**Cosplayer Diary: Race in Cosplay**

When I wake up on the day of a convention, a photoshoot or an appearance, and I look in the mirror, who do I see? Do I see an African-American cosplayer? Do I just see a cosplayer? Or do I see a man who is cosplaying someone of a different race? The correct answer is all three – race always has and always will be one of the prominent subjects in cosplay, and in a non-post-racial society it will continue to be. I have had the honor – and the dismay – of seeing both sides to this subject first-hand.

Let’s flash back about five years. I had just read *Truth: Red, White & Black* by Kyle Baker and Robert Morales. This book spoke to me in such a way that I had to bring the character of Isaiah Bradley to life. As a cosplayer I consider myself blessed if just once in my life a character speaks to the essence of who I am at my core – and this book did just that. I arrived at San Diego Comic Con with pride in what I was doing in cosplaying Isaiah Bradley. I even met Kyle Baker, his creator, and Baker’s expression showed nothing but approval in my execution of it.

But when I was shown on the Marvel Comics website in my costume, I was bombarded with negative comments, including people calling me “Captain N-Word” and so on. Thankfully, in the midst of this, people started coming to my defense with historical content of who I was cosplaying. There was no room for hate with such a positive thing like cosplaying the Black Captain America.

On the flip side of things, I saw a white woman decide that she wanted to cosplay Michonne from *The Walking Dead*, which is great – but she did it in blackface, which began an uproar on social media of pure backlash. Her reasoning was that she wanted to be true to the character. The problem here was putting on that kind of makeup either without knowing or choosing to ignore the history behind that action, so the execution of the character was done in pretty poor taste. The excuse was given of “why doesn’t anyone get upset when someone paints their face red to be an alien,” and that’s a sorry one; the truth is, aliens don’t exist, and there isn’t a negative history behind a fictional creature as there is with the history of blackface.

Now, let’s look at a different female cosplayer, who wanted to cosplay Storm from the *X-Men* franchise. She had the tiara, contacts, and the hair to the exact specifications of the character in the book, and the internet loved it – and she was white! I bring this up to make a point – that it’s possible for people to cosplay a character of a different race without undermining someone else’s race or ethnic background.

This, I feel, is the root of the race in cosplay dilemma: when we totally associate cosplay as race-specific, we all lose as a community. Yes, we need more people of color (and by color I mean more than just African-American) in comics, anime and in movies. But until that day arrives, why not embrace the diversity that we have in our community, without disrespecting anyone or cosplaying from the source material in a way that can be seen as negative? How many times have you seen or heard on a blog or website, “oh, that’s a great Asian Superman,” or “You’re pretty for a black Wonder Woman?” As I step back and view the cosplay world, I have begun to notice a trend that with these cosplay faux pas, the majority of the time they’re made by people who don’t care or don’t know about the history; when the history of a race or ethnicity or even history of cosplay itself is overlooked, we see these problems of race rear their ugly head. When this problem arrives, is it always about racial sensitivity? Not by a long shot – sometimes it’s a simple misunderstanding.

What’s needed now is an open, honest dialogue about race in cosplay, and how we can honor characters without offending anyone. Hopefully this can be the first salvo in what is an ongoing challenge regarding the understanding and respect that is often lacking in cosplay.

-*Eddie Newsome*