Jack* villain Aku (a highly cartoonish devil-like figure with fire instead of eyebrows), expressed, “Like, just walking through here and having people be, like, ‘Oh, my god, Aku!’ Like, that’s the coolest thing ever to me. Like, I was super convinced that nobody would know who I am.” If performers select characters to cosplay based in part on how much of themselves they see in the characters (and vice versa), then to be recognized as the character they are performing is, in a sense, to be recognized as themselves; or even to simply be recognized at all. When individuals do not

perceive social validation in their everyday lives outside of the convention — outside of cosplay — they may be able to find it *through* cosplay, or within spaces like Anime Expo.

Sonia, a cultural anthropologist who studies anime fandom, recounted her first Anime Expo experience during her interview, explaining how she and her family witnessed cosplay performances that seemed entirely to conflict with their expectations of what should occur in public space, even at an anime convention. Sonia explained, “I went with my dad and I went with my sister and we were just, like, ‘Whoa, that dude’s a *Tetris* block! I didn’t know you could do that!’” One would have a hard time imagining many situations that would necessitate or benefit from dressing up as a puzzle block from the *Tetris* videogame franchise. Yet, to encounter something previously inconceivable — to deny one’s expectations for others’ social behaviors — is essentially to flirt with the much larger notion of cultural subversion, or at least to recognize that such a notion exists at all. Bakhtin observes that the “carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (*Rabelais* 34).

As mentioned above, performances of cartoon corporeality still originate within rigid apparatuses of culture that restrict expressive freedom — they cannot be carnival as such. Yet, while neither cosplay specifically, nor cartoon corporeality generally, should be understood as perfectly interchangeable with Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, events and spaces like Anime Expo exemplify a kind “cartoon carnivalesque” wherein the usual “order of things” is rejected, reinterpreted, and even dissolved in favor of allowing bodies to experiment with corporealizing the endless expressivity of animation. Performances of cultural subversion are not merely disruptive, but revelatory and productive — they allow the discovery and development of new ways of understanding and being. HopKins contends, “Performing together we may generate

enough noise to expose and even subvert the critical ideology that deploys us as its subjects” (236). I take from HopKins’ statement that experimental modes of inquiry, such as performances of cartoon corporeality, are necessary to help us attain whatever agency is necessary to see beyond those “critical ideologies” that deploy and restrict us. We cannot conceive of different possibilities until we have, at least on some level, experienced them.

When cultural subversion is one day encountered in the comedically kitschy form of a person casually performing a *Tetris* block — or even, as I witnessed at the 2018 convention, a fully-armored samurai interpretation of the anthropomorphic cartoon and merchandise icon Hello Kitty — it may another day be encountered in the form of a Queer couple holding hands in public spaces that were once more abrasive to Queer public displays of affection; or in the form of greater numbers of women running for public office; or in the form of persons who are openly neurodivergent being considered for business or public service leadership positions. This is not to say that performances of cartoon corporeality alone can unsettle the cultural systems that attempt to dictate how one uses one’s body, or what roles one’s body is even allowed perform. Instead, cartoon corporeality seems to be one particular set of practices that *can* be employed for the purposes of cultural subversion, production, recreation, etc., should one choose to access them.

Because individual performances of cosplay lend themselves to cultural subversion, larger cosplay community formations make such acts of cartoon corporeal subversion systematic and ritualistic, especially as so much of the cosplay community’s activities occur at annual gatherings like Anime Expo. Bakhtin explains that through carnival, “All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people” (“Carnival and the Carnivalesque” 251; emphasis removed). Similarly

characteristic of cosplay community formations are collectively encouraged, ongoing acts of interactive spontaneity that allow the ritualistically chaotic power of cosplay to continue changing — to remain chaotic — such that it might remain subversive. Barad asserts that “specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted” (816) through human discourses, such as those discourses that normally limit “free and familiar contact among people.” Cosplay as a phenomenon is constituted by uncountable acts of individual material interpretations, which perform further reinterpretations of the entanglement between the material and the social. That is, they perform an understanding of the social and the material that highlights, rather than disregards, their inseparability.

The decision to enter a space like Anime Expo, which even from the distance of an uninvolved public can best be recognized as an event at which thousands of people dress up as cartoon characters, is a decision momentarily to discard a sense of normality. Upon entering, one experiences the convention beyond the superficiality of people “playing dress-up” by taking in the corporeal vibrance of those individuals and of the endlessly varied manners of artistic expression present in every facet of the convention. To remain at, or return to, a place like Anime Expo, as every interviewee who focused on cosplay has done, is thus to do more than simply discard normality. To remain or return is instead actively to reject normality — to carve out, deliberately, one’s own ritualistic means of embracing cultural difference. The only way to retain a continuing flirtation or active experimentation with such difference is to welcome, advocate for, and often participate in those acts of spontaneity that ensure outside normalities remain unstable within the space of the convention, producing what HopKins calls “a rupture in the center of the system by exposing the oppositions on which the system depends for its existence” (235).

### ***The Anchor of Familiarity and the Problem with “Continuity”***

These acts of spontaneity, whether they be spur-of-the-moment ensemble dance numbers, impromptu photoshoots, the sudden high-fiving of strangers on the escalator after Flossing in the food court, etc., can only work to destabilize everyday normalities because they retain that “anchor of familiarity” characteristic of cartoons that I have referenced and alluded to throughout the dissertation thus far. As explained in the previous chapter, because performances or other expressions of cartoon corporeality unsettle the static conditions of everyday aesthetics — such as when an animated Pokémon is digitally imposed over the walkway outside a coffee shop, or when a living palpable person performing as a Pokémon actually enters the coffee shop — an anchor of familiarity of some kind is required to make those dynamic and destabilizing aesthetics more acceptable and accessible. Whereas for Masahiro Mori, a greater sense of familiarity with an imitation of a human subject (or a part of a human subject, such as a prosthetic limb) actually draws the spectator ever closer to the discomfort of the uncanny valley, here familiarity can be understood as a secure reference point for the comforts of reality that actually helps the spectator to willfully enter the valley with greater ease — to theoretically embrace the discomfort. The anchor of familiarity in traditional cartoons (as opposed to corporeal ones) can be recognized in the human-like features of most cartoon characters (while limbs, facial features, and other bodily proportions may be warped, they nevertheless mirror those we understand as human), in the actually-human voices producing the dialogue for characters, and in the relatable struggles and tensions communicated through each cartoon’s narrative. Consider the relatability of the perceived physical and behavioral characteristics of the central characters from the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoons: the franchise’s heroes are anthropomorphized warrior turtles who

talk like real people (because they are voiced by real people) and who often argue with their father about responsibility and maturity.

The anchor of familiarity ensures that otherwise or perceived nonsensical elements of a cartoon — such as warrior turtle mutants — are not outright rejected by those with a distaste for the aesthetically or narratively unconventional. While the anchor of familiarity grounds viewers in a sense of normalcy as they explore the extraordinary expressive qualities of cartoons, it works somewhat differently through cartoon corporeality. Through cosplay, specifically, instead of primarily seeking a sense of normalcy by associating the perceived physicalities and behaviors of characters with those of “real” people, individuals who most actively engage and participate in cosplay also seek out the continuity of character and storyworld. That is, cosplay participants are usually quite familiar with the characters being performed. Participants understand the characters’ appearances, often down to details like minor accessories; and they understand the characters’ personalities and narrative backgrounds. Accordingly, participants expect cosplay performances to align with what they know about characters’ appearances, mannerisms, and so on. Cosplayers like Jordan and Avi discussed the reactions of acknowledgement and affirmation they receive when others encounter, recognize, and enjoy their work. Avi noted, “I really enjoy making costumes, and I really enjoy, you know, walking around in the stuff that I’ve made with other people, and them acknowledging it, and me acknowledging other people’s costumes.”

Yet, as Sonia pointed out, “If you do get it right then you do get that continuity. It’s when you don’t successfully adapt it that it’s, like, you might not get that same reaction.” Hale elaborates, “A source text not only informs a cosplayer of what to include within the imitation of a particular textual figure, it can also impose a set of aesthetic and performative boundaries” (18). Such boundaries are not necessarily designed for permeability, even though the practice of

cosplay allows for a great deal of creativity. Accordingly, for as effectively as cosplay performance can run counter to socially-imposed limitations on people's bodies, the practice has been found guilty, by some of its own participants, of bending to those same kinds of restrictions. Avi, explaining that she primarily cosplays as part of a group, noted, "It makes me feel a little more comfortable because I am on the heavy side and it's still very new for people in different shapes and sizes to be doing cosplay." Sonia noted that, at one time, inclusion for people of color was also a serious issue in the cosplay community. Yet, Avi and Sonia both explained, respectively, "It's become a lot more open," and, "I'm very happy that now it's much more open for people of color to experience this fandom, because when I was walking the halls this year there was just so much diversity."

These issues of inclusion and acceptance to which Avi and Sonia pointed connect with that same concern for continuity. I have witnessed members of cosplay communities assert that accurate representation must be so complete so as to reflect the same skin tone and physical proportions of the characters, which arguably aligns with Hale's argument that the animated "source text is not only generative; it is also restrictive," and that it "also indicates how a given character should *not* look, or sound, or act" (17). The key failures of taking Hale's argument as absolute, however, are that corporeally replicating a virtual form as expressively malleable as animation can never be done perfectly, especially the more fantastical the text; and that a presumed requisite for perfect replication not only excludes select and often already marginalized bodies from the practice, but also runs counter to the expressive freedom of interpretation characteristic of cosplay performance as a practice. If cosplay is viewed as a kind of embodied reenactment of an animated subject's performance then we need to recognize, as Rebecca Schneider explains, that an "effort to 'redo' a performance-based piece *exactly* the same

as a precedent piece . . . challenges the given *placedness* of an original through re-placedness” (16-17) that undermines the (presumed) absolute authority of a subject or event misunderstood by the reenacting performers as wholly original.

Schneider points out that “the notion that all bodily practice is, like language itself, always already composed in repetition and repetition is, paradoxically, both the vehicle for sameness and the vehicle for difference or change” (10). Not only do the animated source texts, themselves, repeat any number of sociocultural forms of behaviors — from their language to their plots to their depictions of places and things — they also repeat, through virtual representation, the materials of those places and things (Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity” 810). Yet the repetitions performed by animated texts take obvious liberties, not only by the unique stories they produce, but by flattening the three-dimensionality of the places and things being reenacted, and stylizing them along with the characters depicted. For cosplay performances to interpret animated texts with liberties of their own is little different than how those texts, themselves, change what they “cite.” Because I focus so heavily on developing an understanding of cartoon corporeality as a tool for discovery and personal expressive development, I need also to acknowledge the ways in which modes of the phenomenon might restrict that very function.

#### **“. . . all forms, shapes, and sizes” (Affinity for Material Interpretations)**

Sonia and others also expressed that they see cosplay performance as an opportunity to experiment with cartoons’ established characteristics. Sonia noted that she appreciates the ways cosplayers sometimes isolate specific elements of a character, targeting small changes to the character’s attire or other elements of appearance, retaining their overall original form from the cartoon while generating subtle differences that distinguish the cosplay both from the original



two-dimensional version of the character, and from other cosplay performances of that same character. Gabriel also stated, “So, for me, like in my head when I think about cosplay, people say, ‘Oh, it’s however you interpret the show itself.’ So it never has to be exactly how it’s represented in the show,” and went on to explain, “There’s people of all forms, shapes, and sizes. They do something always unique, all the time. It just blows my mind when I see it.” Much of the joy of engaging with cosplay comes from recognizing the characters who have been brought to life and reveling in the unique interpretations of those characters, which can validate one’s own desire and readiness to interpret uniquely and to experiment through the form as well.

Cosplay demonstrates the inevitability of change when cartoons escape the screen. Cartoon corporeal performances are inherently experimental means of engaging the world, and accordingly the physicalizing transformation of two-dimensional figures from two-dimensional storyworlds not only makes them perceivably three-dimensional and palpable, but also makes them likely to undergo even further change. The experiments conducted and the liberties taken by performers through their cosplay have incredible range. “Teddy bear Thanos” and “samurai Hello Kitty” are two examples of character variance already mentioned. In my years at Anime Expo I have also encountered humanized versions of animal-like cartoon creatures, a deadmau5<sup>29</sup> interpretation of a cat Pokémon, and gender-swapped iterations of some of the most overtly masculine and feminine characters across the anime genre.

Cosplay’s quality of open, experimental interpretation can do more than merely create a wide array of unique aesthetics presented through performers’ bodies. At the panel at the 2018 Anime Expo focused on gender and sexuality through cosplay, panelists discussed how they have been able to explore and discover their identities through the practice, particularly by using

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<sup>29</sup> Deadmau5 (pronounced *dead mouse*) is a DJ and electronic musician from Canada.

it to manipulate cultural conceptions for how gender should be performed by different bodies. Sam Abel states that “gender in the world of animation may reflect the values and structures of society at large, but in a way that emphasizes and clarifies its prevalent features” (185), and Butler notes how “the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended” (“Gender Trouble” 2). The malleability of animation, when adopted by a performer through cosplay, may give that performer the opportunity to command less restrictively the so-called “qualifications” for gendered performance — to test the mettle of the social-discursive barriers separating the feminine from the masculine, and separating both from expressions of neither. As Barad succinctly observes, and as cartoon corporeal performance demonstrates, “Boundaries do not sit well” (817). In the same way that developing and performing interpretations of literary texts serves as a practice-centered method for learning about self and culture — and at times for transforming self and culture — performances of cosplay accentuate cartoon corporeality’s core function as a mode of critical inquiry.

The seemingly endless array of characters and styles in anime that can be performed through cosplay signals to the fandom that there is something unique for everyone to embody, and thus that the possibilities for experimentation are virtually endless. Just as Steff Von Schweetz expressed, “I’ve found a lot more characters that I can relate to within a cartoon as opposed to real life.” Her comment signals that we see something deeper and more complex in ourselves than we are conditioned to, and to contain such complexity through a lack of public physical expression is to limit oneself. While fans are, indeed, embodying characters created by others, they are also continuing the authorship of those characters through entirely distinct material interpretations that both reflect the source text, and transform it into something new. Almost every interviewee who discussed cosplay noted that their favorite cosplay performances

are those that retain the basic aesthetic of the character, but in ways that distinguishes the cosplay from the image referent. Distinct material interpretations of animated source texts suspend cosplay culture in a perpetual state of transformation. Such perpetual transformation invigorates the culture, motivating participants to continue seeking new corporeal iterations of their favorite cartoons. Avi reflected on how she especially enjoys “when people create different interpretations, like completely different, like you wouldn’t think of it; or mashing, like, say a Pokémon with, like, a character that kind of resembles them and, like, putting it together.” As if she overheard my interview with Avi, Jordan also talked about her excitement over her plans for creating a cosplay performance merging two different iconic anime from two distinct foundational subgenres — *Sailor Moon* from the “magical girl” genre, and *Dragon Ball Z* from the “boy adventurer” (Shōnen) genre.<sup>30</sup>

With invigoration for cultural participation, however, comes the labor of participating, and as far as performances of cosplay are concerned, that labor can be quite physically taxing. Gabriel discussed his first attempts at creating more complex cosplay out of more difficult-to-craft materials like foam. Gabriel observed, “I didn’t realize how complicated it would be,” but also went on to note that witnessing the efforts others put into their cosplay inspires him to do the same. Steff Von Schweetz explained how she handcrafted “fur” for a fantasy version of the character Bakugo from the anime *My Hero Academia*; she noted how it “took, like, sixty or so hours just to make fur from scratch, from yarn,” but then also noted, “I won awards for that costume.” The labor of costume construction is often minimal when compared with the labor of performing in certain costumes. Some costumes involve significant alteration to the basic shape of the human form: a *Tetris* block or an anthropomorphized teddy bear villain, for example.

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<sup>30</sup> The “mashing” of characters through cosplay is fairly uncommon, but it does occur, and is similar to how digital remix culture draws from multiple virtual texts including music and video (either live or prerecorded) to rearrange select parts of each into something new.

Some involve heavy prosthetics for augmenting performers' limbs and reach: armor-style cosplay, for example, whereby performers craft heavy foam structures that interconnect to form images of giant robots from "mecha anime"<sup>31</sup> like *Mobile Fighter G Gundam*.

Making such costumes indeed involves labor through significant skill and attention to detail. Wearing them, however, can constrain the range of one's movement, can add often significant weight to one's body, and can even limit one's vision or ability to turn one's head. Jordan stated, "I feel like with cosplay, in regards to physical movement, you have to be really, really aware of how you move through space because of costumes," and Sonia similarly pointed that, as a non-cosplaying spectator, "You also have to navigate cosplayers' physical spaces," accounting for things like "props, and costume parts with wings." Such limitations become all the more complicated when performing in triple-digit temperatures, and even more complicated when the construction of the costumes is designed for aesthetics over durability. Cosplay often shifts performers' and spectators' conceptions of physical space and movement as bodies extend and become larger. Gn expresses, "For both fans and practitioners, cosplay is a complex yet pleasurable expression that is motivated by their attachment to the character" (585), and I would add that attachment to character translates also into an attachment to the performers' costumes, which are sensitive personal and cultural artifacts.

Of course, cosplay is not limited to interpretations of animated figures. Cosplay of literary and live-action cinematic texts are fairly common as well. People often cosplay as characters from the *Harry Potter* novels and films about a world of witches and wizards, for example. Yet, *cartoon* cosplay presents itself with endless combinations of vibrant color palettes and fantastical elements that manage to rival the original cartoons themselves. The range of

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<sup>31</sup> "Mecha anime" are cartoon series or films that feature giant fighting robots as a key element of their aesthetic, and often of their narrative. Mecha anime usually feature a central hero, or a team of heroes, who control the giant robots, fighting with them to overcome whatever the conflict of the plot might be.

aesthetic styles and storyworlds — the radical fantasy-ness — of anime, in particular, expands convention attendees' collective physical presence more so than cosplay from other forms and genres. The central characters in other fantasy genres are still usually human, and in most ways present themselves as such. In anime, however, some of the most fantastical and aesthetically unique figures are also the central characters. They have rich individual backgrounds that are central to the anime's larger narrative. They are more than simply mythic enigmas observed at a distance by the most human-looking characters and by the narrative's audience. Consider the villain character Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings* novels and films. He is huge compared to the average person, and he is covered head-to-toe in intricate and sometimes glowing armor — his appearance is quite fantastical. Yet, in the films, Sauron is given little screen time compared with the central characters who all appear more or less human.

Next, consider anime like *Digimon Adventure* and *Monster Rancher* that feature both human and talking non-human creatures alike as their central characters. Further consider the great many cartoons featuring anthropomorphized animals, other animal-like creatures, and extraterrestrials as their central characters, such as *DuckTales*, *Looney Tunes*, and *Steven Universe*, which feature talking ducks, talking pigs, and talking alien rock warriors, respectively. That cosplay performers give such attention and validation to these kinds of fantastical figures through an embodied mass cultural consumption demonstrates that fans project onto the animated form their own readiness to capture and even personify the fantastical. Such a readiness to give both life and physical depth to these fantastical figures also signals fans' often conscious motivations to project themselves onto the characters, or to see themselves viscerally in those characters by embodying them. These motivations are intensely evident in cosplay as a practice, and are exhaustively exemplified at Anime Expo.

## **Towards Theatrical Adaptation**

Anime Expo's ability to attract cosplay performers and enthusiasts en masse makes the event an apt site of interrogation for helping reveal important insights about cosplay as a mode of cartoon corporeality. With tens of thousands in attendance, I not only had the opportunity to engage directly and at length with a select handful of enthusiastic cosplayers and other attendees who were gracious enough to talk with me, but I was also able to observe critically the convention and its fostering of and relationship to cosplay. My observations at Anime Expo, along with my research into preceding and supporting scholarship on cosplay, on anime convention culture, and on anime fandom more broadly, all allowed me to understand how cosplay performance functions as a deliberate embrace of cultural difference, and how it fosters acts of individual spontaneity largely encouraged by the cosplay and convention community as a whole. I was also able to develop an understanding of individuals' affinities for cosplay as tied not only to their affinities for the animated characters, but for their own and others' unique material interpretations of those characters.

My own past experiences performing in cosplay helped me understand the practice as allowing of multiple expressive identities at once: one can behave casually "as herself" (though the notion of "self" certainly changes through cosplay performance); one can perform deliberately as the character she is representing; one can perform select liberties with her character; and one can alternate between or combine each of these kinds of performance at her own whim. As with other modes of cartoon corporeality, performances of cosplay corporeally remediate the virtual animated subjects that were once, themselves, interpretive remediations of any number of material referents. Cosplay performance seems to invite and strongly encourage

mass documentation of itself, mostly through photography, even further remediating the web of material (re)interpretations that allow for cartoon corporeal and other forms of performance.

Further, being immersed among the saturation of cosplay performances at Anime Expo underscored the difference between engaging such cartoon corporeal performances with and without such immersion or saturation. That is, when individual performances of cosplay are encountered alongside each other, they complement one another, creating an impression that each individual cartoon corporeal performance is situated within a more fully cartoon corporeal world. Conversely, when viewing a group of cosplayers at a distance, or even when viewing a single cosplayer up-close without being surrounded by other cosplayers, one can see the contrast between dark- and soft-tone features of everyday structures (like convention centers) and the vividness of cartoon animation brought to life through the cosplay. This contrast highlights the displacement of cartoon corporeal bodies in everyday cultural spaces. *Pokémon Go* players certainly stand out as well, but do not “become” the cartoons the way cosplay performers do, and so cosplay performance automatically invites the attention of the public. One begins to see how and why cosplay exemplifies cartoon corporeality’s function as mode of inquiry. Cosplay performers not only experiment with vibrantly expressive behaviors comparable to the vibrance of cartoon animation, they also have the opportunity to experience how such behaviors are received, specifically *because* they draw so much attention to themselves.

Another key feature of cosplay is that the performances are most often individually-developed productions. A performance of cosplay, though concentrated at events like Anime Expo, is a production not limited to a specific space or stage, unlike many other artistically calculated performances. Also unlike other artistically calculated performances that traditionally take place on a designated stage, cosplay performances are far more extemporaneous than they

are scripted. Performers will certainly call out iconic character phrases from time to time, such as one cosplayer at the 2018 convention performing as the character All Might from *My Hero Academia*, shouting, just as the character often does in the cartoon, “Have no fear, for I am here!” Yet, a cosplayer need not wait for a specific cue or moment in the production to call out her lines, nor does she need to wait for a scripted response from her scene partners. Cosplay performers have the agency to craft their characters’ stories as they unfold. Cosplay and cosplay-centered events like Anime Expo, however, also have a carnivalesque quality — they are festive, they encourage uninhibited social interaction, and they actively undermine the conventions of cultures that normally insist on more subdued modes of self-expression, even though they are also situated within such cultures (Bakhtin, “Carnival and Carnavalesque” 256; 251). As such, to contend that an event like Anime Expo is akin to carnival is to recognize that the individually-developed productions of cosplay performance take part in the larger production of the convention; while every individual cosplay is its own production telling its own story, it also helps to shape and frame the collective festive image of that larger production as performances interconnect and inform one another (though, again, without the scripted and other formal restrictions of other types of performance).

Because cosplayers have such individually expressive freedom, and because their “stage” is not only constituted by the entire convention center, but also by the surrounding geography to whatever extent the performers see fit, cosplayers also develop and execute their performances without the benefits often available to organized ensemble productions (the quality of organization being what separates the ensemble of a theatrical production from the more spontaneous ensembles of carnival and carnivalesque events). Organized ensemble performances, especially traditional theatrical performances that take place in proscenium



theaters and in intimate black box-style performance labs, are often produced by performance companies or programs that lend support — in the forms of financing, labor, and materials — to the cast of performers, to the director or choreographer, to the technical designers, and so on. While the theatrical concerns for stand-alone productions of cosplay may not be as wide or varied as they are in traditional theatrical productions, cosplay performances nevertheless require a range of craft skills, the labor of which becomes isolated to individuals, instead of distributed across an ensemble, a company, a director, a designer, and so on. As Gabriel pointed out, specifically referencing the devoted labor of cosplay, “They have to paint it, they have to cut it, they have to shape it.” Yet, as I describe in the following chapter, when that labor is spread out, the demands and the expectations for the production change as those involved in the development and performance processes take on the responsibility of more comprehensively interpreting the animated texts they have chosen to corporealize.

#### CHAPTER 4. CARS AND CARTOONS AT BEVERLY AND GENESEE: CARTOON CORPOREALITY THROUGH THEATRICAL ADAPTATION

The crosswalk “method” for James Corden’s “Crosswalk the Musical” series uses the short gaps of time during which pedestrians are allowed to cross from one side of Beverly Boulevard to the other where the street intersects with Genesee Avenue in Los Angeles, California. When the illuminated stick figure person appears on the walk sign below the traffic light across from the performers, they rush into the intersection and begin performing for their audience of drivers and pedestrians — whoever happens to be around at that time. Inevitably, the walk sign changes to a glowing red hand and a countdown begins to warn crossers that the traffic lights are about to change again. On cue, and through a highly exaggerated panic that sometimes results in purposely tumbling over the hoods of stopped cars, Corden yells for the fully-costumed dancers and singers in his ensemble to “Move!” (or some variation thereof) back to their canopy on the southwest corner of the intersection where they change costumes and prepare for their next number. Song-and-dance numbers usually do not finish because of the tight time restrictions imposed by the crosswalk format. Because of such limitations, the crosswalk method seems to demand that attention be given primarily to the most iconic moments of each adaptation’s source text, producing in the case of *Beauty and the Beast* what Raisa Bruner refers to as “a bare-bones version of the Disney classic” (par. 2).<sup>32</sup>

The crosswalk performances produced by *The Late Late Show* also almost always feature Corden as the lead, one of just a handful of exceptions being during a musical number from a New York City Broadway edition of the “Crosswalk the Musical” series that instead featured the actor Hugh Jackman as the lead, much to Corden’s faux-frustration. For every “Crosswalk the

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<sup>32</sup> As I detail in the following section, Corden’s *Beauty and the Beast* begins and ends with two iconic song-and-dance numbers, but the ending number — “Tale as Old as Time” — actually takes place near the middle of the 1991 film.

Musical” segment Corden commits to performing a self-centered diva, going so far as to have the cast shout his name in unison before the opening number of each production. The fact that Corden always plays the lead further contributes to the highly exaggerated comedy of the segment, in particular because Corden often looks little or nothing like the familiar images of the characters who are being adapted. Corden is a white male with short blond hair; he is somewhat heavyset, and he almost always wears a thin beard. Corden’s figure shows a clear contrast to that of the character young Simba, a small lion cub from *The Lion King* whom Corden played on the crosswalk in 2016, and a clear contrast to that of Maria from *The Sound of Music*, a woman almost always depicted with a much thinner figure than Corden’s and with no perceivable facial hair, whom Corden played in 2018.

Cartoon corporeality is one particular phenomenon of what Linda Hutcheon refers to as “an unending mirroring process” of human self-reference (“Theory of Parody” 1). In other words, we are collectively always adapting our own past behaviors, whether we are attempting to reenact them with a virtually impossible exactness (Schneider 16), or interpreting them anew. Hutcheon’s notion of perpetual human self-reference is both expanded and reinforced by Barad’s theory of agential realism. The theory helps us to recognize that while the behaviors that we continually adapt have been significantly shaped by social (human-centered) discourses, those discourses and thus the behaviors themselves have been informed and shaped by all of the material circumstances that precede and exist alongside/within them. Also important to note is that the influence of those material precedents can become rather diluted over time, yet they still enact the conditions through which reinterpretation and self-reference become possible, as I explain below when discussing *Beauty and the Beast* in its historical context.

When any of Corden's "Crosswalk the Musical" productions reference Broadway musicals that precede them, they interpret those musicals anew. The newness of the interpretation can be located in the difference of the space (urban city crosswalk versus Broadway stage), in the breadth of the production (how much of the narrative and other content actually gets repeated), and in the intention of the performance. The intention behind the "Crosswalk the Musical" performances is to parody — to create a "repetition with critical difference" (Hutcheon "Theory of Parody" 32). As Hutcheon points out, parody is not always performed "at the expense of the parodied text[s]," but it uses those texts "as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny" ("Theory of Parody" 6; 57). In the cases of Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* and other crosswalk shows, Corden himself becomes the scrutinized subject as his commitment to the diva persona is prevalent throughout the performances. The parodied texts, then, serve more as channels through which Corden can self-reflexively mock himself. The comedy of mock persona operates in conjunction with theatrical performance and adaptation through what Hutcheon refers to as "inter-art discourse" ("Theory of Parody" 2). In the case of Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, the vibrant expressivity of cartoon animation becomes one additional artistic form contributing to that discourse. Most of Corden's crosswalk productions, however, adapt non-animated texts.

The only other cartoon adaptation in the crosswalk repertoire is Corden's version of Disney's *The Lion King*, in which all characters are anthropomorphized animals, something often achieved through cartoon animation. Conversely, Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* features human characters (including the once-human Beast) alongside several anthropomorphized household fixtures, a narrative element that is a bit more niche than talking lions and warthogs. Both *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast* feature just a handful of moments of magic and mysticism,

qualities also often achieved through animation. My decision to select Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* over *The Lion King* was, as mentioned in Chapter One, partly out of simple preference, as both productions achieve similar feats when adapting their animated source texts into live productions that are at once comedic, fairly elaborate, and well-performed. I also selected Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* because I find it to be more vibrant and dynamic — between the costumes and props it uses a brighter color scheme more characteristic of most contemporary cartoons. Corden's *The Lion King* adaptation has plenty of its own vibrant colors, but its aesthetic feels overwhelmed by an excess of beige tones covering most of the costumes.

Further, the crosswalk at the intersection of Beverly and Genesee offers little to compare with a conventional theatrical space — there is no back wall, no fixed seating, no thrust, and also there are cars with their engines running everywhere. As such, the crosswalk method hardly qualifies as *traditional* theatre, and yet, its theatricality is undeniable. Performers engage their choreography and their singing voices with heightened expression, fully committing to each number. While the crosswalk productions are meant to be comedic, in general, the performers also always seem to take the actual performances very seriously (though there are bits and jokes “caught” on camera between musical numbers). Given that the crosswalk method does not reserve itself for adaptations of animated texts, and given the significant differences between crosswalk musicals and traditional theatre, the decision to select Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* as my site of interrogation into theatrical adaptation as a mode of cartoon corporeality also resides in its accessibility. That is, Corden's adaptation provides me with an example of cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation that I can watch over and over again, and can thus read more closely. I necessarily discuss other adaptations of animated texts that certainly are more theatrically conventional, but I also find it important to recognize the breadth of possibilities

within each mode of cartoon corporeality (videogames can be played on multiple platforms, cosplay performances can be widely interpretive, etc.). The crosswalk method exemplifies that breadth as far as theatrical productions are concerned.

Additionally, these kinds of crosswalk performances demonstrate the power of performance to transform the intended functionality of space. Crosswalks are designed with a fairly simple purpose: to maintain the safety of the intersection by marking a separation between pedestrians and drivers, and by directing pedestrians exactly when to cross. Yet, Corden and company make use of the crosswalk as though it were any other theatrical stage, with the key exception being that they return to the curb whenever the walk sign indicates they should. That is, Corden and company enter and engage the crosswalk with an expressive intention not usually assigned to such a space, while still adhering to the limitations imposed on the space — when the walk sign changes, the traffic lights change as well, and so Corden and company are taking measures to protect themselves from conditions of the space that are outside their control. The company's utilization of the crosswalk aligns with the transformative power of cartoons and cartoon corporeality. Cartoons translate material subjects and environments, finding ways to make those subjects and environments more vibrant and expressive. Performances of cartoon corporeality similarly translate cartoons through performers' bodies in ways that allow individuals to retain or access that same kind of vibrance and expressivity. The use of a crosswalk to deliver a Broadway-style performance production parodies the often high-cost spectacle of Broadway theatre (in part because it employs some of that same spectacle, but in a crosswalk). The parodying of the crosswalk is akin to the “cartooning” of bodies through cartoon corporeal performance, both of which occur through Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*.

After briefly describing Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* feature in relation to some of the narrative's other adaptations in the following paragraphs, I provide in the next section a more detailed description of Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*. The section after that details my own direct observations and performative experimentation at the intersection of Beverly and Genesee. The following section introduces the interview participants who focused on theatrical adaptations of cartoons. As well, it elaborates on the most significant key insight into cartoon corporeality gained through this portion of the research process: highly expressive modes of theatrical performance — whether achieved through technical stagecraft or through exaggerated humor — can fill a lot of the “fantastical gap” that is created when cartoons are theatrically adapted and the power of animation to create endless expressive possibilities consequently appears lost.

### **Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* in Context**

Disney's 1991 *Beauty and the Beast* animated feature film tells a story of Belle, a woman from a small village in France who lives with her widowed father. Belle's independence and intelligence are taken as a challenge by the character Gaston, a local revered hunter who aggressively insists he will marry her. Disinterested in the proposal, Belle rejects him. When Belle's father leaves for a sales trip, he accidentally wanders into part of a forest that is unknown to him and is kidnapped by the Beast, who was once a human prince and was cursed for his vanity to live in his current form. Belle goes in search of her father, finds him in the Beast's castle, and takes his place as the Beast's prisoner. All the servants of the castle, who instead of being transformed into beasts have been transformed into furniture, dining ware, and other household fixtures, try to persuade Belle and the Beast to fall in love in order to break the curse imposed on all of them before it becomes permanent. A jaded Gaston, warned by Belle's father of the Beast, summons a mob to storm the castle, attempts to rescue Belle, and to kill the Beast.

The confrontation leaves the Beast near death, but as Belle confesses her love for him, the curse is broken, and along with all of the servants of the castle he returns to human form. Beginning in the following section, whenever I reference the “original” *Beauty and the Beast*, I am addressing the Disney version (unless otherwise noted), as the Disney adaptation serves as the direct source text for Corden’s adaptation. I need, however, first briefly to locate the Disney interpretation within the centuries-old *Beauty and the Beast* narrative.

Disney’s first interpretation of *Beauty and the Beast* (before the 1993 premier of their Broadway production and before their 2017 live-action film version) is an adaptation of a 1740 French novel of the same name, authored by Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve. Villeneuve’s novel was in part inspired by the true story of a French nobleman who suffered from hypertrichosis, a condition that causes excessive hair growth, often over the whole body. The nobleman, Petrus Gonsalvus, was originally bought and sold to be spectated at as an oddity, and even after achieving noble status was still paraded around for that same purpose (sometimes with his children who suffered from the same condition). Gonsalvus’ real-life story and real-life medical condition are not characterized in Disney’s first adaptation in a way that clearly reflects his experience. Yet, Gonsalvus’ experience, informed by the physiology of his condition and by the sociocultural contexts in which someone with his condition happened to be born, together enacted key narrative elements that have been sustained in their ongoing social and material reinterpretations, from Villeneuve’s novel to Disney’s animated feature to every adaptation in between and adjacent.

Beyond Disney’s adaptations of the novel, there have been multiple others, from Jean Cocteau and René Clément’s black-and-white 1946 film, to the rotoscope animated<sup>33</sup> 1952

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<sup>33</sup> Rotoscope animation is a technique whereby live footage is recorded, and then the individual frames of the footage are either traced, drawn over, or filtered so that the footage then becomes an animated cartoon.



Soviet adaptation of the novel *The Scarlet Flower* (itself adapted from Villeneuve's novel), to a 1987 live-action drama series featured on CBS' television network. Each adaptation retains some core elements of the story: a man cursed to live as a beast falling in love with a beautiful woman whose reciprocation of his love has the power to break his curse. Each adaptation also accordingly employs some element of magic or mysticism, some more uniquely than others. Cocteau and Clément's version, for example, portrays a series of candelabra throughout the Beast's castle that instead of having stems to support each candelabrum, are held up by live human arms extending out of the walls. No other version quite matches the style of mystical aesthetic presented by the first Disney adaptation, however. That is not to say that all other versions fall short in how they design and convey the fantasticality of the narrative, but that the high-budget quality of animation in the Disney version allows for elaborately fantastical sequences and highly expressive interpretations of the magical qualities from the original story. As I assess Corden's 2017 adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, I recognize that his production comes nowhere close to matching the fantasticality of the Disney version, but also that the challenge of determining how such fantasticality might be otherwise translated is an important part of this analysis.

Also important to question is whether Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* parodies the Broadway adaptation of the Disney film, or the film itself, as most other crosswalk productions are adapted from well-known Broadway shows, including *Grease* and *Hair*. A cursory web search of "*Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway" reveals images of performers in intricately designed costumes, many of which are emblazoned with gold patterning from top to bottom. The costumes in the crosswalk version are much simpler, and for the core characters of Belle, Beast, and Gaston, the attires look almost like exact replicas of their animated depictions. The

Broadway production also adds multiple musical numbers that are not in the animated film, none of which are featured in Corden's version. Even if Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* was a parody of the Broadway version, and thus would be an adaptation of an adaptation more so than a direct reinterpretation of an animated text, Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* continues to qualify as cartoon corporeal. Corden and cast still become the once-animated figures from the Disney film in ways that are visually obvious (though the parodic nature of the adaptation certainly changes some of Belle's key features), and the impact of the company's performance on the immediate environment is just as obvious.

### **Recalling Corden's *Beauty and the Beast***

When watching the published video for Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, titled on YouTube as "Crosswalk the Musical: Beauty and the Beast," we are first greeted with a title banner of the segment, "Crosswalk the Musical," and one of Corden's late-night talk show, *The Late Late Show with James Corden*. We then see Corden and his cast — labeled by Hanh Nguyen as Corden's "intrepid group of pavement players" (par. 2) — gathered in a parking lot wearing all-black ensembles. Corden is holding a red rose in a glass-looking encasement as he reveals that "the production we will be performing is a tale as old as time, a song as old as rhyme" (two famous lines from one of the most iconic musical numbers in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, titled "Tale as Old as Time"), before he is interrupted by another cast member with, "Oh, my god, we're doing *Beauty and the Beast*!" Corden erupts in mock fury at the interruption, a preview of the deeply parodical direction in which the rest of the performance will move. Three actors from Disney's 2017 live-action *Beauty and the Beast* feature film then join the cast, as if pretending to dissolve the divide between the "serious" professionalism of the two-

and-a-half million dollar budget motion picture and the late *late* night comedy budget of the “Crosswalk the Musical” interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

Much of the roughly ten-minute spoof progresses as a *mockumentary* reminiscent of television shows like *The Office*,<sup>35</sup> with handheld cameras capturing the ensemble’s process as though it were not scripted. As they work through sketches that are made to look like rehearsals in a parking lot — such as standing in a circle and warming up by posing their bodies as forks, knives, spoons, and chipped teacups, which are all characters from the original animated story and thus presumably needed to be performed in a theatrical adaptation of that story — Corden speaks directly into the camera. He states, “I have to put them through their paces in the parking lot — that’s the closest you’ll ever get to being out there on the crosswalk,” an intentionally absurd line worth noting as we consider cartoon corporeality as something that breaches physical spaces of apparently many kinds. As rehearsals transition into “opening night” (in broad daylight), we see a cast of key characters including Gaston, the Beast, and Belle (played by Corden). Reaffirming the distance from the live-action film, the cast’s attire more closely reflects the designs of the Disney animated version (brighter and more solid colors, and with simpler details).

The actual musical performance begins about four-and-a-half minutes into the video as we see Corden’s Belle, not yet on the crosswalk, singing the aptly titled “Belle,” a song about living a quiet village life (accompanied by at least one large standing speaker playing the music and pointed towards the crosswalk). As Corden sings, he moves from one end of the crosswalk to another. Nearby pedestrians appear to go about their business, and as the traffic lights change

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<sup>34</sup> The involvement of the three additional actors also shows that at least part of the purpose of Corden’s adaptation at the time was to promote the film, another signal that performances of cartoon corporeality are bound up in corporate affairs and financial motivations.

<sup>35</sup> Programs like *The Office* take the form of mock documentaries, whereby episodes’ progressions are recorded as though they are real-life, unscripted events (even though they are not).

and cars stop behind the crosswalk, drivers appear initially to do the same. The performance continues with cast members running out onto the crosswalk carrying props, such as window frames for popping their heads out of (something seen in the animated version of the musical number). Others dressed as villagers run out to dance along with Corden's singing. With the crosswalk now filled from end to end with animated performers and choreography, the edges of the camera frame begin revealing the pedestrians who take notice, most smiling as they look on from the sidewalk. A camera shot then focuses on the window of a driver stopped directly in front of the crosswalk, and we see the performance distorted but still visible in the reflection of the driver's chrome side mirror. The driver's facial expression is one of confusion. Before the number can end, the traffic light changes and we hear the sounds of car horns (some of these, we can assume, may have been edited in to heighten the intensity of the moment). Corden yells, "Cars! Cars! Cars!" as the cast rushes back to one corner of the intersection to prepare for their next number. With excitement, Corden proclaims to the rest of the cast, "There was someone looking through their sunroof, guys! That is a standing ovation!" (something we never actually see in the video).

Most of the remainder of the video progresses along this same pattern of the cast performing an apparently well-rehearsed portion of one of the original film's musical numbers; the camera trading off between long high-angle shots capturing the entirety of the scene, close-up shots of pedestrians and drivers and passengers displaying a range of reactions from confused to amused to surprised; a variety of loosely framed mid- and full-shots<sup>36</sup> of the ensemble singing and dancing with large props through the crosswalk; and the traffic lights changing with sounds of car horns honking and Corden yelling some iteration of "Cars! Cars! Cars!" or "Be safe! Be

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<sup>36</sup> In film, a mid-shot frames subjects from the waist, up, and a full-shot frames the entire subject, and usually with enough space between the subject and the edges of the frame to situate the subject within the surrounding environment.

safe! Be safe!” to the rest of the cast as they run back and prepare for the next number.

Maintaining its mockumentary format, footage of individual performer testimonials is scattered between and throughout the musical numbers. Josh Gad, the actor playing the sentient cartoon candlestick Lumiere, who also played LeFou (a sidekick, of sorts, to Gaston) in the live-action version, says, “Interestingly enough, I didn’t get to play this part in the movie and I’m actually kind of glad, because who wants to do it in front of millions of people in a film when you can do it in front of half a dozen Lyft and Uber drivers?”

The approximately ten-minute video certainly falls short of providing viewers with performances of all fifteen original *Beauty and the Beast* musical numbers, but the crosswalk parody strategically covers some of the most iconic, including “Be Our Guest” (a song about making Belle feel welcome in the castle), “Gaston” (a song all about pleasing Gaston’s inflated ego), and “Tale as Old as Time” (a song about falling in love in uncertain circumstances). Dan Stevens, the actor who played Beast in both the live-action film and Crosswalk versions, communicates confusion about the process, or the method, of performing theatre in a crosswalk throughout most of the video. Yet, after performing the closing number, “Tale as Old as Time,” in which Belle (Corden dressed in a bright yellow ball gown) and Beast share an intimate ballroom-style dance together, Stevens says to the camera, appearing overwhelmed and elated, “Oh, my god. I was wrong. That was just- That was incredible. That was- That was the most invigorating thing I’ve- I’ve ever done!” The cast’s performance ends with a “curtain call” bow for one last group of drivers, passengers, and pedestrians. Corden, sustaining the diva personality he performs in every crosswalk production, is then the last to return to the sidewalk after the traffic lights have already changed; he lingers to relish the series of car horns that seem to take the place of applause.

Throughout each dance number, when not carrying large and appropriately cartoonish props such as giant forks and spoons, members of the ensemble wear equally cartoonish and large costume pieces. One performer is dressed as a tea kettle, another as a tea cup, and another as a giant cake. Each of these performers' faces is fully on display, and their facial expressions are as bright and animated as their costumes and props. Other performers who are dressed in conventionally neutral all-black attire present just as much magnified excitement in the crosswalk while they twirl brightly colored streamers as they dance and sing. The entire production happens in broad daylight, and clearly at a time when there is enough regular traffic to fill the edges of the intersection with an immediately live audience so that it feels like a substantially attended performance for those only watching all of this happen on video.

Rianne Houghton responds to Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* by claiming that "musicals centered on transport infrastructure are *the* dramas of the future" (par. 7). While likely joking, Houghton alludes to how performances of the unexpected — such as performances of cartoon corporeality at urban city crosswalks — can occur with or without the public's initial knowledge or approval (whether or not this is something new or becoming more prevalent as Houghton states is up for debate). In the following section, as I recount my own experience attempting to emulate some of Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, my observations largely connect with the notion of public approval for performances of the unexpected. Performances of cartoon corporeality, in particular, do not necessitate public *disapproval* — they need only show some clear visual representation of an animated figure that influences either the physical body of the performer, the performer's physical environment, or both. *Pokémon Go* superimposes animated Pokémon figures over players' physical environments, and in response to the visual superimposition of those figures players move about their environments in ways they otherwise

would not. Cosplay gatherings like Anime Expo invite and encourage people who transform the appearances (and sometimes even the functions) of their own bodies to mirror those of cartoon characters so that they might effectually perform as those characters. Theatrical adaptations of cartoons achieve similar ends as cosplay, but usually for the purpose of conveying a specific sequenced narrative.

That publics generally do not encourage such performances seems less a matter of *deliberately* rejecting experimental (and therefore unexpected) forms of self-expression like cartoon corporeality, and more a matter of uncertainty or confusion, as I address below. I approached the emulation and partial reenactment of Corden and company's work as an opportunity not only to gain a sense of what a performance of *Beauty and the Beast* in the crosswalk felt like for the performers, but also primarily to establish a more concrete understanding of the immediate public's reaction to such an experiment, which could not be achieved solely from watching the video. As Hutcheon observes, the "camera limits what we can see, eliminating the action on the periphery that might have caught our attention when watching a play on stage" (*Theory of Adaptation* 43; emphasis removed), even when that stage is a crosswalk at a mildly busy city intersection.

### **Experimental Observation(s): A Grand *Jeté* as Old as Time**

Not long after my days spent making observations at Anime Expo in the summer of 2018, I decided to visit CBS' television studios near midcity Los Angeles. More specifically, I decided to visit the crosswalk just outside CBS' studios at the intersection of Beverly Boulevard and Genesee Avenue. On an early and surprisingly cool August evening, around rush hour, I parked at a meter on Beverly about half a block from the intersection before making my way to a bus stop bench just past the crosswalk I had become so familiar with from watching Corden's *Beauty*

*and the Beast* over and over again online. Like my playthroughs of *Pokémon Go* and my visit to Anime Expo, I was there with analytic intent, to observe and experiment. I would obviously not be observing a remount of Corden and company's *Beauty and the Beast* — I was not lucky enough to have seen the production live, nor could I have planned for such a thing to happen as the whole point of "Crosswalk the Musical" seems to be to catch passersby off-guard, to give them a performance to witness that they never asked for and in a place they never would have expected.

My observations, then, would be of the location itself, and of my own experience while I was there. David Bodenhamer asserts that the "world . . . is diverse and complex, and we can understand it only through an appreciation of the uniqueness of places and the events and cultures that they hold" (16). Bodenhamer also notes that "place exists in past, present, and future time" (14), meaning that for me to be at Beverly and Genesee one day in 2018 gives me access to the performance of Corden and company on a completely different day more than a year prior. Further, as Conquergood states, "[P]erformance-centered research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history" ("Rethinking Ethnography" 187). One option I had was to sit and simply imagine the performance I had seen on video several times taking place in front of me, considering the perspectives and reactions of the drivers and pedestrians who were actually there, but I thought that not enough to capture the diversity and complexity Bodenhamer points to. A more effective approach would be to reenact, even if only in a very scaled-down fashion, provocations of pedestrian reactions (so that I could witness them firsthand), as well as some of the experiences of the performers, themselves. To achieve this reenactment I would stage my own series of short performances modeled on and emulating Corden and company's, and in the same crosswalk.



Even if I had the financial means to attempt as much, I could never perfectly recreate Corden's production, and so my goal instead was to allude to Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* through my body. On the sidewalk next to the bus stop bench, about ten feet from the crosswalk and on the side of the intersection most shown in the footage of the performance (southwest, directly adjacent to CBS studios' entrance gates), I stood and simply watched as the traffic lights changed, taking note of their pattern and timing. I pictured the logistics of the performance playing out in front of me, realizing how much smaller the street and sidewalk were than they seemed from the video — the length of the crosswalk, itself, was shorter than several conventional theatrical stages I have performed on, and with significantly less depth.<sup>37</sup> I could imagine how tightly clustered together the performers were while also recognizing how much closer the original unsuspecting audience members were to the action of the performance than I first perceived. Hutcheon notes of one of the contrasts between film and live theatre that "actors [in live theatre] can create intimacy through their 'presence'" (*Theory of Adaptation* 131). If I had been parked just behind the crosswalk during the performance's run, I would have been able to make out the fine details of performers' facial expressions, so I could imagine that full-body expressions like dance phrases that extend performers' limbs would feel intensely engaging, even from behind a car's windshield.

I went to Beverly and Genesee prepared to reenact and emulate some of the sensation from Corden and company's performance, but my solitude — lack of an ensemble — lent itself to some initial nervousness that, through poor foresight, I expected would dissipate. I decided I would ease myself in, using some of what little time I had before sunset to desensitize myself to

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<sup>37</sup> Looking back at the video of Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, the depth I perceived appears mostly to be a result of the angles and distances at which the cameras were used. Long high-angle shots are far enough away that the depth of the crosswalk is difficult to perceive, and tight shots of the performers sometimes show so little of the actual crosswalk that I likely just assumed there was greater depth. Another possibility is that wide-angle camera lenses were used when shooting the performance, which can significantly alter the appearance of depth on screen.

the awkwardness of deliberately exposing my performing body to a nearby public that otherwise would largely ignore my presence. On my first trek through the crosswalk to the gas station at the northwest corner, near the middle I performed a single grand *jeté* — a high balletic jump that extends one leg forward and the other back, usually with the hands and arms extending in both directions as well.<sup>38</sup> The single dance phrase was large enough to gain attention, but short-lived enough that plenty of passersby would miss it. On my way back to the studio side of the intersection I proceeded to dance with greater intention. I improvised quicksteps, jumps, and various gestures starting at the middle and continuing until I made it to the sidewalk. I then casually looked to the nearby car windows to find at least one person staring and smirking (with, I think, amusement).

The first perceivable dance phrase in Corden and company's performance is also a grand *jeté*, performed by a member of the ensemble. More grand *jetés* repeat throughout, as do a number of other balletic jumps and gestures, but all loosely enough that performers' movements also reflect their intentions during each moment of the performance. For example, during the song "Gaston," as the villagers sing Gaston's praises with the line, "For there's no one as burly and brawny," in unison they circle their right arms from first position (elbow slightly bent, fingers extended, arm at a downward angle) to fifth position (elbow bent, fingers extended, arm curved above the head) multiple times before ending by flexing their biceps to the side. Everything about the Corden production, in terms of dance, was all very "musical theatre" — loosely balletic, highly expressive, and always complementing the story. I tried to match the musical theatre quality of the dancers from Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, and to reenact some of the specific phrases (such as the grand *jetés*), but I had no intention of trying to recapture the

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<sup>38</sup> I should note here that I am a trained dancer with experience in ballet, and proficiency in modern and contemporary technique and choreography, which also use iterations of ballet's vocabulary.

entirety of any single dance sequence from the show; my reenactment was not focused on “literal precision” nor on deliberate creative change according to some kind of “rubric of ‘interpretation’” (Schneider 15). Yet, as Schneider points out, “Citation, repetition, and ‘twice-behaved behavior’ . . . provide the basis for why and how reenactors can reenact at all” (10). There were plenty of “weird” or unexpected short performances I could have done in the intersection to elicit a public reaction, but only by accessing specific qualities of Corden’s *Beauty and the Beast* in some fashion could I actually reenact the performance and “stand . . . in its footprint, in its precise place” (Schneider 16), and hopefully begin to develop a more nuanced understanding of what performers and passersby experienced.

Continuing to cross from end to end, I also began incorporating singing into the series of short performances. To the best of my meager vocal ability, I sang a short section from “Tale As Old As Time” with each trek — “Tale as old as time / Song as old as rhyme / Beauty and the Beast.” I kept my hands nervously in my pockets the first time singing while crossing to the gas station side of the street and no one that I noticed appeared to hear me. Singing again on my way back, I began dancing again without restraining my hands, and this time incorporated a rather slow back-dip, imitating a moment when actor Stevens’ Beast dips Corden’s Belle. The displacement of a slow dipping body stopped in the middle of a busy rush hour intersection indeed caught the attention of those around me, mostly made evident by looks of bewilderment from those I could see through their car windows and from the handful of people walking out of and past the gas station.

For my final trek, there happened to be a small group of people “waiting for me” at the other side of the crosswalk, and I forced myself to sing much more loudly to make sure they would hear me. I had established a rule for myself that I would not stop singing and dancing

until one of my feet hit the sidewalk, and so as soon as my one foot went from pavement to curb, I abruptly stopped my dancing and singing, looked to the group nearby (whose expressions I can best describe as polite confusion) and impulsively gave them a casual smile as if I were trying to communicate a normalcy about my presence, something I had just very actively rejected. Quickly, I made my way back to the comfort of the bus stop bench, out of most drivers' and pedestrians' purview. The throughline of embarrassment across my short series of emulating performances comes in part from the lack of "protection" otherwise afforded by Corden's celebrity, from the lack of a full ensemble to thin out the attention I brought on myself, and from the lack of a production team to help manage and edit everything from the live performance itself to any footage of the performance that could later be posted online.

My experience underscores the distance between performances of cartoon corporeality and cultural convention. I arrived at the crosswalk initially uncertain about how I would identify "the rigors of crosswalk performance," as Nguyen calls them (par. 3). When I was finished, I assessed that "crosswalk performance" works well as a metaphor for performances of the unexpected more broadly, and that "the rigors of crosswalk performance" are not simply represented by cars that need dodging, but by fears (and sometimes egos) that need dissolving so that performers can work through the culturally conditioned self-consciousness associated with such performance. Bernadette Wegenstein and Mark Hansen contend that "the body is defined by the activities in which it engages," and that, "As a result, the body has become a 'project' to be worked on and accomplished as a fundamental aspect of the individual's self-identity" (4). The accomplishments of the body are measured against the extent to which one restrains herself not to stray outside the boundaries of those cultural conditions, recognizing unique or non-

normative self-expression as something that must remain subtle so as never to attract too much attention.

Everything from styles of dress to patterns of speech are culturally coded forms of expression expected to conform to the intersecting expectations of locale, time, and audience. As a brief example, I sometimes feel most comfortable in my own speech patterns when I elongate vowels and employ terminologies most strongly associated with Queer popular culture in the United States, such as “Yas” in place of “Yes,” and “Werk it” as a form of praise for another’s actions in place of a more common congratulatory term. Yet, as a college educator, I have also found that whenever I allowed myself to regularly employ such patterns of speech in the classroom, my end-of-semester teaching evaluation scores decline. My speech in the classroom falls within what Bakhtin calls primary speech genres, which are constituted by “short rejoinders of daily dialogue . . . everyday narration, writing (in all its various forms),” and other forms of everyday communication such as conversational political commentary (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 60). Secondary speech genres, according to Bakhtin, are constituted by more specialized cultural communicative utterances and entities such as artistic works, discourses produced by scientific research, and journalistic/media political commentary (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 62). My “Queer speak,” wherever it happens to be employed, is very much informed by those secondary speech genres of Queer popular culture, given how terms like “Werk it” and “Yas” have been popularized by Queer television programs like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

My body in the crosswalk acts, in some ways, as my speech does in the classroom. I “utter” something with my body — a grand *jeté*, for example — informed by Corden’s *Beauty and the Beast*, and consequently informed by the animated referent and by the genre of

Broadway musicals being parodied by Corden and company. Bakhtin contends three characteristics of all communicative utterances: they are “neutral” in that they are lexical, pertaining to some cultural definition; they are of another, in that they are “filled with echoes of the other’s utterance”; and they are personal, unique to the intentions, interpretations, and distinct expressive qualities of the person who performs them (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 88). In turn, for me, the grand *jeté* is, first, simply a balletic gesture, largely recognizable with or without all others knowing what it is called; it is also Corden and company’s grand *jeté*, employed by them for a particular purpose that I chose to emulate; and it is a full-body gesture of my own making, interpreted through the physical impulses and capabilities of my body. While I knew passersby would hardly see me as a threat, I also knew from experience that even simple communicative acts that fail to meet the demands or expectations of a particular space are often met with some form of social reprisal, and I have consequently been conditioned not to take such risks, as have many others for many reasons.

As I further discuss in the final chapter, the adverse consequences of performing self-expressive behaviors that fail to align with cultural demands are not immaterial, and are often far worse than negative job performance feedback. Performances of cartoon corporeality are not exclusively about discovering ways to expand one’s repertoire of social performance behaviors for the purpose of actively and aggressively bringing those behaviors to the particular intersections of locale, time, and audience that most readily reject them. The possibility exists, of course, for one deliberately to perform through any given mode of cartoon corporeality for just such a purpose of challenging a space’s lack of safety, seeking to (re)claim it. Moreso, however, performances of cartoon corporeality are also about first discovering such self-expressive possibilities so that they can then be employed in spaces and circumstances that

actually *are* safe from such adverse consequences. As such, in many cases performances of cartoon corporeality may for some be enjoyable reprieves from the constricting power dynamics that normally and rather effectively organize and categorize individuals and our behaviors, but reprieve is not without further potential benefit.

If we view performances of cartoon corporeality as operating sometimes as “tactics,” which Michel de Certeau describes as “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus” (219), then we can further account for the phenomenon’s relationship to culturally established mechanisms of power. In conjunction with tactics, de Certeau describes “strategy” as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city[,], a scientific institution) can be isolated” (218). A strategy is like a formalized method for establishing and/or maintaining social control. In turn, a tactic is an informal action that undermines strategy, subverts it in some way, functionally allowing it to change just a little; but because tactics themselves largely go unnoticed by the forces that govern the power mechanisms of strategy, the change is subtle and gradual. Also important to note is de Certeau’s contention that the “space of a tactic is the space of the other” (219), meaning that tactics cannot be performed independent of strategies, but instead must navigate the power networks that strategies maintain.

The pertinent strategy in place during my crosswalk experimentation can be understood as the crosswalk itself, or even the intersection as a whole. All four crosswalks connecting the corners of the intersection together, the traffic lights, the electronic walk/stop walking signs, street name signs, nearby parking signs, the clear material differences between the concrete of the sidewalks and the asphalt of the streets, and so on — all of it maintains some kind of order, directing people (both drivers and pedestrians) how and when to move about the space until they

reach the next intersection that does the same. Dancing and singing through the crosswalk, seemingly outside the immediate purview of any formal authority,<sup>39</sup> is an instance (or short series of instances) of tactical subversion of the space. While I made sure to cross only when the sign indicated I could, and while I always kept my body within the lines of the crosswalk, I deliberately disregarded the established directive that I merely *walk* across. Corden and company's much larger production, which can actually be called cartoon corporeal — as it adapts a cartoon, whereas my performances only alluded to one — can also be recognized as tactical. While Corden and cast might return to the space from time to time to perform more crosswalk shows, they would not permanently co-opt the space. The performers also always stayed within the actual crosswalk (or extremely close to its edge), and they always exited the crosswalk whenever the lights indicated they should. Nevertheless, they demonstrated that the space *can* be used differently.

Again, performances of cartoon corporeality need not be deliberately subversive. Conversely, they are often tactical without trying to be. “Crosswalk the Musical” productions are subversive no matter what, whether or not they are cartoon corporeal. Other theatrical adaptations of cartoons — those that occur in traditional theatrical spaces — are no less cartoon corporeal, but are usually much less subversive as they happen where they are formally designed to happen. Performances of cosplay that stay within the walls and the immediate vicinities of convention centers (or other like spaces), which have been sanctioned by cities and host organizations for specifically such a purpose do little to subvert those sanctioning forces. On the other hand, when performers venture further and further away from those sanctioned spaces, while still in cosplay, they perform such a subversion. Similarly, when *Pokémon Go* players

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<sup>39</sup> I think I would have been far less willing to engage the experiment if, for example, any police were present.



engage the game casually, and in accordance with the ordinances of cities, parks, or other public spaces where the virtual Pokémon can be caught, they appear and are perceived much the same as anyone else using a smartphone in public. Yet, those players who violate the game's own policy by trying to capture Pokémon while driving, and those who enter or move through unsafe spaces to reach their next Pokémon, indeed undermine the strategic mechanisms that direct them to avoid such behaviors. Among those mechanisms, beyond the game's own policy guidelines, are the same kinds of ordinances that frame the power dynamics of crosswalk performance — people crossing the street when they are directed not to, wandering through parks after operating hours, visiting war memorials to catch Pokémon instead of engaging the memorial for its intended purpose to publicly honor fallen soldiers, and so on.

Performances of cartoon corporeality are often positioned against societal demand for nuanced self-expression, especially the more public the place one expresses oneself. The nature of cartoons, and consequently the nature of cartoon corporeality, is one of expressive flexibility, something that can only appear nuanced in spaces or at events designed to support such a thing. Cultural convention, on the other hand, restricts the body through what Barad refers to as “boundary-making practices that have no finality in the ongoing dynamics of agential intra-activity” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 821). In other words, we value the presumed hierarchy of social discourses so heavily that we fail to recognize the potential of the material body outside of those discourses. In the next section, I first introduce the interview participants who helped clarify for me how cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation demonstrates, for both performing participants and audiences alike, the ability of socially-situated bodies to reach outside of those restrictive discursive boundaries. I then proceed to develop what I consider to be the most significant insight gained during this portion of the dissertation research, which is

that different highly expressive modes of theatricality perform the role of the fantastical when cartoons are corporeally adapted to the stage.

### **Translating the Fantastical**

As I proceed, I somewhat shift the conversation about cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptations of animated texts to also address more conventional forms of theatre. I explained earlier in the chapter that my decision to select Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* as a specific site of interrogation for this chapter stems from its accessibility, its theatricality that persists without the augment of a traditional theatrical stage, and its status as a production that demonstrates live theatre's range of possible forms of presentation. Other crosswalk productions are arguably just as theatrical as Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*. Accordingly, as I proceed to observe theatre's role as one potential mode of cartoon corporeality, I recognize that non-cartoon-centered theatrical productions are not, themselves, in any way cartoon corporeal, but rather, that performances of cartoon corporeality fit or work well within theatrical performance. After all, Chang and Ungar's first requisite for cartoon animation, more broadly, is its theatricality (52).

Interviewees who focused on theatrical adaptation discussed their respectively years-long histories of working in traditional theatre, most in professional capacities and in a variety of positions from performer, to director, to producer, to writer. Each interviewee detailed firsthand experiences from working on a range of theatrical adaptations of cartoons, and each conveyed a strong affinity for cartoon animation more broadly. The affinity was more intense for some than others, but all expressed a personal understanding of the animated cartoon as more than a simple subject of entertainment, but as a uniquely expressive and culturally influential form. They each reflected in their own way Ward's sentiment that animation "exists at the conjunction of a very

wide range of discourses,” including “film, fine art, philosophy, technology, aesthetics, individual expression,” and more (244). Though I only reference interviewees a handful of times in this chapter, I provide below a brief description of each individual who discussed experiences with theatrical adaptations of cartoons in order to help contextualize their respective contributions to this part of my study.

One interviewee, Sal, discussed his experiences working for Warner Brothers Entertainment Incorporated (Warner Brothers hereafter) in the 1990s, first as a salesperson at a Warner Brothers store in the mall, then as a storyboard artist and animator for Warner Brothers Animation. While working for Warner Brothers Animation, Sal explained how he and other animators were tasked with advising the performers for a production called *Animaniacs on Ice*, a theatrical adaptation of the 1993 cartoon *Animaniacs*. The cartoon centers around three eccentric siblings who escape the Warner Brothers Studio Water Tower, where they had been confined to keep them from causing mayhem for Warner Brothers executives.<sup>40</sup> After Warner Brothers closed its traditional animation studios in their move towards computer animation, Sal’s career as an animator ended, but he later found himself performing regularly in a range of theatrical productions, some of which also happened to be adaptations of other cartoons, including *Peter Pan* and *The Jungle Book*. Another interviewee, Paul, works as a director and producer for The California Theatre of the Performing Arts in San Bernardino, California, and for the Redlands Bowl in Redlands, California. Paul has worked on adaptations of animated films including *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Jungle Book*, *Tarzan*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Important to note is that Paul has an intimate knowledge of working on large-scale theatrical productions

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<sup>40</sup> The show is known for being comedically reflexive of its own relationship to a long history of Warner Brothers cartoons.

(as in those with large budgets). The California Theatre of the Performing Arts seats more than 1,700 and the Redlands Bowl seats around 5,000.

Amanda worked as an ensemble performer on a smaller-scale production of *Beauty and the Beast*, and was able to provide insights about the process of translating some of the more fantastical elements from the animated film onto the stage. Lastly, Alex wrote and co-produced *The Pokémusical*, an adaptation of the *Pokémon* series that primarily focuses on the early episodes of the anime. Like Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Pokémusical* is a parodical interpretation of its source text, in that it intentionally amplifies elements and moments of the original story usually seen as more serious or as inconsequential, and with the intention of making those more serious or inconsequential elements comedic. Amanda and Paul were able to help me conceptualize how technological craft conventions of theatre — lighting techniques, the use of fog, projection, intricate costuming techniques, LED walls, and so on — can be used to supplement some of the fantastical elements of the animated source texts that get lost in their corporeal transformations. Conversely, Alex and Sal helped me understand how the fantastical nature of the original animated source texts can be retained without high levels of spending on stagecraft materials and technicians by adapting the performance to the existing expressive capabilities of human bodies as well as much more accessible (inexpensive) materials. As I proceed, I further detail how these two different modes of theatricality — expression through technical craft and expression through comedic exaggeration — both make cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation achievable, and more importantly, how they can make cartoon corporeality more acceptable to those previously mentioned publics who are not necessarily prepared for an increasingly expressive/cartoon corporeal world.

### **“Just a fun, like, animation good time” (Supplementing Fantasticality)**

In the crosswalk production, the actor for Beast, Dan Stevens, joked in-segment about overcoming his concerns with performing in the crosswalk, stating, “You know, I crossed that road and on the other side was- was everything I love about theatre... and a gas station.” While Stevens’ apprehension about performing in the crosswalk was likely just part of the comedic design of the overall late-night show’s segment, I can attest that performing in the crosswalk can indeed be frightening. Certainly, there is some concern for the safety (or lack thereof) of performing in the middle of an active street, but mostly my fears were tied to the previously mentioned embarrassment over doing something so out of the ordinary in such a visible way. Yet, I deliberately made myself the subject of attention for anyone whose focus happened to already be directed at or around the intersection, and I imagine no one quite knew what I was doing. The imagery of Corden’s *Beauty and the Beast* was immediately present for me in the process, and I could not help but picture myself as Belle/Corden, or as performing alongside her/him. I lacked, however, the material supplements that would have helped clarify my brief performances for the public around me, and that would have qualified my experimental performances as cartoon corporeal — Belle’s iconic bright yellow dress, for example, or perhaps a large teapot costume. I also lacked any speakers that could play the instrumental audio for “Tale as Old as Time” loudly enough to pierce the sounds of traffic while I sang.

For the immediate public to associate my performances with *Beauty and the Beast* would have required more than the presence and movement of my body, and more than the sound of my voice, as the public’s understanding of the text constitutes much more, from music, to costuming, to talking candles and clocks, none of which I made available to myself. Hutcheon observes, “The theater and the novel are usually considered the forms in which the human subject is

central” (*Theory of Adaptation* 11), and Barad repeatedly contends that our social discourses far too heavily prioritize the human subject by framing all discourses of value as human in origin and always only productive because of human involvement (“Posthumanist Performativity” 808, 821, 828). Certainly, as long as humans are the ones talking about a need to decentralize the human subject, we can never totally do so. We can, however, more readily and broadly recognize the roles various kinds of materials play in our various kinds of social discourses. As Barad notes, “Matter is not immutable or passive” (821), but plays an active role in continually shaping cultural behaviors and attitudes (822). An understanding of cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation helps clarify how the messages and images communicated by social bodies are often perceived according to those bodies’ use, non-use, or misuse of other materials, as to adapt a cartoon for theatre necessitates the materializing of that which has always been visible and kinetic, but has also been intangible.

An audience with preeminent knowledge of an animated narrative will impulsively look for the narrative to be fulfilled in a similar fashion as it is in the cartoon. Beyond expectations for content and story, they will seek fulfillment of the fantastical somewhere within the theatrical process of materializing the animated storyworld. Paul Wells asserts, “Animation can . . . challenge our perceived view of space and time, and endow lifeless things with dynamic and vibrant properties” (11), and for an audience to engage an animated text in a theatrically corporeal way does not eliminate the expectation that the text remain “dynamic and vibrant.” Fulfillment of the fantastical appears to be achieved in two basic ways through theatrical adaptation: either through the use of theatrical technologies that are capable of closely replicating the visual vibrance and malleability of cartoon animation, or through the use of exaggerated humor designed largely to draw attention to the *incapabilities* of human performers.

Both approaches direct focus to the stage as needed by providing a contrast to everyday aesthetics and everyday social behaviors. Watching a cartoon character fly from one end of a screen to another feels normal because we expect that cartoons on screens can do such things. In turn, watching a person fly from one end of a stage to another creates a different kind of excitement (especially if we cannot see the zipline or fly system<sup>41</sup> keeping her suspended and making her move through the air). Watching cartoon versions of Belle and Beast dance in a carefully and intricately rendered animation of a large ballroom while a talking and moving candlestick and clock philosophize over their futures (as happens in the film) also feels comfortable because the narrative and aesthetics of *Beauty and the Beast* reflect the disruptions of the ordinary that we have come to expect from the ether of animation. Watching a group of strangers perform a musical number from *Beauty and the Beast* while carrying and dancing with giant spoons, and while other performers whip streamers through the air, and while another performer whose physical features are a far cry from Belle's nevertheless performing as Belle, and all in a public manner, feels different, abnormal, even extravagant. Lawrence Kramer observes that the "animated cartoon . . . carelessly defies the laws of embodiment" (164), and thus, such abnormal and extravagant behaviors (or technologies) are necessary to supplement the fact that human performers cannot defy such laws through their bodies alone.

Adaptation of the fantastical may involve translating a "magical moment" of sorts, such as the transformation scene at the end of *Beauty and the Beast*. Interviewee Paul noted, "It really is about trying to give the audience their money's worth and as much spectacle as you can reasonably afford." Audiences often expect to witness a great deal of technical extravagance on stage, which could be anything from moving sets, to large mechanical props, to giant puppets

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<sup>41</sup> In many traditional theatre spaces, a *fly system* is a grid of ropes and weights that allow lights and other hanging objects (performers) to be suspended above the stage, and to be lowered or raised as needed.

requiring multiple operators, to costumes that light up or have some other function beyond appearance. To build an elaborate costume is one thing; to present an audience with an elaborate transformation from one costume to another that appears and feels just as fantastical (magical, even) as it does in animated form requires more careful thought. Amanda performed in a theatrical adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* at a theatre in Whittier, California. She performed as the Wardrobe (one of the anthropomorphic household fixtures from the film), and besides being quite bulky her costume also had functioning drawers. Amanda noted of the transformation scene in her production that there were “lots of lights flashing to disorient the audience,” and she explained how the production used fog during the scene to hide the action of the costume changes. Cartoon corporeality often necessitates some form of disorientation, or reorientation, that can frame a view of reality that accepts cartoons’ physical presence alongside and within a normally non-cartoon world. Lights and fog are some such ways to achieve disorientation through technical craft on a traditional theatrical stage.

Guy Debord argues that spectacle is merely a “representation” of the real; that it is both an “inversion” (7) and “a negation of life” (8; emphasis removed) that constitutes “the meaning and the agenda of our particular socio-economic formation” (9; emphasis removed). For Debord, spectacle “falsifies reality” (8) and detracts from lived experience. Debord asserts spectacle “is not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society’s unreality” (8). Yet for Debord’s argument to stand absolutely, elements of spectacle would have to be the central focus or the defining qualities of all social activity, including performance. Indeed, theatrical adaptations of cartoons often heavily rely on spectacle, such that those productions might be defined by spectacle. Yet, for cartoon corporeality generally, and even for theatrical adaptations of cartoons more specifically, qualities of spectacle sometimes



function simply as augmentations to the experience, enhancing and informing the expressive qualities of the performers who, themselves, are the main focus.

Beyond high-budget theatre, adaptation from cartoon to stage might involve finding ways to recraft other expressive qualities of the animated source texts to meet or benefit from the capabilities of the live human performers, but without relying on conventions of technological stagecraft. Sal discussed at length his work on *Animaniacs on Ice* in Burbank, California in the mid-1990s. He explained that when he and the other Warner Brothers animators first met with the performers and saw the choreography they had been taught, he realized that their movements had not been stylized to reflect the quality of the characters they were playing. The three central characters from *Animaniacs* — Yakko, Wakko, and Dot — are known for being highly exaggerated and almost aggressively energetic in their movements and behaviors. Sal explained, “You know, we went out and got to tape them, and show them what Yakko would do, what Wakko would do, how they would fall, what they would do. ‘Can you fall and bounce back up?’” He noted that Chuck Jones — a late renowned animator known for his work on *Looney Tunes* and *Tom and Jerry* — came along to watch the performers. Sal reflected on Jones making a comment that preparing the theatrical adaptation would be far less complicated if it was “just animation,” presumably because “animating” other people is simply more difficult than animating hand-drawn images that are entirely subject to the animator’s own expressive whims.

Sal also pointed out, in reference to the performers, that “everything that they do is going to be judged against . . . the cartoon,” further explaining, “If they are not true, and I’m a kid watching the *Animaniacs* and *Pinky and the Brain* on ice, and they’re not like they are in the cartoon, they’ve lost me in the first five minutes.”<sup>42</sup> The fantasticality of *Animaniacs* comes

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<sup>42</sup> *Pinky and the Brain* is a series of shorts that began as part of the *Animaniacs* cartoon, and later spun off into its own series.

much more from its deliberately bizarre and exaggerated humor made even more amplified by recurring animations that stretch and bend the characters in seemingly unnatural ways than it does from moments of magic and mysticism. Such recurring animations include eyes popping out of heads, tongues dropping to the center of characters' torsos, whole bodies getting flattened and then re-inflated, and other moments that Sal described as "really well choreographed violence," such as characters easily recovering after coming in direct contact with large explosions. Chang and Ungar explain how the animated cartoon "is exceedingly successful at engaging its audience; even the most bizarre events are easily comprehended" (45). The requisite for comprehensible engagement with the bizarre carries over to the stage. To adapt effectively a cartoon like the *Animaniacs* for a theatrical performance, then, encourages more attention to be given to the physicalities and comedic expressions of the performers than to intricately flashing lights, fog, projections, elaborate costumes, and so on. Though, as Sal noted, performers' bodies are only capable of so much. "It ended up a seventy/thirty split — it was seventy percent what we told them to do. Because none of us ice skated, we had to make sure that what we wanted them to do, they could do" (Sal).

Alex's account of *The Pokémusical's* staging, however, demonstrated for me how performers' bodies need not attempt impossible contortions in order to satiate an audience's appetite for highly expressive performance, comedic or otherwise. Alex explained, "Our Pokémon on stage . . . were just pictures of the Pokémon on rulers that the actors would, you, know, control, and it was supposed to be ridiculous; it was supposed to be low-budget." Hosea points to "a sense of artifice about an animated character because the movements it makes and the personality it represents are one step removed from the body of the animator that originated them" (13-14). Yet, performances of cartoon corporeality can deliberately direct attention to the

perceived artifice of animation, and in doing so they convey how animation's expressive reach is actually an accessible reflection of the animators' or creators' own expressive impulses. As expressed in Chapter One, cartoon corporeality does more than physicalize existing animated subjects, but also resignifies and reinforces the inherent physicality of cartoon animation more broadly.

*The Pokémusical* won the 2013 Hollywood Fringe Festival Best Musical Award through just such an emphasis on the cartoon's perceived artifice, and with virtually none of the high-budget spectacle characteristic of other animated adaptations like the Broadway versions of *The Lion King* (which uses large elaborate puppets and costume prosthetics for different characters) and *Tarzan* (which has an intricately and very vividly lit scenic design that appears to consume the entire stage). Alex described how he and the rest of *The Pokémusical*'s creative team designed its expressivity around humor: "Our scene transitions are nil. It's all people basically saying where they are right now and people just going along with it and believing it. 'Cause why not?" Further, Alex noted, "We . . . had no qualms with letting the audience know that this was just supposed to be a fun, like, animation good time on stage." *The Pokémusical*'s use of simple materials to represent and move once-animated figures, and its casual emphasis on achieving an immersive experience for its audience through simple explanation instead of exhaustive stagecraft spectacle, signals audiences' readiness to engage a wide range of cartoon corporeal theatrical adaptations.

Watching what little of *The Pokémusical* is available to be viewed online, one can see just what Alex described. A video of the show's opening scene that Alex uploaded to YouTube shows the young central character, Ash, as he is waking up on "Pokémon Day," the day he is supposed to meet his first Pokémon partner. We hear Ash sing some of his opening lines to an

upbeat rhythm: “Gotta get out of bed! Get my clothes on! Oh, wait, I already have them on!” Just a moment later we see Ash meeting his potential Pokémon partners. Actors in all black enter the stage one at a time, each holding a stick with a full-color printout of a different Pokémon. First we see a printout of Charmander, the fire lizard Pokémon; then Bulbasaur, the dinosaur-like plant Pokémon; then Squirtle, the water turtle Pokémon. Each actor vocalizes the lines for their Pokémon: “Charmander!” “Bulbasaur!” “Squirtle!”<sup>43</sup>

As described above, when we watch cartoons we are aware that we are engaging with something outside of everyday aesthetics, and when we watch cartoons manifest themselves physically, we retain that same expectation. Precisely because most audiences are familiar with the “capabilities” of the Pokémon represented in *The Pokémusical*, they are also aware of how and when those capabilities are deliberately different. The Pokémon Charmander, for example, can be seen in the cartoon and the videogames projecting intense blasts of fire from her mouth. Conversely, in *The Pokémusical*, the actor controlling the printout of Charmander on a stick simply holds up a small lighter and ignites it, eliciting sharp laughter from the audience (at least from the audience that was present during the showing Alex posted to YouTube), producing what Hutcheon calls “an inferred intended reaction motivated by the text” (*Theory of Parody* 55). To create a performance outside everyday aesthetics, one can either work to disguise the limitations of the human bodies on stage, or one can largely dismiss those limitations in favor of another kind of aesthetic subversion that simply asks those bodies to perform differently, relying on the material of performance (costumes, props, set pieces, etc.) only as much as is needed to clearly convey the subjects it represents or augments. The latter option — leaning into the differences the body can make on its own or with only minimal material augmentation — in a

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<sup>43</sup> Most Pokémon can only vocalize their own names. In *The Pokémusical*, however, they can converse fully.

way highlights through humor the distance between what the corporeal human body is capable of and what the virtual animated subjects who have been adapted are capable of.

Whether through high-cost spectacle or an intentional lack thereof, theatre is uniquely well-equipped for corporealizing the animated form, especially as cartoons already contain what Chang and Ungar refer to as a “theatrical basis” that gives them “license, and even mandate, to go beyond literal portrayal of the real world in order to convey their message” (52). Further, because theatrical adaptations are more or less beholden to entire animated storyworlds, rather than to isolated individual figures like cosplay performances are, they have a heightened responsibility for achieving a greater breadth of replication that maintains a consistency with the expressive aesthetics of the cartoon as a whole. The creative voices that go into crafting most cartoons include the writers, storyboard artists, production studios (usually situated within larger network companies), background and scenic artists, voice actors, voice directors, sound engineers, and several others. Not everyone involved is an animator *per se*, but all play a role in the development of the animated product. To corporeally adapt an animated product is to add one’s own authorial voice to that list of contributors, in that performances of cartoon corporeality extend the life of the cartoon beyond its on-screen repetitions.

To adapt an animated text to the theatrical stage is to invite several more influential voices into the creative conversation about how the theatrical iteration of the animated product should be developed and presented. Bakhtin contends of language, “Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process” (“Discourse in the Novel” 675). Animated texts, like language, come with many deeply engrained cultural associations that make any radical changes to the text challenging to achieve. The producers of the stage play or musical can find themselves in indirect conversation (or

perhaps direct litigation) with the producers of the cartoon as they selectively determine what qualities are most transferable to the theatrical stage, which qualities need to be changed, and the ways in which change is even allowed or acceptable. In fact, virtually everyone involved in the theatrical adaptation ends up in a similar conversation.

Responsibility for the appearances and voices of the characters, for example, shifts from storyboard artists and voice actors to costume designers and stage actors. All involved in any adaptation take part in the continued authorship of the product. When the product is a cartoon, and the continued authorship takes the form of a theatrical production, participants need to consider that although audiences are conscious of the fact that they are watching live bodies performing on stage, most in attendance are acutely aware of the original cartoon — its scenes, its aesthetics, its pacing, etc. — and are thus experiencing the theatrical adaptation in two ways at once. Audiences witness the corporeal translation of animated figures and an animated world, and simultaneously compare that translation to the referent. Theatre's capacity to facilitate performances of heightened expression only gets compounded by the fact that audiences comprehend the fantastical achievements of the animated version immediately alongside the fantastical achievements *or* failures of the theatrical adaptation.

### **Towards a Tentative Trajectory of Cartoon Corporeality**

The crosswalk format of live performance exemplifies ways in which expressive conventions of theatrical production, including both stagecraft techniques and exaggerated (and physical) humor, help to corporeally achieve the fantasticality characteristic of cartoon animation. The fantasticality unique to the Disney *Beauty and the Beast* narrative — from a cursed beast prince to dancing and singing furniture and cutlery — are characterized in Corden's adaptation of the animated film through both modes of theatrical expression. More

technologically advanced stagecraft technologies like video projection and LED light walls make no appearance, but the costuming and props are fairly elaborate and do much of the work of corporeally conveying the fantasticality of the film. Yet, more of the fantastical labor is seen in the production's humor as Corden and cast embrace the parody of their performance — tumbling over stopped cars, bolting back to the sidewalk in the middle of musical numbers, identifying a person “looking through their sunroof” (Corden) as a standing ovation, etc. — all while keeping the basic narrative intact.

My short series of experimental performances at the intersection of Beverly Boulevard and Genesee Avenue quoted the boldness of Corden and company's adaptation (though I certainly lacked the same level of production value). Having taken the opportunity to directly access just some of the experience of performing as Corden and company performed, along with some of the immediate public's reactions to such performance, I found that the presence of a theatrically expressive body in a place lacking the formal designation of theatre indeed draws attention to itself, but primarily in the form of public confusion. My reenactments were not cartoon corporeal, per se, as I lacked any clear referential markers of the animated source text other than a few short lines from one song. Nevertheless, my experiment reflected and drew from cartoon corporeality's capacity for subversion, but also underscored some of the phenomenon's limitations. In particular, though performances of cartoon corporeality work well as experimental modes of inquiry, helping with the discovery of new and culturally unfamiliar manners of self-expression, they cannot always succeed at transforming the surrounding cultural space into one that views such manners of self-expression as acceptable.

With the help of my interview participants, I have been able more thoroughly to assess how audiences engage cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation in ways that they do

consider acceptable. Public acceptance, however, is about more than containing performances of cartoon corporeality to spaces already identified as allowing or mandating theatricality, and subsequently also identified as allowing or mandating highly expressive actions that undermine the comforting mundanity of everyday social behavior. Theatre audiences' familiarities with animated texts are connected to narrative and content, just like they would be for any adaptation, but expand to include the expressive malleability of the cartoons from which they originate. Audiences who engage with theatrical adaptations of cartoons thus expect the strategically exaggerated quality of live theatre to be used as a channel for that same quality as it is found in animation, even though, visually speaking, theatrical performances abide by different rules than those (not) imposed on two-dimensional cartoons.

I explain in the following and final chapter how theatrical adaptation along with other modes of cartoon corporeality are situated in a culture increasingly informed by its relationship to, and utilization of, cartoon animation. I also express how cartoon corporeality through theatrical adaptation establishes a precedent of using the theatrical stage not only to depict cartoon animation in new ways, but also to further experiment with cartoon corporeality's performative possibilities. Such possibilities include using performance as an experimental tool to embody a rich critique of animation that both uncovers its yet-to-be-seen values, as well as its potential and already-documented cultural abrasions. Such possibilities for staged experimentation also include using animation to expand understandings and practices of live performance, and to allow animation to become the lens through which myriad other phenomena and social performances are critiqued as well.



## **CHAPTER 5. CARTOON CORPOREALITY: A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION**

I begin this final chapter of the dissertation first by addressing important distinctions between the different modes of cartoon corporeality I have focused on, as well ways in which insights gained from interrogating each mode help to inform and frame the others. In the section that follows, I discuss the growing prevalence of cartoon corporeal performance in an age of rapidly increasing media consumption, then describe additional examples of cartoon corporeality as well as phenomena that can better be understood as cartoon corporeal adjacent. In the next section I address how cartoon animation broadly, and cartoon corporeality consequently, are flawed and sometimes abrasive forms of expression, and how such flaws and abrasions should be better understood so that they can more effectively be addressed. The following section introduces the active weaving of cartoon animation with live performance as an important, but more rare, mode of cartoon corporeality. This section is supported, in part, through insights from interview participants who founded the Live Action Cartoonists performance company, which produced almost exclusively such performances that actively weave cartoons with live human bodies performing on stage. I then recount my experience directing and producing *Cue Cartoon* as an example of active weaving, and include short descriptions of prior active weaving performances that motivated *Cue Cartoon*'s development. The concluding section of the chapter clarifies ways in which performances of cartoon corporeality can be understood as culturally significant.

### **Reviewing Cartoon Corporeality Across Modes of Performance**

The physicality of gaming reflects that of cartoon corporeal performance. Gaming as a mode of cartoon corporeality demarcates the physical body of the player from the virtual images of the animated subjects she controls and interacts with. The corporeality of gaming can thus be

located in the physical relationship between physical body and virtual subject — the player's movements influencing those of the animated subject and vice versa. In the case of *Pokémon Go* the physical impact of cartoon corporeality exceeds the relationship between individual player and virtual subject, in that the game entices players to journey out and explore physical environments, and thus for gaming the physical impact of cartoon corporeality can also apply to the performing subject's environment. Feltrow and Ross assess "that we are living in a revolutionary technological era" that facilitates the co-existence of the material and the virtual in a way that "create[s] meaningful experiences" for players of videogames like *Pokémon Go* (20). The other two modes of cartoon corporeality to which I give most of my attention demonstrate a different kind of co-existence between physical body and virtual subject. For both cosplay and theatrical adaptations of cartoons, the performing bodies interact with the animated subject by visually, kinetically, and vocally reenacting the subjects' personae. The body of the individual performer and the appearance of the animated subject coincide; they exist simultaneously through the efforts of the performer to effectively represent the performed subject.

In *Pokémon Go* the animated subjects' on-screen presence visually places them among the real, the palpable. A cosplayer performing as a Pokémon — Pikachu, the electric mouse Pokémon, for example — cannot exactly perform the same fantastical feats Pikachu can, in particular the ability to blast bolts of lightning from her body. Cosplayers instead employ what Gn refers to as a "simulation of artificiality and ambiguity that demands its own form of hermeneutic" through an embodied interpretation or consumption of the virtual subject (584). I have witnessed cosplay performers employ some creative alternatives for the fantastical feats of characters like Pikachu, such as using bright streamers to represent the lightning (or whatever other fantastical power a character might be known for), but the difference between the material

alternative and the animated “power” is obvious. Conversely, a *Pokémon Go* player performing as a Pokémon trainer through her gameplay can still experience Pikachu’s fantastical feats to a fuller extent of the expressive liberation animation allows. That is, though the trainer cannot perform Pikachu’s powers through her own body, it is the player’s relationship with the digitally animated Pikachu that makes the expression of those feats possible (e.g. Pikachu blasts the lightning when the player tells Pikachu to do so). The player thus becomes a vital participant in the fantasticality of the animated subject.

Performances of cartoon corporeality through cosplay, by definition, necessitate little more than the individual performance of an animated subject. Cosplay as informed by cosplay community formations, however, mark the practice as a much richer and more expansive experience than can be understood from just a relatively static definition of the concept. Cosplay is at times flawed and abrasive towards individuals whose bodies do not match culturally standardized conceptions of how a cosplay performer should appear to her audiences — conceptions that further marginalize persons often already discriminated against, such as people of color. Yet, those who incite and support discriminatory discourses within cosplay communities appear today more as outliers, as the practice and communities can best be recognized for their radically inclusive behaviors, which themselves are part of a long history of community building within anime fandom more broadly (McKevitt 910). Cosplay’s active embrace of cultural differences marks one of cartoon corporeality’s most unique functions, in that such an embrace is largely constituted by ongoing collective affirmations for individual acts of spontaneity. Individuals are celebrated for their differences, in general, and for their distinct and often intentionally odd and spontaneous public performances, specifically (dancing in a

stairwell, loudly calling out to cosplaying strangers by their characters' names, initiating an unplanned character/cosplay-themed conga line with a group of strangers,<sup>44</sup> etc.).

Cosplay communities' affirmations for individual acts of spontaneity reflect their strong affinities for individual material interpretations of the animated figures being performed; or put another way, their affirmations reflect cosplay communities' strong affinities for the individually-developed performance productions that each cosplayer enacts and represents. Certainly, the importance of individually expressive impulses and capabilities persists through gaming and theatrical adaptation as well. Gamers play how they choose to play and performers in theatre perform to their strengths. Yet, gamers can only play within the apparatus of the game, adhering to its pre-programmed rules and narratives (even if every player interprets and navigates those rules and narratives somewhat differently). Theatrical adaptations of animated texts similarly adhere to a preconceived narrative, such that individual performances within the production still have to follow a scripted sequence of events. As HopKins notes, "Audiences, consciously or unconsciously, measure the performer in the role against some idea of what the role demands" (230). Yet, while fans usually expect cosplayers to honor the general aesthetic and behaviors of the characters being performed, cosplayers have a great deal of liberty when designing the actual costumes and when deciding how and when to perform as their characters.

While theatrical adaptations of cartoons are scripted, and subsequently so are the individual performances within, that does not mean they are disallowed from designing and producing a unique reinterpretation of the text. The productions still need to match the general look of the animated referents and to tell stories reminiscent of the animated narratives, but neither look nor story is wholly bound to its sources. Though, as Schneider observes, such a

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<sup>44</sup> Interviewee Gabriel discussed witnessing exactly such a spontaneous performance one year at Anime Expo: strangers all cosplaying as characters from the *Super Smash Bros.* videogame franchise forming and dancing in a conga line together.

precise binding is unenforceable or unachievable (16). Productions like Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* and Alex's *The Pokémusical* demonstrate the possibilities for expressive liberty in the ways they blatantly and comically highlight the distinctions between the virtually animated and the corporeally animated, between the limitless expressive capabilities of the cartoon figures and the materially limited expressive capabilities of the performers.

Still, though, high-budget theatrical adaptations of cartoons often attempt to match the fantastical qualities of their source texts quite closely, even while continuing to take certain aesthetic liberties that make the productions visually distinct. Some such productions are quite successful at employing expensive spectacle that can produce the illusion that the bodies on stage are capable of the same highly expressive feats as the cartoons (ziplines to "fly," elaborate costumes to change the perceived forms of performers' bodies, large and complicated puppets or prosthetics that extend performers' physical reach, etc.). In whatever ways productions interpret the fantastical qualities of their animated referents, theatrical adaptation can be understood as perhaps the most culturally comprehensible mode of cartoon corporeality, in that theatrical production more broadly is the least associated with cartoon animation (compared with cosplay and gaming). The corporeal interpretation of animated cartoons for the theatrical stage, then, often appears to audiences as little different, functionally speaking, than any other theatrical production. As I proceed to address the extent of cartoon corporeality's multimodal cultural presence, I do so with a recognition that theatrical adaptation and other modes of cartoon corporeality operate as channels for cartoons' corporeal manifestations, but nevertheless exist independently of cartoon corporeality as a phenomenon.

## Cartoon Corporeality Here, There, Everywhere(-ish)

Contemporary societies are becoming increasingly, though not overwhelmingly, cartoon corporeal. This is not true of all societies; certainly, few cultures consume and produce cartoon animation quite as much as the United States. Yet, the form has been employed all around the world in creative and culturally significant ways.<sup>45</sup> As Abel contends, “The animated cartoon is one of the few uniquely American genres, and one of the most influential in forming our national self-image” (184), pointing to animated icons like Betty Boop (187) and to the perpetual dominance of Walt Disney Animation Studios over the larger animation entertainment market (185) as key examples of his argument. Japan, of course, also has a rich animation market, and one that Domsch points out has a strong presence in U.S. culture as well (128). My decision to focus on examples of cartoon animation’s cultural significance via cartoon corporeality through mostly U.S.-specific experiences rests on the fact that I have much greater ease of access to such experiences. The majority of the scholarship I found on each select mode and site of cartoon corporeality mostly reflected U.S. cultural relationships to gaming and *Pokémon Go*, to cosplay and anime convention culture, to theatrical adaptation,<sup>46</sup> and so on. Additionally, I was best able to contact and communicate with interview participants in the United States, either approaching them directly (as I did at Anime Expo), or by reaching out through my own established networks in gaming, theatre, and performance studies.

One of the key reasons I argue we are becoming an increasingly cartoon corporeal society is, first, that we have experienced significant advancements in digital technologies, both in terms

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<sup>45</sup> The 2007 Iranian film *Persepolis* — adapted from Marjane Satrapi’s graphic novel of the same name — for example, animates “the story of Satrapi’s coming-of-age” after being sent from Iran to a boarding school in Europe “against the backdrop of her life before and during the Islamic or Iranian Revolution, and its bloody aftermath” (DiMattia par. 2).

<sup>46</sup> I could find no peer-reviewed academic scholarship discussing James Corden’s “Crosswalk the Musical” adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, or any other “Crosswalk the Musical” productions, whatsoever.

of capability (e.g., the ability to host and stream large libraries of online content) and in terms of the “proliferation of screens” (Casetti 156) through which we engage such technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, etc. as diverse iterations of the traditional home computer). These contemporary screens are interconnected, allowing them, as Francesco Casetti describes, to “become transit hubs for the images that circulate in our social space” (156). Such advancements and interconnectedness simply create more ways of facilitating certain modes and instances of cartoon corporeality (like *Pokémon Go* and other augmented-reality-based experiences, as I discuss below). Further, we also live in an age of rapidly increasing access to entertainment media, supported in part by those same technological advancements. The increased access to entertainment media lends itself to a rapidly increasing consumption of such media (“Time Flies”), which further lends itself to increasing demand for the creation of new consumable entertainment media products — television/streaming service shows, films, etc. — many of which are animated.<sup>47</sup> We also will never have fewer cartoons than we do now (barring some apocalyptic purging of the online servers on which so many thousands of cartoons have been digitally stored and catalogued), and so there is ever-increasing access to referential cartoon content that can be corporeally interpreted and performed. The modes through which cartoon corporeality manifests have already established their capacity to facilitate such performance, and so with increasing content comes the expectation that those modes will also be increasingly used.

### **Beyond Gaming, Cosplay, and Theatrical Adaptation**

Cartoon corporeality is a phenomenon that manifests and is enacted through myriad channels, each of which — with the exception of active weaving — exists with or without cartoon corporeal performance; each of which is also its own phenomenon. The conditions of

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<sup>47</sup> Netflix alone has produced or bought the rights to more than 100 original animated series or films (“Netflix Original Anime”; “Netflix Original Children’s Series”).

cartoon corporeality — a clear visual representation of the cartoon subject informing an immediately perceivable physical impact — require the functions of those other phenomena to manifest. Even active weaving (which I discuss at greater length below), while not theatrical adaptation, employs many of the same theatrical conventions to allow for cartoons’ visual and physical presence to be performed. It is impossible, therefore, to understand cartoon corporeality without recognizing additional modes and phenomena through which it is performed; without recognizing what Barad calls “the local condition of exteriority-within-phenomena” (“Posthumanist Performativity” 815; emphasis removed). The fact that cartoon corporeality only exists because there are other modes of performance through which it can be channeled should not detract from the phenomenon’s importance. Cartoon corporeality is culturally pervasive in its multimodal possibilities, reflecting Conquergood’s assertion that “cultures throw off forms of themselves . . . that are publicly accessible” (“Cultural Struggles” 18). Cartoons are one such form of cultural expression, and their accessibility is exemplified by all of the ways they are corporeally utilized and interpreted, often beyond gaming, cosplay, and theatre.

On many digital platforms, the creation of a message and the responses to that message can take a cartoon corporeal form. Social media platforms Snapchat and Facebook both have features that allow users with smartphones to overlay photos or videos of themselves, others, or parts of their environments with animated imagery that they can interact with, much like *Pokémon Go*. Unlike *Pokémon Go*, however, the augmented-reality technology on these platforms allows the generated animated imagery not only to respond when users interact with the touchscreens on their phones, but also to respond to users’ movements of their heads, eyes, mouths, and hands. As a culture, we are (many of us, anyway) perpetuating and popularizing and performing through cartoon corporeality all the time without having yet recognized it as



such. In the middle of writing this short section of the dissertation I reached for my own smartphone, opened Facebook, and experimented with animated effects I could layer over my own face and head and then post to my Facebook page. I settled on an effect that would give me the elaborate black, red, and yellow animated hair of the character Yugi Moto from *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, complete with the character The Dark Magician floating next to my head. I turned, looked at The Dark Magician, and gave him a nod. His whole body subtly bounced in response. Such technologies now only give us greater ease of access to engage cartoon corporeality either more casually, such as by posting augmented-reality-based cartoon corporeal videos to social media; or with more vibrant technological fanfare, such as using advanced lighting instruments or projection technologies to integrate the fantasticality of cartoon animation with live performance, sans adaptation, as I discuss of *Cue Cartoon* later in the chapter.<sup>48</sup>

Another example directly involving social media is a video titled *Frieza Comes Out*, produced by the Queer sketch comedy group “Enemies of Dorothy” and posted to their Facebook page in January 2019 (at the time of this writing the post has well over 25,000 views). The video parodies the anime *Dragon Ball Z* as well as the phenomenon of Queer individuals (often internet personalities) “coming out,” as in revealing their Queer identities publicly by posting a video to social media. Frieza is one of the featured villains in the action-adventure anime, and has long been speculated by fans to be Gay, largely because of effeminate characteristics and behaviors that align with many stereotypes of homosexual men: a relatively high-pitched voice, loosely held wrists, and a cackling laugh, to be specific. The “Enemies of Dorothy” performers dress as Frieza and as other characters from *Dragon Ball Z* and talk into the camera one at a time

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<sup>48</sup> I should also note that even more technologically subdued performances of cartoon corporeality (or even those absent of any explicit use of advanced technology) such as cosplay or theatrical adaptations that minimally rely on technological conventions of theatre are promoted and popularized in part through the very same social media platforms that, themselves, allow for such everyday productions of individualized cartoon corporeal performances as those on social media.

as if giving testimonials. Frieza's testimonial is his emotionally enthusiastic coming out, and the other characters' testimonials are of them saying that they always knew Frieza was Gay. While also parody, the sketch differs from Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* in that "Enemies of Dorothy" use the trope of coming out videos to adapt a fan narrative of the cartoon, rather than an established canonical story. Another key difference is that Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* was performed for a live public audience, and thus the physical impact characteristic of cartoon corporeality could easily be observed in the public's immediate reactions. *Frieza Comes Out*, conversely, appears to have been shot on a closed set, and so while some immediately observable physical impact informed by the act of dressing as *Dragon Ball Z* characters may have occurred for the performers while filming, viewers of the video are not quite experiencing the sketch as cartoon corporeal performance, at least not directly.

I would like to offer an additional example of cartoons' physicality beyond the screen by reintroducing Sal, the interviewee who worked on *Animaniacs* and who advised the performers for *Animaniacs on Ice*. Sal has a collection of Warner Brothers animation cels, including one he says was gifted to him by Chuck Jones of the final shot from the original *Duck Dodgers in the 24½th Century*, a series of outer space-themed *Looney Tunes* shorts. Before the takeover of computer animation cartoons were hand drawn on clear sheets of celluloid (cels) that could be layered over unmoving background images or other parts of any given shot that did not need to be animated. The images drawn onto the cel sheets would be placed over the static background images one after another to achieve the animation for a given shot. A market for buying and selling animation cels has long existed, and a great many of these cells have found all-but-permanent residence in the possession of animation traditionalists like Sal, who hangs them in his home office. The cels in Sal's office are the actual, material segments of the cartoon figures

who would be animated. As if his office was designed to memorialize the physicality of animation, Sal also surrounds himself with maquettes, small clay figurines used to give animators an impression of what characters would look like in various positions and shapes. In one sense the maquettes can be understood as palpable and three-dimensional components of some animation processes. In an intra-active sense the maquettes *are* the cartoons that they help give form to; or rather, the cartoons are what they are because of the ways in which they reflect the physical, three-dimensional quality of the maquettes. We do not see the material of the maquettes in the final animated product, but because we do see the product itself, we also see the eventual two-dimensional image as an interpretation — an extension — of the maquettes.

Other examples of cartoons and animation intersecting with or directly informing the performances of live physical bodies deserve mention. Examples include motion capture processes whereby performers wear specially designed suits that track and record their movements and then transfer those movements into computer generated images of animated figures. Another instance is the increasingly popular phenomenon of reinterpreting animated films into live-action cinema, including several Disney films like *Beauty and the Beast* in 2017 and the upcoming *Mulan* in 2020, as well as several anime films like *Fullmetal Alchemist* in 2018 and *Attack on Titan* in 2015. Late-night television show host Stephen Colbert has started conducting mock interviews with animated cartoon versions of political figures, such as his interview with a cartoon Hillary Clinton in 2016.<sup>49</sup> As I mention in Chapter One, no single study could exhaustively assess the significance of every possible mode or manifestation of cartoon corporeal (or cartoon corporeal adjacent) performance. Instead, my hope with this study is simply to expand the conversation about cartoons' cultural influence by recognizing and

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<sup>49</sup> Colbert has also conducted multiple interviews with a cartoon interpretation of Donald Trump, who won the U.S. presidential election in 2016. Colbert is now the executive producer for an animated series on the television network Showtime titled *Our Cartoon President*, which is essentially a spin-off of his interviews with cartoon Trump.

identifying cartoon corporeality as a phenomenon, taking special note of its function as a mode of performance and inquiry, and as a series of possible transformations that cartoons and the individuals who use them can undergo.

### **Animated Abrasions**

Cartoon enthusiasts like Sal, like myself, like many other interviewees, and like the scores of people who dedicate their educational and professional lives to crafting cartoons for others' entertainment all share an appreciation for how cartoons, as a unique form of cultural expression, can benefit people's lives. Yet, precisely because animation is so multifaceted and has accordingly been employed in seemingly countless ways, there has been significant opportunity to misuse the form. Or, put another way, there have been a great many uses of the form that harm or take part in harming people's lives, rather than benefiting them. This section addresses some such ways and instances in which cartoons have been employed at the expense of already marginalized groups and people.

Cultural impressions for how others express themselves through their bodies extend from individual's deliberate decisions to perform their public personae in particular ways, from how one dresses to how she speaks and beyond, but such cultural impressions also extend from how individuals and their bodies are situated and labelled in the cultural conditions that precede them. That is, as I discuss briefly in previous chapters, many individuals and bodies are socially marginalized and discriminated against, even while some discourses insist, at least in the United States, that we have become a post-prejudice society. Consider the extent to which violence against racial minorities and Queer individuals persists. Lynchings against African Americans still occur (Hilbring), and "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people" remain "the most likely targets of hate crimes" in the United States (Park & Mykhyalyshyn par. 1). I spend a great

deal of time in this dissertation asserting and in many ways promoting the ways that performances of cartoon corporeality offer access to a wider range of self-expressive possibilities. I note that performances of cartoon corporeality can be subversive; that they are always physically transformative, and sometimes culturally transformative as well. I also note that performances of cartoon corporeality are sometimes simply cathartic, serving as a reprieve from the inequitable or discriminatory conditions that restrict bodies from expressive growth and exploration.

In no way am I trying to conflate performances of cartoon corporeality with acts of social revolution. Playing *Pokémon Go*, cosplaying as an anime fairy, and performing Belle in the crosswalk do not function the same ways as the kinds of social protests that motivate(d) Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Queer Rights movements. Certainly, cultural patterns of discrimination demonstrate a strong need for greater acceptance of difference, and I do suggest that performances of cartoon corporeality are some such ways of navigating and moving towards greater acceptance of difference. As I have explained, however, mainstream cartoons along with their inspired performances of cartoon corporeality are produced by profit-driven entities that prioritize economic capital (as opposed to human well-being); further, cartoons and cartoon corporeality are also shaped by the cultures in which they are produced, and thus they have a history of reflecting the same kinds of cultural abrasions that acts of social revolution fight against. Abel explains that American cartoons "both reflect and influence social norms, including gender norms" (184). Dobrow et al. reinforce Abel's point, noting that children's cartoons, in particular, not only have a strong influence on the social perceptions and identities of the children who watch them, but also have a long and ongoing history of embracing social/racial stereotypes (par. 14). Dobrow et al. point out that cartoons drastically underrepresent racial

demographics in the United States, heavily favoring characters that are white over any other group (par. 3).

Cartoon animation, and by extent, cartoon corporeality, work as filters for, or distractions from, the socially awkward and the socially unacceptable. In many ways, such filtration and distraction are beneficial as they help mitigate adverse cultural reactions to performances of self-expression. That is, engaging with the implicit freedom cartoons seem to represent can be a way of initially recognizing greater possibilities for freedom of expression; engaging in performances of cartoon corporeality can be a way of actively testing how those possibilities might translate into one's own life. In other ways, however, animation can also function as a mask hiding that which, indeed, should remain socially abhorrent. A cartoon should not, for example, be used for its vivid malleability and seemingly limitless expressive range to ridicule entire groups of people. Consider older *Looney Tunes* cartoons that fully lean into deeply offensive stereotypes about African and African-American bodies (Crowley par. 13, par. 18), stereotypes that become all the more heightened through animation's vibrance and often exaggerated proportions and movements. One such example is the *Looney Tunes* 1937 short "Uncle Tom's Bungalow" which spoofs *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an abolitionist novel from 1852. The short depicts African American characters using said deeply offensive stereotypes, in particular through its portrayals of facial features and speech patterns.

As we recognize and further discover corporeal and other culturally impactful possibilities for cartoon animation, we need also to contend with animation's expressive malleability as a tool that can be used in myriad ways, some of which are quite problematic, offensive, and damaging. Though such cultural abrasions are not my primary focus through this study, I recognize the need for more critically examining them, as animation of today will always

be, in some way, a reflection of its past behaviors and utterances. As Barad points out, “Changes to the past don’t erase marks on bodies” (150), and such lasting material impacts must especially be understood in a study like this dissertation that examines almost exclusively the relationship between the material and the social with respect to cartoon animation. Looking forward I assess the possibilities for cartoon corporeal performance beyond established modes of expression, introducing ways in which cartoon corporeality can be actively employed as a form of analytic experimentation. I do so not to prescribe cartoon corporeal performance as an infallible remedy for the restrictions, discriminatory behaviors, and larger cultural abrasions that many face on a daily basis, and that cartoon animation itself is guilty of supporting and perpetuating. Rather, I explore processes of active weaving simply to understand better how they can be used both as a critical lens turned outward, enhancing the study of non-animated subjects and phenomena; and also how they can be turned inward, used to better understand cartoons themselves.

#### **Fourth Mode of Focus: Active Weaving**

Actively weaving cartoons with live physical performance is distinct from the other modes of cartoon corporeality I discuss in that each other mode of performance can operate independently of any association with cartoons or animation. Videogames, certainly, are always animated in some way, but they do not always require the depiction of clear and definable animated subjects.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, cosplay performances can be inspired by non-animated texts and figures, and theatrical productions can adapt any kind of cultural text — or produce new texts altogether — that have no clear connection with cartoons. Conversely, active weaving, in the sense that I am proposing and using the term, necessitates such a connection. Active weaving necessitates performance that allows live bodies to perform either alongside cartoons, through

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<sup>50</sup> This is not to say that more difficult-to-define subjects, or virtual *objects*, in videogames cannot lend themselves to cartoon corporeal performance. Consider the cosplayer performing as a *Tetris* block that Sonia and her family witnessed, described above in Chapter Three, for example.

cartoons, or using cartoons in some way other than direct adaptation. I elect to allocate a section of this final chapter of the dissertation to discuss and explore active weaving, rather than an entire chapter as I have for the other selected modes of cartoon corporeality, because such performances that deliberately engage a relationship between physical bodies and cartoon animation are much more rare, and so my conversation about the mode is much more of an introduction than an extensive exploration.

Finding live performance work that employs animation in some fashion is not terribly difficult. One popular form that comes to mind is projection mapping, a technique that projects video of animated sequences onto preset objects and scenery that either interacts with the objects and scenery, or appears to change their shapes. Projection mapping can also be used to interact with or change the appearance of live performers. *Pixel*, a performance created in 2014 by the group Kafig, is an intricate dance production featuring projections of hundreds of small dots on the stage that, in tandem with one another, create complex shapes and fluid motions that enhance and respond to the live performers' movements. At one point in the performance the animated dots are projected against the back wall of the stage and are moving quickly at a downward angle to indicate wind and rain; simultaneously, one of the performers holds up an umbrella, and the dots that come close to the umbrella animate around the performer as though the "rain" had actually made contact with the umbrella.

While projection mapping is a clear example of animation being used in live performance, projection mapping does not always constitute cartoon corporeality. Even when some physical impact or interaction with the physical gestures of a performer occur, as they do in *Pixel*, there is still no clear cartoon subject being visually represented. Some projection-based performances might qualify as cartoon corporeal. Étienne-Gaspard Robertson's *Phantasmagoria*,



which he premiered in 1798 and which he later toured around the world, used magic lanterns to project images of skeletons and demonic-looking figures onto the walls around audiences, as a kind of performance of horror. The group teamLab created an interactive installation, titled *Au-delà des limites* (2018), whereby elaborate animated imagery is projected onto multiple surfaces; among the imagery are animations of birds, butterflies, and human figures that fly across the walls. Also important to note is that the animation in *Au-delà des limites* responds to audiences' interactions with it. Active weaving is intentionally exploratory and experimental, and deploys cartoons towards those ends. Cartoon corporeal performance through active weaving must do more than simply poach, arrange, and perform animated subjects from their respective texts the way one might utilize sections of literary works when compiling an oral interpretation performance; and yet the cartoon subjects must be present in the work, and they must be integral to its motivations. Active weaving incorporates cartoons either as the subject(s) of analysis, or as a lens through which to analyze something other.

One example of active weaving is playwright Steve Yockey's aptly named *Cartoon* (2008), a play that, interestingly, requires no video or projection technology to be staged. Rather, the show is a theatrical construction that deliberately employs tropes of cartoon animation to produce its own original narrative (not an adaptation of any specific cartoon) that serves as a comedic social commentary on media portrayals of violence. Yockey's *Cartoon* establishes its own cartoon storyworld without any explicit preceding cartoon referents, yet the characters of the play, such as the trickster figure Trouble who always carries a giant mallet, are still identifiable within the staged storyworld. As an example of active weaving, *Cartoon* weaves the trope of cartoon animation with physically live performance. In contrast, the Live Action Cartoonists reference and interpret specific preexisting cartoon materials and subjects.

As their founding director explained, they focus on producing performances that interpret cartoons from comics, as opposed to cartoon animation. The difference is important, but the basic premise of performing alongside, through, and using cartoons remains the same.

### **The Live Action Cartoonists**

Of the small handful of additional examples of active weaving I have found, most were produced by Natsu Onoda Power and the other founding members of the Live Action Cartoonists. The Live Action Cartoonists use video projection to cast images from their cartoon source texts onto the stage, often onto large sheets of paper on which the performers draw live, during the performance. Performers' live drawings are often sketched over the projections, making the outlines of the images that are projected more defined; and they sometimes draw objects or figures that add to the projected imagery instead. *Science Fiction*, a performance inspired by the cartoon *Astro Boy*, is the title of one of the group's seminal works. *Astro Boy* is a comic series, later made into multiple animated cartoon series, created by Osamu Tezuka. The series features a young robot boy named Astro who struggles with his lack of a human identity, but also fights crime. The Live Action Cartoonist's performance features a scene titled "Accident," a touring version of which can be viewed online. The scene opens on a relatively small stage (at least compared to the size of many standard proscenium theatres) with two performers wearing jumpsuits and standing at the back (upstage) on either side. Behind the performers is a large sheet of paper stretching the width of the stage, and almost double the height of the performers' bodies. Music begins to play along with a narrating voice: "Who is Astro Boy? Where did he come from? In the year 2000 there was no Astro Boy."

As the narration continues and also loops to repeat itself the two performers use thick black markers to draw on the large sheet of paper. They draw a cityscape, complete with two

large intersecting roads in the foreground, futuristic-looking cars, and a skyline. A third performer enters carrying a standing traffic light, places it center-stage, then exits. The performers turn the traffic light on as we hear the faint sounds of cars driving and horns honking. The performers then rush back to their drawing. Already, we see live bodies generating the cartoon scenery of *Astro Boy* (Metro City) in real time and within the context of the narration explaining Astro's origin story. Another performer wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and a visor hat enters, sits downstage-center, and reads silently from a book. We hear a loud crashing sound to indicate a car accident. The downstage-center performer then slowly flails her body upward and rolls back until she is lying limp on the stage as if she had just been in the car accident. Simultaneously, the two performers drawing are joined by a third. One performer removes the traffic light while another erratically draws an explosion at the intersection of the roads in the foreground. One performer takes out a bright red marker and writes above the explosion, in large capital letters, "KERSMASH!" One performer then pours red liquid over the limp body of the other, while another performer picks up a camera and begins circling the body. The footage of the camera — which shows the limp and bloodied body — is projected over the cityscape. The scene continues for some time, and is difficult to decipher outside the context of the whole show, but demonstrates a clear and intentional co-integration of cartoons and live physical performance. The material and cartoon worlds become so entangled that they are almost indistinguishable from one another, and thus all bodies on stage become the cartoon subjects of the cartoon corporeal performance.

In addition to Power, I interviewed one other founding member of the Live Action Cartoonists, Gary Ashwal. Power, who is now a professor of performing arts at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., discussed her lifelong admiration for Osamu Tezuka, even

telling me a brief story about how, when she was a child, she personally asked Tezuka if she could work as his assistant. When I described to Power my intentions for learning more about active weaving, she also explained that through his career, Tezuka “actively incorporated vocabulary from theatre into his work. It wasn’t adaptation of a film into a comic book or adaptation of a play into a comic book. It was more pulling in references and techniques from these two media.” Power’s point was that Tezuka, to an extent, did for comics what she herself, Yockey, and I (to a lesser extent) have done for live performance by using cartoons. Power noted that the Live Action Cartoonists actually prohibited themselves from simply adapting cartoons or other texts. They would instead “deconstruct” the texts, as Ashwal put it. Ashwal described their process as isolating elements of the cartoon and (re)arranging them as they devised their performances. Power elaborated on their process, noting that before her first project of this nature (active weaving, without calling it that), she “already had the idea to incorporate large-scale drawing” in order to “expose the process of cartooning, which you don’t see.” She continued:

[T]heatre is a time-based medium, so I was trying to think about sequentiality in a different way. What if you drew something live, as actors, and then drew something on top of it, and on top of it, [and] on top of it? So the sequence is invisible in the finished drawing, but you will see it in live process.

Power’s work as the group’s director reveals such physical processes that make the production and consumption of cartoons possible.

Power and Ashwal each also recounted when the Live Action Cartoonists travelled to take part in a performance festival in Taiwan, presenting their scaled-down version of *Science Fiction* (scaled-down in the sense that they shortened the production and restructured it to work with fewer performers). They both expressed how exciting it was that an audience that mostly did not speak English seemed strongly to resonate with the show. They noted, in fact, that the

audience's enthusiasm was largely in response to witnessing and experiencing the imagery of *Astro Boy* on stage, regardless of the fact that the performance was not an adaptation of the text that the Taiwanese audience apparently found very familiar.<sup>51</sup> Ashwal described the situation as performing for an audience that already had a “sort of a built-in relationship” with *Astro Boy* that the group was “tapping into” through their utilizations of the text. My own 2018 production, *Cue Cartoon*, similarly tries to access people's nostalgia and affinities for certain cartoons. Instead of focusing on a single text or series of texts, however, *Cue Cartoon* presents the imagery of well over one hundred distinct cartoon entities and several hundred individual cartoon figures, some of which were produced exclusively for the performance.

### ***Cue Cartoon* at the HopKins Black Box theatre**

*Cue Cartoon* was an experimental multimedia performance that attempted to simultaneously fracture the “real” and the “animated” worlds, such that they might bleed into one another. The production utilized contemporary dance, audio narration, various ambient musical scores, edited video of several preexisting animated texts, and original rotoscoped animated sequences. The dancing, the rotoscoping, and the video editing were all devised during the rehearsal process, which lasted about two weeks. I decided to propose the show after experimenting in my graduate performance courses with finding ways for my body (and my body's shadow) to interact with the projections of clips and scenes from different cartoons. Beyond simply finding the aesthetic of a live, palpable human body engaging with the movements of cartoons to be interesting, I also felt that such experiments might be revealing in some way. In particular, I have focused in much of my research (much of which is done through

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<sup>51</sup> The audience's strong recognition of *Astro Boy*, according to Power, was a result of Japanese occupation of Taiwan before and during World War II.

performance practice) on the social identities cartoons perform, and accordingly on how cartoons can impact individuals' own social identities.

With my background in contemporary dance, I have also long valued the human body and its expressive potential in the exploration of both self and culture. For one of my experimental performances I cast a large, somewhat soft shadow of myself against a wall. Adjacent to that wall was a large projection screen that hid my body, and on which the animated short "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" (part of Disney's 1940 feature film *Fantasia*) was projected. The short features Mickey Mouse stealing the hat of a sorcerer and attempting to use its magic to assist himself with his chores. He summons to life several brooms, but loses control of them and they flood the sorcerer's home one bucket of water at a time. The short has no words spoken, but the orchestral musical score effectively complements the narrative (lively when Mickey is happy, fast-paced when Mickey is tense, etc.). My large cast shadow, similarly, reacts to both the animation and the music, dancing happily when Mickey first steals the hat and summons the brooms, and recoiling in fear when the brooms take over.

The other short performance that inspired *Cue Cartoon*, titled *Performing Out of Line*, required a multi-stage process to develop. I used rear projection to project the footage of multiple cartoon clips onto the same large screen. I then began performing a choreographed sequence from behind the screen, allowing the light from the rear projection to cast a crisp silhouette of my body that cut into the cartoons being played. I developed the choreography such that my silhouette could interact with the cartoons, following them as they moved, performing as if my own gestures cued their movements, mimicking their movements, and so on. I video recorded this first stage of the performance and then edited the footage by cutting, rearranging, compressing, fastforwarding, and filtering sections of it. About a week later I

performed again by using rear projection to cast my silhouette onto the screen, but this time I instead used the footage I had edited. The footage included my dancing silhouette from the first stage of the performance, and so at this second stage, I was not only interacting and dancing with the cartoons, but I was interacting and dancing with my past self, hoping to convey how the influence cartoons can have carries forward with time, while still changing.

I learned through experimenting with the dynamic between my own movement and that of Mickey and other cartoon figures that cartoons, at the very least, can work as metaphors for the cultural dynamic between the socialized body of the human and the unrestricted expressivity of the animated form. As I explain in another iteration of *Cue Cartoon*,<sup>52</sup> “We may fail to defy the laws of physics the ways cartoons appear to, but we can certainly learn to defy the expectations that create constricting, conditioning lines around us,” continuing, “Cartoons are a metaphoric window into the possibilities for self-expression; and cartoons are an invitation to *move*, to move *more*, and to move more *freely*.” As I proceed to reflect on my experience with *Cue Cartoon*, I do not provide an exhaustive description of every detail of the approximately forty-five minute show. I instead describe three select moments or sequences that I feel best demonstrate the process of active weaving.

### ***Cue Cartoon Performed***

I approached the development and promotion of *Cue Cartoon* aware that many people might expect to see something along the lines of a show about cartoons “coming to life” on stage, or even perhaps expecting to experience a conventional theatrical play that just happened to be about cartoons. After all, many of the people who attend performances in the HopKins Black Box theatre for the first time have never witnessed experimental or process-centered (as in

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<sup>52</sup> I performed a shortened, solo version of *Cue Cartoon*, titled *Cue Cartoon: The not-so-Solo Special Edition*, at the National Communication Association 2018 convention in Salt Lake City, Utah.

a prioritizing of the value of the process over that of the final product) performance before. I had no desire to produce a show that was simply about cartoons, but instead wanted to create a production that *used* cartoons along with other media to communicate. Gabi, a performer from the show, described in an interview the process as using “cartoons as source material” and then “embodying some of the things that cartoons ask you to do or ask you to think about.”

Specifically, I wanted to communicate how the expressive reach of cartoons can be translated into our own lives. I did elect, however, to embrace the fact that at least some audiences would expect something more conventional, and so I began the show with an introduction from the character Fancy Announcer, the only figure with scripted verbal lines in the entire performance.

#### *Fancy Announcer*

The performer for the Fancy Announcer character is dressed in a silver tuxedo, wears rabbit ears, and has rabbit whiskers painted on his face. He is meant to elicit associations with Bugs Bunny. That is, he is meant to appear as a familiar cartoon that has come to life. He enters a mostly dark stage with a series of loud and elaborate quicksteps, stands under a spotlight, and introduces the show. After welcoming the audience, he then asks them to join him “for the ceremonial singing of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* theme song,” which he then performs operatically (the song is usually performed as a rap), except for the final four lines, which he sings to the tune of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” By the time he is finished singing, the Fancy Announcer is crying. He then exits. My explicit intention with this opening scene was to engage the audience initially with something that felt conventional — a familiar-looking character simply introducing the production. I then wanted to use that same conventional element to introduce something unconventional, something that reads as “strange” when compared to other such theatrically staged introductions. That is, I chose to radically alter the



delivery of the theme song from a children's cartoon instead of using the introduction to frame the performance for the audience, often done by explaining the exposition or introducing the characters.

My goal was not to confuse the audience, but instead to demonstrate at the onset how the messages of the show would not all simply be explained. The show was to be an experimental interpretation of cartoons as a concept — as Yockey's was of cartoons as a trope. *Cue Cartoon* executed such interpretation imperfectly. While several audience members saw the opening scene as it was an intended — as a tool for transitioning into a fuller production that would not align with conventional methods of communicating through theatre — others found the opening moment quite confusing, although even some of those who found it confusing also found it amusing. Helga Finter expresses, “The voice [of experimental theatre] leads from the imaginary to the symbolic” (505). In this opening moment of *Cue Cartoon*, and admittedly throughout, I allowed intended symbolic utterances and gestures to be denser than I needed them to be, and in doing so lost touch with a part of my audience.

### *Narration and Choreography*

After the Fancy Announcer leaves, the stage goes dark and a pre-recorded audio narration begins to play along with clips from several old black-and-white cartoons that are being projected onto three large white scrims hanging side-by-side upstage-right. Stage-left illuminates to reveal three dancers moving in sync with one another as the video and narration continue playing. Their choreography alternates between smooth and erratic; the performers' movements are designed explicitly not to mimic codified balletic gestures and positions. The early narration states that “real life is filled with conflicting conundrums like expectations for everybody to fit in when what it means to fit it was only ever made for some people and some

bodies,” and asserts that “the joy and the beauty available in life is hard to find when the lines drawn to keep us in place aren’t made to move.”

The narration makes no mention of the dancers, and the dancers only subtly react to the narration when certain cues within signal them to move on to the next choreographed sequence. As the narrating voice discusses ways in which bodies are limited by the social conditions of life, there are performers on stage using their bodies in unfamiliar ways, meant to counter expectations for what bodies should do, and for what dancing should look like; and yet the performers’ movements are still choreographed, bound to some set of rules they did not establish for themselves. The projection on the scrims progresses along a timeline, showing clips of cartoons from the earlier 1900s up through the 2000s and 2010s. As the projections progress, more dancers enter the stage and begin manipulating the three scrims, “wrinkling” the cartoons that are being projected, wrapping the scrims (and consequently the cartoons as well) around their bodies, pulling them, clinging to them, releasing them, and exiting and entering between them. The narration progresses as well, arguing that cartoons “are not stuck to the Earth and its rules and its dogma and its filters,” a premise I have realized from this research is not entirely true. The point, though, is that while cartoons are expressive in ways we cannot be, they are also “a vibrant view into the possibilities for how we can feel [and] a window into the promise of what we can be” (*Cue Cartoon*).

### *Rotoscoped Ending*

In the show’s final scene we see performers scattered across the stage, sitting still with their backs to the audience, watching cartoons continue to play across the scrims as a slow, high-pitch melody fills the space. Abruptly, television static appears on the scrims. The performers then slowly stand and turn to face the audience. The static is then replaced, one by one, with

large rotoscoped versions of each performer. That is, each performer has a cartoon counterpart. Each animated performer repeats a short dance gesture or sequence for several seconds. The live performers, in sync with one another (but not in sync with the cartoon versions of themselves), emulate the animated dance movements. As the performers are emulating the final movement in the sequence of their dancing cartoon selves, the television static fades back in; the dancers continue repeating the final physical gesture. After a short moment resonating against the imagery of the static, the performers exit through the scrims one at a time. The projection of the static, the stage lights, and the music all fade, leaving the stage dark and silent.

The rotoscoped figures perform with choppy movements, as they are animated at about five to eight frames per second (as opposed to the standard twenty-four frames per second used for most cartoons). The emulated movements of the performers, then, appear quite smooth and fluid by comparison. My intention for animating the performers, and for showing the performers copying and interpreting the behaviors of their own animated selves is two-fold. First, I wanted to present an explicit example of cartoons' expressions being emulated by live bodies, and in doing so to highlight that while cartoons will always be able to express themselves in ways we are unable to, we are also, ourselves, capable of accessing and discovering a unique range of expressive possibilities. Second, by transforming my cast into cartoon figures performing immediately alongside their live physical selves, I wanted audiences simply to experience the potential for seeing oneself as animated. I hoped to achieve this by blurring, though not entirely eliminating, the distinction between the performers' and their cartoon counterparts. The performers were their own live performing selves, but they were also their cartoon selves, both present and entangled with one another.

Steve Dixon contends, “When virtual spaces, objects, or bodies are projected into performance spaces . . . one ‘reality’ (stage, site, or installation) is punctured by another ‘reality’ (a digital image or representation)” (410). *Cue Cartoon* was such an attempt to invite a “cartoon reality” into the performance space by visually layering a compilation of animated worlds and figures over the architecture of the theatre and over the bodies performing within it. The performance was also an attempt, however, to experiment with how those bodies might be able to “puncture” the cartoon world as well. Animating the performers was one such way of attempting that puncture. The simultaneous interjections of material bodies into a cartoon world and a cartoon world into a material space reflect those environmental interjections produced through *Pokémon Go* gameplay, whereby players enter and therefore change environments they would otherwise go without experiencing, and because of those new experiences, the environments change the players as well. While not all videogames produce such interjections the way *Pokémon Go* does, active weaving necessitates that such interjections of the animated into the material and vice versa be developed and employed as part of the inquisitive experimental process.

I learned through directing and producing *Cue Cartoon* that articulating a message that asks audiences to access (or at least become aware of) cartoons’ expressive freedom requires more careful communication than what I allowed and developed within the show, even when the utterances of that communication are developed and executed within the context of “experimental performance.” I also learned, however, that working with active weaving as a mode of cartoon corporeality can help one to discover how more effectively to access the expressive freedom cartoons represent. Because the majority of the performance was devised in the rehearsal process, I was able to discover through working directly with the performers how to

connect the expressivity of animation with the expressive potential of a performing body. The footage that I rotoscoped, that the performers would eventually emulate, began with a simple prompt to “play with movement.”

When I first revealed to the performers the animated versions of the “play” they had performed as a simple part of one of our daily rehearsals, they expressed surprise and excitement over how “cool” they looked as cartoon characters. When rehearsing (re)physicalized emulations of their animated selves, their excitement appeared to translate into movements that were even more vibrantly and energetically executed than when I first recorded the footage. Gabi expressed, “It makes me want to play more. It makes me want to get in the space and figure out what other ways we could play with the material,” and Kalli similarly noted, “I feel like the show kind of . . . made me realize that the sky’s the limit when engaging with something that feels so unattainable — it’s really not.” Active weaving as a mode of cartoon corporeality is not new, as the Live Action Cartoonists started working with it well over a decade ago, and certainly there are likely more examples other than Yockey’s *Cartoon* that I simply have not discovered. What I find useful, though, is to identify active weaving as the deliberate mode of cartoon-centered experimental performance that it is, such that benefits of expressive discovery might be further developed and applied.

### **Concluding Thoughts (for now) on Cartoon Corporeality**

I see the significance of active weaving among other modes of cartoon corporeality through its more explicitly experimental nature. Cartoon corporeal performance, regardless of how it manifests, already functions as a mode of inquiry. Yet, by and large, people who play videogames, cosplay, and participate in theatrical adaptations of animated texts do so because they simply find the practice enjoyable, stimulating, and rewarding in the way it feels. That is,

most people who engage with these modes of cartoon corporeality are motivated by the experience, and so inquiry and discovery just happen to be significant elements or effects of such experience that rarely are on the forefronts of participants' minds. A practice of actively weaving the animated and the physically live, however, must be motivated by the process, as there is no given standard or nuanced formula for how such a weaving should occur or be developed. Determining how physically live bodies might perform alongside, through, or by using cartoons requires thoughtful design, and thus creators/directors must look at their own process with inquisitive intent; they must experiment so that they can discover what works, and what does not when critically employing cartoons through performance.

Yet, active weaving is only one mode of cartoon corporeality, and it is not a culmination of the other modes nor does it somehow sit above them in the ways it employs cartoons' physical potential. Cartoons have not merely "transcended" the screen to a singular, corporeally enlightened state of being. Animation as a form has always been disparate, varied in its manifestations, executions, and applications, all of which have also always been interpreted and utilized through myriad material means. Whether through traditional storyboarding processes or developed through computer programs, the animated cartoon is always imbued with the performative efforts of the animator, and with the material referents that she reinterprets into a virtual form. Yet, for as often as animation is discussed as a representation of the virtual, the artificially represented (Hayles; Kramer; Greenberg; Manovich), its inherent physical potential persists beyond the animator and her material referents that each precede the animated product. Cartoons utilize animation with narrative intent, vividly constructing uniquely expressive characters and stories that are then often corporeally reinterpreted. Animated figures in videogames are corporealized through the physical actions of their players, whether those actions

be the tilting of an analog stick and the pressing of buttons on a controller, or walking through city streets and swiping the touchscreen of a smartphone. The appearances, mannerisms, and phrases of cartoon characters are all embodied through cosplay performance. These appearances, mannerisms, and phrases are linked and scripted together as theatrical adaptations of cartoons physically reenact and parody entire animated storyworlds.

In the same way that animated texts draw on material referents to frame the forms and expressions of the virtual subjects and objects they present, they are also always produced as parts of larger cultural discourses that precede and surround them. The authorial intentions of the animators — writers, producers, storyboard artists, etc. — directly inform and shape the patterns of discourse and the communicative utterances in which the animated texts take part. The animators themselves, however, have also been informed by the authorial forces of language and communication that constitute the cultures in which their lives are situated. The animated product and its potential corporeal reinterpretations, therefore, are extensions of those same authorial forces, as is true of any form of cultural expression. As Bakhtin explains, “Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances” (“The Problem of Speech Genres” 69). When giving particular focus to the animated cartoon as a multifaceted form of cultural expression, one must account for the form’s potential for radical expressivity — for its distinctly fluid and vivid carnivalesque nature — and for how such potential disrupts the capacity of cultural discourses to bind and contain.

I would argue that any one mode of cartoon corporeality is alone worthy of extensive study. With millions of gamers globally, certainly the interactive relationship between the physical commands of the players and the animated responses of the virtual in-game figures deserves greater focus. The fact that animation-themed and cosplay-centric events like Anime

Expo attract people by the tens of thousands at a time is enough to warrant the continued study of cosplay performance; that cosplay communities so heavily encourage and appreciate how the practice can be interpreted in endlessly unique ways shows that the form can be further studied and understood in many different ways as well. Theatrical adaptations of cartoons not only have a long history, but they occur also through different methods of staging that each access and benefit from the fantasticality of their source texts through a range of physically expressive means, demonstrating that theatrical adaptation as a mode of cartoon corporeal performance also cannot be understood comprehensively as a simple staged translation of an animated storyworld; rather, the method of translation, and not simply the motivations for translation, warrant interrogation.

Cartoon corporeality does not need to be anything more than visually explicit and physically impactful for it to be recognized as such. The subversive quality of the phenomenon results from the contexts in which cartoon corporeal performances are enacted, that context being cultural conditions that simply find themselves unprepared for witnessing displays of expression that are vibrant, both aesthetically and kinetically, and that accordingly run counter to the expressively restrictive power structures that we all normally must navigate. In other words, the fact that we can witness an escape of cartoons from the screen does not *need* to be subversive in order for that escape to constitute cartoon corporeal performance. Bacon contends of performance, “Enjoyment is the final aim — but enjoyment in a full rather than a reductive view. The wonderful thing is that such a pleasurable activity is also so finely instructive to us as human beings” (“Dangerous Shores” 152). Modes of cartoon corporeal performance include playing videogames, playing dress-up, performing in theatrical productions, and a number of other performance practices and activities that stimulate and excite. Cartoon corporeality indeed



functions as a mode of critical inquiry for those who engage with it, but such a method of inquiry need not always, or for some, ever, be profound — sometimes it can just be fun. The aim of this dissertation is simply to argue that through various modes of performance cartoons appear to escape or expand beyond the screen, allowing individuals to access the fluidity, vibrance, and overall expressiveness of cartoons in order to discover more expansive possibilities for their own self-expression, and consequently for their own self-affirmation as well.

## APPENDIX. IRB MATERIALS



### ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

**TO:** Patricia Suchy  
Communication Studies

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** June 6, 2018

**RE:** IRB# E11085

Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
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**TITLE:** Performance Beyond the Screen: Animating Life Through Cartoon Corporeality

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review Date:** 6/6/2018

**Approved** X **Disapproved** \_\_\_\_\_

**Approval Date:** 6/6/2018 **Approval Expiration Date:** 6/5/2021

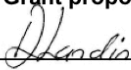
**Exemption Category/Paragraph:** 2b

**Signed Consent Waived?:** No

**Re-review frequency:** (three years unless otherwise stated)

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable)

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman 

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –  
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:**

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

\* All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>

### Questions for all Interviewees

1. Could you discuss how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about cartoon animation, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
2. Could you talk about the ways in which your everyday life involves, or has involved, cartoon animation?
3. What are some of your favorite cartoon series or films?
4. What are some of your most significant memories involving cartoons or animation of any kind?
5. Can you talk about both the social and physical environments in which you engage with cartoon animation?

### Follow-up Questions for Videogame Play Experiences (including *Pokémon Go*)

1. Could you discuss how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about videogames, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
2. Could you talk about the ways in which your everyday life involves or has involved videogames?
3. What are some of your favorite videogames to play, past and present? What are some yet-to-be-released upcoming videogame titles that you are looking forward to?
4. What are some of your most significant memories involving videogames? Can you talk about these memories in detail?
5. Can you talk about your favorite types of videogames (i.e. action-adventure, role-playing, etc.)?
6. Can you talk about your favorite platforms for videogame play (i.e. PC gaming, Nintendo Switch, etc.)?
7. Can you talk about both the social and physical environments in which you play videogames?
8. Do you play *Pokémon Go*?
  - a. Could you discuss at length how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about *Pokémon Go*, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
  - b. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your everyday life involves, or has involved, *Pokémon Go*?
  - c. Could you discuss in detail what a typical experience of playing *Pokémon Go* is like for you?
  - d. Could you discuss in detail what one or more significant, but non-typical experiences of playing *Pokémon Go* have been like for you?
  - e. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your other life experiences, not directly involving *Pokémon Go*, have influenced, or continue to influence, your experiences with *Pokémon Go*?
  - f. Similarly, can you discuss at length the ways in which *Pokémon Go* might have influenced, or continues to influence, other experiences in your life?
  - g. What are the ways in which you associate videogames generally, and *Pokémon Go* specifically, with physical movement? Can you discuss these associations in detail?

- h. What are the ways in which you associate videogames generally, and *Pokémon Go* specifically, with physical environments? Can you discuss these associations in detail?

**Follow-up Questions for Cosplay Experiences (including at Anime Expo)**

1. Could you discuss how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about cosplay, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
2. Could you talk about the ways in which your everyday life involves, or has involved, cosplay?
3. What are some of your favorite cosplays you have experienced (either by dressing up yourself, or by witnessing others dressing up)? What are some cosplays you would like to do or see?
4. What are some of your most significant memories involving cosplay? Can you talk about these memories in detail?
5. Can you talk about your favorite types or forms of cosplay (i.e. direct representation, gijinka, etc.)?
6. Can you talk about your favorite means of experiencing cosplay (i.e. at conventions generally, at cosplay discussion panels, through social media, etc.)?
7. Can you talk about both the social and physical environments in which you engage with cosplay?
8. Do you attend (or, Are you an attendee of, or, Have you attended) Anime Expo?
  - a. Could you discuss at length how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about attending Anime Expo, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
  - b. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your everyday life changes during Anime Expo, or during the time leading up to Anime Expo, or during the time following Anime Expo? If relevant to your experiences, how might you answer this question with respect to other anime conventions?
  - c. Could you discuss in detail what a typical experience of attending Anime Expo is like for you, especially as it pertains to cosplay?
  - d. Could you discuss in detail what one or more significant, but non-typical experiences of attending Anime Expo have been like for you?
  - e. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your other life experiences, not directly involving Anime Expo, have influenced, or continue to influence, your experiences with Anime Expo?
  - f. Similarly, can you discuss at length the ways in which Anime Expo might have influenced, or continues to influence, other experiences in your life?
  - g. What are the ways in which you associate cosplay generally, and Anime Expo specifically, with physical movement? Can you discuss these associations in detail?
  - h. What are the ways in which you associate cosplay generally, and Anime Expo specifically, with physical environments? Can you discuss these associations in detail?

**Follow-up Questions for Theatrical Adaptation Experiences (including with James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*)**

1. Could you discuss how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about theatrical adaptations of cartoons, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
2. Could you talk about the ways in which your everyday life might involve, or has involved, in any way, theatrical adaptations of cartoons?
3. What are some of your favorite theatrical adaptations of cartoons you have experienced (either by participating yourself, or by witnessing them)? What are some theatrical adaptations of cartoons you would like to participate in or see?
4. What are some of your most significant memories involving theatrical adaptations of cartoons? Can you talk about these memories in detail?
5. Can you talk about your favorite types of theatrical adaptations of cartoons (i.e. high-production value adaptations, parodies, etc.)?
6. Can you talk about your favorite means of experiencing theatrical adaptations of cartoons (i.e. in small theatre venues, in large theatre venues, in non-traditional theatre venues, through online videos, etc.)?
7. Can you talk about both the social and physical environments in which you engage with theatrical adaptations of cartoons?
8. Have you seen James Corden's theatrical adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast* from his Crosswalk the Musical series?
  - a. Could you discuss at length how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, and how that interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
  - b. Can you discuss at length the ways in which the usual patterns of your everyday life might have been different on the day you watched James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, or shortly after?
  - c. Could you discuss in detail what it is like for you to watch or rewatch James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*? In other words, can you walk us through the details of each moment, from your point-of-view, of your experience watching it?
  - d. Could you discuss in detail what you think about the thoughts and experiences of the spectators, seen on camera, who saw James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* live?
  - e. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your other life experiences, not directly involving James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*, have influenced, or continue to influence, your experiences with James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast*?
  - f. Similarly, can you discuss at length the ways in which James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* might have influenced, or continues to influence, other experiences in your life?
  - g. What are the ways in which you associate theatrical adaptations of cartoons generally, and James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* specifically, with physical movement? Can you discuss these associations in detail?
  - h. What are the ways in which you associate theatrical adaptations of cartoons generally, and James Corden's *Beauty and the Beast* specifically, with physical environments? Can you discuss these associations in detail?

### Follow-up Questions for Active Weaving Experiences (including *Cue Cartoon*)

1. Could you discuss how you came to be interested in or enthusiastic about the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance, and how your interest or enthusiasm has evolved or changed over time?
2. Could you talk about the ways in which your everyday life involves, or has involved, the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance?
3. What are some of your favorite experiences involving the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance? What are some ways in which you would like to experience the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance?
4. What are some of your most significant memories involving the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance? Can you talk about these memories in detail?
5. Can you talk about your favorite ways in which the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance can be achieved (i.e. through video projection, dance, oral interpretation, etc.)?
6. Can you talk about your favorite means of experiencing the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance (i.e. in a traditional theatre setting, at animation-themed conventions, at multimedia or avant-garde performance festivals, etc.)?
7. Can you talk about both the social and physical environments in which you engage, or have engaged, with the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance?
8. Have you engaged with the live production, *Cue Cartoon* (either as an audience member or as a participant)?
  - a. Could you discuss at length how you became involved with *Cue Cartoon* (either as an audience member or as a participant)?
  - b. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your everyday life might have changed during the time that you engaged with *Cue Cartoon*, or during the time leading up to your engagement with *Cue Cartoon*, or during the time following your engagement with *Cue Cartoon*?
  - c. Could you discuss in detail what a typical experience of engaging with *Cue Cartoon* is (or was) like for you?
  - d. Could you discuss in detail what one or more significant, but non-typical experiences of engaging with *Cue Cartoon* have been like for you?
  - e. Can you discuss at length the ways in which your other life experiences, not directly involving *Cue Cartoon*, have influenced, or continue to influence, your experiences with *Cue Cartoon*?
  - f. Similarly, can you discuss at length the ways in which *Cue Cartoon* might have influenced, or continues to influence, other experiences in your life?
  - g. What are the ways in which you associate the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance generally, and *Cue Cartoon* specifically, with physical movement? Can you discuss these associations in detail?

- h. What are the ways in which you associate the active weaving of cartoon animation with immediately-live performance generally, and *Cue Cartoon* specifically, with physical environments? Can you discuss these associations in detail?

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## VITA

Gregory (Greg) Langner is an educator, performance and critical media studies scholar, and performance artist born and raised in Southern California. Throughout his career in higher education, Greg has also worked as a communications advisor to political campaigns, as the director for afterschool arts programs, as a theatrical carpenter, and as a choreographer, among other rewarding positions. Before pursuing his PhD in Communication and Performance Studies with a graduate minor in Film and Media Arts at Louisiana State University (LSU), Greg earned his Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts and Dance and Master of Arts in Communication Studies from California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA). Taking a practice-centered approach to both teaching and research, valuing experimentation and direct experience as vital to the process of building new knowledge, Greg teaches performance studies, film studies, critical qualitative research methods, and humanities-based communication theory between LSU and Cal State LA. Greg expects to complete his PhD in Spring 2019 to begin pursuing a full-time career in higher education.